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Murmur, Mutter, Matter: *Verbal Veerings and the Practice of Democracy in Billy Budd, Sailor*

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This essay reads *Billy Budd, Sailor* as an exploration of democracy itself understood as a material, pragmatic, and regulated practice. Language is adrift in *Billy Budd*, and the “vagrancy” of the novella’s “verbal reverberations” (Royle) are not mere testimony to Melville’s poetic talent. The murmur and rumor that disseminate across the *Bellipotent* are so many signs that run up against the ship’s institutional and legal structure and call into question the groundwork of an American state. Shifting the locus of *Billy Budd*’s politics from plot and character to the materiality of language, this essay shows how the practice of grappling with matter, be it the materiality of bodies, letters, or the phenomenality of politics, is the site of Melville’s aesthetic practice of democracy. In this pragmatic engagement with forms, Melville challenges the opposition between democratic life and democratic government through a self-reflexive evolutive handling of forms by those who constitute themselves as a *demos*. Melville’s democracy, in that sense, not unlike Melville’s text, is not fugitive but critical, grounded in its capacity to consistently transform itself.

The silence at the moment of execution and for a moment or two continuing thereafter, a silence but emphasized by the regular wash of the sea against the hull or the flutter of a sail caused by the helmsman’s eyes being tempted astray, this emphasized silence was gradually disturbed by a sound not easily to be verbally rendered. Whoever has heard the freshet-wave of a torrent suddenly swelled by pouring showers in tropical mountains, showers not shared by the plain; whoever has heard the first muffled murmur of its sloping advance through precipitous woods, may form some conception of the sound now heard. (*Billy Budd* 66)

The “muffled murmur” at the beginning of chapter 27 of Melville’s *Billy Budd*, after Budd’s hanging, has received due critical attention (Ruttenburg, Jonik). The transfer, and translation, of Billy’s stutter into a postmortem, spectral, “murmurous indistinctness” (66) serves as a manner

of postscript that envelops readers in the materiality of the text, and subjects them to the bewilderment of a sonorous yet unintelligible verbal substance in lieu of an articulate conclusion. At that time in the course of the novella, the “mortal sentence” (67) has been passed and performed; its finality, however, and the silence of death that has followed, is challenged by a sound that Melville’s text reproduces, no matter how it denies doing so, through its alliterative consonantal patterns—s, m, l. No need to be one of the happy few who, like Melville, knew of the tropical freshet-waves in order to experience such sonic disturbance. It is reenacted verbally for us, cut short by an abrupt, unexpected “strategic command” (67), only to be taken up as a “second strange human murmur” (67), merging with the inarticulate sound of sea-fowls, and “dissolved” (68) yet again—this time, by an early drum-beat, the well-timed untimeliness of which was authorized by “the necessity of unusual action” (68). Such a murmuring interval, twice closed by “martial discipline” (68), is what this essay is about—a “disturb[ance],” a moment of political trouble that I propose to read as a contest between the formal requirements of law, embodied by Captain Vere, the fickleness of the multitude, and the practical injunction of constituting the *demos* in troubled circumstances. Put differently, the murmur rising after the stutterer’s death makes palpable the dispute between form and matter, form and mutter, and this dispute, I argue, encodes Melville’s own struggle with the “democratic possibilities”¹ of his time and his forays into what we might call democratic pragmatism.

“With mankind [. . .], forms, measured forms, are everything,” Vere memorably proclaims after the drumbeat has “dissolved the multitude.” “And this,” the narrative voice explains, “he once applied to the disruption of forms going on across the Channel and the consequences thereof” (68). In the context of the novella, and its recurrent gesture towards the trauma of the Nore,² the murmuring interval of seemingly unchanneled energy and inarticulate commotion onboard the *Bellipotent* displaces—yet all but performs—the word not to be named: mutiny (Ruttenburg 92). But there’s more. Gesturing as well to France, the country of a democratic, if formidable, revolution, I propose that the strings of nasals in this “muffled murmur” (66) also acoustically enact yet another absent name in Melville’s novella: that of the *demos*, the power of the *demos*—or the radical subject of modern democracy.³

As Jennifer Greiman has noted, “The study of democracy in Melville’s writing [. . .] all but originates with the study of Melville himself” (“Democracy and Melville’s Aesthetics” 38). Nonetheless, the only consensus would seem to be that the writer maintained a highly ambivalent posture towards democracy. Melville has been called an “extreme, in fact a fanatical democrat” (C.L.R. James, 1953, 75); a disillusioned one, appalled by the tragedy of slavery

(M. Rogin, 1979); and a democrat against the grain of his own writing for Wai Chee Dimock (1989), for whom Melville's defense of democracy must be counterbalanced by the authorial sovereignty of his narrators. More recently, Greiman herself has read Melville with Tocqueville and argued that "his thinking on democracy approximates—and rivals—that of political philosophy" *through the means of language*, figures, plot, and analogies ("Democracy and Melville's Aesthetics" 39). Democracy, she insists—and rightly so—"signals something more in Melville's writing than the particular terms and concepts that usually define it—self-rule, popular sovereignty, individualism" (37–38). Democracy is a structure and a form, and a mutable one at that.⁴ Taking Greiman's proposition seriously—that democracy's mutability, what she calls elsewhere its "groundlessness" (2016 *passim*), is "the power that fuels Melville's aesthetic practice" ("Melville and Aesthetics" 38)—I want to further unpack, and hopefully complicate, the articulation between Melville's uneasy interest in the demos and his search for an aesthetic democratic *practice*, by which I mean a critical writerly practice grounded in the matter of democracy. In *Billy Budd*, I suggest, Melville is not so much seeking modes of aesthetic *representation* of the demos—forms or figures to embody, constitute, and possibly contain, its power; *Billy Budd*, rather, is a text *in search of* the demos, a demos that is not to be found in Vere's "measured forms" (68) but in Melville's stuttering textual practice itself.

