

## Editions of the Early 1960s, Including the Chicago Edition

While Bantam's 1959 edition of *Four Short Novels* by Melville listed no editor and contained no introduction, a valuable 1961 "casebook" edited by William T. Stafford contained both the novel as well as numerous interpretive essays. Stafford's brief introduction called the book a novella, argued that its plot was simple but its meaning complex, referred to its "moral obliqueness," and saw the work as both reflecting and being foreshadowed by earlier works by Melville (v). Stafford's volume signaled that *Billy Budd* was now a central text in the teaching and study of American literature. So, too, in its own way, did the inexpensive 1961 "Signet" paperback, which was ideal both for popular reading and for classroom use. Willard Thorp's brief "Afterword" went over much familiar ground but also intriguingly compared Vere to Starbuck in *Moby-Dick* (since both face moral dilemmas) and even likened Vere to the "bewildered," "innocent" title figure of *Pierre*. Thorp also considered Melville's 1876 long poem *Clarel* ethically relevant to Vere's situation, and he additionally argued that Claggart's Satanic aspects made him a new kind of Melvillean villain (333). Meanwhile, a 1962 edition introduced by John F. Gallagher praised Melville's best writing (including *Billy Budd*) as "perhaps second to that of no other novelist" (vii). He stressed the "ambiguity" of Melville's text and its openness to varied interpretations (ix), and he cautioned against reading *Billy Budd* narrowly, particularly as indicating Melville's "acceptance of the way of the world" (xi).

Another 1962 edition—introduced by Maxwell Geismar—defined *Billy Budd* as a "short story or novelette" (xiii) and argued that it, like *Typee*, deals with "the central Melvillean theme of primitive nature *versus* society" (xiv). Geismar thought Melville never abandoned his admiration for the naturally virtuous "Taipians," even when writing "*Billy Budd*, one of the great short stories of the world." Re-reading this text, Geismar came to feel "that it was just about the best short story ever written" (xvi) and "a perfect little gem of storytelling"—a "late fable" that was "almost a play" exhibiting "perfect craft" (xvii). He thought Melville's prose was "so dense,

so beautiful, precisely” because it mixed “history and myth” and involved “other levels of radical social criticism, of philosophy or metaphysics, [and] of cultural and religious speculation,” so that a “tremendous body of knowledge went into this epic of a simple sailor” (xix).

Most intriguing, however, was Geismar’s view of Billy as “Melville’s last and farewell portrait of Taipian nature”—of “natural man” in all his goodness and innocence (xviii). He compared Billy to mythic heroes, offered alternative explanations for his stutter, but favored the idea that it symbolized Billy’s freedom from the *need* of civilized, corrupting speech (xviii). Geismar saw Melville as a pioneering realist and naturalist (xx). He thought Claggart was “in love with Billy” but had “repressed this passion,” using reason to completely control his emotions (xx). By suppressing his natural instincts, Claggart became “all repression, all intellect, all evil” (xxi). Interestingly, Geismar saw Claggart as “a later, final portrait of Ahab—even more dangerously monomaniacal “because his madness is held under tight control.” Claggart is “civilized western man . . . cut off from all natural impulses” and now “an actual criminal” (xxi). When Billy strikes Claggart’s forehead, he hits the very “center of reason” (xxii).

Vere, Geismar argued, becomes “obsessed” with the supposed “necessity of Billy’s death,” making Billy “the victim not only of the vicious and ‘rational’ Claggart, but of civilized justice, too, which includes, which bends down before, the social pressures of the time.” (Billy’s fate may even resemble that of Melville, himself a victim of social pressures [Geismar xxiii]). Far from approving Vere’s conduct, Melville remained an unrepentant “barbarian,” sympathizing more with nature than with civilization, as in *Typee* (xxiv). *Billy Budd* was Melville’s “final protest”—“a remarkable example of tragic realism” explicable according to the psychological ideas of Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich, and Otto Rank (xxv-xxvi).

Geismar’s spirited introduction made his volume one of the most interesting postwar editions of Melville’s novel, but perhaps the most important edition of them all—and certainly one still central in Melville studies—was issued in 1962 by the University of

Chicago Press. This pathbreaking work, edited by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts Jr., was based on a thorough reexamination of the remaining manuscripts. The full version of this edition contained both a “reading text” (for use by most readers) and a “genetic text” (a painstaking scholarly reconstruction of Melville’s methods of composition). The “reading text” was soon issued in a reasonably priced paperback, and that is the version I will discuss here.

In their exceptionally thorough preface and introduction, the Chicago editors laid out the rationale for their textual choices, stating that in the reading text they provided “the wording that in our judgment most closely approximates Melville’s final intention” (Hayford and Sealts vi). They explained their complex conclusions about the “Growth of the Manuscript” (1-12), outlined their view of the “History of the Text” (12-24), and then offered an especially helpful section on “Perspectives for Criticism” (24-39). Particularly significant was their detailed critique of the 1948 Freeman edition (the only previous attempt at a “scholarly” text). Suffice it to say that they carefully explained their reasons for rejecting many of Freeman’s arguments and that they also carefully laid out the logic behind their own textual choices. Anyone wanting an unusually detailed sense of the many difficulties involved in making sense of Melville’s manuscripts need only consult the first two sections of the Chicago introduction.

It is the section dealing with “Perspectives for Criticism,” however, which will probably interest most readers. In that section, Hayford and Sealts argue that

*Billy Budd* under its author’s hand never began with a preface, and the passage so labeled is actually a discarded fragment of what is now Ch. 19. A reader who in good faith interprets the novel in terms of the “Preface” will scarcely be honoring Melville’s intention, nor will he be in a position to write definitive criticism. (25)

After reviewing earlier critical assessments of the novel’s meaning, the Chicago editors suggested that any view of the book as closely based on the *Somers* case was open to dispute. In the *Somers* affair, the: