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Captain Vere as Outsider and Insider:  
Military Leadership in *Billy Budd, Sailor*

EVER SINCE 1924, WHEN HERMAN MELVILLE'S novella *Billy Budd* was posthumously published, critics have debated whether this last work of Melville's is his "testament of acceptance" or his "testament of resistance." The novella takes place aboard the self-contained world of the *H.M.S. Bellipotent*, and concerns an almost impossibly innocent young man, Billy Budd, who is falsely accused of mutiny by a malevolent master-at-arms, John Claggart. In the presence of the ship's commander, Captain Edward Vere, Budd responds to Claggart's accusation by stuttering helplessly and then lashing out with his fist. This single blow kills Claggart, and Vere is now faced with a dilemma. The naval penalty for bearing false witness is death; Budd, who Vere knows is innocent, has thus fulfilled the sentence that Claggart deserved. But Budd has struck and killed a superior, which is also punishable by death. Captain Vere, in the interest of maintaining discipline aboard his ship, manipulates a drumhead court into convicting Budd of murder, and Budd is hanged the next morning at dawn. This brief synopsis reveals the fundamental question of the text: did Captain Vere make the correct decision? Those who see *Billy Budd* as Melville's "testament of acceptance" exonerate Vere on the grounds that his decision was necessary if unpalatable; such sacrifices, according to this view, are occasionally required to ensure the harmonious functioning of an imperfect society. Those who see the novella as Melville's "testament of resistance," on the other hand, focus on Vere's errors and lament the fact that the innocent

are often overrun by those with unchecked power. There are indications, however, that Melville tinkered with *Billy Budd* to make his text as inscrutable as possible. Critic John Wenke, for one, argues convincingly that Melville continuously made “decisive alterations that seem *designed* to thwart the determinate readings so characteristic of *Billy Budd* criticism.”<sup>71</sup> If this is true, then debating Melville’s worldview as represented in this novella is bound to be inconclusive. What may be more useful is to closely examine the personality and conduct of the complex character Captain Vere. What can we infer about Vere’s status as Insider or Outsider? And what do his personality and his conduct reveal about successful and unsuccessful military leadership?

At first glance, Vere appears to be the consummate Insider. A career officer, he is firmly entrenched in the military machinery. Melville tells us that he is “thoroughly versed in the science of his profession,” and even the revered Admiral Nelson “is at bottom scarce a better seaman or fighter.”<sup>72</sup> Certainly Vere’s skills mark him as an Insider who is privy to substantial military knowledge and experience. Vere is also a “dry and bookish gentleman,”<sup>73</sup> and this bookishness is symbolic of Vere’s tendency to always go “by the book.” When we are told that Vere “always acquit[s] himself as an officer mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerat[es] an infraction of discipline,”<sup>74</sup> we can hear the characteristic Melville irony. The rigidity of “always” and “never,” as well as the commander’s refusal to ever look the other way, no matter how trivial the offense, undercut Vere’s apparent concern for the welfare of his men. He is a “martinet” for whom “forms, measured forms, are everything.”<sup>75</sup> Vere’s obsession with rules, order, and discipline has led Joyce Sparer Adler, among others, to label him the consummate military man, the “most austere monk of war.”<sup>76</sup> But Adler’s characterization unfairly simplifies the job of a commander. Absolute rigidity, while an admirable quality in those sailors who only need to follow orders, proves to be a liability in a leader who must navigate gray areas.

Let’s look more closely at Vere’s personality. His peers, while acknowledging his naval skills, detect “a queer streak of the pedantic running through him.”<sup>77</sup> “Pedantic” connotes pride, narrowness, formality, and lack of imagination—all qualities that serve Vere poorly when he is faced with a knotty ethical question. As soon as Budd strikes Claggart, Vere declares the blow “the divine judgment on Ananias!...Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!”<sup>78</sup> Vere’s eagerness to place the action in a known historical setting—after all, Vere is a voracious reader of history<sup>79</sup>—indicates his tendency to see the killing in terms that are absolute and predetermined. The captain shies away from the difficulty

of weighing Budd's case on its individual merits. He prejudices Budd—"the angel must hang"—and the rest of the novella records Vere's inexorable desire to fulfill his own prophecy. In addition to his pedantry, Vere's "queer streak" alludes to a social awkwardness that officers of his rank feel acutely. They find him "lacking in the companionable quality," a man whose "discourse never fall[s] into the jocosely familiar."<sup>10</sup> The fact that Vere is also a bachelor nicely aligns with this portrait of a man who always preserves a formal distance, a man who is never intimate. So is Adler right? Is this austerity what a consummate military professional should aspire to?