"Vere is a veerer," Nicholas Royle writes in *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (166). "The tacit homophonic madness of this word," Vere / veer, would seem to turn the representative of form and law in Melville's novella into the voice of a paradox—that of a veering truth—and the proponent, however unwittingly, of a radical political proposition—that of a groundless political regime, to wit, a democracy. We are not at a loss of resources for understanding this groundlessness: "If the divine shepherd no longer rules the world," writes Jacques Rancière, "then only one additional qualification can exist. And this is the qualification of those that are no more qualified for ruling than they are for being ruled" (*Dissensus* 52). By this measure, *potentia*—or "a source of power drawn from government's actual ability to control the disposition of things" (Loughlin 407)—can only be derived from qualification. But it is precisely this qualification that Billy's very presence—both aesthetic and political—on the *Bellipotent* calls into question. Billy thus poses the question: With no *arkhè* that entitles Vere, nor Billy, nor the muttering multitude for that matter, to exercise power, who is there to rule the *Bellipotent*?

Melville's question is also ours. How can "we" found a regime on the very paradox that, to quote Rancière, "the very ground for the power of ruling is

that there is no ground at all" (50)? The gusty winds of democratic revolutions and counter-revolutions that blow on Melville's novella, the twists and turns of narration, plot, down to the level of syntax and even word, have raised the troubling question, then as now, of the overflow of the social over and against the institutional. *Billy Budd's* answer, this essay proposes, looks in a different direction, forcing us to reconsider the terms in which it has been posed. That is, Melville does not so much "re-stage the anarchic foundation of the political" (Rancière 54) as he builds it paradoxically out of a self-reflexive poetic and political confrontation with matter, a constant literal and literary experimentation with material and historical contingencies. This ceaseless experimentation, I contend, is the place where democracy, however "ruthless,"⁵ avers its ever veering, and yet regulated, unfolding.

"But boggy ground to build on": The Temptation of a Groundless Democracy?

But the *might-have-been* is but boggy ground to build on.

(*Billy Budd* 14)

In the fourth chapter of *Billy Budd*, when the narration is at its most digressive, the terra firma of plot seems to recede for a while, as the text indulges in the "literary sin" of "divergence" (13), an interlude that commends the vain beauty of adornments over the matter-of-factness of military purpose. Praising heroic Nelson over Wellington and the "Benthamites of War" (14), the narration suspends its purposefulness, and chooses poetic veerings over strategic straightness. The choice, however, may be only in appearance. The ground *Billy Budd* is built on is indeed as unstable as can be. Usually qualified, or rather disqualified, by the indefinite adjective "some," the "ground" is said to be "apparent," "imaginative," or "boggy" (14).⁶ As one of Melville's late battle-pieces, *Billy Budd* bares the "slimed foundations" of a world gone adrift in the times of revolutions, mutinies, and other political disturbances.⁷ While the earlier book, *Battle-Pieces*, was published just after the war, in 1866, the latter was written sometime in the 1880s.⁸ Both emerged from the stormy waters of military conflict and social and political disruptions—the Civil War, and the Revolutionary Wars of the end of the 18th century. Both may be read as Melville's attempt to grasp the grounding of political rule when all grounds have become slippery;⁹ both, finally, are experimentations with forms (shall we say the "measured forms" of poetry and the romance?) at the moment when "an upheaval [is] affecting the basis of things" ("Supplement," *Battle-Pieces*, 181).¹⁰

Caught in the whirl, the democratic revolutionary “commotion” that affected the world in 1797, *Billy Budd, Sailor* is left hanging, in more than one sense. It dwells in a space between the heroic ages, all but extinct at the time of the story, and modernity, “in the time before steamships” when “everything [used to be] worked by muscle alone” (3), by the physical strength of men.¹¹ Writing a century or so after the facts, in the decade of the Haymarket riots and the centennial of the French revolution, Melville worked on *Billy Budd* at a time when the threat of the possible rule by a non-constituted body was on everybody’s mind. Is such ubiquitous groundlessness one of the prerequisites for the murmur of the underdog to rise up and rule? Why, then, does the narrative, though tempted by poetic anchorless veerings, also keep flaunting the word “constitution” and its various avatars? “To some extent,” says the narrator in chapter 3, “the Nore Mutiny may be regarded as analogous to the distemperring irruption of contagious fever *in a frame constitutionally sound*, and which anon throws it off” (13, my emphasis). If the ground is uncertain, the *Bellipotent*, not unlike the ship in *White-Jacket*, abides as “a bit of terra firma”: “a state in itself,” with “the captain [as] its king.”¹² “Well-constituted,” the ship, as a metonym of the nation, should therefore “refrain from blazoning aught amiss or calamitous” (*Billy Budd, Sailor*, 12). Similarly, anything “defective or abnormal” in the “constitution and blood” of Claggart, or in the “original constitution” of the handsome sailor should be kept as muffled as possible.¹³ Hammered down by the narrative voice, the word “constitution” can be traced from Billy to Claggart to the ship to the nation; it reemerges time and again as if to divert attention away from the flaw that cleaves the origin, from all that threatens to “disrupt” the fixed forms, as if to emphasize instead what is “set, fixed, established,” that is, according to Webster, what is “constituted.”¹⁴

In Chapter 27, what first interrupts the “murmurous indistinctness” (66), “ere [it] had time to wax into clamor,” is “the mechanism of discipline” (67). To prevent the murmur from morphing into mutiny, it is enough that the sailors simply fall back to their “temporary employments,” the “trimming (of) the yard and so forth” (67). “This closing formality” (67) is not detailed, but one thing is clear: forms are the bulwark against the potential efficacy of that formless voice—the voice of the multitude. But the “strategic command” (67) only works so far. Once the body of the handsome sailor has been swallowed up by the sea, “a second strange human murmur” (67) is heard that needs be “dissolved” again by the drumbeat, a metonym for the “customary”—the adjective is repeated three times within ten lines, together with “regular,” “orderly,” and “formally.” What saves the constitution from the terrible impending “disruption” (68) feared by Vere—a word that Thomas Carlyle would use to refer to the French Revolution¹⁵—is the formality of customary regulations.

