1980

Herman Melville and Paul Tillich: An Ontological Interpretation of Billy Budd

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Recommended Citation

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Herman Melville and Paul Tillich: An

Ontological Interpretation of Billy Budd
(TITLE)

BY

Michael E. Gress

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

M. A. in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1980
YEAR

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Herman Melville and Paul Tillich: An
Ontological Interpretation of Billy Budd

By

Michael E. Gress

B. A. in Philosophy, Eastern Illinois University, 1977

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in English at the Graduate
School of Eastern Illinois University

CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS
1980

294229

The traditional approaches to Herman Melville's Billy Budd focus upon the question of whether or not the story was Melville's final statement of acceptance or irony. Both arguments are sociological in nature in that the different sides argue that Melville either finally accepts or continues to reject by irony, the forms of society. The acceptance critics contend that Melville ends by seeing value in the forms because of their use for maintaining order in society; the irony critics claim that Melville was taking a final satirical poke at society's limiting forms and authority.

My thesis differs from these traditional arguments because I treat the story and the actions of Captain Vere ontologically rather than sociologically. Using Paul Tillich's description of man found in The Courage To Be, I interpret Vere according to Tillich's three types of ontological anxiety. According to Tillich, all men suffer from the three types of anxiety due to a lack of an ultimate concern, though men find concerns that they take to be ultimate in spite of the fact that they are not. I argue in my thesis that Vere is a perfect example of a man who suddenly experiences ontological anxiety when he loses his spiritual center which is dependent upon a concern which is not ultimate. Vere, being a representative of 18th century, aristocratic society, places great faith in the order of the world. He manages to protect himself against threats to his faith until the "innocent" Billy suddenly kills the "evil" Claggart. The actions of Billy and the death of Claggart shock Vere's faith and his spiritual center, and his actions which follow, including the drum-head court and the hanging of Billy, fit neatly the description of a

man suffering from ontological anxiety.

By using Tillich to interpret <u>Billy</u> <u>Budd</u>, I believe that the story is made artistically better because the reader is better able to understand Vere's situation because his experience is existential, i.e., the experience of anxiety is one which we all face due to the fact that we all participate in being. Also, by using this interpretation, the story becomes a tribute to the insight of Melville and his ability to understand and to write about man's state of being.

I

The traditional critical approaches to Melville's <u>Billy Budd</u>
focus on the argument about whether Melville was writing a final
testament of acceptance[1] or a final ironic criticism of authority
and the forms or structures of the world.[2] Those who argue for
acceptance believe Melville approved of Vere's actions, and those
who argue for irony believe Melville thought Billy was innocent and
Vere punished him unjustly. Peter Still makes this distinction in
his article "Herman Melville's <u>Billy Budd</u>: Sympathy and Rebellion."
"This interpretation [acceptance] of <u>Billy Budd</u> clearly sees
Melville as sympathizing with Captain Vere, even sees him identifying
with Vere's point of view, while the first interpretation [irony,
rejection, rebellion] tends to see Melville identifying with Billy
against Vere."[3] In either case, the main concern of these
arguements centers around the rules and authority of society; the
critics treat the story as a social study in which Melville opts
either to accept society and its authority, or to continue to rebel
against the forms that society imposes on man and uses to tyrannize
him.[4]

For the most part,[5] the main argument of the critics who see
<u>Billy Budd</u> as Melville's statement of acceptance is that Melville
sanctions Vere's actions because Vere sees value in order and form
and opposes rebellion and anarchy in society. There are slight
variations on this theme, but all of the arguments are built on
this basic notion. E. L. Grant Watson was the first to emphasize
Melville's shift from rebellion to acceptance, and his argument
was expanded by such writers as Wendell Glick and William Braswell
who argue that Vere is correct in acting as he does because by

hanging Billy he acts practically to save society as a whole. Edward Rosenberry argues similarly by writing that Vere acts according to the law because it is the law which saves society from the Hobbesian state of nature.

The ironists, once again for the most part,[6] argue against the actions of Captain Vere. They insist that Melville uses Vere's character to display the dangers and evil of the traditional forms of authority. Based on such evidence as Melville's past works like White Jacket, in which he displays his satrical and rebellious contempt for the injustices of authority, or on Billy's final blessing of Captain Vere which they see as ironic, or on the reaction of the crew following Billy's death, they see the story as a continuation of Melville's rebellion.[7] Joseph Schiffman, arguing from an ironic reading, bases his theory of irony on the blessing, which he sees as the greatest irony of the story, and he charges Vere with completing Claggart's work. Leonard Casper and Phil Withim also see Vere as a Claggart who puts Billy to death because of his narrow views in which he believes service to the King more important than serving nature. Both Withim and Oliver Snyder, basing their arguments on the preface's praise of the French Revolution, believe that Melville was advocating rebellion against the past aristocratic structures which deny lower classes of any authority or freedom. Karl Zink emphasizes Melville's social criticism strongly when he writes that Vere "defends the harshness of the social code as ultimately best for the common good." He continues by writing that Vere symbolizes the "awful power and blind impersonality of the forms," and he ends his article by claiming that Billy Budd is "ironic social criticism, not

acceptance."[8]

In this paper, I would like to take another look at the actions
of Captain Vere, but instead of seeing them as Melville's final
sociological statement about the justice or injustice of society's
forms and authority, I will examine Vere's actions as ontologically
existential. Rather than seeing the actions of Vere as a comment
by Melville about society's forms, I will treat these actions as
important because of what they reveal about man's ontological
condition as described by Paul Tillich.

