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## **The Handsome Sailor, the Cult of Beauty, Moral Dilemmas and Political Imperatives in “Billy Budd, Sailor”**

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**RÉSUMÉ.** « Le beau marin » incarne la synthèse précaire du Beau et du Bien - du Bien public comme des valeurs morales - avant qu'elle ne vole en éclat. Lorsqu'il est condamné à mort, la raison d'État l'emporte sur toute considération esthétique ou morale. Or, paradoxalement, l'esthétique et l'éthique, loin d'être proscrites, en viennent à être subordonnées à l'état d'exception car ce dernier, pour emporter l'adhésion, doit se parer d'une aura esthétique et éthique. Néanmoins, le récit, par son style, témoigne du fait que l'esthétique résiste de façon irréductible à la mission politique, pseudo-morale, qui lui est assignée.

**ABSTRACT.** *“The handsome sailor” embodies in his own person the transient conjunction of Beauty and Benevolence, of moral and political virtues. When he is sentenced to death, those values prove to be conflicting ones as reasons of state prevail over any aesthetic or moral considerations. And yet, paradoxically enough, far from being banned altogether, aesthetics and ethics are made to subserve political ends because realpolitik, in order to enforce the martial law convincingly, must be credited with a semblance of aesthetic and moral aura. Nevertheless, the intricate style of the novella evinces the fact that aesthetics will not be harnessed to a political or moral purpose.*

**MOTS-CLÉS :** esthétique, éthique, politique, le beau marin, horreurs

**KEYWORDS:** *aesthetics, ethics, politics, the handsome sailor, horrors*

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*In memory of André Dupuis and Marc Nicolai*

Billy Budd, dubbed “the Handsome Sailor,” embodies in his own person the living picture of beauty as well as a model of virile virtue and moral integrity: “The moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make.” (Melville 44) The epithet bestowed on him means both grace, gallantry and goodness (“I’ll beat thee into handsomeness” is used in this sense by Ajax in *Troilus and Cressida*, Act II, sc.1). The common sailor chosen as a foretopman who is also called “Beauty” (72, 83) on account of “his significant personal beauty”(77) is also referred to as a “moral phenomenom” (78), a moral standard for all the members of the crew, as if his outstanding physical looks were “the veritable unobstructed outcome of the innermost man” (45) and as if his beauty coupled with his basic good-heartedness ensured the political cohesion of the community, their common end, ultimately. Therefore, Billy Budd, who is described as “a cynosure” (44, 50), epitomizes the singular conjunction of aesthetics and ethics and, as the idol of the crew, he constitutes the cement of the political microcosm that a man-of-war is.

His impressment and his transfer by force from the merchant ship aptly named *Rights of Man* to the *Bellipotent* entails more than the suspension of the customary rights any subject of his Majesty is normally entitled to by the *Habeas Corpus*. The action takes place in a state of emergency (in 1797, that is to say, in the context of the recent Nore Mutiny), and it reveals the growing divide between moral standards and political imperatives, aesthetic sensibility and the sense of duty. Throughout the novella, strains will increasingly appear between the overwhelming sense of beauty elicited by Billy Budd on the one hand and moral musts or political necessities that prove to be of paramount importance on the other hand. Captain Vere will be locked in a dilemma and torn between his sense of military duty and his moral conviction that Billy Budd is fundamentally innocent. No matter how sensitive he may be to “the handsome sailor”’s attractiveness or to his good nature, he will ban aesthetic or ethic concerns and focus his attention solely on the political state of emergency. At this juncture, aesthetics is no longer integral to ethics and politics (as means to an end); both aesthetics and ethics end up being sacrificed on the altar of politics.

Thus, good-hearted Captain Vere unwittingly acts as a deputy and a surrogate of sorts for the heinous man that Claggart is and, by taking justice in his own hands, he proceeds to manipulate not only the handsome sailor but the court-martial into sentencing Billy Budd to death. The narrative recounts the process whereby martial law relays and relieves (in the military sense of the word) Claggart’s unfounded accusations and hints at the “moral obliquities” (52) that brew under the guise of would-be military duty. Whereas Billy Budd’s “simple nature remain[s] unsophisticated by those moral obliquities which are not in every case incompatible with that manufactured thing known as respectability” (52), Captain Vere’s moral stance seems equivocal. His duplicity is pitted up against Billy Budd’s self-evident simplicity and, as a consequence, instead of being at one and of

betokening integrity in every respect, aesthetic, ethical and political values come to diverge and betray their two-faced character. We readers are made to understand that, for all his self-righteous, self-aggrandizing attitude, Captain Vere might indulge in double talk and double dealing for some obscure reason.

All in all, the so-called “reasons of state” he invokes might be but another name for fundamentally irrational urges: the fear of a mutiny that might jeopardize his personal ambitions or, even worse, unnameable desires that are denied in the name of public morals. The underlying immorality of Captain Vere’s handling of the situation is thus intimated. Moreover, the moral “cant” (62) which serves to justify and cover up his arbitrary decision is laid bare by means of ironical insinuations. The narrative also deflates the spectacle of punishment—a horrendous perversion of the aesthetic canons of taste—which is made to serve military power that masquerades as a civil religion of sorts in order to sanctify the sanction. The toll it exacts passes for a “sacrifice” in the name of the sacred interest of the Nation. Realpolitik in order to be effective must perform a faithfully orchestrated show of justice and thus supersedes the part played by religious rites, even as it demands the internalization of military rules and commands as a code of conduct, no matter how arbitrary they may seem. Ethics and aesthetics, far from being banished altogether, are thus deviously enlisted and embattled for the sake of National Security and Sacred Unity, as we shall see in a second stage.

And yet, “aesthetics” which is shorthand for the play of the senses—in every sense of the word “sense”, whether it be, ambiguously enough, sensitivity, sensibility or common sense, the assumed sense of words and so on - remains basically a “loose can(n)on” that cannot be harnessed to a purportedly moral or political task. What surfaces gradually throughout the narrative is an alternative aesthetics, not that of classical beauty relying on the symmetry of forms that supposedly betokens moral and political harmony, but the aesthetics that brings to light unimaginable moral horrors and unnameable political strains. Sexual dissidence, illicit homosexual attraction, barred out by the prevailing ethos (in late eighteenth-century England as well as in late nineteenth-century Victorian America) or severely punished by military authorities keen on “honor”, might innervate the would-be platonic spirit of “camaraderie” and the would-be innocent worship of “the Handsome Sailor”, the mascot of the crew in a body. High and Low can no longer be ascribed a proper place of their own in such a revolutionary aesthetics that embraces what is outlawed morally or politically. *Billy Budd, Sailor* retraces the emergence of that counter-aesthetics that is not merely immoral and politically subversive but, above all, a-moral and a-political, just as the unruly play of letters (whether they be missives or atomized alphabetical letters) proves to be utterly beyond the pale of the law.

