I. Introduction

Dangerous Crossings: Herman Melville's Voyage to the Invisible

The purpose of this research, based on Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*, is to reorient the discussion of *Billy Budd* to include Melville's use of the figure of the inviolate male realization in Billy Budd--to reinsert the character of Billy Budd into a text which has produced readings that decisively displace him and the crucial importance of his characterization. Melville's thesis in *Billy Budd* is that all-male worlds are always already doomed. *Billy Budd* is the culmination of Melville's ongoing critique of the homosocial--his bitterest and most unflinching assault on the compulsory fraternity of American life. Because Billy Budd, determinedly constructed as a sexually inviolate and unavailable male, incites male utopia, one must consider the source--the source of his power, and his power as a source, for male utopia. The affectional zone of romantic male friendship is destroyed and the hopes of homosocial utopia are pitilessly crushed in Melville's Sea-faring narrative *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924) because of the society that regards homosexuality as exceptional and unnatural.

In *Billy Budd*, an officer accuses a navy sailor of fomenting (or plotting) mutiny during wartime, at which point the sailor strikes the officer dead. To settle the issue quickly, the sailor is summarily tried and convicted by the captain for murder, and is hung at sunrise the following day. The novel presents different versions of the events themselves.

Herman Melville (1819-91), one of America's greatest authors, Melville is best remembered as a creator of *Billy Budd, Sailor*, a novel since heralded as a triumph of nineteenth- century American fiction.

Herman Melville was born in New York City in 1819 to a family with both English and Dutch ancestry. The family was financially and socially secured during Melville's childhood but his father, a cultivated gentleman, suffered from severe financial problems and was forced into bankruptcy. An introduction to Billy Budd contends on Melville's sea-faring obligations, which later proved to be a landmark in his literary career that "Herman's education did not go much beyond his fifteenth birthday after which he undertook various jobs, before joining a ship bound for Liverpool as a cabin boy in 1839" (*Billy Budd*, "Introduction," I). "The voyage proved to be both romantic and harrowing and was later described in his novel *Redburn*," Introduction further holds, "The trip also ingrained in him a love for the sea and his eighteen month trip on a whaling ship bound for the South Seas in 1841 provided much of the factual details found in *Moby Dick*. In July 1842, he deserted the ship in the Marquesan islands and lived for a month among the savages" (II):

> Boarding an Australian trading ship he again jumped ship when the crew mutined and was latter imprisoned in Tahiti for his part in the desertion. Finding his way back to America in 1844, he returned as an ordinary seaman on the frigate United States, which sailed to Boston. The books he wrote based on his wild times such as *Typee* and *White-jacket* won him immediate success and a wide readership. Marrying in 1847 he then moved with his wife in 1850 to farm in Massachusetts that was to be his home for thirteen years. (II)

During this time he became close friends with his neighbor and contemporary man of letters, Nathanial Hawthorne, to whom *Moby Dick* is inscribed. Melville's popularity began to wane with the publication of *Moby Dick* as his complex themes and elaborate prose alienated readers who were anticipating more of the earlier adventure

stories. Apart from a collection of short stories published in 1856 and his novel *The Confidence Man* (1857), Melville wrote no further prose. He moved to New York City during civil war and three years later in 1866 was appointed a deputy inspector in the customs house. He continued in this post for nineteen years, many of them spent in complete obscurity. He died in 1891 living some unfinished manuscripts, among them his masterpiece, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, which were only discovered by chance in the 1920s when a renewed enthusiasm for Melville's work reevaluated his long-obscured literary reputation. *Billy Budd, Sailor* is considered to be among the masterpieces of American fiction. It is unique in its narrative method, profound in theme, and explores such controversial themes as the isolated self.

Billy Budd, Sailor is arranged in thirty chapters, it is the tale of the official naval report on the murder of a seaman, and later the persecution of the murderer. In no time at all, the events are summarized:

> On the tenth of the last month a deplorable occurrence took place on board H.M.S. *Bellipotent*. John Claggart, the ship's master-at-arms, discovering that some sort of plot was incipient among an inferior section of ship's company, and that the ringleader was one William Budd; he, Claggart, in the act arraigning the man before the captain, was vindictively stabbed to the heart by the suddenly drawn sheath knife of Budd. (IV)

In the end, this stands as one version of the novel's plot, but the other twenty-nine chapters tell a different story. What Melville reacts against in Billy Budd and other works is the nineteenth century construction and implementation of separate spheres, the rigid separation of the sexes into male paradises and female domes, the bifurcation of the world into homosocial spheres, into the public world of men and the private

world of women, into same-sex spaces whose integrity is breached only by the equally pressing demands of compulsory heterosexuality. No world is more intensely homosocial than that aboard a ship like the Bellipotent. Through the microcosmic yearnings for homosocial space of the sailors aboard the Bellipotent, Melville critiques the nineteenth century's determined creation and enforcement of rigidly demarcated same-sex spaces.

Since its first publication in 1924, Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* has continuously come into the scrutiny of criticism as a most applauded seafaring narrative, adventure story, and sexual paranoia. An introduction to the posthumously published *Billy Budd, Sailor* emphasizes on Melville's consideration of controversial themes: "Billy Budd, sailor is considered to be among the small masterpieces of American fiction . . .unique in its narrative method, profound in theme, and explores such controversial themes as the isolated self and the failure of conventional worldly knowledge" (Melville "Introduction" II).

Similarly Melville's narrative has been, for Charles G. Hoffman, "Captain Vere's statement in Melville's Billy Budd, "The prisoner's deed. With that alone we have to do" (qtd. in *College English* 23.8 653). Hoffman further ventures through the psychological trauma and ambiguity inherent in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* and Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*:

> But Captain Archbold lacks self-knowledge and thus lacks understanding; he does not understand his own failure in the crisis of his ship, and therefore cannot comprehend Leggatt's crisis. The narrator-captain in his judgment of Leggatt is that aspect of self that has to do with private conscience, corresponding to Captain Vere's

> personal understanding of the moral justification for Billy Budd's crime. (Hoffman 653)

Most of the criticisms heralded upon Melville's work come in common ground in terms of the novel's projection of Billy Budd as a figure that resembles Christ. The paperback to *Billy Budd, Sailor* affirms Billy as "a handsome, unpretentious, stuttering, young able seaman."

However, the noteworthy explanations come in forms of theories to define homosexuality in Melville's work. Hans Bertens quotes Alan Sinfield in *Literary Theory: the Basics* as "Sexuality is an unstable construct in our society, and hence produces endless textual works" (qtd. in Bertens 225). Such an awkward issue is continually "revisited, disavowed, rediscovered, affirmed . . . closure, by definition, is always potentially unsatisfactory" (225).

In the current treatment of *Billy Budd*, the researcher is not locating Melville's critique of the homosocial within his overarching concern with creating sea fiction. In this regard, views differ from Cesare Casarino's work on Melville's construction of sea life as a Foucauldian "heterotopia." David Greven has proposed to delineate Vere's ambiguity while quoting Cesare Casarino. Greven reiterates in *Gender and Society* on Casarino, "one can think of Foucault's heterotopia as a mode of representation, as a particular kind of space from and through which one can see and make new and different sense of all other spaces" (312). A fascination with the heterotopic social potentialities suggested by the narrative centrality of the figure of the ship in nineteenth century literature defines Casarino's work: "the point is that the space of the ship is definitionally constituted by the very fact that so many different modes of representation, so many irreconcilable spaces, and all their attendant political-historical contingencies and conjectures, coexist within it" (312-3). The

Melvillean ship becomes, for Casarino, a Foucauldian heterotopia par excellence. Casarino describes *Billy Budd*:

> The paradigmatic text of the encounter of the crisis of the ship as heterotopia par excellence with the crisis in constructions of sexuality . . . such an account finds its conditions of possibility in a half-century of experimentation with the heterotopic energies manifested and maintained in and as the space of the ship. (313)

In other words, the ship-bound negotiations with sexual desire and the social constructions they undergo in Melville and others' work culminate in *Billy Budd*. It is precisely at this critical juncture that Casarino's and Greven's work both merge and wrench apart.

The research is in agreement with Casarino's finding that "the ship embodies that desire that produces heterotopias: the desire to transcend the social while simultaneously representing it, contesting it, inverting it, the desire to escape the social while simultaneously changing it" (314). But, while agreeing that in *Billy Budd* culminate the evolving, cohesive, yet also heterogeneous negotiations in Melville between desire and the social order, this research locates *Billy Budd's* synthesization of these themes within its ship-setting or within its relationship to the ongoing development of the ship-as-social-space in Melville. For these purposes, Melville's narrativization of his own sea experiences--however interesting--is a separate issue (hence the importance of Casarino's work, which examines it discretely as such). In the researcher's view, the ship offers an especially dramatically stark, delimited zone for sexual/cultural negotiations--an effectively spare tidiness, if one will--but it is only one of such closed yet fecund spaces Melville chooses as the setting for homosocial

dramas, through which he reveals the implications and effects of homosociality as he views it.