At the end of chapter 27, it would appear that order indeed has been restored through the customary forms demanded by the effective operation of the ship:

At this unwonted muster at quarters, all proceeded as at the *regular* hour. The band on the quarter-deck played a sacred air. After which the Chaplain went through the *customary* morning service. That done, the drum beat the retreat, and toned by music and religious *rites* subserving the *discipline* and purpose of war, the men in their *wonted orderly* manner, dispersed to the places allotted them when not at the guns.

And now it was full day. The fleece of low-hanging vapor had vanished, licked up by the sun that late had so glorified it. And the circumambient air in the clearness of its serenity was *like smooth marble* in the *polished* block not yet removed from the marble-dealer's yard. (68, my emphasis)

After the commotion that threatened chaos, beauty is restored to the scene; the air itself is likened to “smooth white marble” awaiting the hand of the sculptor, Greek no doubt, to give it a harmonious form again. Greek theorists, Sheldon Wolin explains, “developed a critique of democracy and then constructed a conception of a constitution as a means of demonstrating how democracy might be domesticated, rendered stable, orderly, and just” (15). Could it be one reason why the Greeks are overly present in *Billy Budd*, in a context that did not necessarily call for such references? Claggart's features resemble those “on a Greek medallion” (19); Billy's “constitution” is compared to that of Hercules under the tool of a “Greek sculptor” (9), not to mention the explanation given for the odd “euthanasia” that ends Billy's life, “at once imaginative and metaphysical,—in short, Greek” (66). Since antiquity, Wolin goes on, the idea of a form was “adapted by Plato and Aristotle to political discourse” and made into a justification for subordination, whereas democracy was deemed as “*informal*, indifferent to *formalities*” (92, italics in original). Thus democracy, he concludes, is “wayward, inchoate, unable to rule yet unwilling to be ruled. It does not naturally conform. It is inherently formless” (93).

In *Billy Budd*, such formlessness—or, in Melville's terms, such “murmurous indistinctness” (66)—cannot last. Not unlike the Greek narrative as relayed by Wolin, at least at first sight, the democratic impulse emerges when inherited forms are being transgressed. As the narration suggests in chapter 21, “[i]n associating an officer of marines with the sea-lieutenants in a case having to do with a sailor, the Commander [Vere] perhaps deviated from general custom” (50).¹⁶ And repeatedly so. In chapter 27, again, Vere orders the “beating to quarters at an hour prior to the customary one” (68). Which the narration justifies as follows: “That such variance from usage was authorized by an officer like Captain Vere, a martinet as some deemed him, was evidence

of the necessity for unusual action implied in what he deemed to be temporarily the mood of his men" (68). What legitimates the disruption of forms, even for a disciplinarian like Vere, is exceptional circumstances, the threat of a more formidable disruption still. On account of such a deviation, the *demos*, then, is entitled to take its consent back by way of a symmetrical transgression, revolutionary in essence, whereby the *demos* makes itself political. In such a narrative, the democratic moment is but a parenthesis. The political impulse born of the multitude soon becomes formalized again, recast into the measured forms of a constituted power. As Wolin and others argue, democracy is ever fugitive, and groundless.¹⁷ The *Bellipotent*, in that sense, is no terra firma for the polymorphous *demos*, no territory proper. Because democracy is necessarily ungrounded, a perpetually unsettled political practice, the *demos* cannot find itself represented by any subject—not Vere, not Claggart, not even Budd—nor can its inarticulateness be instituted in a legible linguistic form.

Such perpetually unsettled political practice is, however, what I call the matter of democracy, and it tends to get lost along the way as literary critics almost inevitably revert to a definition of democracy as an aesthetic form, even a mutable one. In the rest of this essay, I want to consider the hypothesis that Melville's democracy does not consist in an *Aufhebung* of the alleged formlessness of the *demos* into renewed (democratic) aesthetic forms. Instead, I argue, Melville's democracy is modeled after, and takes place in, his practice of writing as a constant grappling with, and pushing against, what the narrator in *Billy Budd* repeatedly calls "matter."

Writing Matters

In this *matter of writing* resolve as one may to keep to the main road, some by-paths have an enticement not readily to be *witstood*. I am going to *err into such a by-path*. If the reader will keep me company I shall be glad. At the least we can promise ourselves that pleasure which is wickedly said to be in sinning, for a literary sin the *divergence* will be.

(*Billy Budd* 13)

Billy Budd is a diverging text, in Royle's terms, a "veerer." And the man at the helm (the writer that is), not unlike the aptly named Vere, who is himself not afraid of a good deviation if it serves his interests, indulges in the pleasure of "divergence." A sin, really? "When a literary narrative veers," says Royle, it "enables a more dynamic, riskier, less certain model for what is happening, in the moment, in the strange grain of the writing in which the end of the digression is not foreseen, . . . various forms of 'critical control' (and no

doubt the fantasy of 'literary control' that goes with it) are relinquished, and the language of the text is allowed to do its thing, in other words veer" (155–156). The foregrounding of the ever-perverse "matter of writing" at the beginning of chapter 4 is not a signal to be ignored. Here, "control"—whether critical, literary, or political—is both pleasurably foregrounded and paradoxically dismissed: "resolve as one may," the temptation is too strong to go a-veering, to allow the matter of letters to do the writing. I propose that this matter of writing, the uneasy, contested, practice that writing is, grounds Melville's aesthetics of democracy.

In *Billy Budd*, the material, all but bodily, constituents of language, its nasals and labials, keep circulating across the boundaries of words, names, creating what Royle refers to, apropos "Bartleby," as "the vagrancy of [. . .] verbal reverberations" (165). More recently, Stuart Burrows has noted "the strange wandering behavior displayed by proper names in the novella, which detach themselves from their purported referents and reattach themselves to others" (40).¹⁸ Such verbal veering pits the text between a seeming unreadability indexed on its default of articulation—its "muffled murmur" (66)—on the one hand, and, on the other, a "seeming excess of readability" (Jonik 22), whereby each element, each textual atom, signifies well in excess of the signified attached to it. One example will suffice, among a great many: the moment of confrontation between the three figures of Budd, Claggart, and Vere.

