Introduction

When Herman Melville died in 1891, he could hardly have imagined that *Billy Budd* would become one of his most widely read prose fictions; after some five years of working on it, he left the story in a manuscript not to be published until 1924. More than three quarters of a century after its appearance it remains rich for serious general readers, literary critics, legal and military historians, and, of course, college and university students, especially in literature courses (*Billy Budd* is one of the most anthologized of Melville’s writings). Others intrigued by this prose fiction are engaged in the ongoing dialogue about the prerogatives and responsibilities of civilized institutions and those in charge of maintaining and preserving their authority and power.

The story Melville was developing evolved into a tale deceptively straightforward in its outlines: Billy Budd, a cheery, popular, and young English merchant sailor—a literal bastard—is impressed into the English Navy to serve aboard a man-of-war, a “ponderously cannoned” and “majestic” battleship. This all takes place “In the time before steamships,” as Melville opens his tale, during a 1790s naval battle between the French and English. Once aboard, the “handsome” and enormously popular young sailor immediately arouses the darkest passions of the vessel’s chief police officer, John Claggart, the battleship *Bellipotent*’s Master-at-Arms. Billy
has left his merchant vessel, the *Rights of Man*, and as millions who have served in the military, he is caught in the grinding gears of institutional procedures and justice. Maligned, falsely accused by Claggart of fomenting a mutiny, Billy retaliates in his fury in perhaps the only manner of which he is capable under the circumstances: He decks him with a punch that kills him. But Melville’s tale does not end simply with justice, or what some would argue passes for it, but with justice’s miscarriage, or plain injustice. Captain The Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere’s agony of decision that leads to Billy’s execution perhaps bears the tale’s more important meaning. For it is he who effects the handsome sailor’s hanging and suffers remorse and guilt for the rest of his short life.

What of the political conditions which create such an impossible situation? Further, what about institutions other than the military which judges Billy’s case? Is Billy another historical and perhaps representative victim? (Consider the narrator’s recollection of the African sailor and his multicultural mates in the book’s second paragraph.) Is he for some readers in the twenty-first century yet another casualty of the insidious, unrelenting, determined and determining forces that doom members of one or another class or race in an array of civilizations and social arrangements to be controlled and crushed by a ruling elite with an eye principally on maintaining its own power? The United States and other countries have long been engaged in the discussion arising from such queries. Was Melville anticipating issues before modern societies, and is this why we read him? Or are such readers interpreting and bending Melville and his work to fit the agenda they wish to promote or at least have discussed? These are just some of the queries and speculations that might be raised by serious readers of Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd, Sailor* (*An Inside Narrative*).
Introduction

What were Melville’s views on the rights of man, not the ship from which the handsome sailor was impressed, but the fundamental rights and prerogatives asserted and protected so vigorously in the eighteenth century, which had ended fewer than two decades before Melville’s birth in 1819? More fundamentally, how concerned was he about the democratic and republican ideas which were articulated in the United States’s founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights? Melville was the grandson of Revolutionary heroes; his mother was from Albany, New York, and of Dutch background, and his father was the son of a Bostonian who participated in that city’s notorious Tea Party. The question of just how committed Melville actually was to democratic principles, how much he was one of the so-called “People,” the common sailors, has been debated since the Melville Renaissance began in the 1920s when Billy Budd was resurrected from the proverbial bread box in the attic.

This man was connected by birth to the privileged, the elite in current jargon. He enjoyed none of the trappings of money and position, however. To get some sense of the quandary faced by the young man of genteel upbringing, one need go no further than the struggles, some of them comic, of the title character in the author’s fourth book, Redburn (1850). Melville, whose family’s financial circumstances were severely reduced by the death of the father when the boy was twelve, shipped out as a merchant seaman at the age of nineteen (the journey was a month-and-a-half round-trip to England) and spent a few years in the South Pacific whale fishery, jumping his original vessel and signing aboard at least one other. This was the personal experience on which Moby-Dick (1851) and other early works were based. After some months in Hawaii he joined the United States Navy for the length of a
voyage around Cape Horn and back home to the northeastern United States. While on the battleship *United States* he met Jack Chase, the heroic Captain of the Maintop, to whom *Billy Budd* was dedicated about a half century later. The fictionalized rendering of Melville’s own military service is recounted in his fifth book *White-Jacket* (1850).

