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MORE EFFECTIVE THAN WORDS: THE ROLE OF
KINESICS,
PARALANGUAGE AND PROXEMICS IN *BILLY BUDD*

It is generally agreed that in Melville's short novel, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, the sailor is a naive young man possessed entirely by a natural goodness and Claggert, a character of uncertain background, is a man almost entirely possessed by a natural depravity. His occasional attitude of a man of sorrows tempers somewhat (but only somewhat) his role of evil incarnate. But Captain Vere's role in this allegorical structure is not so clear. A common interpretation is that Vere's decision that Billy must hang for the death of Claggert is a difficult one that causes him to suffer extremely, that against a background of war and mutinies Vere has no choice.¹ There is evidence in the text to support this position, which, however, Melville sometimes undercuts and even contradicts by means of a kind of communication that has nothing to do with verbal language. I refer to such phenomena as kinesics, paralanguage, and proxemics,² which, although

1 References here are to the Hayford and Seals text of 1962 as printed in *The American Tradition in Literature*, 4th edition, edited by Bradley, Beatty, Long, and Perkins (New York, 1974).

2 "Kinesics" refers to facial expressions and gestures; "paralanguage" refers to such things as tone of voice; and "proxemics" describes a person's bodily use of space. The popular term "body language" is a composite of the latter two terms.

linguists would not formally identify and examine for another fifty years, Melville used to tell a large and significant part of his story. A close examination of the evidence provided by these features brings all of the characters into sharper focus and suggests that Captain Vere is a highly complex individual (more complex than the military man/father figure dichotomy would suggest) who might even have been self-serving in his determination to see that the angel must hang.

Few if any writers, of course, fail to record some instances of these physical language features,³ but Melville's practice reveals an interesting preoccupation with them. Furthermore, the many instances of his reporting accurately and straightforwardly how a character said what he said and how he looked when he said it carries a curious authority when one notes the number of equivocations and obliquely expressed opinions on the part of the author of this «narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact.»⁴ But there are times when ambiguities will not do, and it is then that Melville chooses to drop his mask of ignorance and with accurate details make clear to the reader the true spirits animating his characters. I will show further that the two most important pieces of action — Billy's attack on Claggert and his subsequent hanging — derive their highly dramatic quality from a curious imbalance between the physical and verbal language features.

In real life all of the physical features of kinesics, paralanguage, and proxemics are interrelated and cannot, furthermore, be entirely separated out from the verbal language which sometimes, but not always, accompanies them. For my purposes here, however, I will treat, first, the two closely related features of kinesics and paralanguage, and then I will

3 It is convenient to use the term "physical" as opposed to "verbal" but I should point out that, technically, paralanguage is expressed by voice features.

4 For example: When Lieutenant Ratcliffe pounces on Billy and contents himself with this, his first, spontaneous choice for impressment, Melville doesn't know whether it was because Ratcliffe took pity on the Merchantman's captain or whether it was because Billy was so obviously superior (492). The text is filled with such dodges as "However it was;" "the truth whereof I do not vouch;" "I cannot recall;" and "not unlikely."

deal with proxemics and also with Melville's use of space on the printed page. Finally I hope to show that that part of the «Inside Narrative» which is told by means of a detailed report of these physical features is crucial, that were they ignored, we would have a highly romantic, even sentimental tragic tale rather than the masterpiece we do have.

There is always a danger in using "machinery," such as these physical language features, of imposing a system on the novel and thereby distorting the author's intention in an attempt to make the material "fit." But it is clear in many places that Melville was consciously exploiting these particular features and perhaps, like Joyce's author-god, sits paring his fingernails waiting for the critics to catch up with him.

Nevertheless, the exploitation is not always an easy one, even for an omniscient narrator such as Melville often chooses to be — for example, describing Claggert's interview with Captain Vere, Melville concedes that the way the Master at Arms looked at the Captain is «difficult to render.» "His successful essay, a look such as Joseph's jealous brother might have worn when showing Jacob the blood-dyed coat, testifies to his genius. Quite commonly, the physical language features are outside of an individual's control. For example, though both Claggert and Billy try to tell a convincing story, it is the *manner* of speaking and not the *matter* which suggests to Vere that Claggert is guilty and which persuades both Vere and the drumhead court that Billy is innocent. One can control the substance of speech and can even manipulate the paralinguistic and kinesic features (as Claggert indeed does) but an essential part of one's message is carried by physical language features outside of our control.⁵

However, that part of the physical language features which we can control plays a more significant role in this story. For example, the drumhead court is deliberately set up by Vere so as to permit him to direct it in much the same way as a choir master directs a musical piece.