"Ah, Your Honor!" sighed Claggart, mildly shaking his shapely head as in sad deprecation of such unmerited *SEVERITY* of tone. Then, bridling—erecting himself as in virtuous self-assertion—he circumstantially alleged certain words and acts, which collectively, if credited, led to presumptions mortally inculcating Budd. And for some of these *AVERMENTS*, he added, substantiating proof was not far. (44)

Though something exceptional in the moral quality of *CAPTAIN VERE* made him, in earnest encounter with a fellow-man, a *veritable* touch-stone of that man's essential nature, yet now as to *CLAGGART* and what was really going on in him, his feeling partook less of intuitional conviction than of strong suspicion *CLOGGED* by strange dubieties. (44)

Not at first did *BILLY* take it in. When he did, the rose-tan of his cheek looked struck as by white leprosy. He stood like one impaled and *GAGGED*. Meanwhile the accuser's eyes removing not as yet from the blue dilated ones, underwent a phenomenal change, their wonted rich violet color blurring into a *MUDDY* purple. Those lights of human intelligence losing human expression, *GELIDLY* protruding like the alien eyes of certain uncatalogued creatures of the deep. The first mesmeric glance was one of serpent fascination; the last was as the hungry lurch of the torpedo-fish. (46)

The episode, situated in chapters 18 and 19, is one of transfer, but the transfer is not only spatial (“a transfer to a place less exposed to observation than the broad quarter-deck” [44]); it is also a transfer of letters and sounds that results in troubling the neat distribution of power, virtue, and villainy. Vere’s “severity” is transferred to Claggart’s “averments,” while Vere himself is described as “clogged” (a word consonant with Claggart) “by strange dubieties.” Billy Budd, on the other hand, finds himself as if “gagged” and soon to be “gurgling,” caught in Claggart’s disseminating gutturals, while his accuser’s violet eyes turn “muddy,” an adjective whose proximity with the conspicuous “gelidly” muddles indeed the strict binary opposition between the figures of pure virtue and pure evil. Not unlike the oblique connections established through allusions or intertextual references that blur the line between characters and between the unstable notions of good and evil in *The Confidence-Man* (see Ronan Ludot-Vlasak’s essay in this issue), these and other lexical transfers make language reverberate across the thresholds of individual figures, who are turned into mere contingent assemblages of linguistic materiality, poetically considered.¹⁹ Language begins to vibrate and bifurcate, as Michael Jonik has shown, challenging “the capacity of the organized mind to animate a *formless* external material” (Rancière, *Flesh*, 149, quoted in Jonik, 21, my emphasis), the capacity, that is, of representation. “The new power of literature,” Rancière goes on apropos “Bartleby,” “takes hold, on the other hand, just where the mind becomes disorganized, where its world splits, where thought bursts into atoms that are in unity with atoms of matter.” Such atomization and agglutinations of language, for Rancière, Jonik, and others, are the linguistic equivalent of the democratic paradox of groundlessness. The splitting of the *word* creates a supplement hardly amenable to representation, to the constitution of a figure, let alone a people. To say it with Rancière, such a supplement, as a power of disjunction, “challenge[s] the police distribution of parts, places or competences, and . . . re-stage[s] the anarchic foundation of the political” (*Dissensus* 53). We are left once again, or so the story goes, with an ever-fugitive democracy whose sole vehicle is the indistinct murmur of the insurrectional, even anarchical, mob—a groundless, figureless, “ruthless” democracy.

And yet, I propose that this perspective ignores another quality of “the matter of writing” (13). The materiality of the letter, the phenomenality of the signifier, does not only lie in its capacity to glide and reverberate and thereby unsettle any constituted meaning. In *Billy Budd*, language as matter also resists, contests, thwarts, and obstructs the flow. A battle-piece indeed, *Billy Budd* wages war with, yet not necessarily against, materiality itself. In this grappling with matter, with the materiality of bodies, letters, and the phenomenality of politics lies Melville’s aesthetic practice of democracy.

Matter Matters

“Hallo, what’s the matter? [. . .] Ah, *Beauty*, is it you? Well, something must have been the matter for you st-st-stuttered.”

(*Billy Budd* 34)

Matter matters in *Billy Budd*. The word in all its grammatical avatars occurs more than forty times in the novella. Matter, in fact, unceasingly disrupts—for example, “some minor matter” time and again “interrupt[s]” “the current of [Vere’s] thoughts” and his “dreaminess of mood” (17). But matter—the matter of language, the consonants that make Billy stutter, those dentals and gutturals that he shares with Claggart—not only interferes with the otiose wanderings of Vere; it also interrupts form itself, in the etymological sense of the term (*forma* means beauty in Latin). Matter impairs Billy’s perfection and compromises the fluidity of the narration itself. Matter—that which resists any clarification, or explanation, that which is not amenable to the transparency of truth or meaning—sits at every juncture of the text; as such, it gives the reader pause and allows, or forces, the narration to change direction again and again, the better, perhaps, to capture an ever-elusive knowledge, or more accurately, to foreground the opacity and resistance of the phenomenality of things.²⁰

Intriguingly, one prominent material juncture of the text, or we might say, one recurrent *époque*, in the sense of a suspension of its temporal, spatial, and logical flow, is the word “but.” The pattern is conspicuous all through the novella and merits attention. An example will suffice. After “the little matter at the mess” (37), when Billy accidentally spilled the entire content of his soup upon the new scrubbed deck just as Claggart was passing, the narration keeps veering, hanging as it does on a word that is not just any word—“but.”

But after the little matter at the mess Billy Budd no more found himself in strange trouble at times about his hammock or his clothes-bag or what not. While, as to that smile that occasionally sunned him, and the pleasant passing word, these were if not more frequent, yet if anything, more pronounced than before.

