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The motif of the water journey as a metaphor for philosophical enquiry in selected novels of Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad

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2007-03-01T11:27:38Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/2174

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Chapter Three – *Billy Budd, Sailor* and *Lord Jim*

The voyage of the H.M.S. *Bellipotent* and the stages of Jim's "retreat ... towards the rising sun"

The physical journeys of the three major characters in Billy Budd, Sailor are almost identical. Billy Budd (a foundling in whom "noble descent was as evident ... as in a blood horse"[1]) is "impressed on the Narrow Seas from a homeward-bound English merchantman [the *Rights-of-Man*] into a seventy-four outward bound, H.M.S. *Bellipotent*".[2] Among those on board the warship are its commander, Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere, and the master-at-arms, John Claggart. Shortly after the impressment of Billy, the *Bellipotent* joins the English naval fleet (at war with its French counterpart) in the Mediterranean, but it is when the *Bellipotent* has been dispatched on separate duty at some distance from the rest of the fleet that the crucial events in the plot of Melville's novella take place. "Falsely accused by Claggart of plotting mutiny ..., Billy Budd, his speech impeded by a stutter, strikes his accuser dead in front of the captain, and is condemned, after a summary trial, to hang."[3] In rapid succession, the bodies of Billy and Claggart are committed to the sea. On its return passage to the English fleet, the *Bellipotent* encounters the French line-of-battle ship, the *Athée*, and an engagement ensues. Captain Vere is "hit by a musket ball" which "[m]ore than disable[s]"[4] him. Having been put ashore with the rest of the wounded at the English port of Gibraltar, he "linger[s] for some days"[5] before finally succumbing to his injuries.

In Lord Jim, the eponymous hero grows up at an English parsonage. "[W]hen after a course of light holiday literature his vocation for the sea declare[s] itself, he ... [is] sent at once to a 'training-ship for officers of the mercantile marine.'"[6] After two years of training, he goes to sea and makes many voyages. On one such voyage, he is injured by a falling spar, "and when the ship arrive[s] at an Eastern port [namely Singapore] he [is admitted] to ... hospital."[7] After he has fully recovered, he takes a berth as chief mate on the *Patna*, an old steamer chartered to carry approximately eight hundred Muslim pilgrims to the Arabian port of Jeddah. He and his fellow officers abandon ship when it appears as though the *Patna* is about to sink after her

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[1] Herman Melville, Billy Budd, Sailor (*An Inside Narrative*), in Melville's Short Novels, ed. Dan McCall (New York : W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2002), p. 110. All quotations from Billy Budd, Sailor in my research report are from this edition.

[2] Billy Budd, Sailor, pp. 104-105.

[3] Barbara Johnson, "Melville's Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*", in The Critical Difference : Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading (Baltimore and London : The John Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 79. My own interpretation of Billy Budd, Sailor is much indebted to Johnson's outstandingly perceptive analysis of the novella.

[4] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 167.

[5] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 168.

[6] Lord Jim, p. 8.

[7] Lord Jim, p. 12.

collision with a submerged object. However, the *Patna* does *not* go down, but is towed to Aden by a French gunboat, while Jim and his three "accomplices" are plucked from their lifeboat by the *Avondale*, and taken to Bombay. After Jim's certificate is cancelled at the court of inquiry into the "*Patna* affair", he is employed as a water clerk, first in Bombay, but later also in – amongst other places – Calcutta, Rangoon, Penang, Samarang and Batavia. His retreat "in good order towards the rising sun"[8] occurs because of his "exquisite sensibilities",[9] which are made manifest by the intense shame he feels whenever the "scandal of the *Patna*" is mentioned in his presence. Eventually, Marlow consults with Stein on a possible remedy for the burden of guilt which his young friend carries, and Jim is given the opportunity of going to the remote settlement of Patusan, which becomes his final resting-place. We are given very little information about Marlow's journeys in Lord Jim, although he seems to have travelled extensively, especially in maritime south-east Asia and the surrounding regions; we *are* told of at least two visits to Stein, and an extended visit to Jim in Patusan.

It is evident that Jim's physical journey from England to Patusan should be categorised as linear. And, while it is reasonable to assume that Marlow's travels begin and end in Great Britain (making his journey a circular one), neither the starting-point nor the end-point of his peregrinations is made explicit, and so, readers are likely to detect traces of *vagabondaggio*[10] (even if these are only illusory) in the various journeys which he undertakes. The physical journeys of Billy Budd, Claggart and Vere are also linear, and similarly ill-defined. The narrator implies that they commence in England, and describes how they are cut short in relatively quick succession: those of Billy and Claggart, at two unspecified locations in the Mediterranean Sea; and Vere's, at the southernmost tip of the Iberian peninsula. But, because readers are not given any detailed information about the route taken by the *Bellipotent*, they may gain the (erroneous) impression that Billy, Claggart and even Vere have travelled very little during the course of the novella. However, I will show (as I did in the case of Moby-Dick and Heart of Darkness) that the physical journey of each of the main characters in Billy Budd, Sailor and Lord Jim is emblematic of that character's own particular experiential journey.

Readings of innocence and depravity, successful conduct and failure

In Melville's novella, Billy Budd is introduced to us as extraordinary: he exemplifies the "Handsome Sailor" who wins the affection of his fellow mariners, and moves "along with them like Aldebaran among the lesser lights of his constellation."[11] Billy is compared to two gods of manly beauty, Apollo and Hyperion, and Captain Vere considers him "a fine specimen of the

[8] Lord Jim, p. 8.
[9] Lord Jim, p. 120.
[10] For M.H. Abrams's explanation of this term, *vide* p. 3 of this research report.

genus homo, who in the nude might have posed for a statue of young Adam before the Fall."[12] Billy's "moral nature", moreover, is not "out of keeping with the physical make"[13]: he has a "genial happy-go-lucky air",[14] and, on the *Rights-of-Man*, he fulfils the important role of "peacemaker".[15] Captain Graveling tells Lieutenant Ratcliffe, that "a virtue went out of him [i.e. Billy], sugaring the sour ones."[16] In fact, the narrator depicts Billy throughout the novella as the embodiment of innocence and absolute goodness: he is a sort of "child-man" who has hardly any "intuitive knowledge of the bad"[17], and he does not "deal in [or, for that matter, show a conversance with] double meanings and insinuations of any sort"[18]. All this is further underscored by the narrator's revealing comparisons: "Billy in many respects was little more than a sort of *upright barbarian*, much such as *Adam* presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company."[19] (My italics.) Barbara Johnson furnishes us with the valuable insight that "Billy seemingly represents the perfectly *motivated* sign; that is, his inner self (the signified) is considered transparently readable from the beauty of his outer self (the signifier)."[20]

By his thoughts and actions, Billy consistently strives to preserve his innocence and moral rectitude. When he is impressed to do service on the *Bellipotent*, he makes "no demur".[21] When he witnesses the punishment meted out to a novice-afterguardsman for dereliction of duty, he "resolve[s] that never through remissness [will] he make himself liable to such a visitation or do or omit aught that might merit even verbal reproof."[22] When the Dansker opines that Jemmy Legs (i.e. Claggart) is down on him (i.e. Billy), he is mystified and incredulous, maintaining that he seldom passes Claggart "but there comes a pleasant word."[23] Finally, when an afterguardsman tries to enlist him in a mutinous conspiracy of impressed men, he recoils in disgust "from an overture which, though he but ill comprehended, he instinctively knew must involve evil of some sort".[24] Thus Billy's approach to life may be encapsulated as follows: he endeavours to remain cheerful in the face of adversity; he is afraid of doing anything that might undermine his irreproachability; and he does not understand, or wish to understand, evil of any kind. His stutter could well be read as an outward manifestation of his continual struggle to

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[11] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 103.
[12] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 142.
[13] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 104.
[14] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 108.
[15] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 107.
[16] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 106.
[17] Billy Budd, Sailor, pp. 135 and 136.
[18] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 108.
[19] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 110.
[20] Johnson, p. 84.
[21] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 105.
[22] Billy Budd, Sailor, pp. 122-123.
[23] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 124.
[24] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 134.

distance himself from all iniquity: not only does it express his anxiety about living in a universe that does not fulfil his expectations, but it also serves as a defence mechanism which protects him from the risks of committing himself through speech. This last point is substantiated by the fact that Billy seems to be more adept at solving problems by physical than by intellectual means: on the *Rights-of-Man*, he administers a "terrible drubbing" to the "burly"[25] trouble-maker, Red Whiskers; and, on the *Bellipotent*, he strikes down the wicked John Claggart. In readily relying on his physical prowess, Billy reveals his unsophisticated nature. And, as I have already hinted, he strives to maintain a childlike simplicity of outlook by a steadfast refusal to enter the dangerous realm of knowledge – a realm which threatens to disturb "the noiseless tenor of [his] way."[26]

Johnson provides us with the further insight that,

> in accordance with his "nature," Billy reads everything at face value, never questioning the meaning of appearances... His literal-mindedness is represented by his illiteracy because, in assuming that language can be taken at face value, he excludes the very functioning of *difference* that makes the act of reading both indispensable and undecidable.[27]

However, when Billy is asked in court whether he "knew of or suspected aught savoring of incipient trouble (meaning mutiny, though the explicit term was avoided) going on in any section of the ship's company",[28] he replies in the negative, and decides not to mention his disturbing interview with the afterguardsman who had approached him "in underhand intriguing fashion".[29] Here,

> [t]he naive reader is not naive enough to forget to edit out information too troubling to report. The instability of the space between sign and referent, normally denied by the naive reader, is called upon as an instrument whenever that same instability threatens to disturb the content of meaning itself. Billy takes every sign as transparently readable as long as what he reads is consistent with transparent peace, order, and authority. When this is not so, his reading clouds accordingly.[30]

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[25] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 106.
[26] Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", in The Complete English Poems of Thomas Gray, ed. James Reeves (London : Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1973), l. 76.
[27] Johnson, p. 84.
[28] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 150.
[29] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 133.
[30] Johnson, pp. 97-98.

This suggests that Billy's self-enclosed innocence is not entirely natural and innate; sometimes it can be upheld only by the cultivation of a wilful ignorance. It becomes clear, therefore, that Billy reads in terms of his own interests, and is unwilling to venture onto any path of interpretation which could bring him into direct contact with evil. His assiduous avoidance of readings which have the potential to unsettle him prevents him from giving due consideration to certain interpretations that might be valid, thus limiting the range of responses available to him in any given situation; it also militates against his own character development and intellectual growth during the course of the novella.

The other important character who remains essentially unchanged throughout Billy Budd, Sailor is the scheming master-at-arms, John Claggart. The antagonist of the innocent, "welkin-eyed",[31] and – presumably – blond Billy, Claggart has a "notable" face which is spoilt somewhat by a chin that has "something of strange protuberant broadness in its make... [H]is brow [is] of the sort phrenologically associated with more than average intellect; silken jet curls partly clustering over it, making a foil to the pallor below ..."[32] Although the protuberant chin and, more especially, the pallid complexion of the master-at-arms

> hint of something defective or abnormal in the constitution and blood[,]... his general aspect and manner [are] so suggestive of an education and career incongruous with his naval function that when not actively engaged in it he looked like a man of high quality, social and moral ...[33]

However, Claggart's wickedness completely belies whatever favourable impressions the reader may have formed of his physical appearance. Moreover, it is a malevolence which is so extreme and seemingly unmotivated that the narrator has great difficulty in trying to account for it. He freely admits that the sort of antipathy felt by Claggart towards Billy "partake[s] of the mysterious" (since it is occasioned "by the mere aspect of some other mortal"[34]), and suggests that it is conjoined with a passion often held to be incompatible with it, namely envy:

> But Claggart's [envy] was no vulgar form of the passion... If askance he eyed the good looks, cheery health, and frank enjoyment of young life in Billy Budd, it was because these went along with a nature that, as Claggart magnetically felt, had in its simplicity never willed malice or experienced the reactionary bite of that serpent... One person excepted, the master-at-arms was perhaps the only man in the ship intellectually capable of adequately

[31] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 104.
[32] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 119.
[33] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 120.

> appreciating the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd. And the insight but intensified his passion ... Yet in an aesthetic way he saw the charm of it, the courageous free-and-easy temper of it, and fain would have shared it, but he despaired of it.[35]

The mixed emotions which the contemplation of Billy arouses in Claggart are not unlike those felt by Satan, when (in Milton's Paradise Lost) the arch-fiend casts envious glances at the blissful existence of Eve in the Garden of Eden, but realises that he has excluded himself from ever experiencing such happiness again:

> Such pleasure took the serpent to behold
> This flowery plat, the sweet recess of Eve
> Thus early, thus alone; her heavenly form
> Angelic, but more soft, and feminine,
> Her graceful innocence, her every air
> Of gesture or least action overawed
> His malice ...
> That space the evil one abstracted stood
> From his own evil, and for the time remained
> Stupidly good, of enmity disarmed ...
> But the hot hell that always in him burns,
> Though in mid heaven, soon ended his delight,
> And tortures him now more, the more he sees
> Of pleasure not for him ordained: then soon
> Fierce hate he recollects, and all his thoughts
> Of mischief, gratulating, thus excites.[36]

While most people are fairly familiar with vice, they are at a loss to comprehend or explain motiveless evil of the kind exhibited by Satan and Claggart. The narrator is no different, as is evident from his comment, "His portrait [i.e. Claggart's] I essay, but shall never hit it."[37] Whereas the illiterate Billy succeeds in "hitting the target" (i.e. Claggart) by literally aiming a blow at it, the eloquent narrator musters words in a bid to "strike through the mask"[38] that obscures Claggart's "true" character. After a few inconclusive attempts to "hit the target", the narrator turns – almost as a last resort, one feels – to the writings of Plato for assistance in the

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[34] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 126.
[35] Billy Budd, Sailor, pp. 129-130.
[36] John Milton, Paradise Lost, ed. Alastair Fowler (rpt. Harlow, Essex : Longman Group Ltd., 1986), Book IX, ll. 455-472.
[37] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 119.

elucidation of Claggart's demoniacal character. From that source, he quotes the following item in a list of terms and definitions: "Natural depravity: a depravity according to nature".[39] He then proceeds to delineate some of the recognizable features of "natural depravity", but this brings him no nearer to explaining it satisfactorily or understanding its origins. Of course, Plato's definition of the term is not particularly illuminating, since it is merely a tautologous rewording of the term itself.

To paraphrase the words of "an honest scholar",[40] it is hardly possible for the narrator to enter the labyrinth of Claggart's character and get out again. For, as Johnson quite rightly observes, the master-at-arms is the

> image of difference and duplicity ... He has no vices, yet he incarnates evil. He is an intellectual, but uses reason as "an ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational" [p. 128]. Billy inspires in him both "profound antipathy" [p. 126] and "soft yearning" [p. 137]. In the incompatibility of his attributes, Claggart is thus a personification of ambiguity and ambivalence, of the distance between signifier and signified ...[41]

From this it may be inferred that the narrator conceives of Claggart as the antithesis of Billy, and then assigns qualities to him in accordance with that conception. This interpretation is supported by the fact that, whereas almost all those who come into contact with Billy are prepared to vouch for his goodness on the basis of concrete evidence, it is the narrator alone who designates Claggart as evil.[42] I believe that, because the moral oppositions in the novella appear to be somewhat contrived, it is reasonable to conclude that the narrator is less interested in presenting us with an incident-packed plot than in exploring the nature of good and evil, and the possible results of their interaction.

Although good and evil (in the persons of Billy and Claggart) are diametrical opposites, it is of interest to note that, like Billy, Claggart reads signs in a way that corresponds with the kind of "sign" he himself is. For Claggart

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[38] Moby-Dick, p. 140.

[39] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 128.

[40] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 127.

[41] Johnson, pp. 84-85.

[42] While a rumour circulates amongst the crew that "the master-at-arms was a *chevalier* who had volunteered into the King's navy by way of compounding for some mysterious swindle whereof he had been arraigned at the King's Bench" (Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 120), the narrator dismisses this as unsubstantiated gossip: "But the less credence was to be given to the gun-deck talk touching Claggart, seeing that no man holding his office ["a sort of chief of police" – Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 119] in a man-of-war can ever hope to be popular with the crew... About as much was really known to the *Bellipotent's* tars of the master-at-arms' career before entering the service as an astronomer knows about a comet's travels prior to its first observable appearance in the sky." (Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 121.)

> is properly an ironic reader, who, assuming the sign to be arbitrary and unmotivated, reverses the value signs of appearances and takes a daisy [such as Billy] for a mantrap and an unmotivated accidental spilling of soup [by Billy] for an intentional, sly escape of antipathy.[43]

The soup-spilling episode is one of several "veiled allusions to shipboard homosexuality in the novella".[44] In his presentation of the incident, the narrator tells us: "Pausing, [Claggart] was about to ejaculate something hasty at the sailor [i.e. Billy]", but checked himself, and pointing down to the streaming soup, playfully tapped him from behind with his rattan ..."[45] Soon afterwards, there is another oblique reference to homosexuality when the narrator speculates about Claggart's enigmatic character, and associates the master-at-arms with a certain "X—", whom "an honest scholar" had characterised as "a nut not to be cracked by the tap of a lady's fan."[46] Although homosexuality can become quite common in an environment from which women have been excluded (such as on a man-o'-war), W.H. Auden puts forward a subtle interpretation of the sexual symbolism in Billy Budd, Sailor as it relates to Claggart and Billy:

> In *Billy Budd*, the opposition is not strength/weakness, but innocence/guilt-consciousness, i.e., Claggart wishes to annihilate the difference either by becoming innocent himself or by acquiring an accomplice in guilt. If this is expressed sexually, the magic act must necessarily be homosexual, for the wish is for identity in innocence or in guilt, and identity demands the same sex.
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> Claggart, as the Devil, cannot, of course, admit a sexual desire, for that would be an admission of loneliness which pride cannot admit. Either he must corrupt innocence through an underling or if that is not possible he must annihilate it, which he does.[47]

Ironically, in seeking to accomplish his diabolical aims, Claggart behaves like Billy, in that he does not consistently uphold his preferred method of interpretation. We are told that, when

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[43] Johnson, p. 85.

[44] Mervyn Cooke, ["Homosexuality in *Billy Budd*"], in the Norton Critical Edition of Melville's Short Novels, p. 359. Cooke comments that "[h]omosexual lust is a chief foundation for Claggart's hatred of Budd, and even Vere's attitude towards the foretopman is more than altruistically paternal ('he had congratulated Lieutenant Ratcliffe upon his good fortune in lighting on such a fine specimen of the *genus homo*, who in the nude might have posed for a statue of the young Adam before the Fall' [Billy Budd, Sailor, pp. 141-142])." (Cooke, p. 359.) The latter assertion is underscored by "[a]nother striking sexual symbol[:] ... at the moment of his execution, Billy's body hangs motionless and is not convulsed by the expected spasm. At this moment, Vere stands 'erectly rigid as a musket' [Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 163]." (Cooke, p. 360.)

[45] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 125.

[46] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 127.

"Squeak", a corporal whom Claggart had employed "as an implicit tool in laying traps for the worriment of the foretopman [i.e. Billy][,]... pervert[s] to his chief certain innocent frolics of the good-natured foretopman," and "invent[s] for his mouth sundry contumelious epithets he claimed to have overheard him let fall", Claggart "never suspected the veracity of these reports".[48] Here, "the ironic doubter forgets to suspect the reliability of anything confirming his own suspicions."[49] Claggart, therefore, also reads in terms of his own (malevolent) interests by not hesitating to manipulate the available evidence to suit his own preconceptions.