I shall therefore study the entanglement of aesthetics, ethics and politics in *Billy Budd, Sailor*, the way in which they are gradually dissociated and, finally, radically disunited and yet, enmeshed in that knotty case, the way in which they can be discriminated between as distinct values even as they pretend to pass for one

another and supersede one another through devious displacements and disguises. *Billy Budd, Sailor* literally hangs on their linkage and their unraveling.

### **The Sacrifice of Aesthetics and Ethics on the Altar of Realpolitik**

To begin with, as I already suggested, the trial of “the handsome sailor” is a matter of conscience for Captain Vere, who feels “the clash of military duty with moral scruple—scruple vitalized by compassion,” (110) but his management of the crisis prevails over qualms of conscience. Immediate action must be taken on account of the impending political crisis: Britain is at war with Revolutionary France, and the recent mutinies in the British fleet (notably the Nore mutiny) seriously jeopardize national security. Political imperatives outweigh any sense of moral sympathy “when it is imperative promptly to act” (114). Given the state of emergency, there is no time left for moral deliberation (Spanos 79-86). Drastic decisions must be taken at once. Thus, realpolitik finally takes precedence over “the moral dilemma” (105) Captain Vere as a person is faced with. Hence his about-face in his attitude toward Billy Budd, shortly after the tragic event. So far, he has always acted as a fatherly if paternalistic figure in the face of the foundling, but he suddenly turns his back on him and changes into a strict “military disciplinarian” (100).

Slowly he [Captain Vere] uncovered his face, and the effect was as if the moon emerging from eclipse should reappear with quite another aspect than that which had gone into hiding. The father in him, manifested toward Billy thus far in the scene was replaced by the strict disciplinarian. (99-100)

While early critics (E.L. Grant Watson, Milton Stern, Merton Sealts) read the “inside narrative” as a conservative “Testament of Acceptance” focused on Captain Vere’s inner turmoil and the tragic dilemma he was faced with, later New Historicist critics (Bruce Franklin, Brook Thomas, Michael Rogin) have challenged such a literal reading of “a moral dilemma involving aught of the tragic” (105) and underscored the narrator’s scathing sense of irony. See Robert Milder’s detailed survey of the heated debate between the “Acceptance” school and the “Resistance” school (Milder 3-18). As Gregg Crane recently pointed out, “*Billy Budd* is more than a dry courtroom report on an actual case; it is an “inside narrative” of Vere’s reasoning, vicariously engaging us in that process and simultaneously spurring us to question it.

While sympathizing with Vere and the difficulty of his situation, yet impelled by the question “why must Billy die,” the engaged reader makes further inquiry.” (Crane 150). True, the novella, which is restricted to the inner life of a particular ship in closed quarters (Burrows 39) and focused on the interior life of his captain (as in chapter 22), foregrounds qualms of conscience as opposed to martial discipline, as T. Walter Herbert remarks: “Captain Vere cannot enforce the Articles of War without acute inward distress, because Billy has awakened bedrock moral instincts that affirm his innocence. The officers are tempted to defect from their

duty, just as the crew is tempted to mutiny, and the ruling order of the warship is brought to the brink of collapse.” (Herbert 57-58)

Nevertheless, Captain Vere’s stature as a tragic hero worthy of the “the great epics and dramas” (58) is undercut by his ambiguous response that can be put down either to his Machiavellian tactics (Terestchenko 421-425) or to his uncalculating irrationality; indeed, Captain Vere passes judgment on him in a state of frenzy, even before Billy Budd has been formally summoned for trial: “It is the divine judgment on Ananias! Look! [...] Struck dead by an angel of God! yet the angel must hang!” (100-101). His unintelligible judgment (a hint at God’s punishment visited on Ananias in *Acts* 5, 1-5) pronounced in the presence of non-plussed witnesses precedes the summary trial and conditions beforehand the final death-sentence. Captain Vere is fully convinced of Billy Budd’s innocence, and yet Billy Budd must be convicted of murder. Billy Budd’s necessary conviction overrides Captain Vere’s heartfelt convictions.

Captain Vere’s unrelenting severity has been approved of by Hannah Arendt, who read the novella as a plea for Men’s Law, regardless of God’s justice. According to her, Captain Vere was only right to enforce the martial law and to condemn Billy Budd, no matter how angelical he was at heart and no matter how devilish Claggart may have been. His concern as a law-abiding captain was neither to judge budding angels nor born devils (which was beyond his ken, since it was God’s privilege), but with his men under his sole responsibility as the commander-in-chief. “The tragedy is that the law is made for men, and neither for angels nor for devils” (84) Hannah Arendt concluded in *On Revolution*. According to Hannah Arendt, Billy Budd’s impressment, his kidnapping from *The Rights of Man* and his transfer on board the *Bellipotent* did not involve on the narrator’s part a devious critique of the abrogation of the Bills of Rights or the nullification of the *Habeas Corpus* on the strength of the war effort. The supremacy of military power in case of war is encoded in the ship’s name, *Belli-potent*, because, according to Hannah Arendt, Melville, like Burke and Bentham, intended to expose the so-called “Rights of Man” promulgated by the French National Assembly and defended by Thomas Paine as a verbal fallacy designed to cover up the Reign of Terror. To her, Billy Budd was a “terrorist” (an English word coined by Burke in 1795) in the sense that, by striking Claggart to death, he proved the hidden violence that lurked beneath his archangelical appearance, just as the lofty ideals of the French Revolution covered heinous crimes. Billy Budd was justiciable and, therefore, liable to be sentenced to capital punishment and Captain Vere was praiseworthy to have him tried by court martial because, to him, military duty ranked higher than moral conscience.

