Melville's Late Reading and the Revisions in the *Billy Budd* Manuscript

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In 1888, Herman Melville's little story about a sailor facing execution seemed close to completion, yet it was not satisfactory. So unsatisfactory was it that Melville told Professor Archibald MacMechan late in 1889 that he could not speak with him about his life and "*literary methods*" because "I husband for certain matters as yet incomplete, and which indeed may never be completed" (*Correspondence* 518–19). He never did complete one of those matters. *Billy Budd* had grown out of a ballad drafted in 1885 that was introduced by a prose headnote and featured an older sailor's musings while awaiting his execution for fomenting mutiny. Melville later expanded the headnote, instituting the "Handsome Sailor" topos and revised the ballad that would become "Billy in the Darbies." Billy also became youthful and peaceable, yet this time guilty of killing a new character, Claggart, who had falsely charged Billy of a planned mutiny. After twelve chapters, Melville ended the story with a newspaper account praising Claggart. While attempting a fair copy in ink of this new version sometime after November 1888, Melville continued to revise, making Billy a more tragic figure. In the final two stages, Melville composed several more chapters that introduced Captain Vere and Billy's trial. He concluded the expanded prose story with an account of Vere's death, a revised newspaper story on Claggart (which no longer praised him outright), and the revised ballad. In the latest stage, Melville continued to revise with his pencil, complicating the nature of Vere, particularly in early chapters and in chapters 20–21, while accentuating the dark psychological aspects of Claggart.[1] It is likely that Melville did not have a chance to thoroughly flesh out Vere's character in later chapters. After Melville's death, his unfinished manuscript lay inside a tin bread box, and it was untouched until Raymond Weaver was allowed to edit the novella, which was published in 1924 as

volume 13 of the Constable edition of Melville's works.[2] His editing was flawed, including the fateful decision to print some discarded passages from chapter 20 as a preface, and would not be rectified until the 1962 publication of Harrison Hayford and Merton Sealts Jr.'s revised Genetic Text edition based on a careful study of the manuscript.[3] While the unfinished nature of the manuscript itself complicates the story, Melville's revisions between 1888 and 1891, the year of his death, also muddle the story's moral implications. As Hershel Parker pointedly claims, scholars remain divided as to its meaning: "Vere was good and Melville liked him (as any decent person would), Vere was bad and Melville despised him (as any decent person would)" (Parker 76). The judgment tends to reflect which chapters one chooses to focus on. Regardless of one's critical stance, the story's development coincides with parallel aspects of Melville's methods: his readings during the last years of his life and his decision to revise *Billy Budd* into a longer, more ponderous story.

This reading of *Billy Budd* accounts for the convergence of Melville's late revisions to the *Billy Budd* manuscript and his readings, focusing on the influence of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. There are many other influences to consider, for Melville was a voracious reader, but Schopenhauer's philosophical pessimism seems to have dominated Melville's thinking at the end of his life, and these ideas relate to Melville's revisions that emphasized Claggart's active evil and positioned Captain Vere as a solitary genius bewildered by a fallen, rapidly changing, and absurd world. Melville's decision late in the composition process to balance the forceful evil of Claggart with a troubled intellectual such as Vere makes the fate of its tragic hero, Billy, reflect a pessimistic acceptance akin to an ascetic no-self doctrine that Schopenhauer also emphasized.

Schopenhauer's influence on Melville has received sporadic attention from scholars, but none has focused on Melville's marginalia and its compatibility with the themes, rhetoric, and revisions in *Billy Budd*.[4] Melville's marked copies of *Counsels and Maxims* (1890), *Religion: A Dialogue* (1891), *Studies in Pessimism* (1891), *The Wisdom of Life* (1891), and *The World as Will and Idea* (1888)

warrant fuller treatment than they have received, for they suggest a level of Melville's engagement comparable to his interest in other major writers whose works he is known to have acquired in deliberate fashion, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Matthew Arnold, and Honoré de Balzac. Melville's knowledge of Schopenhauer can be traced to no earlier than 1867, the publication date of William Alger's *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man; or, The Loneliness of Human Life* (Sealts 11), in which he marked passages from Alger's chapter discussing Schopenhauer's attention to the solitary individual and the virtues of eccentricity (Leyda 2:720–21).[5] British and American editions of Schopenhauer's works did not become common until T. Bailey Saunders's translations appeared in the London Sonnenschein editions, which Melville purchased in early 1891 after borrowing *Counsels and Maxims* from the library (Leyda 2:831). In his introductory remarks to the 1892 United States Book Company edition of *Typee*, Arthur Stedman writes that Melville's passion for philosophy lasted into his final days, "a set of Schopenhauer's works receiving his attention when able to study" (*Early Lives* 163).

