

"Billy Budd" and the Fear of Words

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Billy Budd and the fear of words

BARRY EMSLIE

1 Three themes

Three thematic clusters can be inferred from the libretto of *Billy Budd*: the sexual, the spiritual and the social.¹ Each exists dialectically with the other two, creating a characteristic *apparent* synthesis of their respective internal and relational contradictions. Indeed, *Billy Budd*'s status as a masterpiece traditionally depends on an assumed successful and harmonious resolution of its thematic material within the overall musical context.² However, this article will argue that no such resolution takes place and that this 'failure' is the opera's most striking and interesting characteristic. I do not wish to argue that exposing these contradictions, along with the failed strategies designed to effect customary artistic reconciliations, lessen the opera's status: they are better regarded as evidence of its most challenging and worthwhile aspects.

In order to develop this approach it is best to begin with surveys of the three themes named above. The *homosexual* element, once regarded as the opera's hidden agenda, if not an irrelevancy imposed on the work by those too interested in the private lives of its creators, is now seen as essential to a satisfactory understanding of Britten's artistic personality.³ It is clear, for instance, that the hero's oft-mentioned beauty is both a symbol of his angelic virtue and a more earthly attraction to those around him. The *spiritual* is probably the opera's most overt theme. It is explicit in E. M. Forster's and Eric Crozier's libretto, which treats Billy

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all references are to the revised two-act version of the opera (1960).

² Michael Kennedy, *Britten* (London, 1981), 199, claims: 'Structurally the opera is among Britten's greatest and most intricate achievements'. For Erwin Stein 'in *Billy Budd* the integration of the thematic material goes much further [than in the earlier operas] and is more than a means of dramatic expression'. See his 'Billy Budd', in Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller, eds., *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on his Works from a Group of Specialists* (London, 1952), 201. However, several commentators have felt less certain of the opera's integration and homogeneity, in particular Andrew Porter's review of the original production in *The Musical Times*, 33/2 (April, 1952). See also Arnold Whittall, "'Twisted relations': Method and Meaning in Britten's *Billy Budd*", this journal, 2 (1990), 145–71, for a more thorough account of the ambivalent responses of critics.

³ See Philip Brett, 'Salvation at Sea: *Billy Budd*', in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer (London, 1984). For a more wide-ranging argument on the importance of homosexual repression in Britten's work, see Brett's contribution to the Programme Book of the English National Opera's production of *Peter Grimes* (première 17 April 1991), and the chapters 'Britten and Grimes' and 'Postscript' in his *Benjamin Britten: 'Peter Grimes'*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, 1983). Some account of the gossipy reactions to *Billy Budd* on the part of those more interested in the private lives of its creators can be found in Christopher Headington, *Britten* (London, 1981), 104–5.

as an angelic manifestation capable of effecting the salvation and 'blessing' of, at the very least, Captain ('Starry') Vere.

The *social* theme is the least immediately self-evident. The closed world of the ship, while clearly a 'society', is so exceptional as to suggest a distance from general social or political problems, and although the opera's chief creators saw themselves as outsiders, they characteristically gave their work little overt political punch. Neither Forster nor Britten was influenced by the Left in the manner of several artistic friends and contemporaries; indeed, Forster's hatred of 'causes' has become a commonplace.⁴ None the less, social and political considerations play an important role in *Billy Budd*, as Tim Albery's recent production for the English National Opera at the London Coliseum (1988) revealed. Vere clearly has the status of a benevolent patriarch and, equally clearly, represents an historically conditioned view of social stability, one hostile to radical change. When, listening to the crew singing below decks, he remarks: 'We owe so much to them – some torn from their homes', notions of consensus and shared responsibility are unavoidably linked to an acknowledgement of socially institutionalised brutalities in which Vere himself is implicated. In *Billy Budd*, 'The Rights of Man' cannot be limited solely to individual spiritual redemption or sexual fulfilment. Human worth and human rights are group concepts.

These three themes are, of course, worked out in intense interdependence. Although a conventional argument might claim that the opera's richness rests upon the manner in which each underpins and enriches the others, I shall argue that each of the three themes is marked by fundamental contradictions that remain irreconciled and problematic at the opera's end. Indeed, the opera comprises a series of shifts whereby the problems and tensions associated with any one thematic area are avoided by a continual mixing of the others. In other words, *Billy Budd* rests on strategies of evasion which, alongside an attendant ambiguity of language and imagery, mislead the spectator into believing that the material reaches some final resolution when in fact at crucial points the issue at stake is flunked and fudged. At those moments when the matter might be pursued to something approaching a resolution, a gap remains – a gap disguised by a shift in imagery and ideology that directs attention elsewhere. As a result, what is most interesting in the work are the considerations that prevent it from realising its implicit agenda. For precisely the problems that necessitate the ambiguities and strategies of evasion give the opera its peculiar weight and profundity. *Billy Budd* is a work that should, above all, be valued for what, in conventional aesthetic language, are its imperfections.

2 Liberation and apparent clarity

This continual shifting is made possible by a shared, underlying theoretical terrain, realised in terms of the repressive character of shipboard life. As Peter Evans

⁴ None the less, Britten's and Pears's pacifism should be acknowledged. Furthermore, however much Britten may at times have felt himself an outsider, it was extremely important to him to work in the community (see n. 18).

points out, the ship's complement is a cruelly treated, 'incarcerated community'.⁵ Accordingly there is an equally shared, but implied, agenda of liberation. However, the ambiguities of the opera reflect the fact that no real emancipation is possible, as genuine liberation would evoke radical implications well beyond the predispositions of the opera's creators. There is one apparent exception to this, namely the redemption that Billy seems able to confer on Vere, and about which we learn in the Epilogue. This too is presented in a highly compromised fashion. Vere is both saved and damned, blessed and tormented. Above all, shipboard repression is such an ever-present common ground – perverting all relationships, thwarting, like the mist in Act II, all collective acts – that it facilitates the intermingling of every implied aspect of emancipation, so 'clouding' the issues that anything fundamentally dangerous and radical is evaded.

In this underlying context of repression and liberation, the notion of beauty is particularly important. Billy's beauty is, at the very least, a symbolic reflection of all the various expressions of emancipation that exist in opposition to the cruelties of life on board an English man-of-war. It is neither solely sexual, nor spiritual, nor social, but an often simultaneous manifestation of all three. For instance, it is unclear in what manner beauty attaches itself to love, whether the rawly sexual but twisted 'love' of Claggart, or the seemingly spiritual 'love that passeth understanding' that redeems Vere. Billy's beauty will serve all ideologies equally. Of particular significance is the love that emanates from the crew. Melville's tale gives this something of a sociological basis, the 'Handsome Sailor' being a welcome, civilising and common phenomenon of shipboard life.⁶ Whatever the background, Billy's 'mere' presence is a blessing for his shipmates. This need have no sexual content, though its spiritual⁷ and social connotations are considerable. Thus 'beauty' and 'love' constitute key signifiers in the opera, but they move so freely within the opera's symbolic order that it is never clear what their *intended* signifieds are.

Indeed the whole of *Billy Budd* is remarkable for the vagueness of both its textual and musical signifiers. Not that the work lacks superficial precision, or that it appears to hide behind the conscious employment of ambiguities; quite the contrary. The libretto, for instance, is remarkably factual, at times almost technical. Both Forster and Crozier immersed themselves in shipboard research⁸ and, following the former's wishes, avoided poetry in favour of a deliberate textual prosaicness. And there is the clarity of the score. Britten's skill in setting texts is well known, and in *Billy Budd* his sparing use of the huge orchestra so that the words are never masked has been frequently admired;⁹ it has even led to the simplified assertion that words and music: 'do not trespass upon each other's domain [because of] the soberness of Britten's music and . . . his realistic attitude

⁵ Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London, 1979), 164.

⁶ Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Typee* (New York, 1962), 5f.

⁷ Melville goes so far as to associate Billy with the 'Lamb of God' and the spar on which he was 'suspended' with the 'cross' (Melville, 86 and 94).

⁸ See Eric Crozier's reminiscences, 'Writing the libretto', in the Programme Book to the English National Opera's production of *Billy Budd* (première 24 February 1988).

⁹ See, for instance, Evans (n. 5), 164.

towards the words'.¹⁰ Certainly the spectator is compelled to pay attention to what is being sung, not least because there is 'page after page ... of recitative, or quasi-recitative'.¹¹ Indeed the clarity and originality of the orchestration often suggest a commentary on crucial textual statements, so that the authority and significance of the 'word' is underlined. Moreover, there is the framing device of the Prologue and Epilogue, which throws the events of the opera into flash-back, presenting it to us 'whole' and, as narrative, seemingly unproblematic. The story asserts closure, suggests that things have been worked out and settled. This need not mean that the events that 'Starry' Vere recalls are now black and white, nor that problems have been solved. Guilt, for instance, is a common consequence of recollection, and it is not surprising to hear the 'saved' Vere cry 'O what have I done'.

None the less, in spite of all of these manifestations of clarity, confusion and ambiguity dominate the opera. The determination, or readiness, of Forster and Crozier to clarify the big themes of Melville's novella has resulted in a radical agenda with far-reaching violations of political and social norms. Most strikingly, the shared terrain of repression and liberation means that the opera is remarkable for leaving a good many things unsaid. This inability to pursue stringently a radical agenda results in the contradiction that while the *observable* events are dramatically straightforward – not least because the villain and the hero are killed before everyone's eyes – the meanings that might reasonably be inferred from these events are anything but clear.

3 The sexual

This exceptional degree of ambiguity is, not surprisingly, most evident when one considers the (sublimated) sexual attraction of Billy. The most obvious problem is that the implied homosexuality is trapped in the old cliché of the 'love that dare not speak its name'. The extent to which Forster's covert homosexuality ultimately thwarted his creative life is often debated, while Peter Pears was explicit in public about his and Britten's private life only after the latter's death.¹² But

¹⁰ Stein (see n. 2), 209.

¹¹ Desmond Shawe-Taylor 'Billy Budd II', *The New Statesman and Nation* (8 December 1951), 664. However, Edmund Tracey in *The Musical Times*, 105 (March, 1964), 201, writes: 'Of all Britten's operatic scores *Billy Budd* has the most glorious abundance of melody'; a statement one either completely disagrees with or treats as an incentive to consider the question of the distinction between recitative and melody. It can also be argued that the superficial clarity of the text is underpinned by Forster's openness concerning the opera's sexual theme. Philip Brett in Palmer, *Companion* (see n. 3), 136, argues for a link between Billy Budd and the idealised working-class Forsterian hero Alec Scudder in *Maurice*. He quotes Forster: 'I want to love a strong young man of the lower classes and be loved by him and even hurt by him. That is my ticket, and then I have wanted to write respectable novels'. On the same page there is Forster's explicitly sexual account of Claggart's Act I aria: 'I want *passion* – love constricted, perverted, poisoned, but nevertheless *flowing* down its agonizing channel; a sexual discharge gone evil'. An account of Forster's dissatisfaction with Britten's setting of Claggart's aria and the subsequent cooling of their friendship can be found in, among others, the ENO Programme Book (see n. 8).