⁵ See, for example, the work of George L. Traner on paralanguage and of Raymond Birdwhistle on kinesics.

At a critical point in the court's interrogation of Billy, the officer of the Marines asks Billy why Claggert should have lied. Billy, not himself knowing the answer, soon gives up and looks to Vere for help. But instead, Vere, rising now as if to take charge again, dismisses the Marine's question as being immaterial. It is certainly inimical to Vere's purposes, and with frequent references to and gestures toward "the prone one" who "will not rise," Vere claims that the only business before the court is the prisoner's deed. The Marine is thus discouraged from pressing his questioning and the First Lieutenant, "now overrulingly instructed by a glance from Captain Vere, a glance more effective than words, resumed that primacy" he had assumed at the outset in the court (539). At a second glance from Vere, the Lieutenant asks Billy if he has anything more to say, and, also at a glance from Vere, Billy says no. Aware as he has proved himself of the power of the "glance more effective than words," not surprisingly Vere can receive as well as send silent messages when his role switches from "witness, little more" to coadjutor (540). "Pausing from time to time to study the effect of his rhetoric on the three judges and perceiving something in (their) aspect" that indicates they are "less convinced than agitated" by his argument, he abruptly changes his tone (541). On the surface or verbal level, the reader is persuaded that Vere is truly suffering from a "clash of Military duty with moral scruple.... vitalized by compassion (540)," that his responsibility is "that however pitilessly (the) law may operate in any instance, (he) nevertheless adhere to it and administer it (541)." But underneath, on the physical language level, the current is running counter-wise. Our author claims for Vere a disinclination to monopolize "to himself the perils of moral responsibility;" that "he was glad to turn the matter over to a summary court (536)." Yet we have seen that his way of supervising this court is to actually control and direct it by, among other things, occupying the weather side, gesturing here, casting a glance there; and we do indeed see "whither, prompted by duty and the law" he has steadfastly driven (543): that "the angel must hang (534)."

But the most significant function of the non-verbal "message" is to convey information not available from any other source, and the information thus conveyed is of singular importance to the full experience of the

novel. Thus the reader (but not *Billy Budd*) is impressed with the extent of Claggert's hatred for the Handsome Sailor, Claggert's dual nature as both depraved yet sorrowing, the strength of Vere's feelings in the matter of the trial and conviction of *Billy*, and finally the degree to which *Billy* has been affected by the calamitous events. But not, significantly, through anything the characters themselves say, nor anything that the author (either omniscient nor benighted) tells us. But rather through the largely uncontrollable, hence revealing, physical features of language.

The "soup incident" is a cameo example of the power of the physical features of language. As soon as Claggert notices that it was *Billy* who had spilled the soup, "his countenance changed (513)." The sexual imagery is particularly strong here as Claggert, "staying in a low musical voice peculiar to him at times," remarks that "Handsome is as handsome does." Although these words are taken by *Billy* and his comrades "as meant for humor," they are, as Melville cautions, equivocal. The involuntary grimace that accompanies them is not. And this bitter smile gives way to the even more distorting expression which replaces it, "usurping the face from the heart (513)."

Another unguarded portrait of Claggert reveals a weaker but equally genuine side to his nature which is important because it gives him a tragic element in his uncontrollable hatred for *Billy* that puts him in a class with Iago and Milton's Satan. In language redolent of Christ, he is said to be responsive to the daily beauty in *Billy*'s life which makes him ugly. "When Claggert's unobserved glance happened to light on belted *Billy*... that glance would follow the cheerful Sea Hyperion with a settled meditative and melancholy expression... Then would Claggert look like a man of sorrows." This look had in it "a touch of soft yearning as if Claggert could even have loved *Billy* but for fate and ban (524)." But this look was repented of and replaced by another "inchng and shriveling the visage into the momentary semblance of wrinkled walnut (524)."