To put this another way, Melville is, throughout his career, interested in both fashioning and violently critiquing the homosocial spaces he depicts as, simultaneously, inevitable, irresistible, and deadly. The ship, then, is a part of a revolving system of settings--like the Wall Street firm and world of “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” the realm of the Templars' homosocial club in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” the affectional zone of hopeful romantic male friendship (hopes pitilessly crushed, in the end) in *Billy Budd*. In Melville’s work, characters lend themselves to the staged representation of men's relationships to the homosocial order and this order's fraught, binding relationship to men. *Billy Budd* deploys the ship as a particularly fascinating sphere of homosocial, homoerotic desire--one perhaps even more terrifyingly inescapable and world-like than the firm or the club--yet the ship is also only one of many such spaces in which male groups wage wars of conflicting desires.

The research is also concerned in the theoretical aims of Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Michel Foucault --concerned as it is with the ship as a detonator of time and space--however brilliantly conceptualized, remind the historical and cultural contingencies of Melville's work. The research hopes to show, fanciful and dreamlike though it is, *Billy Budd’s* grappling with the social realities of its era--especially in terms of the separate gendered spheres of the nineteenth century--with a relevance that is frightening in its intensity. Casarino’s privileging of the “the space of the ship” as “the heterotopia of modernity” (qtd. in Greven 315) does not necessarily overlap with the hierarchical location of the ship in Melville's work and thought.

This research work is much more linked to James Creech's project both to restore a gay engagement with the literature of potentially queer authors like Melville and fashion a legitimate means whereby queer readings might make use of the coded and

specific lexical devices whereby certain authors, like Melville, potentially communicate queer content. Creech's theory is especially helpful in that, rather than explicitly communicating gay themes, in Melville and others, he has developed a ‘winking’ rhetoric that awaits the responses of certain readers. Having established the legitimacy of responding to such winks, however, Creech is careful to point out:

> Melville poses difficult problems for a camp epistemology of the wink... he does not... resolve the epistemological problems that we must face... We do not yet know the extent to which Melville had at his disposition, consciously or unconsciously, a shared language upon which the homosexual wink depends if it is to achieve the camp recognition that it seeks from the right readers... Only willful denial can purge Melville's novels of the yearning gazes and subtle glancings of homoerotic sexuality. (qtd. in Greven 307)

Beyond Melville's explicit references, then, and more pertinent to the problem at hand, are these homoerotic gazes in which his protagonists are themselves so often bathed. Understanding of such texts depends entirely on the freedom of mind. The parodistic crucifixion is the figural culmination of Melville's project, begun in *Typee* and synthesized in *Billy Budd*, to expose the religious, national, and sexual hypocrisies of his era, of which institutionalized homosociality is a prime example.

Interested in intersecting these potential spaces of homosociality, this research categorically exploits critical apprehensions among human sexuality and unavoidability of homo-eroticism in the following chapter before interpreting the text itself, which will succeed the former. All four chapters, along with conclusion, are meant to transcribe the research aspirations for which Melville’s text is appropriated.

II. Theoretical Modality

Homo-sociality

Homo-sociality is a term frequently used in discussions of the all-male world of knightly life in medieval culture. Homo-social relationships are not obliged to be sexual relationships; they are merely same-sex social interactions. The term homosociality is most often used with reference to male relationships. Critics used the term homosocial reproduction (originally, homosexual reproduction) to describe the alleged tendencies of corporate executives to socialize with and promote other men.

The term homosocial is particularly associated with the thought of Eve Sedgwick, and her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. She acknowledges that the term predates her in occasional usage, with a generic meaning: "homosocial is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex" (1). Sedgwick's contribution, however, is the notion that the boundaries between the social and the sexual are blurry, fuzzy; thus homosociality and homosexuality are connected and can never fully be disentangled. She acknowledges that the nature of this boundary varies from society to society and from era to era, and even within one society it can differ between women and men. Sedgwick eloquently sums up her basic argument in *Between Men*:

> [*Between Men*] attempted to demonstrate the immanence of men's same-sex bonds, and their prohibitive structuration, to male-female bonds in nineteenth-century English literature. . . .[The book] focused on the oppressive effects on women and men of a cultural system in which male-male desire became

> widely intelligible primarily by being routed through triangular desire involving a woman. (15)

Her primary concern in the text is to bring into light the social hazards among male- male relationships that consists of social ostracization of those characters in English literature, and the difficulty that persists in classifying them. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick argues that "virtually any aspect of modern Western culture, must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition"(58). According to Sedgwick, homo/heterosexual definition has become so angrily argued over because of a lasting incoherence "between seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority . . . and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities"(61). This contradiction between what Sedgwick refers to as a "minoritizing versus universalizing" view of sexual definition is even more angrily argued over by yet another set of incoherent definitional terms: that "between seeing same-sex object choice on the one hand as a matter of liminality or transitivity between genders, and seeing it on the other hand as reflecting an impulse of separatism — though by no means necessarily political separatism — within each gender" (62). Sedgwick is not interested in judging which of the two poles of these contradictions should be considered more correct. Rather, she makes a compelling argument for the "centrality of these nominally marginal yet

conceptually intractable set of definitional issues to the important knowledges and understandings of twentieth-century Western culture as a whole" (1-2).

Sedgwick points to how, in the contemporary United States, there is a clear connection and continuum (but not an identity) between the desire of women to help their fellow women (feminism) and the desire of women for their fellow women (lesbianism). However, turning to men, the story is different: patriarchy is analogous to feminism; in that it involves social relations among men (she connects this to Heidi Hartmann's notion of patriarchy) as "relations between men which create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" (2); yet the men who most further patriarchy are also (at least publicly/consciously) those who are most homophobic. She writes:

> When Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms get down to serious log rolling on family policy, they are men promoting men's interests. Is their bond in any way congruent with the bond of a loving gay male couple? Reagan and Helms would say no--disgustedly. Most gay couples would say no--disgustedly. But why not? Doesn't the continuum between "men-loving-men" and "men-promoting-the-interests-of-men" have the same intuitive force that it has for women? (3)

She also cites ancient Greece as an example of a very different society, where there was a clearly observable continuum between men furthering men's interests and male homosexuality. One of Sedgwick's major theses, however, is that the seeming male heterosexual in our society is actually a displacement of male homosocial desire. When men desire women, she argues, often the ultimate object of the desire is not the woman desired, but rather other men; the desire for women serves as a conduit through which the desire for men can be expressed. She develops this through René

Girard's study of love triangles (in *Desire, Deceit and the Novel*, 1961), and his thesis that in a love triangle the desire between the rivals is just as strong if not stronger than the desire between each rival and the beloved, in conjunction with the notion of patriarchal society as involving traffic in women (and especially notion of traffic in women constituting male homosexuality), although Sedgwick acknowledges “the male homosexuality discussed here turns out to represent anything but actual sex between men” (26)). She also discusses how homophobic blackmail actually serves male homosocial ends: “the result has been a structural residue of terrorist potential, of Western maleness through the leverage of homophobia” (89).

In sociology, homosociality describes same-sex relationships that are not of a romantic and/or sexual nature. For example, a heterosexual male who prefers to socialize with men may be considered a homosocial heterosexual. Homosociality implies neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality.

The Queers

Webster’s New World College Dictionary (fourth edition) defines queer as an adjective for human attitude “differing from what is usual or ordinary; odd; singular; strange; having mental quirks; eccentric,” and “slang for homosexual; in general usage still chiefly a slang term for contempt or derision, but lately used by some academics and homosexual activists as a descriptive term without negative connotations” (III). The definition consists of the historical treatment of queer through ages, and thus eulogizes the genesis of such practices in society. Victoria Pitts puts the process of theorizing queer experiences in her most celebrated essay Visibly Queer: Body Technologies and Sexual Politics published in *The Sociological Quarterly*: “queer body modification is a site for investigating the possibilities and limitations of agency in body practices” (443-63). This article considers the use of new and

recirculated body modification technologies--many of them modeled after practices of indigenous, non-western groups--by members of gay, lesbian, and transgendered communities. The article also upholds the contours of narratives likewise fashioned after social indifference and frigidity as is manifested by the samples chosen by the author. Pitts' observation further contends:

> By creating anomalous bodies that provoke shock and consternation, body modifiers not only underscore the body's symbolic significance as a site of public identity but also conceive it as a resource for opposing (hetero) dominant culture. Body modification, even though it tests social tolerance, is not guaranteed in its subversive effects. I approach the narratives from a perspective informed by feminist Poststructuralism, and I understand body modifiers' agency as limited by and constituted within regulatory regimes of power, such as heteronormativity, pathologization, and colonialism. (443)

Such modifiers constituted under "regulatory regimes of power" can generally fail to assume the individual sexual identity, and can interfere in the exposition of true identity. However, Pitts is optimistic over the recent developments in creating new base for queer identity: "in recent years, new and recirculated body modification technologies have been deployed by queer and other subcultural communities to create anomalous, spectacular figures that not only provoke shock or consternation but also underscore norms of embodiment, sexuality, and gender" (443). The discourse has boiled the traditional beliefs to create new vapor regarding the question of representation.