There are several reasons for using Paul Tillich's description
of ontological anxiety[9] to interpret the actions of Vere.[10] The
first and most ovbious reason is simply that criticism need not
follow the traditional line. I would like to offer an alternative
to the traditional sociological approach to Billy Budd, though I
would in no way suggest this past criticism is of no worth. In
fact, past criticism supports my paper at many points, and
traditional criticism's emphasis on social forms provides the
basis for my second demonstration of the validity of using Tillich.
That Vere is taken to be a man who advocates the traditional forms
of society and that these traditions are being threatened by mutiny
and rebellion is obvious, and past criticism emphasizes the point.
This sort of situation and its historical place in time are both
seen by Tillich as a time in which ontological anxiety is at its
peak; this existential condition of man is more obvious in the
lives of men at this time than at any other time in history.
Tillich describes the circumstances which lead to the rise of
ontological anxiety. "The breakdown of absolutism, the development
of liberalism and democracy, the rise of technical civilization

with its victory over all enemies and its own beginning disintegration—these are the sociological presuppositions for the third main period of anxiety. In this the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness is dominant"(T61). There is no doubt that Vere is a symbol of the aristocratic authoritarian. His background is one which elevates him in the hierarchy of society to a position which places him above the social status of his crew members, and he advocates the "controlled system of doctrines and sacraments"(T60). The system of control that Tillich describes makes up the past that "Starry Vere" belongs to, but the system is one which is breaking down, so Vere acts as a perfect example of a man who experiences the anxiety that Tillich describes. My third reason for using Tillich is that I am not alone in my view of the novel as a description of the breakdown of the ontological structures of the past. Marlene Longenecker also makes this point. She writes, "By locating his drama in the midst of the French Revolution, Melville describes the death of a fragile but deliberate eighteenth century ontological security."[11] Using Tillich, I will be able to give a more complete and detailed description of that death and its effect on men, as exemplified in the case of Captain Vere.

In the rest of this paper, I am going to suggest that the story Billy Budd and Vere's actions provide a perfect example of the condition of men in the state of ontological anxiety as Tillich describes it. Anxiety arises when the spiritual contents of certain beliefs deteriorate slowly and unnoticed until a sudden shock occurs which causes the damn of ontological anxieties to break. The effects of this break (as Tillich describes them) are clearly seen through Vere's actions. I will begin the explanation

of Vere's actions with an exegesis of Tillich's description of
ontological anxiety, and I will then relate this descritpion to
Vere's actions. In the final section of this paper I will make
some concluding statements about Vere's actions and differences
between my interpretation of these actions and the interpretations
of past critics.

II

Tillich opens The Courage To Be with a historical discussion
of the relationship between courage and self-affirmation in the
process of being. Tillich points out that if courage is used as
the key to the interpretation of being-itself, what is found is
"being and the negation of being and their unity"(T32). Nonbeing
is essential to any discussion of being because it is the denial of
being. Throughout history, the subject of nonbeing has accompanied
the discussion of being. Philosophers from Parmenidies to Sartre
have realized the importance of dealing in any serious ontological
study with nonbeing. Nonbeing, for religion, has traditionally
taken the form of the demonic or the experience of the transitoriness
of the created world. Nonbeing is the denial of every concept, and
it is that denial which is a part of all being, but which being
seeks to overcome. Man is capable of standing outside his being,
because of consciousness, and of seeking to affirm it, in spite of
nonbeing, but in the consciousness of his need to affirm himself,
he is aware of the denial of that affirmation, nonbeing. Man does
not have what he seeks to affirm, and awareness of this fact is
anxiety: "...anxiety is the existential awareness of nonbeing"(T35).
Anxiety doesn't occur when man recognizes the condition of the
transitoriness of the world or experiences death, but it occurs
when man realizes the implications of these facts. What man
realizes in anxiety is his own finitude, and that he will one day
be nothing beyond the grave. "Anxiety is finitude, experienced as
one's own finitude"(T35).

Tillich makes a distinction between fear and anxiety. "Fear,
as opposed to anxiety, has a definite object (as most authors agree),

which can be faced, analyzed, attacked, endured"(T36). Fear is conquerable, and anxiety is not. "But this is not so with anxiety, because anxiety has no objects, or rather, in a paradoxical phrase, its object is the negation of every object. Therefore participation, struggle, and love with respect to it are impossible. He who is in anxiety is, insofar as it is mere anxiety, delivered to it without help"(T36). Tillich uses death as an example of this distinction. Death as an occurrence can be anticipated as a fear--fear of the way we die or the pain involved. But the anxiety of death is the realization that nonbeing is awaiting man after death. Anxiety arises in fear of the unknown, against which there is no defense.