Although, on a few rare occasions (as we have seen), Billy and Claggart are prepared to abandon their favourite interpretative methodologies when these threaten to undermine their previously-held beliefs, as naive and ironic readers respectively, they are

> equally destructive, both of themselves and of each other. It is significant that both [of them] should die. [Their] readings do violence to the plays of ambiguity and belief by forcing on the text the applicability of a universal and absolute law. The one, obsessively intent on preserving peace and eliminating equivocation, murders the text; the other, seeing nothing but universal war, becomes the spot on which aberrant premonitions of negativity become truth.[50]

Because Billy and Claggart function as archetypes, the plot of Billy Budd, Sailor shows little potential for advancement until the obsequious Claggart approaches Captain Vere in order to deliver his poisonous message that Billy is a "dangerous character"[51] who is fomenting mutiny on the *Bellipotent*. Here, the singularity of Claggart's interpretation of Billy parallels Ahab's highly subjective reading of Moby Dick. Both Ahab and Claggart adopt a myth-making strategy (as outlined by Roland Barthes in Mythologies[52]) whereby first-order signs representative of creatures that are either harmless, if left alone (in the case of Moby Dick), or innocent and good (in the case of Billy) are transformed into the signifiers of second-order signs that mark those creatures as treacherous and evil. In the novella, Vere's reaction to Claggart's accusation is of crucial importance in determining the outcome of the plot. Indeed, the captain's role is such a dominant one from this point onwards that it behoves us to examine the introductory portrait which the narrator paints of him.

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[47] W.H. Auden, "The Passion of Billy Budd", in Twentieth Century Interpretations of *Billy Budd*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Englewood Cliffs : Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), pp. 87-88.
[48] Billy Budd, Sailor, pp. 130-131.
[49] Johnson, p. 98. This subtle change in Claggart's interpretative tactics highlights (by way of contrast) one of the generic problems of an unvaried scepticism: ultimately it must doubt itself.
[50] Johnson, p. 98.
[51] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 140.

Vere is described as "a sailor of distinction" who has "sterling qualities" and is "undemonstrative", but there is a hint of some ambiguity within his character, since he is "practical", though given "upon occasion ... [to] a certain dreaminess of mood."[53] The captain of the *Bellipotent* possesses self-control, "ha[s] a marked leaning toward everything intellectual", and loves books, particularly those

> treating of actual men and events no matter of what era – history, biography, and unconventional writers like Montaigne, who free from cant and convention, honestly and in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities. In this line of reading he found confirmation of his own more reserved thoughts – confirmation which he had vainly sought in social converse... [Vere's] 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... [He] disinterestedly opposed [the theories of innovators] 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.[54]

The information that Vere's "settled convictions" function "as a dike against [the] invading waters of novel opinion" suggests that he is conservative, and that he, too, reads in terms of his own predilections – when it suits him to do so. Some of his fellow-officers deem him "a dry and bookish gentleman" with "a queer streak of the pedantic running through him",[55] a perception which the narrator glosses as follows:

> Some apparent ground there was for this sort of confidential criticism; since not only did the captain's discourse never fall into the jocosely familiar, but in illustrating of any point touching the stirring personages and events of the time he would be as apt to cite some historic character or incident of antiquity as he would be to cite from the moderns. He seemed unmindful of the circumstance that to his bluff company such remote allusions, however pertinent they might really be, were altogether alien to men whose reading was mainly confined to the journals. But considerateness in such matters is

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[52] Roland Barthes, "Myth Today", in Mythologies, sel. & tr. Annette Lavers (rpt. London : Vintage, 1993), pp. 109-159.
[53] Billy Budd, Sailor, pp. 116 and 117.
[54] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 118.
[55] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 118.

> not easy to natures constituted like Captain Vere's. Their honesty prescribes to them directness, sometimes far-reaching like that of a migratory fowl that in its flight never heeds when it crosses a frontier.[56]

The narrator's delineation of Vere creates the impression that the captain of the *Bellipotent* is a man of integrity, seriousness, honesty and intelligence, and that he can be relied upon to show good sense and sound judgement in almost every situation. But the portrait also provides a few subtle hints that, on occasion, Vere might be inclined to act in an opinionated, inflexible and – perhaps even – rash manner. While it may be commendable that he is reluctant to appropriate innovative ideas of doubtful value (though his opposition to the revolutionary views of eighteenth-century Europe may reflect the personal prejudices of Melville himself), this ought not to make him a slavish upholder of traditional values and well-established measures, especially if these are likely to yield unsatisfactory results. Vere could also be counted unwise if he were to rely too heavily on historical precedents in dealing with complex social situations, since such an approach might blind him to that combination of factors which makes every human situation unique. Again, while there is no denying that "lasting institutions", universal peace and notions of "the true welfare of mankind" help to prevent the world from falling into chaos, these should not be cultivated to the exclusion of the legitimate rights of individual human beings. Moreover, although honesty and directness are generally considered to be laudable character traits, if directness becomes too "far-reaching", its possessor may be ill-equipped to perceive what is close at hand. And, finally, as a fallible human being, Vere is not blessed with Godlike wisdom, and so there will sometimes be limits (or "frontiers") beyond which it would not be prudent for him to proceed.

> Yet it is by inviting Billy Budd and John Claggart to "cross" the "frontier" between their proper territory and their superior's cabin, between the private and the political realms, that Vere unwittingly sets up the conditions for the narrative chiasmus he must judge.[57]

A strong case can be made for the argument that Vere's conduct, in bringing Billy and Claggart together, is improper and a betrayal of naval principles. In his capacity as a naval officer, Vere should not indulge in philosophically motivated experiments: this constitutes the crossing of yet another frontier. If he had felt that there were sufficient substance in Claggart's accusations to warrant further investigation, he should have laid charges against Billy, and evidence should

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[56] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 119.

[57] Johnson, p. 105. The "narrative chiasmus" to which Johnson refers occurs when Claggart dies as a result of Billy's blow, since "innocence and guilt personified in Claggart and Billy in effect [change] places." (Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 148.) At that instant, the criminal who fabricates false accusations (Claggart) becomes the victim, and the victim of those accusations (Billy) becomes the "criminal" (the perpetrator of manslaughter). Thus Claggart's allegiance to order has the perverse effect of promoting confusion.

have been heard within the framework of formal naval proceedings. Be that as it may, the narrator ensures that we are fully apprised of Vere's reasons for acting in the way he does:

> At first, indeed, [Vere] was naturally for summoning that substantiation of his allegations which Claggart said was at hand. But such a proceeding would result in the matter at once getting abroad, which in the present stage of it, he thought, might undesirably affect the ship's company. If Claggart was a false witness – that closed the affair. And therefore, before trying the accusation, he would first practically test the accuser; and he thought this could be done in a quiet, undemonstrative way.[58]

Vere may be deemed ingenuous for supposing that the veracity or falsehood of Claggart's accusation could be determined with absolute certainty in this "quiet, undemonstrative" manner. Yet it is understandable that he should be sensitive to the possibility of insurrection on his ship in the immediate wake of the naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore in the spring of 1797, and that this should influence the course of action he decides to take in the circumstances currently under discussion. Unfortunately, though, he precipitates a catastrophe which he could hardly have foreseen. "Under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling" brought about by Claggart's allegations, Billy's voice "develop[s] an organic hesitancy,... a stutter or even worse",[59] which prevents him from making a verbal statement in reply. I agree with Johnson that

> [i]f Claggart's accusation that Billy is secretly plotting mutiny is essentially an affirmation of the possibility of a discontinuity between being and doing, of an arbitrary, nonmotivated relation between signifier and signified, then Billy's blow must be read as an attempt violently to deny that discontinuity or arbitrariness. The blow, as a denial, functions as a substitute for speech, as Billy explains during his trial: "I did not mean to kill him. Could I have used my tongue I would not have struck him. But he foully lied to my face and in presence of my captain, and I had to say something, and I could only say it with a blow" [p. 150]. But in striking a blow in defense of the sign's motivation, Billy actually personifies the very *absence* of motivation: "I did not mean ..." ... Billy performs the truth of Claggart's report to Vere only by means of his absolute and blind denial of its cognitive validity.[60]

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[58] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 143.
[59] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 111.
[60] Johnson, p. 86.

Clearly, Billy is intent on defending his innocence and remaining a naive reader to the very end. Like Claggart, he steadfastly refuses to embark on an experiential journey which might alter his outlook on life. Even when he is sentenced to death, he accepts his fate without demur, despite the fact that he has every reason to feel aggrieved because a cruel concatenation of circumstances seems to have conspired against him. The experiential journeys of Claggart and Billy are curiously static; they can be regarded as progressive and linear only if it is argued that every human being continues to encounter new experiences until his dying breath. The journey of Claggart should not be envisaged as leading to a destination that is exceptionally tormenting, since not only is his death sudden, but it is also not preceded by a period of prolonged suffering. Nevertheless, the vast majority of readers are likely to regard his death as the just (or, at least, justifiable) retribution for his sinister plotting. In appraising the destination of Billy's journey, the reader must be guided by the narrator's insistence that Billy faces his impending death with equanimity, if not serenity: "Billy ... freely referred to his death as a thing close at hand"[61] and

> was wholly without irrational fear of it, a fear more prevalent in highly civilized communities than those so-called barbarous ones which in all respects stand nearer to unadulterate Nature. And, as elsewhere said, a barbarian Billy radically was...[62]

Because Billy is essentially a primitive, it is probable that he sees death not as a truncation of life, but simply as a continuation of the linear journey with which he is already familiar. Most readers, on the other hand, look upon his execution with dismay, even if some of them deem it to have been necessary for the preservation of law and order in the British navy.

The steps which Vere takes in the immediate aftermath of Claggart's death are perhaps even more surprising than his original decision to bring Billy and Claggart face to face in his cabin. He seeks to maintain "secrecy in the matter,... confining all knowledge of it for a time to the place where the homicide occurred".[63] Furthermore, he is fearful that "the deed of the foretopman, so soon as it should be known on the gun decks, would tend to awaken any slumbering embers of the Nore among the crew," and so, "a sense of the urgency of the case overrule[s] in Captain Vere every other consideration."[64] He decides summarily to convene a drumhead court, and appoints "the individuals composing it: the first lieutenant, the captain of

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[61] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 160.
[62] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 161.
[63] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 148.
[64] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 149.

marines, and the sailing master."[65] Vere's self-evident agitation and his desire for secrecy cause the surgeon to wonder whether the captain is "unhinged". And,

> as to the drumhead court, it struck the surgeon as impolitic, if nothing more. The thing to do, he thought, was to place Billy Budd in confinement, and in a way dictated by usage, and postpone further action in so extraordinary a case to such time as they should rejoin the squadron, and then refer it to the admiral.[66]

The surgeon's opinion is shared by the two lieutenants and the captain of marines, who also "think that such a matter should be referred to the admiral."[67] This suggests that it might have been illegal for Vere to hold a summary trial on the *Bellipotent*. Indeed, it *would* have been illegal if the trial had taken place as an historical event, and not as a fictional one in Melville's novella.[68] Although Vere is the only person who witnesses Claggart's killing, it must also be counted something of an anomaly that he chooses to make himself the sole witness in the case. As Robert K. Martin Jr. points out,

> [n]o [other] witnesses are heard; no attempt is ever made to determine the truth of Claggart's accusation. Of course, the fact that the accusation is false does not alter the fact that Billy killed Claggart, but it does determine a great deal about motive and justification... It is hardly the function of courts to make mere determination of facts; as Leonard Casper has pointed out, Vere's rulings make the court function as a coroner's jury, which has no power to sentence anyone. And some investigation might determine whether or not mutiny is likely on board the *Bellipotent*; the issue is important, since it is Vere's assumption of the danger of mutiny that justifies his suspension of proper procedure, although no effort whatever is made to examine that assumption.[69]

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[65] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 149.

[66] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 147.

[67] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 147.

[68] The following quotation is taken from Harold Beaver's notes to Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor* and other stories, ed. Harold Beaver (rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1970), p. 462: "Hayford and Sealts [in Herman Melville, Billy Budd, Sailor (*An Inside Narrative*), ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 175-183] ... make clear that, according to British naval regulations in effect at this time, the trial was threefold illegal... First, a captain was not authorized to punish a seaman beyond 'twelve lashes upon his bare back, with a cat-of-nine-tails'; any greater punishment required a court-martial; but to convene a court-martial a captain needed the permission of his squadron commander. Secondly, a regular naval court-martial could consist of commanders and captains only. Thirdly, a sentence of death, for crimes other than mutiny, could not be executed 'till after the report of the proceedings of the said court shall have been made to the lords commissioners of the admiralty, or to the commander of the fleet or squadron in which the sentence was passed, and their or his direction shall have been given therein.' (John McArthur, Principles and Practice of Naval and Military Courts Martial, 4th ed., London : printed by A. Strahan; sold by J. Butterworth, 1813.)"

[69] Robert K. Martin Jr., ["Is Vere a Hero"], in the Norton Critical Edition of Melville's Short Novels, pp. 362-363.

Moreover, once Vere has recused himself from acting as a judge, it should be axiomatic that he refrains from interfering in the deliberations and decision-making of the officers whom he has entrusted with the task of dispensing justice. Yet, he *does* interfere, and in the most blatant manner: the official judges become no more than token figures, since Vere effectively tells them what verdict they should reach and what sentence they should pass.

Although it is possible to criticise Vere, his conduct could also be construed as the judicious response of a captain who is required to act expeditiously in times of great danger not only to himself and his crew, but also to the British navy and Great Britain itself. Nevertheless, the requirement on him to act in the best interests of his country, even if that means that he should disregard the dictates of what he refers to as his "private conscience",[70] weighs heavily upon him, subjecting him to severe psychic stress. This is evident from his "excited manner"[71] immediately after Claggart's death, and from his violent starts and vehement exclamations ("It is the divine judgement on Ananias! Look!" and "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!"[72]). Vere is torn between the compassion of a "father" who feels that Billy is "an angel of God", and the inflexibility of a military disciplinarian whose dispassionate assessment of the situation demands that "the angel must hang". He readily acknowledges that, in an environment less rigid than the navy, a compassionate view of Billy's deed is likely to prevail: "[B]efore a court less arbitrary and more merciful than a martial one, [the] plea [that 'Budd purposed neither mutiny nor homicide'] would largely extenuate. At the Last Assizes it shall acquit."[73] However, Vere argues against such a verdict by telling the three officers presiding at Billy's trial:

> "But your scruples:... [m]ake them advance and declare themselves. Come now; do they import something like this:... How can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?... Well, I too feel that, the full force of that. It is Nature. But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King. Though the ocean, which is inviolate Nature primeval, though this be the element where we move and have our being as sailors, yet as the King's officers lies our duty in a sphere correspondingly natural? So little is that true, that in receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents... [S]uppose condemnation to follow these present proceedings. Would it be so much we ourselves that would condemn as it

[70] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 154.
[71] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 146.
[72] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 146.

> would be martial law operating through us? For that law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible. Our vowed responsibility is in this: That however pitilessly that law may operate in any instances, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it."[74]

Here, Vere posits Nature and Civilization (the latter symbolised by the King) as the constituent terms of a binary opposition. He implies that the two concepts (i.e. Nature and Civilization) make mutually exclusive demands on us: we can show allegiance either to Nature or to Civilization, but not to both at once. In ruling out the possibility of any compromise, Vere evinces an unwillingness to venture beyond the familiar confines of logocentric thought. He also attempts to forestall any twinges of guilt which the officers might feel in the future (if they were to sanction Billy's execution) by asserting that judges are duty-bound to follow the letter of the law in all cases, and that no blame can be attached to them for doing so. Although Vere could be accused of sophistry in putting forward an argument that would allow those in authority to disclaim responsibility for their actions, he continues to reason in a similar vein:

> "To steady us a bit, let us recur to the facts. – In wartime at sea a man-of-war's man strikes his superior in grade, and the blow kills. Apart from its effect the blow itself is, according to the Articles of War, a capital crime... We proceed under the law of the Mutiny Act... War looks but to the frontage, the appearance. And the Mutiny Act, War's child, takes after the father. Budd's intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose."[75]

It may be argued (as Martin does) that such a reductive simplification of jurisprudence – an instrumentalist view which disregards motives and intentions – is a travesty of justice. However, a tenable counter-argument might run as follows: if victory in war is one's goal, the maintenance of military discipline is of paramount importance, and this can be ensured only by a rigid adherence to rules and regulations, and by an unflinching resolve to impose the prescribed punishment on anyone guilty of breaking the law.[76] It is important to note that never for a moment, after the execution of Billy, does Vere show any contrition for having proceeded as he did. We *are* told that "[n]ot long before death,... [Vere] was heard to murmur words inexplicable to his attendant: 'Billy Budd, Billy Budd.'" However, the narrator continues: "That these were not the accents of remorse would seem clear from what the attendant said to the

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[73] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 154.
[74] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 153.
[75] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 154.
[76] Doubtless, the latter argument would have been endorsed by that arch-conservative amongst philosophers, Edmund Burke.

Bellipotent's senior officer of marines..."[77] I suspect that the dying Vere repeats Billy's name because it is a symbol for him of all the insoluble problems which confront us during our lives. Claggart's death had placed Vere in an invidious position: any measures he decided to take would be based on guesswork, since it was impossible for him to foresee precisely what the consequences of the various courses of action that were available to him would be. However, having formulated his strategy of dealing with the situation, he remained convinced that it was both responsible and correct – in short, the best solution available to him in the circumstances prevailing at the time.

Whereas Billy and Claggart read by (almost always) "forcing upon the text the applicability of a universal and absolute law",[78] the cultured Vere realises that interpretation is often highly subjective. He accepts in principle, for instance, that Billy could be found guilty of murder, and be sentenced to death, or that he could be given a more lenient sentence, since he "purposed neither mutiny nor homicide."[79] But, when he is required to halt the play of undecidability by handing down his own considered judgement (albeit by proxy) at Billy's trial, he bases this judgement on a reading that is heavily reliant on the prevailing socio-historical context. Thus Vere also forces on the text the applicability of a law (though, in this instance, the law is contingent and historical, rather than universal and absolute). This is unavoidable, however, since all acts of judgement are founded on the assumption that unassailable interpretations are possible (although, of course, they are not). What each reader of Billy Budd, Sailor needs to do, therefore, is to decide whether the interpretative approach which Vere adopts in order to pass judgement on Billy is the best that he could have chosen.

Personally, I find it hard *not* to criticise Vere: his lack of remorse for having sanctioned Billy's execution is, at worst, callous; at best, it is indicative of a stubbornly narrow perspective on human affairs. Moreover, as C.N. Manlove trenchantly observes,

> there is a further and deeper consideration. When all is said of Vere's character and motives, his remark before proceeding to judgment on Billy Budd must reflect ironically on himself, reducing the significance even of the better of his impulses – "intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose" [Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 154]: the repulsive act is everything; what worthy or innocent motives lie behind it, nothing. By his unveracious refusal of Budd's intentions Vere must in the last analysis forfeit consideration of his own. In

[77] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 168.
[78] Johnson, p. 98.
[79] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 154.

> this sense we must judge him by his acts alone.[80]

One of those acts consists in advocating that the death sentence should be passed on someone who would be acquitted – and Vere publicly acknowledges this – at The Last Judgement. In other words, Vere knowingly opts for imperfect human justice when he could have chosen (although, of course, he denies that he has a choice in the matter) what he deems to be perfect divine justice.

Despite the fact that there is very little, if any, evidence to suggest that Vere's fundamental beliefs undergo a metamorphosis during the course of the novella, he is (as I have already observed) not unaffected by the moral dilemma which faces him as a result of Billy's death-dealing blow. It seems likely, therefore, that after Billy's hanging he would have felt somewhat less at ease in his environment, and, for that reason, his experiential journey would have followed, for the most part, a downward trajectory terminating in painful death.