In stigmatizing sexuality the agencies that create power, and the system to regulate it, play vital role. Pitts asserts, "among gay, lesbian, and transgendered body

modifiers, the meaning of body modification is narrated in a queer discourse that underscores the body's location in a context of power relations that produces/regulates gender and sexuality" (444). The intentional othering of so-called derisive behaviors is the consequence of various forms of colonialism: "Scarification, branding, and other body modification technologies are employed, then, as limited practices of agency within normalizing and hegemonic discourses that construct, link, and regulate categories such as sexuality/ health/perversion and nation/race/ethnicity" (444).

Similar version of identifying Queer sensibility appears in *The Trouble with Normal*, in which Warner contended that queer theory and the ethics of a queer life serve as critiques of existing social and economic structures, not just is critique of heterosexuality and heterosexual society. Warner coined the term heteronormativity in an article published in the journal *Social Text,* entitled, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet." His latest book, *Publics and Counterpublics* is a collection of essays on the politics of communication in advanced capitalistic societies, or Habermasian public sphere theory. That individuals who employ body practices operate from different (and shared) subject positions in relation to dominant, heteronormative culture and that body practices themselves can buttress or deviate from dominant notions of the body, race, sexuality, and gender render body practices heterogeneously significant. The narratives below of white, urban, gay, lesbian, and transgendered body modifiers reveal how body modification is perceived, experienced, and presented as a rebellious performance that engages a set of queer issues involving pleasure, visibility, community, and assimilationism. The narratives also reveal the role of disciplinary pressures, such as pathologization, in shaping the experiences of gay body modifiers. They suggest difference and particularity (in regard to gender and sexuality) and also

reveal their shared positioning in dominant cultures in regard to race/ethnicity and Western privilege.

Human Sexuality

Sigmund Freud's "Three Essays on Human sexuality" (1905) is the first ever published discourse, which helps to shape the fate of psychoanalysis. This work is an investigation on human sexuality. At that time the topic of sex was taboo and any public expression of it might have been resulted in social isolation. Before defining the concept of sexuality, Freud questioned and requested his neurotic patients to speak openly about their sexuality. And he assembled all the findings and the details in the Three Essays. Freud's theoretical work extends the concept of sexuality as follows:

> That extension is of a two-fold kind. In the first place sexuality is divorced from its too close connection with the genitals and is regarded as a more comprehensive bodily function having pleasure as its goal and only secondarily coming to serve the ends of reproduction. In the second place the sexual impulses are regarded as including all of those merely affectionate and friendly impulses to which usage applies the exceedingly ambiguous word 'love'. (272)

The citation encapsulates the broader concept of sexuality, which is not only related with the sexual organs but rather is such a bodily act directed to pleasure primarily, and reproduction secondarily. Thus sexuality got its hitherto unexplored and unexpressed dimension- pleasure. Moreover, feelings and emotions like love have their roots in the very same sexual impulses.

In the first essay "The sexual Aberration," Freud has investigated the nature and characteristics of sexual instinct. He introduces two technical terms: 'sexual object' and 'sexual aim'. He defines sexual object as "the person from whom sexual

attraction proceed" (282), and sexual aim as "the act towards which the instinct tends" (282). Then, the deviation in respect of the sexual object and the sexual aim is listed and explained.

The people whose sexual object is of same sex are described as having contract sexual feeling, or as inverts. According to the behaviors of inverts Freud categorizes three types of inverts: "absolute inverts are those whose 'sexual objects are exclusively of their own sex', Amphigenic inverts lack the characteristics of exclusiveness and it is 'psychosexual hermaphrodites', and Contingent inverts are capable of deriving satisfaction from sexual intercourse with the sexual object of their own sex whenever there is 'inaccessibility of any normal sexual object' (282). The characterization of inversion involves two suppositions. Either it is innate or it is acquired. However, Freud is critical of both these suppositions. In his explanation of inversion he argues:

> The nature of inversion is explained neither by the hypothesis that it is innate nor by the alternative that it is acquired. In the former case, we must ask in what respect it is innate, unless we are to accept the crude explanation that everyone is born with his sexual instinct attached to a particular sexual object. In the latter case, it maybe questioned whether the various accidental influences would be sufficient to explain the acquisition of inversion without the cooperation of something in the subject himself. As we have already shown the existence of this latter factor is not to be denied. (286)

Thus, Freud shows the problems inherent in both suppositions. If one believes it to be innate, one must accept that ones sexual instinct is attached to a particular sexual object by birth. If inversion is taken as acquired, how can it be acquired without the

cooperation of something within himself? Though the theory of psychical hermaphroditism assumes that “the sexual object of an invert is the opposite of that of a normal person” (289), it cannot be applied universally. In conclusion Freud writes:

> It has been brought to our notice that we have the habit of regarding the connection between the sexual instincts and the sexual object as more intimate that it in fact is. Experience of the cases that are considered abnormal has shown us that in them the sexual instinct and the sexual object are merely soldered together- a fact which we have been in danger of overlooking in consequence of the uniformity of the normal picture, where the object appears to form part and parcel of the instinct. (292)

In the 1960s and 1970s, sociologists (along with anthropologists and others) contributed significantly to a fundamental shift in the theorization of sexuality and homosexuality. Against naturalized conceptions of sexuality as a biological given, against Freudian models of the sexual drive. Sexuality was naturalized in two senses: first, in the dominant assumption that human sexuality should be understood as a biological function rooted in evolutionary imperatives which are then translated straightforwardly into social institutions and cultural norms; second, in the acceptance of the corollary that certain expressions of sexuality are natural, while others are therefore unnatural.

The publication in English of Foucault's short yet dazzling first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1980) consolidated the emergent constructionist perspective, even as it provoked new controversies and suggested critiques of some of the sociological approaches within that perspective. Three volumes of *The History of Sexuality* were published before Foucault's death in 1984. The first and most

referenced volume, *The Will to Knowledge* (previously known as *An Introduction* in English — *Histoire de la sexualité, 1: la volonté de savoir* in French) was published in France in 1976, and translated in 1977, focusing primarily on the last two centuries, and the functioning of sexuality as an analytics of power related to the emergence of a science of sexuality (*scientia sexualis*) and the emergence of biopower in the West. In this volume he attacks the repressive hypothesis, the widespread belief that we have, particularly since the nineteenth century, repressed our natural sexual drives. He shows that what we think of as repression of sexuality actually constituted sexuality as a core feature of our identities, and produced a proliferation of discourse on the subject.

Whereas symbolic interactions often risked eliding history and social structure in its emphasis on concrete social interaction, Foucault trained his attention on the big picture: sexual and erotic desire encompassed a diverse set of practices, strategies, discourses, institutions, and knowledge that were historically contingent and were played out on a dispersed field of power. In Foucault's account, sexual categories--homosexual, heterosexual, and the like--are themselves products of particular constellations of power and knowledge. The recent historical emergence in Western societies of the homosexual and other sexual types, Foucault claimed, "reflected a shift in the tactics of power from an emphasis on sexual behavior to one on sexual personhood: in place of the opposition between natural and unnatural acts, sexual experience would be divided into normal and abnormal identities" (1). Sexuality therefore became a central site for the construction of subjectivity. At the beginning of seventeenth century certain frankness was still common, it would seem, sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with

the illicit. Codes regulating the coarse, the obscene, and the indecent were quite lax compared to those of nineteenth century: “It was a time of shameless discourse, and open transgressions, when anatomies were shown and intermingled at will . . .it was a period when bodies ‘made a display of themselves’ (qtd. in Foucault 3). In the Victorian age “sexuality was carefully confined; on the subject of sex, silence became the rule . . .a single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents bedroom” (3). Foucault holds that “the history of sexuality must be seen first of all as the chronicle of an increasing repression” (5).