In spite of the fact that fear and anxiety must be distinguished, they are closely related. "They are immanent within each other: The sting of fear is anxiety, and anxiety strives toward fear"(T37). What Tillich means here is that in the fear of death anxiety arises as man realizes the hopelessness of his being after death, and this fear determines man's anxiety. In anxiety over a special situation (such as death as an event), anxiety about man's situation arises as man realizes he cannot preserve his own being. "In this moment, therefore, in which 'naked anxiety' lays hold of the mind, the previous objects of fear cease to be definite objects"(T39). But man cannot endure this anxiety and must transfer it into an object to be feared so that he can confront it. "Anxiety strives to become fear, because fear can be met by courage"(T39). Man's mind creates fears to escape God, who, by his divine nature, is the absolute threat to man's finite attempts at self-affirmation and cannot be an object of fear. Man also attempts to escape the threat of non-being. But all of these attempts are in vain, and at best, they

serve to cover anxieties which will later return. The threat of nonbeing is not eliminated since it is inextricably part of finite being.

Tillich points out two ontological facts about nonbeing which are important in his description of man's condition. First, nonbeing is logically dependent on being, no matter how much nonbeing seems victorious in its denial of man's self-affirmation. Nonbeing is ontologically dependent upon being because negation is not possible "without some prior affirmation to negate"(T40). Second, nonbeing takes on the qualities of the being negated, making it possible to speak of qualities of nonbeing and different types of anxiety. Man depends on courage to be able to affirm his being ontically, spiritually, and morally, and corresponding to each of these three is a type of anxiety which threatens man's attempts at self-affirmation. Tillich points out that these anxieties are not meant to be viewed as forms of neurotic or psychotic anxiety, but they should be viewed existentially, as an essential part of existence and the mind in its normal state. Finally, before defining these three states of anxiety, he emphasizes the fact that though these states of anxiety are distinguishable, they are not separate, and they accompany each other in despair although one anxiety is usually dominant.

The first anxiety described is that of ontic anxiety, the denial of self-affirmation by fate and death. "The anxiety of fate and death is most basic, most universal, and inescapable. All attempts to argue it away are futile"(T42). All men are aware of their complete loss of self when their biological self ceases to function, and this threat is ever present, even though men in

society create psychological and ritual activities to overcome this anxiety. Ontic anxiety is caused by the awareness of death, the absolute threat to man's being, and fate, the relative threat to man's nonbeing. Anxiety of fate is caused when man recognizes the contingency of his existence in a particular place and time. Contingence is defined as the realization that the determining causes of man's existence have no ultimate necessity. "Fate is the rule of contingency, and the anxiety about fate is based on the finite being's awareness of being contingent in every respect, of having no ultimate necessity"(T44). Death is ever present in man's mind and makes man anxious about his fate. Man, aware of his contingency, constantly suffers the denial of affirmation because of his finitude.

Man also suffers from spiritual anxiety. Just as nonbeing threatens man's physical existence, it threatens his creative sphere of meaningfulness. Man does not need to be a genius to live creatively. He lives creatively when he responds to the meanings that culture gives to his life. As man responds to the art of culture or uses the language of the poet, he lives life creatively. Man loves himself as he participates in or creates the meanings of life, and he loves these meanings because they are his fulfillment and because these meanings are actualized through his participation in them. "He affirms himself as receiving and transforming reality creatively"(T46). This is spiritual self-affirmation, and it presupposes that man's self-affirmation is an ultimate concern. It also presupposes that in and through this experience that there is an attempt to manifest ultimate reality.

A man who does not experience spiritual self-affirmation is

threatened by nonbeing in the forms of emptiness and meaninglessness. The absolute threat to man's spiritual self is meaninglessness and the relative threat is emptiness, but as in ontic anxiety, the absolute is ever present behind the relative. The anxiety of meaninglessness has its source in the loss of an ultimate concern or a "meaning which gives meaning to all meanings"(T47). The anxiety of emptiness is aroused when the beliefs which man has affirmed are shattered. The meanings of life that culture has given begin to lose their meaning or content. When present culture fails to provide man with content, he realizes the loss of a spiritual center, and this situation cannot be remedied by the intentional production of a new center. All such attempts only lead to deeper despair. "The anxiety of emptiness drives us to the abyss of meaninglessness"(T48).

The emptiness and loss of meaning that man experiences in these situations are expressions of the threat of nonbeing to his spiritual self-affirmation. This threat is expressed in man's doubt about his spiritual life. Doubt is a part of one's spiritual life, but when total doubt takes over, the threat of nonbeing swallows the awareness of having a spiritual meaning and leaves only the feeling of not having, the experience of existential despair. As man becomes aware of his not having, the spiritual life struggles to maintain itself in spite of the doubt "by clinging to affirmations which are not yet undercut, be they tradition, autonomous convictions, or emotional preferences"(T48-9). If these attempts fail man finds himself separated from the whole of reality, cut off from universal participation and isolated because of his doubt. As a result, he seeks to locate spiritual meaning by sacrificing his spiritual

freedom to fanatical causes. "He flees from his freedom of asking and answering for himself to a situation in which no further questions can be asked and the answers to previous questions are imposed upon him authoritatively"(T49). He does this in a desperate attempt to salvage his spiritual life, but the meaning he finds costs him his individuality as he participates in the group cause.