If Claggert's depraved nature is relieved, if only occasionally, by a soft yearning, *Billy*'s virtuous nature is unalloyed. However, his seeming

imperviousness to the lessons of experience is penetrated at least once. And just as Claggert's tender side, which recognizes love in the world, removes him from a class of larger-than-life mere caricatures, so Billy's recognition of the evil in the world removes him from a class of unthinking upright barbarians incapable of suffering because incapable of understanding. Billy is lying, entirely ignominiously on the upper gun deck.

In most tentative language Melville hints that Billy has suffered, if only briefly, and that this suffering has left its mark upon his face:

Such was the deck where now lay the Handsome sailor.
Through the rose-tan of his complexion
no pallor could have shown. It would have
taken days of sequestration from the
winds and the sun to have brought
about the effacement of that. But the
skeleton in the cheekbone
at the point of its angle was just
beginning delicately to be defined under
the warm-tinted skin. In fervid hearts
self-contained, some brief experiences devour
our human tissue as secret fire in a
ship's hold consumes cotton in the bale.

(547)

But Melville is quick to add that the agony is over and Billy's former adolescent expression regresses as it takes on something akin to the look of a slumbering child in the cradle (547). "The faint evidence of the skeleton in the cheekbone is all we have but it is enough to reassure us that Billy Budd has looked squarely at the diabolical incarnate and recognized it, a reassurance which is almost undercut when we see that over the "gyved one's" face "a serene happy light born of some wandering reminiscence or dream would diffuse itself (548)."

Billy Budd, as well as Claggert, then, has been given another dimen-

sion through the account of the physical features which raises his stature if only slightly. The two sides to Captain Vere's nature — authoritarian and loving father — are underscored by a description of Captain Vere's face on two critical occasions: Immediately after Billy Budd has struck and killed Claggert, "the father in him... was replaced by the military disciplinarian (533)." He has, during this transition, covered his face with his hands and when he uncovered it, it was as though the moon would emerge from an eclipse looking radically different (33). Vere is not, therefore, merely a complex character having both fatherly and authoritarian impulses, but rather a man who can be *either* humanitarian *or* authoritarian, and there is no way for him to temper the one with the other. The suffering side is revealed after his interview with Billy which we are later told (547) was a healing experience for the sailor, and was largely responsible for the dissipation of his agony: The Senior Lieutenant was impressed with Vere's face as "expressive of the agony of the strong (545)." That Vere suffers more than Billy does is a less impressive testimonial to his sensitivity when we see subsequently that Billy, in his essential innocence and peace, suffers very little (548-549). The last note on Vere is not entirely clear⁶ as he dies saying "Billy Budd. Billy Budd," in accents having nothing to do with remorse. What prompted him, we are not told; but at the very least this indicates the vitality of Billy's posthumous influence even on his executioner.

In two of the most dramatic scenes of the novel these two aspects of language — the physical and the verbal — are in an imbalance. In the first scene, that of Claggert's confrontation with Billy, the first is dominant over the second as the faculty for verbal language suffers a paralysis preventing speech at the same time that the physical faculty becomes entirely instinctual and effectively delivers the fatal blow to Claggert's forehead. In the second — the moment of Billy's hanging — each of the two features participates in a suprahuman aspect of the natural goodness that is Billy's when he achieves the height of his verbal powers in his benediction upon his

⁶ This is the only evidence derived from the physical language features which is slightly ambiguous. The rest is straightforward.

executioner, and immediately afterwards his body suffers an unnatural failure to move.

In the midst of his character sketch of Claggert, Melville points out the "irritating juxtaposition of dissimilar personalities... which is possible aboard a great warship fully manned at sea (514)." Later on he comments, "Of all the sections of a ship's company the forecastlemen, veterans for the most part and bigoted in their sea prejudices, are the most zealous in resenting territorial encroachments... (521)." The reason, of course, is that space is at a premium and Melville exploits the use of this precious commodity with the same effect as he does the physical language features.⁷ There is the same kind of evidence that this is a conscious exploitation: The sailors are proprietary about the available space.⁸

As this passage implies, the scarcity of space aboard ship leads to a system of neighborhoods among the sailors and, in the case of the Captain, ownership of certain spaces. When Claggert ascends "from his cavernous sphere" to accuse Billy of plotting a mutiny, Vere is in his accustomed place on the weather side of the quarter deck, and the spot where Claggert stood was the place allotted to men of lesser grades. (527).