This discourse on modern sexual repression holds up well owing no doubt to how easy it is to uphold. By placing the advent of the age of repression in the seventeenth century, after hundreds of years of open spaces and free expression, Foucault adjusts it to coincide with the development of capitalism: “it became an integral part of bourgeois order” (5). Foucault further contends:

> At a time when labor capacity was being systematically exploited, sex and its effect are perhaps not so easily deciphered: on the other hand, their repression, thus reconstructed, is easily analyzed. And the sexual cause- the demand for sexual freedom, but also for the knowledge to be gained from sex and the right to speak about it- becomes legitimately associated with the honor of a political cause: sex too is placed on the agenda for the future.(6)

It is certainly legitimate to ask why sex was associated with sin for such a long time- although it would remain to be discovered how this association was formed: “repression is so firmly anchored, having solid roots and reason, and weighs so heavily on sex that more than one denunciation will be required in order to free

ourselves from it" (8). There was a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex-specific discourses, different from one another both by their form and their object: a discursive ferment that gathered momentum from the eighteenth century onward. "This scheme for transforming sex into discourse had been devised long before in an ascetic and monastic setting," Foucault investigates, "the seventeenth century made it into a rule for every one" (21). Since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and increasing valorization of the discourse on sex: and that "this carefully analytically discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself" (23). Foucault reiterates:

> Not only were the boundaries of what one could say about sex enlarged, and men compelled to hear it said; but more important, discourse was connected to sex by a complex organization with varying effects, by a deployment that can not be adequately explained merely by referring it to a law of prohibition, A censorship of sex? (23)

First there was medicine, "via the nervous disorders; next psychiatry, when it said out to discover the etiology of mental illness, focusing its gaze first on excess," (30) then "frauds against procreation," (30). "But especially when it annexed the whole of sexual perversions as its own province," Foucault elaborates, "which had long been concerned with sexuality particularly in the form of 'heinous' crimes and crimes against nature" (30). Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, the state broadened its jurisdiction to include petty offences, minor indecencies, insignificant perversions; and lastly, "all those social controls cropping up at the end of the last century, which screened the sexuality of the couples, parents and children, dangerous and endangered adolescents -- undertaking to protect" (30). Foucault speculates over the nature of

modern societies in terms of their treatment of sex: “what is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum,* while exploiting it as *the* secret” (35). Foucault further illumines the emergence of perverts and illnesses related to sex:

> Through the various discourses, the legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied; sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness; from childhood to old age, a norm of sexual development was modern societies defined and all the possible deviations were carefully described; pedagogical controls and medical treatments were organized; around the least fantasies, moralists, but especially doctors, brandished the whole emphatic vocabulary of abomination. (36)

Prohibitions bearing on sex were essentially of juridical nature. The nature on which they were based was still a kind of law. For a long time hermaphrodites were criminals, or crimes offspring, since their anatomical disposition, their very being, and “confounded the law that distinguished the sexes and prescribed their union” (38).

Foucault makes a critique of systems conceived by the West for governing sex: “the law of marriage and the order of desires” (40). He brings the instance of Lord Byron’s famous character Don Juan as a figure of rebellion—“and the life of Don Juan overturned them both” (40). Foucault mimics the then social system, “we shall leave it to psychoanalysts whether he was homosexual narcissistic, or impotent (40). Although not without delay and equivocation, the natural laws of matrimony and immanent rules of sexuality began to be recorded in two separate registers. There emerged a world of perversion that partook of that of legal or moral infraction, yet was not simply a variety of a letter: “from the end of the eighteenth century to our

own they circulated through the pores of society" (40). Foucault describes the social treatment of those who transgress the sexual boundaries created by society:

> They were always hounded, but not always by laws; were often locked up, but not always in prisons; were sick perhaps, but scandalous, dangerous victims, prey to a strange evil that also bore the name of vice and sometimes crime. In the course of the century they successively bore the stamp of 'moral folly,' 'genital neurosis,' 'aberration of the genetic instinct,' 'degenerescence,' or 'physical imbalance.' (40)

Human sexuality, however, does not follow the rules of restriction. The more society attempts to repress it, the more it flourishes in different colors. "Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul," Foucault examines the overt expression of homosexuality, "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43). He endows the emergence of homosexuality to nineteenth-century bourgeois society:

> Nineteenth-century "bourgeois" society – and it is doubtless still with us – was a society of blatant and fragmented perversion. And this was not by a way of hypocrisy, for nothing was more manifest and more prolix, or more manifestly taken over by discourse and institutions. Not because having tried to erect too rigid or too general a barrier against sexuality, society succeeded only in giving rise to a whole perverse outbreak and a long pathology of sexual instinct . . .pleasure and power reinforced one another. (47)

The changing economic and political scenario did not set up a barrier; it provided places of maximum saturation. It produced and determined a sexual mosaic. Modern society is perverse, “not in spite of its Puritanism or as if from a backlash provoked by its hypocrisy; it is in actual fact, and directly, perverse” (47). “The growth of perversions is not a moralizing theme that obsessed the scrupulous minds of Victorians,” Foucault outlines, “It is the real product of the encroachment of a type of power on bodies and their pleasures” (48).

The second two volumes, *The Use of Pleasure* (*Histoire de la sexualite, II: l'usage des plaisirs*) and *The Care of the Self* (*Histoire de la sexualité, III: le souci de soi*) dealt with the role of sex in Greek and Roman antiquity. Both were published in 1984, the year of Foucault's death, with the second volume being translated in 1985, and the third in 1986. In his lecture series from 1979 to 1980 Foucault extended his analysis of government to its wider sense of techniques and procedures designed to direct the behavior of men, which involved a new consideration of the examination of conscience and confession in early Christian literature. These themes of early Christian literature seemed to dominate Foucault's work, alongside his study of Greek and Roman literature, until the end of his life. However, Foucault's death left the work incomplete, and the planned fourth volume of his *History of Sexuality* on Christianity was never published. The fourth volume was to be entitled *Confessions of the Flesh* (*Les aveux de la chair*). The volume was almost complete before Foucault's death and a copy of it is privately held in the Foucault archive. It cannot be published under the restrictions of Foucault's estate.

Dr. Gary W. Wood theorizes the characteristic features of homosexuals, though the society has already witnessed the overlapping/blurring of sexual boundaries. “There is more at stake because a strong component of attitudes to male

homosexuality is the sense of deviation from the narrow confines of the traditional male role, Wood contends in *Sex Lies and Stereotypes: Challenging Views of Women Men and Relationships*, "transcending these restrictions and breaching boundaries of masculinity represents a challenge to male power" (163). Wood furthers his argument:

> The term 'homosexual' was first used to refer to effeminate men who took the passive role in sex with masculine men. Thus, it was acknowledged at the same-sex desire had different meanings for each of the participants. A man who allowed to be penetrated by another man undertook the role traditionally ascribed to a female. (qtd. in Wood 163-64)

Wood's observation denies the categorization of sexuality: female and male roles are present in any forms of sexual practices. For him construction of human sexuality depends more on gender roles assigned to male and female.

A significant part of discourses on sexuality comes from Judith Butler. Butler's argument concerns the role of sex in the construction of natural or coherent gender and sexuality. In *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), Butler explicitly challenges biological accounts of binary sex, reconceiving the sexed body as itself culturally constructed by regulative discourse. The supposed obviousness of sex as a natural biological fact attests to how deeply its production in discourse is concealed. "The sexed body, once established as a 'natural' and unquestioned 'fact,' is the alibi for constructions of gender and sexuality, unavoidably more cultural in their appearance," she argues, "which can purport to be the just-as-natural expressions or consequences of a more fundamental sex" (6).On Butler's account, "it is on the basis of the construction of natural binary sex that binary gender and heterosexuality are likewise constructed as natural" (7). In this way, Butler claims that "without a

critique of sex as produced by discourse, the sex/gender distinction as a feminist strategy for contesting constructions of binary asymmetric gender and compulsory heterosexuality will be ineffective" (8). Butler further argues:

> The abject body can be a "critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the . . . terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility" for contemporary body- subjects. Practices such as performance art, drag, women's bodybuilding, and anti-aesthetic cosmetic surgery, as well as the scarring, branding, tattooing, and piercing in body modification subculture, have been conceived from this viewpoint as radical or countercultural, potentially undermining normative, hegemonic, or traditional categories of identity. (3)

In Judith Butler's formulation, gender is performed as the body is stylized. Following Foucault's insistence that subjectivities are produced through discursive regimes and technologies of the self, Butler argues that the everyday production of hegemonic heterosexuality is accomplished through bodily practice and figures centrally in women's subordination, in the subordination of those who reside outside the sexual mainstream, and in the buttressing of oppressive, binary gender roles. Yet because they are constituted by and within the practices of embodiment, gender and gendered bodies are not wholly immutable. This feminist emphasis on practice affords not only a dynamic reading of discursive formations such as (hetero) sexuality but also the possibility of agency--the body--subject is not only socially controlled, but because it is constituted by practices, it is open to the possibility of deconstruction and re-inscription. Some poststructuralist feminist and queer theorists have taken up the ambiguous/anomalous body as a space that potentially elides the effects of normative gender socialization.

III. Eve-less Genesis: Homosociality and Queer Desire in *Billy Budd, Sailor*

Billy Budd, Sailor contests and supplements numerous accounts in homosocial instances emphasizing the relation between society and individual. Melville's narrative illustrates the ways in which subjects are bound even to an unjust law not only by fear but also by love. The judgment against and execution of Billy Budd, a signal enactment of legal violence, require the repression of powerful erotic bonds between Captain Vere and Billy; and Billy's execution is legitimated by the reassertion of those bonds via a chain of homoerotic identifications at the moment of his death. Melville's novella shows the relation between subjects and the law to be constituted and maintained by an ambivalent fusion of violence and love.

What makes Melville's deconstruction of desire so important is precisely its attempt to represent sexuality as something that resists representation, its ambiguity reflecting the extent to which our existing modes of reality cannot account. Impatience with respect to Melville's ambiguities might be one of the problems of Billy Budd. He is too anxious to show sexual identity as a positive, existing quality, rather than as an absence. Here Melville's portrayal of sexual desire finds substantial parallels with contemporary queer theory. While this approach to sexual identity as an absence is bound to be a controversial one, it is not without a highly developed genealogy in queer theory. Melville's work identifies this strand of queer identity in the figure of Captain Vere's parody of the self with liberationist inflection of gay subjectivity. As explained earlier, it would be right to claim that such alternative, perhaps masochistic, queer sexualities are existent: rather, as a void, they exist insofar as they foreground the absence of positive content.