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to realize that spiritual anxiety arises not only from personal doubt, but also from the failure of the spiritual contents of past systems (once thought to be ultimate) to account for or express the human situation and answer questions of existence. Tillich argues that this is largely the case with the doctrinal symbols of Christianity. This failure also occurs as a result of the actual conditions of the present being different from those of the period in which the spiritual contents are created. A sudden shock brings the slow waste of these contents to man's awareness and the anxiety of meaninglessness sets in. It is also important to keep in mind that the loss of man's ability to shape and understand reality not only causes spiritual anxiety, but results in ontic anxiety as well. Any threat to man's spiritual being is a threat to his whole being.

Besides ontic and spiritual anxiety, Tillich describes a third anxiety, moral anxiety, which arises from the fact that man's ontic and spiritual being are not only given to him, but are demanded of him. Man asks himself what he has made of his ontic and spiritual being in his awareness of his being, and as his own judge, he stands against himself. "This situation produces the anxiety which, in relative terms is the anxiety of guilt; in absolute terms, the anxiety of self-rejection or condemnation"(T51-2). Man is free to

determine his destiny, to determine his being ontically and spiritually, and his actions of moral self-affirmation contribute to the determination of his being. But no matter how he tries, none of his moral actions is perfect; he can never fulfill his destiny to the point of satisfying the ethical norms established by philosophy and religion becasue nonbeing, which is ever present, prevents his actions from being perfect. "A profound ambiguity between good and evil permeates everything he does because it permeates his personal being as such"(T52). Nonbeing is mixed with his being in moral self-affirmation, and this ambiguity leads man to judge himself as guilty. This guilt begins to show itself in every moment of moral self-awareness and drives man to complete self-rejection, the despair of having lost or of not having fulfilled his destiny.

Tillich's description of man's reation to this situation is essential to my thesis. "To avoid this extreme situation man tries to transform the anxiety of guilt into moral action regardless of its imperfection and ambiguity"(T53). He does this by taking nonbeing into his moral self-affirmation in two ways with "the first based on the contingencies of fate, the second on the responsibility of freedom. The first way can lead to defiance of negative judgements and the moral demands on which they are based; the second way can lead to a moral rigor and the self-satisfaction derived from it"(T53). And, as in the two previous anxieties, Tillich emphasizes the fact that moral anxiety can be distinguished from ontic and spiritual anxiety, but that they are inextricably interrelated. The threat of fate and death awakens the guilt of moral failure in man, and this guilt can reciprocally destroy man's

ontic foundation. Likewise, even though man can save himself from
spiritual emptiness by the "call to duty" affirmed by the moral
self, spiritual doubt can cause the feeling of moral guilt and lead
to despair "by throwing into the abyss of skepticism not only every
moral principle but the meaning of moral self-affirmation as
such"(T54).

Tillich concludes his description of the anxieties by linking
them with despair. "All of them and their underlying unity are
existential, i.e. they are implied in the existence of man as man,
his finitude, and his estrangement"(T54). They are fulfilled in
despair of the "boundary situation," the situation of no hope. In
depsair, man feels nonbeing to be victorious, but feeling presupposes
being, enough being to feel the power of nonbeing and to leave man
in the despair of despair. The pain of despair comes when man
realizes he cannot affirm himself in the face of nonbeing, and the
reaction to this pain is usually the desire of the being to get rid
of itself. But moral anxiety or guilt always prevent man from
committing suicide as he realizes the moral failure of being implied
in suicide. In the face of meaninglessness, ontic exit presents
itself, but guilt always prevents man from taking this way out.
Tillich points out that it is no wonder that in the face of this
despair man spends his life in a continuous effort to avoid despair.
Extreme situations of despair are not usually reached because man
finds concerns in which he can affirm himself spiritually and
morally and overcome, for a time, ontic anxiety. But because they
lack ultimacy, the attempts to overcome anxiety must fail,
especially in times of change in the structure of society when men
intentionally try to find a spiritual center. It is in this

situation of anxiety that I view Captain Vere in Melville's _Billy Budd_.

III

Although Tillich has pointed out that no one anxiety is felt
alone, he states that in any given age one anxiety is usually
predominant and brings on the others. He breaks the past ages down
and lists them according to the anxiety which is predominant at
that time. Tillich decides that with the breakdown of the
hierarchical structures of the 18th century and with the rise in
liberalism and democracy, a loss of spiritual content resulted.
With this loss, there was, and there still is today, a rise in
spiritual anxiety as the predominant anxiety. It is in this
setting that the Billy Budd story takes place. The traditions of
Britain are breaking down, and this is especially experienced in
the navy, traditionally England's primary military strength. The
navy is short on men, and prisoners from the jails are forced into
service alongside the regular navy men. "Insolvent debtors of
minor grade, together with the promiscuous lame ducks of morality,
found the navy a convenient and secure refuge..."(HS65). Besides
the ranks being filled with criminals forced into service, the navy
is rife with discontent which threatens to lead to mutiny. In
fact, mutiny actually flared forth in the Spithead and Nore cases.
The effect of these mutinies on England is exactly the same effect
as that which Tillich describes when he writes about the decline of
absolutism.