Schopenhauer's work combines systematic skepticism and Kantian idealism to formulate his notion of the thing-in-itself, which he calls the will. As Brian Magee has suggested, Schopenhauer's will "need not be accompanied by consciousness, and is not so accompanied for most of the time even in material objects which are nevertheless conscious" (137). Rather, the will constitutes a phenomenal manifestation of "a single underlying drive which ultimately is undifferentiated" (139). According to Schopenhauer, the will—the underlying substratum of metaphysical reality—must be overcome in order to transcend the suffering entailed by the will. Melville's marginalia in his copy of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* reveal that he studied Schopenhauer's phenomenological treatment of the will in that work. With a solitary disposition and still-vital penchant for iconoclastic views, Melville read Schopenhauer in these last months with a degree of empathy that must have been intellectually sustaining.

Schopenhauer's *Studies in Pessimism* opens with a proposition that speaks to Melville's lifelong concern with the problem of human suffering: "Unless *suffering* is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim" (11).[6] This could well be applied to Melville's Captain Vere, "who, free from cant and convention, honestly and in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities" (Melville, *Billy Budd* 62).[7] While Melville is not known to have delineated his philosophical views, he did express approval of the Victorian poet James Thomson's "pessimism" after receiving a copy from James Billson in 1885: "altho' neither pessimist nor optomist myself, nevertheless I relish it in the verse if for nothing else than as a counterpoise to the exorbitant hopefulness, juvenile and shallow, that makes such a bluster in these days—at least, in some quarters" (*Correspondence* 486). Here Melville's tendency as an individualist to avoid classificatory worldviews shows he could not identify himself with a school of pessimism. Melville underlined what Edward Fitzgerald called the "Irreligion of Thinking men," to which Omar Khayyám belonged (*Rubáiyát* 22; *Melville's Marginalia Online*, hereafter *MMO*). But he shared many views with the pessimists, and as a freethinker, he was attracted to the unconventional views of writers such as Thomson and Schopenhauer. Indeed, this investigation of Melville's marginalia to Schopenhauer may serve as a model for studying Melville's relationship to philosophy, such as Aristotle (Sealts 14a and 14b), Edmund Burke (Sealts 97), Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (Sealts 103), Thomas Carlyle (Sealts 122 and 123), Emerson (Sealts 203–205), *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, by Diogenes Laertius (Sealts 183a), Montaigne (Sealts 366), and Seneca (Sealts 457) (see the Online Catalog at *MMO*). The case of Schopenhauer is unique because Melville's markings in Schopenhauer fall into four interrelated categories that he also emphasized in *Billy Budd*, particularly in late revisions: the doctrine of the Fall and the problem of innate depravity, the problems of evil and human suffering, the imprisoned character of solitary genius, and the denial of the will-to-live as a possible solution to epistemological problems.

