LOVE AND SALVATION IN BRITTEN'S 'BILLY BUDD'

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FOLLOWING the 'chamber operas' *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Albert Herring*, Benjamin Britten returned to full-scale opera with a commission to produce a work for the Festival of Britain in 1951 — *Billy Budd*. The theme, among other things, enabled the composer to deal with a victorious period of British naval history (not inappropriate to the commission), yet in a way which reflected his own concern with the evils of war. Eric Crozier, co-librettist with E. M. Forster, did a good deal of research on the background of naval life at the time, as well as the technical details relating to life on a man-o'-war,[1] and the opera contains a great deal about the nature of life in Nelson's navy. But we quickly learn of the shame as well as the glory which accompanied the victories over the French — the impressment and the flogging, as well as the patriotism and camaraderie below decks. This is no panegyric of the British Navy. On the contrary, protest against the evils of war is a significant part of the opera's message.[2]

It remains, nevertheless, a secondary one. For out of the mists emerge two key relationships, both of them with more or less overt homosexual overtones: that between Billy and Claggart and that between Billy and Vere. All the incidents in the first part of the opera, including the abortive naval engagement at the beginning of Act II, are in fact essential to setting out the tensions against which the relationships between the main characters are worked out.[3] But it is on these relationships that the drama focuses, above all that between Vere and Billy, until, by the end of the work, we have moved into a realm of personal and even spiritual experience which Philip Brett has not inaptly characterized as 'salvation at sea'. In an illuminating essay, Brett has persuasively argued that writing the libretto for *Billy Budd* gave Forster 'the opportunity to write about profound relationships between men; symbolically to evoke the power of homosexual love without being in any way sexually explicit'.[4] Brett goes on to speak of the love between Captain Vere and Billy as manifesting 'the most daring of all the Forsterian salvations'. The purpose of the present article is to demonstrate what striking support this thesis receives from a detailed study of the libretto drafts which are to be found in the Britten–Pears library at Aldeburgh.[5]

The original story, by Herman Melville, is of course dominated by that other relationship — between Billy and the Master-at-Arms, Claggart. It is a study in evil — of

[1] Eric Crozier, 'The British Navy in 1797', *Tempo* (1951), No. 21, pp. 9–11. Cf. Benjamin Britten, 'Some Notes on Forster and Music', *Aspects of E. M. Forster*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass, London, 1969, p. 86.

[2] Cf. Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett*, Cambridge, 1982, Chap. 12.

[3] On the battle scene it is worth quoting from an unpublished letter from Forster to Britten dated 14 January 1951 (in the Britten–Pears Library, Aldeburgh): 'I think you and Eric are right and that it would be unwise to keep [Billy] out of the battle scene. He could be nicely seen fighting for his country instead of fighting his countryman and could be grouped with other characters one likes — Dansker, Donald.'

[4] Philip Brett, 'Salvation at Sea: *Billy Budd*', *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer, London, 1984, p. 135.

[5] I am grateful to Mr Eric Crozier, who has deposited his share of the papers with the Britten–Pears Library, Aldeburgh, and kindly given me permission to quote from documents owned by him. I am grateful also to the

repressed love which goes sour. In the novel, as in the opera, it is (in the words of Forster's letter to Britten, which Brett quotes) about 'love constricted, perverted, poisoned, but nevertheless *flowing* down its agonising channel; a sexual discharge gone evil'.[6] Forster here refers in particular to the extended monologue provided for Claggart at the end of Act I. He seems, however, to have reached this view of Claggart at a very early stage, and neither in the monologue nor elsewhere in Claggart's part do successive drafts of the libretto reveal changes of significance on a par with the remarkable developments that can be traced in the evolution of the relationship between Vere and Billy.

It is here that the opera departs so strikingly from the original story. Not that an element of sexual interest is entirely lacking between Vere and Billy even in Melville. It appears, however, only as the implied physical desire of the older for the younger man, most notably when Vere congratulates his officers on having lighted upon 'such a fine specimen of the *genus homo*, who in the nude might have posed for a statue of a young Adam before the Fall'.[7] For the rest, Billy remains, in Melville's depiction, the deferential subordinate, and Vere the unbending interpreter of naval discipline. At the trial, Billy is portrayed as turning a look of 'dumb expressiveness' upon Vere, such as 'a dog of generous breed might turn upon his master'. In the subsequent veiled interview, it is Vere who conveys a mysterious healing power to Billy, not vice versa. There is nothing between them that might be described as a personal relationship, still less love of a kind which could lead to 'salvation' for Vere. 'Love' in this context, of course, while not excluding the physical, moves far beyond the realm of purely physical desire. Indeed, once such love is accepted as a legitimate dimension of human experience, many examples can be found of deep emotional attachments between men which, while they may well have a basis in sexual attraction, range far more widely in scope and depth. They represent a spiritual and emotional bond which, while it transcends the physical, may still be described as homosexual. Much of Walt Whitman's poetry is devoted to the celebration of such relationships, which, in a famous phrase, he summed up as 'the dear love of comrades'.[8]

What a study of the libretto drafts shows is how such a relationship between Billy and his captain was evolved from the unpromising material offered by Melville's portrait of Vere. From the standpoint of today, when homosexual relationships can

former Librarian of the Britten–Pears Library, Mr Paul Wilson, and to the Britten–Pears Foundation for the opportunity to consult the original documents at Aldeburgh, and to the Britten–Pears Foundation for permission to quote from materials owned by them. Except (at the time of writing) for a few documents recently acquired (seen nn. 16 & 24, below), all the *Billy Budd* material has been microfilmed, and references below are to the microfilm copy, which provides a continuous numeration (by frames) for each page of the original manuscript or typescript.

