# BILLY BUDD AND THE TRANSPERSONAL SELF

**Iustin SFÂRIAC**[1]

## *Abstract*

Melville's characters are explorers. Not always able to justify their leaving home and the familiar, they nonetheless embark upon a quest that is not only physical but also moral. From Tommo to Pierre, they passionately identify with a quest in which they invest all their resources: physical, intellectual or spiritual. From this point of view, Billy Budd seems to be an atypical Melvillean hero since his mindlessness makes him a poor candidate for a spiritual enterprise. This paper intends to examine this apparent atypicality.

**Keywords:** Melville, Billy Budd, self, transcendence, transpersonal psychology

Many critics, such as E. L. Grant Watson, consider *Billy Budd* Melville's testament of acceptance (319-327). Other critics, such as Phil Withim speak about the same novel in terms of a testament of resistance; they claim that irony permeates the story and, to quote Phil Withim, Billy's final words "God bless Captain Vere" actually represent "the crowning irony and really the climax of the story, for he was hanged unjustly." (78-90). Still another critic, William Braswell, considers *Billy Budd* as an "inside narrative" in the sense of presenting Melville's inner development:

> In the character of Billy Budd he presents, one may say, the dominant tendencies of his young manhood; in Captain Vere he presents in essence the later Melville. (…) The crucial point in Melville's development came when he realized the necessity for curbing the wild, rebellious spirit manifested in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*. The fact that rebelliousness was inspired, in part at least, by the highest idealism was no justification for its being tolerated, especially since it threatened to destroy his whole being. (91-103).

Braswell's perspective makes sense if one analyzes the way in which the three protagonists relate to society. Indeed, Vere, Budd and Claggart may be seen as three possible types of relating to the community.

Billy Budd would then stand for the pure individuality; ignorant of anything beyond his own self; the fragment below is relevant in this sense:

[1] Assistant Professor, PhD, Petru Maior University, Târgu-Mureş



BDD-A3063 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:09 UTC)

> Asked by the officer (…) his place of birth, he replied, "Please, Sir, I don't know."
> "Don't know where you were born?- Who was your father?"
> "God knows, Sir."
> (…) "Do you know anything about your beginning?"
> "No, Sir. (…)
> Yes, Billy Budd was a foundling, a presumable by-blow, and, evidently, no ignoble one. Noble descent was as evident in him as in a blood horse. (*Billy Budd,* 1360-61)

Of high physical beauty, Billy is best described by his sheer individuality: with no ties to the surrounding environment, actually with no ties at all, he feels no need to build any; he lives for himself and by himself, so far as that is possible in a human community.

The fact of being a foundling comes to underline this very aspect. Billy's life does not develop under the sign of any general law or ideal; nothing beyond the mere individual, acting automatically according to the laws of nature.

Billy's noble descent may suggest, through the connotations of unselfishness and generosity, a connection with a higher instance, connection that was, however, severed, soon after his birth.

"The Handsome Sailor" is compared to Adam. Just like the latter, the former is characterized by physical perfection and, as far as his moral nature is concerned, by sheer ignorance. But how can ignorance be a solid foundation of a meaningful life? They will both lose their Eden – Billy in the sense of being forced to leave the *Rights of Man* and join the *Bellipotent*.

By no means can we suspect Melville of being ironic in dealing with the character of Billy Budd; on the contrary, an all-encompassing sympathy can be seen at work all throughout the novel. How, then, can one understand a statement, such as "Of self-consciousness he seemed to have little or none, or about as much as we may reasonably impute to a dog of Saint Bernard's breed"? The importance of the idea can only be emphasized by its recurrence in Chapter 21:

> This utterance, the full significance of which it was not at all likely that Billy took in, nevertheless caused him to turn a wistful interrogative look toward the speaker, a look in its dumb expressiveness not unlike that which a dog of generous breed might turn upon his master seeking in his face some elucidation of a previous gesture ambiguous to the canine intelligence. (1412)

Of "generous breed" or not, a dog provides no laudable comparison for a human being; comparing a person with such an animal can only serve one purpose: to express in the bluntest way possible the incompleteness of that person, the fact that he lacks that



BDD-A3063 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:09 UTC)

particular thing which, more than anything else, gives him his human quality: self-consciousness.