Melville marked Schopenhauer's assertion that "the story of the Fall . . . is the only metaphysical truth" in the Old Testament, displaying Melville's continued fascination with the myth of the Fall that had characterized his thought and work for decades (*Studies in Pessimism* 24). In *Moby-Dick* (1851), Melville had likened Ahab to "Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise" (544), and the image of Adam informs the "prisoner cluster" that Harrison Hayford identified in chapter 41 of that work and in chapter 24 of *Billy Budd* (*Melville's Prisoners* 5–7, 19–25).[8] By the time he acquired *Studies in Pessimism* in 1891, Melville had already initiated in *Billy Budd* a romantic theme of the fall into knowledge, or the damning qualities of human limitations in a fallen world. Yet the phrase that Billy "in the nude might have posed for a statue of young Adam before the Fall" was a late-stage pencil addition that supplanted a potentially long passage on his being the "flower" of "masculine strength and beauty" (Melville, *Billy Budd* 94, 368). Instead of writing another exposition on Billy's masculine beauty, Melville opted to emphasize his innocence in relation to prelapsarian man. Here Melville also executes what he learned from Milton: that the beautiful human being, sinewy and strange, is fallen *and* noble—"My trust is in the living God who gave me / At my Nativity this strength, diffus'd / No less through all my sinews, joints and bones" (*Samson Agonistes*, lines 1140–42; see Sealts 358b).[9] There is also a connection between the doctrine of the Fall—or the view of innate depravity—and metaphysical imprisonment, which results from the corruption of the soul-body dualism and the essential dissoluteness of the soul. Compare this sense also to a passage Melville scored in which Schopenhauer equates the man of genius in contemporary society with a "noble prisoner of state, condemned to work in the galleys with common criminals" (*Studies in Pessimism* 28). Vere finds himself pitted between a natural (Claggart) and a nominal criminal (Billy). While chapter 24 was written at an early stage (possibly going back to the prose headnote), several late substantive revisions involve Vere and the Chaplain, not Billy, whose nobility in the face of death is either stoic or naive yet nonetheless palpable. For example, the Chaplain (a "worthy man") "lifted not a finger to avert

the doom of such a martyr to martial discipline" (Melville, *Billy Budd* 409). The irony is that he serves the God of War, showing his complicity in pushing a religion of the meek in an enterprise whose function is "brute Force" ("sheer Force" in an earlier, less brutish, stage). Melville considered softening the image of the chaplain as a minister of peace, but decided to retain his robust hypocrisy (see *Billy Budd* 406). The fallen masses undermine (or entrap) the rare superior mind, as Schopenhauer asserts that "Every hero is a Samson. The strong man succumbs to the intrigues of the weak and the many; and if in the end he loses all patience he crushes both them and himself. Or he is like Gulliver at Liliput, overwhelmed by an enormous number of little men" (*Studies in Pessimism* 141; marked by Melville). When Vere is forced to announce Billy's fate to the ship, "his manner showed neither more nor less than that properly pertaining to his supreme position aboard his own ship" (Melville, *Billy Budd* 116). His "supreme" standing might suggest the impracticability of Christian virtue on the man-of-war, yet he also succumbs to the masses while he announces Billy's execution to the shipmates, who stand "in a dumbness like that of a seated congregation of believers in hell listening to the clergyman's announcement of his Calvinistic text" (117). Vere fears the depraved masses because of their potential to mutiny, and his decision crushes both the idea of mutiny and of himself.

Melville connects the fallen prisoner to the isolated genius by focusing on the "noble fellow, Starry Vere" who estranges himself from his officers and crew—a distinguishing trait resembling "the King's yarn in a coil of navy rope" (Melville, *Billy Budd* 63). The manuscript leaves that constitute chapter 7 show Melville puzzling out this character, adding, for example, "by birth" to the aristocracy to which Vere belonged, and changing the "angry waters of new-fangled opinion social and political" to be "cracked" rather than his earlier word, "insane" (313; the "angry waters" also became "impetuous" before Melville settled on "invading"). To call those opinions "insane" is too judgmental, and perhaps Melville realized that Vere ought to be unsettled, despite the late revisions that may suggest his irrationality; so the new ideas "cracked" the foundations

of the long-standing (yet ephemeral) feudal class, which is not a value judgment but rather a disruption. Billy himself "cracked" the ship's foundations; and Vere's elevated circumstance "by birth" further illustrates the fundamental instability that Melville initiated in the latter stages of composition. Melville scored a similar passage about the "aristocratic class" in Matthew Arnold's *Mixed Essays* (which Melville acquired sometime after its publication in 1883):