Ownership of space, of course, eventually leads to manipulation of space as a means of exerting power. One telling incident: Billy has been arraigned and Captain Vere is preparing for his role of "sole witness in the case, and as such temporarily sinking his rank though singularly maintaining it in a matter apparently trivial, namely, that he testified from the ship's weather side with that object having caused the court to sit on the

7 Melville evidences unusual sensitivity to space and how it is used. There are, therefore, even more examples of proxemics than of physical language features. But, having already demonstrated Melville's manipulation of kinesic and paralanguage features, I will content myself here with only the most dramatic events involving proxemics.

8 For example, when Billy is approached by one of Claggert's men to join "the impressed ones (520)," he reports to a forecastleman, "I found an afterguardsman in our part of the ship here, and I bit him be off where he belongs (521)."

lee side (537)." This is, of course, only apparently trivial and such a position, both actually and symbolically permits Vere to maintain control over his court.

Indeed, the weather side of the ship is repeatedly designated as Vere's side.⁹ Not only does this side assure him of a dominant position over his men, it also represents that part of the ship from which the weather comes and thus Vere's influence over his crew is symbolized.

For Vere, space is power. For Billy, the space he occupies testifies to his popularity with his fellows. He is invariably in the center of a company of his shipmates (491). Billy's unfitness for the super-sophisticated, potentially evil life is symbolized by his transfer from the *Rights of Man* to the *Bellipotent*, from a homeward bound English Merchantman to an outward bound Warship (492). Billy is a "rustic beauty transplanted from the provinces and brought into competition with the highborn dames of the court (496)." Here, on the *Bellipotent*, he is no longer a cynosure. "He was young (496)." Too young. It is Billy's inexperience as well as his virtue that brings about his ultimate annihilation. The incident with Red Whiskers makes this clear. The sailors on the *Rights* took to Billy

Like hornets to the treacle; all but the buffer of the gang,
the big shaggy chap with the fire-red whiskers. He indeed,
out of envy, perhaps, of the newcomer, and thinking such a
"sweet and pleasant fellow," as he mockingly designated him to
the others, could hardly have the spirit of a gamecock, must needs
bestir himself in trying to get an ugly row with him.

Billy forebore with him and reasoned with him in a pleasant
way — he is something like myself, Lieutenant, to who aught
like a quarrel is hateful — but nothing served. So, in the
second dogwatch one day, the Red Whiskers in presence of the
others, under pretence of showing Billy just whence a sirloin

⁹ "Close-reefing topsails in a gale, there he was, astride the weather yardarm-end (491)."

steak was cut — for the fellow had once been a butcher — insultingly gave him a dig under the ribs. Quick as lightening Billy let fly his arm. I dare say he never meant to do quite as much as he did, but anyhow he gave the burly fool a terrible drubbing. It took about half a minute, I should think. And, lord bless you, the lubber was astonished at the celerity. And will you believe it, Lieutenant, the Red Whiskers now really loves Billy — loves him, or is the biggest hypocrite that ever I heard of.

(493-494).

This passage with its obvious parallels — Billy's popularity, Red Whiskers' envy, the mocking epithet, the sexual overtones and controversy over food, and Billy's impulsive strike — illuminates the latter "soup incident." Strong evidence that Billy could handle himself very well when not out of his depth is provided by the discrepancies between the two similar events. First, notice that because the Red Whiskers is not Billy's superior, Billy is able to reason with him first. More important, of course, because he is not so frustrated, Billy merely gives the shaggy chap a drubbing. But Claggert on the *Bellipotent* was too much for him.