Hannah Arendt’s bloodcurdling critical judgment on the novella has been systematical reappraised by more recent literary critics like Bruce Franklin (202-206), and Brook Thomas (211-212), who have pointed out Captain Vere’s repeated breaches of the law (“sanctioned irregularities” 66) even as he claimed to stick to its letter. True, killing an officer was a hanging offence for a common sailor according to article 22, but the selfsame Articles of War also made it clear that a

captain was not authorized to punish a seaman beyond twelve lashes. Furthermore, Captain Vere, as a Post-Captain, was not entitled to convene a court-martial, for the case should have been referred to a superior jurisdiction under the leadership of the Squadron Commander, a point which did not escape the surgeon of the *Bellipotent*, who nevertheless does not dare gainsay Captain Vere, lest he should be accused of mutiny in his turn (102); besides, a court-martial could consist only of commanders and captains (which was not the case here 104) ; and finally, the death sentence could not be carried out unless it had been reported to and approved of by the lord commissioners of the Admiralty. As a consequence, Billy Budd's summary trial and his expeditious execution are blatantly illegal from beginning to end.

Besides, Captain's Vere personal interference with the course of events should be underlined. Indeed, he is responsible for Billy Budd's fateful gesture, not only because he organized the confrontation between the two men, assuming that he had the situation in hand, but also because, somehow, he unintentionally prompts Billy to react. His commands are ambiguous enough since, at first, he orders him to speak ("Speak, man, defend yourself" 98) and then, when he realizes Billy Budd has lost his voice because he is liable to stammer in such circumstances, he pronounces the ill-fated words which have pernicious effects: "There is no hurry, my boy. Take your time, take your time" (99). Billy Budd was bound to be puzzled by such contradictory summons, tantamount to a double bind. Unintentionally, the captain, who is in turn commanding and sympathetic, suits the action to the word, by laying his hand on Billy Budd in a fatherly or friendly way. But the equivocal gesture of patting him affectionately (compounded by his no less ambiguous words—calling Billy Budd now "man", now "my boy" or even more puzzlingly, "my man" 106) immediately triggers an unexpected response. For lack of finding the right words to defend himself, tongue-tied Billy Budd strikes Claggart dead with his bare fist as if the death-blow dealt by Billy Budd, at the slightest touch of Captain Vere's hand, had been the right arm of military power by proxy, a synecdoque for "the Armed Forces" at large (with a pun on "Arm(ed)").

Not only had Captain Vere a hand in this murder case but he sees to it that the act alone should be judged, regardless of Billy Budd's extenuating circumstances. Billy Budd's act in the sense of deed falls under the Mutiny Act and is judged accordingly. Billy's transfer from the *Rights of Man* to the *Bellipotent* and his subsequent indictment for manslaughter can almost be read as a political allegory of the way in which a Bill (in the sense of a draft aimed at securing fundamental rights) came to be vetoed and displaced by an Act (the Mutiny Act of the British Articles of War that was not so different from the Alien and Sedition Act passed by the U.S Congress in 1787 that curbed the initial Bill of Rights of 1791) on account of an ill-fated gesture (an accidental act) that theoretically fell foul of the law as a statutory offence. By a sleight of hand, at the expense of the handsome sailor (who keeps being manhandled and manipulated), Captain Vere's "averments"(96) in the sense of assertions ("Budd's intent or non intent is nothing to the purpose" 112) set in motion the supposedly legal proceedings and, in the

process, an accidental manslaughter comes to qualify as first-degree murder and, by and by, as an incriminating clue testifying to Billy Budd's plan to plot a mutiny. An "avermment" in the sense of a mere surmise gradually grows into a dead certainty and ends up being tantamount to a living proof as in Claggart's specious argumentation: "And for some of these averments, he added, the substantiating proof was not far" (96). By degrees, Billy Budd unwittingly comes to substantiate Claggart's slanderous accusation, so that the victim and the villain of the play finally trade parts:

In the jugglery of circumstances [...], innocence and guilt personified in Claggart and Budd in effect changed places. In a legal view the apparent victim of the tragedy was he who had sought to victimize a man blameless; and the indisputable deed of the latter, navally regarded, constituted the most heinous of military crimes. (103)

Barbara Johnson (245) and Sharon Cameron (181-182) have rightly pointed out the eerie similarities that blur the boundary line between the two men, for all their apparent antagonism.

Vere summons a court martial on the ground of enforcing the law, but he violates it by the same token since he usurps supreme authority instead of referring the case to his superiors. His decision is a departure from the rules that govern the state of emergency, which already entails the suspension of the customary rights protected by the Common Law. As in the controversial *Somers* case in which Melville's own cousin was directly involved and which left him shattered till the end of his life—as Michael Rogin has shown (296-297)—, a would-be mutineer was speedily sentenced to the death penalty. The summary trial of Philip Spencer, in 1848, was a mockery of justice and, ironically enough, the so-called culprit happened to be the 19-year old son of the U.S. Secretary of War, John C. Spencer (Barton 212-219).

No matter how different from that historical precedent the case here may be, Captain Vere, as numerous critics have amply demonstrated—notably such knowledgeable legal experts as Richard Posner (73) and Richard Weisberg (30), clearly assumes leadership in an illicit way. Not only does he argue that "given the exceptional situation of the *Bellipotent* - a situation of war, with mutiny impending—the exceptional in the case of Billy Budd must be put aside, as well as all emotional turmoil it might give rise to", as Thomas Claviez has aptly pointed out (37), so that "one exception—expediency—seems to exempt all other exemptions but itself" (37) but "in the case of Vere, things are even worse; in no less than eight instances does he himself violate the very rules according to which he urges Billy be executed." (37)

Ambiguously enough, Captain Vere acts as a commander-in-chief, as a judge or as a father, and keeps impersonating continually shifting parts. Now a benevolent father, now a strict disciplinarian, he officiates in turn as the judge, the prosecutor and the main eye-witness, thus taking justice in his own hands and setting himself up as a law unto himself. He claims to defend Billy Budd even as he indicts him,



equivocally enough, but he will not admit his abuse of power, even in his heart of hearts. He persuades himself that he acted fairly, while his thoughts are rife with denials and denegations:

Very far was he from embracing opportunities for monopolizing to himself the perils of moral responsibility, none at least that could properly be referred to an official superior or shared with him by his official equals or even subordinates. So thinking, he would glad it would not be at variance with usage to turn the matter over to a summary court of his own officers, reserving to himself as the one on whom the ultimate accountability would rest, the right of maintaining a supervision of it, or formally or informally interposing at need. Accordingly, a drumhead court was summarily convened, he electing the individuals composing it, the first lieutenant, the captain of marines, and the sailing master (63).