> "our often very unhappy brethren," as Burke calls them, are by no means matter for nothing but ecstasy. Our charity ought certainly, Burke says, to "extend a due and anxious sensation of pity to the distresses of the miserable great." [. . .] For my part, I am always disposed to marvel that human beings, in a position so false, should be so good as these are. Their reason for existing was to serve as a number of centres in a world disintegrated after the ruin of the Roman Empire, and slowly re-constituting itself. (65; *MMO*)

Here Melville notices not only Burke (whom he had also read carefully) but also Arnold's sense of the unhappiness of privileged people trying to resurrect the greatness of the Romans. A passage in Schopenhauer that Melville scored hints that the nobility theme enhances the connection of Vere and Billy:

> When he is young, a man of noble character fancies that the relations prevailing amongst mankind, and the alliances to which these relations lead, are, at bottom and essentially, *ideal* in their nature [. . .] Accordingly, we find that a man is always measured by the office he holds, or by his occupation, nationality, or family relations—in a word, by the position and character which have been assigned him in the conventional arrangements of life" (*Counsels and Maxims* 92).

Billy, already established early in the book as "without knowing it, practically a fatalist," faces his death as if he, like Schopenhauer's young man, believes in that ideal relationship, whereas it is clear Vere has succumbed to his "office," as well as the conventional arrangement of duties assigned to him.[10] Even Claggart receives the hostility of the "sea quidnuncs" who dislike his unpopular

office (Melville, *Billy Budd* 49, 67). This narrative stress between youth and age, natural nobility and noble genius, does not appear in earlier versions of *Billy Budd*. In addition to this juxtaposition, Vere's mental state calls into question the stability of his "office," especially if examined alongside his emotions for "the child-man" Billy.

That Vere's duties undermine his intuition complicates his reliance on intellect. Melville left several scores in the margin of Schopenhauer's argument about the "unhappiness" that results from a disproportionate ratio between the intellect and will, creating "a condition which is the essence of real genius":

> The result is that, in youth, excessive energy is grasping the objective world, accompanied by a vivid imagination and a total lack of experience, makes the mind susceptible, and an easy prey to extravagant ideas, nay, even to chimeras; and this issues in an eccentric and phantastic character. And when, in later years, this state of mind yields and passes away under the teaching of experience, still the genius never feels himself at home in the common world of every day and the ordinary business of life [. . .] [H]e will be much more likely to make curious mistakes. (*Religion* 90)

Disproportion applies to the character of Vere, as well as his relation to justice. The question of disproportion arises in Jonathan Swift's commentary on what the Greeks meant by tyranny, which is "the breaking of the balance by whatever hand, and leaving the power wholly in one scale" (6). Vere, as an "exceptional character" whose devotion to his service had nevertheless "not resulted in absorbing and *salting* the entire man," exhibits disproportion with a "marked leaning toward everything intellectual," aligning himself "toward those books to which every serious mind of superior order [. . .] naturally inclines" (Melville, *Billy Budd* 62). And, "With minds less stored than his and less earnest, some officers of his rank, with whom at times he would necessarily consort, found him lacking in the companionable quality" (63). All of these passages were written at a late stage, and then subject to even later pencil revisions: for example, the un-companionable comment came

after Melville replaced an entire leaf to rewrite his sense of Vere's imbalanced aloofness. Before Vere was a "character" he was merely a "sea-officer," which he deleted and then tried "man" (312). The "character" gives more depth to this pedant, who, as Schopenhauer says about genius, shows a disproportionate amount of intellect over will and makes the mistakes of hastily convening a court martial, not referring the matter to the admiral, and executing Billy.

The narrator's question about Vere's mental state in chapter 20, "Was he unhinged?" (Melville, *Billy Budd* 102), may be used to discredit the captain's handling of Billy's crime in subsequent chapters. But when considered in light of Schopenhauer's connection between insanity and genius and Melville's own correlation between madness and inspired wisdom, this development in Vere's character becomes less incriminating and Billy's fate less a result of Vere's failings than of tragic circumstances ingrained within the will of a superior intellect. Schopenhauer observed that persons of genius "may exhibit certain weaknesses which are actually akin to madness," a judgment Melville scored in his copy of *The World as Will and Idea* (1:246). Melville himself had captured this theory in Ishmael's observation that "man's insanity is heaven's sense [. . .] which, to reason, is absurd and frantic" (*Moby-Dick* 414). This also informs Melville's opening to chapter 21 of *Billy Budd*: "Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of the colors, but where exactly does the one first blendingly enter into the other? So with sanity and insanity" (102). This opening was subject to late-stage pencil revisions, and composed *after* the chapters following it.[11]

