

# The vanity of the pursuit of justice in billy budd

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



The course Herman Melville charts in his novella, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, is long and convoluted, perhaps surpassing even that of Captain Ahab and his crazed pursuit of the white whale. Published nearly three decades after Melville's death, the author's last work of prose is set aboard H. M. S. *Bellipotent* in the wake of *The Great Mutiny at Nore*. Due to the gravity of this particular insurrection, the vessel's cramped atmosphere is thick with the paranoia of its commanding officers, who fear the same plight. It is an inopportune moment for master-at-arms John Claggart to falsely accuse a simple sailor named Billy Budd of mutiny, saddling Captain Vere with an agonizing legal and moral decision. The entirety of this novella is told through the eyes of an unknown narrator, granting the reader an excellent perch from which he can observe how Captain Vere makes his judgment. In *Billy Budd, Sailor* the flawed omniscience of the narrator is shared by Captain Vere, emphasizing the limitations of narration, which Melville argues produce a negative effect on the passage of justice.

If a reader were to examine the cover of *Billy Budd, Sailor* he would soon find the subtitle, 'An Inside Narrative' housed in parentheses below the true title (Melville 1). The presence of this lesser title manufactures a sense of intimacy that is soon bolstered by the third-person narrator, who classifies the novella as a tale concerning the "inner life of one particular ship and the career of an individual sailor" (12). With all this in mind, a reader might reasonably expect *Billy Budd, Sailor* to be told in a bold, personal style much like the "Call me Ishmael" that opens *Moby-Dick* (1). This judgment, however, is inaccurate, for the narrator remains oddly distanced from the story which he claims to be so close to. Building the expanse between the

teller of the novella and his reader is the fact that he says virtually nothing about himself or how he came to know Billy's story in the first place. Yet despite his foggy background, the novella's obscure narrator claims an extraordinary access to the minds of the characters in his narrative. For instance, early in the story, when Billy witnesses a shipmate's flogging, the narrator knows that he "was horrified" and as a consequence 'resolved that never through remissness would he make himself liable to such a visitation' (25). Later in the story, after Billy declines an afterguardsman's request for assistance in plotting a mutiny, the narrator miraculously knows that "it never entered his [Billy's] mind that here was a matter which, from its extreme questionableness, it was his duty as a loyal blue-jacket to report' (40). What is so unusual about the content of these passages is how an unknown third-person narrator has access to Billy's present thoughts as well as those which are not yet available to the sailor himself.

In a similar fashion, the thoughts of Captain Vere lie exposed to the narrator's prying eyes. After Claggart falsely accuses Billy of plotting a mutiny, Vere is so astonished that for a moment he becomes mute. Instead of speaking, the Captain contemplates images of Billy's time aboard the warship, doubting Claggart's claim. It is only 'after a brief pause, during which the reminiscences above mentioned passed vividly through his mind' that Vere's lips issue a response (50). The events of the story at this time are presented in an interesting manner. There is a "brief pause" during which the reader experiences a difference in the actual time the events of the story occur and their representation in the narrative. This impressive display of omniscience, however, does not remain consistent.

The reader first sees a shift in the narrator's omniscience during a scene in which Billy unintentionally spills soup on a portion of deck occupied by Claggart's feet. In the surprisingly calm aftermath of this incident, the narrator describes Claggart's temperament as "protectively secretive, which is as much as to say it is self-contained, so that when, moreover, most active it is to the average mind not distinguishable" (32). At the words "secretive," "self-contained," and "not distinguishable" it is clearly evident that the narrator has lost his power to freely enter the minds of other characters. In other words, the thorough mental evaluations that the reader has become accustomed to are done away with and replaced with the foreign tongue of conjecture. However, the most complete lapse in omniscience occurs at precisely the moment during which a thorough documentation of events is crucial: when Captain Vere himself delivers the sentence of the Drumhead Court to Billy. It is in the tension of this moment that the narrator finally notifies the reader of his present blindness, that 'beyond the communication of the sentence, what took place at this interview was never known' (68). How strange it is for readers to find the narrator who otherwise enjoys a complete access to both Billy and Vere's thoughts unable to eavesdrop on a simple conversation where privacy is not explicitly enforced. This moment is especially frustrating, because as Walter L. Reed observes, the hungry reader is not satisfied; rather he is left to starve on meager scraps sourced from an insufficient grasp of basic events (233). How then could one begin to understand the narrator's inconsistency?