¹² See Brett (n. 3) *passim*; on Pears, see Headington (n. 3), 155.

the question of homosexuality should not simply be approached in respect of how explicit it is or is not, nor should its authenticity depend upon the issue of physical gratification – a consideration that might be implied by the opera but is never realised.

What is more interesting is that in the closed community of men the notion of a social life, of working, sleeping and fighting together, becomes of necessity a kind of social ‘gayness’ in that there is no outlet for feelings of human warmth or hostility not focused on someone of the same sex. With the exception of the painfully coy and unconvincing references in the sea shanty episode, none of the characters is ever placed in relation to women. This lack of explicitness in the treatment of sexuality might be seen as one of the opera’s strengths. Even in its most explicit, or rather least implicit, expression, it is nothing if not ambivalent. Claggart’s Act I solo ‘O beauty, o handsomeness, goodness’, is wholly suffused by a passion not simply inimical in itself, but animated by a view of social life in which relations between men are determined by a black, nihilistic power. In this context the gay theme dare not speak its name partly because it is not clear whether the signifier ‘gay’ is adequate. Certainly homosexuality cannot be detached from Billy, the quasi-spiritual ‘visitor’ who, because of *both* his beauty and his goodness, threatens to shatter Claggart’s Weltanschauung. It might well be that Forster’s dissatisfaction with the music Britten wrote for Claggart’s aria – he wanted it to be a clear statement of passionate love – and the subsequent temporary break between librettist and composer illustrates how much more complex the composer’s attitude to the homosexual theme was.¹³

4 The spiritual

Billy’s beauty is, among other things, a manifestation of his goodness. He is an angelic visitor to this world, not just to the ‘Indomitable’: his lack of ancestry (he is a foundling) makes him an alien in the outside world as well. But this, too, is far from unambiguous. We are asked to see him in this paradigmatic light (Claggart recognises him immediately as a ‘pearl, a king’s bargain’, in fact as unique), although he is also inherently imperfect, as his speech defect illustrates. However, the stutter is also a prosaic, wordly flaw and, therefore, more than just a symbolic demonstration that nothing is perfect and the devil ‘still has something to do’ with the business. Billy’s identity and function in the narrative thus oscillate between a symbolic, quasi-religious ideal (the angel) and a character type determined by the plot (a virtuous innocent limited by a speech defect that will cost him his life).

Indeed, given the spiritual imagery surrounding Billy, his stutter is not necessarily evidence of an imperfection. Certainly in worldly terms it is a flaw, as the officers present at his initial interrogation recognise. But in respect of Billy the agent of the inarticulate powers of goodness, the ‘flaw’ enables him to save others. That is, Billy’s ultimate gift of redemption depends upon his Christ-like death, itself the narrative consequence of his bout of stuttering when accused by Claggart

¹³ See n. 11 and n. 12.

of mutiny. Looked at in this way, Billy's 'imperfection' is a perverse plot device that leads to his crucifixion and thereby, paradoxically, reveals his immaculate inner nature.

Furthermore, his redemptive power is restricted and strangely conditional. He not only, we infer, 'saves' Vere in the missing scene after the trial; his last utterance bestows a blessing once more on the captain and, in doing so, betrays the crew. There is an enormous contradiction between the crew's sheep-like repetition of 'Starry Vere, God bless you!' and their wordless grunting as they approach open rebellion; not least because the music of the incipient mutiny turns into the work song that unambiguously represents their repression. As a result, Billy's spiritual goodness appears not only selective, but class selective in its effectiveness – a notion very much at odds with the universal Christian ideology that his angelic status implies and that the crew sensed.¹⁴

Certainly what the crew have lost in Billy's execution is beyond price. His very presence was a benediction, something particularly clear in the Novice's protests when Claggart blackmails him in Act I scene 3. Thus at the end of the shipboard part of the opera we must see Billy's shipmates as betrayed and tormented. But nothing is to be made of this, and nothing can be made of it without putting Vere himself in a social and political context that would violate all those civilising notions that, at best, the opera's creators play with but cannot develop.

5 The community and Vere's dilemmas

The social aspect of the opera is best seen in the context of the crew's attitude to Vere, in whom – rather than Billy – the various contradictions of the opera are clearest. He is, paradoxically, the most powerful and determining figure in the drama and, at the same time, the least active, the most problematical and certainly the most trapped. These contradictions stem from Vere's ambivalent status as both a benevolent patriarch and the informed instrument of an oppressive system. In fact, it would appear that Britten circumvented Forster, who was more interested in Melville's title character than in the captain, whose behaviour during the trial he found odious. Forster went so far as to claim that 'his first task [was] to rescue Vere from Melville'.¹⁵ However, it is not clear how that could have been accomplished. One of the consequences of the libretto's comparative nakedness is that Vere's authority is unconditional, and this serves only to make the captain's central dilemma more pressing. Therefore, as long as no act of pardon – well within the operatic captain's power – takes place, Vere remains trapped

¹⁴ With respect to Billy's spiritual 'identity' there is an interesting difference between the novella and the opera. In the opera we know only what Billy tells Dansker of his meeting with the Chaplain on the night before the execution, and it seems conventional enough. However, in the novella the Chaplain cannot get anywhere with Billy. That is, although all the Christian imagery tells us of Billy's spiritual status, it is, I suggest, important to Melville that he remain in part a noble savage. Indeed, there is a strong pantheistic aspect to his description of Billy: he remains a child of nature until the end. For instance, the 'bird' imagery is stronger in Melville than in the opera. See Melville (n. 6), 83–4.

