Nancy Ruttenburg

Melville's Handsome Sailor: The Anxiety of Innocence

"I feel, with dejection and amazement," Walt Whitman lamented in *Democratic Vistas* (1872), "that few or none have yet really spoken to [the American] people, created a single, image-making work for them [so that their] central spirit [remains] uncelebrated, unexpress'd."[1] He dismissed contemporary literature as the product of a merely "verbal intellect," powerless to move those few who had retained an instinctive fidelity to the ideal of genuine American expression and who, in their isolation, remained "obedient, lowly, reverent to the voice, the gesture of the god, or holy ghost, which others see not, hear not" (*DV*, 395, 391). While the "class of supercilious infidels" refused to be silent, those who might testify to the authentically American remained utterly "voiceless" (*DV*, 395, 391, 388).

Because it belies his career-long celebration of inarticulateness as both the sign and guarantor of the national poet's purity, Whitman tempers his anxiety regarding the significance of America's continuing silence by praising "the noiseless operation of one's isolated self" as the source of all genuine poetry, as he had from the first attributed the "richest fluency" to the silent movements of the body.[2] Thus he constructs in *Democratic Vistas* a somewhat elaborate account of this silence, characterizing the authentic national poet as still a sleeping infant, not only unconscious and prelingual, but geographically remote, culturally ignorant, and thus "happily unrecognized and uninjur'd" by the cultural elite (*DV*, 412). From these buds, he prophesied, will "sprout, in time, flowers of genuine American aroma" (*DV*, 413). If in this passage Whitman represents silence as both a natural attribute of the "infant genius" as well as the environment necessary to his germination, the very benignity of

American Literature, Volume 66, Number 1, March 1994. CCC 0002-9831/94/$1.50.

the characterization begs the question of his poetic development. If, as Whitman seems to suggest, purity cannot be simultaneously embodied and articulated, then what kind of poetic expression can America expect from its budding poet?

Whitman's steadfast advocacy of voicelessness as the condition for genuine national-poetic expression reveals his substantial engagement with a cultural ideology elaborated with increasing detail and urgency in response to the continuing absence of a national literature: an American aesthetics of innocence. As it developed from the post-Revolutionary through the antebellum eras, this aesthetics of innocence took shape less as a set of assumptions concerning the form or content of a future national literature than as a set of prescriptions for the realization of authentic national-poetic selfhood. The growing body of literary-critical pronouncements on the character of the genuine American poet were intended in part to facilitate the nation's recognition of this figure when he should appear, but primarily to provide a set of guidelines, a discursive mold, for his eventual embodiment. Ironically, the very conventionality of this composite portrait of the genuine American poet—requiring that he be in humble circumstances, unselfconscious and isolated from the artificial life of cities, and possessed of an unstudied simplicity—betrays its derivation from the hypothetical folk-poet of European romantic nationalism. But as the American critical establishment reelaborated this type in the course of the nineteenth century, his most striking because most paradoxical trait (considering the growing urgency of his mission to express national identity) was his increasingly extreme innocence of language, as if only the poet's inarticulateness and illiteracy guaranteed the purity of the national essence he was invented to contain.[3]

In the course of his career as a writer of poetic manifestos, Whitman provided the aesthetics of innocence with a programmatic integrity, an elaborate set of criteria for the production and reception of an authentic national literature. But it was Emerson, from whom Whitman explicitly drew, who disclosed the ideological rationale according to which the profoundly paradoxical critical demand for an innocent national art was for so long supported. In "The Poet," the premiere essay of *Essays: Second Series* (1844), Emerson identified inarticulateness as the fundamental trait of American national-poetic character; in so doing, he revealed that the poet was less silent by nature than silenced at the behest of the critic. As Emerson proclaimed with his own ready eloquence, the poet, although uniquely "without impediment," must yet "abdicate a manifold

and duplex life" and "be content that others speak for [him]," in particular, members of the financial, political, and social elite. He continued his apostrophe to the speechless poet by directing him to withdraw from the life of the world:

> Others shall be thy gentlemen and shall represent all courtesy and worldly life for thee; others shall do the great and resounding actions also. Thou shalt lie close hid with nature, and canst not be afforded to the Capitol or the Exchange. The world is full of renunciations and apprenticeships, and this is thine; thou must pass for a fool and a churl for a long season. This is the screen and sheath in which Pan has protected his well-beloved flower, and thou shalt be known only to thine own, and they shall console thee with tenderest love.

Emerson mitigates his sentence of silence by assuring the "balked" poet that his transcendent "rage"—the inevitable product of his inarticulateness, itself the result of his mandated yet voluntary subordination to cultural spokesmen—shall in time be expressed as limitless power: "Stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until at last rage draw out of thee that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity."[4]

With striking precision, the passage anticipates the fate of Melville's own "flower," Billy Budd, as he stands balked and stuttering before his articulate adversary, John Claggart, a posture finally relieved by the fatal blow the enraged Billy deals Claggart which in turn releases a "vocal current electric" among various members of the ship's crew.[5] In his docile silence as well as his stuttering rage, Billy Budd faithfully exemplifies the ideal poet as Emerson conceived him; moreover, he conforms precisely to Whitman's added specifications of authentic poetic character, including the organic association he represents of perfect poetry with perfect physicality.[6] Thus Billy demonstrates an utter ignorance of "the idea of the covert, the lurid, the maleficent, the devil, the grim estimates inherited from the Puritans, hell, natural depravity, and the like" (*DV*, 414). He is distinctive for "his cheerful simplicity, his adherence to natural standards, . . . and by the absence in him of doubt, ennui, burlesque, persiflage, or any strain'd and temporary fashion" (*DV*, 414). When Melville claims that "the spirit lodged within Billy . . . made the dimple in his dyed cheek, suppled his joints, and dancing in his yellow curls made him

preeminently the Handsome Sailor" (*BB*, 64), we recall Whitman's emphasis on the primary expressiveness of physical beauty in his serenade to his budding poet: "your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body" (1855*P*, 440–41).