> It [the Great Mutiny] was indeed a demonstration more
> menacing to England than the contemporary manifestoes
> and conquering and proselyting armies of the French
> Directory. To the British Empire the Nore Mutiny was
> what a strike in the fire brigade would be to London
> threatened by general arson(HS54).

This is the world of threatened values in which Vere is captain of

the ship <u>Bellipotent</u>.

Captain Vere is a military man "thoroughly versed in the
science of his profession." He is an "unobtrusive" man, a modest
man of the "higher nobility" who suggests an "aristocratic
virtue"(HS60). He is a traditionalist and a part of the absolutist
world that is breaking down, though he shelters himself from
admitting this by certain settled convictions about the world:

> His settled convictions were as a dike against those
> invading waters of novel opinion social, political,
> and otherwise, which carried away as in a torrent no
> few minds in those days, minds by nature not inferior
> to his own. While other members of that aristocracy
> to which by birth he belonged were incensed at the
> innovators mainly because their theories were inimical
> to the privileged classes, Captain Vere disinterestedly
> opposed them not alone because they seemed to him
> insusceptible of embodiment in lasting institutions,
> but at war with the peace of the world and the true
> welfare of mankind(HS62-63).

It is obvious from this passage that Vere firmly hopes to maintain
his aristocratic heritage, that heritage which Tillich describes as
spiritually bankrupt following the rise of liberalism and democracy
(see T61). The spiritual content of Vere's heritage is slowly
losing its meaningfulness, and when Vere recognizes the deterioration
of its meaningfulness in a sudden glimpse, the results are
disastrous. The "unnoticeable" deterioration is "realized with
a shock as it progresses," and it produces "the anxiety of
meaninglessness at its end"(T50). Vere, by ignoring the emptying
out of the spiritual contents of the aristocratic society, has set
himself up for the shock of spiritual anxiety and the despair of
the "boundary situation." He experiences this shock when Billy
kills Claggart.

A description of Billy and Claggart helps to make clear the

source of the spiritual anxiety that he experiences. Billy, throughout the story, is marked for his exceptionally noble makeup. Both physically and morally he is almost beyond reproach. He does not have the "sinister" in him, and he is "one to whom not yet has been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge"(HS52). He gives no offense to anyone, and instead on the Rights, he was "like a Catholic priest striking peace in an Irish shindy"(HS47). Billy is a naively simple character whose qualities are closely related to divine goodness. Vere goes so far as to call him an angel.

Claggart, on the other hand, is the opposite of all these qualities. "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'"(HS76). There are several references to him as a serpent(HS52) who cannot stand Billy because of his innocence. He is "the direct reverse of a Saint!"(HS74) and the direct opposite of Billy.

The religious implications of these two characters are obvious. Billy represents absolute good and Claggart absolute evil. This distinction fits perfectly into the aristocratic world view of Vere. What I am suggesting is that the aristocracy is part of the traditional religious heritage of the chain of being (or the beliefs of the aristocracy centered around traditional world view based on the chain of being) in which good and evil are two distinct worlds, and this heritage is an ultimate concern for Vere. This traditional world view, which distinguishes good as the upper part of the chain and evil as the lower part, makes up part of the spiritual content which has kept Vere from experiencing spiritual anxiety.

When Claggart comes to Vere with his tale of Billy's mutiny, Vere decides to handle the situation in his very self-assured, aristocratic manner. He is sure that Claggart is lying. "With gray eyes impatient and distrustful essaying to fathom to the bottom Claggart's calm violent ones, Captain Vere again heard him out..." (HS96). The Captain is quite sure that Billy is innocent and thinks of him as "a King's bargain." The solution to the problem seems to be to bring "good" and "evil" face to face to test the accuser, and them in an "undemonstrative way" close the affair. But to Vere's surprise, the bringing together of "good" and "evil" not only backfires, but it also brings on in Vere the ontological despair that Tillich describes.

When Billy is faced with Claggart's charge, his fateful stammering is the result. Vere realizes the difficulty that Billy is having, and confident of the goodness of Billy, he tries to soothe him. But Vere's "fatherly" attempt has the opposite effect on Billy, who is not soothed, and who instead kills Claggart. In the killing of Claggart, not only is Vere's self-confidence rattled as he witnesses the extremely harsh failure of his attempt to soothe Billy, but what is more shocking to Vere is the blurring of the traditional distinctions between good and evil when "...innocence and guilt personified in Claggart and Budd in effect changed places" (HS103). The result is that when the spiritual content of his heritage is challenged, Vere experiences the anxiety of spiritual meaninglessness. No longer is the distinction between good and evil (the distinction which is taught by the notion of the chain of being) so clear in Vere's aristocratic mind.

Tillich describes how one anxiety accompanies or causes another,

and Vere fits the description as he experiences ontic anxiety at
nearly the same moment. After lifting the dead body of Claggart off
the floor, the sudden flash of the anxiety of nonbeing hits Vere.
He experiences that flash of horror which Tillich says men can only
stand for short periods of time, and the change in him is drastic.