¹⁵ Concerning Forster's distaste for the novella's Vere during the trial scene, see Palmer (n. 3), 135; about Britten's greater interest in the ambivalence of Vere, see Whittall (n. 2), 150–1.

and, to some degree, guilty. Forster could not get around this difficulty by making him silent at the climax of the trial scene; he could not, in short, 'save' Vere from Melville, as the tormented, contradictory figure in the opera's Epilogue makes clear.¹⁶

It is important to remember that the operatic Vere, in contrast to the novella Vere, is the only character shown capable of serious intellectual thought. This gives him an unchallenged status: his fellow officers are portrayed as vulgar nationalists – it is not difficult to imagine what Forster and Britten thought of *them* – and when faced with their one key decision in the court martial scene, they feebly call on Vere for help. And though Claggart is extremely clever, he is no intellectual: he is passionate and diseased by hate and love. Significantly, the more speculative and analytical Vere warns the Master-at-arms that he knows him for what he is.¹⁷

In other words, *Billy Budd* is bound to Vere if its content is to be articulated intellectually. Moreover, his personal reminiscences, which frame the opera, make it very difficult for the spectator to be objective or detached: we are dependent on him, and when he is puzzled and inarticulate, we have few grounds for trusting our own judgement. Above all, the 'missing' scene when Vere tells Billy that he is to be executed compels us to acknowledge that Vere knows more and has experienced more than we have. Thus, at the end when he leaves us confused as to what actually happened on board ship and its significance, the confusion goes to the heart of the opera. Vere, too, cannot articulate what has taken place, and once again the spectators are deprived of a truly worked-out development.

Moreover, Vere cannot be disentangled from the brutalities of the system, a system he administers either from the quarter deck or the cabin, both sites placed symbolically and literally above and over the working or sleeping crew. It is significant that the opera's creators, faced with the contradictions of their 'major' character, allow him to quibble – the men may *just* have had good cause at 'Spithead' but 'The Nore, the Nore'. Yet this evidence of a mind capable of making fine, if potentially radical distinctions, does not fundamentally alter the oppression whose chief, albeit detached, functionary he is. If the radical notion of the Rights-of-Man (with its Jacobin connotations) is being placed in opposition to the Burkean/Forsterian ideal of a community that is civilised partly through traditional but contained inequities, then our faith in the latter takes a serious pounding. And if we remember the famous Forsterian axiom of 'only connect', then life on the

¹⁶ Melville is well read concerning the argument between the radical Paine and the conservative Burke. See Melville (n. 6), 10–11. It is central to the argument of this essay that the polarities between which the operatic Vere is trapped – loyal servant of a tyrannous naval system and benevolent, Burkean patriarch committed to the civilising notion of community – are hopelessly irreconcilable, although it is remarkable how much of this irreconcilability we are allowed to observe. The simplifications that strengthen the symbolic identities of Claggart and Billy in the opera are not reproduced in Vere.

¹⁷ About the greater complexity and intellectual weight of the officers in the novel, especially during the court martial, see Melville (n. 6), 65–7; about Claggart's status as a thinker, 40–1, and Chapter VIII, *passim*. With respect to the operatic Vere's greater knowledge of Claggart, as contrasted with the novella Vere's ignorance of the Master-at-arms, see 54–5.

'Indomitable' permits only the most brutal and perverse of relationships.¹⁸ Furthermore, because the problem of Vere as king and benevolent sage cannot be evaded, the crew have to reflect exactly that same ambiguity in order to maintain Vere's unique ideological status. They praise and look up to him, while simultaneously living under the daily torment of his chief henchman. As the opera's creators have not managed to circumvent these contradictions, the spectators are justified in speculating whether on this 'floating monarchy' it is a mere technical question as to whose hand is on the cat-o'-nine-tails.

Then there is the special case of the opera's nominal hero. Here Vere cannot detach himself; he is not at arms' length; indeed it has been inferred that he is a good deal closer.¹⁹ Nor do the opera's creators allow him any assistance, for his lack of an intellectual equal is all too clear during the trial scene. In such unyielding circumstances he is forced, or feels himself forced, to face up to his responsibilities.²⁰ For although he forgoes the complex and stringent legalistic reasoning of his namesake in Melville, his silence is damning. Were this clearly worked out it would make him either a victim or a criminal – or both. But at this moment the opera's ideology shifts: we are invited to feel that this (shameful?) act leads to Vere's redemption and, further, that this redemption is arguably intermingled with a quasi-sexual link between the (guilty, knowing) man and the (innocent but blessed) boy. Vere's 'crime' is thereby the means of his salvation, allowing the opera's creators to avoid facing up to any of the three thematic clusters identified at the beginning of this essay. The sexual, the spiritual and the social here so intermingle that each is compromised; not out of a respect for the complexity of 'real life', but because a true working out of either the social or the sexual would have taken the opera in a radical direction impossible for its creators.

The execution of Billy and Vere's Epilogue are, in particular, compromised by these problems. Vere, as noted above, is not the only one to lose by Billy's death (though he may be the only one to gain). Billy's execution is a catastrophe for the crew as well. But it is not clear why. When Billy is sacrificed the loss for the crew is so great that they come close to mutiny, musically portrayed as a wordless grunting chorus. Although this episode is taken directly from Melville we are entitled to ask: Are they no longer men? If this is revolution raising its head it is not only ugly but inarticulate, and while by no means the opera's only great moment of inarticulateness, it is certainly a powerful one. Of course,

¹⁸ This notion of community was also extremely important to Britten, as he made clear in his acceptance speech (22 October 1962) on becoming an Honorary Freeman of Aldeburgh. See Headington (n. 3), 123–4.

¹⁹ In Melville there is the 'conjecture' of a paternal embrace; see Melville (n. 6), 77–8. With respect to a positive but idealised homosexual relationship between the operatic Vere and Billy, see Whittall (n. 2), 149 and 156.