Without it, Billy is doomed, sooner or later, just like Biblical Adam or the Typees; ignorant of their own selves, they ignore the essence of the world at large and the slightest change in the environment will bring about the destruction of their worlds. For neither God nor Nature are under any obligation of preserving a safe, unchanging environment for those who will not grow.

It is now obvious that Melville does not see Budd as a role model; Billy's amorality is as deadly as Claggart's immorality. Thus, Budd beats a fellow sailor to death and there seems to have been a Bristol Molly that has been left behind without remorse. The killing of Claggart is only the top of the iceberg. One should also remember Billy's reaction when confronted with sin (uncontrolled rejection and desperate attempt to regain the lost peace of mind by burying annoying incidents deep in his mind) and his further incapacity to properly defend himself at the trial (he refuses to speak about his tempter).

All in all, Billy is one more Melvillean *isolato*. Lacking any trace of self-consciousness, he becomes unable to understand the others' motivations and will forever be an alien in their world, always admired and always laughed at. As Robert Milder points out, he is basically "good-natured but pre-intellectual and pre-societal" (98). But his isolation from other sailors is not particularly painful since no one dares to openly challenge him and because so many sincerely admire him. There is, however, still another isolation he (unconsciously) suffers from: he is unable to connect his own destiny to any higher design, to any higher authority, be it the King, or God or anything else in the world. On only one occasion could this gap be bridged: during the interview between Captain Vere and Billy, previous to the execution. It is significant that the young sailor's morale after the interview is surprisingly high for someone who has been sentenced to death. Indeed, Billy's excitement appears to have been elicited by his eventual discovery of meaning; having led a life similar to that of "a dog of Saint Bernard's breed," culminating in the disaster caused by the involuntary killing of Claggart, Billy Budd can find in death, paradoxically, a meaningfulness that has eluded him in life; it is precisely his death that restores to the *Bellipotent* an order that is indispensable under the double threat of mutinies within the English fleet and attacks from French enemy ships.

Melville often associates spiritual flaws or sufferance with physical pain. Thus, in *Typee* he bestows upon Tommo a mysterious pain in the leg, pain actually generated by the latter's fear of losing his identity, a pain impossible to cure without leaving the Typee valley. Various other characters such as the man of Roorootoo display the same physical signs of spiritual flaws or sufferance. Billy Budd is no exception: his moral and intellectual impotence (resulting in isolation from anything beyond and above his individual nature and total lack of self-consciousness) finds a representation in Billy's occasional stuttering.

Captain Vere, on the other hand, is the most balanced and the most serene character conceived by Melville. A "nature constituted", he is "Melville's complete man



BDD-A3063 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:09 UTC)

of action, mind and heart" (Stern 1957, 225). Just like the other two characters, Vere is noble. His is a nobility of merit as much as one of birth. Unlike Budd, who ignores his nobility as he ignores everything else and unlike Claggart who works hard at hiding his origin, Captain Vere is the only one to fully acknowledge his own. His being "allied to the higher nobility" is just one of the elements suggesting Vere's attachment to the general, to those instances and forms that are likely to connect individual human lives not only to the rest of society but also to the entire humankind.

Vere (as opposed to both Budd and Claggart) has no remarkable figure; his individuality is difficult to notice but in action:

> Ashore in the garb of a civilian, scarce anyone would have taken him for a sailor (…). It was not out of keeping with these traits that on a passage when nothing demanded his paramount action, he was the most undemonstrative of men. (1369)

His discourse displays the same lack of personalization: avoiding the familiar tone, it is meant to express and illustrate ideas (with the risk of sounding pedantic):

> (…) not only did the Captain's discourse never fall into the jocosely familiar, but in illustrating of any point touching the stirring personages and events of the time he would be as apt to cite some historic character or incident of antiquity as that he would cite from the moderns. (1372)

> Last but not least, Captain Vere's convictions come to emphasize the fact that his life has been dedicated to a higher design, to a project that encompasses not only his own life but that of humankind at large; Vere disinterestedly opposes fashionable revolutionary theories because they seem to him "incapable of embodiment in lasting institutions" and "at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind." (1371)