In portraying other military characters, Melville provides several counterexamples to this austerity. One is the ship's lieutenant, "burly and bluff," who invites himself into another captain's cabin, helps himself to that captain's liquor, and demonstrates a self-confidence and an ease of manner that Vere sorely lacks.<sup>11</sup> It is notable that the lieutenant and the other officers on board the *Bellipotent* who comprise the drumhead court are hesitant to convict Budd, only capitulating after strong pressure from their captain. When faced with the unavoidable prospect of a "guilty" verdict, the officers (unsuccessfully) implore Vere to mitigate the sentence. These officers, in stark contrast to Vere, possess a humanistic quality that manifests itself in both the social and military realms.

Another foil to Captain Vere is Admiral Horatio Nelson. Melville devotes two whole chapters of this novella to Nelson, which would be an odd choice unless Nelson were intended to be juxtaposed with Vere. (In fact, Melville facilitates this comparison by placing the Nelson chapters immediately before the first description of Vere.) The differences between the two men are striking: Nelson, whom Melville describes as "the greatest sailor since our world began," leads not by "terroriz[ing] the crew into base subjection, but [by] win[ning] them, by force of his mere presence and heroic personality, back to an allegiance if not as enthusiastic as his own yet as true."<sup>12</sup> Vere, on the other hand, *does* terrorize his crew—Lester Hunt claims that "he maintains power by the use of fear"<sup>13</sup>—and Vere's presence and personality, unlike Nelson's, only problematize his leadership. A good example occurs during the interview between Budd and Claggart, in which Vere intends to sort out the allegations of mutiny. When Budd, stricken dumb by his accuser, begins gurgling and stuttering, Vere "lay[s] a soothing hand on [Budd's] shoulder" and attempts to calm the boy down.<sup>14</sup> This humane gesture, so alien to Vere, only "prompts yet more violent efforts at utterance" and directly leads to the fatal blow.<sup>15</sup>

We have seen that Vere's awkward personality and his lack of human connections mark him as a *social* Outsider. But don't his actions, which are intended to preserve order and discipline, still identify him as a *military* Insider?

Vere's decision to hang Budd, which forms the moral center of the novella, does seemingly mark him as an Insider. Claggart's death has identified Budd as an Outsider, and Vere's task as commander must obviously be to rid his ship of this corrosive influence. In rooting out the Billy Budds of the world, Vere displays his fundamental conservatism. Historical context illuminates this character trait: the novella takes place in 1797, smack in the middle of the French Revolutionary Wars, so Vere's concern with individual uprisings is quite understandable. His decision to execute Budd parallels his support for the Crown against the tide of anarchy. Melville bluntly alludes to Vere's political leanings when he tells us that Vere thinks of the French Revolution as a "disruption of forms going on across the Channel."<sup>16</sup> This is a major infraction to an individual who believes that these "forms are everything." Vere's conservatism, both political and military, suggests that he is an Insider who wants to define clearly the limits of his organization and then defend to the death any attempts at change.

Vere's decision, at first blush, strikes us as legal and authorized, and seems to confirm his status as Insider. As captain of the ship, he claims the authority to call a drumhead court and the authority to carry out a death sentence. In leading his kangaroo court to their ineluctable "conclusion," Vere invokes the Articles of War, the Mutiny Act, allegiance to the King, and the unpleasant responsibility of upholding martial law. His agenda is couched in such convincing officialdom that the less eloquent officers making up the court are incapable of putting up much resistance. While the members of the court want to debate the issue at length, Vere presses for a quick decision because of the risk of mutiny and the risk of confronting the enemy. Some critics, such as Christopher Sten, have hailed this logic as sound and pragmatic.<sup>17</sup> But how legal *are* these proceedings, and how much is the ship actually at risk?