If, in Melville's novella, Billy Budd's innocence is pitted against Claggart's malevolence, in Conrad's Lord Jim, the eponymous character's idealistic dreams of heroic action are tested by his interaction with other human beings and the contingencies of the physical world. The youthful impulsiveness (if not naivety) inherent in Jim's decision to become a sailor mostly on the strength of his reading – what one supposes must have been – popular books about the sea is a character trait which obtrudes itself with some regularity during the rest of his life; it certainly plays a pivotal part in determining his destiny – as does his penchant for valuing his imaginative life so highly that it distracts him from the here and now of quotidian reality. We observe the latter characteristic for the first time in Jim's career when he is undergoing training for the merchant navy. During a severe storm, a "coaster running in for shelter ... crashe[s] through a schooner at anchor".[81] Jim and his fellow naval cadets are given orders to man a cutter in order to provide whatever assistance might be required. However, Jim is so awe-struck by the fury of the storm that he all but loses his ability to act: the cutter is lowered before he is able to reach her. Two men are saved from probable drowning, but Jim's reaction to the story of the rescue, as narrated by the bowman of the cutter, is little short of astonishing:

> Jim thought it a pitiful display of vanity. The gale had ministered to a heroism as spurious as its own pretence of terror. He felt angry with the brutal tumult of earth and sky for taking him unawares and checking unfairly a generous readiness for narrow escapes. Otherwise he was rather glad he had not gone into the cutter, since a lower achievement had served

[80] C.N. Manlove, "An Organic Hesitancy : Theme and Style in *Billy Budd*", in New Perspectives in Melville, ed. Faith Pullin (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 1978), p. 280.

> the turn. He had enlarged his knowledge more than those who had done the work. When all men flinched, then – he felt sure – he alone would know how to deal with the spurious menace of wind and seas... [H]e exulted with fresh certitude in his avidity for adventure, and in a sense of many-sided courage.[82]

Here, Jim rationalises his failure to respond promptly to a crisis by the construction of an elaborate series of self-deceptions. Surely there is *some* degree of heroism involved in braving a storm at sea and risking personal injury (or, even, death) in order to rescue others from a watery grave? The "tumult of earth and sky" can hardly be blamed for Jim's tardiness in getting to the cutter, since it did not prevent others from boarding her; this excuse represents the circumstantial evasion of someone who has not risen to a physical and moral challenge. It is also not easy to see how a person *not* involved in a rescue operation could learn more from his non-participation than those who actually do the work. Finally, it seems rather perverse of someone to become more confident of his courage when he has just neglected to give concrete proof of his bravery in a situation that required it. However, Jim's firm belief in – and resolute defence of – his idealised conception of himself is not unlike Billy Budd's careful nurturing of his innocence and his determined efforts to repulse everything which threatens to undermine that innocence.

The discrepancy between Jim's thoughts and actions is a consequence of his excessive self-absorption. Jacques Berthoud correctly points out that Jim's imaginative reveries as a trainee-sailor reveal his limited understanding of what the naval code of honour entails, and go some way towards explaining his "unusual incapacity to learn":[83]

> The reason is that he regards the code not as something to be obeyed, but as something to be used. His concern is not with what it demands – steadiness in the face of danger – but with what it sometimes provides – glory at danger overcome. In effect, this means that he does not take danger seriously enough.[84]

Jim's self-interestedness gives him a tendency to confuse and conflate the realm of his imagination with the actual world. There is a vast difference between: (a) thinking about possible danger and one's imagined response to it, and (b) showing real courage when one's personal safety is in jeopardy. For it is an incontestable truism (as the proponents of

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[81] Lord Jim, p. 9.
[82] Lord Jim, pp. 10-11.
[83] Jacques Berthoud, Conrad : The Major Phase (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 71.

existentialism will confirm) that bravery can be demonstrated only *in practice*; it is not enough to believe that one possesses valour, if only one were given the opportunity to exhibit it.

The relatively unimportant training-ship incident is a prelude to one of the defining moments in Jim's life. As the first mate of the *Patna*, he joins his captain, the chief engineer and the second engineer in violating the obligation on all sailors in the mercantile marine to ignore their own safety until they have secured the safety of all the passengers in their care. The *Patna's* collision with (presumably) a partly-submerged wreck near the Horn of Africa takes Jim completely by surprise, because it happens on a calm sea and in balmy weather. Again, his thoughts had been full

> of valorous deeds: he loved these dreams and the success of his imaginary achievements. They were the best parts of life, its secret truth, its hidden reality. They ... carried his soul away with them and made it drunk with the divine philtre of an unbounded confidence in itself. There was nothing he could not face.[85]

Jim's conviction (reported in free indirect discourse) that "his imaginary achievements" represent the "hidden reality" of his life is a delusion, since his thoughts of success are merely daydreams. Indeed, the ensuing events prove his "unbounded confidence" in himself to have been misplaced. Water gushes through a hole below the water-line of the *Patna*, causing the forepeak to be flooded. The collision bulkhead between the forepeak and the forehold bulges under the strain and, as Jim "hold[s] up [his] lamp along the angle-iron in the lower deck[,]... a flake of rust as big as the palm of [his] hand [falls] off the plate, all of itself."[86] Jim's vivid imagination conjures up the image of the iron buckling and "the rush of water going over [all the pilgrims] as they [lie asleep.]"[87] He is so horrified by the magnitude of the impending disaster that he is unable to focus on what measures need to be taken immediately:

> "He stood still looking at these recumbent bodies, a doomed man aware of his fate, surveying the silent company of the dead. They *were* dead! Nothing could save them! There were boats enough for half of them perhaps, but there was no time. No time! No time! It did not seem worth while to open his lips, to stir hand or foot."[88]

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[84] Berthoud, p. 71.
[85] Lord Jim, p. 17.
[86] Lord Jim, p. 54.
[87] Lord Jim, p. 54.
[88] Lord Jim, p. 55.

Here, it is once again evident that, whereas inactivity promotes imagined heroism in Jim, real danger paralyses action. After he has stood motionless at the hatchway for about two minutes (in Marlow's estimation) while he rehearses in his mind exactly what might happen, it comes "into his head that perhaps he [will] have time to rush along and cut all the lanyards of the gripes, so that the boats [will] float off as the ship [goes] down."[89] However, because he becomes distracted by a man begging for water and by the desperate attempts of the captain and the three engineers to launch a lifeboat for their personal use, it is only much later that he remembers to cut the boats free. Jim's overactive imagination seems almost to destroy his ability to think rationally; he appears to become panic-stricken and incapable of acting sensibly. The impairment of Jim's conscious faculties is also implied by his jump from the *Patna*. There is an element of surrealism in the incident, especially as he describes it:

> "'With the first hiss of rain, and the first gust of wind, they screamed, "Jump, George! We'll catch you! Jump!" The ship began a slow plunge; the rain swept over her like a broken sea; my cap flew off my head; my breath was driven back into my throat. I heard as if I had been on the top of a tower another wild screech, "Geo-o-o-orge! Oh, jump!" She was going down, down, head first under me....'
>
> "He raised his hand deliberately to his face, and made picking motions with his fingers as though he had been bothered with cobwebs, and afterwards he looked into the open palm for quite half a second before he blurted out –
>
> "'I had jumped...' He checked himself, averted his gaze.... 'It seems,' he added."[90]

The pluperfect tense of "I had jumped" reflects just how unpalatable it is for Jim to accept the fact that he had jumped: he attempts to banish his leap to a distant past that might soon fade from memory. He signals his sense of shame by trying to avoid looking his confidant, Marlow, (and his failure to perform his duty) in the face. The "picking motions" of his fingers (which are noted by Marlow) are indicative of his self-entrapment and the obscurity of his vision. This inability (or reluctance) to see clearly is underscored by Jim's addition of "It seems" to his account of what had happened: he appears to suggest that the real Jim had watched helplessly as a surrogate Jim had disgraced himself.

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[89] Lord Jim, p. 57.
[90] Lord Jim, p. 69.

Marlow interprets Jim's transgression as dereliction of duty and a breach of one's social responsibility: Jim had betrayed the pilgrims and the trust which they had placed in the crew of the *Patna*. Although Jim cannot refute the construction which Marlow puts on his deed, he regards his leap from the *Patna*, first and foremost, as a betrayal of himself. This is obvious from Marlow's comment, "[T]he idea obtrudes itself that he [i.e. Jim] made so much of his disgrace while it is the guilt alone that matters."[91] Ian Watt is thus correct in saying that Jim is afflicted with shame, rather than guilt, after his desertion of the *Patna*:

> The nature of the distinction remains moderately obscure, partly because the word "guilt" is used in so many different ways; but it is usually agreed that shame is much more directly connected than guilt with the individual's failure to live up to his own ideal conception of himself. As Gerhart Piers puts it in his psychoanalyic treatment of the distinction: "Whereas guilt is generated whenever a boundary (set by the Super-Ego) is touched or transgressed, shame occurs when a goal (presented by the Ego-Ideal) is not being reached. It thus indicates a real 'shortcoming.' Guilt anxiety accompanies transgression; shame, failure."[92]

While most people set themselves goals which they hope to achieve, they learn to accept their failures and to move beyond them. Jim is exceptional in that he sets particularly exacting – some would say, unrealistic – standards for himself, and cannot become reconciled to the disparities which emerge between his real self and his ego-ideal. This is an almost inevitable consequence of his seeking to live so persistently in an imaginary world.

If Jim's leap from the *Patna* is a mark of cowardice, his willingness to accept responsibility for his actions by facing official sanction and public humiliation at a court of inquiry is a commendable demonstration of courage – courage of a different kind from that which he had failed to show on the *Patna*. By submitting himself to the ordeal, Jim dissociates himself from his fellow crew members, who continue to act in an expedient and pusillanimous manner by absenting themselves from the hearing: whereas the captain absconds, the chief engineer requires hospitalisation for the treatment of delirium tremens (the result of drinking himself into a stupor), and the second engineer appears to be incapacitated and bedridden because of a broken arm. In addition, Jim proves his loyalty to the merchant navy by consenting to the legitimacy of its disciplinary procedures. It is ironic, therefore, that he should be expelled from the very community to which he continues to pledge his allegiance.

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[91] Lord Jim, p. 107.

[92] Ian Watt, Conrad in the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1979), p. 343. Watt quotes from Gerhart Piers and Milton B. Singer, Shame and Guilt: A Psychoanalytic and a Cultural Study (Springfield, Ill. : Charles C. Thomas, 1953), p. 11.

The “yellow dog” incident outside the courtroom illustrates how exceedingly ashamed Jim becomes when he listens to any criticism levelled against the officers of the pilgrim ship. Although he reproaches himself for having deserted the *Patna*, a sense of self-worth compels him to defend his reputation against attack from those who seem to think of him as a pariah. Mistakenly believing that Marlow has referred to him as a “wretched cur”,[93] he shows himself ready to fight for his honour by angrily stating that he “won’t let any man call [him] names outside this court.”[94] When Jim adds, “‘You thought I would be afraid to resent this,’ ... with just a faint tinge of bitterness”,[95] Marlow confesses:

> “I was interested enough to discern the slightest shades of expression, but I was not in the least enlightened [about what was rankling Jim]; yet I don’t know what in these words, or perhaps just the intonation of that phrase, induced me suddenly to make all possible allowances for him.”[96]

Marlow’s sympathy for Jim is reinforced by the latter’s embarrassment when he discovers that the remark which he had overheard was not an insult directed against himself, but the irritated reaction of Marlow’s companion to a troublesome dog: Jim blushes, his lips tremble, and he becomes “incapable of pronouncing a word from the excess of his humiliation.”[97] Marlow’s interest in Jim is augmented by the young sailor’s stubborn insistence that he runs away “[f]rom no man – from not a single man on earth” (in the light of his subsequent career as a “fugitive” water-clerk, there is some irony in Jim’s remark), and by his contempt for “[a]ll these staring people in court[, who seem] such fools”[98] to him. Marlow admits that Jim’s assertion of his personal superiority to the broad commonalty

> “opened suddenly a new view of him to my wonder. I looked at him curiously and met his unabashed and impenetrable eyes... I don’t pretend I understood him. The views he let me have of himself were like those glimpses through the shifting rents in a thick fog – bits of vivid and vanishing detail, giving no connected idea of the general aspect of a country... Upon the whole he was misleading. That’s how I summed him up to myself after he left me late in the evening.”[99]

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[93] Lord Jim, p. 46.
[94] Lord Jim, p. 47.
[95] Lord Jim, p. 47.
[96] Lord Jim, p. 47.
[97] Lord Jim, p. 48.
[98] Lord Jim, p. 49.

Perhaps the dominant component of Marlow's experiential journey in Lord Jim is his quest to achieve a "connected idea of the general aspect" of Jim's character. When he sees Jim for the first time just prior to the official inquiry into the abandonment of the *Patna*, he finds it hard to tally Jim's betrayal of the naval code with the apparent soundness of his mien:

> "I would have trusted the deck to that youngster on the strength of a single glance, and gone to sleep with both eyes – and, by Jove! it wouldn't have been safe. There are depths of horror in that thought. He looked as genuine as a new sovereign, but there was some infernal alloy in his metal."[100]

Of course, the fact that Marlow frequently questions or revises his opinions during the course of Lord Jim suggests that he might not be the most reliable judge of human character. On the whole, though, his inability to dispel the fog surrounding Jim's mental and moral qualities should be ascribed to Jim's complexity: he is a multivalent sign composed of innumerable signifiers. These signifiers allow an interpreter to perceive neither a homogeneous signified, nor a signified whose disparate elements cohere into a uniform "meaning". Moreover, individual interpreters often locate radically different signifieds from their reading of the *same* signifier. For instance, the police magistrate and the two nautical assessors who preside over the inquiry into the conduct of the *Patna's* officers find that Jim and his co-accused had shown an "utter disregard of their plain duty" to secure the safety of those whose "lives and property [had been] confided to their charge".[101] The sentence handed down for the officers' criminal negligence is the cancellation of their certificates. Like Captain Vere, the court officials subscribe to an instrumentalist view of wrongdoing: the motives and intentions of an accused are of no consequence; all that matters are the facts of a case. Marlow, on the other hand, is not prepared to damn someone on the basis of a single mistake made in a crisis, and so he tries to uncover "the fundamental why, [and not] the superficial how, of [the *Patna*] affair."[102] The relative thoroughness of Marlow's investigations is in sharp contrast to the (over-)hasty decisions taken by Vere in response to Claggart's death, and passes an adverse judgement (by way of comparison) on the interpretative rigidity which informs Vere's conduct. Marlow's efforts to understand Jim's nature begin in earnest when he invites the young man to dine with him at the Malabar House.

The lengthy colloquy between Marlow and Jim extends until well past midnight, and takes up the bulk of Chapters VII to XIII of the novel. Jim provides Marlow with a detailed account of the events leading up to, and immediately following, his desertion of the *Patna*. Marlow hears

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[99] Lord Jim, p. 49.
[100] Lord Jim, pp. 31-32.
[101] Lord Jim, p. 97.

him out patiently, as he tries to understand the thought processes which had led his young interlocutor to jump figuratively "into a well – an everlasting deep hole."[103] In this second inquiry into Jim's case (an informal one which privileges the consciousness of the accused over his deeds), Marlow's feelings oscillate between condemnation and sympathy, before tilting decisively towards the latter. Yet, as a seasoned sailor himself, Marlow is uneasy about what Jim has done: near the beginning of their conversation, he reports that Jim

> "discovered at once a desire that I should not confound him with his partners in – in crime, let us call it... I gave no sign of dissent. I had no intention, for the sake of barren truth, to rob him of the smallest particle of any saving grace that would come in his way. I didn't know how much of it he believed himself ...; for it is my belief no man ever understands quite his own artful dodges to escape from the grim shadow of self-knowledge."[104]

Quite clearly, Marlow has a sneaking suspicion (at least, initially) that Jim's leap from the *Patna* is indefensible, no matter how many "artful dodges" Jim might employ in trying to prove otherwise. But, by the time Jim departs from the hotel in the small hours of the morning, it has dawned on Marlow that the self-evident facts of a case often tell only a part of the story. Having been won over to Jim's cause, Marlow attempts to persuade him to leave Bombay at the earliest opportunity (a plan of evasion which had been suggested to Marlow by Brierly) so as to avoid the humiliating experience of being present in court when he is found guilty of misconduct. He also offers to lend Jim some money and to write "to a man (in Rangoon) who could put some work in his way."[105] Jim's refusal to take Marlow up on his offer is to be admired, since it is a clear demonstration that he is prepared to take responsibility for his mistakes and to be punished for them by the relevant authorities. His integrity in this instance strengthens the favourable opinion which Marlow has already formed of his character and ensures that the seeds of a lasting friendship between the two men have been sown.

The closeness of their relationship is surprising, given that Marlow is substantially older than Jim. As Albert J. Guerard observes, "We can see why Jim needs Marlow ... He cannot believe in himself unless he has found another to do so. And he needs a judge, witness, and advocate in the solitude of his battle with himself."[106] The accuracy of this assessment is confirmed by the epigraph which Conrad chose for Lord Jim: "It is certain my Conviction gains infinitely, || the

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[102] Lord Jim, p. 38.
[103] Lord Jim, p. 70.
[104] Lord Jim, p. 51.
[105] Lord Jim, p. 93.
[106] Albert J. Guerard, ["*Lord Jim*"], a selection from Conrad the Novelist (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1958), which is reprinted in the 2nd Norton Critical Edition of Lord Jim, p. 404.

moment another soul will believe in it."[107] Guerard then goes on to ask why Marlow needs Jim. In trying to answer this question, he notes that Marlow "speaks of the fellowship of the craft, of being his very young brother's keeper, of loyalty to 'one of us,' [and] of mere curiosity".[108] But I believe that the most important reasons are those which Guerard mentions last: Marlow has "a moral need to explore and test a standard of conduct", and "[h]e is loyal to Jim as one must be to another or potential self, to the criminally weak self that may still exist."[109] The narrator of Lord Jim knows full well that the perils of the sea pose a constant threat to his – and every other sailor's – courage, and that, at any time, his instincts of self-preservation may overcome his sense of duty; at no stage can a sailor be certain that his "criminally weak self" has ceased to exist. Here is Marlow's own revealing analysis of his interest in Jim's predicament:

> "Why I longed to go grubbing into the deplorable details of an occurrence which ... concerned me [hardly at all,] I can't explain... [B]ut I have a distinct notion I wished to find something... I see well enough now that I hoped for the impossible – for the laying ... of the uneasy doubt uprising like a mist, secret and gnawing like a worm, and more chilling than the certitude of death – the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct... [A]nd why did I desire it so ardently? Was it for my own sake that I wished to find some shadow of an excuse for that young fellow whom I had never seen before, but whose appearance alone added a touch of personal concern to the thoughts suggested by the knowledge of his weakness – made it a thing of mystery and terror – like a hint of a destructive fate ready for us all whose youth – in its day – had resembled his youth? I fear that such was the secret motive of my prying."[110]

Marlow's wish for a "sovereign power [to be] enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct" (a desire to make morality absolute and its principles universally applicable) encompasses a desire for signs to be transparently readable, and for interpretation to be univocal and stable – a factitious stability of the kind which Vere seeks to impose when he places all his faith in the provisions of the Mutiny Act and advocates that Billy Budd should be sentenced to death for manslaughter. However, whereas Marlow suspects that human nature and human conduct are too complex for morality to be reduced to a set of fixed rules, Vere is prepared to embrace simplification if it promises to avert whatever he regards as threatening to the status quo. And, whereas Vere is willing to disregard the particular circumstances of an individual case for the

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[107] Lord Jim, p. 3. The epigraph is a translation by Thomas Carlyle of a passage from fragment 153 of Das Allgemeine Brouillon by the romantic author, Friedrich von Hardenberg, whose pen-name was Novalis (q.v. Thomas Moser's footnote on p. 5 of the 2nd Norton Critical Edition of Lord Jim).