But for all that, there were certain other demonstrations now. When Claggart’s unobserved glance happened to light on belted Billy rolling along the upper gun deck in the leisure of the second dog-watch, exchanging passing broadsides of fun with other young promenaders in the crowd; that glance would follow the cheerful sea-Hyperion with a settled meditative and melancholy expression, his eyes strangely suffused with incipient feverish tears. Then would Claggart look like the man of sorrows. Yes, and sometimes the melancholy expression would have in it a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy *but* for fate and ban. *But* this was

an evanescence, and quickly repented of, as it were, by an immitigable look, pinching and shrivelling the visage into the momentary semblance of a wrinkled walnut. **But** sometimes catching sight in advance of the foretopman coming in his direction, he would, upon their nearing, step aside a little to let him pass, dwelling upon Billy for the moment with the glittering dental satire of a Guise. **But** upon any abrupt unforeseen encounter a red light would flash forth from his eye like a spark from an anvil in a dusk smithy. That quick fierce light was a strange one, darted from orbs which in repose were of a color nearest approaching a deeper violet, the softest of shades. (37–38, my emphasis)

The guilty “evanescence” of Claggart’s desire, revealed by the messy materiality of an untimely and awkward “spilling” (“the little matter at the mess”) is pitted against, and repeatedly checked by, the law that bans such sinful pleasure, embodied or materialized in the adversative conjunction “but.” And not only that. The other meaning of “but,” as in “could not but,” or “but for,” provides additional opportunities for those complex by-paths that Melville’s prose indulges in. *Billy Budd*’s “but,” which the text keeps exposing while exposing itself and its tergiversations, may well indeed be the crux of the matter. Not unlike Claggart’s dead body lying athwart at Vere’s feet, the materiality, or phenomenality, of the Handsome Sailor’s body—which is catachrestically present here as “but”—gets in the way of a direct report on what is the matter with . . . Claggart. Matter once again “interrupts” and constrains the text to account, if indirectly, for what must remain unsaid aboard *The Bellipotent*—be it the illicit homoerotic desire of the Master-at-Arms, or the very word “mutiny.” But a more dangerous threat is pending: the constitution of something that will not stop at the “muffled murmur” (66) of mutinous sailors, but might reach the articulation of a power not unamenable to the customary practices of law but using these very practices to articulate itself.

The matter at hand in *Billy Budd* requires to be handled with care. The story takes place in a revolutionary interval when “events have not yet rounded themselves into completion” (*Supplement*, 181), a moment of plasticity in between regimes, in between laws. To take up once again Melville’s words in his “Supplement” to *Battle-Pieces*, “There has been an upheaval affecting the basis of things; to altered circumstances complicated adaptations are to be made” (181). In more than one respect, *Billy Budd* is a tale of adaptations, variations, and adjustments—a British merchant sailor, impressed on a war-ship, takes his leave from *The Rights of Man* and learns the rules and language of the *Bellipotent*; a Captain adapts his verdict to the “circumstances” of war and “military necessity” (56); a narrator is confronted with “facts” that do not fit the “symmetries” of fictional form.²¹ Be it plot, characterization, or syntax, the matter

of *Billy Budd* is measured and adapted to “difficulties great and novel” (*Supplement* 181), and writing itself, by way of an uneasy textual practice flaunting its double negations,²² self-correction, or adversative turns, dramatizes the grappling of form with the matter of the novella. In *Billy Budd*, I propose, practice, then, is the measure of form.

Billy Budd, Practically; or, Melville’s Critical Democracy

“it is a case practical, and under martial law practically to be dealt with.”

(*Billy Budd* 54)

Melville’s novella is a practical novel. The polyptoton used in chapter 21 is significant, and reverberates throughout the text: Vere, for example, has a streak of practicality in him, which pushes him to “*practically* test the accuser” (44); Billy, the Handsome Sailor, the beautiful form, is also said to be “*practically* a fatalist” (8). In *Billy Budd*, form and practice go hand in hand, as shown in the constant friction between the two: Vere’s intuition, “though as yet obscure *in form*, served *practically* to affect his reception of the ill tidings” (42); the practice of impressment was “*never formally renounced*,” because “it was not *practicable* to give [it] up” (15). Tightly interwoven in the texture of the text, form and practice culminate as one in Claggart’s slur at Billy, when the latter spills the soup across his path and the Master-at-Arms responds: “Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it too” (26). The old proverb that Claggart wields ironically here, and almost stutteringly, originally connotes generosity, liberality. But the very excess evinced by the would-be representative of law, order, and measure, as well as his liberal use of repetition, should give us pause. The ironic doubling reveals other layers of meaning. Most importantly, here, the measure of form (*forma*, how handsome the handsome sailor is) proves inextricable from what form does—giving, and giving too much. But the encrypting of the very agent (“hand”) in the word that tells of the beautiful form of the foretopman (“handsome”) gives another turn to the screw, twisting together form and practice. What is handsome is not only what corresponds to a norm, a universal absolute (according to the first meaning of “handsome” given in the Webster: “well made; having symmetry of parts; well formed”) but what fits the task “at hand” (alternative meanings of handsome are indeed: “properly, dexterous; ready; convenient”). “Handsome,” then, connotes the adequation of gesture to task—something that the handsome sailor, the plastic matter in the hands of the Greek sculptor, indeed embodies, however blunderingly so.²³

Melville has been read as a proto-pragmatist. About his *Battle-Pieces*, Maurice Lee writes, “When navigating a world characterized not by perfect designs or first principles fixed in stone, but rather by forces William James referred to as ‘flux,’” Melville turned to experience “as the most reliable guide” (399). When the winds are contrary and the foundations uncertain, when sailing directions can no longer be premised on absolute or “measured forms” (68), then the primacy of form recedes behind the contingency of material circumstances. More accurately, form proves nothing but the contested, uneasy, grappling with contingency. Melville’s aesthetics, in that sense, is not driven by the quest of form as universal measure; form has not only a situatedness,²⁴ a clear phenomenality; form is Melville’s name for the adaptability of (democratic / aesthetic) laws to the matter at hand. Melville’s democratic aesthetics, then, is much less a matter of un-founding representation through the verbal reverberations of vagrant atom-letters and contingent agglutinations of language than a constant literal and literary experimentation with material and historical contingencies. To put it differently, Melville’s democratic theory is indistinguishable from its pragmatic poetics—a form that is a practice, not fugitive but critical.