Captain Vere seizes the opportunity of lording it over and single-handedly managing the situation by vicariously manipulating the self-appointed members of the jury. His repeated denegations betray the fact that he is at least dimly aware of the fact that he is not entitled to do so: "In associating an officer of marines with the sea lieutenants in a case having to do with a sailor the commander perhaps deviated from general custom" (104). The adverb "perhaps" here is highly symptomatic of his qualms. But he deludes himself into thinking that he has taken the right course of action. In fact, that highly learned man who is apt to be pedantic even in front of petty officers, has obviously misread Montaigne (one of his favorite authors, 62) and failed to learn the lesson he taught. At bottom, there is no such thing as a just law because it is just a law, Montaigne intimated. Hence "the mystical foundation of authority":

And so laws keep up their good standing, not because they are just, but because they are laws: that is the mystical foundation of their authority, they have no other. [Or, les lois se maintiennent en crédit non parce qu'elles sont justes mais parce qu'elles sont lois. C'est le fondement mystique de leur autorité. Elles n'en ont point d'autre] (*Essais*, III, ch.13, "De l'expérience").

Ironically enough, Montaigne's phrase backfires on the bellistristic captain. "Forms, measured forms" (128), which Captain Vere treasures as much as Edmund Burke, seem retrospectively to condone a blatant abuse of power taken by force, a kind of military *coup*. Formally law-abiding, Vere keeps in fact swerving from the regulations which cannot be totally justified because they have always been partly arbitrary at bottom. Being perforce groundless in the first place and yet forcibly *enforced*, the law is flawed by that inherent vice; justice is a euphemism for ruthless Force, as Derrida pointed out in *Force de loi* (17-19).

Ultimately, legal forms vindicate a power grab, not the rule of law but the law of rulers and autocrats of all ilk. Captain Vere seems to believe in being true to justice, but his very name unconsciously betrays his continual wavering between veracity (vere) and serious departures from that golden rule: he repeatedly veers



from that standard and (unwittingly) re-enacts a Pagan *Ver Sacrum* (a fertility rite involving a ritual sacrifice for the Romans, namely the immolation of a handsome stud). In the state of emergency, in other words, “in a moral emergency” (70), the stage is set for “the abrogation of everything but Brute Force” (122) in a nation supposedly grounded on “founded law and freedom” (54). Does Vere’s dream of justice boil down to a mere fantasy of forceful domination? His name that rings like Verity encapsulates its anagram “Rêve” just as King Lear’s insane state of mind is the Real world turned upside down. But, in order to act out that fantasy of absolute power, he must not only convince himself but persuade the members of the jury and, by and by, the whole crew, so as to win their consent. Only then, will he be completely cleared of suspicions of bad faith (and filth in camouflage uniform).

A matter of conscience is thus displaced by the necessities of a state of emergency. But if ethics is bracketed as well as the rule of Law under the pressure of realpolitik, the preservation of a united community eventually relies on the art of persuasion. The poetics of the narrative consists in foregrounding the part played either intentionally or unconsciously by rhetorical power and the art of deploying an arsenal of rhetorical tactics to circumvent any opposition of the part of Captain Vere’s subordinates. Vere’s crafty casuistry is an amazingly sophisticated strategy to win over the members of the drumhead court by means of hair-splitting arguments. First, in order to overcome the jury’s reluctance to condemn Billy unreservedly, even though they can hardly deny the hard fact that he was (whether voluntarily or unintentionally) the cause of Claggart’s death, he dispels their doubts by silencing the voice of conscience compared to “the feminine in man” (111). In order to do so, he resorts to a kind of personification by referring to it as “some tender kinswoman of the accused” (111) that he urges them to banish by means of a prosopopeia: “she must be ruled out” (111).

The trial he organizes has less to do with veridiction (establishing the plain truth) than with the rendering of a verdict that was delivered even before the trial actually began. All dissenting voices are systematically reduced to silence. Vere pronounces judgment and produces the verdict for all, in every sense of the preposition “for” (“on behalf of,” but also “in lieu of”). Acting as the sole representative of “the people” (112), he officiates as their self-appointed mouthpiece and he speaks for the speechless jury as well as for Billy Budd, that inarticulate “upright barbarian” (52) who is liable to “a vocal defect” (53). The “sea commonalty” (67) may feel uncomfortable because they have no say, but he sees to it that, through him, they should speak with one voice and express “the consent of the governed” whereas, in fact, they are coerced into giving their assent. Captain Vere talks them into taking it for granted that

‘The people’ (meaning the ship’s company) ‘have native sense’ [...] they, long molded by arbitrary discipline, have not that kind of intelligent responsiveness that might qualify them to comprehend and discriminate. No, to the people the foretopman’s deed, however it be worded in the announcement, will be plain homicide committed in a flagrant act of mutiny (112).

And yet, ironically enough, when he does address “his men” (113), the word “mutiny” is carefully avoided because the sophist he is well aware of the power of words that might bring about unintended effects like a self-fulfilling prophecy:

The word *mutiny* was not named in what he said. He refrained too from making the occasion an opportunity for any preachment as to the maintainance of discipline, thinking perhaps that under existing circumstances in the navy the consequence of violating discipline should be made to speak for itself (116).

Given the impact of such heavily loaded terms as “mutiny” that might kindle a revolution, they should be handled with care, or better still, remain utterly unspoken. And, significantly enough, the mute spectacle of punishment is supposed to “speak for itself” (117) for all its underlying ambiguities. The Captain assumes that he will be able to command the whole crew verbally as well as through this show of justice, but his unusual display of common sense in order to uphold the reasons of state in front of “his men” proves how wary he is of dispelling his own fear of political unrest.