As to a different kind of wisdom, conduct, Melville had scored the following passage in Matthew Arnold's *Mixed Essays*: "The power of intellect and science, the power of beauty, the power of social life and manners,—these are what Greece so felt, and fixed, and may stand for. They are great elements in our humanisation. The power of conduct is another great element" (49; *MMO*). Where in *Billy Budd* does the sense for beauty and for conduct collide more compellingly than in the chapters about Vere? Melville's description of him follows Arnold's list of proper qualities. Arnold wanted the instinct

for conduct and for beauty to synthesize with knowledge acquisition, but Vere was still "clogged by strange dubieties" when interviewing Claggart about the informer of the ship (Melville, *Billy Budd* 96). *Dubieties*—does beauty create his doubt? As Albert Camus simply put it, "Melville's highest blasphemy" is that "beauty and innocence should be put to death" (292). This shows Melville's interest in the complex aspects of what Arnold called "humanisation"—the curious ways in which beauty or intuition play upon other senses such as duty, knowledge, and a desire for order. Melville's rejected prose from chapter 20 (which Weaver incorrectly printed as a preface in his ill-fated edition) says that Vere acted rashly because of a "crisis for Christendom" following the failures of the French Revolution (*Billy Budd* 377). Yet Melville favored the surgeon's thoughts on Vere's mental instability—that is, judging by his lack of proper conduct—which seem to undermine Vere's book learning praised in chapter 7. Moreover, how does chapter 4 (the "Nelson chapter," which Melville may or may not have intended to include in the book) affect the reading of Vere's conduct? Like Nelson, Vere's devotion to duty is virtuous, but this novella shows how virtue and morality do not always cohere—that "strange dubieties" sometimes undermine ethics. Nelson is a specter whose details may not have the "ragged edges" of the story of Vere, the flawed individual. (Is the Nelson chapter "pure fiction"?) In any case, this "Truth uncompromisingly told" mimics Schopenhauer's disagreement with Kant's categorical imperative that duty is a universal moral good (Melville, *Billy Budd* 128). How can Vere's conduct, after so much proper training, be ill-judged—*despite* following the rules? The will creates these failures of conduct, and Schopenhauer indicates that only a select few can overcome the difficulties, so when Melville scored Schopenhauer's claim that to "*Know thyself*" is a difficult enterprise, he agreed that only a committed minority can attain wisdom—a view that he also followed closely in Schopenhauer's comments on genius in *The World as Will and Idea* (*Studies in Pessimism* 72). That the "right conduct" sometimes leads to the wrong decision may be the paradox that Melville leaves us with, a poignant counter-example to Kantian ethics and optimism.

Two of Melville's markings in *Studies in Pessimism* explicitly address the untenable nature of optimism. He scored a passage where Schopenhauer asserts that a person who has lived for more than one generation has really lived in a "conjurer's booth," suggesting that human events are merely repetitive and vain, and placed a checkmark where Schopenhauer concludes that as a result of the futility of human activity "there are countless numbers whose fate is to be deplored" (*Studies in Pessimism* 14). Nature's cruelty stands against philosophical claims based on Leibnitz's first premise that this is "the best of all possible worlds," a premise that dismisses the problem of evil and the reality of suffering, and leads to unfruitful exercises in theodicy. Dillingham asserts that Melville read into Schopenhauer's pessimism "with a sense of personal involvement," as if he spoke "directly to his concerns and in a way that uplifted and justified him" (74). Melville's absorption with Schopenhauer in the last year of his life suggests he had solidified his opposition to optimistic philosophy. His interest in the above passages, and in similar expressions of pessimism he marked in other works by Schopenhauer, corresponds with the questioning of duty, nature's indifference to human suffering, and the problematic ego in the late poems such as "The Haglets": "Discipline, curbing nature, rules— / Heroic makes who duty know"; "The Berg," "so cold, so vast, / With mortal damps self-overcast"; and the "Implacable I [. . .] Pleased, not appeased, by myriad wrecks in me," in section five of "Pebbles" (Melville, *Published Poems* 224, 241, 247).