Because he embodies with such exactitude the positive traits of the innocent poet, Billy exhibits a characteristic that, although desirable in itself and integral to the critical portrait of innocence, throws into question his fitness to carry out his mediating function as the channel through which national identity would achieve its purest expression. In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman confessed himself haunted by the possibility that, despite the simple poet's unique ability to gain access to the "interior and real," the "conflicting and irreconcilable interiors" of the nation might exceed his power to resolve "all lesser and definite distinctions in vast, indefinite, spiritual, emotional power" (*DV*, 367, 368). For Melville's Billy, this inability "to deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort," coupled with his inability to articulate and his absolute reliance on the "richest fluency" of his body, leads him not precisely to poetic impotence, but to murder, and involves the narrator of his story in an almost incoherent attempt to establish the truth of his innocence (*BB*, 12).

Melville's final novel thus textually enacts the paradox of inarticulate innocence as that which both legitimated and promised to redress the nation's enduring silence about itself. *Billy Budd* shows with relentless specificity what happens when the hypothesized national poet, conceived as a "novice in the complexities of the factitious life," is actually made to perform in the fictitious life (*BB*, 14). In order to read Melville's final novel as offering his assessment of a cultural ideology so influential in his day as to determine, to a significant degree, the parameters according to which works of literature would be judged as legitimate or illegitimate, representative or misrepresentative of the infant nation, one must look first to the *rage* that Emerson named as the silent poet's compensation for a life of mandated marginality. The "river of electricity" that Emerson carefully qualifies as the inarticulate and enraged poet's "dream-power" is realized in *Billy Budd* as a "vocal current electric" initiated by Claggart's lie about Billy and galvanized by Billy's responsive stuttering and fatal blow to Claggart's forehead. In the remainder of this essay, I would like first to trace the trajectory of this vocal current as it sweeps through *Billy Budd* in order to show how it functions both as the key to the novel's

integrity and as its governing and triumphant contradiction. I would then like to show, through an analysis of the role the narrator plays vis-à-vis the usurping dynamism of the vocal current, why and how Melville rejected the Emersonian and Whitmanian practice of copiously producing words about the superiority of wordlessness as the sole guarantor of national-poetic integrity.

Before turning to an examination of the text's dynamic principle, the vocal current electric, I want to note that the following analysis entails four implications for our understanding of *Billy Budd*'s place in Melville's oeuvre (the significance of its being his "last will and testament") as well as in the context of nineteenth-century American literature (the question of its relation to the antebellum past as well as the literature of its own time, a time when Melville had long been professionally inactive).[7] Because space does not permit my developing these points here, I would like to state them up front as claims for the novel's generic, critical, literary-historical, and aesthetic significance.

The first claim is that Melville's determination to understand the relationship of inarticulate innocence to artistic authenticity led him, in his own estimation, to the creation of a new literary genre whose peculiar illogic he expressly correlated with a truth perceptible only through art. The second and closely related critical claim is that the novel categorically rejects precisely the type of either/or reading to which it has historically given rise in the still vital "acceptance" and "resistance" schools of *Billy Budd* criticism; instead it upholds an alternative to the various sacrificial solutions to the novel's paradoxes suggested both by characters within it and readers of it.[8] I shall return to this point in the final section of this essay. The third claim is literary-historical. Critics have long speculated upon Melville's purpose in writing *Billy Budd*, his first work of prose fiction since his withdrawal from the profession of authorship after the spectacular critical failure of *The Confidence-Man* (1857) some thirty years earlier. I propose that the novel offers Melville's retrospective and metaphorical account of his own professional failure, his inability or refusal even to dissemble the "innocence" that might have quieted critical fears of his lack of "veracity" and the consequent desire, as one hostile reviewer expressed it, to "freeze him into silence."[9] The final, aesthetic claim is that Melville in many respects recapitulates Nietzsche's observations on the relationship of innocence to art: it is not that Melville denies innocence a place in human experience; rather, he refuses to sentimentalize it, acknowledging instead the destructive potentiality underlying its

inoffensiveness. It is to the joint process of destruction and reconstitution through the offices of the vocal current electric that I now turn.

■ ■ ■

Impressed from a merchant vessel to join the "fighting peacemakers" of the *Bellipotent*, a British man-of-war actively engaged in the struggle against revolutionary France, Billy Budd joins the crew without a murmur of protest (*BB*, 8). The new foretopman's peculiarities include his inability to read or "to deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort," and a verbal defect, an "organic hesitancy" of speech which surfaced "under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling" (*BB*, 12, 19). His "significant personal beauty" in combination with his extreme simplicity stimulate a profound antipathy in the ship's master-at-arms, John Claggart, who "recoils" from the mystery of Billy's innocence (*BB*, 63, 65). Claggart's pent-up hostility is finally released in the form of a lie: having failed to tempt Billy into an outright act of insubordination, Claggart nevertheless reports to the ship's captain—directly following a harrowing encounter with a French vessel—that Billy had attempted to foment mutiny among the impressed sailors. Captain Vere judges the charge as unlikely given Billy's aspect and reputation. But plagued with anxiety over the recent mutinies at Spithead and the Nore, he decides to bring Billy and his accuser together before him so that he might read the truth of Claggart's charge, or its untruth, in Billy's face. When Billy begins to stutter in reaction to Claggart's lie, Vere immediately recognizes the proof of his innocence in his inability to articulate it. As Thoreau had said of his simple-minded visitor to Walden who confessed to a deficiency of intellect, "And there he was to prove the truth of his words."[10]