The task toward which queer desire is aimed, that of transgressing the given coordinates of sexual desire, practice, and identity, to reconfigure the boundaries of

the self and the Other, demands the ambiguity with which Melville describes the "much more than friendly attachment" (17) between Billy Budd and Captain Vere. In its ambiguity, its resistance to representation, queer desire can function to resist the forces, which seek to categorize it in, fixed cartographies of identity in *Billy Budd, Sailor*. Author is able to deploy language to contain the radical potential of 'transgressive' sexuality in Melville's work:

> The moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make. Indeed, except as toned by the former, the comeliness and power, always attractive in masculine conjunction, hardly could have drawn the sort of honest homage the Handsome Sailor in some examples received from his less gifted associates. (*Billy Budd* 9)

When considering this passage in the context of Melville's treatments of sexuality, it is plausible to conclude that he offers the more reactionary depiction. This detail is essential in that it demonstrates how the project that Billy Budd undertakes to go beyond the bounds of language entails a sort of willful drive directed toward self-annihilation.

In an uncanny twist on the interpellation of the subject, perhaps we might suggest that to easily recognize one, as being hailed as queer entails that one is not one, if we take queer to signify alternative sexual-social configurations that escape existing structures of meaning. In this paradigm to fully embrace the free-floating identity of a queer would be synonymous with completely submitting one's subjectivity to erasure.

In this respect, it is proposed that one might read Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* as enacting such an annihilation of the humanist subject, in which its queer holds both its liberating potential and the seeds of its own destruction. To reorient ourselves back

to the novel in question, I parallel this concept of queer with the trope of the empty pyramid in *Billy Budd, Sailor* both symbolize an emptiness that defies any taxonomical structure.

It is simply the self-destruction of liberal individualism on a scale never seen before or since. In addition to this compelling scene, the extent to which Melville depicts Captain Vere and Billy Budd in the long dark sequences when they first meet, the novel works to explore the self-annihilating nature of radical reconfigurations of sexual identity: the numerous scenes of poorly lit bodies that Vere shoots enable an art of invisible subjects and emergent identities.

It is precisely through the novel's ability to show darkness, to occupy the frame with nothing, while at the same time showing the movement of this nothingness through space, that the viewer becomes convinced of a reality that cannot be figured. In the final pages of *Billy Budd*, the narrative focus becomes blurry, the angle goes askew, at which moment the reader is jarred from melodramatic identification--the realm in which Vere exists is utterly foreign to representation, textual or otherwise.

In the first eight chapters, the narrator attempts to sketch the histories of these men-- first Billy Budd, then Captain Vere, then John Claggart. Billy is "impressed" (9) into the British navy, then (1797) at war with the French. A lieutenant boards the merchant ship, the *Rights-of-Man*, that Billy has worked on for some time, and selects only him to bolster the crew of the Bellipotent, without any consideration of Billy's or the merchant captain's desires. Apparently Billy was selected because he has the charismatic qualities of what the narrator calls the "Handsome Sailor," (8) a leader both physically and morally:

> He was young, and, despite his all but fully developed frame, in aspect looked even younger than he really was, owing to a lingering

> adolescent expression in the as yet smooth face all but feminine in purity of natural complexion but where, thanks to his seagoing, the lily was quite suppressed and the rose had some ado to flush through the tan. (14-15)

Billy appears to be exceedingly simple, an "upright barbarian," (9) but factual knowledge of him is limited to his status as an orphan. Of his family history only speculation is possible. Captain Vere, on the other hand, traces his ancestors well back into the seventeenth century; he is well read, respected for his intelligence and open heart; he is a dedicated seaman and an efficient disciplinarian. About as much of Claggart's life before service on the *Bellipotent* is known "as an astronomer knows about a comet's travels prior to its first observable appearance in the sky" (29).

Chapters nine through seventeen develop the antagonism between Claggart and Budd -- though 'antagonism' must be used in a qualified manner since Budd holds no grudge against Claggart, and simply cannot understand why Claggart would dislike him. The reasons for this antagonism are unknown. The narrator suggests that perhaps the older man "envied Billy's personal beauty" (33), or saw in Billy the innocence he had lost. Because Claggart can "really form no conception of an unreciprocated malice" (33) he contrives traps for Billy. These incidents occur to test Billy's goodwill. Claggart has an underling disturb against Billy's possessions so that he would fail inspection. Then Billy accidentally spills his soup in front of Claggart, who reads the mess as intentional. Finally, another stooge of Claggart's fails to tempt Billy into mutinous plots, even though Billy could justly resent having been impressed on board.

Since none of these incidents produce Billy's downfall, Claggart escalates his attack by taking advantage of a failed chase of a French warship, in chapter eighteen,

to corner the captain and claim (falsely) that Billy had just revealed mutinous intentions. Vere is skeptical but arranges to question the two men privately in his cabin. In chapter nineteen, Claggart calmly accuses Billy, and instead of answering Claggart and clearing himself in front of the captain, Billy stutters and strikes Claggart directly on the forehead, killing him instantly.

In chapters twenty and twenty-one Billy is tried before the captain and three officers. He says to the court, could “I have used my tongue I would not have struck [Claggart]” (64). All four judges appear to believe in Billy’s good intentions, but Vere ultimately convinces them all that their duty is to hang Billy. They must send a clear message to the sailors that even the taint of “mutiny” on your name will result in severe punishment. “For that law [the Mutiny Act] and the rigor of it,” (68-9) Vere says, “we are not responsible” (69).

Chapters twenty-two to twenty-seven describe the last few hours of Billy's short life. Vere tells Billy of his sentence, in such a way that added to the feeling he already had for the good captain, and Billy seems to respect Vere all the more. Billy has one more night and spends the time peacefully and alone. At sunrise, the Handsome Sailor is hung. There is some grumbling of discontent among the sailors at this seemingly unwarranted event, but naval discipline represses any actual signs of protest. The body is wrapped in what was once his hammock, and, like Claggart's body a few hours earlier, tossed into the ocean.

In the final three chapters, the narrator follows the fate of Captain Vere, includes the naval report on the incident, tells how the spar from which Billy was hung and was “converted into a monument,” (86) and includes a poem by one of the sailors who knew Billy. Vere dies soon after in a fight with a French ship, and the men on board the Bellipotent who were present when Billy died all take a shard of the

beam from which Billy was hung, since to "them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross" (87). With these shards, the men remember Billy. The poem "Billy in the Darbies," which speculates on how Billy might have spoken in his last hours, closes the novel: "I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist" (88).

Providing the meaning to Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* has become an initiation rite in theory and criticism culture. David Greven has proposed to delineate Vere's ambiguity fermenting various dubious questions before providing us with his observations. Greven reiterates in *Gender and Society* that the meaning of Billy Budd usually comes "in the form of the position which the critic takes on the novella's presumably central moral question: the case either for or against Captain Vere of the ship Bellipotent" (312). It is Vere who sentences Billy Budd to death by hanging after Billy strikes the master--at-arms, Claggart--who has falsely accused Billy of mutiny--dead. "Did Captain Vere make the right choice?" (312) Greven interrogates, "Was it in his power to rescue Billy?" (313). But an answer to a seemingly Sphinx-like question--"is Vere right to insist that Billy Budd should be hanged or not?" (313)--does not provide meaning to the story, only a resolution, a classification, that the story resists, even as it resists the critical project of meaning-making. For Greven, interest in the meaning of the story lies not in the "Vere question," (314) but in an aspect of the story that is rarely, if ever, examined: "the uses and the significance of the figure of Billy Budd" (314). He writes:

> The critical history of *Billy Budd* is far too complex and vast to synthesize with any coherence in this essay, but the most salient point to be made is the strain that runs throughout it: a fetishistic regard for Christ like Billy Budd as a figure of divine good who is the battleground for the forces of good and evil, or rationality and chaos.

> And the case for or against Vere has displaced the titular figure of Billy Budd, whose qualities are of a seeming obviousness that does not inspire critical reflection. (315)

It is surprising that Billy Budd has so rarely been placed within the scheme of Melville's ongoing project--which is, to illuminate the drives that engineer a homosocial utopia, and, just as urgently, to critique both those drives and the counterfeit same-sex society (as Melville viewed it) they construct. Most astonishingly, the treatments of *Billy Budd* have tended to see the novel as a "healing affirmation of Melville's belief in Billy's goodness" (315). Even caustically insightful Lewis Mumford, in his biography of Melville, offered this exemplary verdict: "rascality may be punished; but beauty and innocence will suffer in that process far more . . . as Melville's own end approached, he cried out with Billy Budd: in this final affirmation Herman Melville died" (38-39).

