Matt Deline

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Professor Granger

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Inside the American Mind:

Burroughs, Hegel, Power/Control, Lordship and Bondage in Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*

- "*Control can never be a means to any practical end ... It can never be a means to anything but more control." ~ William S. Burroughs* (137)

The essence of control is an obsession for many great authors as they attempt to use literature as a means to describe or to resist the confines of their own existence. This essence of control, or power, a proverbial "white whale" for these authors is sought by many, realized by a select few, and *fully* understood by none. Nineteenth century philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and author Herman Melville are members of the few. The majority of the collected works of both writers in some way attempt to make sense of this issue, but Hegel's Phenomenology of the Spirit (specifically the "master/slave" dialectic) and Melville's Billy Budd, Sailor are particularly strong examples of this attempt. The correlation between Hegel's dialogue and the interaction and deaths of the three primary characters within Billy Budd, illuminates a more concrete examination of the nature of power than in most texts from *any* era.

While Hegel's text, Phenomenology of the Spirit, is primarily concerned with the examination of aspects of self-consciousness within the *mind*, Billy Budd appears (at first) to be an investigation of similar concepts within an external space. Yet, Melville's claim directly following the title that Billy Budd is "(*An Inside Narrative*)" suggests that it too is *internalized*

(Melville 2468). Where Hegel uses concrete philosophical terminology to explore the relationship of "Lordship and Bondage," Melville uses characters and narrative techniques. In order to explain the presence of "Lordship and Bondage" in Billy Budd, two key concepts from Hegel's text must first be addressed: sublation, and the inverse relationship between the "Lord" and "Bondsman."

Sublation, from the German *aufheben*, was "used by Hegel as having the opposite meanings of 'destroy' and 'preserve'" (OED). While this seems impossible, the concept is at the core of Hegel's investigations into the nature of a "duplicated self consciousness" that he uses to build the figures of the "Lord" and "Bondsman" (Hegel 1). Hegel claims that self-consciousness:

> Must cancel this its other ... First, it must set itself to sublate the other independent being, in order thereby to become certain of itself as true being, secondly, it thereupon proceeds to sublate its own self, for this other is itself. (Hegel 1)

This is important to the relationship between master and slave because of the symbiotic nature of the two beings, one must necessarily reflect through the other (through action or otherwise) in order to establish a sense of *total* control. Note that in the Hegelian sense, the internal *self* and the *external* other are one and the same. This is not the case with Melville's use of master and slave figures, who share opposing characteristics but are not one singular character.

The inverse relationship between the lord and the bondsman is Hegel's attempt to express a sort of role-reversal from what the semantics of the terms seem to suggest. Hegel states:

> Where the master has effectively achieved lordship ... It is not an independent, but rather a dependent consciousness that he has

> achieved ... The truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the consciousness of the bondsman ... just as lordship showed its essential nature to be the reverse of what it wants to be, so, too, bondage ... will enter into itself, and change round into real and true independence. (Hegel 5)

Hegel's revelation lies in the fact that the lord is dependent upon the *action* of the bondsman. They are unable to act for themselves, only through the bondsman, and are *chained* to the bondsman in this way. Whereas the bondsman is essentially free to *act*, although they do not possess the agency bestowed in the position of lordship. This is a total reversal of a more common interpretation of the structure of control where the master is invested with power and the slave is fundamentally *powerless*.

Hegel defines the *Master* as "the consciousness that exists *for itself* ... a consciousness existing on its own account which is mediated with itself through an other consciousness" (Hegel 5). What Hegel is constructing is a notion that a being in control must live vicariously through its subject, "for what is done by the bondsman is properly an action on the part of the master" (Hegel 5). Where the master makes *choices*, it is the bondsman that is necessarily invested with *action*. In a sense, the "Lord" is dependent upon the connection to the "Bondsman" in order to affirm their own existence. Without the bondsman the lord is unable to achieve a sense of dependent truth derived from the nature of its need to control. This need is satisfied through the *labor* (the action) of the bondsman. Therefore, when considering which characters fit this model in Billy Budd, two characteristics must be observed: a sense of "existence ... [as] the

power controlling the other" and the presence of an *other* or "individual that makes its appearance in antithesis to" that of the lord (Hegel 4).

John Claggart, *master*-at-arms, and *Captain* "the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere" both hold positions of power upon the *Bellipotent* (Melville 2479). Because of this, they are the most likely choices for "lords" within the narrative. Billy Budd, as a low ranking crew-member, who was *impressed* (forced to serve) is also a likely choice While the master-at-arms was technically only a petty officer, Melville describes an extension of their position to that of a police chief as a result of the Nore mutiny. Both characters are able to issue orders to nearly every member of the crew based solely on responsibilities of their respective positions. However, discerning a "direct relation to Billy Budd" for either Claggart or Vere in a way that is both "unlike and opposed" is much more complex (Melville 2487, Hegel 4). When Melville asks, "What was the matter with the master-at-arms," the answer could be Billy Budd himself (Melville 2487). Or rather, that Billy embodies the qualities he desires in himself (youth, beauty, esteem, status) that he has spent a lifetime searching for but never acquired. Instead, Claggart was born with "a depravity according to nature" (Melville 2489). It is the *absence* of these qualities that drives him mad. As the two most intelligent members of the crew, both Claggart and Vere are presented as the intellectual opposite of Billy. However, the connection runs deeper with Vere than Claggart. Captain Vere is the *voice* of command on the *Bellipotent*. In direct contrast, the inability to speak when he most needs to is the very "imperfection in the Handsome Sailor" that defines him (Melville 2475).