In his attempts to reassure Billy, Vere intensifies his anxiety to utter the truth until, in a "convulsed tongue-tie," Billy deals a fatal blow to Claggart's forehead (*BB*, 93). As he ruefully tells a drumhead court of three officers which Vere convenes directly following the event, "Could I have used my tongue I would not have struck him" (*BB*, 102). The blow is Billy's substitute for the words of self-identity he could not articulate—"I am true"—words whose truth the blow belies, as all but Billy realize when he states before the court, "I eat the King's bread, and am true to the King" (*BB*, 102). Vere understands Billy's "essential innocence" but fears that if he does not execute Billy for the crime of mutiny, the crew will misinterpret clemency as weakness and stage an actual uprising (*BB*, 121). The execution takes place accordingly.

Melville's narrator characterizes the verdict of Vere's drumhead court

as a "jugglery of circumstances" by which the innocent Billy and the criminal Claggart exchange their essential identities, becoming indistinguishable and finally interchangeable in the process (*BB*, 98). The official report of Billy's execution contained in a naval chronicle reifies this jugglery as historical truth: until the narrator's own intervening effort to supply the true story of what happened on board the *Bellipotent*, the chronicle's inversion of the truth stood alone "in human record to attest what manner of men respectively were John Claggart and Billy Budd" (*BB*, 134). But despite his straightforward desire simply to tell the truth, the narrator finds himself bedeviled by a seemingly independent narrative dynamic that appears to warp his efforts, turning his own offering into a chronicle of mis-givings, an account marred by double negatives, self-canceling statements, and obfuscating syntax. His desire to tell the truth uncompromisingly thus compels the narrator to account for a narrative dynamic by which an originary lie (Claggart's identification of innocent Billy as a mutineer) is transformed into the truth. What is the nature of the power characteristic of this narrative undercurrent against which the distracted narrator struggles?

The logical place to begin to address this question is Vere's argument for a guilty verdict before his reluctant drumhead court, insofar as he renders it despite his express acknowledgement of Billy's essential innocence and Claggart's provoking accusation—that is, despite his knowledge of the extenuating circumstances of the case that the narrator wants to recover as the truer "inside narrative" beneath the naval chronicle's superficial relation of the facts. From the beginning, when he exclaims with horror directly after the blow, "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!", Vere instinctively rejects the ambiguity of murderous innocence (*BB*, 95). Before his court, he argues for the repudiation of all considerations that take into account Billy's angelic nature, what he acknowledges to be the sacred dimension of the murder, in favor of a strict focus upon the requirements of the Mutiny Act. Thus Vere exhorts the court to sacrifice moral scruple to "a lawful rigor," concern about Billy's intent to a focus upon his "overt act," the private conscience to the codified imperial one, the feminine heart to the cool head, and theories of natural justice to the unhesitating application of martial law (*BB*, 108, 106). In short, for Vere the sacred embraces all considerations of narrative context, the nuances and subtleties of those "antecedents" to the murder whose absence baffles the ship's Surgeon when he arrives on the scene to verify Claggart's death (*BB*, 95).

In his desire to eliminate ambiguity, Vere condemns narrative itself to

irrelevance, declaring the extenuating circumstances of the case which occupy the first two-thirds of the novel "immaterial," matter for "psychologic theologians," perhaps, but not for judges (*BB*, 103, 104). But the courtroom within which Vere argues for the arrest of narrative as a theological matter inappropriate to a court of law reinstates, in its very layout, the paradox he strives to eliminate. The narrator describes Vere's quarters (in which the drumhead court is held) as consisting of two small staterooms situated on either side of a central space which, "expanding forward into a goodly oblong of length," is illuminated by port-hold windows "convertible" into embrasures for carronades (*BB*, 101). Vere's courtroom is both a cross and an instrument of war. Its small staterooms—the arms of the cross—become on one side the "jail" containing the stuttering prisoner and on the other the "dead-house" containing the eternally "tongue-tied" Claggart (*BB*, 101, 104). By its very shape it begs the question: do the arms of the cross separate the inarticulate innocent and the liar, or do they unite the condemned and the corpse, separated in truth by only a few fleeting hours?

Vere's argument to condemn Billy to death rhetorically reenacts the paradox of the cross-court in which he delivers it, betraying the same fatal symmetry as that which identifies the angel of God with the one he strikes dead. His argument distinguished by a tautological symmetry, Vere states that the court is obligated to "confine its attention to the blow's consequence, which consequence justly is to be deemed not otherwise than as the striker's deed" (*BB*, 103). Instead of establishing liability through an account of motivation, Vere attempts to identify "the blow's consequence" with "the striker's deed," an equation that, insofar as it obliterates to the degree possible all reference to the actors' subjectivity, unambiguously produces a victim—Billy. The narrator's cautionary designation of narrative symmetry as the sign not of truth but of "pure fiction" retrospectively indicts the tautological argument by which Vere urges his jurors to restrict their focus to the dimensions of a truth beyond dispute (*BB*, 131). It is no wonder that, even as the jury reluctantly condemns to death a man they know to be "innocent before God," they sense in Vere's words a "meaning unanticipated" which causes them to doubt not only the captain's objectivity but even his sanity (*BB*, 106, 103).