Melville's work both critique the utopian underpinnings of privileged same-sex space while actively exploring the compulsory nature of immersion into the homosocial sphere for the individual subject. The radical figure of engagement with the pressures of homosocial kinship devised by Melville is an idiosyncratic literary invention: the inviolate, isolate male, who, in his balked, clenched nature, both cannot and refuses to participate in either heterosexual or homosexual relations, remaining determinedly sexually unavailable to members of either sex.

Melville likens Billy to "one of the beautiful women in one of Hawthorne's minor tales," suggesting he had Hawthorne on the brain (53). Hawthorne's effect on Melville, as has been expansively documented, was deeply profound. It is useful to see in the relationship between Melville and Hawthorne "the projective mutual accusation of two mirror-image men" (qtd. in Sedgwick 100). "Like Hawthorne"s

Dimmesdale [in *The Scarlet Letter*], inviolate vessel of manhood who trigger sexual attention he refuses to satisfy, the character of Billy Budd trenches on “the uncertain and the terrible”--in that white man’s culture regards as “freakish those with insufficiently demonstrated interest in procuring sexual fulfillment” (Greven 320).

In *Billy Budd*, the fraternal community is the order of the naval society onboard the ship Vere commands, the Bellipotent. Like other such orders in Melville the all-male community of the Bellipotent attempt to realize a utopian existence, one both facilitated and endangered by the new Handsome Sailor, Billy Budd. In Melville's treatment, the Handsome Sailor incites utopian impulses and serves as the overpowering manifestation of them. The Handsome Sailor is a recurring figure, embodied by different men in different times on different ships. Billy Budd happens to be the manifestation of the Handsome Sailor got in this story. It is important to consider, in the treatment of Billy Budd, that Billy Budd plays a type, manifests a recurring symbolic character, in the worlds of fraternal orders like those on Melvillean ships.

The homoerotic gaze powerfully informs *Billy Budd*. *Billy Budd* immerses both the gay subject and the gazer in a bottomlessly deep project of desiring looking. *Billy Budd* suggests that looking is a ritualistic group activity that cyclically incites and sustains (male) community. Each time The Handsome Sailor appears, a group of sailors, arrested by his visual splendor, converge upon and surround him. Looking becomes an act of tribal male cannibalism (cannibalism being an early Melville trope in the sea fiction)--the sailors ingest the Handsome Sailor with their eyes. The sailors' group gaze metonymically functions as the narrative's multivalent current of desire. But if the sailors devour the Handsome Sailor with their eyes (which are agents of

penetration), he is a meal that can't be kept down. Psychically digested throughout the narrative, Billy Budd is evacuated from it at the end.

If Billy Budd winks at the reader—that is, communicates homoerotic desire--it is the wink, so familiar to the reader of the seemingly dormant sea monster at its unsuspecting prey. Which is to say, the reader eventually drown in the homoerotic desire in which the story and he/she is bathed. The homoeroticism is the voice of the siren that drags the reader to his/her deaths. In desperate countermeasure, Melville impairs the siren with a stutter. The intense readability of homoerotic desires in the story serves the purpose of a larger point--Melville's pathetic exposure of the soullessness of all-male worlds. Locating the homoeroticism as the destination of the story, it is important--hugely so--as the vehicle for both the literary and the political journey of the story to the logic of homosociality itself.

Ruttenberg is one of the few critics to offer an account of Billy Budd that is less than celebratory: “Billy’s innocence cannot be considered a positive phenomenon; it is neither heroism nor righteousness . . . the innocence's violence functions as a black hole of purity, a central, if half-hid, warp through which narrative, in its transit from first paragraph to last, must pass” (qtd. in Greven 368). Given the hegemonic critical affirmation of Billy Budd as Christlike hero, this finding is positively heroic. Yet Ruttenberg's essay becomes a powerful meditation on the Melvillean pyrotechnics of narrative that is ultimately purgative of homoerotic and homosexual content. Ruttenberg casts Billy Budd as a Tempest-like valedictory statement from Shakespearean Melville: one that acknowledges the defeat of his tale because it “offers a ‘truth whereof I do not vouch,’ and a manifesto proclaiming the creation of a new genre, defiantly asymmetrical, flaunting its ‘ragged edges’ in the name of ‘the truth uncompromisingly told’” (qtd. in Greven 378). For Ruttenberg, Billy Budd is

harrowing evidence of “what happens when the hypothesized national poet . . . is actually made to perform in the fictitious life (379): hence the paralytic bind of the author, who must create a new truth out of the inability to tell a national lie. Ruttenberg finds:

> Melville's final novel thus textually enacts the paradox of inarticulate innocence as that which both legitimated and promised to redress the nation's enduring silence about itself... I propose that the novel offers Melville's retrospective account of his own professional failure. (qtd. in Greven 348)

These findings would be much more highly charged in their relevance if Ruttenberg systematically linked them to the novel's dizzying homoerotic sensibility. What Ruttenberg offers, instead, is an account of Melville's political radicalism effectively cleansed of all that distracting, disorienting, and homoerotic energy--a picture of radical politics in which the white noise of homoeroticism has been cleaned up. She thereby leaves her sharpest insights blunted:

> Billy's innocence is exposed as republican virtue gone decadent, or as the honesty of Nietzsche's beast which cannot 'dissimulate' and 'conceals nothing'...Melville shared Nietzsche's insight and demonstrated it repeatedly: for them, piety so conceived revealed a special ability to 'blendingly enter' the space of nihilism. (378)

The linkages between Melville and Nietzsche function here as practitioners of a (romantic) nihilism, but how much more powerful would Ruttenberg's piece be if it managed to intensify these linkages through a sustained analysis of *Billy Budd's* intrinsic homoerotic themes. The homoeroticism here is self-reflexive, a way for men to mirror their own desires back to themselves. *Billy Budd* stares itself down, exerting

its unflinching, leviathan-gaze at its own beastliness: the monstrous organism of homosociality, the logic of the decadent republic of men that, the novel shows, perpetually rises up, destroys, and reinvents itself.

For Melville and *Billy Budd*, homosociality achieves coherence only once it plots its own decimation--one figured, in Billy's pointedly meaningless, pseudo-sacrificial death, as a nihilistic parody of Christ's crucifixion. The homoeroticism and the nihilism of the text are inextricably linked. The homoerotic themes of the novel can be hygienically transmuted into meta-novelistic concerns. For emblematic example, the 'homoerotic and tautological exchange' between Billy and Claggart represents a self-referentiality reconstituted as violence. The sexual violence of the novel serves as a metaphor for a literary-aesthetic one, a process the novel obsessively inverts, in its deployment of the fiercest rhetorical violence to expose the violence of sexual politics.

Melville's depiction of Billy Budd is an effort to restore the story's interest in his very person to the general critical discussion of the text that foregrounds his homoerotic/homosexual themes. This is the implication of Melville's characterization of Billy Budd as an inviolate male. *Billy Budd* is thesis about the male world and its cathected relationship of Billy Budd as homoerotic icon.

Billy Budd's very first sentence plunges the reader into an all-male world. "In the time before steamships," the narrator tells us, "even a casual 'stroller' on 'any . . . seaport' might have his attention arrested by a group of bronzed mariners, man-of-war's men or merchant sailors in holiday attire, ashore on liberty" (*Billy Budd* 8). The tone of fairy-tale enchantment—"in the time before steamships" (8)--is crucial to this fantastic world ruled and riveted by men. The narrator further reports that these sailors would often "quite surround" a "superior figure of their own class," this "signal

object" being "the Handsome Sailor," who "seemed to accept the spontaneous homage of his shipmates," who may be taken as "representatives of the Human Race" (8). The Handsome Sailor is not a person, but a looming and monolithic fantasy, a "signal object" around which the men--all the men in the world, since these men represent the human race--revolve like satellites. No other evidence of his superior nature is offered save his transfixing, signal beauty; it instigates mass-male worship. From the story's start, the male world of Billy Budd hinges on the trope of male beauty, an attribute apotheosized into an ideal.

The Handsome Sailor, who mobilizes yet remains apart from the homosocial community, the apostles of his Beauty, is inherently a critique of this community, because he instigates it yet is never a member of it. It is the need to form the homosocial community, however inherently flawed or incomplete it may be, that Melville critiques in *Billy Budd*.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes of the forces driving this text as homosexual ones: "every impulse of every person...that could at all be called desire could be called homosexual desire, being directed by men exclusively toward men" (92). If the story is accurately read in this way, Melville then treats male homosexuality as a fundamental social model in *Billy Budd*. He treats it the way one prominent gay theorist does. Why does Melville write a text in which women are so consciously excluded--and consciously? When the story of the Fall is invoked, only Adam and the snake who "wriggled" into his company--the male body is constantly in danger of being penetrated in this tale--are mentioned (52). It's an Eveless Genesis. Yet Melville does want it both ways. Through the mesmerizing figure of Billy Budd, Melville catalyzes the just barely suppressed homoerotic yearnings of the crew and of the tale itself into increasing violence, a violence that gathers full force in Billy's death. In

other words, Billy is both the carrot on the stick with which the narrator lures out the homoeroticism and the stick itself, used as a bludgeoning instrument of castigation and death. For Melville, naval life is a kind of sacred, priestly order. As the novel describes it, it is an order comprised exclusively of male homoerotic relations. An institutionalized version of male homosocial/erotic relations, the male world of *Billy Budd* produces not democracy but tyranny, the subservience of Billy Budd to Captain Vere.