²⁰ Again the differences between novella and opera are instructive. In the novella Vere does not have as free a hand as in the opera. True, in the novella the 'Indomitable' is on its own when the story takes place, but Vere has to consider the 'admiral' and the fleet. Moreover, we know that there was criticism among certain officers of the fleet as to Vere's behaviour in conducting an immediate court martial; see Melville (n. 6), 65–6. In the opera there is no possibility of confusion, no reference to any worldly authority other than Vere. He is a 'monarch' and, as a result, cannot avoid responsibility.

we are supposed to believe that the men are, axiomatically, in no position to contemplate the issue at stake in the thoughtful manner of Vere. And, quite logically, they are shown to be inescapably trapped. Ordered below, they go like dogs.

Which leaves Vere alone in the Epilogue – a man saved and damned, blessed and guilt-ridden. He is not allowed to work much of this out. Indeed, by the time we have arrived at this high point of contradiction it is not clear how the matter *could* be worked out. Vere concedes that he could have saved Billy, that he had the power to do so. Which raises the question of why he did not. Was it simply a matter of training, or loyalty to the system? If so, how perverse and irrational are both Vere's beneficent notion of community and that blessing which we are supposed to believe he received.

In this context, we should not forget the differences between the operatic Vere and the character we find in Melville. The latter is capable of delivering a rational account of the reasons that necessitated Billy's immediate execution: the ship was officially on a war footing and, above all, there was the fear of mutiny. In Melville the threat of mutiny would be increased were Billy to be 'saved', while in the opera this Jacobin danger is linked only to the consequences of the execution.²¹ In this manner Forster and Crozier have, once again, sharpened the contradiction in which Vere is placed, leaving us only the flimsiest grounds on which to rationalise his behaviour during the court martial. Therefore his appearance before us in the Epilogue is unconvincing if we concentrate solely on his optimistic final statements. The operatic Vere's actions were confused, his reasoning banal or non-existent and, as a result, his salvation compromised and ambiguous – not least because he is so confused about it himself.

None the less, even at this final moment he does not entirely forget the communal notion, for the operatic Starry Vere is, above all else, an earthly God in a society of men. So we discover that he knew that he could have saved 'him', and that Billy himself knew. More than this, 'even his shipmates knew'. How pejorative that 'even' sounds.

6 Post-structuralist gaps in *Billy Budd*

The preceding pages have attempted to show how 'meanings' in *Billy Budd* blend into each other to the degree that *naming* or identifying thematic material becomes impossible unless one accepts contradictions and ambiguities as intrinsic and essential. This process can be taken further. The opera can be seen as embodying, in its formal structure, the epistemological notion of a 'gap': a key post-structuralist

²¹ There is a clear difference between novella and opera here with regard to 'mutiny'. In the former there is no doubt that Vere fears mutiny as a *result* of clemency (see Meville [n. 6], 74–5). But there is no reason for carrying this over automatically into the opera, as Whittall appears to do (see Whittall [n. 2], 162 and 169). Furthermore, in the novella we are aware that Starry Vere was given this particular post because he was judged the man to calm matters down after the Nore, a mutiny in which the 'Indomitable' and its crew were implicated; see Melville, 23. None of this is relevant for the opera, where, on the contrary, the danger of mutiny is *increased* by the execution.

concept that explodes the myth of the stable and homogeneous work of art. This concept can be seen as an essential factor in all discourse, where the text will always imply too much, and signifieds will always shift under the 'space' that separates them from their signifiers. The result is a plurality of meaning that violates the intentions of those who created the discourse in the first place. It has, for instance, already been noted that in *Billy Budd* the notion of 'beauty' and its theatrical embodiment in the hero cannot be controlled, thus implying radical social and sexual actions that violate the opera's apparent symbolic order.

A basic Lacanian example of the 'gap' can also be inferred from the preceding argument. The entry of the subject into the symbolic order – speech above all – amounts to the assumption of an identity, an assumption that is never unproblematic and can never decisively be completed. Billy's identity is ambivalent out of ideological need: he functions as all things to all men. As we have seen, his mysterious background, his charms, his looks, his goodness and so on, all give him a contradictory 'character': sometimes angel, sometimes innocent, sometimes foolish boy or hero. His status in the opera is more that of a symbol, or rather the nexus of a collection of positive symbols, so that reducing him to any one of his 'identities' amputates a considerable part of the opera's thematic scope.

Most significantly, Billy does not enter the symbolic order unambivalently. He cannot write, and even speech itself is for him, as for no other character, compromised and self-evidently imperfect. In a sense Billy hides behind the ambiguous and poetic realm of music, again to a degree that none of the other characters can match. After admitting to illiteracy, he triumphantly asserts: 'but I can sing!', and in case we miss the point he has his first bout of stuttering in the ensuing recitative. In short he belongs, exceptionally, in the operatic order, caught in a shifting imbalance between words and music. The result is the emergence of a stage figure who, of narrative and ideological necessity, is so innately but 'meaningfully' vague that even at the end of the opera no one is entirely sure who he really was.

In fact, *Billy Budd* in general is marked by an exceptional range of staged or 'voiced' inarticulacies. Despite all those 'superficial clarities' mentioned earlier, the opera actively foregrounds the ambiguities and shortcomings of the symbolic order. Besides Billy's stutter, consider the following: the love, which Vere says 'passeth understanding' (and cannot therefore be named); the grunting of the crew as they unsuccessfully approach what would have been their most articulate deed; and, finally, the mist which, symbolising the ambiguities in which the work as a whole is shrouded, is 'ev'rywhere ... confusing ev'ryone. Confusion without and within'. All these signifiers make clear that this work is characterised by an apparently knowing uncertainty as to the symbolic order.