### **The Aestheticization and Moral Sanctification of the State of Emergency**

If Captain Vere’s devious rhetoric proves highly effective, it is nevertheless the end result of the gradual conversion of the subversive power of aesthetics into a secret agent of the military forces. Initially, Billy Budd’s forceful aesthetic appeal was a two-edged sword, or “ambidexter implement” (76), before it became a “handsome” or rather handy tool in the Captain’s hands. As Gail Coffler (266-268) and Ronan Ludot-Vlasak (5) have made it clear, Billy Budd’s stately and manly “comeliness” (47) is in keeping with the canons of classical Beauty: he is well-proportioned, both graceful and muscular. This is underscored by recurrent comparisons to Greek statues of Apollo (48) and Hercules (51) or to Italian paintings representing archangels; Fra Angelico is explicitly mentioned (121) on account of its celestial ring, but there might be in fact an implicit reference to Boticelli’s seraph hidden in the tree in “Spring.” But the fatal blow he strikes proves that he is handy with his fists and that he can raise his arm or an armed insurrection. Claggart battered to death is given a “handsome” drubbing. “Quick as the flame from a discharged cannon, his right arm shot out” (99). Aesthetic forms, no matter how picturesque, statuesque and plastically perfect they can be, are liable to change all of a sudden into colossal, uncontrollable forces that need to be held in check. Captain Vere’s design is to contain that alluring striking force and to turn it into a secret weapon and a potent adjunct of military clout. The impressive sex symbol whose nickname is “my beauty” (48) or “Beauty” (72), must needs be “impressed” (44), that is, enlisted by force so as to subjugate comrades-at-arms and stimulate all members of the crew, as Agnès Derail has remarked (Derail 10-11). His sex appeal is tapped to fuel the war effort and made to reinforce National Defense, paradoxically enough, and this is not altogether surprising in retrospect when you think of propaganda films in totalitarian states

like Nazi Germany or Soviet Union under Stalin that paraded half naked, brawny bodies of both sexes as living proof of the regenerating vitality of the regime.

Likewise, Billy Budd is appointed foretopman so as to be in full view and a cynosure for all, aloft on the mainmast. Lifted to such heights, who could doubt that the sexually aroused seamen (that sound like “semen”) would not be equal to the task and rise to the level of lofty ideals? The miracle performed by military service, almost like a religious sacrament, consists in erasing vulgar sexual fantasies, sublimating them and raising them to the sublime heights of military or/and religious glory. Same-sex Eros is thus transfigured into a collective ethos and this military *Aufhebung* of ordinary lust by a kind of relief of the guard is converted into a latter-day avatar of the Christian miracle of Incarnation. The collective sex-slave is transsubstantiated into a species of the Holy Body: the common assumption is that, whether erect on the topmast or hanging limp at the yard-end above the deck, Billy Budd (free from the taint of sexual stain) embodies the Articles of War turned into an immaculate article of Faith for the crew as a body to revere: *Hoc est corpus meum*. Billy Budd on board the *Bellipotent*, not unlike Isabel in *Pierre; or The Ambiguities*, is a Belle on board a warship secretly dedicated to Bal, also called Bel, worshipped as “their grand sculptured Bull” (44). *Billy* Budd rhymes with the *Bellipotent*, because that “bully boy” (69) (one of his pet-names) at the bidding of Bel/Baal is also the Belle of all common sailors, their favorite sex symbol, their Belle cum Buddy dedicated to the boosting of the morale of the troops and the lubrication of the machinery of state.

The execution of Billy Budd, masterminded by Captain Vere, thus assumes a semblance of religious authority. The aim of the commander-in-chief is to obtain “the consent of the Governed” inscribed in the American Declaration of Independence, not by force but of their own free will, as it were. Billy Budd’s blessing, “God bless Captain Vere”—based on a similar precedent during the Civil War—sanctifies the sanction, no matter how arbitrary it may seem; this is tantamount to “a plenary absolution” (56). It is echoed in unison by the huddled masses that witness the scene on the upper deck. The threatening masses that could rise up at any moment are made to take part in a communion Mass like a “congregation of believers” (117) and tamed into “uncomplaining acquiescence” (45). *Vox populi, vox Dei*, it is believed. Vere’s despotic absolutism is thus finally absolved and revered, no matter how severe it is. The sacrifice of the martyr on the altar of the state of emergency completes the transformation of realpolitik into a travesty of religious rites. A vocal dumb show that proves that pomp and circumstance go hand in hand together. The end of politics is to masquerade as an indisputable ethics, a new creed that, not unlike faith, involves the willing suspension of disbelief. Punishment is thus “visited” on the victim of a judicial error, not unlike a God-like visitation. Billy Budd dies shrouded in glory, standing out in high relief against golden “fleecy” clouds. This is assumedly the apotheosis of military service, but in the context of the 1890s, Billy Budd’s hanging cannot but remind us of the lynching of Blacks in the Deep South, and this is not as unlikely as it may seem since the first fine specimen of “the Handsome Sailor” described

before Billy Budd enters the stage happens to be a “Native African” sailor in Liverpool (43), surrounded by a bodyguard of admirers, “a group of bronzed mariners” (43). In merchant ships and navies of all colors, the lure of black beauties was already celebrated, regardless of social prejudices. Was “welkin-eyed” (44) Billy Budd black at heart then for all “the rose tan in his cheek” (77)? The summary execution that calls to mind “the United States of Lyncherdom” (in Twain’s words) cannot but make us think also of the crackdown on anarchists after the Haymarket riots of 1886 (Reynolds 27-28). Who would seriously believe then that Billy Budd’s death by hanging is a re-enactment of the sacrifice of Isaac and a latter-day Second Coming? How could the “pinioned figure” (124) that was a victim of the martial law, “a martyr to martial discipline” (121) condone “brute Force” (122) when it strives to look angel-like under the cloak of religion? How could military power perform such a mystifying masquerade as to make us imagine a single moment that death by hanging can work wonders, perform the anabasis of ejaculation into a sublime effusion (a benediction, a jaculatory prayer) or that a tightening noose round the neck instead of mechanically causing a seminal discharge can change miraculously into enchanting vocal chords as if by magic? Capital punishment is supposed to be a passion-killer. But hanging has the opposite unintended consequence. The Purser who is staggered by the absence of the automatic effect (the expected cumshot) in the case of Billy Budd’s hanging talks about “the absence of spasmodic movement” to the Surgeon and refers to it euphemistically as “a species of euthanasia” (125), that is, a quiet “little” death, an epiphanic ecstasy. Is the rope a trope for male bonding and other disgraceful masochistic rites at odds with the full enjoyment of the Rights of Man? All in all, this show of “patriotic devotion” (55), the moralization and aestheticization of politics brought to a pitch through the pageantry of punishment (“the ringleaders [of the Nore mutiny] were hung for an admonitory spectacle “, we are told in the “Preface” to the 1924 Weaver edition), finally aim at making all subjects to military rule internalize the code of conduct by crediting it with a would-be religious aura. “But aren’t it all sham?” (132), we may wonder.