Melville noted how Schopenhauer's refutation of optimism follows from his observation of "positive evil" in the world, a force he finds present in the abundance of human suffering (*Studies in Pessimism* 15). As he asserts:

> There are two things which make it impossible to believe that this world is the successful work of an all-wise, all-good, and, at the same time, all-powerful Being; firstly, the misery which abounds in it everywhere; and secondly, the obvious imperfection of its highest product, man, who is a burlesque of what he should be. (Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism* 24)

For Schopenhauer, the sheer abundance of evil undermines the New Testament view of a benevolent and omnipotent deity (see *Studies in Pessimism* 26–27). Schopenhauer's attention to suffering and evil compares to chapter 11 of *Billy Budd*, where the narrator muses on Claggart, a living representative of a degenerate human being:

> Now something such an one was Claggart, in whom was the mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and innate, in short "a depravity according to nature."
>
> Dark sayings are these, some will say. But why? Is it because they somewhat savor of Holy Writ in its phrase "mystery of iniquity"? If they do, such savor was far enough from being intended, for little will it commend these pages to many a reader of today. (Melville, *Billy Budd* 76)

The last three sentences were added in late pencil revisions, and the last sentence was significantly reworked. It originally read, "If they do, it was unintended, but rather sought to be avoided." Melville also considered elaborating on "the point" of the story "turning on the hidden [. . .] nature of the Master at Arms" in order to emphasize his evil, but he dropped "the point" and the word "hidden," which makes the implication of his evil all the more sinister in its final form (*Billy Budd* 337). He uses both Platonic and Christian conceptions of natural depravity as evidence of the world's abiding evil, but omits the redemptive elements of both traditions and implicates "many a reader of today" for avoiding the truth of universal misery. Melville presents the embodiment of evil in Claggart as both essential and unexplainable. When the narrator compares Claggart to a scorpion "for which the Creator alone is responsible," he further insinuates that the undeniable presence of evil in the world contradicts traditional and contemporary notions of God's goodness (78).[12] Melville also reworked that phrase in manuscript: originally Claggart was to "*live* out to the end the *nature* alloted it," then Melville adopted "*act* out to the end the *stage-part* alloted it," and crossed out "stage-" (my emphases). The decision to change Claggart's agency (substituting "act" and "stage" for "live" and "nature") resonates

with Schopenhauer's *active* (i.e., "positive") evil, and creates the more ambiguous idea that while God is responsible for such evil, Claggart still acts, like a character onstage, with free will (343). But the play has already been written, so Melville shows that a pure free will does not exist, while also casting doubt on strict determinism. This compares to Claggart's metamorphosis after he accuses Billy of mutiny, where Melville reworked in a late pencil revision that the "mesmeristic glance was one of serpent fascination"; and Claggart lies prostrate as a "dead snake" after Billy strikes and kills him (98–99; 373–74). Claggart's evil—a "wantonness of malignity"—not only represents a counter-example to optimism, it also resists any idea of individual redemption. Melville finds himself alone in being able to articulate such innate depravity in a world in which psychology trumps theology for explanations of evil (Parker 121). That Melville wrote and then deleted "Consider" before this sentence in chapter 13—"An uncommon prudence is habitual with the subtler depravity, for it has everything to hide"—illustrates a calculation behind Claggart, something that Melville chose not to expand upon until chapter 17, where a "self-contained and rational demeanor" coexists with the "subterranean fire" of his madness (80, 90). The sentence originally read, "Profound prudence is natural to the subtler depravity," so here again the agency slightly changes: "natural" becomes "habitual" (345). That "subterranean fire" might illustrate the raw mind articulated by Schopenhauer's Demopheles in *Religion: A Dialogue*: "You can't form any adequate idea of the narrow limits of the mind in its raw state; it is a place of absolute darkness, especially when, as often happens, a bad, unjust, and malicious heart is at the bottom of it" (43; marked by Melville).