Let's start with the second question. There is no indication of an impending mutiny aboard the *Bellipotent*—in fact, Merlin Bowen points out that Captain Vere does not even have "the least grain of particular evidence that *disaffection* actually exists aboard his ship."<sup>18</sup> The afterguardsman who tries to enlist Budd into the so-called "mutiny" is Claggart's subordinate, and has clearly been ordered to frame the innocent man. Claggart, who possesses what Melville calls a "depravity according to nature,"<sup>19</sup> cannot look upon the prelapsarian Budd without feelings of hatred and jealousy. Vere may be a subtly drawn character, but Budd and

Claggart are good and evil personified. Melville's Biblical metaphors make it plain that Claggart's antipathy is as inexorable as the snake's attempt to lure Adam and Eve into eating the apple of knowledge. The only disaffection aboard the ship is Claggart's malevolence toward Budd; when Vere invokes the fear of mutiny in calling for Budd's execution, he fails to realize that the only source of disaffection is already dead. Vere's leadership by fear and his trouble understanding the mood of his subordinates echo his previously discussed shortcomings as a commander. Vere's other major concern, as he rushes the court into a hasty decision, is an enemy attack. But the process of interview, trial, sentence, and execution takes more than 12 hours, during which time the *Bellipotent* is at substantial risk. If minimizing the risk of attack were essential, Vere should have simply shackled Budd below deck, rejoined the fleet, and referred the matter to the admiral.

This leads us to the other question posed above: how "legal" are these proceedings? Critic C.B. Ives points out that Vere's often-invoked Mutiny Act was actually applicable only to the Army, not the Navy.<sup>20</sup> Ives goes on to prove that the Articles of War, which Vere also uses to justify the hanging, "provided the punishment of death [for Budd's offense] only upon conviction by...a *general* court-martial, called by the commander of a detachment, a squadron, or a fleet."<sup>21</sup> Although a captain possesses some latitude during times of war, the drumhead court was, if not strictly illegal, at least not permitted using Vere's justification. And lest we accuse Melville of historical ignorance, the author's awareness of this inaccuracy is indicated by the response of the surgeon and the officers aboard the ship. "Was [the captain] unhinged?" wonders the surgeon.<sup>22</sup> The speed and secrecy of the proceedings seem "unaccountably strange" to the surgeon and the other officers; they all agree "that such a matter should be referred to the admiral."<sup>23</sup> Melville, quoting "a writer whom few know,"<sup>24</sup> seems to exonerate Vere for acting hastily:

Forty years after a battle it is easy for a noncombatant to reason about how it ought to have been fought. It is another thing personally and under fire to have to direct the fighting while involved in the obscuring smoke of it. Much so with respect to other emergencies involving considerations both practical and moral, and when it is imperative promptly to act. The greater the fog the more it imperils the steamer, and speed is put on though at the hazard of running somebody down.<sup>25</sup>

But again, Melville's characteristic irony is at work; this passage does *not* let leaders off the hook simply because they are acting in the "fog of war." Thomas

Claviez observes that “no captain in possession of his senses would ‘put speed on’ a ship in the middle of a fog...[this] decision...is both utterly wrong and completely insane.”<sup>6</sup> Claviez overstates the case—Vere’s decision is too nuanced to be called “utterly wrong and completely insane”—but his point is well taken that Melville in this passage subtly casts a negative light on Vere’s attempt to arrogate Budd’s fate. The irony is that although Vere’s pride leads him to overstate his authority and play god, his guilt about doing so becomes apparent when he attempts to declaim responsibility for Budd’s death. It is not our fault, he tells his officers, if we convict Budd: it is “martial law operating through us. For that law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible.”<sup>7</sup> But this is merely an attempt at rationalization. Vere is a commissioned officer: in taking his obligation freely, he has, de facto, accepted responsibility for martial law. Moreover, a commander is always responsible for *enforcing* the law, and he has wide latitude to do so, especially in wartime. Contemporary manuals on military leadership inform us that in unclear situations, leaders must exercise “the commander’s intent.”<sup>8</sup> Even in 1797, a captain had the authority to mitigate the offender’s sentence.<sup>9</sup> Vere uses no such discretion, and he misses “the commander’s intent,” which in this case is to ensure discipline on board the ship. Since Vere has no discipline problem on the *Bellipotent*, the death sentence is superfluous and cruel. The decision becomes easier if, like the captain, one looks only to the “outward facts.”<sup>10</sup> “War looks but to the frontage,” he maintains; “Budd’s intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose.”<sup>11</sup> Let’s not forget, however, that the full title of the novella is *Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative*. Vere, so concerned with external “forms,” cannot fathom the “inside narrative” of intent.