Like Claggart's lie, Vere's death sentence proclaims Billy's involvement in the capital crime of mutiny and thus intends his destruction, just as both speech acts are premised upon a uniquely "adequate appreciation" of the "moral phenomenon" of Billy's innocence (*BB*, 64). In its

tautological circularity, Vere's sentence also bears a marked resemblance to Billy's stutter—a recoil of narrative upon itself, a damming of the flow of words, a capitulation to that which cannot be accounted for, a susceptibility to displacement by violence. Thus Vere's death sentence does not so much reveal independence of mind in the face of a complex legal problem as it establishes itself as part of a pattern initiated by Claggart's lie and recapitulated by Billy's stutter: recoil and blow, failed articulation followed inevitably by violence. Resembling Claggart's lie (in function) and Billy's responsive stutter (in form), Vere's death sentence extends the reach of the originary lie of mutiny, abetting it in its drive to establish itself as the truth. After all, it is the death sentence which in turn produces the authorized "jugglery" of the naval chronicle's account in which innocence and evil, truth and falsehood, are misidentified.

At this point, it becomes possible to discern that vocal current which will prove so integral to the narrator's effort to expose the "mysterious swindle" by which the essential moral characters of Claggart and Billy had been officially misrepresented. The current is initiated by Claggart's lie which, in collaboration with Billy's responsive stutter, results in the murder that converts the lie into the literal truth: having struck and killed a superior officer, Billy did indeed commit an act of mutiny. Vere's death sentence, elaborated out of a desire to contain the violence of the originary lie—that is, out of fear that any acknowledgement on the part of the ship's officers of the incident's essential ambiguity would result in a mutinous uprising on the part of an emboldened crew—converts the lie into official truth.

The discursive conversion of lie into truth is completed at the point when the potential energy of mutiny—so intense aboard the *Bellipotent* that Vere will not allow the word "mutiny" to be uttered—ironically converts Vere's public indictment of Billy as a mutineer into an incitement to mutiny on the part of the crew. In his announcement to them of Billy's crime Vere becomes the unwitting high priest of his own "arrested allusion," the word whose articulation he so assiduously suppresses (*BB*, 87). Insofar as he attempts to construct and stage a verdict that will preclude all interpretation, Vere initiates an inarticulate litany of the arrested allusion by which the sleeping god of Spithead and the Nore is invoked. As he ascends, the god speaks, and he speaks as we expect he will—with a stutter, his sacrificial "Vestal priestess" being none other than Billy himself (*BB*, 93).

Thus, Billy's "strange dumb gesturing and gurgling" when confronted

with Claggart's false witness is replicated by the sailors as they hear Vere's account of the originating exchange of lie and blow (*BB*, 93). At first, the "throng of standing sailors" responds with a "dumbness like that of a seated congregation of believers in hell listening to the clergyman's announcement of his Calvinistic text" (*BB*, 115). Although Vere refrains from "preachment" in making his announcement as he refrains from explicitly naming Billy's crime, his silence on this score constitutes a hellfire sermon, an exposition of original sin and predestination as determined by the Mutiny Act, for which, like the Calvinist God, "intent and non-intent are nothing to the purpose" (*BB*, 115, 108).

The collective dumbness of the crew yields at several points after Vere's announcement. After their mechanical repetition of Billy's "conventional felon's benediction" of the captain, the execution, and the dropping of Billy's body into the sea, their speechlessness yields to a sound "inarticulate," "ominous," and "low" (*BB*, 124, 128). This "strange human murmur," Vere instantly recognizes, is the sound of the word never uttered: mutiny (*BB*, 129). To the extent that the crew wholeheartedly reject Vere's account of Billy's crime and Claggart's victimization as a falsification of the fundamental moral difference between the two men, they ironically complete that dynamic by which the lie of mutiny establishes the truth of mutiny. Although this last pent-up release of feeling is not permitted to expend itself in a full-scale uprising, its short-lived manifestation is sufficient to establish it as the terminus of the vocal current initiated by Claggart's lie. It remains to establish the narrator's relationship to the liar and the narrative dynamic he launches.

■ ■ ■

Normally that instrument by which a temporal sequence unravels contradiction while preserving crucial sense-making distinctions, narrative in *Billy Budd* appears to be intercepted in its trajectory by the vocal current which makes what was untrue true, a conversion that seems to elude the narrator's ability to contain it. As many readers have noted, he too seems to be afflicted with a strange sort of narrative stutter: he proceeds by fits and starts, appearing to give information when in actuality he withdraws it or undermines its authority. To echo Billy's question about Claggart's odd behavior: what is the matter with the narrator? Why is he unable simply to point out the ironies relating to Billy's case and set the record straight once and for all? Instead of standing above the events he narrates—a stance which historical distance, if nothing else, would seem

to permit—he appears to be entangled in them as if he cannot keep his distance, as if he experiences the telling of his tale as a long slide down a slippery slope. It is at this juncture that we must return to Melville's assessment of the aesthetics of innocence, particularly as Whitman theorized it, as both explanation for and proposed solution to the nation's inability to represent itself in literature.

For Whitman, pure poetic practice derived from perfect physicality. A body such as Billy's, all "innocence and nakedness," might function as a "channel of thoughts and things" and ultimately—provided its possessor does not impede the natural flow through the channel with "any elegance or effect or originality"—a channel for the pure poetic expression of the "richest fluency" of the self as well (1855*P*, 447, 444). What emerges from the channel under these ideal conditions of non-interference is uniquely "of itself" and thus genuinely independent: "all else," Whitman says, "has reference" (1855*P*, 453). As long as the poet remains secure in such a system of pure self-referentiality, he has no need to seek beyond the self but would compose "regardless of observation," heedless even of the supervisory observation of self-consciousness: "What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me" (1855*P*, 444).