Yet all these expressions of inarticulateness are trumped by an unprecedented manifestation of the gap. At the very heart of the work there lies – or so we are expected to believe – a scene during which Vere informs Billy of the court's decision. They are alone together. The build-up to this scene, and the consequences it has for Vere at least, confer meaning on all that has preceded it and all that is to come. It is in every respect the central scene of the opera, necessary for

understanding every theme by which the work is animated. It constitutes a signifier so authoritative that, *potentially*, it resolves the ambiguities of all the others. It is the opera's transcendental signifier. However, this scene is not presented, nor may we hear the duologue that takes place during it. Transcendental signifiers do not allow of theatrical embodiment.

Although this extraordinary absence and textual silence lies at the ideological centre of the opera, it is best approached from a narrative perspective. Narrative, as Fredric Jameson argues, also constitutes an attempt at exclusion in order to foreground unambivalent meaning and closure, an attempt that inevitably fails.²² That is, the 'gap' that in a linguistic context exists between signifier and signified, and in Lacanian theory between the subject and his presentation of himself in the symbolic order, also exists narratively in as much as each single story forever breaks down into plurality. Moreover, in doing so – in escaping or exposing its own 'strategies of containment' – narrative foregrounds that which it has, superficially, suppressed. As a result, narratives are susceptible to a process of deconstruction that places them in the context of those stories they apparently do not want to tell but cannot escape; stories that suggest values and closures that radically undercut those overtly presented.

In *Billy Budd* the question of suppressing alternative and radical narratives is acute. The appeal of the novella's homosexual element, in particular to Forster, the unavoidable brutality of shipboard life, the quasi-divine status of the hero; all these can be contained only with difficulty, even on the most superficial level. The 'solution' is not so much a narrative that drags the opera to a desired overt conclusion and then invites the spectator to make the best of it; rather there is the gutting that we have already noticed, so that when the various narratives reach a thematic climax and attain their most explicit level of meaning, there is nothing there. The contradictions have become so acute that words are no longer to be trusted.

The 'missing' scene should thus be examined as essentially a gap in the *story*. It is the key 'event' in Vere's reminiscences and validates whatever conclusions are reached concerning the opera's outcome. However, since the scene is *not* there, it is possible to conclude the opera in such a fashion that all sorts of positive (or negative) claims can be made about what has, finally, taken place on the basis of pure supposition as to that which has not been shown. The paradox follows: *Billy Budd* accomplishes something that, in post-structuralist terms, is theoretically impossible; it consciously foregrounds that which represents the ultimate incoher-

²² See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York, 1981), for a remarkable argument that claims an epistemological superiority for Marxism in understanding both literary texts and history, the former being for Jameson a crucial narrative encounter with the latter. With respect to the determining notion of narrative and the specific uncertainties of Billy's place in the symbolic order of language, one might consider something Jameson wrote in 1978: "'character" is that point in the narrative text at which the problem of the insertion of the subject into the Symbolic most acutely arises'. See 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan', in Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory, Essays 1971–1986*, I (Minneapolis, 1988), 102–3. I would argue for a clear link between Billy's 'problem' with language – as an expression of his unstable status as a character – and the irreconcilable contradictions of the opera's narrative(s).

ence of all spoken or written discourse. In consequence, this opera is most clear about the *existence* of what cannot be said, sung or allowed on the stage. To an exceptional degree it foregrounds its own deconstruction.

7 Music with and without words

However, that is not the end of the matter. For while the gap exists in both theatrical and textual terms, it can be claimed that there is no gap in the musical language. Although there are no words or stage actions, the silence is not complete. Thirty-four chords that harmonise the notes of the F major triad are played – sometimes producers use them to cover the scene change – and these chords are, inevitably, taken to represent the encounter of captain and crewman. A good deal of ink has been spilt on these thirty-four chords.²³ Their importance is never questioned, but their meaning is forever unclear. Most significantly, they raise the problem of the function of music *vis-à-vis* words in opera, and it is in respect of this, and in the context of the preceding discussion, that I now spill my quota of ink.

The typical laudatory evaluation of these thirty-four chords claims that they go beyond words, taking the opera into realms more profound than would be possible with text. However, the missing scene in *Billy Budd* is not only without a libretto, it is also without a plot and context. To be sure, we know that Vere has no doubts as to what he has to do. But the mere passing on of the death sentence, however dreadful, is clearly not at stake, and no commentator has ever pretended so. We feel that a good deal more took place, leaving Vere at the end of the opera both tormented and contented – or so he says. In fact the thirty-four chords, in conjunction with the theatrical absence, can be used to elide or avoid all the opera's critical questions. What exactly is the nature of the spiritual redemption that occurs? Above all, what is to be made of the liberatory character central to the sexual and social themes? Are they realised in this scene ... or betrayed? We have nothing dramatic or operatic on which to hang the chords. It is not simply that their meaning is abstract; operas, especially operas of salvation, are awash with dramatic manifestations of redemption underpinned by orchestral passages, but they do not have the character of these chords.

An obvious comparison would be with Wagner. But there the redemption that takes place is, in every music drama from the *Dutchman* onwards, plot dependent, textually written out – however abstract the language – and theatrically present. Most importantly, in Wagner's purely orchestral passages there is a system of motif symbolism that relates musical ideas to preceding and/or subsequent events and textual concepts. No matter how vague the language, the Wagnerian notion of redemption actively struggles to become stage manifest. In contrast, *Billy Budd*, faced with the complexity and contradictions of its thematic material, is compelled to forgo the stage precisely when the drama becomes most intellectually demand-

²³ For a thorough discussion of the responses among musicologists, see Whittall (n. 2), Parts 4 and 5.

ing; when the dialectically interdependent demands of narrative and the musical/conceptual language are most acute.