Billy is a desirable figure because "plump upon first sight" of him, the Bellipotent's lieutenant "pounces" on Billy (10). Billy is spontaneously elected foretopman. It is a very good thing that Billy "makes no demur," since any such rebuttal "would have been as idle" as that of a "goldfinch popped into a cage" (10):

> Plump upon Billy at first sight in the gangway the boarding officer lieutenant Ratcliff pounced, even before the merchantman's crew was formally mustered on the quarter deck for his deliberate inspection. And him only he elected. For whether it was because the other men when range before him showed to ill advantage after Billy, or whether he had some scruples in view of the merchantman being rather short-handed, however it might be, the officer contended himself with his first spontaneous choice. To the surprise of the ship's company, though much to the lieutenant's satisfaction, Billy made no demure. But, indeed, any demure would have been as idle as the protest o a goldfinch popped into a cage. (10)

In this very first paragraph of Billy's presence, three key elements of his persona are established: his immediate desirability, his conventionally feminine, "womanly" obsequiousness (no demur), and his (trapped) animal nature. Congruously, these

elements cohere into a distinctively feminized, thus endangered and vulnerable (again, conventionally feminine), man. Yet the story also treats Billy as irreducibly male in that his masculine strength--his ability to kill with one thrust of his murderous arm--is from the start emphasized. The idea is that Billy is a male with both hyper-masculine; and, conventionally female elements are the core of the work.

The master of the Rights plaintively cries to the Bellipotent's lieutenant, twice, "you're going to take my best man from me, the jewel of 'em" (12):

> But they all love him. Some of 'em do his washing, darn his old trousers for him; the carpenter is at odd times making a pretty little chest of drawers for him. Anybody will do anything for Billy Budd; and it's the happy family here…. "Aye, lieutenant, you are going to take away the jewel of 'em; you are going to take away my peacemaker!" (12)

The situation on the Rights of Man before Billy's impressments on it, describes the master, was "black" (12): "but Billy came . . . they took to him like hornets to treacle" (11). This is one of the most explicit indications in the text that Melville's attitudes towards Billy and the crew are less than warmly fond: Billy is sticky-sweet, finally repulsive treacle, the men buzzing, and voracious hornets. This, of course, nicely prefigures the ritual eating of the Host--Billy's execution --by the end.

"All but the buffer of the gang" is rhapsodic over Billy, the scenario nearly exactly and eerily foreshadows that imminently onboard the Bellipotent. The publicly disdainful buffer gives Billy a jab under the ribs, to which Billy responds, "quick as lightning" with a "fly" of "his arm" (12). Unlike Claggart, the buffer does not plummet to the ground in death. He survives; joining in happily with the mass adulation accorded Billy. He grows to "really love Billy" (12). Then again, the master

gushes, “they all love him . . . it’s a happy family here” (12). The familial affection extends itself to Billy's old trousers, ever darned by the crew, one of whom, the carpenter, "is at odd times making a pretty little chest of drawers for him" (47). Billy incites familial feeling--it's no surprise that he's also called Baby Budd. His presence instigates and legitimizes the burly sailors' feminine sides, which serve to feminize Billy, who is poked, prodded, like a sexually harassed office worker. But, Billy Budd reforms the brusque, brute buffer into a canine worshipper of Billy--Billy Budd flattens out and equalizes tensions in the men, and the men themselves. The Rights is a kinder, gentler Bellipotent. It's striking that the same situation, if not their outcomes, exist for Billy from ship to ship. What is being suggested here is that all male utopias operate by the same principles, and that Billy, as both the catalyst for and the flesh sacrifice to those principles, serves, as the Handsome Sailor, the same function on each ship. Melville creates an erotic palimpsest, on which the same, fraught scenes are painted over and over, with Billy a constant, vanishing glyph. And if, as many critics have understandably seen, Billy is a Christ figure, he perpetually instigates both apostle-like devotion and Judas-like deceit and betrayal.

“Lieutenant, you’re going to take my best man from me, the jewel of “em,” Billy, as the master describes him, is something rarefied and precious, something desirable in terms conventionally feminine. “Sorry,” responds the lieutenant, “but where's my Beauty?" he asks, searching for Billy (13). Already, Billy is Beauty, a trope rather than a person, an item--a jewel--possessed by his new superiors. When luggage-encumbered Billy staggers aboard the Bellipotent, he is again likened to a mythological figure, “Apollo with his portmanteau,” (14) which underscores his beauty and his status as a figure of light, a figment of the male utopian imagination, albeit, one paradoxically weighed down by a suitcase. “The note of parody is

important," Greven observes, "Billy Budd is a hellish parody of godlike manhood" (qtd in Greven 369).

When Billy utters his ominous line: "and goodbye to you . . . Rights-of-Man," (13) he inspires the disciplinarian side of the lieutenant who gruffly orders, "down, sir!" (13). Yet, the outwardly curmudgeonly lieutenant is secretly charmed by Billy: though he "instantly" assumes the entire "rigor of his rank," (13) he yet has difficulty "repressing a smile" (13). That 'down, sir,' and the half-riled, half-idolatrous way in which it's said, therefore, makes rather plain Melville's strategy for his depiction of nautical life here. This is, after all, the king's navy, staunch, ferocious, and necessarily severe. Yet, Billy present, it all becomes rather a game, a put-on: butch-drag. The surface severity is a ruse, as made clear by Billy's ability to charm even the militant, gruff lieutenant. Through Billy, Melville punctures the veneer of martial sternness presumably necessary to a great warship's efficiency, exposing an affectional camaraderie that is shown to be wholly pervasive.

Billy initially adapts quite swimmingly to the atmosphere aboard the Bellipotent. Throughout his depiction of Billy, the narrator enforces the power of Billy's good looks to sway the sailors. Little else is offered to support his immense success with the crew, which remains, save some key figures, blank and anonymous, an idolatrous, sweaty mob.

Yet, as shown by Chapter two, something is different onboard the Bellipotent. Billy has transmogrified--to his utter ignorance--from "the cynosure he had previously been on the Rights" to "something analogous to that of a rustic beauty transplanted from the provinces and brought into competition with the highborn ladies of the court" (15). He assumes this womanly role as the Handsome Sailor, and we are offered a depiction of Billy which transcends his status as Handsome Sailor--a loving,

spatially regulated description of Billy ensues, in which his beauty is itemized physical attribute by physical attribute, the narrator lingering over each corporeal detail like a collector savoring rare gems. One swath of the Billy palimpsest, the uppermost one, is indeed, 'heroic,' that is, conventionally male, something the Greek sculptor in some instances gave to his heroic strong man, Hercules. But that obvious, manly layer removed, the special qualities of Billy's special beauty may be appreciated:

> The ear, small and shapely, the arch of the foot, the curve in mouth and nostril, even the indurated hand dyed to the orange-tawny of the toucan's bill...but, above all, something in the mobile expression, and every chance attitude and movement, something suggestive of a mother eminently favored by Love and the Graces; all this strangely indicated a lineage in direct contradiction to his lot. (15)

The itemized list of Billy's endowments signifies that he is a visual subject, perpetually scanned, disassembled into components, an object of art weathered by the gaze. The concern over his lineage--presumably noble--adds a whiff to Billy's fate. But Billy is hardly fatherless. He has a horde of fathers looking after him, tending his laundry, carving out his furniture. When asked who his father is, Billy responds, "God knows, sir" (16). Billy's anonymity is crucial to his role as foretopman on this ship since he is the summoned-up manifestation of the sailors' desires for a self-sufficient connection and desires.

The sign of Billy's beauty is a screen behind which the murderous anxieties mobilizing the fraternal relations of the ship can hide. Romanticized though it is, the world of Billy Budd writhes in panic: panic of identity (Claggart), panic of upheaval (ever-threatening mutiny), panic of authority (Vere), and a general male sexual panic

of emasculation, which is to say, of penetration (rape) and castration. These last fears are underscored by the iterated references to “invading waters” () and to the spectacle of “spilled soup” on deck when Billy and Claggart have a puzzling incident. Every man aboard the Bellipotent lies in dread of the serpent wriggling into their company, even as they worship Billy. What so intrigues and maddens the execrable/pitiable Claggart is that Billy has never “experienced the reactionary bite of that serpent” (40). Literally, a bite from that reptile would be the kind of evil thoughts teeming in Claggart's brain. But the unbittenness of Billy also points to his inviolate virginity. Claggart despises Billy for his virginity, his moral and physical innocence. Only Claggart and Vere can appreciate the “moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd” (40). Billy Budd, to the extent that he is even aware of having a self, cannot appreciate himself as a being that might provoke multivalent speculation, much less as a moral phenomenon.