[108] Guerard, p. 404.

[109] Guerard, p. 404.

sake of a continued adherence to broad principles, Marlow is ready to revise his opinions about the appropriate punishment for unethical behaviour when the reasons for him to do so are sufficiently compelling. Once again, a comparison of the differences in outlook displayed by Marlow and Vere in these analogous situations serves to discredit the appositeness of Vere's conduct.

Although Jim must have expected that the court of inquiry would find him (and his "accomplices") guilty of misconduct, the verdict still comes as a shock to him: his jealously-guarded reputation is in tatters, and the prospects for his future happiness appear to be bleak. Marlow leads him to his hotel room so that Jim can "withdraw" and "be alone with his loneliness."[111] The older man continues:

> "There is no doubt that he had a very hard time of it ... He was rooted to the spot, but convulsive shudders ran down his back; his shoulders would heave suddenly. He was fighting, he was fighting – mostly for his breath, as it seemed... [B]eyond [the verandah] all was black; he stood on the brink of a vast obscurity, like a lonely figure by the shore of a sombre and hopeless ocean."[112]

I concur with Berthoud that Jim is involved in "an ultimately hopeless struggle to overcome what is, in the largest perspective, an opposition between the inner and the outer, or the private and the public."[113] In attempting to harmonise his desertion of the *Patna* with his idealistic vision of himself, he vainly seeks to bridge the gap which he has opened up between his overt conduct (the signifier) and his cherished self-image (the signified). Marlow senses that the impossibility of the task has thrust Jim to the edge of an abyss ("a vast obscurity"), and that the young man appears doomed to become an outcast in a hostile world ("a lonely figure by the shore of a sombre and hopeless ocean"). Such a fate affects Marlow as a heavy price to pay for an indiscretion committed under extreme duress, and he resolves to do everything in his power to prevent it from being actualised. He tells Jim, "I make myself unreservedly responsible for you",[114] and writes to a friend (who owns a rice-mill), asking him to take Jim into his employ. Jim is understandably elated:

> "He darted – positively darted – here and there ... 'You have given me confidence,' he declared soberly... 'I always thought that if a fellow could

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[110] Lord Jim, pp. 34-35.
[111] Lord Jim, p. 104.
[112] Lord Jim, pp. 104 and 105.
[113] Berthoud, p. 79.
[114] Lord Jim, p. 111.

> begin with a clean slate... And now you ... in a measure ... yes ... a clean slate.' I waved my hand, and he marched out without looking back".[115]

Although Marlow envies Jim his callow optimism, he knows that it is no simple matter to "march out" into the world "without looking back": "A clean slate, did he say? As if the initial word of each our destiny [sic] were not graven in imperishable characters upon the face of a rock."[116] That there is more than just a modicum of truth in Marlow's observation (an extended version of the aphorism, "character is destiny") may be deduced from subsequent events in Jim's life (for example, his underestimation of, and inadequate response to, the danger posed by Gentleman Brown) and also, incidentally, from the destructive fate which befalls Ahab as a result of his relentless pursuit of the white whale in Moby-Dick.

Jim's career as a water-clerk is characterised by his repeated "fling[ing] away [of his] daily bread so as to get [his] hands free for a grapple with a ghost"[117] – the ghost of his past. When he "turn[s] up ... on board [Marlow's] ship" after having tossed a "cross-eyed Dane"[118] (with whom he had had an altercation) into the Menam River, Marlow becomes "seriously uneasy, because if his exquisite sensibilities were to go the length of involving him in pot-house shindies, he would lose his name of an inoffensive, if aggravating fool, and acquire that of a common loafer."[119] As a consequence, Marlow decides to ask his friend Stein about a possible remedy for Jim's case. During the course of their discussion, Stein puts forward his own analysis of the human condition:

> "A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns – *nicht wahr*?... No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up."[120]

Although Stein asserts that idealism is a necessary component of our humanity (in the figure of man falling into the sea), he intimates that it is potentially harmful to us (we may drown). Yet he is adamant that we should not attempt to escape from such idealism (by trying "to climb out into the air") but, rather, that we should strive to preserve our idealistic vision(s) through our actions ("... with the exertions of your hands and feet ... make the deep, deep sea keep you up").

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[115] Lord Jim, p. 112.
[116] Lord Jim, p. 112.
[117] Lord Jim, p. 118.
[118] Lord Jim, p. 120.
[119] Lord Jim, pp. 120-121.
[120] Lord Jim, p. 129.

In other words, we need to complement our idealistic dreams with a real commitment to the "surface-truth"[121] of practical action in the material world. This is exactly what Jim had failed to do in the immediate aftermath of two maritime disasters – the collisions between a coaster and a schooner, and between the *Patna* and a submerged object. However, by offering to appoint him as his agent in the remote settlement of Patusan (significantly, the name is an extended anagram of "*Patna*"), Stein gives Jim another opportunity of pursuing his ideals in an environment that will allow him to play an active role in community life.

Jim makes it his mission in Patusan to atone for his failures in the past, and he is so successful in his new environment that he rapidly becomes an almost legendary figure. The initial catalyst for his enduring fame is the defeat which he inflicts on Sherif Ali, the half-breed Arab who had "devastated the open country", and who had "hung over the town of Patusan like a hawk over a poultry-yard".[122] Marlow reports that, when he visited Jim, he saw him "loved, trusted, admired,... as though he had been the stuff of a hero."[123] In fact, "the Malays of the jungle village ... added a word to the monosyllable of [Jim's] incognito. They called him Tuan Jim: as one might say – Lord Jim."[124] The Bugis settlers also ask for – and follow – Jim's advice in almost all matters of importance, and, in their accounts of his exploits, he often acquires a superhuman status. Three examples will suffice: "There was already a story that the tide had turned two hours before its time to help him on his journey up the river";[125] "As to the simple folk of outlying villages, they believed and said (as the most natural thing in the world) that Jim had carried the guns [i.e. cannons] up the hill on his back – two at a time";[126] and, "The popular story has it that Jim with a touch of his finger had thrown down the gate [of Sherif Ali's stockade]."[127]

Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan points out that Jim also appears

> to accept this mythical version of himself without the slightest touch of self-consciousness. His description of his flight from the Rajah's stockade
> employs the same epic hyperbole: "He ... went over 'like a bird' ... The earth seemed fairly to fly backwards under his feet [Lord Jim, p. 152]."[128]

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[121] Heart of Darkness, p. 38.
[122] Lord Jim, p. 155.
[123] Lord Jim, p. 106.
[124] Lord Jim, p. 8.
[125] Lord Jim, p. 146.
[126] Lord Jim, p. 159.
[127] Lord Jim, p. 161.
[128] Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, Joseph Conrad and The Modern Temper (Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 41. I am much indebted to Erdinast-Vulcan for her astute analysis of the oft-noticed "structural rift" (Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 34) in Lord Jim (between the *Patna* and the Patusan sections of the novel).

Even Marlow begins to see Jim in larger-than-life terms, as is evident from the following descriptions of the young man: "He ... burst into a Homeric peal of laughter";[129] "He had regulated so many things in Patusan – things that would have appeared as much beyond his control as the motions of the moon and stars";[130] "[O]pportunity sat veiled by his side like an Eastern bride waiting to be uncovered by the hand of a master";[131] and, "He was like a figure set up on a pedestal, to represent in his persistent youth the power, and perhaps the virtues, of races that never grow old".[132] I am in agreement with Erdinast-Vulcan that

> [b]y moving to Patusan, Jim becomes part of another story, as it were. This new identi-fiction,[133] which is closely modelled on the heroic epic, offers him a new context of psychological and ethical orientation. He turns away from the individualized ethos of modernity, the "ghostly freedom of choice" offered by the multiplicity of voices in the first part of the story, towards the heroic mythical narrative, a fictional genre which is predicated on the ethos of communality.[134]

> [In Patusan,] Jim embraces the heroic virtues: physical courage, fidelity, cunning, and friendship – the virtues which are essential for the maintenance of the community. He creates the community of Patusan as a mythical heroic society, and is, in turn, created by his role in this society, given a new identity and a new name.[135]

Notwithstanding Jim's pre-eminent position in Patusan, Marlow becomes ever more convinced that "[i]n fact, Jim the leader was a captive in every sense. The land, the people, the friendship [most notably, that between Jim and Dain Waris], the love [between Jim and Jewel], were like the guardians of his body. Every day added a link to the fetters of that strange freedom."[136] Although Jim "drinks deep" from the "golden cup" of "felicity"[137] in Patusan, he is unable to cast off all remembrance of his past. In a moment of self-revelation, he admits as much to Marlow: "The very thought of the world outside is enough to give me a fright; because, don't you see,... I have not forgotten why I came here. Not yet!"[138] Unfortunately, the sudden arrival

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[129] Lord Jim, p. 160.
[130] Lord Jim, p. 134.
[131] Lord Jim, p. 147.
[132] Lord Jim, p. 159.
[133] Erdinast-Vulcan's concept of "identi-fiction" denotes "a literary text or genre on which a fictional character construes his or her identity." (Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 39.)
[134] Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 40.
[135] Erdinast-Vulcan, pp. 41-42.
[136] Lord Jim, p. 157.
[137] Lord Jim, p. 106.
[138] Lord Jim, p. 181.

of a rogue from the outside world (the inappropriately-named Gentleman Brown) rudely shatters the idyllic peace of Patusan. Almost instinctively, Brown senses where Jim is most vulnerable: he portrays himself as the wretched victim of bad luck, and Jim only too readily sympathises with a fellow Briton who appears to be his secret sharer. Ironically, Jim's endeavour to behave honourably towards Brown (by granting him a safe passage to the coast) produces catastrophic results. With the help of Cornelius, Brown and his men steal up from behind on Dain Waris and his compatriots, and a general massacre ensues.[139] Here, once more, Conrad foregrounds the tension that exists between intention and action, with Jim's strictly honourable – if mistaken – intentions leading to disastrous consequences yet again (although, in this case, the consequent actions are dastardly, premeditated and not performed by Jim himself).

Jim's moral principles dictate that he should be true to his word by accepting responsibility for the deaths of Dain Waris and his companions. He does so by going voluntarily to Doramin's campong, where a great many people have congregated. This is virtually an act of suicide: to a voice in the crowd that says, "He hath taken it upon his own head," Jim replies, "Yes. Upon my own head."[140] To the grieving Doramin he says, "I am come in sorrow... I am come ready and unarmed."[141] As might have been expected, the old man exacts vengeance for the death of his son by shooting Jim. In trying to sum up Jim's life, Marlow puts forward two competing interpretations:

> "Not in the wildest days of his boyish visions could he have seen the alluring shape of such an extraordinary success! For it may very well be that in the short moment of his last proud and unflinching glance, he had beheld the face of that opportunity which ... had come veiled to his side.
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> "But we can see him, an obscure conqueror of fame, tearing himself out of the arms of a jealous love at the sign, at the call of his exalted egoism. He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct."[142]

Although, by the end of the novel, Marlow has a deeper understanding of various facets of Jim's character than he had at the beginning, he is forced to admit that Jim "passes away under

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[139] Just as Billy is unlikely to have considered the fairly remote possibility that he might kill Claggart by means of a single blow to the head, so Jim does not – and cannot reasonably have been expected to – foresee that his treatment of Brown might put the lives of Dain Waris and his fellow Bugis at risk.

[140] Lord Jim, p. 245.

[141] Lord Jim, p. 245.

[142] Lord Jim, p. 246.

a cloud, inscrutable at heart".[143] Thus Marlow's effort to uncover "the fundamental why" behind (rather than "the superficial how"[144] of) Jim's actions founders on shifting sands, and is unable to anchor itself to a stable and ultimately satisfying interpretation: sometimes Marlow believes that Jim has scored a dazzling personal triumph, but, on other occasions, he feels that it has been a Pyrrhic victory, achieved at too great a cost to human love and fellowship. But, perhaps any uneasiness occasioned by Marlow's uncertainty is unnecessary, since both the triumphant and the Pyrrhic views could apply aporetically. If, as I believe, Marlow's experiential journey in Lord Jim is largely concerned with his understanding of Jim's character, that journey could be said to follow, for the most part, an upward trajectory, but, because Marlow's knowledge can never be more than partial, there is also a sense of the older man's circling around a destination that is unattainable.

Jim's experiential journey can be charted with much more confidence than Marlow's: it plunges from a carefree plateau to a low point after his jump from the *Patna*, moves alternately upwards and downwards at a low level while he is a water-clerk, and ascends to dizzying heights when he is at the pinnacle of success in Patusan. Finally, it pitches into an abyss when he acknowledges the role which he had inadvertently played in the slaughter of Dain Waris and many of the Bugis warriors. However, it could also be argued that, in Jim's own estimation, his death at the hands of Doramin is a victory, since it represents the exorcising of the ghost of cowardice that had haunted him since his fateful leap from the *Patna*.

Narrative indirections and the "ragged edges" of "truth uncompromisingly told"

The narrative complexity of Lord Jim is a reflection of the hermeneutic difficulties which Marlow encounters (and transmits to the reader) during the course of the novel. As is the case in Heart of Darkness, an unnamed primary (though subsidiary) narrator sets the reader on his narrative journey; having given an indication of the sort of voyage that lies ahead, this pilot-like figure soon hands over responsibility for the narrative to Marlow, who takes command of affairs and determines the course of the journey from that point onwards. However, Marlow's narrative is not straightforward, but is characterised by indirection.[145] At various stages, for example, it is achronological, a verbatim report by Marlow of what a character in the novel has told him, or suggestive of meanings that are difficult to decipher.

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[143] Lord Jim, p. 246.

[144] Lord Jim, p. 38.

[145] This is the term used by Kenneth Graham – in Indirections of the novel : James, Conrad and Forster (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1988) – to describe the sort of narrative strategy that is typical of the three masters of the modernist novel who are the subject of his study.

In Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, Ian Watt discusses the narrative techniques of Lord Jim in some detail.[146] He emphasises the symbolic nature of much of Conrad's writing, and coins the term "symbolic deciphering" to designate a particular interpretative process which the reader needs to employ in Lord Jim. This is comparable to, though somewhat more complex than, the technique of "delayed decoding" that was a fairly common feature of Marlow's narrative methodology in Heart of Darkness. According to Watt, "symbolic deciphering" suggests "the much more tenuous and complicated process of making out a message that is inherently difficult to read, and whose meaning is intentionally hidden, or at least ambiguous, mysterious, or unresolved."[147] Watt then goes on to point out that, although certain episodes in Lord Jim seem, at first glance, to have very little bearing on the main story, such initial impressions are deceptive: almost invariably, the episodes in question expand upon and clarify important themes in the novel.

For instance, in the early part of Marlow's narrative, the tales of three seemingly unconnected incidents are placed in "thematic apposition". In Chapter V, Marlow breaks off his account of the events that took place on the day when Jim and his fellow deserters arrived in Bombay (the "Eastern port"[148] where the inquiry would be held) to recount his own visit to a hospital a few days later. One of the patients at the hospital is the chief engineer of the *Patna*; still suffering from delirium tremens, he tells Marlow that the pilgrim ship had been "full of reptiles"[149] and that there are "[m]illions of pink toads"[150] under his bed. He imagines that the toads are trampling on him and, in his terror, yells out that he will "smash them in heaps like flies."[151] To escape from the commotion, Marlow beats a hasty retreat, and, although the chief engineer is mentioned again in Jim's chronicle of what had happened on the *Patna*, nothing further is said about his life subsequent to his conversation with Marlow on this particular occasion. In his illuminating analysis of the scene's importance, Watt points out that, in the preceding chapter, Marlow had been disconcerted by the fact that "Jim and the other three officers of the *Patna* seemed completely unmarked by any sign of inward compunction." However, Watt argues that the hospital scene is reassuring to Marlow since, although the "engineer cannot be perceived as repentant[,]... he is not unmarked by his betrayal"[152]: the fixed standard of conduct appears to be justified, in this instance at least, by retribution for its violation.

As readers of Lord Jim, we are transported back into the courtroom at the beginning of Chapter VI. After introducing us to one of the assessors at the inquiry ("Big [Montague] Brierly – the

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[146] Watt, pp. 269-310. Watt is particularly good at analysing Conrad's narrative procedures.
[147] Watt, p. 276.
[148] Lord Jim, p. 21.
[149] Lord Jim, p. 35.
[150] Lord Jim, p. 36.
[151] Lord Jim, p. 36.

captain of the crack ship [the *Ossa*] of the Blue Star line"[153]), Marlow springs a surprise by stating that this renowned and apparently self-satisfied sailor had "committed suicide very soon after."[154] In attempting to unravel the mystery of why Brierly should have ended his own life, Marlow reports a conversation which he had with Brierly's first mate, Mr Jones, some two years after the event. In response to Marlow's suggestion that the reason "wasn't anything that would have disturbed much either of us two", the crusty old sailor finds a rejoinder "of amazing profundity...: 'Ay, ay! neither you nor I, sir, had ever thought so much of ourselves.'"[155] Jones's words give discriminating readers (and, no doubt, Marlow as well) insight into the underlying reason for Brierly's suicide: the details of Jim's case had provoked fear in the captain of the *Ossa* that he might fail to live up to his own idealised conception of himself.[156] After this digression, Marlow describes how Brierly had told him privately during the progress of the *Patna* inquiry: that the publicity attendant upon Jim's case was undermining the reputation of professional sailors for trustworthiness; that "[s]uch an affair destroy[ed] one's confidence";[157] and that he would give Marlow two hundred rupees for Jim if the young man would follow the example of his skipper by "clear[ing] out".[158] This outburst brings Marlow to the realisation that Brierly was concealing exasperation beneath an outward appearance of boredom at the trial, and the thought occurs to him that, in a similar manner, Jim could have been feeling despair while, at the same time, communicating an air of impudence to onlookers. Watt's analysis of the significance of the episode is, once again, perceptive:

> [T]he apposition of the [Brierly episode and the hospital scene] calls upon us to mediate between two antithetical moral analogies: the engineer has shown that the most unscrupulous reprobate may not be able to stand up to the unconscious idea of his guilt; Brierly has shown that the most beribboned pillar of society may not be able to stand up to the shameful idea of his fear.[159]

After the Brierly episode (the second in the series of three which I am discussing), Marlow's narrative moves forward to the second day of the inquiry. As the people leave the courtroom upon the adjournment of the day's proceedings, the "yellow dog" incident occurs.[160] Although this incident, the hospital scene, and the Brierly episode are not chronologically propinquitous, they are juxtaposed in Marlow's narrative because they serve to illuminate at least three of

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[152] Watt, p. 275.
[153] Lord Jim, p. 38.
[154] Lord Jim, p. 39.
[155] Lord Jim, p. 43.
[156] Jim's death is not altogether dissimilar, and may be attributed to his constant pursuit of the ego-ideal.
[157] Lord Jim, p. 45.
[158] Lord Jim, p. 43.
[159] Watt, pp. 280-281.
[160] For a fuller discussion of the significance of this incident, *vide* pp. 89-90 of this research report.

Jim's redeeming qualities: his sense of shame at failing to live up to his own expectations of himself; his courageous acceptance of the punishment that is meted out to him for shirking his responsibilities; and, finally – notwithstanding the blows to his ego – his continued faith in positive moral values and in his own capacity to uphold them in the future.