In the blow, the event which occasions innocent Billy's fall into plot, the elements of Whitman's synthesis of poem, poet, and poetic practice—channel, mirror, and self-referentiality—undergo a sea change, as if the channel of pure self-reference had been invaded and corrupted. Thus while Billy rollicks and rolls along the upper gun-deck, his unself-conscious movement in stark contrast to the scuttlings of Claggart below, what Whitman called the "threads of manly friendship" twist about him, like the "oozy weeds" of "Billy in the Darbies" which the sailor-balladeer imagines receive his body as it founders in the deep (*BB*, 137). Below Claggart's "self-contained" demeanor, a "subterranean fire" burns for one whom he has designated, in Whitman's words, his "most inevitable twin and counterpart": for without Billy, to avail ourselves of Whitman again, Claggart knows himself "incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating [him]self."[11] The only inroad through which Claggart can gain access to Billy—the text's other "fervid heart self-contained" with its corresponding "secret fire"—is the gap left by the tabooed word, mutiny, whose articulation Vere is so careful to suppress (*BB*, 118).[12] With the lie, administered with a "hungry lurch," Claggart penetrates the inno-

cent Billy's perfect self-referentiality (*BB*, 98). When the innocent holds up the mirror after his "virgin experience" of this rupture, one sees reflected not the image of one "such as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company" but rather an illicit exchange: Claggart, with his glance of "serpent fascination," draws out Billy's stutter, which the narrator had punningly characterized as "a striking instance" of the contribution of the "envious marplot of Eden" to Billy's composition (*BB*, 118, 17, 93, 19).

By adding to his representation of Billy as the embodiment of pure self-referentiality precisely that component which Whitman insisted on eliding, "the Puritan's grim estimates," Melville suggests the inevitability of the Handsome Sailor's corruption, his fall into plot—homoerotic desire playing the role here of original sin.[13] Advancing through the text as a series of stutters and tautologies terminating in acts of violence, the vocal current electric is conceived in the confrontation of these two men, their interchange marked by an unaccountable mingling: Claggart takes on the innocent's victimization and Billy the deceiver's depravity. In the breakdown of distinction prefigured in this homoerotic and tautological exchange, poetic self-referentiality is reconstituted as discursive violence, a violence that appears to be singularly directed against the possibility of narration as an instrument of accountability.

In this respect, Claggart, who accuses Billy of dissimulation or concealment, is not really far off the mark: in containing or concealing nothing, Billy conceals everything. Meant to be an absolute transparency, Billy is fundamentally opaque, the cipher of the book, and as such, is as potentially subversive as the blank, undifferentiated ocean that surrounds the ship or the white whale cruising through it. Whether the narrator compares him with the nightingale, the baby, or the barbarian, he defines Billy's innocence most tellingly as a "blankness" which functions at the moment of moral emergency as a mirror for evil (*BB*, 78). Neither conceptual nor progressive nor active, Billy's innocence cannot be considered a positive phenomenon; it is neither heroism nor righteousness. He intends neither his innocence nor his transgression. His innocence is more a state of being than an active choice; it is the innocence of the leviathan over which Ahab and Starbuck argue.

For this reason, the innocent Billy cannot save the text, the Christological symbolism surrounding him notwithstanding. As an alternative to its comprehensive doubleness, he offers an integrity premised upon emptiness and whose functioning is thus analogous to that of the gap left by the

tabooed word mutiny. With the narrator tongue-tied, only Billy "tells" us with his stutter—the sign of innocence and depravity alike—that as ultimate self-referentiality, the blow, the pivotal event of the text, lies beyond the pretensions of narrative to account for and thus to contain it. Nothing can equal the blow's directness; nothing else will succeed so well at hitting the mark. In its unmediated transit from impulse to expression, in its unexampled directness, the blow supersedes the Whitmanesque innocent soul as the text's ultimately self-referential figure.

We are now in a better position to understand the narrator's obvious struggle with the impact of the blow on his narrative's progress. Precisely at the point where he is to tell us how innocence and transgression intersect—his description of the fatal encounter of Claggart and Billy—he draws back in order to speculate not upon the blow's moral significance but upon the purely material circumstance of its placement on Claggart's anatomy: "Whether intentionally or but owing to the young athlete's superior height, the blow had taken effect full upon the forehead . . . so that the body fell over lengthwise, like a heavy plank tilted from erectness" (*BB*, 93). Like the "fated boy" before the mystery of Claggart's antipathy, or the equally bewildered Vere before the mystery of Billy's fate, the narrator here cannot bring himself to penetrate the literal surface of the event—like Vere, he confines himself to representing merely the "frontage" of this key moment in the text (*BB*, 93, 108). Neither confirming nor denying the blow as a socially or psychologically significant act, the narrator leaves us with the ineluctable contradiction of murderous innocence. The more he tells, the more he winds himself around this central emptiness which allows neither access nor egress, and the more his narrative is unable to achieve its own release into clarity.