Perhaps one might reason that the narrator occupies the same space as his characters and is thus forced by the confines of his setting to theorize about

words he could not possibly overhear. However, this supposition is incorrect, because in scenes where characters enforce privacy, the narrator continues to practice omniscience. When Vere arranges for Billy and Claggart to discuss the rumored mutiny for example, he transfers them to “ a place less exposed to observation than the broad quarter-deck’ (51). Yet Vere’s attempt to ensure confidentiality fails because it does not inhibit the narrator from recording the events that transpire in this “ less exposed” place. This presents a question about how the narrator’s ability to overstep the bounds of privacy is reconciled with its failure during the interview between Captain Vere and Billy in which the events were “ never known”. Benjamin Britten suggests that this inconsistency is a deliberate attempt to make the narrative feel more realistic by varying the methods through which it is reported (175). Alternatively, Wayne Booth proposes that these fluctuations in narrator omniscience may simply constitute a gap in Melville’s technique (284). In a more productive mode of speculation however, one can explore how these jarring shifts in narrative representation are similar to Vere’s dilemma between legal and moral judgement, which also seems to echo the narrator’s inconsistency.

When Captain Vere first appears in the novella, he is described as a man who “ loved books, never going to sea without a newly replenished library’ (19). In a literal sense, Vere is a reader. It is a quality that alienates him from his officers and crew, earning him the nickname “ Starry Vere”. Yet the Captain also presents himself as a reader in other senses than the literal. During chapter nineteen when Vere simply commands Billy to “ Speak” so that he might defend himself from Claggart’s mutinous charges, the Captain chances

upon a case of unintentional mutiny, when the sailor's stutter renders its owner mute (53). Fortunately, Vere understands the nature of Billy's silence and does not interpret it as a true sign of defiance. The Captain demonstrates an ability to read the psychology of his crew in a way similar to the narrator practicing omniscience on the minds of his characters: ' Though at the time Captain Vere was quite ignorant of Billy's liability to vocal impediment, he now immediately divined it, since vividly Billy's aspect recalled to him that of a bright young schoolmate of his whom he had once seen struck by much the same startling impotence' (53). In this moment of understanding between Vere and Billy, the Captain also presents himself as a competent judge in that he draws reasoning from the similar case of the ' bright young schoolmate' and applies it to the welkin-eyed sailor who shares his same " vocal impediment". Moreover, Vere divines the meaning of Billy's silence and communication still transpires. The Captain reads Billy's silence as a rejection of Claggart's charges, shifting from his harsh ordering of " Speak, man!" to a gentle consoling of " There is no hurry, my boy. Take your time, take your time" (53). The former addresses a " man" who is held fully accountable for his actions, whereas the latter addresses a " boy" who is not held fully accountable for his actions. In this scene, Vere and the narrator are symmetrical — Vere reads Billy's predicament at the same moment the narrator reads Vere's thoughts. In other words, the judge shares the narrator's omniscience and is subject to it at the same time. On the very next page however, the reader watches this beautiful symmetry devolve into chaos. Although Vere can read Billy, Billy is unable to reciprocate, which prompts him to feel so overwhelmed by the false accusation that he strikes

Claggart dead. Then at Billy's subsequent trial under the Drumhead Court, Vere argues against lessening his sentence, reasoning that ' However pitilessly the law may operate, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it' (64). So, although Vere believes Billy not to be fully responsible for the killing, he issues a sentence that suggests the opposite. This behavior is intriguing because despite his ability to read and understand Billy, Vere claims that he cannot incorporate his understanding into the basis for his judgment.

The ruling at Billy's trial seems to belong to a man who embodies the complete opposite of a man who is " no lover of authority for mere authority's sake'. Indeed at first glance, Vere seems to cling to the law even in situations where enforcing it becomes unjust. The Captain's almost religious observance of a legal system void of natural and spiritual connections, as Robert Ferguson claims, provides the plot's central conflict. Similarly, Michael Rogin finds in Vere the image of a legal system drained of religious meaning and opportunities for redemption (316). However, with a closer examination of Vere's argument, its more subtle complexities begin to surface. The first of these is the image that Vere, as Captain, must present his crew. Vere's concern about his image is most apparent in his observation that " The people (meaning the ship's company) have a native sense; most of them are familiar with our naval usage and tradition" of the law (66). Vere then questions how these sailors would react to the quarterdeck mitigating Billy's sentence, saying that " Even could you explain to them — which our official position forbids — they, long molded on arbitrary discipline, have not that kind of intelligent responsiveness that might qualify them to