> Retaining erectness, Captain Vere with one hand covering
> his face stood to all appearance as impassive as the
> object at his feet. Was he absorbed in taking in all the
> bearings of the event and what was best not only now at
> once to be done, but also in the sequel? Slowly he
> uncovered his face; and the affect was as if the moon
> emerging from eclipse should reappear with quite another
> aspect than that which had gone into hiding"(HS99-100).

What emerges from hiding from Vere is a military legalism in
the form of a direct command to Billy. In the face of ontic
anxiety, Vere realizes his lack of moral self-affirmation, which
amounts to a denial of his freedom to fulfill his destiny. This
moral anxiety produces a feeling of guilt in him which he seeks to
overcome by transformation of guilt into "moral action regardless
of its imperfection or ambiguity"(T53). When Vere comes away from
his meeting with his nonbeing, he acts immediately. "The father in
him, manifested towards Billy thus far in the scene, was replaced
by the military disciplinarian. In his official tone he bade the
foretopman retire to a stateroom aft (pointing it out), and there
remain till thence summoned"(HS100).

This sudden return to militarism is a typical response for men
in Vere's position, according to Tillich, since one cannot face
anxiety too long. The actions of Vere which follow are typical,
in that Vere tries to insulate himself from all three types of
anxiety. His first action is devised to attack the anxiety of
meaninglessness, and it helps Vere re-establish his spiritual center

in the face of doubt. "On the way to this situation [the situation
in which the spiritual life is threatened by doubt] the spiritual
life tries to maintain itself as long as possible by clinging to
affirmations which are not yet undercut, be they traditions,
autonomous convictions, or emotional preferences"(T48-9). Vere
tries to cling to the tradition of militarism in an attempt to
maintain his spiritual center which is threatened by Billy's actions,
when good and evil change places. Thinking of Claggart, he exclaims,
"Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang"(HS101).

Militarism also allows Vere the opportunity to maintain
himself against moral anxiety, by a series of orders and moral
actions, such as the drum-head court. He tries to avoid the despair
of moral anxiety of having lost his destiny in two ways, exactly as
Tillich describes. Realizing the contingencies of his fate, Vere
proceeds with the drum-head court in defiance of negative judgments
of the officers and the moral demands which they are based on. As
C. B. Ives has clearly pointed out, Vere acted in defiance of the
legal demands of the situation. Rather than holding Billy for
trial by the admiral, he misused the Articles of War as an excuse
for immediate action.[12] The doctor and the officers believe the
drum-head court is wrong because it goes against ordinary military
handling of such situations. "In obedience to Captain Vere, he
[the doctor] communicated what had happened to the lieutenants and
captain of marines, saying nothing as to the captain's state. They
fully shared his own surprise and concern. Like him too, they
seemed to think that such a matter should be referred to the
admiral"(HS102). Not only did they think his actions were wrong,
they expressed their objections to the Captain by pointing out

that Billy meant neither mutiny nor murder and by asking that the death sentence be mitigated, but neither objection had any effect on Vere's determination.

The attempt to overcome moral anxiety is seen in its second form, too, as a sudden rise in legalism or moral rigor. When Vere realizes that the other officers believe that Billy is innocent before God, he calls it nature, but he insists that their allegence is not owed to nature, but to the King and his laws no matter what they require. "For the law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible. Our vowed responsibility is in this: That however pitilessly the law may operate in any instances, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it"(HS110). This moral rigor works to satisfy Vere's need to act in the face of his responsibility to his moral freedom. By emphasising the law of the King and the fact that he acts according to it, he fulfills his need to act according to accepted norms even though he defies the norms of military law by invoking the drum-head court. He is caught in the paradoxical situation that Tillich describes in which men act in contradiction. Vere feels both the need to strike out against the contingencies of his fate by denying certain norms, but then he feels he must act in some way according to society's norms because he still recognizes his obligation to affirm himself morally. But what Tillich says happens to men in this condition is that when they try to affirm themselves morally, they take the attempt to extremes. Vere acts extremely when he enforces the legal rigor of the King's navy "prompted by duty and the law"(HS113). He temporarily satisfies his need for moral affirmation by his second act even if it contradicts his denial of military law earlier.

Finally, Vere confronts ontic anxiety by reducing the threat of nonbeing (as Tillich describes) to fear in an object. He reduces ontic anxiety to fear of mutiny. By treating Billy as a mutineer, Vere reduces the source of his ontic anxiety to an object which can be feared. When Billy's actions are reduced to something to be feared, Vere's anxiety can be confronted and overcome. "We proceed under the law of the Mutiny Act"(HS111). In his determination to overcome his ontic anxiety by reducing it to fear of mutiny, he prejudges Billy. All the jurors recognize the prejudice. This recognition and the jurors recognition of Billy's essential innocence prove the determination of Vere to overcome ontic anxiety. The quick judgment of Billy also helps Vere to conquer fear of mutiny that would arise if Billy wasn't condemned. "You know what sailors are. Will they not revert to the recent outbreak of Nore? Ay"(HS112).