Insofar as the narrator's dream of clarity can no more be realized than Vere's desire to construct a verdict that resists interpretation, Claggart—as the producer of the text's only unhindered utterance, the lie—indirectly offers what appears to be the sole possibility of narrative progress, a way out of the morass of parallel and contradictory discourses. Claggart's activity is entirely premised upon his ambiguous relationship to the structures of control and containment available to him by virtue of his official position as the ship's overseer of law and order. On the one hand, he contains his illicit desire to possess Billy under the stern guise of the master-at-arms, masking his passion as respectability, intellectuality, and a principled austerity (*BB*, 65). On the other hand, the very constraints attached to his official position force him to vent his passion

indirectly, in the form of a lie about Billy's true character and activity. Once articulated, the lie that Billy is mutinous promotes a state of mutiny independent of Claggart's original intention simply to possess Billy in the only way he can, through a specious accountability. Claggart's word has indeed become flesh—one might say that Whitman's poetic miracle has occurred—but his very success is fatal to him. Once released, the desire that Claggart had hoped to dissemble with his vicious lie takes on an independent existence, its destructive potentiality directed back upon the desirer who had relinquished the power to discipline the one desired in the very act of identifying him. To express one's desire, however obliquely, is thus figured here as a suicidal or self-mutinous act, an act of insanity. Ironically, though, Claggart's desire survives him. Once released in the form of a lie and made flesh by the responsive fatal blow, Claggart's desire takes on a life of its own: Claggart's initial report to Vere is replicated by Vere's to the crew and by the naval chronicle's to history. Claggart's insanity is thus allied to that "point" on which narrative turns and from which it is generated, such that the narrator's own effort to vindicate Billy compels him to tell the story of the conversion of Claggart's lie into truth (*BB*, 58).

The structural intimacy of the lie and the narrative that endeavors to tell *about* the lie (and thus account for and contain it) is replicated on the characterological level in the resemblance of Claggart's insanity to Vere's authority, specifically to the degree that the latter is exercised through the scrupulous application of Vere's beloved "measured forms." So intimately do the characters of Claggart and Vere reflect one other in this regard that it is possible to see how Vere, with Claggart's help, effectively makes insanity an institution aboard the *Bellipotent* (*BB*, 130). Vere explains to his jury that the man-of-war best serves the king to the degree that it suppresses all that subsists underground, from private conscience to the love proscribed by "fate and ban" (*BB*, 80). Patriotism is a "button" that secures the drawn veil, excluding all that for Vere signifies a psycho-sacred dimension irrelevant to military officers in time of war, precisely the dimension the narrator wishes to restore. The revolving forms of suppression and censorship that Vere institutes overlap and undercut one another: the practice of oppressing and impressing sailors, for example, generates a subterranean fear of mutiny which in turn produces an atmosphere fraught with secrecy. Form and chaos thus battle continually for dominion, mirrored in the tale's political context of brutal repression and anarchic revolution. Although Vere presides over

this quintessential text of mutiny, Claggart emerges as its most perfectly adjusted composite figure: as master-at-arms he patrols the decks, his "self-contained lunacy . . . not distinguishable from sanity" (*BB*, 60). The world he monitors exists in a state of carefully plotted doubleness: behind each man working a gun stands another with drawn sword, appointed to ensure that the gunner does not unexpectedly swivel and thus turn the violence he deploys inward.

Behind the narrator's explicit doubling of Claggart and Billy as twin theological mysteries, then, he establishes Claggart as the character from whom Vere is unable to keep his distance. Many critics have noted the resemblance between the two men: the description of Claggart as "dominated by intellectuality," demonstrating "no vulgar alloy of the brute," folded in "the mantle of respectability" and associated with austerest civilization, echoes or adumbrates descriptions of Vere, a similarity which becomes more pronounced (if never outspokenly so on the part of Vere's beleaguered officers) with each turn of the plot (*BB*, 60). Beginning with the Surgeon's initial doubt of Vere's sanity, the individual character descriptions of Claggart and Vere, posited so confidently on antithetical ends of the moral spectrum, begin to "blendingly" converge, as do the violet and orange of the narrator's rainbow (*BB*, 97). Together, then, Vere and Claggart pose the riddle of insanity that threatens to exceed the narrator's capacity to account for and thus contain it, insofar as both, in order to accomplish "an aim which in wantonness of atrocity would seem to partake of the insane . . . will direct a cool judgement sagacious and sound" (*BB*, 60).

It is the ever-present possibility of the text's disintegration figured by the rapport of Vere and Claggart, the captain and the criminal, that compels the narrator to practice a defensive indirection. Early in the text, when the narrator attempts to introduce his drama's major characters, he is forced to confess of Claggart that "[h]is portrait I essay, but shall never hit it" (*BB*, 40). Clearly impatient with the "hints" he has offered to account for the villainy of Claggart, the narrator tells us that "to pass from a normal nature to him one must cross the " 'deadly space between' " (*BB*, 58).[14] Yet some sort of passage is required if one is to make sense of the text, insofar as Claggart's "hidden nature" is identified as the "point" on which "the present story turn[s]" (*BB*, 58).[15] Both Vere and Billy attempt a direct crossing. The "heedless" Vere possesses a "directness" that the narrator clearly admires, "sometimes far-reaching like that of a migratory fowl that in its flight never heeds when it crosses a frontier" (*BB*,

38). Confronted with the very turning point of narrative—Claggart's lie, a deeply mutinous utterance as Vere is instantly aware—the captain capitulates to untruth intending to expose it all the more starkly in the innocent's clarifying presence. The innocent, wordless Billy's response to the naked power of Claggart's unaccountable word is even more precise and direct, as his capitulation is more absolute. The narrator whose task is to account for these responses and their consequences endeavors to remain on this side of the deadly space separating Claggart from the normative. In order to do so, he portrays the inscrutable Claggart whose character he cannot contain—the attempt at characterization dissolves in a series of digressions—less as a personage than as a type of narratological directive. Claggart's presence constitutes a "hint" to the narrator to proceed "by indirection," despite his explicit condemnation of indirection (in contrast to the sailor's frank and simple manner) as "an oblique, tedious, barren game hardly worth that poor candle burnt out in playing it" (*BB*, 58, 78).