As such, Captain Vere illustrates a new type of accomplishment, one that goes far beyond the experience of fulfillment generated by good physical health and drive satisfaction. Instead, Vere strives for more; he senses the need to transcend himself and to devote himself to something bigger than his individual life. This includes service to people or to self-defined aims that eventually contribute to communal good, because it is only in doing so that one finds existential fulfillment. Viktor Frankl, one of the pioneers of transpersonal psychology, said: "I thereby understand the primordial anthropological fact that being human is being always directed at and pointing to something or someone other than oneself: to a challenge to meet or another human being to encounter, a cause



BDD-A3063 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:09 UTC)

to serve or a person to love. Only to the extent that someone is living out this self-transcendence of human existence, is he truly human or has he become his true self. He becomes so, not by concerning himself with his self's actualization, but by forgetting himself and giving himself, overlooking himself and focusing outward." (Frankl 1978, 35).

*Billy Budd*, then, may be seen as the depiction of three possible attitudes towards the necessity of finding meaning in our lives (meaning that cannot ignore what is above the individual): Billy represents the ignorance of such a need; Claggart stands for the lip-service acknowledgement of the existence of the general meaning and for its simultaneous rejection. Captain Vere is the only one to consciously accept the law (the general) and adhere to it with all of his heart and mind. In Gail Coffler's words, "Vere is the executor whose judgement is necessarily severe for the good of the whole, at the expense of the individual" (76).

Eventually, Captain Vere dies a heroic death fighting the *Atheist*, (name suggesting the refusal of a higher authority) but without remorse: despite the often rigid demands of society, his dedicated service to it has bestowed upon his life the precious gift of meaningfulness. This gift cannot avert the violent end Vere shares with both those who ignore the existence of an order above the individual (Billy Budd) and those who acknowledge the existence of such an order but refuse to observe it (Claggart). However, just like Nelson, Vere has, at least, the moral consolation of acting in agreement with a higher, superior authority, and, eventually, the feeling of being part and parcel of a higher design; again like Nelson, Vere is a preserver of social forms and order, of what Camille Paglia calls our "frail barrier against nature"(3), against this "festering hornet's nest of aggression and overkill" (28).

It is true, Melville could have saved at least Billy Budd; in doing so he would have avoided a number of misinterpretations (Vere seen as a dictator, Billy's last words regarded as an irony directed against Vere, etc.). Luckily, however, by choosing to give his characters their share of misfortune, Melville did more than simply avoid an aesthetic blunder; he settled the issue of innocence once and for all. Innocence, Melville implies, cannot be a valid answer to our dilemmas (as a last minute salvation of Billy could have intimated); ignorance can hardly be a solid foundation for any long-lasting achievement; neither is isolation a solution. Without a firm connection with a general sense one's life can hardly know any accomplishment.

This conclusion seems to be the ultimate truth that Melville, "the greatest seer and poet of the sea" according to D. H. Lawrence (Chase 11), passes down to his posterity. And, in so doing, Melville joins his best realized character, Captain Vere, in his role of conscious preserver of the order and forms of society, our only barrier, as Camille Paglia points out, against the heavy price exacted by Nature: the dissolution in its bosom. Society, therefore, remains our only way of creating and preserving our identity, the only way of transforming a life threatened by biological decay and mutability into a meaningful passage.



BDD-A3063 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:09 UTC)

**Bibliography:**

Braswell, William. "*Billy Budd:* an Inside Narrative," American Literature 29 Feb. 1957: 133-146.
Chase, Richard. *Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962.
Coffler, Gail. "Religion, myth, and meaning in the art," in Donald Yanella, ed., *New Essays on Billy Budd*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
Frankl, Viktor E. *The Unheard Cry for Meaning. Logotherapy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978.
Melville, Herman. *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*. Vol. 3 of *Melville: Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd*, edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1984.
Milder, Robert, ed. *Critical Essays on Melville's Billy Budd, Sailor*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989.
Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Randon House, Inc., 1991.
Stern, Milton R. *The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1957.
Watson, E. L. Grant. "Melville's Testament of Acceptance." *New England Quarterly* 6, no. 2 1933: 319–327.
Withim, Phil. "The Case Against Captain Vere." *Modern Language Quarterly* 20, June 1959: 115-27.



BDD-A3063 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:09 UTC)