comprehend and discriminate' (66). The purpose of Vere's rather cynical speech is to further convince other judges on the Drumhead Court that any attempt to communicate to the crew the need for leniency is doomed to fail. Due to how well versed the crew is on matters of discipline in the British navy, they would interpret a single lenient punishment amongst a sea of harsh punishments as weakness and, to the fear of the court, incite a larger insurrection in response. Additionally, regardless of how well-worded a lenient sentence might be, the crew would distrust it when it is announced because they are 'Molded on arbitrary discipline' (66). Essentially, Billy and his shipmates have learned from Captain Vere and his officers that the language of the law is unchanging. Indeed, Vere reminds the officers on the Drumhead Court that the very nature of their 'official position forbids' them from attempting to speak with the crew since it would produce a myriad of misinterpretations because an officer choosing to associate himself with those of lower rank is almost unheard of and therefore suspicious. The act would go against the intimidating and distanced reputation that Captain Vere and his officers have worked hard to build, and to which the crew has become accustomed. Here, the similarities between Captain Vere and Billy's predicaments are readily apparent: Billy, who is forced to act instead of speak, effectively robs the quarterdeck of its strength, forcing it to execute a partially innocent man so that it does not look weak. Vere, as a member of that quarterdeck, finds himself trapped by his own authority and must also act instead of speak in order to follow the law and preserve his authority. As Lawrence Douglas laments, Vere is barred from using words to bridge the great moat between the judge and his subject (150). The story that Vere



then tells to legitimize his unjust use of force serves as a cautionary tale about the limitations on communication that are latent in the law and its courts.

With the common thread of communication between narration and judgement, Billy Budd, Sailor weaves a tapestry in which the vulnerabilities of judgement, performed by Captain Vere, and narration, performed by the narrator, are depicted in a similar manner. Both men play a central role within the novella yet remain distanced from the reader and their fellow characters. The narrator reveals nothing about his identity to the reader, preventing himself from being classified as an officer or a member of the crew. Meanwhile, Captain Vere is so occupied by his interest in literature that the small fraction of men aboard the Bellipotent whom his rank deems appropriate to socialize with, find him a “dry and bookish gentleman... lacking the companionable quality” (20). Although Vere and the narrator are capable readers, who demonstrate an ability to peruse the thoughts of their subjects with an omniscience described as ‘divine,’ they both encounter limits upon their omniscience that prevent their extensive knowledge from becoming part of the narrative. Lastly, both men claim the ability to ‘read’ and judge the motives of other characters. However, the content of their judgements ultimately does not matter since “justice” aboard the Bellipotent during a time of mutiny is unchangeable, because all outcomes conform to a single mold that anticipates and prevents the feared collapse of authoritative control. The sentences, therefore, are always the same regardless of what the Captain and the narrator know.

Of course, there is one sizeable difference between the narrator and Captain Vere. The narrator's predicament appears to be a crisis of omniscience, a conflict between his total knowledge of events at some points in the story and his total lack of knowledge at other points in the story. In essence, the narrator grapples with what he knows and what he doesn't know about his own story. Vere's predicament, however, seems to be rooted in the conflict between knowing and saying. The Captain wrestles with what he alone knows about the events surrounding Claggart's death, and the manner through which he would attempt at presenting Billy's mitigated sentence to the crew in a language they would understand. By planing away at the knots in these dilemmas, it is possible for one to glean a new understanding of the narrative hole that spans Captain Vere's conversation with Billy about his sentencing under the Drumhead Court. After the narrator confesses that ' what took place at this interview was never known', he tries to make up for his lack of knowledge by cultivating various conjectures about what Billy and Vere might have said to each other (68). For instance, the narrator makes the observation that Vere was ' old enough to have been Billy's father,' a detail that is intended to evoke the image and sentiments of Abraham during his preparations to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, at God's request (68). Yet the narrator's conjectures prove merely to serve an aesthetic purpose because alluding to a Biblical father and son does not reveal anything about what Vere and Billy actually said to each other. Perhaps the presence of these conjectures serves to remind the reader about the impossibility of communication in this moment. With this in mind, the narrator's silence becomes revealing because it indicates how the judge and his subject, in a

sense, exist in separate spheres which no degree of communication is capable of uniting, since there will always be something that prevents the judge and the subject from sharing a united perspective. In Billy's case, two items are responsible for this divide: what Captain Vere cannot communicate to his crew, and a court that is "forced" to rule against the him in order to maintain its authority over the masses. Or, as Robert Cover eloquently states, 'The 'interpretations' or 'conversations' that are the preconditions for violent incarceration are themselves implements of violence' (1608). In other words, total communication between the prisoner and the judge is impossible so "true justice" is unattainable. As a result of this imperfect communication, violence is usually inflicted upon the prisoner, who will lose his freedom or even his life, as in the case of Billy Budd. In a similar sense, the narrator, like Vere and Billy, also finds himself in an impossible situation. Up until the moment of Billy's sentencing, the narrator has the capacity to trespass on the thoughts of both Billy and Vere. However, the very act of Vere passing his judgement onto Billy creates a dilemma in the structure of the narrative. Just as Vere finally understands that his words cannot span the divide of power and rank, the narrator, in his failure to tell Vere's thoughts is forced to recognize how his claimed omniscience is unattainable.