### **A Revolutionary Aesthetics that Subverts and Foregrounds What Ethics and Politics Anaesthetize**

Seen from a certain angle, the aesthetic sense of beauty or the sense of the sublime are supposed to pave the way for a better world in terms of ethics and politics. According to Kant (*Critique of The Power of Judgement* § 23), only the imagination can intuit the limitations of the understanding in the face of the sublime, that is, in the face of lawless forces that cannot be grasped because they exceed the a priori forms through which they are apprehended; but this experience of its shortcomings ushers in the sense that practical reason must determine its own laws for itself and reign supreme over the province of ethics (ibid, §42 and §59). As for Schiller’s conception of aesthetic experience in his *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, it relies on a community of experience (one of the American

translations for Rancière's *Partage du sensible*), an agreement grounded not just on personal tastes but on tastes shared in common, if not universal or timeless ones: "Taste leads our knowledge from the mysteries of science into the expanse of common sense, and changes a narrow scholasticism into the common property of the human race" (Letter XXVII); it foreshadows the reign of common sense according to Thomas Paine, the foundation stone of the political community to come.

Aesthetics is thus a prelude to ethics and politics that could therefore be reclassified as one of the fine arts, being its end. It is not by chance maybe that allusions to stars, meteors and, more largely, the vault of heavens pervade the novella, if one bears in mind Kant's famous statement: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." (*Critique of Practical Reason*, "Conclusion", 1788). There are other allusions to these two infinities in §59 of his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. References to "welkin-eyed" Billy Budd, an adjective borrowed from *The Winter's Tale* (I, sc.2, l.136), which means literally "as blue as the sky," as handsome as a star, and to "starry Vere," an homeric epithet applied to the Captain on account of a line lifted from a poem by Marvell, "Appleton House," applied in the context of the French Revolution, which is likened to a "red meteor of unbridled and unbounded revolt" (54), certainly make sense in Kantian terms.

But the narrator's scathing irony disrupts such a teleologically oriented view of Aesthetics. It may look sublime and lofty but there is such a thing as a debased brand of art, that is the art of Rhetoric because it is always liable to be enlisted in the service of specious ideologists of all ilk, as Captain Vere's verbal manipulation amply shows. And, still more disturbingly, Kant's and Schiller's Idealism is undercut by the revolutionary poetics of the novella that brings into light the vile bodies, the trite interests and the base passions or pulses that lurk beneath would-be ideals. It is suggested that Captain Vere deliberately sacrifices an innocent to safeguard his own military glory. Self-interested personal ambition at the expense of the "angel" may have been a key factor in his decision. His irrational state of mind verging on insanity during the trial is clearly hinted at, even as he keeps pleading for the so-called "reasons of state". The narrative registers the clinical signs of his monomania, the sound and the fury brewing under a superficial demonstration of rationality.

Written shortly before Melville's death in 1891 (just two years before Oscar Wilde's trial), at a time when Charcot and Pierre Janet were already famous overseas (thanks to William James), this end-of-the century story revolves around the budding symptoms of male hysteria, a state of quasi-somnambulism between dream and wake, half-way between sanity and insanity; Claggart, who is compared to an "asylum physician" (98), performs hypnotic passes to mesmerize his voiceless victim, compared to a fainting female patient given to convulsions, a vestal virgin about to be walled-in alive (the punishment meted out for having lost their virginity) and, truly enough, Billy Budd was deflowered, as it were, by

Claggart's darting glance just as impressment by the press-gang was tantamount to a gang rape of sorts. It is intimated that Billy Budd falls prey to two "hideous men": Vere and his dark double, the master-at-arms, a worm in the bud, who is his right arm, as it were, and his perverse, reverse side at the same time. Both could be described as "uncatalogued creatures of the deep" (98) wrestling with the Angel.

Interestingly enough, André Stanguennec has compared Claggart's "innate Depravity" to Iago's "motiveless malignity" and to Kant's distinction between two kinds of willpower—willful destructiveness as opposed to moral resolutions—in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (Stanguennec 146). Would it be exaggerated to say that Claggart, who is literally a "clag" (a clot of dirty wool) that tarnishes "fleecy" Billy Budd, does the dirty work for the Manipulator-in-Chief versed in the art of manufacturing consent? RATcliffe who forcibly impresses Billy Budd, ClaggART who accuses him of mutiny, ClaggART who is associated with his "official RATtan in hand" (72) suggest close ties between ARTS and RATS. The heavenly view of Aesthetics so obvious in Kant's and Schiller's writings must be revolutionized by a sort of Copernican revolution in terms of perspective. The hierarchy of values must be toppled and unsettled radically by re-envisioning them not from a God-like vantage point but from that of rats underground or that of the sub-human men from the underworld below decks (Ratcliff, Claggart, "Squeak", his spy, likened to "a rat in the cellar" 79) belong there, in the "rat pit of quarrels" (46) at variance with the noble-minded foretopmen perched on the topmast. The narrative excavates and brings to the fore an underground counter-aesthetics by embracing all that is unpoetical, inaesthetic, immoral or "impolitic" (101). It deflates politics and ethics, just as it debunks Aesthetics or flights of poetry. This is a war requiem for the power of judgment. In a sense, Melville followed Novalis's cue when the latter suggested that the pursuit of the loftiest ideals rested on darker desires, even as they repressed them:

With a remarkable *instinct*, Spinoza and others have looked to theology for everything – and have made theology the seat of intelligence. Spinoza's *extremely interesting idea* of a knowledge that *pleasantly* eliminates the desire for knowledge, and annihilates all other kinds of knowledge – in short, of a *sensuous* knowledge (lying at the basis of all mysticism). (*Euthanasia*)  
Insofar as it is based on the *struggle against sensual* desire [*Bekämpfung der sinnliche Reizung*] – isn't even *morality* [*die Mora*] itself *sensuous* genuine *endaemonism*? Sensuousness is a pleasant and ennobled pain. All *war* is sensuous [*Aller Krieg ist wollüstig*]. (Transcendent sensuousness of enthusiasts etc...) (Note 958, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia* [*Das allgemeine Brouillon*]).