Billy Budd’s poetic coda is one of the places where the novella, I contend, articulates such practice of democratic difference. In turning to “Billy in the Darbies,” I do not intend to rekindle the feud between the champions of the novella as a “testament of acceptance” and the proponents of the text as a “testament of resistance” (Watson, Whithim). This alternative has fueled critical readings of *Billy Budd* for decades, and taken the text’s coda as its key. Does “Billy in the Darbies,” “serve the ends of political subversion” (Frank 381) and supersede the conservative account of the Naval Chronicle (Spanos, Gilmore)? Or, does it “mirror the chronicle’s counterrevolutionary function” by expressing “Billy’s acquiescence to his fate,” thereby functioning as the counterpoint to the novella’s call for “legitimate revolt”? (Wolff 3). Whether *Billy Budd* accepts or resists authoritarianism is no doubt one of the most compelling questions raised by the text. The problem, however, is that this tension has been almost systematically understood as an avatar of the opposition between the tyranny of forms, on the one hand, and the dissenting potential of the multitude, on the other—or, in Rancière’s terms, the tension between “democratic government” and “democratic life,” democracy as a form of government being threatened by democracy as a form of social and political life, “and so the former must repress the latter” (47). As this essay has suggested, it is not an opposition that animates Melville’s *Billy Budd*. Melville was no naïve dreamer. He knew that “the world’s fairest hope” was “linked with man’s foulest crime,” (“Misgivings,” *Published Poems*, 7) and that the delusion of democratic equality in the

United States of his time was tainted with the crime of slavery. As a pragmatic engagement with forms, I suggest that Melville's democratic proposition in *Billy Budd*, if somber and partially disenchanted, is still an attempt to defy such neat antagonism between democratic chaos and democratic forms, and locate the democratic beyond this so-called opposition in a self-reflexive handling of forms by those who *thereby* constitute themselves as a *demos*. The stuttering structure of the novella is the poetic and political locus of resistance to such definition of the democratic.

As is well known, *Billy Budd*, not unlike its eponymous foundling, has an uncertain, stuttering beginning. It also has a stuttering end.²⁵ The murmur of the multitude, rechanneled through the customary practices of the morning service, is taken up twice in the closing chapters: once by Vere who, before being dispatched by the tale, is heard to "murmur" "Billy Budd, Billy Budd"; then by the "artless" anonymous foretopman, Billy's democratic understudy as it were, who is author of the ballad. But is the poem the *telos* of the prose? Because Melville had turned to poetry in the later years of his life, with Billy Budd standing as the exception, it might be tempting to argue that "Billy in the Darbies" is the "poetic reproach" (14) leveled at the "prosaic (in)significance" of the rest of the text. And yet, the "measured form" that closes the novella, an utterly conventional, if democratized, voice, fares ill with the complex entanglements of the narration. If it is the democratic *telos* of the tale, it reads like a parodic one indeed. Rather than considering "Billy in the Darbies" as the novella's *Aufhebung*, the resolution of the tensions between the common sailors' "muffled murmur" (66) and Vere's "measured forms" (68),²⁶ I would like to add one last veering to this reading, and argue that Melville's experimentation with a democratic practice of form does not in fact stop with "Billy in the Darbies," nor start there for that matter. The text as a whole perversely undoes the logics and chronology that it also apparently proposes—that of the neat narrative of constitution, usurpation, democratic rebellion, and constitutional democracy.

If we take democracy to be "the sort of political phenomenon whose teleological or even ideological destination is a constitutional form" (Wolin 102), then the well-constituted ballad that ends the novella, a regular form, heir to a long tradition that gave voice to the common people, may be read as the ideological democratic destination of the text, a sort of formal *Aufhebung* of chaos into form, or more accurately, disorder into constitution. This narrative is congruent with readings of late Melville as fearful of the disorder inherent in the mutinous mob. It fails to account, however, for the ambivalence of the text's ending/non-ending that only resorts to a parody of democratic form the better to prolong the democratic, not as the fugitive triumph of a fickle multitude, but as a continuous contest *within* the process of writing, in the very belly of

the Leviathan / *Bellipotent*. This interpretation diverges from those who have argued for an opposition in the text between forms as a “stabilizing power,” “the explicit link between poetry and authority” (Wolff 9), and formlessness as the locus of a democratic power.²⁷ *Billy Budd* reinvests the instability of form itself as the condition of a critical democracy. The fact that “Billy in the Darbies” is better read as part of the naval chronicle’s conservative politics emphasizing obedience, patriotism, and duty, does not turn the novella *as a whole* into “a troubling, anti-democratic expression of popular acquiescence to Billy’s fate” (Wolff 5). “Billy in the Darbies,” which did not come last in drafts of the text, is a critical wedge, not a *terminus ad quem*. It is democratic in that it is a non-authorized and barely authored variation, a “twist” (its last word), a gesture, perhaps, to other forms—the “weeds and wildings” of Melville’s co-temporaneous poetry. As a compound of first-person narrative, poetry, chronicle, *Billy Budd* does not do away with form; rather, it posits Captain Vere’s “forms, measured forms” as a locus of resistance, the only one maybe, and turns democracy into a political *poiesis* that confronts the material contingencies of form and turns them into critical practice.

Billy Budd, then, does not tell the story of a democratic murmur silenced by martial rule. It is not an exuberant defense of a “fugitive democracy” that only emerges as a rebellious moment of absolute formlessness, nor an *an-arkhè* that re-stages over and over again a rift in a regime that can only be structurally repressive. In Melville’s text, the efficacy of the *demos*, which is distinct from the power of the multitude, is nowhere to be found, or founded, *but* in the constant workability of material contingencies—the form of the ballad being one of them. The *demos* nurtures the ongoing resistance of material forces *within* itself, those very forces that the text embodies, and translates into, adversative turns, trials, loopings, and self-corrections, the literal stutters that constitute reading as experience. In that sense, the *demos* in Melville’s novella is enacted by, and takes place in, the continuous practice of writing, the constant vying with the contrary forces of what I, and the text, call “matter.” Put differently, Melville’s writing in *Billy Budd* does not need form as its externality, something to be upturned or contested always; it undoes the binary form / matter, constitution / *demos* by turning the *demos* into a practice—textual and critical.