The arrangement in the plot of the three episodes which I have just discussed also illustrates, in miniature, Conrad's treatment of time in the novel. Marlow's narrative (in this instance) commences with the court proceedings; continues with a digression about his experiences as a ship's captain and the mentor of young sailors; describes the above-mentioned hospital visit; returns to the inquiry; leaps forward to Brierly's suicide and Marlow's conversation with Jones; and then reverts, once again, to the inquiry and, more specifically, the "yellow dog incident". These to and fro movements in time epitomise what Watt (appropriating a term coined by Joseph Warren Beach in The Twentieth-Century Novel[161]) refers to as Conrad's "chronological looping method" of narration,[162] and are particularly characteristic of the first half of Lord Jim (the *Patna* section). Watt also usefully adopts Gérard Genette's term "'anachrony' to categorise all the various kinds of chronological difference between the time of the *histoire* and that of the *récit*, ... between the original historical sequence of events and the order of their telling in the narrative [Tomashevsky's "story" and "plot" respectively]."[163]

Although Conrad's repeated use of anachrony in the first part of Lord Jim slows down the plot, there are at least two possible reasons for its presence in the text. Firstly, the yoking together of events separated from one another by a long period of time imitates the way in which our brains process information: we draw conclusions about things by associating what we have already discovered in the past – perhaps, even, the distant past – with what we are experiencing in the present. So, although it is intellectually convenient for us to think of time as composed of a series of discrete units that stretch from the past into the future, our intuitive experience of it is as a continuum of moments which permeate one another by the operation of memory.[164] Secondly, if one wishes to understand someone else's character, one needs to interpret that person's behaviour in the light of the circumstances of his life. However, because it is impossible to know *everything* about someone else's experiences and the effects of those experiences on him, an interpreter's initial impressions of the person concerned are quite likely to be superficial, inadequate or incorrect. In order to minimise his errors in this regard, the interpreter might search for, and evaluate, any additional information that seems relevant to his

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[161] The full publishing details are: Joseph Warren Beach, The Twentieth Century Novel (New York : Appleton, 1932).

[162] Watt, p. 291. Anachrony may take one of two forms: that of retrospection (Genette calls this "analepsis") or that of anticipation ("prolepsis" in Genette's terminology).

[163] Watt, p. 294. Genette's detailed analysis of narrative may be found in Narrative Discourse. Tr. Jane E. Lewin. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

investigations – information which he might obtain before, at the same time as, or after his original assessment. Clearly, Marlow considers it prudent to adopt this strategy – especially in the first half of the novel: his narrative passes back and forth over all the circumstances leading up to Jim's leap from the *Patna*; the immediate repercussions of that event; its long-term effects on Jim's psyche; and the opinions of a varied assortment of people who comment – or pass judgement – on Jim. In portraying the to-and-fro movements of his mind as he ponders philosophical questions and the complexities of the human psyche, Marlow asks us to accompany him on a logically disordered (but psychologically persuasive) narrative journey which regularly subverts the linearity of the reading process itself.

Now, while it is reasonable to assume that the more familiar one is with someone else's actions and the opinions of other people about him, the more accurate one's appraisal of him is likely to be, I am of the opinion that Marlow's interpretative experience (and, hence also, that of most readers) in Lord Jim suggests the opposite. It seems as though the more information he procures about the novel's protagonist, the *less* certain he can feel about the correctness of his resultant conclusions. This paradoxical situation arises because an exhaustive search for the signified often provides (as it does here) the raw material for more – rather than fewer – interpretations. Indeed, I concur with Hillis Miller that there are a number of narrative features in Conrad's novel which are calculated to frustrate those readers who imagine that careful textual analysis is an unfailing key to interpretative closure.[165] For instance, a proliferation of narrative voices (those of an omniscient narrator, Marlow, Jim, the French lieutenant, Chester, Stein, Jewel, Cornelius, Tamb' Itam et al.), which often put forward conflicting points of view, problematises the notion that there exists a single interpretation which can be regarded as authoritative. The stories that are told about some of the minor characters in Lord Jim are also

> analogous to Jim's story, though whether in a positive or in a negative way is often hard to tell... [For instance,] Captain Brierly's suicide is a jump ambiguously duplicating Jim's jumps (was it cowardly or an act of heroism following logically from a shattering insight into the truth of things?), while the French lieutenant's courage shows what Jim might have done on the *Patna*, and Stein's strange history echoes Jim's either positively or negatively... Is he [Stein] a man who has bravely immersed himself in the destructive element to win an ultimate wisdom, or has he withdrawn passively from life to collect his butterflies and to give Marlow and the

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[164] As Ian Watt notes, this insight was first set out by the philosopher Henri Bergson: he "developed the not unfamiliar distinction between scientific, objective, calendar, or clock time and the subjective experience of time as duration, which is arrived at through individual introspection." (Watt, p. 302.)

[165] Miller discusses these in "*Lord Jim*: Repetition as Subversion of Organic Form", an extract from Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1982), which is reprinted in the 2nd Norton Critical Edition of Lord Jim, pp. 439-454.

> readers of the novel only misleading clues to the meaning of Jim's life?[166]

These analogous characters and events provoke the reader to speculate on how they are interrelated in the hope that he will be able to unlock some concealed meaning – the "fundamental why" behind the events themselves. But, no matter how persevering the reader is in his efforts, an inextinguishable indeterminacy continues to prevail "in the multiplicity of possible incompatible explanations given by the novel and in the lack of evidence justifying a choice of one over the others."[167] Billy Budd, Sailor also presents readers with a host of possible interpretations (of the leading characters and their actions), but it is perhaps different from Lord Jim in that no single strand of interpretation appears to be without its own internal contradictions.

Just as there is an ambiguous interplay between light and darkness in Heart of Darkness, so the ubiquitous imagery of contrasting black and white is of little help to the reader who searches for stable meaning in Lord Jim. In Chapter XVI, for example, Jim is depicted on the verandah outside Marlow's hotel room as a *dark* figure who, after being illuminated by frequent flashes of lightning, seems finally to be obliterated.[168] However, in Chapter XXXV, after Marlow has bade Jim farewell for the last time, the older man looks back from the departing schooner at his young friend standing on the beach. Jim, he says,

> "was *white* [my italics] from head to foot, and remained persistently visible with the stronghold of the night at his back, the sea at his feet, the opportunity by his side ... The twilight was ebbing fast from the sky above his head, the strip of sand had sunk already under his feet, he himself appeared no bigger than a child – then only a speck, a tiny white speck, that seemed to catch all the light left in a darkened world.... And, suddenly, I lost him...."[169]

Of course, one could argue that it is entirely appropriate for Jim to be pictured (in Chapter XVI) as a dark shape threatened by a hostile environment quite soon after his conduct has been condemned by a court of inquiry, and that it is no less fitting for him to be portrayed as a beacon of light against a darkening sky (in the quotation), because of the manner in which he had redeemed himself by improving the everyday life of the people in Patusan. Nevertheless, the inconsistency in Marlow's application of black/white imagery in these two instances underlines the tentative nature of most interpretative acts, and is comparable to Ishmael's

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[166] Miller, "*Lord Jim*: Repetition as Subversion of Organic Form", p. 448.
[167] Miller, "*Lord Jim*: Repetition as Subversion of Organic Form", p. 454.
[168] Lord Jim, pp. 107-108.

uncertainty (in Chapter 42 of Moby-Dick) about the "whiteness of the whale": similar situations often seem totally different when seen either in a new context, or by an interpreter whose outlook has changed since he made his initial reading.

Although the hermeneutic difficulties which are presented to Marlow and the reader in the first part of Lord Jim are not dissipated in the concluding Patusan section, there is little doubt that the second part of the novel is simpler in philosophical and psychological content than the opening *Patna* section: the narrative, on the whole, is chronological, and Jim's heroic exploits are not analysed in the same sort of minute detail as his jump from the *Patna*. Jim's inner life is no longer foregrounded to the extent that it had been earlier, as the narrative shifts its focus onto recording the not uninteresting events of the plot. Thus the pace at which events succeed one another gathers momentum, as the "highly wrought art novel"[170] "turns away from the individualized ethos of modernity, the 'ghostly freedom of choice', offered by the multiplicity of voices in the first part of the story,"[171] and becomes a heroic quasi-epic in which action – rather than subjectivity – predominates, and each of the characters is certain of his allotted role in society. In the last ten chapters, the shift in emphasis from psychological novel to quasi-epic is also accompanied by a spatial and a temporal distancing of the narrator (Marlow) from the main subject of his interest (Jim): these chapters no longer represent the eyewitness account of an oral narrator, but take the form of a letter (to "[t]he privileged man"[172]) reporting information that has been pieced together from various sources. Edward Garnett was the first of many critics to remark on the division of the book into two parts,[173] but Conrad himself provided some justification for it in a letter to William Blackwood (although Conrad seems to be referring to events subsequent to the arrival of Brown, rather than to the Patusan section as a whole) :

> The end of Lord Jim in accordance with a meditated resolve is presented in a bare almost bald relation of matters of fact. The situation – the problem if you will – of that sensitive nature has been already commented upon, illustrated and contrasted. It is my opinion that in the working out of the catastrophe psychologic disquisition should have no place. The reader ought to know enough by that time. I enlarge a little upon the new character which is introduced (that of Brown the desperate adventurer) so as to preserve the sense of verisimilitude and for the sake of final contrast; but all the rest is

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169 Lord Jim, p. 199.
170 Thomas C. Moser, "Preface to the First Edition", in the Second Norton Critical Edition of Lord Jim, p. ix.
171 Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 40.
172 Lord Jim, p. 200.
173 Conrad responded rather self-deprecatingly to Garnett's criticism in a letter he wrote to Garnett on 12 November 1900. The relevant extract appears on pp. 306-307 in the Second Norton Critical Edition of Lord Jim.

> nothing but a relation of events – strictly, a narrative.[174]

Although I am not dismissive of Conrad's comments concerning the emphasis on "strict narrative" towards the end of Lord Jim, I am in agreement with Erdinast-Vulcan that, at a deeper level, the obvious contrast between "the multiplicity of voices" in the first half of the novel and the mythical mode of discourse in the Patusan section is symptomatic of

> the tension between [Conrad's] temperamental affinity [as illustrated, for instance, in the letter which Conrad wrote to Cunninghame Graham on 20 December 1897 – *vide* p. 62 of this research report] with the Nietzschean conception of culture as a set of fragile illusions imperfectly overlaid on a chaotic, fragmented, and meaningless reality, and his ideological need to reinstate the Ptolemaic (i.e. integrated and anthropocentric) universe.[175]

I am of the opinion that, in the second half of Lord Jim, Conrad indulges his hankering after an irrecoverable past by inserting his protagonist into a setting of epic proportions that is largely bereft of multivalent uncertainty. There is undoubtedly an element of wish-fulfilment in Conrad's granting Jim the satisfaction of realising some of the idealistic dreams which had eluded him in the early parts of the narrative. And so, in the almost mythical realm of Patusan, the author resists his modernist conviction that we live in an indifferent universe by depicting nature as responding sympathetically to human events. (Shortly before Jim goes to his death, for example, Marlow reports that "[t]he sky over Patusan was blood-red, immense, streaming like an open vein. An enormous sun nestled crimson amongst the tree-tops, and the forest below had a black and forbidding face."[176]) He also constructs a narrative that is reluctant – or even refuses – to acknowledge two of the notions "which characterize the modern consciousness – namely, the "separation of the ideal from the real" (Jim's dreams *become* reality), and "the opposition of 'image' and 'object'".[177] (As Erdinast-Vulcan notes, the ring which was given to Jim does not merely signify friendship, but "*is friendship*. It is, in this sense, a charm through which, as in a myth or fairy-tale, Jim is gifted with the quality of friendship."[178]) But, of course, Conrad knows that Patusanian fantasy-worlds can exist only in the imagination: Jim's final failure and subsequent death are the shocking reminders of that fact.

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[174] Joseph Conrad to William Blackwood, 19 July 1900, quoted in the Second Norton Critical Edition of Lord Jim, p. 306.
[175] Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 4.
[176] Lord Jim, p. 244.
[177] Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Synbolic Forms, tr. R. Manheim (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1955), ii. p. 38 (also quoted in Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 29).
[178] Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 43.

The narrative modality of Billy Budd, Sailor is far less complex than that of Lord Jim, since the third-person narrative of Melville's novella is the work of an unnamed, omniscient and intrusive narrator who comments in great detail on the events that constitute his story.[179] Although it might be expected that the interpretative guidance which readers receive as a result of the narrator's intrusiveness would militate against their "going to war" over the novella, this is far from being the case: the plot of Billy Budd, Sailor tends to provoke extreme reactions amongst its readers, who (usually) pledge their allegiance to

> one of two mutually incompatible positions. One is to agree with the captain that the preservation of law (even military law) overrules all considerations of natural law and justice. The other is to acknowledge that in this world those in power can and often do act as Vere did, but then to insist that Melville's story must be read as an attempt to rouse his readers to protest against any social institution which could sacrifice Billy Budd; such readers despise the captain who all-too-hastily makes his decision and cloaks it in a show of unanimity at a rigged court martial. Readers tend to assume that Melville must have felt about Vere just what they feel, even though other readers with equal conviction are sure that Melville meant just the opposite, and that *they* are the true understanders of the writer.[180]

There are those who aver that strong differences of opinion about the "meaning"[181] of Billy Budd, Sailor are inevitable, given the unfinished state of the novella: the author was still in the process of revising his work when he died, and he had not tied up all the "loose ends". While this argument may sound plausible, I believe that the ambiguity of the tale is not solely (or, even, to any significant degree) attributable to its accidental incompletion. I am of the opinion that Billy Budd, Sailor was deliberately crafted so as to present a hermeneutic challenge to the reader. As we have already seen in our discussion of Moby-Dick, Melville was consistently sceptical of final interpretations, and I find it hard to believe that the man who, in his thirties, had ceaselessly debated questions of "Providence and futurity, and ... everything that lies beyond human ken" (since he could "neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief")[182]

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[179] Of the four novels I have chosen to discuss, Billy Budd, Sailor is the only one that is narrated throughout by an omniscient third-person narrator.

[180] Hershel Parker, "The Plot of *Billy Budd* and the Politics of Interpreting It", in Reading Billy Budd (Evanstan, IL : Northwestern University Press, 1990), an excerpt of which is reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of Melville's Short Novels, pp. 341-342.

[181] I use inverted commas because no single unassailable meaning can be assigned to any literary text.

[182] ["Hawthorne and Melville in Liverpool"], an extract from Nathaniel Hawthorne's journals, which is reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of Melville's Short Novels, p. 232.

would, in his old age, wish or attempt to compose a work whose transparent "meaning" readers would have little trouble in deciphering.[183]

Yet, at first glance, the narrative journey which the narrator has devised for readers of Billy Budd, Sailor appears calculated to overcome whatever interpretative difficulties they might encounter. The events of the plot are relatively few, but the narrator gives the impression of assembling all the evidence and the opinions that are available to him in an endeavour to unlock the full significance of those events. Indeed, he is so conscientious in investigating every nook and cranny of plot, character and motivation that the unfolding of the story frequently slows to a snail's pace or, even, grinds to a halt. Attentive readers will notice that the exposition of Billy's innocence, the effort to understand Claggart's malevolence, and the dilemma which confronts Vere take up large sections of the narrative in Billy Budd, Sailor. They will also sense Melville's "work[ing] and rework[ing] at the story, [as he] relat[ed] Druid mythology to 'The Great Mutiny' of 1797, Milton's *Paradise Lost* to Shakespeare's *Othello*, the '*Bellipotent* case' to the *Somers* case of 1842," until a bewildering array of "meanings,... double-meanings, allegory and allusions"[184] permeated the text.

This last point is well illustrated by the author's meticulously detailed characterisation of the "Handsome Sailor" who is the hero of his tale. While Billy's surname is a shortened form of the Buddhist god, both his Christian name and his surname allude to alternative names given by the Druids to their most important deity, the sun-god Hu: this "Celtic Apollo" was also known as Beli or Budd. One of the myths about Apollo was that he had killed a reptilian foe, Typhon-Set, just as, in Melville's novella, Billy Budd slays the serpent-like Claggart.[185] Further underscoring the connection between Billy and the Celtic god, Beli, is the fact that the latter was often represented as a sacred bull which was ritually sacrificed. The Druids were also notorious for performing human sacrifice to ensure victory in war, just as Billy appears to be sacrificed for the sake of peace and order on the *Bellipotent* (with the ultimate aim of securing a naval victory over France).[186] The name of the warship under Captain Vere's command is itself "a variant of Billy Budd's own name":[187]

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[183] Although Billy Budd, Sailor is often seen as Melville's recantation of the radical positions which he had formerly espoused, the manuscript evidence does not seem to validate this view. Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, the editors of the Chicago University Press edition of the novella, tell us that "[t]he cumulative effect [of Melville's late pencil revisions to the manuscript] ... [is] to throw into doubt not only the rightness of Vere's decision and the soundness of his mind but also the narrator's own position concerning him." They conclude (quite correctly, in my opinion) that "[t]o Melville's mind, ... the question was not simply the rightness or wrongness, sanity or insanity, of the captain's action, but also the very existence of a ... world [that is] problematical... His story [is] an epitome, in art, of such a world." ("Editors' Introduction", pp. 34 and 39.)

[184] Harold Beaver, "Introduction" to *Billy Budd, Sailor* and other stories (Penguin Classics edition), p. 39.

[185] Of course, Christ's triumph over Satan is also an analogue for Billy's killing of Claggart.

[186] For the mythological underpinnings of Billy Budd, Sailor, I am indebted to H. Bruce Franklin, The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1963), pp. 188-206.

> The first half of *Bellipotent* is a complicated pun combining a Latin word for war ["bellum, -i"], several of the names of Billy Budd's divine Celtic prototype [the Welsh "Beli" and the Irish "Bili" or "Bile"], and the apparent meaning of these names ["Beli", "Bili", and "Bile" are translated as "Death" by John Rhys, the author of an important book on the Celtic religions]; the second half suggests that this combination may triumph.[188]

Quite understandably, some readers might imagine that a careful study of the narrator's allusions will provide them with the framework to unravel the "overall meaning" of Billy Budd, Sailor. However, any hopes they might have entertained in this regard are soon dashed, for the comparisons which the narrator presses into service are often multivocal in their significance, and they sometimes contradict other comparisons that are designed to shed more light on the same character or event in the novella. Billy Budd, for instance, is associated with the Celtic god, Beli. But, at various times, he is also compared to Apollo, Hyperion, Hercules, Achilles, Adam and Isaac. Towards the end of the novella, he assumes some of the attributes of Christ: when his stutter prevents him from replying to Claggart's accusations, the expression on his face is "a crucifixion to behold";[189] his execution seems manifestly unjust to most readers; he is hanged from the mainyard, which makes a cruciform structure with the mainmast; his last words, "God bless Captain Vere!",[190] distantly recall those of Christ on the Cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do";[191] and, after his death, a chip of the spar from which he had been suspended is venerated by his fellow bluejackets "as a piece of the Cross."[192]

If the god Beli is taken as Billy's prototype, it would appear that Billy's death should be regarded as necessary for providing victory for the British fleet over its French counterpart, thus staving off the threat of revolution. However, if Christ is to be viewed as a model for Billy, the consequences for interpretation become ambiguous. This is the case because a number of profound differences counterbalance – or even outweigh – the similarities between the Christian Saviour and the popular foretopman of the *Bellipotent*. Just as Christ is the second Adam, who cleanses the corruption inflicted by the serpent, so Billy, in his capacity as the "Handsome Sailor", inspires goodness in his fellow shipmates. But, although Christ and Billy are both morally good, the former is partly human, partly divine and the epitome of perfection, while the latter is wholly human and tainted – albeit to a mild degree – by the hand of "the

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[187] Franklin, p. 198.
[188] Franklin, p. 198.
[189] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 145.
[190] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 163.
[191] Luke 23 : 34.
[192] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 169.

envious marplot of Eden"[193] (who is given the blame for Billy's vocal defect). Whereas Christ easily recognises evil, Billy either does not, or will not. And, whereas Christ willingly becomes a sacrificial victim in order to atone for the sins of mankind, it seems unlikely that Billy knows why he is being sacrificed. (Is it in order that naval discipline should be preserved? Is it in order that victory in war should go to the British? Or is it merely for the sake of expedience? Indeed, such discriminations appear to be far beyond Billy's limited intellectual range; he simply focuses on the slur to his loyalty and the consequent – but unintended – killing of Claggart.) Now, although the conflict between British conservatism and French revolutionary tendencies was closely intertwined with competing understandings of what it meant to be human, I have grave misgivings about whether the triumph of centrist (or right-wing) politics – if that is, in fact, the cause for which Billy is sacrificed – can be considered of comparable importance to the saving of the human race from eternal damnation. In my opinion, therefore, the notion – widely held by early critics of the novella – that the sacrificial death of Billy is necessary, cannot be justified with any real conviction. It springs from a reading of the novella which – wrongly, I believe – emphasises the allegorical elements of the narrative at the expense of the literal.