Recognizing Schopenhauer's solution to such pervasive suffering and depravity, Melville marked a passage arguing that "The spirit of the New Testament is undoubtedly asceticism" (*Studies in Pessimism* 26). According to Schopenhauer, the solution is the "denial of the will to live," suggesting the Eastern philosophical method of attaining austerity by means of ego-annihilation. In chapter 26 of *Billy Budd*, following Billy's execution, "will power" makes a prominent (perhaps ironic) showing when the surgeon

expresses his puzzlement as to why Billy did not move at all during the hanging. Another relevant detail from the hanging involves the way in which the "vapory fleece hanging low" compares to a "mystical vision" (Melville, *Billy Budd* 124). The fleece refers to the hair of Billy, which recalls Shakespeare's "Ere dead beauties dead fleece made another gay" in Sonnet 63, while gesturing to the biblical Lamb of God from Revelation 1:14.[13] Yet the soft fleece that constitutes a part of the self is a metaphor for the vapor that is the self. And Billy might be released from suffering in a positive way by denying the will to live.

Melville's late poetry and prose features numerous examples of asceticism and self-abnegation. For example, the epigraph to his poem "Buddha" invokes the notion in James 4:14 that the self is an illusory vapor, "*For what is your life? It is / even a vapor that appeareth for a / little time and then vanisheth away*" (*Published Poems* 281). The "Aspirant to nothingness" in that poem relates to Billy, whose execution seems to be a scene of motionless self-renunciation. Afterward the purser suggests to the surgeon, much to his disbelief, that Billy's death was a case of euthanasia. As Walter Sutton has noticed, Schopenhauer equates the word "euthanasia" with the Buddhist nirvana, for it is the "greatest boon" as "an easy death, not ushered in by disease, and free from all pain and struggle" (*Counsels and Maxims* 158). Melville did not resolve the stress between "will power" and the denial of life: no one can say why Billy died the way he did, just as no one can say whether Vere was insane. Also unresolved is the question of whether Melville would have solved these stresses by further revising the chapters following Chapter 22, which in their unambiguous exaltation of Vere's superior intellect seem to contradict the late revisions suggesting Vere's flaws in Chapters 20–21 (Hayford and Sealts 10–11; Parker 142–43). Nevertheless, Billy's death suggests that the wisdom in *Billy Budd* comes from a kind of austerity that denies the will.

Melville's revisions in *Billy Budd* show that he wanted to emphasize the limitations of knowledge, while also casting doubt on religious redemption. It is clear that the surgeon shows his own scientific limitations in chapter 26 when he does not understand why

Billy did not have spasms during the hanging (which was written before the passages in chapter 20); similarly, in chapters 16, 21, 29 (which ended the book in earlier stages of composition, when the ballad came before it), and 30, the prominent theme is the way in which human beings misconstrue each other.[14] The effect is that learned expertise is ultimately dehumanizing. And the entanglement of misconstruing suggests a subtle absurdity in the novel that has yet to be recognized by any critic of *Billy Budd*. While absurdity often appears in earlier Melville prose tales such as "The Lightning-Rod Man" and "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the elder Melville also scored Schopenhauer's assertion that "mankind cannot get on without a certain amount of absurdity, that absurdity is an element in its existence, and illusion indispensable" (*Religion* 106). It is difficult not to connect that passage with the concluding ballad of *Billy Budd*, "But aren't it all sham? / A blur's in my eyes; it is dreaming that I am. [. . .] But me they'll lash in hammock, drop me deep. / Fathoms down, fathoms down, how I'll dream fast asleep" (Melville, *Billy Budd* 132).