Some musicologists have argued for a relationship between the thirty-four chords and later musical statements in the opera, statements tied to both plot and libretto. However, as Arnold Whittall shows, the overriding effect remains one of profound ambiguity.²⁴ Moreover, purely musicological explanations can never invest the passage with anything like the clarity of the leitmotif system. Peter Evans, for instance, while observing that the triads are ‘assimilated in the epilogue’, argues that they are ‘outside the motivic scheme’.²⁵ Since, of course, it is precisely the *uniqueness* of this musical passage that is fundamental, the ‘great curtain of successive triads’²⁶ is privileged not only in being placed outside of the theatrical narrative; it is also privileged in the context of the musical fabric itself, in that it is a series of discrete statements with ‘no rhythmic change’ and ‘nothing that comes within any text-book definition, however broad, of melody’.²⁷

Because the dialectical relationship between words and music is so exceptionally problematic in *Billy Budd*, the notion of a satisfactory synthesis centred on the thirty-four chords has little credibility. If, on the one hand, purely technical, musicological explanations make little contact with the libretto, then, on the other, attempts to elucidate the passage in openly subjective terms succumb to an appropriately exceptional vagueness of language. Patricia Howard, for example, tells us that while Vere is alone with Billy the chords express ‘by sonority alone the extremely complex range of reactions and emotions taking place behind the closed door’.²⁸ But there is no word as to what these reactions and emotions are. And while Eric Walter White claims that the chords ‘give the effect of a simple signal seen through an extremely powerful telescope – a rainbow of hope’,²⁹ the arbitrariness of such language only points out the unintentional irony of employing the metaphor of a telescope when nothing is brought into clearer focus or amplified. To take a third example, Erwin Stein makes the unshackled nature of formulations often employed in writing about this passage particularly clear when he loads his own response with repeated qualifications:

The changing colours *seem* to convey rapid changes of emotions, ranging, *one might conjecture*, from surprise to fright – from terror to resignation; and an even higher stage of mind is *perhaps* suggested by the last chords of the divided strings and the muted brass.³⁰

Interestingly, John Culshaw accepts implicitly that any valid explanation must deal with both words and music. His essay title, ‘The Deadly Space Between’, recalls Melville’s description of Claggart. But this space is no post-structuralist gap. Rather it is something that the opera’s creators have bridged. Far from being

²⁴ See Whittall (n. 2), Part 5 and n. 35.

²⁵ Evans (see n. 5), 167.

²⁶ Evans, 167.

²⁷ John Culshaw, ‘The Deadly Space Between’, booklet issued with the Decca recording of *Billy Budd* (SET 379–81, London, 1968), 6.

²⁸ Patricia Howard, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten* (New York, 1969), 98.

²⁹ Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* (Berkeley, 1983), 187.

³⁰ Stein (see n. 2), 208–9. My emphases.

deconstructionist, it confers harmony and meaning – a harmony and meaning that must extend, above all, to the thirty-four chords. He asks: ‘Why are we so profoundly moved? Why do we sense that we *know* what words are passing in the cabin?’³¹ And at this point he pulls up short, merely remarking that the passage is beyond definition. Clearly the notion of ‘sensing words’ is a peculiar one, but it is none the less a revealing formulation, emphasising that something is taking place and that words are being employed. However, if the words employed can be ‘sensed’, then they have meaning, and if they have meaning then there is room for more specific speculation as to what is actually happening.

Now, if I were to say that I do not ‘see’ this or that orchestral passage in another opera – a passage occurring somewhere during the course of the *story* – you could tell me it depicts an off-stage hunt or the passing of the seasons; or it is a musical representation of Good Friday or a collection of musical statements whose overt meanings will become clear as the plot develops. But in respect of the missing scene in *Billy Budd* such explanations are not possible. Instead, one is asked to take an awful lot on trust, and our attempts to explain to a perplexed listener who does not ‘sense’ what John Culshaw senses are unlikely to be helpful. Such explanations invariably end up employing adjectives such as ‘equivocal’, ‘ambivalent’, ‘obscure’, ‘elliptical’ or with an acknowledgement that the matter is beyond words. In short, each listener is, at this moment in the drama, accorded an exceptional freedom in fitting these thirty-four signifiers to the stage opera in general. He can resolve the thematic material of plot, character and ideas in whatever way suits him.

Two further points regarding the missing scene ought to be made. Several commentators assume that the absent scene in the opera is underpinned by a parallel absent scene in Melville.³² However, the scene in fact constitutes Chapter XIII of the novella and amounts to more than that oft-quoted opening sentence of the second paragraph: ‘Beyond the communication of the sentence what took place at this interview was never known’. For Melville goes on to conjecture what *did* happen, and in some detail. Of course, the novelist may play whatever textual games he likes. It is typical of Melville that, in order to underline the imagined factual basis of his ‘stories’, he names his ‘sources’. In this case – given that the ‘interview’ is private and that both men are ‘now’ dead – there are none. But we do not have to go along with this fiction. Although it is a great compliment to Melville’s narrative technique that commentators seem to take his protestation of ignorance at face value, he is, and always has been, our only source of authority. His ‘conjectures’ are so only in name. Thus the ‘narrative’ problem that exists in the opera cannot be validated or underpinned by an imagined parallel gap in Melville’s story.

The second point concerns those commentators who lay out their interpretations in essentially narrative terms. Revealingly, they give the thirty-four chords short

³¹ Culshaw (see n. 27), 6.