I have already indicated the similarities between Claggart and the Satan of Paradise Lost. The former's devilish attributes are underscored by the "first mesmeristic glance ... of serpent fascination"[194] which he fastens onto Billy as he recapitulates the accusation against him, and by the comparison of the master-at-arms' corpse to a "dead snake".[195] The falsehoods which Claggart fabricates about Billy also call to mind the lies which Iago concocts about Desdemona and Cassio in Shakespeare's Othello.[196] But counteracting these negative views of Claggart is the suggestion that he is not unlike "an asylum physician approaching in the public hall some patient".[197] Those who subscribe to psychoanalytical readings of literature take this as an indication that Billy's "innocence" is actually pseudoinnocence: Billy represses hostility to the father (in the person of Vere) by adopting a passive and placatory attitude towards those in authority. The blow which he strikes is actually meant for Vere, but displaced onto Claggart, his rival for securing the father's affection. In this reading, the accusations which Claggart levels against Billy should be regarded in a positive light as an attempt by the master-at-arms to purge the young foretopman of his psychological problems. Although I do not subscribe to this interpretation, it is certainly plausible, and can be justified on the basis of textual evidence (if one ignores the fact that, as a psychiatrist, Claggart should be disinterested and not driven by concealed motives – which is clearly *not* the case).

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[193] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 111.
[194] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 144.
[195] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 145.
[196] William Shakespeare, Othello, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (Walton-on-Thames : Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1997), 3.3 and following.

If both Billy and Claggart can provoke divergent critical responses from readers of the novella, so, too, can Vere. Early on in Billy Budd, Sailor, the narrator asks for the indulgence of his readers while he commits the "literary sin"[198] of digressing from his tale by the insertion of some material concerning Lord Nelson, "the greatest sailor since our world began [according to the poet Tennyson]."[199] He mentions that certain "martial utilitarians" might criticise "Nelson's ornate publication of his person [on the quarter-deck of his flagship, the *Victory*, at the Battle of Trafalgar]" as "not only unnecessary, but ... savor[ing] of foolhardiness and vanity. They [might] add, too,...

> that but for his bravado the victorious admiral might possibly have survived the battle, and so, instead of having his sagacious dying injunctions overruled by his immediate successor in command, he himself when the contest was decided might have brought his shattered fleet to anchor, a proceeding which might have averted the deplorable loss of life by shipwreck in the elemental tempest that followed the martial one.[200]

The narrator, however, is dismissive of such criticism:

> Personal prudence, even when dictated by quite other than selfish considerations, surely is no special virtue in a military man; while an excessive love of glory, impassioning a less burning impulse, the honest sense of duty, is the first... [I]f thus to have adorned himself for the altar and the sacrifice were indeed vainglory, then affectation and fustian is each more heroic line in the great epics and dramas, since in such lines the poet but embodies in verse those exaltations of sentiment that a nature like Nelson, the opportunity being given, vitalizes into acts.[201]

It is understandable that many readers will take the narrator's decision to include this digression about Lord Nelson as a tacit invitation to draw comparisons between Captain Vere and the hero of Trafalgar. In the quotation above, the narrator praises Nelson for his sense of duty; in a similar vein (shortly afterwards in the narrative), he lauds Vere for always discharging his naval responsibilities with "signal devotion".[202] Although Nelson is said to have been "a reckless

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[197] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 144.
[198] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 113.
[199] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 115.
[200] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 114.
[201] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 115.
[202] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 118. An important difference between Nelson and Vere, though, is that, whereas the former enjoys stepping into the limelight, the latter appears to be unassuming and to shun all unnecessary display.

declarer of his person in fight", he had always been "painstakingly circumspect" in his careful preparations for battle (presumably, so as to give himself the best chance of victory and to minimise the risks to those under his command).[203] Likewise, Vere is characterised as an officer "thoroughly versed in the science of his profession,... intrepid to the verge of temerity," yet ever "mindful of the welfare of his men".[204] Doubtless, there will be some readers who will interpret these similarities as an indication that Vere ought to be admired. However, the rigidly conservative adherence to the provisions of the Mutiny Act which characterises his response to the fatal blow struck by Billy is in sharp contrast to the "[exaltation] of sentiment" which prompted Nelson to risk his life for the sake of an admirable "love of glory".[205] Here, other readers might contrast – to Vere's disadvantage – Nelson's preparedness to allow his heart to overrule his head in exceptional circumstances with Vere's cold rationality in a situation that seems to cry out for a flexible and compassionate approach. So, instead of providing clarity, the comparisons that are implied between Vere and Nelson tend to produce ambiguity.

Similarly, it is sometimes possible to put two different constructions on what appears to be, at first glance, a fairly unambiguous statement by one of the characters in the novella. For instance, when the surgeon confirms that Claggart is indeed dead, Vere exclaims, "It is the divine judgement on Ananias!" Shortly afterwards, he adds, "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!"[206] Is Vere's first comment (and the first part of the second) meant to be taken rather loosely as signifying that Claggart deserved to die, or does he really believe that Claggart's death is a judgement from God, with Billy acting as God's instrument? If the former holds true, then "Yet the angel must hang!" merely reflects Vere's awareness that the law prescribes the death sentence for a deed such as Billy's.[207] However, if Vere genuinely believes that Billy is God's instrument of retribution, how can he justify passing the death sentence (which is, in effect, what he appears to be doing) on the foretopman? Once again, the text presents its readers with a choice of possible interpretations, without giving clear guidance as to which is to be preferred. Of course, the assertion, "Yet the angel must hang!" is ready-made ammunition for those readers who are critical of Vere: "[t]hey note [that] he pronounces sentence before he convenes a court."[208]

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[203] Billy Budd, Sailor, pp. 114 and 115.

[204] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 116.

[205] Although the two situations are perhaps not directly comparable, they are not altogether dissimilar. I feel, therefore, that the comparison is justified.

[206] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 146.

[207] According to Beaver, p. 463, Article XXII of the Articles of War in force at the time stated: "If any officer, mariner, soldier, or other person in the fleet, shall strike any of his superior officers, or draw, or offer to draw, or lift any weapon against him, being in the execution of his office, on any pretence whatsoever, every such person being convicted of such offence, by the sentence of a court martial, shall suffer death..." Beaver quotes from John McArthur, Principles and Practice of Naval and Military Courts Martial.

[208] Dan McCall, footnote no. 7 on p. 146 of the Norton Critical Edition of Melville's Short Novels.

The ending of Billy Budd, Sailor also serves to vitiate whatever possibilities exist for interpretative closure. After Billy's death and burial at sea, the narrator makes the following observation:

> The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial.
>
> How it fared with the Handsome Sailor during the year of the Great Mutiny has been faithfully given. But though properly the story ends with his life, something in way of sequel will not be amiss. Three brief chapters will suffice.[209]

Whereas the inclusion of the "Etymology" and "Extracts" sections suggests that Moby-Dick is a novel hesitant to begin, the above-mentioned supplementary chapters in Billy Budd, Sailor betoken a reluctance to end. It is almost as if the novella is intent on re-interpreting itself. Chapter 28 deals with the death of Vere in battle, and includes a brief discussion of the significance of the words, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd",[210] which he murmurs before his death. In Chapter 29, the narrator quotes in its entirety an account of the events that took place on the *Bellipotent*, as reported in an authorised naval chronicle of the time. In the article, Claggart is described as "respectable and discreet",[211] and as having had a "strong patriotic impulse";[212] Billy, on the other hand, is transformed into a mutinous villain who is wrongly credited with stabbing the master-at-arms to death. (If one discounts the factual error concerning the cause of Claggart's death, the article constitutes a plausible counter-reading of the events which took place. A more cynical view would be that it represents an expedient rewriting of the facts by the officer class.) And, finally, in Chapter 30, the veneration with which the bluejackets recall "the fresh young image of the Handsome Sailor, that face never deformed by a sneer or subtler vile freak of the heart within",[213] is highlighted; a fellow foretopman of Billy's is reported to have composed an artless poem in his memory, and it is with this that the tale draws to a close.. As Barbara Johnson rather wittily observes, "the story in fact begins to repeat itself – retelling

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[209] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 167. I shall say more about the narrator's somewhat misleading claims concerning the factuality and the truthfulness of his tale in my later discussion of the hermeneutic journey.
[210] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 168.
[211] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 168.
[212] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 169.
[213] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 169.

itself first in reverse, and then in verse." The effect of these revisionary recapitulations is "to empty the ending of any privileged control over sense."[214]

It is to be expected that the various narrative indeterminacies of Billy Budd, Sailor will persuade many a reader to question the accuracy and the appropriateness of his own critical response to the novella. Two of the results of such a reappraisal are likely to be an acknowledgement of the ineluctable subjectivity and provisionality of all human attempts at interpretation, and an increased willingness to be tolerant of readings that are not in accord with his own.

"Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins?" Following the dream in the "destructive element"

My own interpretation of Billy Budd, Sailor (the hermeneutic journey which I am about to describe) synthesises and builds upon what I have already said about the various physical, experiential and narrative journeys in the novella. It proceeds on the assumption that Melville's text speaks to us of the complexities of language, and of the problems associated with interpretation and judgement.

I have pointed out in the section on experiential journeys how the novella (in the unravelling of its plot) demonstrates the inherent dangers of the reductive readings adopted by Billy and Claggart. Their methods of interpretation (which have been labelled by Johnson as "naive" and "ironic" respectively) arise from a failure to understand the nature of language – namely, that it is a semiotic system composed entirely of differences, and, therefore, devoid of any positive terms. So, although "the differential play (*jeu*) of language may produce the 'effects' of decidable meanings in an utterance or text,... these are merely effects and lack a ground that would justify certainty in interpretation."[215] Not realising this, Billy believes that language is transparent and that individual signs and texts have the same "meaning" for everybody who reads them. Claggart, too, regards interpretation as a simple matter: he merely reverses the apparent "meanings" of signs so that the signifier and the signified become the two poles of a binary opposition. Clearly, such thinking falls within the ambit of logocentrism, and disregards the play of language which "dispers[es] meanings among innumerable alternatives,"[216] and negates the possibility of an authoritative and final interpretation.

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[214] Johnson, p. 81.
[215] M. H. Abrams, "Deconstruction", in A Glossary of Literary Terms, 7th ed. (Orlando, Florida : Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), p. 57.
[216] Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, p. 57.

Unlike Billy and Claggart, Captain Vere reveals an awareness on several occasions (firstly, for instance, after hearing Claggart's accusations against Billy, and, secondly, after witnessing the foretopman's catastrophic response to the slanderous charges) that a choice of feasible interpretations is usually available to readers. Yet, when it comes to formulating and finalising his own reading of the circumstances surrounding Claggart's death, he allows himself to be unduly influenced by the prevailing political climate and the terms of the Articles of War. His interpretation (which, like all readings, is but one of many versions of the truth) then forms the basis upon which judgement is passed on Billy. Many Melville scholars[217] hold the view, however, that Vere's interpretation of the homicide perpetrated by Billy does not accord very well with the evidence (not only because it is patently unfair towards Billy, but also because it goes against Vere's own ideas of natural justice), and I am in complete agreement with them.

Although (as Vere reminds the three judges of the drumhead court) the Articles of War in operation at the time of Claggart's death stated that, if "[i]n wartime at sea a man-of-war's man strikes his superior in grade," he has committed "a capital crime",[218] I firmly believe that the legal statutes of any era are (or should be) drawn up to deal with the *typical* cases which might arise. Consequently, they should *not* be regarded as absolutely prescriptive if there are *compelling* reasons in a *particular* case to suggest that those responsible for dispensing justice should use their discretion. While Vere seems to be convinced that the martial law in force at the time gives him no room for manoeuvre as regards the sentence to be passed on Billy, I would question the validity of that assumption. But, if he is indeed correct in assessing the exigencies of his situation, I feel obliged to express my hostility towards a social institution which could countenance the sacrificing of Billy Budd in the name of a supposedly (yet, in my opinion, specious) greater good. For Billy's execution is a flagrant miscarriage of justice.

The social institution of which I have just spoken somewhat disparagingly is, of course, the practice of war. At this point it is worth stressing the irony in the fact that, whereas wars are often justified as necessary for the preservation of civilized values, the waging of war is, in itself, both a product and a debasement of civilization. Despite the fact that Vere possesses many character traits which are untypical of naval officers, it is not altogether surprising that, as one of the "King's" men who are accustomed to "fight[ing] *at command*"[219] (my emphasis), he should have difficulty in heeding the voice of his conscience (rather than slavishly implementing the law) when he is called upon to administer justice. Joyce Adler perceptively takes him as

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[217] e.g. Joseph Schiffman, Lawrance Thompson and Robert K. Martin Jr.
[218] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 154.
[219] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 153.

> the symbolic figure – not crudely, but finely and fairly drawn – of civilized man: learned, but not sufficiently imaginative; not devoid of the ability to love, but not allowing this capacity to develop; sensitive to the difference between the good and evil signified by Billy and Claggart, but the puppet of the god he has been trained to think must rule in this world. His ultimate faith is in Force, not only against the enemy, but in dealing with his own side – utilizing impressment, flogging, and hanging – and in dealing violently with his own heart.[220]

Lending credence to Adler's conception of Vere's role in the novella are the aspersions which the narrator casts on "citified man" at the outset of his tale:

> [I]t is observable that where certain virtues pristine and unadulterate peculiarly characterize anybody in the external uniform of civilization, they will upon scrutiny seem ... to be derived ... from a period prior to Cain's city and citified man. The character marked by such qualities has to an unvitiated taste an untampered-with flavor like that of berries, while the man thoroughly civilized, even in a fair specimen of the breed, has to the same moral palate a questionable smack as of a compounded wine.[221]

While I do not subscribe to a myth of pure, unadulterated origin (such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of the "noble savage"), I am of the opinion that, because "citified man" lives in a relatively complex environment, he sometimes has a tendency to mistrust his instincts (and better judgement) when he is faced with a moral dilemma. Although the various assessments which the narrator makes of Vere during the course of the novella (or, to use the terminology of Wayne C. Booth, all that the narrator "tells" – as opposed to "shows" – us about Vere[222]) are commendably even-handed, many readers (including this one) are less charitable, and question the prudence of Vere's response (as "shown" by the narrator) to: (a) Claggart's slanderous charges and (b) Billy's unintended homicide. However, it is important to realise that the historical conditions in existence at the time strongly influence Vere's reaction to the crisis on the *Bellipotent*. And so, if his actions are to be criticised, civilized man's zealous endorsement of war should take some of the blame. Adler astutely recognises that,

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[220] Joyce Sparer Adler, "*Billy Budd* and Melville's Philosophy of War", PMLA 91 (March 1976), pp. 266-278, an extract of which is quoted in Merton M. Sealts Jr, "Innocence and Infamy : *Billy Budd, Sailor*", in A Companion to Melville Studies, ed. John Bryant (Westport : Greenwood Press, Inc., 1986), p. 426.

[221] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 111. Although the sentiments expressed are nominally those of the narrator, there is no reason to suppose that they are not those of Melville as well.

[222] In The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 3-20, Wayne C. Booth draws a distinction between two styles of narration: the first ("telling") is characterised by intrusive authorial comment, whereas the second ("showing") gives the impression that the author is allowing the reader to reach his own conclusions about

> [w]hat we have seen in Vere is that his human nature has been so tampered with that he believes that he is "not authorized" to determine matters on the "primitive basis" of "essential right and wrong" [Ch. 21] and that he must fight against his most natural emotions, his "primitive instincts strong as the wind and the sea" [Ch. 21].[223]

Although it seems as though Melville cannot resist being fascinated by war, his disapproval of it is evident in the names which he chooses for the ships that are particularly associated with the destinies of Billy, Claggart and Vere. By identifying the peaceful merchantman from which Billy is press-ganged into the navy as the *Rights-of-Man* (the title, also, of a book by Thomas Paine, in which he argues passionately in favour of the basic rights and civil liberties of all men – ideas which gave birth to the French Revolution), Melville implies that war (as symbolised by the seventy-four-gunned British man-o'-war on which Billy is forced to serve) represents an authoritarian curtailment of human freedom and an attack on the putative rights of individuals. The name which he ultimately selected for the man-o'-war, the H.M.S. *Bellipotent*, tells a similar story: according to Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, the editors of what is generally regarded as the standard text of Billy Budd, Sailor, Melville's original name for the warship had been the H.M.S. *Indomitable*.[224] The change to "*Bellipotent*" is significant because, whereas "*Indomitable*" (from the Latin, "*indomitabilis*", meaning "not to be subdued") connotes a ship that *defends* itself strongly against attack, "*Bellipotent*" is perhaps more suggestive of a glorying in battle and a willingness to start a fight. In a further sortie against the waging of war, Melville has his narrator comment as follows on the appositeness of the designation, "*Athée*", for a warship:

> Such a name [the *Athée* or *Atheist*], ...was yet, though not so intended to be, the aptest name, if one consider it, ever given to a warship; far more so indeed than the *Devastation*, the *Erebus* (the *Hell*), and similar names bestowed upon fighting ships.[225]

However, Billy Budd, Sailor does not dwell exclusively on man's destructiveness; it also recognises his potential for good. The character of Billy expresses the positive aspects of man's

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the action and the characters in the story. Although Booth goes on to show that the distinction between showing and telling is somewhat problematic, I do feel that it is of considerable use in the analysis of narrative.

[223] Joyce Sparer Adler, "*Billy Budd* and Melville's Philosophy of War", PMLA 91 (March 1976), pp. 266-278, an excerpt of which is reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of Melville's Short Novels, p. 358. Here, I believe that Adler presents us with a valuable insight, even though I concede that the rationale of the Last Assizes, while informed by principles of "natural justice", is still culturally conditioned.

[224] Hayford and Sealts, "Editors' Introduction", in the Chicago University Press edition of Billy Budd, Sailor (*An Inside Narrative*), pp. 5 and 20-21.