Thus the text survives in fragile equilibrium the volatility of its content and particularly its enactment of its own conception, both the inevitable violence of its originary moment as well as its tortured gestation. To propose that Melville is here choosing sides—between "acceptance" and "resistance," good and evil, God and the Devil: mutually exclusive alternatives that Billy and Claggart are imagined unambiguously to represent—obscures the pathos of *Billy Budd* as Melville's "last will and testament" as it underestimates its achievement as literary art. Most regrettably, it celebrates the sacrificial logic that Melville strives to hold at bay.

■ ■ ■

Whitman inserted into his otherwise ebullient 1856 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* a paragraph which appears to contradict the dominant tone of the address and to anticipate the more expressly jeremiadic *Democratic Vistas* of 1872.[16] Midway through the paragraph, the familiar pattern of the jeremiad suddenly emerges—an elaboration of cultural achievements which, at least initially, serves only to underscore a failing so grievous that it threatens to eradicate the very fact of accomplishment: "America, grandest of lands in the theory of its politics, in popular reading, in hospitality, breadth, animal beauty, cities, ships, machines, money, credit, collapses quick as lightning at the repeated, admonishing, stern words, Where are any mental expressions from you, beyond what you have copied or stolen?

Where the born throngs of poets, literats, orators, you promised? Will you but tag after other nations?" (1856*P*, 1328).

By virtue of its being the beneficiary of "the mighty inheritance of the English language," America lies under an enormous debt to the European cultural progenitor. "Payment prevails," Whitman solemnly intones, yet even as he does so the paragraph moves toward the triumphant upswing indicative of moral recovery (1856*P*, 1328). This reversal is accomplished through a rhetorical undermining of the very notion of cultural succession as involving the elaborate mechanisms of inheritance (the imposition from without of something not inherent in the culture, a will which disregards the will of the recipient vis-à-vis its legacy) and adoption (the artificial acceptance of something fundamentally alien into a naturally exclusive family circle). But if one denies these hallowed forms of cultural transmission, these long chains of bequest and adoption which ensure both legitimacy and continuity, what replaces them? What else guarantees the generation of culture?

Whitman's answer turns on the concept of submission and involves a choice of cultural sires. Henceforth, Whitman proclaims, the nation need not submissively "lie under" a debt owed to the demanding parent culture, but will lie instead under "the most robust bard," submitting willingly to his crude and primitive—and therefore more legitimate—claim to possession: "Submit to the most robust bard till he remedy your barrenness. Then you will not need to adopt the heirs of others; you will have true heirs, begotten of yourself, blooded with your own blood" (1856*P*, 1328). The pun on "heir" divests the American song, or "air," of further responsibility to any but this bard, both its begetter and true mate; paradoxically, the only way to satisfy the English debt is to satisfy the American poet.

Whitman thus himself suggests in this figure of virility an alternative to the sleeping infant poet of *Democratic Vistas*. America must seek a manly innocence, which could simultaneously be itself and comprehend itself, and then inscribe this accomplishment in the incontrovertible word of American identity. Only so conceived would the American poet show "the States . . . themselves distinctly, and what they are for."[17] In the years that elapsed between the 1856 Preface and *Democratic Vistas*, the continuing silence of the poet compelled Whitman, his hypothesis of the babe notwithstanding, to recommend as antidote to what appeared to be an obdurate barrenness those negative virtues suggestive of the robust bard. Thus, while acknowledging America as "the most positive

of lands," he expresses the most anxious yearning for a native artist possessed even of "[n]egative qualities, even deficiencies" (*DV*, 409, 394).

If Billy Budd—and most explicitly Billy shackled on the upper gun-deck awaiting execution with "the look of a slumbering child in the cradle"—represents Melville's version of Whitman's great American poet as a sleeping infant, "unrecking itself" and thus invulnerable to the machinations of the dissimulators, then John Claggart represents his offering of a character composed exclusively of "negative virtues," those hidden recesses and deep pockets of non-information summed up in the adjective "ambidexter" (*BB*, 118, 60). Claggart's lie—articulate, coherent, unimpeded, effective because it demands that reality conform to it—generates the vocal current electric and thus "blendingly enters" the space of truth: a poetic production in which the infantilization of innocence plays no part (*BB*, 97). Billy's innocence is rather the honesty of Nietzsche's beast which "cannot dissimulate" and "conceals nothing," so that "at every moment it seems what it actually is, and thus can be nothing that is not honest."[18] If, even as he demonstrates the proximity of such innocence to nihilism in his account of the vocal current's trajectory, Melville's narrator appears to be taken hostage by the lie (as insanity made fluent), then one must concede that he exhibits the captive's typical and resourceful ambivalence toward his captor, a capacity to oppose while accommodating which is born of the will to survive.

This ambivalence translates into that peculiar psychological idiom of narration that stutters in its earnest desire to be nothing but honest, even as it enacts the learning of Billy's and Vere's lesson: namely, that honesty does not necessarily correlate with or guarantee the truth. Thus, in the very process of refuting the lie whose passage to truth he chronicles, the narrator acknowledges the lie's undeniable constitutive power—its perfect choreography of directness and indirection—by telling his own negotiations and renegotiations of the text's deadly spaces. In this way, the narrator of *Billy Budd*, Melville's last Ishmael, survives not to tell the tale, but survives the telling of his tale. Anything but a "barroom bore" endlessly repeating his failure, the narrator walks in intense concentration a via crucis between tautological stasis and sacrificial violence, recoil and release, accompanied—or shadowed by—that genius of the anti-logos, the liar.[19] Melville's final word is both a confession of defeat—an admission that, at best, his tale offers a "truth whereof I do not vouch"—and a manifesto proclaiming the creation of a new genre, defi-

antly asymmetrical, flaunting its "ragged edges" in the name of a "truth uncompromisingly told" (*BB*, 43, 131).