So the battleship world young Billy is forced into was not unknown to his creator. In 1849, Melville crossed the Atlantic mainly to arrange the English publication of *White-Jacket*, which among other concerns presented a harshly critical attack on problems in the United States Navy. (This timely book contributed to lessening the severity of punishments such as flogging in the US Navy.) But Melville had not lost his love of the sea, writing in his journal that “Before breakfast, went up to the mast-head, by way of gymnastics.” Two days later, October 15, he noted with evident pride that “My occasional feats in the rigging are regarded as a species of tight-rope dancing.”¹ It was only five years and five books since he had returned from his Pacific adventure, and though he may have grown at a colossal rate intellectually, he enjoyed showing off – perhaps strutting a bit as many military men do. His knowledge of the maintopmen enabled him to understand how elite, daring, and distinguished these men were compared to the “underlings” on the decks below.² The topmen flew without parachutes in the time before airplanes.

One of the pleasures of Melville’s crossing was the company of George J. Adler, a young professor of German at New York University, with whom Melville seems to have had pleasure passing the time discussing metaphysics, flying high in the air of abstraction. On the 18th he records that he “Spent the entire morning in the main-top with” Adler.³ Here is the new intellectual Melville pursuing his new interests in the haunts of his young, old-salt self of a half decade and more earlier.
Such youthful experiences are never forgotten. We know that he was as bothered by flogging, as is evident in *Billy Budd* as it had been in *White-Jacket*. But it appears likely that forty-or-so years later, in the late 1880s, time also may have buffed other aspects of his early adventures in the fleets to a ruddy, glowing nostalgia. The elderly Melville probably enjoyed recalling, even reminiscing about his days on the square-riggers, the setting of the tragic tale he unfolded.

Discipline on the military vessel was different from that on board ships in the private fleets. At the time Melville was in the Pacific from 1841 to 1844, his cousin Guert Gansevoort sat on the court which condemned to death three alleged mutineers, including Philip Spencer, the son of Secretary of War John C. Spencer. The case was a major event and was even mentioned occasionally in the public press when he was writing *Billy Budd*; it was no doubt one of the streams flowing into Melville’s meditation on Billy and those he touches and who touch him.4

The *Billy Budd* genetic text reveals just how much Melville pondered the situation about which he was writing: how he kept returning to it, modifying it, shifting and refining character portraits, thematic emphases, bringing the tale’s actors out from the shadows and returning them there. Which brings us to the question of what specifically in a word or few Melville was trying to say. What was the truth he was trying to convey?

The short answer is that we do not know. As long as a reader is not intent on bending or warping the author’s text to accommodate an ideological position, for example, at the expense of fathoming the statement the author is trying to make, then a serious search for the writer’s meaning can take place. This is what professional literary critics and serious amateurs do, or should do, as a matter of course when engaging a text. Granted, disagreements will occur due to one or another reader’s disposition or predilections. But the problem
of finding the author’s meaning is compounded by a writer such as Melville. For he was a philosophical skeptic.\(^1\)

To begin addressing ourselves to this and related issues, we must first acknowledge his skepticism, his wariness of certainty, assumed truth, or, to use the philosophical term, certitude. One might point to numerous passages in his collected writings to demonstrate this. His third prose work, *Mardi* (1849) and his long poem *Clarel* (1876) are often viewed as speculations about truth-seeking. In the former, which Melville began a few years after making his smashing debut as a serious and popular New York author, he began with the formula he used in *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) to earn some celebrity with a tasteful reading public. But after *Mardi*’s opening chapters which promised yet another South Seas adventure, Melville swamped his volume by testing the store of knowledge he had managed to gain in the few short years since he had returned from his Pacific adventure. Political, social, aesthetic observations, for instance, were packed aboard; philosophical and theological speculation and rumination, probably intended to make the volume fly higher in the minds of his audience, turned to ballast. The volume sank – failed. Yet Melville demonstrated how much he was learning, how intensely he was reading, reflecting, and writing. In short, he revealed how powerful an intellectual he had become during the several years that had passed since his return from the Pacific.

Melville’s intellectualism, his continuing quest for ideas, simply made the possibilities of truth too elusive for him—or any intelligent person for that matter— to settle on a position. On his way to the Holy Land, Melville visited Nathaniel Hawthorne in England; the latter noted in his journal that evening, November 12, 1856: “Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything
that lies beyond human ken, and he informed me that he had ‘pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated;’ but he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists — and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before — in wandering to and fro over these deserts. . . . He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us.”

Two passages in Moby-Dick, the centerpiece of the Melville canon, make the point. Ishmael, the book’s narrator, provides an analogy about the virtually nonexistent possibilities for a human to achieve truth. In a rather manic passage Ishmael, having just read the wall tablets in the Seamen’s Bethel commemorating some of those lost in the whale fishery, realizes the enormous danger he faces. In bursts of almost hysterical fear, sarcasm, fatalistic resignation, he says at the end of Chapter 7: “Yes, there is death in this business of whaling – a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity. But what then? Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance. Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through water, and thinking that water the thinnest of air.” The assertion signals Ishmael’s growing philosophical skepticism and his increasing caution, ambiguity, reluctance, even refusal, to make commitments. He alone survives the mad quest after the white whale; the rest of the crew are killed. Ishmael may give himself to Ahab’s obsession near the start of the voyage, but withdraws into a safer “Ifs eternally”
attitude, a position more in keeping with Melville’s own tentative, cautious philosophical view.