[225] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 167.

nature most clearly, but the subtleties of Melville's art convey a similar message. While the narrator's account of Billy's execution does full justice to the pathos of the occasion, it also succeeds in transfiguring it into a spiritual event comparable to the ascension of Christ:

> The hull, deliberately recovering from the periodic roll to leeward, was just regaining an even keel when the last signal, a preconcerted dumb one, was given. At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and ascending, took the full rose of the dawn.
>
> In the pinioned figure arrived at the yard-end, to the wonder of all no motion was apparent, none save that created by the slow roll of the hull in moderate weather, so majestic in a great ship ponderously cannoned.[226]

The "mystical vision" in this passage refers to the vision of Saint John the Divine, as recorded in the Book of Revelation. "The Lamb of God" in Saint John's vision "is Jesus in his final, apocalyptic form at the end of time: he is the Son of God who defeats Satan, judges mankind, and establishes his eternal kingdom in a mystical marriage to the heavenly city of Jerusalem."[227] A further echo of the Book of Revelation is the "soft glory" which illuminates "the vapory fleece hanging low in the East". Here, "glory" is used in its biblical sense, alluding to the Lamb of God who shines through and in the holy Jerusalem: "And the city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it, and the Lamb is its light."[228] Clearly, the narrator's account of Billy's hanging (he is able to depict it as an ascension because Billy's body is raised by means of a halter which is suspended from the main yardarm), sprinkled as it is with allusions to the Book of Revelation, is designed to underline the similarities between Billy and Christ. Gordon Teskey perspicaciously analyses the two contrasting physical motions that are described by the narrator. These are

> the lateral rolling of the ship on her beam and Billy's vertical ascent to the spar. The first motion is ... the motion of the physical world, of which the brute factuality of the hanging is a part. The second motion, Billy's "ascension," seems to have something in it that is nobler than the first: let us say the possibility of transcendence and of spiritual hope. Yet for all its

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[226] Billy Budd, Sailor, pp. 163-164.
[227] Gordon Teskey, "The Bible in *Billy Budd*", in the Norton Critical Edition of Melville's Short Novels, p. 388.
[228] Revelation 21 : 23.

> transcendental promise the rising motion is at last absorbed in the ship's "periodic roll to leeward" as the dead body sways at the yardarm...
>
> But because the physical truth alone can never give us a world in which the trouble of living is worth it, the spiritual hope is preserved, as it were, under erasure... For Melville, it is the duty of the writer to acknowledge fully the unyielding authority of the physical world without dismissing the claim on the human heart that spiritual hope has.[229]

The latent spiritual hope (perhaps no more than a visionary aspiration or momentary perception) which Melville evokes in Billy's quasi-ascension also resonates within the poem composed by an unsophisticated shipmate of Billy's. The original lines, "after circulating among the shipboard crews for a while, finally [get] rudely printed at Portsmouth as a ballad" entitled "BILLY IN THE DARBIES".[230] The speaker of the poem (Billy) imagines his impending execution and burial at sea, but his final words come to us (as Johnson also recognises[231]) from beyond the grave and from the bottom of the ocean:

> Fathoms down, fathoms down, how I'll dream fast asleep.
> I feel it stealing now. Sentry, are you there?
> Just ease these darbies at the wrist,
> And roll me over fair!
> I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist.[232]

Just as, here, in the poet's fancy, the ghost of the Handsome Sailor cannot be silenced, so Billy's goodness lives on in the minds of his fellow sailors and is transmuted into art – the unskilful art of the sailor-poet speaking to us eloquently from within the refined art of Herman Melville himself. I agree with Joyce Adler that, in the poem,

> Melville's imagination works through the sailor's; his voice sounds in the overtones with which the narrative has endowed the sailor's simple words. The sailor's descriptive title is Melville's symbolic one: Billy Budd, sailor, lies in the darbies of war, from which he and all other sailors need to be released. He is a pearl of great beauty about to be jettisoned by the man-of-war world... [Yet] Billy will, in a nonliteral way, go "aloft from alow" [Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 170]: as he ascends the yard-end his goodness will convey

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[229] Teskey, pp. 387 and 391.
[230] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 169.
[231] Johnson, p. 80.

> an inspiration of true glory which at some future time may prove the salvation of all sailors on what *White-Jacket* in "The End" sees as "this earth that sails through the air."[233]

And so, although Billy Budd, Sailor is a prose tragedy which foregrounds the potentially devastating consequences of evil and of war, its tone is not entirely one of despair. For, as Adler observes,

> art ... in its interaction with life may give rise to a conscious desire by man to change his mode of existence. The *Bellipotent* form is not an inescapable part of the human condition but the result of the failure so far of man's heart and imagination to attempt to understand its mystery and to seek out the transforming possibility within it.[234]

If Melville suggests, however tentatively, that mankind has the power – though perhaps not the inclination – to refrain from warfare, his detailed exposition of the issues surrounding Billy's trial represents a searching interrogation of the entire process of judgement, and demonstrates that the problems associated with every act of judgement are far more intractable than those connected with warfare. Two of the most important reasons for this are as follows: anyone who acts as a judge has to *interpret* the evidence at his disposal, despite the fact that *no* interpretation can ever be regarded as unassailably correct or final; and, if he finds the accused guilty, he must hand down a sentence which will be a suitable punishment for the accused and which will prevent him from repeating the crime in the future. In other words, the judge must try to anticipate and protect the future in terms of an imperfectly understood past. Clearly, the difficulties which face him (both in terms of understanding the past and in terms of predicting the future) are insurmountable, and human justice can never hope to eliminate its inherent shortcomings. Nevertheless, it must continually aspire towards limiting imperfection as much as possible if man's potential for good is to triumph over his destructive tendencies.

As I have already indicated, Vere's judgement (by proxy) of Billy is an attempt "to convert an ambiguous situation into a decidable one."[235] For Vere to be successful, he must, of necessity, reduce the complexity of the situation by a process of simplification that amounts to

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[232] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 170.

[233] Adler, Melville's Short Novels, pp. 356-357. The phrase which Adler quotes from White-Jacket may be found in Herman Melville, White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago : Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1970), p. 398.

[234] Adler, Melville's Short Novels, pp. 357-358. While I am in broad agreement with Adler, I have some reservations about whether the concluding note of optimism in her remarks takes full account of the wilful ambiguity of Melville's tale.

[235] Johnson, p. 105.

(unavoidable) distortion. Barbara Johnson explains how Vere does this by furnishing us with the valuable insight that judgement consistently converts

> a difference *within* (Billy as divided between conscious submissiveness and unconscious hostility, Vere as divided between understanding father and military authority) into a difference *between* (between Claggart and Billy, between Nature and the King, between authority and criminality). A difference *between* opposing forces presupposes that the entities in conflict be knowable. A difference *within* one of the entities in question is precisely what problematizes the very *idea* of an entity in the first place, rendering "the legal point of view" inapplicable.[236]

Because human nature is ambiguous and multi-faceted, there will always be "differences within" the character of every human being. We have seen how this holds true for the leading characters in Billy Budd, Sailor. But when Vere pronounces judgement on Billy, he is forced to ignore these complex differences in favour of an unambiguous interpretation which defines Billy as the perpetrator of crime, with Claggart as the innocent victim. It follows that, if Vere's reading of the evidence is perforce partial (in both senses of the word), any measures which he decides to take on the basis of that reading are not unlike bullets fired at a target by a short-sighted marksman: the shottist cannot have much confidence in his ability to hit the target.

Despite the fact that a forced alliance between understanding (or cognition) and action (or performance) cannot be made to work perfectly in the act of judging, a complete separation of cognition and action does not appear to be possible within human relations either, as Barbara Johnson demonstrates in her illuminating analysis of Melville's text. After stating that law is the "forcible transformation of ambiguity into decidability", she asks whether it is "possible to read ambiguity *as such*, without that reading functioning as a political act?"[237] She continues:

> Melville has something to say even about this. For there is a fourth reader in *Billy Budd*, one who "never interferes in aught and never gives advice" [p. 135]: the old Dansker... When asked by Billy for an explanation of his petty troubles, the Dansker says only, "Jemmy Legs [Claggart] is down on you" [p. 124]. This interpretatation, entirely accurate as a reading of Claggart's ambiguous behavior, is handed down to Billy without further explanation... As a reader who understands ambiguity yet refuses to "commit himself" [p. 125], the Dansker thus dramatizes a reading that

[236] Johnson, pp. 105-106.
[237] Johnson, p. 107. She defines politics "as the attempt to reconcile action with understanding" (p. 103).

> attempts to be as cognitively accurate and as performatively neutral as possible. Yet however neutral he tries to remain, the Dansker's reading does not take place outside the political realm; it is his very refusal to participate in it, whether by further instruction or by direct intervention, that leads to Billy's exclamation in the soup-spilling episode ("There now, who says [that] Jemmy Legs is down on me?" [p. 125]). The transference of knowledge is no more innocent than the transference of power, for it is through the impossibility of finding a spot from which knowledge could be all-encompassing that the plays of political power proceed.[238]

As I have already mentioned in my analysis of Moby-Dick, there are at least two reasons why knowledge cannot be "all-encompassing". The first of these is that language is not completely transparent, and the second is that the universe is too complex to be perfectly understood. A seemingly inexplicable occurrence in Melville's novella illustrates the latter principle. This is the absence of muscular spasm in Billy's body when he is hanged. The ship's purser speculates that it is perhaps attributable to "the force lodged in will power", or that Billy's death belongs to "a species of euthanasia".[239] The ship's surgeon, while acknowledging that the absence of spasm in Billy's case is "phenomenal", searches for a scientific explanation, but, ultimately, he is forced to admit defeat: "I do not, with my present knowledge, pretend to account for it at all."[240] Whereas the purser is prepared – or, even, eager – to interpret Billy's death as supernatural, the surgeon prefers not to resort to metaphysics when faced with the mysterious. Here, Melville points to the multiple ways in which situations may be read, and highlights the natural desire of human beings to live in a world which they are able to understand and explain.

Yet he also appears to suggest that it is sometimes advisable to accept the inexplicable as an inescapable part of life. In fact, Billy Budd, Sailor is liberally dotted with circumstances or events which partake of the mysterious. The well-spring of Claggart's evil, the hanging of Billy (which possesses some of the characteristics of a classical apotheosis or of Christ's ascension), and the unusual behaviour of the seabirds after Billy's body is committed to the sea (as if in tribute, they fly "screaming to the spot" where the shotted hammock has entered the sea, and, even after the ship has left the burial spot astern, they keep "circling it low down with the moving shadow of their outstretched wings and the croaked requiem of their cries"[241]) are just three more examples. Although such enigmas cannot readily be accommodated within a practical, down-to-earth reading of the narrative, it is also not possible to read the novella in a

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[238] Johnson, p. 107.
[239] Billy Budd, Sailor, pp. 164 and 165.
[240] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 164.
[241] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 166.

consistently imaginative manner as an allegory of some sort: the large number of realistic elements in the plot virtually demand a commonsensical approach to interpretation.

However, because human beings are uncomfortable with incertitude, they are likely to do all in their power to dispel it. The construction of myths and the proffering of explanations which invoke the supernatural are just two of the strategies they may employ. The ballad, "BILLY IN THE DARBIES", provides a case in point: it is a myth-making exercise which converts Billy into a naval hero. But the poem is merely the culminating product of a process which began soon after Billy's death, as is evident in this excerpt from the novella:

> Everything is for a term venerated in navies. Any tangible object associated with some striking incident of the service is converted into a monument. The spar from which the foretopman was suspended was for some years kept trace of by the bluejackets. Their knowledge followed it from ship to dockyard and again from dockyard to ship, still pursuing it even when at last reduced to a mere dockyard boom. To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross.[242]

Here, there is an allusion to one of the preoccupations of medieval Christians: the finding of artifacts that could "prove" the truth of the Christian religion. Connected with this are the stories of unscrupulous charlatans (such as the Pardoner in The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer) who used to exploit the almost universal need of human beings to believe in a spiritual realm by offering bogus Christian relics for sale (in the hope that the naive and the gullible would purchase them). It seems, then, that the narrator is reminding us that spirituality is often threatened at its boundaries by superstition. And, by placing the heroizing of Billy Budd within this context, he causes us to mull over the possibility that we frequently arrive at our ideas and opinions by combining justifiable belief with wishful thinking. From this we may deduce that, while Melville does not denounce the inclination of human beings to believe in something worthwhile, he is of the opinion that faith should not be blind, but that it should be subjected to the test of honest questioning. In other words, he endorses an uneasy tension between belief and scepticism as a satisfyingly stable foundation for cognition.

Towards the end of Billy Budd, Sailor, he also foregrounds his interrogation of what could be regarded as true. The narrator asserts (in Chapter 28) that it is possible to endow fiction with "symmetry of form", but that a story of facts ("truth uncompromisingly told") "will always have its ragged edges".[243] In the process of questioning fictional truth (as opposed to factual

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[242] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 169.

[243] I have already quoted, in its entirety, the paragraph in which these phrases occur – on p. 113 of this research report.

truth), the narrator's words are intended to create the illusion that Melville's tale is an accurate record of certain historical events which took place in 1797. But, of course, this is not the case: Billy Budd, Sailor is fiction. The most one could say is that it is a short historical novel or an instance of "faction", a genre which fuses facts with fiction. In support of the classification as "faction", are the narrator's comment, which stresses the factuality of his story, and the interweaving of historical incidents (the mutinies at Spithead and the Nore, for instance) with fictional ones (what is purported to have happened on the *Bellipotent* – a series of events which existed only in Melville's imagination). As we have seen, the narrator tells us that fictional truth is dubious, but he also sets factual truth into oscillation during the course of the novella by putting forward (for example) competing interpretations of Lord Nelson's exploits at the Battle of Trafalgar. In this way, the narrator cuts across any distinctions which we might be tempted to draw between facts and fiction, and we come to realise that facts are never transparent: our access to events is always mediated, and interpretation depends both on who is doing the reading and on the particular reading strategy which that person chooses to adopt.

From my analysis of Billy Budd, Sailor thus far, it should be evident that truth can never be regarded as absolute. As Melville envisages it, truth is an intellectual model which people construct in order to make sense of their experiences. As such, it is never certain, but always subject to change (since, at various times, different versions of the truth may be deemed more compelling than others). This pragmatic view of truth as processive was also shared by the philosopher, William James, who stated: "Truth *happens* to be an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events."[244] James's opinion, in other words, is that truth is always provisional, and that it is created to explain the way things (seem to) "work". Given the fact that truth remains elusive, it is ironic that we can never escape from the necessity of trying to explicate things satisfactorily to ourselves. But, although we may be trapped within the "prisonhouse of language", our place of incarceration is comparable to "that universe finite and unbounded which some modern cosmologies posit"[245] – and so, the possibilities for interpretation are endless (even if the problems of verifiability remain). Because Billy Budd, Sailor is the final composition in Melville's literary oeuvre, critics have often considered it to be his "last will and spiritual testament".[246] I believe that, if, indeed, we are justified in taking such a view, the novella is the work of a man who is staggeringly honest: he acknowledges that we live in a world which we can never fully understand, and that our structures of truth will always have their ragged edges.

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[244] William James, an excerpt from Pragmatism, quoted in The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 386.

[245] J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host", in Deconstruction and Criticism (with essays by Harold Bloom *et al.*) (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 231.

If, however, we are required to act or to pronounce judgement, we are compelled to adopt one particular interpretation as the truth. This entails both the disregarding of boundaries and the drawing of boundaries where these do not exist. When Vere summons Billy and Claggart to his cabin, he crosses a social frontier by meeting informally (and improperly) with his naval inferiors. This produces catastrophic results upon which he is forced to act. But, as the narrator rhetorically asks (though in a different context),

> 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?[247]

Vere enters this no-man's land of the rainbow and attempts to separate the hues. In doing so, he betrays the inadequacy of his own way of reading, which cannot cope in the uncharted territory of the hinterland. For it is a region where interpretation becomes problematic, even dangerous, and certainly questionable. In justifying his approach to the presiding officers of the drumhead court, Vere opposes his naval buttons (Culture) to the sea (Nature), and pledges his allegiance to the former. However, the cultural constructs of the Mutiny Act and the Articles of War are ill-equipped to take account of the exceptional aspects in Billy's case (for instance, Claggart's provocative accusations, Billy's stutter and the unfortunate consequences of Billy's blow). Vere does not realise, though, that Nature (which appears to take the Bible as its final authority[248]) is also culturally conditioned. By his stubborn refusal to acknowledge its relevance to Billy's trial, he is finally "at sea", and the course which he has plotted for the microcosmic world of the *Bellipotent* heads towards an unknown – and, possibly, treacherous – destination.

Up to this point, I have discussed the reading strategies of Billy, Claggart, Vere and the Dansker. But there is also a fifth type of reader we need to consider – ourselves. In the process of leading us ever deeper into complexity, Melville's novella asks us to formulate our own interpretations, and it is through them that we reveal our reading practices. Like Vere, we have to cross into the rainbow and establish boundaries in the hope that the results will satisfy us. In my own case, I am conscious of the fact that my interpretation of Billy Budd, Sailor probably indicates a preference for liberalism over conservatism, and an inclination to value the interests of the (worthy) individual more highly than those of the group. (I endorse change if it is for the better, I believe that interpretation should be informed by flexibility, and I frown upon the unjust treatment of an individual for the sake of a putatively greater good.) But I realise that I cannot regard my interpretation as indisputably correct, or, even, as unquestionably superior to

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[246] The phrase is J. Middleton Murry's, and is quoted in the Chicago University Press edition of Billy Budd, Sailor, ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, p. 25.
[247] Billy Budd, Sailor, p. 147.
[248] Johnson makes this point on p. 104 of her essay.

anybody else's. For one of the outstanding strengths of Melville's novella is that it heightens our awareness of the multivocality of texts. This, in turn, has the salutary effect of making us readers who will be more likely to submit our own reading practices to the scrutiny of self-criticism in the future.

Whereas my reading of Billy Budd, Sailor emphasises the difficulties associated with interpretation, my reading of Lord Jim concentrates on the protagonist's conduct, the various ways in which it is, or may be, interpreted, and Conrad's response to the spectre of meaninglessness which lurks within the pages of the novel. Since Jim's misdemeanours as a sailor are not planned in advance, but the result of his fraught relationship to the universe, I feel justified in taking, as the starting-point of my hermeneutic journey, Stein's pronouncement that human consciousness is the underlying cause of man's sense of alienation in the natural world:

> "We want in so many different ways to be... This magnificent butterfly finds a little heap of dirt and sits still on it; but man he will never on his heap of mud keep still. He want to be so, and again he want to be so... He wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil – and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow – so fine as he can never be.... In a dream...."[249]

Jim is an oustanding exemplar of Stein's man who "will never on his heap of mud keep still." His career is characterised by an obsessive idealism which isolates him to some degree from his fellow human beings, since he seems to seek self-fulfilment in an exalted and lonely realm of personal aspiration which few can understand. He learns very little from his failures in the merchant navy because he is reluctant to acknowledge them. This, in turn, prevents him from lowering the high – if not illusory – standards which he continues to set for himself. Since, as Philip Weinstein suggests, "[h]is nature [is] a door he wants to keep closed, [and] his native culture [is] a past he has abandoned, his isolation ... intensifies and he [appears to sink even] deeper into his ego-dream".[250] He pursues the dream by demonstrating an unwavering fidelity to Doramin's people, whom he loves with what Marlow describes as "a sort of fierce egoism".[251] But, although the Patusanian community may be the necessary catalyst for Jim's vindication of his self-image (it is with a sense of satisfaction that he tells Marlow, "Well, I am all right anyhow"[252]), his narcissistic tendencies consistently prevent him from becoming totally integrated within that community. And so, despite the fact that he is admired and respected, he

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[249] Lord Jim, pp. 128-129.

[250] Philip M. Weinstein, "'Nothing Can Touch Me': *Lord Jim*", an excerpt from The Semantics of Desire : Changing Models of Identity from Dickens to Joyce (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1984), which is reprinted in the Second Norton Edition of Lord Jim, p. 465.