University of California, Berkeley

Notes

1 Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, in *Collect and Other Prose, Vol. 2* of *The Collected Works of Walt Whitman*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1964), 388. Future references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text and designated *DV*.

2 See Walt Whitman, "Preface, 1855, to *Leaves of Grass*," in *Collect and Other Prose*, 440; future references to the 1855 Preface will be cited parenthetically as 1855P. "Noiseless operation . . ." appears in *Democratic Vistas*, 399.

3 For a fuller account of the aesthetics of innocence, especially in relation to the burden it placed upon the aspiring national author, see Nancy Ruttenburg, "Silence and Servitude: Bondage and Self-invention in Russia and America, 1780–1861," *Slavic Review* 51 (1992): 731–48.

4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 244, 240, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *E*. For a record of Melville's annotations of Emerson, see William Braswell, "Melville as a Critic of Emerson," *American Literature* 9 (1937): 317–34. For an analysis of Melville's relationship to Emerson, see Merton J. Sealts Jr., *Pursuing Melville: 1940–1980* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 250–77. Because "The Poet" is the most heavily annotated essay in Melville's edition of Emerson's *Essays: Second Series*, Sealts conjectures that this is "where his mixed feelings about the man came to their sharpest focus" (274). For an alternative account of Emerson's presence in *Billy Budd*, see Philip D. Beidler, "*Billy Budd*: Melville's Valedictory to Emerson," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 24 (1978): 215–28.

5 Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative*, ed. Milton R. Stern (1924; rpt., Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1975), 9, 124. All further references to this text will be cited parenthetically in the essay as *BB*. For a history of the text's growth and history, as well as a thorough analysis of Melville's manuscript of the novel, discovered in 1924, see Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts Jr., eds. *Billy Budd: The Genetic Text* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), 1–24, as well as Hershel Parker's extension of their inquiry in *Reading "Billy Budd"* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1990).

6 For evidence that Melville, during the time he was writing *Billy Budd*, had Whitman very much on his mind, see Merton M. Sealts Jr., *Melville's Read-*

ing: A Check-List of Books Owned and Borrowed (1966; rev., Charleston: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1988), 133.

7 *Billy Budd* has been spoken of as Melville's "last will and testament" since the time of its discovery: see John Middleton Murray, "Herman Melville's Silence," *Times Literary Supplement* 10 (1924): 433.

8 The "acceptance" and "resistance" schools of *Billy Budd* criticism were initiated by E. L. Grant Watson's "Melville's Testament of Acceptance," *New England Quarterly* 6 (1933): 319–27; and Philip Withim's "*Billy Budd*: Testament of Resistance," *Modern Language Quarterly* 20 (1959): 115–27. For a cogent critique of this either/or approach to the text, see Barbara Johnson, "Melville's Fist: The Execution of Billy Budd," in *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), 79–109. For a recent, extremely sophisticated "acceptance" reading, see Andrew Delbanco, "Melville's Sacramental Style," *Raritan* 12 (1993): 69–91.

9 For a compilation of contemporary reviews of Melville's work, see Watson G. Branch, ed. *Melville: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974). The issue of Melville's lack of "veracity" is especially prominent in reviews of his first two novels, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847). On this problem, see Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956), 157–67; 203–08; 216–19; 247–51. The critical desire to "freeze [Melville] into silence" was expressed by George Washington Peck in his review of Melville's novel of the trials of American authorship, *Pierre* (1852), reprinted in *Critical Heritage*, 316. For an assessment of the extent to which Melville courted his readership's disapproval, see William Charvat, "Melville and the Common Reader," in *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800–1870*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (1968; rpt., New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1992), 262–82. For Charvat's assessment of the readership's (as opposed to the critical establishment's) impact upon a writer's professional success in the mid-nineteenth century, see 290–92 in the same volume. For an alternative reading of the novel that posits Billy's silence as directly relevant to Melville himself, see Brook Thomas, "*Billy Budd* and the Judgment of Silence," in *Literature and Ideology*, ed. Harry R. Garvin (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1982), 51–78.

10 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 101.

11 The Whitman lines are taken from his discussion of the significance for democracy's future of "manly friendship" in "Democratic Vistas," 414–15.

12 For instances of the tacit rule against articulating the word *mutiny*, as well as Vere's policy of "confining all knowledge" of Billy's mutinous act to the ship's officers, see *Billy Budd*, 86, 99, 102, 115.

13 For a brilliant reading of the structural significance of homosexuality in *Billy Budd*, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Some Binarisms (I): *Billy Budd*: After

the Homosexual," in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 91–130.

14 Stanton Garner has identified the source of the phrase "the deadly space between" as the poet Thomas Campbell's "Battle of the Baltic" written to commemorate Nelson's victory at Copenhagen. See Stanton Garner, "Melville and Thomas Campbell: The 'Deadly Space Between'," *English Language Notes* 14 (1977): 289–90. Those plagued by the many historical inaccuracies in *Billy Budd* should also see Garner's delightful "Fraud as Fact in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*," *San Jose Studies* 4 (1978): 83–105.

15 See also Johnson, "Melville's Fist," especially 91–97.

16 Walt Whitman, "Appendix to *Leaves of Grass*, 1856," in *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1326–37. Future references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text and designated 1856*P*.

17 Walt Whitman, "Preface, 1876, to the two-volume Centennial Edition of *Leaves of Grass* and 'Two Rivulets,'" in *The Collected Works of Walt Whitman, Vol. 2*, 469.

18 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins (Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Press, 1949), 5, 6. See also Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1965), especially 76–84.

19 The phrase appears in Terry Eagleton's critique of the deconstructive mentality in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), 146.