That Vere was in a state of anxiety is seen by those around him. The doctor realizes the condition is not necessarily madness. "No more trying situation is conceivable than that of an officer subordinate under a captain whom he suspects to be not mad indeed,[13] but yet not quite unaffected in his intellects"(HS102). Reading Tillich shows that Vere is manifesting a man's shock at recognizing his own nonbeing, not a psychotic condition, and that his actions are attempts to overcome it. This is a normal state for all men because it is a part of being. But because it is a part of being, it can not be overcome, and all Vere's attempts to overcome it by affirming himself spiritually through militarism must fail. This militarism, as a part of the aristocratic order, was wasting away as a spiritual content and did not (and never could) offer

ultimate answers. Tillich points out that attempts to intentionally produce new spiritual centers, or to continue with old ones in the face of doubt about part of the center, are doomed to fail "and the attempt to produce it only produces deeper anxiety"(T48). This deeper anxiety is seen by the others as Vere emerges from Billy's compartment after telling Billy the decisions of the court. "The face he [the first lieutenant] beheld, for the moment one expressive of the agony of the strong, was to the officer, though a man of fifty, a startling revelation. That the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation was apparently indicated by the former's exclamation in th scene soon perforce to be touched on"(HS115). Vere's spiritual anxiety is not overcome, as it cannot be, and he finds himself deeper in despair than he had been previously. He has sacrificed his self to militarism, a concern which is not ultimate and cannot eliminate anxiety because it does not truly affirm his being in the face of nonbeing. He suffers moral despair also since his emphasis on legalism did not cover up the guilt of his failure to fulfill himself ontically and spiritually. The nature of his death seems appropriate for a man who found spiritual meaningfulness in the forms of the 18th century. He dies from a wound received in battle with the <u>Atheist</u>. And as he dies, it is clear he has not overcome the anxiety of meeting with Billy Budd. The drug that soothes his body mysteriously activates "the subtler element" in Vere, and he dies calling out to Billy.

What I have attempted to show is the ontological anxiety that Vere, in the meeting with nonbeing, must endure. The ontological anxiety in Vere's situation follows directly from the combination of changes in the philosophical and religious thought which

determines the thinking of culture by interpreting the world and
its meaning and from Vere's sudden awareness of the lack of ultimacy
in his forms. As the forms break down, so does the spiritual
content which makes up Vere's spiritual center, and with the loss
of his spiritual center, Vere ends in the anxiety of despair.
Tillich's description of ontological anxiety provides a perfect
explanation of Vere's character and his actions.

IV

At this point, I am in a much better position than I was before beginning to discuss Billy Budd and Tillich's thought to make some statements about my interpretation of Billy Budd and its relationship to past criticism. The first point that I would like to make is in reference to the much disputed Preface which Hayford and Sealts dismiss, claiming that it is not a part of the story as Melville intended it. According to them, Mrs. Melville's comments on the three sheets led to the use of these as the preface to the story.[14] Many critics have taken advantage of this misuse of the preface (if it is a misuse) by other critics to dismiss their theories. William Stafford believes that even if Melville had taken out the preface, the story is a better one with the preface as a part of it and that Melville would probably have used the preface in the final draft.[15] As far as my paper is concerned, it supports Stafford's contention. In the preface, Melville speaks of the same breakdown in traditional hierarchy that Tillich describes:

> The year 1797, the year of this narrative, belongs to a
> period which, as every thinker now feels, involved a
> crisis for Christendom not exceeded in its undetermined
> momentousness at the time by any other era whereof there
> is record. The opening proposition made by the spirit
> of the Age involved rectification of the Old World's
> hereditary wrongs.[16]

Whether the preface belongs or not does not hinder the validity of my paper, but my thesis does provide a place for it.

It should also be more clear by now the place my paper has in relation to past criticism of Billy Budd. Both of the traditional streams of criticism, acceptance and irony, take society's forms to be the central importance to Melville, and depending upon the thinking of the critic, they decide whether Melville approved Vere's

actions or not. The interpretation that I have arrived at by using Tillich is more existential. While the forms of society are important in my interpretation, what is the catalyst to Vere's actions are not the forms, but is instead Vere's confrontation with his nonbeing. Ontological anxiety is the source of Vere's actions, even though I agree with other critics that Vere did attempt to preserve the forms or his spiritual content. What is important to my interpretation is not whether or not the forms survive (which they can not according to Tillich), or Melville's moral decision about the subject, but instead the effect on Vere when these forms are challenged.

There are two valuable reasons for interpreting Billy Budd this way. The first is that as a result of this interpretation, readers can more easily understand Vere and the situation he is in. If readers accept Tillich's description of ontological anxiety as existential (a part of their being), then the story and Vere's situation (the feeling of anxiety) is more meaningful and personal than a story which is simply concerned with whether or not Melville accepted the forms of society. At some time in our lives, we all suffer the anxiety that Vere suffers because we share in being.