[251] Lord Jim, p. 150.

is never really understood by anybody – not even by those (Jewel, Dain Waris, Tamb' Itam and Marlow) who are closest to him in the novel.

On the day when he bids Jim farewell for the last time, Marlow recalls some words of Stein's ("In the destructive element immerse!.... To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream – and so – always – *usque ad finem* ..."), and concludes that the young man "was romantic, but none the less true."[253] Watt suggests that,

> [i]f we seek to find an ancient ideal of individual behaviour which can be called romantic, but which emphasises the obligation of being "true" and "faithful," it is surely to be found in the medieval romance... That ideal [is] named, and given a kind of transcendental status, by the French Lieutenant: "The honour ... that is real – that is!" [Lord Jim, p. 91.][254]

Jim's exploits in Patusan are, indeed, the stuff of legend, and resemble some of the doughty deeds mentioned in chivalric romances.[255] He wins fame for himself by displaying the knightly virtues of bravery, friendship and keeping faith. But, in presenting himself to Doramin after Dain Waris's death, he assigns an absolute value to these virtues, and (as might be expected whenever extreme positions are at issue) his conduct elicits conflicting interpretations. For, as Watt argues,

> Jim's death is, in its way, an act of friendship for Dain Waris: Roland must not survive his comrade-in-arms Oliver. In obeying his pledge to Doramin [that he "was ready to answer with his life for any harm that should come" to Doramin's people – Lord Jim, p. 232], Jim is also implicitly keeping faith with Stein, Doramin's sworn comrade. Of course, to keep faith with Dain Waris, Doramin, and Stein, must entail betraying Jewel... But after Jim's death, when Jewel asserts that Jim "was false," Stein protests, "Not false! True! true! true!" [Lord Jim, p. 208.]
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> The contradiction reflects how, although the code of honour, like that of solidarity, is based on approved social values, its more peremptory claims on the individual tend to convert it into a personal absolute, and thereby exalt

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[252] Lord Jim, p. 149.
[253] Lord Jim, p. 198.
[254] Watt, p. 352.
[255] Indeed, Jim's exploits also call to mind some of the feats performed by the knight-heroes in Spenser's epic romance, The Faerie Queene. Any such similarities would tend to support Erdinast-Vulcan's reading of the Patusan section as belonging to a mythical mode of discourse.

> it above all other obligations, whether public or private.[256]

If Jim sacrifices his life in the cause of restitution (for the deaths of Dain Waris and *his* companions), he also does so in order to validate his heroic status through death. His decision is based on the supreme value which he attaches to personal honour – even if that is at the cost of romantic love and continued service to the community. It is possible, therefore, to accuse him of selfishness, but he cannot be censured for cowardice or unethical conduct. In Billy Budd, Sailor, Vere is also confronted with a difficult choice between – as he sees it – natural justice (which would save the blameless individual but put the community at risk) and imperfect human justice (which would sacrifice the individual for the sake of the continued well-being of the community). Although Jim and Vere could come in for some criticism for making arguably poor decisions, they both do what they think is right in the most trying of circumstances. In Jim's case, the words of Marlow are an apt commentary on the young man's fate: "He was overwhelmed by the inexplicable; he was overwhelmed by his own personality – the gift of that destiny which he had done his best to master."[257]

There is, indeed, an inevitability about Jim's destiny which is attributable, in large part, to his personality. In fashioning such a hero, Conrad would seem to endorse Schopenhauer's views on human character. According to the German philosopher,

> will is first and original; knowledge is merely added to it as an instrument belonging to the phenomenon of will. Therefore every man is what he is through his will... Through the knowledge which is added to it he comes to know in the course of experience *what he is*, i.e., he learns his character. Thus he *knows* himself in consequence of and in accordance with the nature of his will, instead of *willing* in consequence of and in accordance with his knowing... [I] say that .. he cannot resolve to be this or that, nor can he become other than he is; but he *is* once for all, and he knows in the course of experience *what* he is.[258]

This postulate of character as pre-determined and unchanging is pessimistic in its denial of a human being's potential to become the person he would like to be. Although the destinies of Ahab (in Moby-Dick), Billy and Claggart (in Billy Budd, Sailor) also appear to be determined, for the most part, by their individual personalities, I would argue that the exploration of this theme in Lord Jim takes on a more sombre complexion than it does in the two Melville texts

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[256] Watt, pp. 352-353.
[257] Lord Jim, p. 202.
[258] Arthur Schopenhauer, "The World as Will and Idea", in Schopenhauer : Selections, ed Dewitt H. Parker (New York : Scribner's, 1928), p. 212.

which I have mentioned. This is the case because, whereas Lord Jim conforms fairly strictly to the conventions of the realist novel, Moby-Dick is a romance, and Billy Budd, Sailor nods in the direction of allegory: it is likely that readers will consider the depiction of character in the Melville texts to be just a little unrealistic and remote from everyday reality.

However, Lord Jim and Billy Budd, Sailor are similar in a number of respects: in each novel(la), for instance, the death of the protagonist is unjust. Although such an unmerited demise is not a sufficient reason for a literary work to be classified as a tragedy in Aristotle's definition of the term, I am in agreement with Watt that Lord Jim is tragic for at least two other reasons: it evokes "awed astonishment"[259] at Fate's remorseless dealings with a young man of exceptional idealism, who goes to his death with heroic resolution; and it exemplifies a tragic sense of life, since

> [t]he moral perspective of the three chief characters, Jim, Marlow, and Stein, is dominated by a sense of inexorable contradiction: for Jim it is his preoccupation with the intolerable discrepancy between what he has done and what he would like to have done; for Marlow it is the distance between his faith in solidarity and the apparently random and amoral meaninglessness of the physical and the social world; for Stein it is the radical disjunction between the individual's ego-ideals and the world he struggles to realise them in.[260]

In the case of Jim, his feelings of shame after he has jumped fom the *Patna* are understandable (and redound to his credit), but whether the naval fraternity is justified in taking such a severe view of his indiscretion is a moot point. Although the directive that sailors should generally remain on a stricken vessel is issued out of considerations of duty and safety, the matter is not quite as simple as the regulation might imply. For, as Pierre Lefranc points out,

> [w]hat has just been stated implies that, unless an order is given and can be heard, one's professional honor [as a sailor] may hang on one's precise evaluation of circumstances (which is not always possible), an ability to make and carry out the right decision under great stress, and an exceptional sense of timing (in view of the risk of being sucked into the sea with the sinking ship if one jumps too late). It also means that duty in its extreme form includes suicide: a thought worth pondering. Who can say in advance that, whatever the circumstances and in spite of normal emotions and impulses[,]

[259] Watt, p. 349.
[260] Watt, p. 350.

> ... he will never flinch – never jump? No one, of course, except the blissfully unconscious, the complacent, and all those who live in pretenses or self-illusion.[261]

If, as the quotation suggests, so much in our lives depends on chance, and if sudden crises often force us to act on impulse, should we not sometimes be prepared to make allowances for the less than perfect behaviour or actions of others? In creating the enigmatic figure of Jim, Conrad highlights the fact that there are always areas of another person's experience which are inaccessible to our gaze. And, in A Personal Record, he states explicitly what he hints at in Lord Jim: "The part of the inexplicable should be allowed for in appraising the conduct of men in a world where no explanation is final. No charge of faithlessness ought to be lightly uttered."[262] But, in accepting a particular explanation as final, the court of inquiry into Jim's alleged betrayal of the pilgrims on the *Patna* disregards the inexplicable. The same can be said of the drumhead court which investigates Claggart's death in Billy Budd, Sailor.

Of course, underlying Marlow's diligent commitment to understanding Jim is the notion that final interpretations are possible. However, as I have already noted, the glimpses that Marlow gets of Jim's character are often contradictory, and do not add up to form a coherent picture. This discovery undermines the faith which Marlow had placed in "the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct",[263] and forces him to reassess the validity of his formerly-held moral principles. Paul B. Armstrong is thus correct in saying that "Marlow's hermeneutic crisis in making sense of Jim quickly takes on metaphysical overtones because the failure of his rules for reading his world exposes the contingency of the convictions and conventions on which they are based."[264] Although Marlow also turns to others for help in deciphering Jim's character, their opinions are so diverse that he is little better off than when he started. Because all the readings of Jim

> are finally irreconcilable, they frustrate Marlow's attempt to develop a coherent, comprehensive view of Jim as much as they aid it. Irreducible hermeneutic pluralism thus displaces the monistic assumptions about reality with which the novel began.[265]

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[261] Pierre Lefranc, "Conradian Backgrounds and Contexts for *Lord Jim*", in the Second Norton Edition of Lord Jim, pp. 386-387.

[262] The extract is from Joseph Conrad, A Personal Record, and is quoted on the back cover of Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim, ed. John Batchelor (rpt. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1989).

[263] Lord Jim, p. 35.

[264] Paul B. Armstrong, ["Monism and Pluralism in *Lord Jim*"], in the Second Norton Edition of Lord Jim, p. 472.

[265] Armstrong, p. 471. Armstrong argues (convincingly, I believe) that Lord Jim begins with monistic assumptions about reality because "the opening chapters of third-person narration suggest that Jim has an existence independent of what Marlow and others may later think about him." (Armstrong, p. 470.)

Whereas Melville appears to be reconciled to a world in which meaning cannot be stabilised and morality is subjective and conventional (rather than objective and universally applicable), Conrad's instincts rebel against such indeterminacy, even if his intellect tells him that it is an ineradicable part of the human condition. His response, therefore, is to try to rescue a few fragments from the ashes of disillusionment in the hope that they may be resurrected – phoenix-like – as enduring dreams which give some substance to life. I would suggest that, in Lord Jim, the raw materials for Conrad's dreams are human solidarity, romantic aspiration and art.[266]

A *leitmotif* which keeps recurring throughout the novel is Marlow's assertion that Jim was/is "one of us". When the older man sees Jim for the first time in the company of the captain of the *Patna* and two of the engineers, his admiration for the "upstanding, broad-shouldered youth"[267] who comes "from the right place" and is "one of us"[268] contrasts sharply with his contempt for the vulgar German captain (whose "monstrous bulk"[269] makes Marlow "think of a trained baby elephant walking on hind-legs"[270]) and the other "two no-account chaps".[271] Initially, the significance of the phrase, "one of us", seems to be based on Jim's Britishness, as well as on assumptions of his allegiance to the naval code and to acceptable moral standards; but, by the end of the novel, it has come to "[encompass, also,] the doom of youthful ambitions that must eventually fade before maturity's unavoidable compromises and defeats."[272] (In this latter sense, it approaches the meaning it possesses in Genesis – after Adam has eaten the forbidden fruit, God says to the angels, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us [sic], to know good and evil."[273]) However, even if readers cannot always be certain that their understanding of the phrase corresponds to Marlow's, the narrator's insistence that Jim is "one of us" emphasises the importance which he attaches to notions of human solidarity – of belonging to a group whose members share the same values and lend moral support to one another.

A special form of human solidarity which the novel celebrates is friendship. Although Marlow informs us that he is twenty years Jim's senior (Lord Jim, p. 142), the friendship between them begins on the basis of their belonging to the same occupational group. But it is soon "transformed into a private intimacy which functions as an escape, an alternative, or even as a counterforce, to the public attitudes of their own group, and of society in general."[274] Because

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[266] For Marlow, in Heart of Darkness, work seems to have a similarly soothing effect as a defence against metaphysical obscurity.
[267] Lord Jim, p. 28.
[268] Lord Jim, p. 30.
[269] Lord Jim, p. 28.
[270] Lord Jim, p. 26.
[271] Lord Jim, p. 32.
[272] J.H. Stape, "*Lord Jim*", in The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad, ed. J.H. Stape (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 70.
[273] Genesis 3 : 22.
[274] Watt, p. 336.

Marlow is acutely aware of Jim's vulnerability in a hostile world, he does his best to traverse the gulf of ignorance (or a mutual lack of understanding) which separates one human being from another:

> "It is when we try to grapple with another man's intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering, and misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun. It is as if loneliness were a hard and absolute condition of existence; the envelope of flesh and blood on which our eyes are fixed melts before the outstretched hand, and there remains only the capricious, unconsolable, and elusive spirit that no eye can follow, no hand can grasp. It was the fear of losing him that kept me silent, for it was borne upon me suddenly and with unaccountable force that should I let him slip away into the darkness I would never forgive myself."[275]

The friendship between Marlow and Jim represents a resolute reaching out of kindred spirits (in terms of their idealistic bent) towards each other. Although it is true to say that each spirit continues to elude the "hand [that] grasp[s]", their attempts at meeting *do* succeed in warding off, at least temporarily, the loneliness and the darkness which seem to be "hard and absolute condition[s] of [our] existence".

Jim's idealistic dreams of glorious endeavour represent yet another attempt at fending off the darkness, but, if the attempt is to be considered a success, the dreams need to be translated into concrete action. Jim's failure to live up to his aspirations on the *Patna* does not detract in any way from the impressiveness of his accomplishments in Patusan. Though it must be conceded that there is an egotistical element to his idealism, the benefits which he brings to the people of Patusan are tangible – and deeply appreciated by most of them. The fact that his achievements might be undone by the ravages of time or the ill-considered actions and malevolence of others should not blind us to their value. For a brief period of time, Jim *was* able to bring prosperity and stability to the area, and to show the way forward to a "brave new world".[276] Marlow's (and, I would suggest, Conrad's) contempt for those who wallow in the mire of materialism and sordid self-interest is evident in his dismissive and uncomplimentary attitude towards them. I have already noted the short (and, at times, satirical) shrift which the captain of the *Patna* and the two engineers receive. At least three other scoundrels are treated with similar disdain by

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[275] Lord Jim, p. 109. In commenting on the essential loneliness of all human beings, Marlow echoes a remark made by his namesake in Heart of Darkness: "We live, as we dream – alone...." (Heart of Darkness, p. 30.) *Vide* p. 51 of this research report.

[276] William Shakespeare, The Tempest, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (Rpt. London : The Arden Shakespeare, 2000), 5.1.183. I use the phrase without the irony intended by Shakespeare (and Aldous Huxley).

Marlow, who seems to derive a grim sort of pleasure from recounting how they die. The opportunist, Chester, who is scornful of Jim for taking the disgrace of the *Patna* to heart, and who says that one should always see things "exactly as they are",[277] succumbs during a hurricane that sweeps across the Pacific. The odious Cornelius, who reminds the narrator "of everything that is unsavoury",[278] and is frequently characterised as slinking or creeping away stealthily, is stabbed to death by Tamb' Itam. And, finally, the ruthless Brown, who causes Marlow to reflect on "how much certain forms of evil are akin to madness," is portrayed as giving up "his arrogant ghost"[279] after a series of debilitating asthma attacks.

Quite often in Lord Jim, Conrad reminds us that the selfish realists of the world (Brown, Cornelius and the others) are like Stein's ugly beetles. Marlow tells us, for instance, that the "slow laborious walk [of Cornelius] resembled the creeping of a repulsive beetle".[280] In a similar vein, Gentleman Brown readily admits that he is not endowed with "any wings", and expresses an intense dislike for anyone (he has Jim in mind, though he does not mention him by name) who "talk[s] as if [he] were one of those people that should have wings so as to go about without touching the dirty earth."[281] The vividly-communicated sense of loss which accompanies Jim's passing is a sure sign that Conrad endorses (perhaps with minor reservations) the character of his butterfly-like idealist who tries to rise above the commonplace in order to achieve goals that are altruistic, rather than purely selfish. I would also argue that the general tenor of Marlow's narrative seems to imply that, if the dreams of a romantic figure like Jim are insusceptible of fulfilment in "the destructive element",[282] the "measure of dignity and greatness [in his quest] consists, not in absolute achievement, but in maintaining the discrepancy between infinite reach and finite grasp."[283]

If, as Lord Jim seems to indicate, our knowledge of other human beings and of the world can never be complete, and if our ethical standards are not absolute, but merely conventions, we may come to the conclusion that the universe is inherently meaningless. We have already seen that Conrad entertained this idea in his conception of the material world as having been created by an impersonal knitting-machine that works "without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, [and] without heart".[284] However, because Conrad remains "an incurable moralist" (albeit that he is "infected with the ethical relativism of his age"), he undertakes what Erdinast-Vulcan refers to as a "Sisyphean task" of "reinstat[ing] myth or

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[277] Lord Jim, p. 99. On the same page, Chester refers to the Merchant Service certificate as "[a] bit of ass's skin."
[278] Lord Jim, p. 170.
[279] Lord Jim, p. 204.
[280] Lord Jim, p. 170.
[281] Lord Jim, p. 227.
[282] Lord Jim, p. 129.
[283] M.H. Abrams, "Spiritual Travelers in Western Literature", in The Motif of the Journey in Nineteenth-Century Italian Literature, ed. Bruno Magliocchetti and Anthony Verna (Gainesville : University Press of Florida, 1994), p. 14.

metaphysics by ... [the] exertion ... of [his] authorial will."[285] Although he presents Marlow as asserting (in the form of a rhetorical question) that we cannot achieve "that full utterance which through all our stammerings is of course our only and abiding intention",[286] I concur with Hillis Miller that "the key to [Conrad's] aesthetic theory"[287] is another sentence in Lord Jim: "only a meticulous precision of statement would bring out the true horror behind the appalling face of things."[288] Despite the fact that ordinary language and truth seem to be incompatible, Conrad insists upon the lofty position which the literary artist occupies because of his ability to give us a glimpse of the truth behind surface appearances (a truth which Melville's Ahab also seeks by "strik[ing] through the mask[289]):

> [A]rt itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential – their one illuminating and convincing quality – the very truth of their existence.[290]

The claims which Conrad makes for art are impressively large, and many might look upon them with considerable scepticism. Nevertheless, he tempts art-lovers to agree with what he says, simply because they would like it to be true. (Such a willing suspension of disbelief may be looked upon as yet another form of defence against meaninglessness, and is similar to Berthoud's concept of the "positive illusion".) And so art-lovers are also likely to concur with Conrad that

> the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition – and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives: to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain: to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation – and to the

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[284] Joseph Conrad to Cunninghame Graham, 20 December 1897, quoted in Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 17.
[285] Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 3.
[286] Lord Jim, p. 136.
[287] Miller, Poets of Reality, p. 38.
[288] Lord Jim, p. 23.
[289] Moby-Dick, p. 140.
[290] Joseph Conrad, "The Preface to the The Nigger of the *Narcissus*", in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus", Typhoon* and other stories (rpt. Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1971), p. 11. Paul Armstrong provides us with an astute analysis of this passage: "Conrad not only calls truth 'manifold' as well as 'one.' He also refrains from claiming that the series of essences disclosed by art will eventually synthesize into a single 'Truth.' More subtly but even more tellingly, his lengthy list of plurals at the beginning of the second sentence ('forms,' 'colours,' 'shadows,' and so on) insistently

> subtle but invincible, conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts: to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity – the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.[291]

Although, in this passage, Conrad acknowledges the incomprehensible dimensions of personality ("the sense of mystery surrounding our lives"), he strongly emphasises the importance of human solidarity ("the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation"). In Lord Jim, he articulates these concerns once again by portraying Marlow as struggling to perceive the protagonist's character through the fog, while yet striving to give the young man due credit for being "one of us"; for heroically immersing himself in the destructive element; for contending with illusion and fear; and, finally, for remaining hopeful of realising the most elusive of dreams.

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asserts the world's inherent multiplicity and thereby implicitly undercuts the plea for oneness with which the sentence ends (itself a listing of several elements)." (Armstrong, pp. 472-473.)

[291] "The Preface to The Nigger of the *Narcissus*", pp. 11-12.