Claggart, the deviant ‘other’ on this ship, boils in his own high intellectuality--in some ways, he's evil because he thinks, and obsesses, too much. Vere is presented as a model of rationality, modulated good breeding and logic. Claggart and Vere stand-in for two destinies available to Billy, who serves as a battleground for their warring drives and programs, just as he serves as a vehicle for the sailors' utopian male desire. Billy Budd always serves, never lives; he is always the fulfillment of needs and fantasies, never the perpetrator of his own desires and wishes, never autonomous but always subservient to the yearnings of the crew. He is their true, desperately inviolate vessel.

The text endorses Claggart's envious apprehension of Billy. The narrator makes Billy Budd’s strengths and fatal flaw obvious: “though our Handsome Sailor had as much masculine beauty as one can expect to see,” nevertheless, there was just

one thing amiss in him, “a liability to vocal defect...in fact more or less of a stutter or even worse” (17). Without the power of speech fully at his command, Billy must rely all the more heavily on his physicality--his extruded, apparent self--to communicate with others. As the wily narrator wryly notes, Billy Budd's stutter is potent clarification that Satan, “the envious marplot of Eden,” still has everything to do with human life, and “is sure to slip in his little card” (17-8). The terrifying threat of such slippages to the integrity of the masculine self--the threat of penetration--will become the chief concern of the text.

The rational discourse that Billy Budd has only incomplete access to is what distinguishes him as male in the first place. In the world of *Billy Budd*, Billy Budd's failure to wield the power of phallogocentric discourse leaves him in the position of the decapitated Woman-- his stutter leaves him in the subject position of Woman. The rendering of Billy Budd as a kind of male Woman in this text is crucial to the staging of homosocial failure in Melville's work. The stutter is the story's vital wound, the site at and through which the story's and the sailors' conflicted yearnings can pass and cross. Billy's stutter simultaneously confirms one rigid mode of maleness precisely by symbolizing a ‘defect’ in Billy’s masculinity and ruptures this rigid mode by providing a conduit, fissure, or an entrance into the brawny armor of Billy's extruded masculinity. If Billy is a new Christ, then his stutter is his stigmata, bleeding on cue for the ‘sins’ of the homosocial community.

Billy Budd's subjecthood is never comprehensively but only scantily developed. But through his stutter, readers can learn what the fraternal order that converges around him needs: a point of entrance, a way in, to Billy’s magnetic but unknowable, unreachable interior. And because his speech or lack thereof allows Claggart to die with a contented post-coital smile on his face; Vere to rise to the

challenge of juridical expediency; and the men to mourn for the loss of the ideal of their fraternal order, to grieve cathartically for the necessary loss of the ideal which Billy Budd represents, a loss necessary because the homosocial community must be contained, Billy Budd's stutter signifies the internal conflict within his own relationship with the order he serves and enslaves.

The critical consensus on Billy as a kind of shimmering Christ-like figure of goodness misses the crucial satiric scheme of his depiction, since, for Melville, Billy Budd must be depicted as a laughable, bestial figure in order to castigate the community that idealizes him and which he metonymically represents. In the famously sexually suggestive scene of Billy's spilled soup on the scrubbed deck, Claggart is, of course, passing by, and

> The greasy liquid streamed just across his path. [He observes that Billy spilt it.] Pausing, he was about to ejaculate something hasty at the sailor but he checked himself, and, pointing down to the streaming soup, playfully tapped [Billy] from behind, saying . . . “Handsomely done, my lad. And handsome is as handsome did it, too.” (34)

The sailors laugh “with counterfeited glee” (34). Billy laughs because he is “tickled . . . by the allusion to his being the Handsome Sailor” and “merrily” says: “there now, who says Jemmy Legs is down on me!” (34). The business with the spilled greasy soup releases the premonitory, gathering sexual tensions of this all-male world. Claggart's momentary near-ejaculation-- signals that in some ways he craves a mutual sexual experience, or spilling of soup, with Billy. Absolutely tickled by his own status as the Handsome Sailor, a celebrity elated at being recognized, Billy relishes the public revelation that he is appreciated as a trope, delighting in his own function as symbol, cynosure, signal object, Handsome Sailor, Beauty, and Baby Budd.

When Billy finds himself in the “closeted” conference with Vere and Claggart after the latter has accused him of mutinying, Billy does not feel “either apprehension or distrust” (57):

> To an immature nature essentially honest and humane, forewarning intimations of subtler danger from one's kind come tardily if at all. The only thing that took shape in the young sailor's mind was this: Yes, the captain, I have always thought, looks kindly upon me. Wonder if he's going to make me his coxswain. I should like that. And maybe now he is going to ask the master-at-arms about me. (57)

At the time of his imminent death, Billy's concerns are about his being liked, being made the captain's coxswain. That Billy is unable to fathom the depths of Claggart's contempt for him strikes the narrator as a thing “to be wondered at” (47):

> Yet not so much ‘to be wondered at.’ In certain matters, some sailors even in mature life remain unsophisticated enough. But [Billy] . . . is much of a man-child. And yet a child's innocence is but its blank ignorance, and the ignorance more or less wanes as the intelligence waxes. But in Billy Budd intelligence, such as it was, had advanced, while yet his simplemindedness remained for the most part unaffected. ...He had none of that intuitive knowledge of the bad which in natures not good or incompletely so foreruns experience, and therefore may pertain as in some instances it too clearly does pertain, even to youth. (47)

This rumination on Billy is a subtly severe condemnation. Billy's inability to perceive the bad in others is a harrowing flaw. The degree of innocence that Billy represents simply cannot exist in the world; indeed, it becomes a kind of evil, the inability to

ever know or judge. In light of Claggart's sexual hunger for significantly beautiful Billy, of the myriad references to spilled soup and invading waters, one must see knowledge of the ‘bad’ in Billy Budd as post-lapsarian knowledge of sex.

Thus, Melville canvases the successful contestation against bonds with the opposite sex, and the successful formation of relationships within the homosocial sphere in *Billy Budd, Sailor*: figures male friendship as an escape from the gentle tyranny of home and woman. The most radical and troubling aspect of Melville's work of the homosocial is his insistence on locating homoerotic attraction as its foundation. The sharp separation of homosexual desire from homosocial intimacy seems absurdly indifferent to Melville's continuous insistence on suggesting the inextricability of both. But both, straight or queer, reading made above acknowledges the rampant homoerotic imagery and homosexual orientation of this text. In *Billy Budd*, Melville suggests that homosexual desire inspires homosocial community--precisely the reason why such a community must implode.

IV. Conclusion

Melville's fictional project, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, is oriented toward his profound effort to blur the established taxonomies of sexual desire, gains much of its power subverting normative heterosexual identity and practice. Recalling the utopian elements discussed earlier in Melville's insistence on the inadequacy of language to capture experience, the more challenging position is one that seeks to frustrate the existing bounds of sexual identity in *Billy Budd, Sailor*. Nevertheless, the text serves to explore and dissect proposed hypothesis that the zone of romantic male friendship is destroyed and the hopes of homosocial utopia are pitilessly crushed because of the society that regards homosexuality as exceptional and unnatural.

Rather than the uniform concern to hide sex, rather than a general prudishness of language, what distinguishes *Billy Budd, Sailor* is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it: around sex, a whole network of varying specific and coercive transpositions into discourse. Rather than a massive censorship, beginning with the verbal proprieties imposed by the Age of Reason, what is involved is a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse.

It can be claimed that this problematic underlies the difficulty inherent in depicting emerging sexual identities that teeter on this precipice between desire for the nothing and the void of non-existence. One can easily inscribe this alternative configuration in terms of existing structures of normative heterosexuality in attempting to identify positive characteristics of which same sex desire is composed. Such a denial of fixed identity threatens to frustrate any organized political mobilization. The fluidity of queer identity simultaneously serves as its strength for

revolutionary reconfigurations of sociality and its fragility that leads to its self-destruction in Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*.

What we gain by seeing Billy Budd as a figure Melville entrusted—that is, what we gain by viewing Billy Budd as an inviolate, sexually unavailable male who remains, in these ways, intact by the end of the work-- is, nonetheless, a homosocial perspective of reading the story places the work in the larger context of Melville's oeuvre. In chapter after chapter, Melville questions why the impulses of men to create same-sex utopian spaces results in betrayal, enmity, and war. The Great Mutiny that frames the narrative of *Billy Budd* looms, unremarked upon, above the story--and it is as if the story sails right into a vortex it pretends does not exist. The endless debates over *Billy Budd* will presumably continue.

But the idealization of Billy Budd in the history of *Billy Budd* criticism, matched by the equally prevalent distinction to the character in it, manages to distort through difference the urgency and the dangers of Melville's own work. Defending the radically harsh depiction of the compulsory homosocial by emphasizing Melville's reverence for Billy Budd, on the one hand, and ignoring this reactionary depiction of homosexual desire, on the other, the breadth of this *Billy Budd* research has managed to relate homosocial practice in *Billy Budd, Sailor* as the rejection of powerful sex-normalised social institutions. It does so by theorization and application of the concept of homosociality in the text.

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