

Billy Budd, Sailor

H.Melville

September 13-14, 2013

The prose of Melville tends towards exuberance. A luxuriant growth that at times is hard to penetrate without a machete. There is a similar tendency with the other American - Hawthorne, and thus it is natural to speculate that this is due to some insecurity among barbarian Americans to prove their sophistication.

Billy Budd does not come to the point right away, but there is a lengthy preamble with all kinds of digressions. Relevant or not may be beside the point. The plot of the story is simple enough, it is the moral dilemma that provides its edge.

Billy Budd is a young man of twenty-one, a good-looking foundling with an open temperament, verging on the naive. A youngster who inspires the love of everyone involved. A disinterested love which in some cases verges on the carnal. In fact one of the unsaid mysteries of the story concerns who among the characters are homosexually attracted to him, consciously or unconsciously. One of them, the master-of-arms, by name of Claggart, is smitten by envy for the Handsome Sailor, and decides to frame him. One night Budd is woken up by a sailor who offers him two guineas. Budd rejects the intended proposal, but has scruples reporting the incident to the authorities of the ship, for fear of appearing a stooge. Later on Claggart approaches the Captain Vere with tidings of a smoldering mutiny. The captain wants to hear details and is informed about Budd. He is incredulous and wants them both at his office where Claggart is to repeat his accusations face to face with Budd, who is summoned there, hopeful of getting a rumored promotion. When the two men are confronted, Claggart repeats his accusations, and Budd is invited to respond to them. But Budd suffers one defect, no one is perfect, namely a tendency to stuttering at crucial ventures. So also now. He just cannot produce a word in his defense. The captain, sympathetic to his plight, tells him to take his time, but the well-meaning solicitations of his master only makes things worse. Out of frustration he can only resort to one thing, namely violence. He hits his adversary so hard that he falls to the floor dead. The captain is stricken, calls for the surgeon to confirm his suspicion, and thereby acting in such a distraught manner, that the surgeon suspects him of being unhinged. Maybe he is. He calls forth a drum-court on short notice, presents what has happened and has his account confirmed by Budd. Normally, such a case should be taken to the admiral, and not be decided on such a spur of the moment, but there seems to be some haste. A subordinate attacking a superior is punishable by death, and even worse when the attack results in death itself. The captain is quite aware of the extenuating circumstances, and would like nothing more than to acquit the man, but finds that there are no legal grounds for such an action, which would set a very dangerous precedent. Why he would not just postpone the matter, keeping the sailor in custody, for which there would be plenty of legal justification, nay even obligation, remains a mystery in the tale. (Perhaps because it is taken from real life, and real life, unlike fiction, is its own explanation and has no need for the plausible).

The sentence is announced and to be carried out in the early morning. The captain

takes upon himself to inform the sailor personally, maybe to make him understand the complexities of the case and the inescapable need to let principles overrule any other considerations. The sailor takes it all fatalistically, and when the noose is placed around his neck in the ensuing dawn, expresses a 'God Bless Capain Vere' into which the entire crowd joins in. Then there is complete silence. The body is then slid into the sea, and where it sank, seabirds hoover.

The short story ends with some epilogues, one depicting the early subsequent death of Vere and the fact that he never came over his regrets. The other a purported newspaper clipping, presenting Claggart as the hero and Billy Budd the villain. The verdict of posterity is not always just and correct, there is in fact little hope of therein finding a redress.

September 18, 2013 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se