Why critical? Because the text is non-self-identical from its non-beginning to its non-ending; because it is grounded, paradoxically, in its capacity to ever differ from itself.²⁸ It is in this way that it is democratic. Poetry then, or rather the poetical, is not the *telos*, but the rip, the ragged edge, the internal difference that is the hallmark and the drive of such critical democratic aesthetic. It is not so much that democracy is groundless, that the only thing we are left

with as readers are the verbal reverberations of letters gone adrift. What *Billy Budd* requires from its readers is a practice of reading that is not vectorized towards the truth, nor an ideal form, nor a completion. Reading *Billy Budd* as an experiment, and an experience, that is also a propaedeutic to the democratic, invites us to veer, or shift, from a focus on representation to an attention to practice, from form to matter, or rather, to an understanding of form as the contested, uneasy, grappling with the radical uncertainty of material and historical circumstances. In that sense, the practice of textual veering is the modality of Melville's critical democratic aesthetic. As Melville's contribution to the pragmatic democratic tradition, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, however unfinished, or because it is so, continues to beckon us as Melville's unsettling testament, a form that is always and inherently a practice of the political.

Notes

¹ I am borrowing this phrase from F.O. Matthiessen, who famously proposed that the writers of the American Renaissance were united by "the devotion to the possibilities of democracy" (ix).

² "It was the summer of 1797. In the April of that year had occurred the commotion at Spithead followed in May by a second and yet more serious outbreak in the fleet at the Nore. The latter is known, and without exaggeration in the epithet, as the Great Mutiny" (11).

³ For a definition of the modern *demos*, see Stephen W. Sawyer's response in the H-Diplo Roundtable XXI-55 where he writes: "A historical focus on the *demos* reorients democratic theory and the history of the political away from biographies of official proceedings, institutional design, or formal abstract rights and toward a more grounded, concrete, and pragmatic investigation of popular magistrature, public administration, and the substantive content of socio-economic regulation. As the proper collective subject of political modernity, the *demos* highlights that modern social form and social space wherein society's relationship to itself was politically constituted. A history of the *demos*, therefore, diverges radically from 'civil society' conceptions of the social, that is, from the more depoliticized liberal notions that dominate current histories of modern democracy."

⁴ Greiman finds in the figure of the circle one of the most significant "structures and forms" with which both Tocqueville and Melville identify democracy ("Circles upon Circles" 124).

⁵ In a June 1851 letter to Hawthorne, Melville wrote: "when you see or hear of my ruthless democracy on all sides, you may possibly feel a touch of a shrink, or something of that sort. It is but nature to be shy of a mortal who boldly declares that a thief in jail is as honorable a personage as Gen. George Washington" (*Correspondence* 190). David S. Reynolds reads this provocation as suggesting "the profound debt he owed to contemporary sensational writings and particularly to the radical democrats of the 1840s" (Reynolds 248). I suggest that in the 1880s Melville's views on democracy had taken a more reformist, pragmatic turn, the radicalism of which, however, should not be underestimated.

⁶ "Some *apparent ground* there was for this sort of confidential criticism" (19, my emphasis); "Some *imaginative ground* for invidious comment there was" (50, my emphasis).

⁷ I'm borrowing the phrase "slimed foundations" from Melville's poem "The Conflict of Convictions" (1860–61), in *Battle-Pieces* (*Published Poems* 10).

⁸ The "Textual note on *Billy Budd, Sailor*" of the Northwestern-Newberry edition of the novella dates the process of writing from 1885, or 1886, to April 1891 (385, 387).

⁹ Another "Battle-Piece," "The House-Top" addresses in poetic form, *a propos* the 1863 New York City Draft Riots, the question of democratic governance vs. a riotous mob—a tension that is taken up in *Billy Budd* in a different historical context. See Ohge and Hendler.

¹⁰ “Events have not yet rounded themselves into completion. Not justly can we complain of this. There has been an upheaval affecting the basis of things; to altered circumstances complicated adaptations are to be made; there are difficulties great and novel” (“Supplement” to *Battle-Pieces*, in *Published Poems*, 181). On Melville’s *Battle-Pieces* as an experiment in form, see Marrs, who shows that the war, and historical significance, becomes a matter of intense formal interest.

¹¹ The time of sailing ships, the narration explains, was also the time of impressment, when men were essential to the good handling of war-ships. The outcome of the Nore mutiny was that some grievances were indeed redressed aboard war-ships, but, for *practical* reasons, impressment was “never formally renounced” (15): “It was not practicable to give [it] up in those years. Its abrogation would have crippled the indispensable fleet, one wholly under canvas, no steam-power, its innumerable sails and thousands of cannon . . .” (15).

In superseded leaves that were mistaken for a preface by some early editors, Melville commented on the impact of the Nore mutiny. He insisted that what the sailors gained was a more just, a more democratic and “humane” governance of every matter: “in a way analogous to the operation of the Revolution at large the Great Mutiny, tho’ by Englishmen naturally deemed monstrous at the time, doubtless gave the first prompting to those progressive reforms in the British navy which for its sailors makes it a service so much more humane than it was in the days of this story” (425). What was important, then, was the *reforms* that proceeded from the Revolution—an everyday democratic *practice*, implying the non-despotic regulations of bodies and tasks, for example, as the novella states, not “providing shoddy clots, rations not sound, or false in the measure” (15).

¹² “It is a state in itself and the captain is its king” (Melville, *White-Jacket*, 23).