Let’s return to an earlier question posed by the surgeon: “Was [Captain Vere] unhinged?” Clearly, indications of madness would jeopardize Vere’s Insider status. Melville answers the surgeon’s question cryptically:

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 first blindingly enter into the other? So with sanity and insanity.<sup>12</sup>

This may seem to be another passage intended to complicate the reader’s judgment of Vere, but Melville is again using his subtle irony. As several critics have observed, orange and violet are at opposite ends of the rainbow’s spectrum<sup>13</sup>—so we *can* draw the line between sanity and insanity. Where does Vere fall? Melville

never explicitly states it, but given the litany of errors and unusual decisions made by the captain, decisions that were “not a little criticized by some officers,”<sup>34</sup> the text certainly supports a reading of Vere as temporarily mad. This commander goes against custom in creating a hurried and secretive sham proceeding; he misapplies the military laws of the day; he fails to understand his men. After a close reading, he is no longer the consummate military Insider. Vere stands aloof; he is not part of the inner circle. Although he can recite the laws verbatim, his misapplication of these laws reveals that he has failed to internalize an essential component of his duty as commander. Captain Vere, in both personality and actions, proves to be an Outsider who has only marginally been performing his role as an Insider.

Officially sanctioned guidance about military leadership has changed over the years. Current DoD doctrine identifies four skill sets for leaders, and the first is, believe it or not, “interpersonal skills.”<sup>35</sup> The “personality and will of strong commanders” is now acknowledged to be “a significant part of every unit’s combat power.”<sup>36</sup> By these measures, Vere fails where Nelson succeeds. A leader must do even more than inspire and motivate his troops, however; he must also be *one of them*. “Leaders are soldiers first,” the doctrine tells us; “they know and understand their subordinates.”<sup>37</sup> This identification with one’s subordinates is critical not only to understanding the mood and morale of the troops, but also to developing a trust based on personal fondness. Again, Vere fails this test. His standoffishness and chilly intellectualism alienate him from his men and result in both his inability to “read” Claggart and a faulty suspicion of mutiny. His distance from his men is nicely symbolized by his solitary pacing on the quarter deck while the crew keeps their distance, fearful of interrupting his reverie.<sup>38</sup> Vere’s lack of trust in his own crew—both officers and enlisted—directly informs his decision to hastily execute Budd. Leaders who trust their subordinates do not have to wield power based on mutual fear. In identifying with their subordinates, leaders often perform as Outsiders who can look critically at their organizations. These leaders temporarily suspend their positions at the center of these bureaucracies, and this performance gains them valuable insight. But they must quickly return to their positions of authority, of command; remain too long as an Outsider, and the leader cannot credibly maintain order.

Admiral Nelson, whose magnetic personality inspired his men, led “from the front.” Was he a maverick, an Outsider? Melville tells us that the “martial utilitarians may suggest considerations implying that Nelson’s ornate publication of his person in battle was not only unnecessary, but not military, nay savored of foolhardiness and vanity.”<sup>39</sup> But even this derring-do was a carefully calculated decision. “Few

commanders,” Melville writes, “have been so painstakingly circumspect as this same reckless declarer of his person in fight.”<sup>40</sup> Nelson’s performance as an Outsider—a reckless, daring Admiral—generated esprit de corps and spurred his men to courageous victories. Thus, his brief and strategic Outsider performance was all in the service of the greater military mission. In subordinating everything to this mission, Nelson demonstrates the ultimate Insider trait. The bookish and antisocial Vere, on the other hand, naturally inclines toward Outsider status. Vere has carefully cultivated an identity as an Insider over many years, but he has never gotten comfortable in that role. When his identity is tested by an unconventional situation, he reveals his natural tendencies and unintentionally makes the decisions of an Outsider.