Some readers argue that forty years later in *Billy Budd*, Melville would raise the same sort of doubts about Claggart and Vere’s monomaniacal behavior in handling the case of the handsome sailor, paralleling their pursuits with Ahab’s quest after the white whale.

In a key passage in which the certitudes, among other possibilities, are being pondered, Ishmael describes humanity’s life cycle: “There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause: – through infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence doubt (the common doom), then skepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood’s pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally.”

One might even pursue the question as it is approached by pondering the very name of the narrator in Melville’s sixth long fiction. The opening line is so memorable it entered the popular culture some seventy-five years ago during the beginning of the Melville Renaissance; it reads, “Call me Ishmael.” We are invited, or allowed, to call him by the name of the biblical wanderer, but it is not necessarily his name. Wandering, an elusive identity, and skepticism are linked and compressed nicely in the biblical allusion to Ishmael which Melville’s contemporaries would have caught immediately. The *Billy Budd* narrator’s not having a name is probably not without significance.

So ascertaining the statement or “message” Melville is conveying in his writing is a matter of debate among serious readers. There are no simple, reductive answers, even to apparently simple queries such as the meaning of the statement
Melville is making in *Billy Budd*. His canon is suffused by ambiguous statements, hints, sly pokes in the readers’ ribs about the search for truth. One might even suggest that as with many people as they age, Melville became less sure of any verities, however many or few he had ever embraced, even tentatively. Hawthorne, who first met him in 1850, made his 1856 journal comments about his friend’s intellectual wanderings more than thirty years before Melville wrote *Billy Budd*.

For the impatient or reductive person this can make reading Melville frustrating. This is especially true in periods of cultural tension during which societies are polarized or fractured. In such times, emotions run high, passions rage, and people look to their leaders for direct, simple answers and solutions, easily comprehended and readily assented to and effected. In Melville’s lifetime there were issues such as “Manifest Destiny” played out, for example, in the Mexican War of the late 1840s. Melville publicly attacked it in his satirical essays on Zachary Taylor, at the time a general and soon to become President of the United States. Among the other tensions, one might consider issues of public debate such as slavery, abolition, Southern secession, and the countless deeply emotional questions Melville and his contemporaries faced in the expansive post-Civil War boom – Twain’s gilded age. In the twentieth century Melville’s voice spoke eloquently to cultural shocks such as the Vietnam conflict and all the attendant issues bursting from the turbulent 1960s which witnessed questionings of fundamental values, beliefs, mores that will continue to vex, even torment, cultures for decades to come.

The authors of the new essays presented here are writing in the serious tradition of inquiry about Melville’s meanings that has been in progress for almost a century. The center of discussion during seventy-five of those years has been in colleges and universities, principally in the United States.
but also wherever American literature has been and is being read.

To use one of Melville’s more widely familiar analogies, drawn from the whale fishery, what the present authors and others are engaged in is a cutting into the *Billy Budd* text, seeking as Ahab’s crew did a “little lower layer.” Whalers sliced ever deeper into their prey to retrieve its oil and other valuable products; in search of meaning critical crews carve deeper and deeper into the text’s body. And as already suggested, what they discover is varied.

Perhaps Merton M. Seals, Jr., the late dean of *Billy Budd* studies, said it best: “But how to read that final story, as its narrator pointedly declares, ‘everyone must determine for himself,’ and it is tempting to say as many interpretations have been advanced as there have been readers and critics.”

The contributors present a variety of interest, knowledge, methodologies, and critical postures, each intended to bring forth and illuminate the richness buried in Melville’s contemplation of the issues to which he was addressing himself. It is a dozen years since it was suggested that “Among the areas most promising for future investigation are Melville’s late reading, his response to contemporary social and political developments, his interest in the arts and in myth.” These accurately anticipated the focus of some of the more important recent Melville criticism. But before turning to the essays collected here, a review of the book’s critical history is in order.

Since *Billy Budd*’s posthumous appearance, it has gone through stages of interpretation, some clearly fashions or even trends, by professionals and general readers. When first published in the 1920s, *Billy Budd* was interpreted on the obvious level of allegory between good and evil; then as interest turned to Melville’s life as “spiritual