The second reason that this interpretation is valuable is that it shows Billy Budd to be a more artistically constructed story. Instead of being expected to sympathize with Billy, a flat character, we sympathize with Vere in his moral dilemma. His life becomes the tragedy that Billy's life never could become due to the fact that Billy's character is so innocent, and as a result, is a character that is alien to Melville's readers. In empathy with Vere, we take a different view of Vere and his actions, and he is not seen as the

ogre that the irony critics claim him to be. The reader has a
better story which is more relative to his life because Vere is a
real character with whom to identify and empathize; the reader is
no longer forced to feel sorry for the celestial Billy. My
interpretation says more for Melville's power as an artist. The
fact that Melville's character, Captain Vere, acts as Tillich observes
real (tormented) men to act in times of social and personal crisis
is a remarkable demonstration of Melville's extraordinary skill as
both observer and artist. And the fact that this interpretation
makes the story more personal to the reader and a better piece of
art may be the most compelling reasons to accept it.

ENDNOTES

[1]The list of acceptance critics is much longer than the few
names which I mention here, but those that I have chosen to cite
expound the basic thrust of the acceptance argument. See E. L.
Grant Watson, "Melville's Testament of Acceptance," The New England
Quarterly, 6(June 1933), 319-27; Wendell Glick, "Expediency and
Absolute Morality in Billy Budd," PMLA, 68(March 1953), 103-10;
William Braswell, "Melville's Billy Budd as 'Inside Narrative,'"
American Literature, 29(May 1957), 133-46; Edward Rosenberry, "The
Problem of Billy Budd," PMLA, 80(Dec. 1965), 489-98; Edward Cifelli,
"Melville's Billy Budd," Studies in Short Fiction, 13(Fall 1976),
463-69.

[2]As above, the list could be longer. See Joseph Schiffman,
"Melville's Final Stage, Irony: A Re-Examination of Billy Budd
Criticism," American Literature, 22(May 1950), 128-36; Phil Withim,
"Billy Budd: Testament of Resistance," Modern Language Quarterly,
20(June 1959), 115-27; Leonard Casper, "The Case Against Captain
Vere," Perspective, 5(Summer 1952), 146-52; Oliver Snyder, "A Note
on Billy Budd," Accent, 11(Winter 1951), 58-60; Karl E. Zink,
"Herman Melville and the Forms--Irony and Social Criticism in
'Billy Budd,'" Accent, 12(Summer 1952), 131-39.

[3]Peter Still, "Herman Melville's Billy Budd: Sympathy and
Rebellion," Arizona Quarterly, 28(Spring 1972), p. 42.

[4]Eleanor Simpson makes this point in her article "Melville's
Judgment on Captain Vere," Midwest Quarterly, 10(Spring 1969),
189-200.

[5]John Freeman, for instance, sees Billy Budd as a statement of
acceptance of the peace found in Christian goodness. Billy's
character, a peaceful character which is such a contrast to the
angry character of Ahab in Moby Dick, marks a major shift for
Melville. Billy is at peace when he dies. Freeman takes Billy's
death and his acceptance of it as a signal that Melville had found
peace himself and was ready for death. See Herman Melville(New York:
Macmillan, 1926), pp. 131, 135-6.

[6]Richard H. Fogle, in his article "Billy Budd: Acceptance or
Irony," Tulane Studies in English, 8(1958), 107-13, claims that
Budd is ironic, but not in the sense of saying something other than
it is saying. It uses irony in the "modern" sense of meaning a
great deal more than it seems to say.

[7]Edward Rosenberry, 489-98, does a very thorough job of
discussing the arguments and their reasons that the irony critics
put forth.

[8]Karl Zink, pp. 132 and 139.

[9]Paul Tillich, The Courage To Be(New Haven: Yale University

Press, 1952). Hereafter, all subsequent references to Tillich will be made in the text as T and page number.

[10]I must make it clear that I take Vere to be the central character of Billy Budd. Because of the essential flatness of the character of Billy (and Claggart for that matter) and because of the fact that Vere is the character in a moral dilemma, I see his role as the one of primary importance to Melville. Hayford and Sealts support my position in their introduction. According to them, Melville was developing Vere as the main character in the final draft he worked on before his death. See Billy Budd--Sailor by Herman Melville, ed. by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962). Hereafter, all subsequent references to Billy Budd will be made in the text as HS and page number.

[11]Marlene Longenecker, "Captain Vere and the Form of Truth," Studies in Short Fiction, 14(Fall 1977), 337-43. Though Longenecker does make the point that this novel describes the breakdown of past ontological structures, her work differs from mine overall because the main concern of her paper is to show that Vere acted wrongly in choosing to hang Billy, and she comes to the common sociological conclusion of the irony critics, i.e., Vere acted wrongly in following the forms of the past. She claims that Vere should have used a more "dynamic, flexible, liberating form of transcendental human imagination." In my paper I will not be concerned so much with saying how Vere should have acted; my concern will be with describing how he does act and how these actions display the pressure of ontological anxiety as Tillich describes it.

[12]C. B. Ives, "Billy Budd and the Articles of War," American Literature, 34(March 1962), 31-9.

[13]The emphasis is mine. Most critics miss this point; instead they insist that the doctor's comments prove Vere's madness.

[14]Hayford and Sealts, pp. 18-9 of the introduction.

[15]William T. Stafford, "The New Billy Budd and the Novelistic Fallacy: An Essay Review," Modern Fiction Studies, 8(Autumn 1962), p. 308.

[16]Herman Melville, Melville's Billy Budd, ed. by Fredrick Barron Freeman(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 3.

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