³² Porter (see n. 2), 112; Culshaw, 6; White (see n. 29), 187.

shrift. This is not to say that they deny the passage is significant. However, because their framework is narrative, there is little they can do with 'pure' music. The very uniqueness of the chords within the score precludes an explanation placed within the musical narrative.

There is also an understandable tendency to avoid these problems by the simple, common-sense assertion that music must, by its very nature, go 'beyond' words: that the ultimate sphere of meaning in opera cannot be contained within the realm of unambiguous language, even if one were to imagine language transcending ambiguity. It is self-evident that operatic music as a discourse has its own characteristics and that these are not the same as the libretto. However, it does not follow that the (problematic) relationship of words and music in opera can be resolved by treating each as a separate discourse, functioning according to its own laws, and then concluding neatly that in the most successful operas the two sides of the equation are in best balance and most complementary. Inevitably words and music in opera change each other. They cannot survive or communicate as two discrete 'domains'. They are locked in a dialectical relationship in which meaning and effect depend on a constant instability: a dialectic in which the synthesis is never a single, fixed solution. It is not only words that change *as words* when 'set' to music; music also changes when placed in relation to text.

On this basis the famous thirty-four chords attain the extraordinary degree of free association I have noted above by virtue of 'simplifying' the discourse, by forgoing a true dialectic. Were there more to go on – were there a musical structure overtly related to the rest of the opera or, more important still, a concomitant textual or narrative context – meaning and theatrical effect would be enhanced.

Something of what I mean by enhanced can be found in two examples from Britten's first and last operas. Neither 'The Great Bear' aria for Peter in Act I of *Peter Grimes*, nor the 'Socrates' aria for Aschenbach in the last act of *Death in Venice* is easy to understand. Yet both arias are central to understanding the spiritual state of two men who also find themselves outsiders. The interaction between poetic text and music *does* give the spectator more and encourages a much more complex, but integrated, range of associations than in *Billy Budd*.

Both Grimes and Aschenbach might, like Vere, be seen in relation to the notion of salvation. Which of these three are saved and which damned, and in what manner, is an interesting question in itself, albeit one that goes beyond the terms of this essay. However, there is one theatrical distinction between Vere on the one hand, and Grimes and Aschenbach on the other, that surely plays a role in the decision not to stage the scene between Billy and Vere. Unlike the arias of Grimes and Aschenbach, the missing scene in *Billy Budd* is an *encounter*. Vere is not alone, although throughout the rest of the opera his status as commander isolates him. As argued above, the radical connotations of *Billy Budd* follow from the notion of relationships, of sexual and social contacts, that violate norms and, as result, cannot be voiced. In opposition to this, Grimes is wholly cast out, and however emotionally and intellectually 'dependent' Aschenbach may become on Tadzio there is never, as he bitterly observes, a 'relationship'. As a result the absence of scene and text leave Vere's redemption (or damnation) not so

much unresolved as circumvented,³³ but because Grimes and Aschenbach *voice* their private dilemmas, our knowledge of their suffering (or redemption) is deepened and our experience in the theatre enriched.

The question of theatrical experience will, I hope, permit an observation on the problem of the thirty-four chords in performance. The audience, or a good part of it, is not prepared to listen in silence: there is always an appalling bout of coughing, chat and programme rustling. The reasons for this are significant. Too many of the audience clearly do not feel that anything important is taking place. To which one might reply: they are partly right, as nothing whatsoever *is* taking place on the stage. Perhaps it is simply that, when a large part of the audience does not know the opera or has not read the programme carefully, they assume that the scene between Vere and Billy is coming and that the orchestral passage is merely a preparation for it: they are still looking to see the narrative worked out. Whatever the reason, there certainly seems a reluctance, or inability, to accept the music as representative of the fateful encounter. No doubt this is of no consequence for musicologists, but it does suggest that in performances of *Billy Budd* those thirty-four bars have little chance of realising the many profound significations with which they have been freely invested.

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Thus *Billy Budd* is exceptional in that the dichotomy between the surface coherence – the sense of a finished and contained work of art – and the underlying but inherent contradictions is extraordinarily great. The opera comes to us framed and authoritative. There appears no lack of control, no sense of disintegration. Yet the shifts among the thematic material of the libretto, and the impossibility of following through any of the narratives inscribed in the text, are strategies of containment whose deconstruction floods the opera with those notions and stories it is compelled to repress. Most remarkable of all, the absent scene at the opera's ideological and narrative heart is the paradoxical embodiment of a textual silence that implicitly acknowledges the presence of all the creators wanted to circumvent, but on which everything they wrote and composed unavoidably rests. It is as if the text, through foregrounding its own evasions, calls its own validity into question. The result is a disintegration of the conventionally imagined artistic 'whole'.

One final image might sum this up. When the mist comes back after the failed chase in Act II scene 1, Claggart once again approaches Vere and is now permitted to feed him the story of Billy's alleged plotting. Vere knows this to be false, and he is not shy of saying so. He can voice the dreaded word 'mutiny' and tells Claggart that he is 'not to be scared by words'. Then, employing the dominant image of the opera's middle and final sections, he warns Claggart not to come to him 'with so foggy a tale'. But at this moment the metaphor is false. Claggart's tale is not foggy. It is clear and direct, not in the least difficult to understand. None the less, it is a lie. However, the truth or, better, the truths of *Billy Budd*

³³ Whittall (see n. 2), 168, prefers to see the ending of the opera as evidence of Britten's 'positive, creative indecision'.

are nebulous and drift around, ever present but unspoken. To name them is to imply other narratives and other operas called *Billy Budd*; operas which would, none the less, be expressions of that *Billy Budd* created by Crozier, Forster and Britten which we see in the opera house.