Finally, space for Billy is sometimes challenging, sometimes *gemütlich*,¹⁰ but always generous and limitless. What discomfort he must have felt when he "found himself in the cabin, closeted there, as it were, with the Captain and Claggert (531)." Then the door is shut and Claggert deliberately advances even closer. Such an experience is not merely unpleasant. To be closer than is comfortable, especially to an accuser, can render one ineffectual or even powerless.¹¹

10 "When not actually engaged on the yard's end yet higher aloft, the topmen... constituted an aerial club lounging at ease... spinning yarns like the lazy gods and frequently amused with what was going on in the busy world of the decks below (510)"

11 This closeting participates in a curious sail-to cabin movement. Further, there is an interesting space over-pattern, as it were, which reaches a climax in the hanging of Billy Budd. That is, we first associate Billy with the expansive space in the rigging, then we see his

For Billy to have gone to the Captain's cabin is to have descended from the generous space of the foretop to a closet. For Claggert, however, it is, like the conspirator Guy Fawkes, to have risen from "hid chambers (519); " to "ascend from his cavernous sphere (526)." But space is not less precious to Claggert than to Vere or Billy Budd. For when Billy accidentally spills his soup, he, as it were, fouls Claggert's space: "the greasy liquid streamed just across his path (513)." Claggert is about to step over it when he "noticed whence came that greasy fluid streaming before his feet (518)." The sexual redolence is overpowering, but the important thing is that it is conveyed in terms of space.

We move now to a different kind of space, that is the space on the printed page. But once again, as with the physical language features and the use of actual space, we find Melville self-consciously manipulating the space on the page. He admits, for example, that to talk of Wellington and Nelson is to enter a bypath (501), to report Claggert's burial in chronological order would have been "to clog the sequel with lateral matters (546)," a sequel which Melville claims itself spoils the form that would be possible were this story not more fact than fiction (554). But, as I will argue shortly, Melville is here being only somewhat disingenuous, and the novel finally takes a necessary kind of *open* form precisely because of this sequel.

Another use of space in the novel involves the juxtaposition of chapters dealing with Admiral Nelson and the famous mutinies, which do more than set the precarious background of the novel and provide an excuse for Vere's hasty and heavy-handed trial of Billy Budd. Far from being the unnecessary digressions they are sometime labeled, they beg the comparison of the Captain of the *Bellipotent* and the Captain of the *Victory*. Nelson took risks which Vere would never take.¹² His vanity was respon-

closeting first with Vere and Claggert and finally with Vere. This unwitnessed scene is a kind of nadir from which Billy rises to lie in irons but on the upper gun deck and finally, of course, to his ascension taking with him "the full rose of the dawn (551)."

12 "The ornate publication of his person in battle savoured of foolhardiness and vanity (502)."

sible not only for Nelson's death but for the unnecessary deaths — his critics would have it — in the shipwreck which followed the battle. But for all this, Nelson was a hero largely because he won battles. We see Vere in two confrontations in which, by comparison with Nelson, he comes off poorly indeed. The first, immediately prior to his interview with Claggert, involved a frigate which "perceiving through the glass that the weight of the men and metal would be heavily against her... signally succeeded in effecting her escape... (526)." And the second, an ignominious one, occurs on the return passage (after the hanging of Billy Budd) when Captain Vere was hit by a musket ball fired from a porthole, was "carried below to the same cockpit where some of his men already lay," was put ashore and after lingering a few days finally died (555). When we see that the juxtaposed chapters are meant to illuminate each other, we are better able to appreciate exactly what it means that Vere, "unhappily... was cut off too early for the Nile and Trafalgar, the spirit that spite its philosophic austerity may yet have indulged in the most secret of all passions, ambition, never attained to the fullness of fame (555)." This remark, oblique as it is, provides a self-serving basis for Vere's conduct of the Budd case and damages the myth-of Vere as a man who denies his humanitarian side to secure, in the name of Blind Justice, the conviction of Billy Budd solely to maintain order in those precarious times of wars and mutinies.