Oddly enough, both Novalis and Melville (ch. 26, p. 125) use the same word "Euthanasia" in connection with repressed lust and bloodlust, although this literary borrowing or, at least, cross-reference has not been pointed out by Melville scholars. By the end of the century, around 1890, that is to say, just a few years before Freud's groundbreaking insights into the unconscious (three decades before Freud's theory of the death-drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*), the aphorisms that



were the legacy of German Romanticism dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century took on uncanny overtones. Melville's late novella, written four decades after *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale*, is resonant with the contemporary concern of psychiatrists like Janet or Charcot with cases of mental alienation:

With the measured step and calm collected air of an asylum physician approaching in the public hall some patient beginning to show indications of a coming paroxysm, Claggart deliberately advanced within short range of Billy, and, mesmerically looking him in the eye, briefly recapitulated the accusation. (98)

It is not quite by chance that *Billy Budd*, which was never published in Melville's lifetime, should have become a gay icon or a cult book, even though it is anything but an erotic novel between men. There is little food for that kind of sexual fantasy or rather, little else than food, "spilled soup" (73), significantly expunged from Britten's libretto, and so few male bodies in the nude, let alone, not the slightest "navel engagement," the slang word for homosexual intercourse in the US navy as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century according to Eric Partridge. This is a far cry from *Le Condamné à mort* by Genet although the two works queerly echo somehow.

If it is suggested that "Claggart could have loved Billy but for fate and ban"(88), that his hatred is the result of his inhibitions against his own impulses, the word "ban" might be misleading because it means "curse" or "baleful influence" rather than "prohibition," even if Claggart fell prey to homosexual panic (Kosowsky-Sedgwick 95-97) and refrained from giving free rein to his leanings because homosexual intercourse was liable to the death penalty (at least in theory) both on board HMS and on board the US Navy in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; the law of silence, the tacit rule—"don't ask, don't tell"—usually prevailed (Crain 257). Apart from a few suggestive innuendos, like Vere's characterization of Billy Budd as "a fine specimen of the *genus homo*" (94) or the comparison of Billy Budd to "a rustic beauty...brought into competition with high-born dames of the court" (51), telltale clues of homoerotic desire are scarce. And the most blatant "erotic" scene of the novella, apart from Billy Budd's Second Coming as he is hanged, is the incident of Billy's accidental spilling of soup ("that greasy liquid streamed just across his [Claggart's] path" 72) that causes Claggart's strictly verbal "ejaculation" in response and shows how averse he is to his other half's "adhesiveness", a by-word for homosexual attraction:

Pausing, he was about to ejaculate something hasty at the sailor, but checked himself, and pointing down to the streaming soup, playfully tapping him from behind with his rattan, saying in a low musical voice peculiar to him at times, "Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it, too!" And with that passed on. (72)

"Handsome is that handsome does", a phrase fraught with double-entendres as we shall see. It is assumed that "Passion, and passion in its profoundest, is not a thing demanding a palatial stage" (78) and "Passion" with a capital P might mean



Christ's Passion as opposed to ordinary passions or basic pulsions. Still, this is no place for grace but a bare floor defiled by a discharge of sticky grease. There might be an obscene sexual pun in Billy Budd's epithet if the « handsome sailor » is to be literally taken in hand (manipulated, grasped or fondled with one's hand?) as is suggested by the pun on "unhandsome" in a well-known quotation from Emerson's "Experience" often commented on by Stanley Cavell: "I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects which lets them slip through our fingers when we clutch hardest to be the most unhandsome part of our existence" (473). The execution scene sounds like a far cry from the myth of Orphic music that is supposed to re-enchant a definitely downfallen prosaic world bogged down in sexual perversions. Captain Vere, "the austere devotee of military duty" (115) cum father-figure, would willingly believe in the power of music to cast a spell on the "brutes" (whether they be beasts or inhuman men) and preserve a sense of harmony and "measured forms", in other words the fetishized norms of "formalized humanity" (115). Orpheus's gift, the fabled lyre that assumedly keeps beastly men at bay alluded to by Captain Vere (128), "the alleged power to charm down insanity, or ferocity in beasts" (Emerson, "Behavior", 1043) is a liar's state-lie, designed to reconstitute law and order at all costs. The execution of Billy Budd and his final outcry that sounds like the *Logos spermatikos* let out by tongues of fire brings the penal code to a climax but, for all its sublime harmonics, this outpouring is rife with less pronounced profanities at variance with the would-be sacredness of that patriotic sacrifice.

To posit that there is a teleological end orienting aesthetics towards an ethical or political finality is an assumption that is gradually called into question as the narrative unfolds. Even the death-sentence communicated to the prisoner, and which calls for his final incantatory blessing in response, ends up sounding equivocal on account of eerie echoes. It is repeated twice by Billy Budd, once behind closed doors, "closeted in that state-room" (114): " 'God will bless you for that, your honor!' not without stammering said Billy" 106; and then in public and finally reiterated by the whole crew like a man (123), but those reverberations are not totally devoid of ironical repercussions. It is equivocally referred to as "a conventional felon's benediction" (123) but the scope of the adjective "conventional" is unclear: is it applied to "felon" (a so-called felon) or does it extend to "benediction" (a would-be benediction)? And the purported blessing taken up like a burden "implying a sullen revocation on the men's part of their involuntarily echoing of Billy's benediction" (126) finally blends with the inarticulate murmurings of the common sailors about to rise up against the officers and with the ominous "inarticulate sound proceeding from certain larger sea-fowl" (127) all too ready to prey on Billy's corpse when it is dumped into the sea.