This ability to seamlessly and appropriately shift between Insider and Outsider highlights Vere’s greatest shortcoming: his lack of flexibility. Vere, who stands “erectly rigid as a musket”<sup>41</sup> during Budd’s hanging, could never understand Nelson’s philosophy that warfare, and by implication, leadership, cannot be effectively conducted from a single “consistent psychological position.”<sup>42</sup> Melville realized, long before the current DoD doctrine, an important tenet of military leadership. A good military leader can—and probably should—sometimes *act* as an Outsider; but to be truly successful, that leader must ultimately *be* an Insider.

## Notes

1. John Wenke, “Melville’s indirection: *Billy Budd*, the genetic text, and ‘the deadly space between,’” in *New Essays on Billy Budd*, ed. Donald Yannella (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 117.
2. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 309, 312.
3. *Ibid.*, 312.
4. *Ibid.*, 309.
5. *Ibid.*, 380.
6. Joyce Sparer Adler, “*Billy Budd* and Melville’s Philosophy of War,” in *Critical Essays on Melville’s Billy Budd, Sailor*, ed. Robert Milder (Boston: Hall, 1989), 167.
7. Melville, 312.
8. *Ibid.*, 351-52.
9. *Ibid.*, 311. This preference for historical texts throws some suspicious light upon the captain. Melville, the writer of fiction, is certainly being more than a little ironic when he tells us that Vere read “nothing of that literary taste...[but rather] those books to which every serious mind of superior order occupying any active post of authority in the world naturally inclines: books treating of actual men and events.”



10. Ibid., 312.
11. Ibid., 294. The lieutenant partakes of alcohol purely to “irrigate[e] [the] aridity [of duty]...with a fertilizing decoction of strong waters”; Vere, on the other hand, wants his duty to remain as arid as possible.
12. Ibid., 307, 308.
13. Lester Hunt, “*Billy Budd*: Melville’s Dilemma,” *Philosophy and Literature* 26.2 (2002): 287.
14. Melville, 350.
15. Ibid., 350.
16. Ibid., 380.
17. See Christopher Sten, “Vere’s Use of the ‘Forms’: Means and Ends in *Billy Budd*,” *American Literature* 47.1 (1975): 41-43.
18. Merlin Bowen, “Captain Vere and the Weakness of Expediency,” in *Critical Essays on Melville’s Billy Budd, Sailor*, ed. Robert Milder (Boston: Hall, 1989), 68.
19. Melville, 326.
20. C.B. Ives, “*Billy Budd* and the Articles of War,” in *Critical Essays on Melville’s Billy Budd, Sailor*, ed. Robert Milder (Boston: Hall, 1989), 88.
21. Ibid., 88, emphasis mine.
22. Melville, 352.
23. Ibid., 352, 353.
24. Ibid., 365. That “unknown” writer is Melville himself.
25. Ibid., 365.
26. Thomas Claviez, “Rainbows, Fogs, and Other Smokescreens: *Billy Budd* and the Question of Ethics,” *Arizona Quarterly* 62.4 (2006): 35.
27. Melville, 362.
28. Headquarters Department of the U.S. Army, “Fundamentals of Full Spectrum Operations,” in *Joint Forces* (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air University, 2001), 173.
29. Ives, 89.
30. Melville, 363.
31. Ibid., 363.
32. Ibid., 353.
33. See, for example, Claviez, 36.

34. Melville, 354.
35. Headquarters Department of the U.S. Army, 172.
36. *Ibid.*, 172.
37. *Ibid.*, 172.
38. Melville, 341.
39. *Ibid.*, 306.
40. *Ibid.*, 307.
41. *Ibid.*, 376.
42. Lori A. Davis Perry, "Leadership at Trafalgar," review of *Seize the Fire*, by Adam Nicholson, **WLA** 17. 1 and 2 (2005): 327.



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