The pessimistic ideas in *Billy Budd* establish a sound accord between the elderly Melville and Schopenhauer's philosophy: both reveal an intellectual interest in the subjects of the doctrine of the Fall, prisoner imagery, the solitary genius, the problems of evil and suffering, the denial of the will-to-live as a solution to suffering, and the limitations of knowledge in an absurd world. Melville exhibited a detached, world-weary, and resigned temperament, and those ascetic tendencies are more prominent in his later works. Reflecting Schopenhauer's outsider status, the narrator in *Billy Budd* remembers the "honest scholar," who told him of another man whose mind was a mysterious "labyrinth" (74). Melville's marginalia in his late readings illuminate his own solitary determination in the last months of his life. What he read furnished support for much of what he had already come to believe, providing intellectual sustenance and a sense of confirmation in his last, and unfulfilled, attempts at finishing *Billy Budd*. Hence *Billy Budd* can be seen as a figure against the background of (or in relation to) a great philosopher of pessimism. Perhaps this is why *Billy Budd* presents a more nuanced

story about victimization than a similar novel from Melville's younger days, *White-Jacket* (1850). *Billy Budd* exists as a great *threnos* in American literature, difficult and inscrutable, like the deity that Melville imagined and the world in which he lived.

Notes

1. For a more detailed explanation of the growth of the manuscript, see the Hayford and Sealts, *Billy Budd* 1–12 and 236–40.
2. Another edition of *Billy Budd*, this time edited by F. Barron Freeman, appeared in 1948, but it relied on Weaver's erroneous text (*Melville's Billy Budd* [Harvard UP, 1948]). For more on this, see Hayford and Sealts 12–13. The *Melville Electronic Library* (mel.hofstra.edu/) is also in the process of publishing an electronic text with manuscript images.
3. A "genetic text" shows with symbolic notations the revisions of surviving versions of a work. In this case, Hayford and Sealts transcribed the surviving manuscript and demonstrated the chronology of the writing process.
4. In *The Early Lives of Melville*, Sealts refers to Melville's marking of Schopenhauer's reference to Tacitus, comparing it to Melville's prose headnote to "The American Aloe on Exhibition," in *Weeds and Wildings*. Sealts also cites Melville's marginal score in Schopenhauer's *Wisdom of Life* dealing with the artist's relation to his own contemporaries and the value of asceticism (80–81). Sutton and Ledbetter have argued for Schopenhauer's influence on Melville's mind in his final months, but neither explores the Schopenhauerian ideas in the characters in *Billy Budd* (see Fite 336–37). Fite and Gupta both attempt to establish significant parallels between the writings of Schopenhauer and the characters in *Billy Budd*. Arguably the most effective study to date is in chapter 2 of Dillingham. All of these writers use the marginalia to substantiate their claims, but the variety of markings and annotations do not receive the critical attention they deserve, especially in connection to the revisions of *Billy Budd*.
5. See Leyda 1:319, for more on Melville's documented interest in German thought. Sealts numbers may be accessed at the online catalog that is part of *Melville's Marginalia Online*.
6. Melville's marginalia in *Studies in Pessimism* was first edited by Walker Cowen for *Melville's Marginalia*. For more on Cowen, see

my introduction to the electronic edition of Melville's marginalia to *Studies in Pessimism.*

7. This phrase is part of Melville's late revisions to Vere in chapter 7. It was reworked from "philosophise upon those greatest of all mysteries, facts" (313).
8. For an explicit association of the "captive king" with the figure of Adam in chapter 41 of *Moby-Dick*, see Olsen-Smith 35–36.
9. Consider Melville's attention to Billy's mysterious and "rustic beauty" (51), alongside the scene when he is awaiting execution: "Through the rose-tan of his complexion no pallor could have shown. It would have taken days of sequestration from the winds and the sun to have brought about the effacement of that. But the skeleton in the cheekbone at the point of its angle was just beginning delicately to be defined under the warm-tinted skin" (119).
10. Melville also marked several passages on Schopenhauer's interest in honor and fame (for which see Dillingham 73–76).
11. For more on this see Parker 136–37.
12. The image of the scorpion may echo Revelation 9.10: "And they [locusts] had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails: and their power was to hurt men." Elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., Revelation 9.3–4, 1 Kings 12.13–14, Deuteronomy 8.15, and Luke 10.19), scorpions are associated with serpents and other forms of evil.
13. Hayford and Sealts also note the similarities between the "vapory fleece" and several passages in *Clarel* (191–92).
14. For more on the misconstruing theme, see Parker 160–61.

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