Similarly, the word "handsome" recurs but with an altered meaning. Billy Budd's nickname, "the Handsome Sailor" is slyly commented on through the popular saying alluded to by Claggart in the soup incident: "Handsome is that handsome does" (72). It means: "Well done! Congratulations!", which is taken at face value for a compliment by simple-minded "Baby Budd" (71), although it is

fraught with ironical double meanings. “Beau travail!” is the corresponding French phrase for “Good work!” and, incidentally, the title of Claire Denis’ film based on *Billy Budd*. It insinuates that one should be judged by one’s deeds rather than by one’s good looks. In other words, appearances can be deceptive. Just as Billy Budd’s blessing reverses and revokes the death-sentence passed on him even as he pretends to revere military authority and give his consent to Captain Vere, similarly, Claggart’s sally warps the set phrase “the handsome sailor” - characterized as “the pleasing passing word” (87) even though it is but “a passing pleasant word” (89), that is, a password that will pass away - by resorting to another proverbial maxim which twists its original meaning, under cover of paying lip service to Billy Budd’s beauty: “Handsomely done, my lad! And as handsome is as handsome did it too?” Deleuze rightly emphasized the motif of stuttering (142): all sentences, whether they be “the promulgated sentence” (123, in the sense of death-sentence or “sententious” sayings (86), vibrate and become hesitant under the strain of “sentience” (one of Edgar Allan Poe’s keywords in “The Fall of the House of Usher”): they are stammerings, unintelligible variations for lack of finding the right word.

Never has Melville’s style been so “equivocal” (72). The non-judgmental narrator keeps unsaying what he has just stated by multiplying double negatives, epanorthoses, antanaclases, oracular (anti)phrases, “Delphic deliverances” (86) or “Dark sayings” like “mystery of Iniquity” (76), “indirection[s]” (74, 87), inconclusive digressions compared to “a literary sin” (56), “ragged edges” and additional chapters “in way of sequel” (128) to that pending case, thus maintaining a sense of indecisive suspense and leaving the reader utterly baffled in the end:

[M]ore or less of a stutter or even worse. (53)

But something more, or rather something less, than mere shrewdness is perhaps needful for the due understanding of such a character as Billy Budd (90)

‘Natural Depravity: a depravity according to nature,’ a definition which, though savoring of Calvinism by no means involves Calvin’s dogmas as to mankind (75)

Whether Captain Vere, as the surgeon professionally and privately surmised, was really the sudden victim of any degree of aberration, every one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford (102)

Unmeaning, “murmurous indistinctiveness” (126) is the key word. *Billy Budd*, like *Bartleby* or *Babo* (all variations on the alliteration BB), rings like the babble of Babel that reverberates although it is subdued, “clogged” (96) by Claggart and unavailingly “gagged” (96) thanks to the craft of Captain Vere that is not unlike Claggart’s debased art.

### Judging an Angel from an Aesthetic, Ethical or a Political angle, “Playing the Angles”

In conclusion, I have tried to show the way in which the aesthetic sense of beauty, the sense of duty in ethical and political terms far from being at one, as they were supposed to be initially come to clash and, eventually, to be at variance with one another throughout the novella. I have first suggested that in such a state of emergency, political imperatives take precedence over any other concern, whether they be aesthetic or ethic. Yet, I have proceeded to indicate, that far from being outlawed altogether, the worship of beauty and strong morals are enlisted in the service of the armed forces. Lastly, I have intimated that far from being subservient to a definite political or a moral code of conduct, the novella advocates a revolutionary counter-aesthetics that calls into question both political and moral values and that blends the poetic with the unspeakable.

Like “unlettered Ishmael”, “illiterate” Billy Budd (52) is free from the fetters of the letter of the Law and from “martial law operating through” him (111) because he conveys in his own person the true Spirit of the Living Faith in keeping with St Paul’s injunction: “ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink but with the living God; not in tablets of stone, but on fleshly tables of the heart” (2 Corinthians, 3). Billy Budd is supposed to sing celestial music for lack of being able to speak in an articulate way, not unlike “the illiterate nightingale” (52), even if such a bird does not exist on the American continent. The assumption is that “The whole economy of nature is bent on expression. The telltale body is all tongues,” as Emerson remarked in “Behaviour” (1041). And indeed, as the narrative unfolds and blossoms, bud after bud, it appears, albeit “in a dim random way”, that Billy Budd might be a God-sent messenger carrying a *billet doux* written live on his flesh and conveyed by means of body-language through his own person, but a heavenly archangel whose intended message has been deflected by “phenomenal men” (75) like Claggart and Captain Vere. Like *The Scarlet Letter*, this is yet another variation on the leitmotiv of “The Purloined Letter”. Assumedly, “every bullet has its billet” as the phrase goes, but unlike missiles, missives may not necessarily reach their intended destination as Derrida pointed out in *La Carte postale*. Letters can be diverted any time. And this is true of alphabetical letters, of missives and *Belles Lettres* in general, because they are not bound to reach their goal even if they were “meant” to; the very indeterminacy of the meaning of the word “letter” that wavers between the various aforementioned meanings already proves it. They are always liable to give rise to unintended, blossoming interpretations, undesirable misuses and abuses.

English words and Angelical courriers are at cross-purposes, at cross-angles as the pun on the anagram Angels/ Angles (in the sense of Englishmen) intimates: “Angles (meaning *English*, the modern derivative), “Angles, do you call them because they look so like angels?” (120). This is a story of falsification, counterfeiting bills (laws or banknotes) and forgery gradually gaining currency (65) but never absolutely warranted and bound to remain “a rumor perdue” (65), a

dead letter till the end. Therefore, there is no such thing as an end, in the dual sense of an ending and a finality. Aesthetics, ethics, poetics and politics may be used in turn as means to an end, tend to displace and supersede one another even as they are theoretically pitted up against each other so that vs (short for versus) and “as” (passing as) are virtually interchangeable in the end. All in all, *Billy Budd* may read like aesthetics vs/as ethics vs/as politics as/vs poetics as/vs (non-) aesthetics and so on *ad infinitum*, round and round, coming full circle by means of negations and denials, displacements and condensations, criss-crossing each other at an angle and communicating angelically by endlessly reconfiguring love and hate triangles between the so-called opposites, irrespective of the non-contradiction principle. How many configurations are encapsulated within that magic square? Aesthetics, poethics, poelitics, polaesthetics, poliethics, so to speak, “blendingly entering into” one another (102), morphing into ever-new epicene state-of-the-art budding outgrowths in the making that pass into/for/over one another like a Moebius strip since there is no such thing as a stable state involved in that dynamic process? Therefore, loosening such labile ligaments and exfoliating *Billy Budd* might prove a hopelessly tricky task.

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