Two final passages, significantly juxtaposed, are, I think the most, telling and ultimately put Vere's conduct in clearer focus. They occur in the confrontation scene right after Claggert has made his "paralyzing lurch of the torpedo fish" and is incapable of doing anything other than "dumb gesturing and gurgling." The narrator tells us that Billy "gave an expression to the face like that of a condemned vestal priestess in the moment of being buried alive, and in the first struggle against suffocation (532)." Even allowing for this narrator's known penchant for hyperbole, Captain Vere's account, which follows immediately, of this expression would almost seem to be of another situation entirely: "Vividly Billy's aspect recalled to him that of a bright young schoolmate of his whom he had once seen struck by much the same starting impotence in the act of eagerly rising in the class to be foremost in response to a testing question put

to it by the master (532)." The contrast is striking and needs no explication. In addition to revealing the pedantic turn of Vere's mind, this vivid analogy also reveals the crucial fact that Vere does not truly understand Billy nor his suffering; and Captain Vere now comes into focus as not only a basically good man with an overdeveloped sense of his duty to the King at the expense of his duty to God, but, more, as a man who cannot comprehend the degree or kind of suffering a nature such as Billy's can undergo. No wonder if one lacking fine sensitivity should also lack fine judgment. And, although "*the might have been* is but boggy ground to build on (502),"¹³ and we cannot indeed know how the crew would have reacted had Billy's sentence been lightened or commuted, we do know how they did react to the sentencing and the hanging: With a confused murmur which had to be suppressed by an order to about ship and a second disquieting murmur also suppressed by a command from the Captain. And now we have evidence to the extent to which Vere is benighted in addition to the suggestion from the narrator that Vere, however he behaved in his public life, may have entertained privately that "excessive love of glory... (502)" the first virtue in a military man, which may in turn have led him to indulge "in the most secret of all passions, ambition (555)." Were they strong enough to lead Vere to persuade himself that he was fearful of a mutiny unless the angel should hang when in reality he was anxious to advance himself, enhance his reputation as a no nonesense, effective captain worthy of a larger command? One who could be trusted to run a tight ship and one who was not afraid of "the perils of moral responsibility?"

Finally in an artful dodge, Melville announces that this narration which properly ends with Billy Budd's death will nevertheless have a concluding sequel which will render it less finished than an architectural finial because the story is largely true. In actuality, the story could not have ended here because a significant part of the story is that the salutary influence of Billy Budd continues after his death. First as a name on the

13 This point has been made by Christopher W. Sten in "Vere's Use of Forms: Means and Ends in *Billy Budd*" in *American Literature*, vol (March 1975), 42

lips of the dying Captain Vere, second in a depressingly false account of the affair in an authorized weekly publication¹⁴ and third, in the minds and hearts of Billy's fellow blue-jackets, one of whom, who like Billy, could sing and compose his own songs, wrote a ballade (which also makes no mention of Vere) commemorating the hanging of the Handsome sailor. This final emphasis on Billy and the extension of his influence beyond what most of us can hope to attain is made more effective precisely because Melville insists he has written beyond the proper end of the story.

Finally, it would seem that in this story we not only have a kind of tension working between verbal language and physical language, but we also have an association of physical language with the primitive and, by implication, verbal language with the civilized. That is, physical language is direct, clear and effective — the most outstanding case being Billy's fatal and primitive way of dealing with Claggert. Verbal language, on the other hand, is often indirect, ambiguous and ultimately fails, as in the same case the saintly hero, the upright barbarian, is rendered mute by the glib recital of his accuser and the Handsome Sailor is tried by a naval law that will not permit such primitive considerations as "the essential right and wrong involved in the matter (535)." For his part, Melville, too, seems not so much concerned with the essential right or wrong: He makes out a very good case for Captain Vere at the same time he strongly suggests he is wrong; and baby, even, somewhat qualify his saintliness. Rather, Melville seems very concerned with what is: In the conflict between natural goodness and natural depravity, society, ultimately "strives against scruples (540)," and in the name of the Law manipulates that Law against a goodness which is capable not of defending itself but only of destroying its adversary. Melville set it out at the beginning of his story:

... it is observable that where certain virtues pristine and unadulterate peculiarly characterize anybody in the external uniform of civili-

14 The fact that this account by the Establishment makes no mention of Captain Vere suggests the degree of fame which he attained. He must, after all, be content with Marvell's lines on one of his ancestors.

zation, they will upon scrutiny be seen not to be derived from custom or convention, but rather to be out of keeping with these, as if indeed exceptionally transmitted from a period prior to Cain's city and citified man. The character marked by such qualities has to an invitiated taste an untamperedwith 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.

(598)