If Claggart and Vere are the lords to Billy's bondsman, what exactly makes Billy bonded to their lordship? Billy is *aware* that "Jemmy Legs is down on" him, but he does not understand

why (Melville 2487). Yet it is this knowledge that keeps Billy subjugated and also saves him from falling for the trap that Claggart set for him. Though not the only reason why, Billy does not take the coins offered to him by the faux mutineer because he knows that his pack is being searched when he isn't around. Hegel states, "The fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom, consciousness is not therein aware of being self-existent" (Hegel 6). This is supported by Melville's declaration, "of self-consciousness he [Billy] seemed to have little or none, or about as much as we may reasonably impute to a dog of Saint Bernard's breed" (Melville 2474). This is doubly important because Melville is equating Billy's state of consciousness with that of an extremely *loyal* breed of dog, and because he is being denied the Hegelian sense of self-existence. All Billy has is the fear.

Where Hegel attributes "death [as] the natural 'negation' of consciousness," death in Billy Budd is used as a narrative technique that anchors the most significant problems within the text (Hegel 3). These deaths occupy a sort of "negative space" in Melville's logic because these deaths are described as *un*natural. Claggart was killed in a single punch, "struck dead by an angel of God," and Billy Budd essentially *willed* himself to death (Melville 2504, 2518). Indeed, Billy's death actually occurs twice. Once, on the deck, and beforehand when Captain Vere informs him of his fate in a scene that is implied but *does not occur in the text.* Yet it is Captain Vere's death that is most crucial to Melville's analysis of power. First, when he utters his final words, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd" he is expressing a need, in the Hegelian sense, for the affirmation of his identity through Billy (Melville 2521). The affirmation he is given "at the penultimate moment" of his existence, when Billy dies while echoing his own thoughts, "God bless Captain Vere!" (Melville 2517). What is perhaps more interesting is that Vere's final words

had “not the accents of remorse, though ... he kept the knowledge to himself, who Billy Budd was” (Melville 2521). That keeping of knowledge is the preservation of Billy’s identity, even though he previously had him executed. This supports the notion that Vere had sublated Billy in an effort to achieve a sense of self awareness. Additionally, for a man who was heavily invested in the works of others (through his obsession with literature), Vere is essentially unable to complete any works within his own name. Vere’s name is not even mentioned in the closing ballad “Billy in the Darbies” (Melville 2522-23). Also, the focus of the narrative itself is on Billy (the bondsman) *not* Vere (the lord). In this way, Vere’s “lordship showed its essential nature to be the reverse of what it wants to be” (Hegel 5). His *own* essence of control is lost the moment he is forgotten. Second, in a concept that would resurface nearly a century later in the works of William S. Burroughs, Captain Vere’s death signifies the safeguards in place within institutions of power through self-replication. Melville writes that Captain Vere, “was hit by a musket ball ... [and] more than disabled, he dropped to the deck and was carried below” while “the senior lieutenant took command [and] under [*him]* the enemy was finally captured” (Melville 2521). In the immediate sense, Vere was *replaced* and the ship (a representation of the power of the British navy) remained. By leaving the *Bellipotent* intact, Melville creates a situation where this process will continue *ad nauseum*.

Ultimately, given the intense conflict that was endemic to the state of the American nation in the Nineteenth century, it comes as no surprise that Melville’s text was a product of its time. The creation of the Union and Confederate states is a concrete example of a Hegelian “duplicated self consciousness” that was diametrically opposed on the very issue that is the focus of both Hegel’s dialogue and Melville’s Billy Budd: Slavery (Hegel 1). The creation of a re-

united nation following the Civil War was the result of the Union *sublating* the Confederacy. In a sense, by absorbing the South, the northern states both cancelled *and* preserved the identity of the Confederate States. It *cancelled* through the abolition of slavery, but also *preserved* an extreme prejudice that still exists within the core of a modern sense of American national identity. Because Melville is exploring power relationships (both in the state, and between individuals) within his texts directly following the birth of a post-Civil War America, he is anticipating both the consequences and the duplicity of this Union. The result of this shift in the identification of institutional or governmental control is in a double-sense both necessary and ineffectual. This makes Melville's Billy Budd particularly salient both as a historical perspective *and* as a timeless examination of the nature of power itself.

Works Cited

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