¹³ “By his *original constitution* aided by the cooperating influences of his lot, Billy in many respects was little more than a sort of upright barbarian” (10, my emphasis); “This complexion [. . .] tho’ it was not exactly displeasing, nevertheless seemed to hint of *something defective or abnormal in the constitution and blood*” (about Claggart, 20, my emphasis).

¹⁴ “To constitute: 1. To set, to fix, to establish” (Webster, 1828).

¹⁵ Melville’s interest in Thomas Carlyle has been amply documented. See, for example, Sealts, 47–48. “Consider it well, the Event, the thing which can be spoken of and recorded, is it not, in all cases, some disruption, some solution of continuity? Were it even a glad Event, it involves change, involves loss (of active Force); and so far, either in the past or in the present, is an irregularity, a disease. Stillest perseverance were our blessedness; not dislocation and alteration, could they be avoided” (Carlyle, Book I: II, chapter 1. 2. I).

¹⁶ The editorial appendix of the Northwestern-Newberry edition adds that “the various references . . . to naval law and ‘general custom’ as support for this ‘summary court’ are not historically accurate” (425). However much Vere’s discourse uses the shield of law, he is on the side of transgression, or at least “deviation.”

¹⁷ Following Wolin in this, Greiman concludes: “Rather than presupposing a ground for democracy, Melville’s post-Civil War writings suggest that he is instead grappling with an understanding of democracy as the practice of politics with no ground at all,” that is, not founded “in a presupposed territory, subject, or institution” (2016 14).

¹⁸ On unreadability in *Billy Budd*, see also Jonik.

¹⁹ In *Billy Budd*, as in *Pierre* (see Edouard Marsoin’s essay in this issue), verbal utterances, not only Claggart’s and Billy’s, but also those of the narrative voice itself are a swerving force that resist the teleological, the narrative fate of characters—at least for a while. Just as the finality of the sentence is contested by the murmur of the multitude in chapter 27, here, the sonic disturbance that overtakes a clear articulation and distribution of the sensible unleashes some uncontrollable forces, a linguistic agency that threatens the solid contours of characters and the axiological regime of the narrative.

²⁰ I use “phenomenality” here as it is defined in the novella, as the appearance of things that resist rational explanations. The term “phenomenal,” in the sense of “wonderful, extraordinary” conspicuously returns in the text. It is defined in chapter 26, apropos “the absence of spasmodic movement” following Billy’s hanging: “It was phenomenal, Mr. Purser, in the sense that it was an appearance the cause of which is not immediately to be assigned” (66).

²¹ At the beginning of chapter 28, the narration reflects on the difficulty for facts to be accommodated neatly in a symmetrical form. “The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction

can not 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" (68–69).

²² An example from chapter 14 can serve as an illustration of what is a common trait in this novella. "Now Billy like sundry other essentially goodnatured ones had some of the weaknesses inseparable from essential good-nature; and among these was a reluctance, almost an incapacity of plumply saying *no* to an abrupt proposition *not* obviously absurd, on the face of it, *nor* obviously unfriendly, *nor* iniquitous. And being of warm blood he had *not* the phlegm tacitly to *negative* any proposition by *unresponsive inaction*" (33, my emphasis).

²³ In a sense, Claggart's "ejaculation" only responds to Billy's "spilling." The handsome blunder mirrors and redoubles itself, creating a handsome symmetry that is more adequate than it is faulty.

²⁴ In Melville's late poem "Greek Masonry," a quartet whose first two lines read "Not magnitude, not lavishness, / But Form—the Site;"), "Form" is interestingly articulated with "the Site." Greek architecture is indeed situated, and the product of time, and history—not to be revered as the universal absolute, or at least, not only.

²⁵ The first paragraph of the novella is devoted to a personal reminiscence of the narrator, recalling his confrontation with a Black embodiment of the "Handsome sailor." The second paragraph, starting with "To return" (3), returns indeed to a white incarnation of the figure. Analyzing this stuttering beginning is beyond the scope of this essay. But I'd like to suggest that the conspicuous interruption of the encomium of a Black beauty by the portrait of white Billy is yet another illustration of the resistance of matter to form, raising the question of how to practically accommodate blackness within the practice of democracy. On "Billy in the Darbies" as contemporaneous with "the spate of extrajudicial lynchings of Black people coincident with his writing of the novel in the 1880s and into the 1890s, see Wolff 17.

²⁶ On "Billy in the Darbies" as the medium by which the "inarticulate crew has found its voice" and the "feelings which had been only a murmur" find utterance "in poetry, however rude," see Adler 275, quoted in Wolff.

²⁷ Nathan Wolff's recent reading of *Billy Budd* takes up the important task of getting out of the interpretive impasse of acceptance vs. resistance. He concludes that "it is only by venturing a misanthropic reading of "Billy in the Darbies" as a testament of acceptance that we can recover *Billy Budd's* distant horizon of resistance" (17). If the ballad expresses "Billy's acquiescence to his fate," and thereby acts as the counterpoint to the call for "legitimate revolt," it does so, I argue, from *within* the text itself—as a voice that does not so much counter democracy as questions the efficacy of the fugitive formless revolt of the multitude.

²⁸ My position here is clearly inspired by the conversation between Jacques Rancière and Jacques Derrida on the subject of democracy. "(B)ecause the foundation is riven," Rancière writes as a response to Derrida's "democracy-to-come," "democracy implies a practice of dissensus, one that it keeps re-opening and that the practice of ruling relentlessly plugs." However important, the practice of dissensus here maintains the binary opposition between a practice of ruling and a practice of resistance. Melville had a distinctly nineteenth-century conception of the relationship between democracy as a social form and democracy as government. The apparent aporia between democracy as a form of government and good policy and democracy as a social form and a rambunctious form of life, was profoundly changed in his post-revolutionary moment. Beyond the idea of groundlessness or the constant antagonism between the social and the institutional, Melville's democracy as a social practice is only able to sustain itself through its constant and relentless struggle for auto-institutionalization. Democracy emerges then as the non-despotic practice of self-regulation by the *demos* itself. It is a practice of form that is also a form of life and an aesthetics of life—that is a self-reflexive handling of form by the *demos*.

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