[6] *Selected Letters of E. M. Forster*, ed. Mary Lago & P. N. Furbank, ii (London, 1985), No. 394. Cf. Brett, op. cit., p. 136.

[7] Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Stories*, selected and ed. with an introduction by Harold Beaver, Harmondsworth, 1967 (repr. 1981), 372.

[8] Conclusion of the poem 'I hear it was charged against me' in *Calamus*. Melville had found similar same-sex relationships among the Polynesians, among whom he had lived in his youth (see extracts from his *Omoo* and *Typee* in Edward Carpenter, *Selected Writings*, ed. David Fernbach & Noel Greig, i (London, 1984), 202—though one need hardly go so far afield for examples). Of Melville's belief in romantic companionship between men, William Plomer has written that it was for him 'a fleeting memory or visionary ideal which offered some compensation to a lonely heart in a terrifying world': *Electric Delights*, London, 1978, p. 57 (in an essay, 'Herman Melville', originaliy published in 1943).

Whatever may be true of some of Britten's other operas, the question of paedophilia is, I think, not to the point in *Billy Budd*. While there is some difference in age (unspecified in the opera) between Vere and Billy, they are both grown men, acting in a world of men. They may be contrasted with the midshipmen, who are portrayed as boys with unbroken voices.

be openly depicted in television soap operas, it may be felt that hardly enough is explicitly stated in *Billy Budd* to sustain the philosophical weight attributed to it. But not much historical imagination is needed to realize just how difficult it was in the 1950s, when *Maurice* still lay hidden, unpublished, in Forster's drawer, to say anything at all on the stage about love between men. It would seem, however, that at the end of his life, Forster found, in collaboration with Benjamin Britten, the means of making a public statement that had up till then eluded him.[9] At any rate, that this was the intention seems to me proved by the material that has hitherto lain unstudied at Aldeburgh.

LOVE AND FATE

The key to this approach lies in an unpublished note in Forster's hand which is to be found among the libretto drafts at Aldeburgh and deserves to be quoted in full:

Librettist's note on Dirge Libretto

> I intended to convey not only that the men were lost, but *where*: —the infinite sea. First of four references to such a plight; the next being Vere's after trial [*sic*]; the next Billy's solution when he sights the sail of love which isn't Fate; the last Vere's in the Epilogue when he sees what Billy's shown him.
>
> Intended—apart from these high matters—to show the sea's round and almost *in* the boat. For stage and other reasons we're having a tendency to dry-dock feeling.
>
> Further—but here I'm getting off my own ground—I'd thought of the dirge in strongly defined stanzas of increasing length, each ending in a recognisable refrain. That there would be contrapuntality hadn't occurred to me.

Various pieces of internal and external evidence show that this note, while it cannot be dated exactly, belongs to a period when Forster's work on the libretto was completed, or all but completed.[10] It may therefore be taken to be his considered judgement on a central theme, not just a passing thought. Some of its substance—the

[9] Could this be part of what Forster meant when, having enjoyed world fame for over a quarter of a century, he wrote to Britten in December 1951: 'You and I have both put into it something which lies deeper than artistic creation, and which we both understand . . . this opera is my Nunc Dimittis, in that it dismisses me peacefully and convinces me I have achieved' (*Selected Letters*, ii, No. 398)?

[10] Microfilm A61, frame (fr.) 50. This manuscript note is undated and unsigned, though unmistakably in Forster's hand. The Aldeburgh archivists have included it in what they label 'Item 3: Draft Libretto (3 Acts)', which is datable to March 1949 at the latest. There are, however, strong reasons for assigning the note to a later date. The Epilogue (referred to in the note) appears not to have been drafted as early as March 1949. Moreover, the note itself is written on lined letter-writing paper of a kind quite different from the poor-quality flimsies Forster was using for his drafts in the early months of 1949. But most significant of all is a comparison of the final paragraph of the note with Forster's letters. The third and final paragraph of the note refers to the music for the dirge following the flogging of the Novice in Act I. Now when did Forster first hear this music? On 11 August 1949 he was writing to Bob Buckingham, 'I would like to hear some musical notes from Ben, but apparently they don't start yet—only musical ideas' (unpublished letter in the library of King's College, Cambridge). Forster in fact seems to have had to wait until the following spring to hear his 'notes'. In a further unpublished letter to Buckingham at the end of March 1950 he writes, 'Even on the piano Ben gets some lovely, mixed effects'. But the first act was still not finished when in a letter to Buckingham dated 23 April 1950 he wrote: 'Ben has played me most of the first Act of Billy—it should run to 40 minutes. I have had my first difference of opinion with him—over the dirge for the Novice. He has done dry contrapuntal stuff, no doubt original and excellent from the musician's point of view, but not at all appropriate from mine. I shall have a big discussion when the act is finished.' (Unpublished letters in King's College, Cambridge.)

The discussion over the music for the dirge and the precise relationship of the note under discussion to this letter need not concern us. What seems to be clear is that Forster could not have committed any view about the music to paper before the early months of 1950. This conclusion is of some importance because it means that the note (written at the earliest in the spring of 1950, and perhaps not until later, when Forster judged the time was opportune for discussing the music with Britten) must be taken to reflect Forster's considered thoughts, when his part of the work was complete, rather than an interim reflection at a very early stage.

Here and elsewhere I am indebted to Dr Michael Halls, Modern Archivist of King's College Library, for his assistance in consulting unpublished manuscripts in the library.

importance of 'the white sail beating up against the storm' as Melville's counter to the hostility of Fate—was taken up in an article that Forster wrote for the American periodical *Griffin* and which is cited by Brett.[11] What is not stated in that article, but is made quite clear in the present note, is that for Forster that sail signified *love*.

Love as the means of salvation from a hostile Fate, the solution to being 'lost on the infinite sea': this, it would seem, is Forster's framework of understanding. It is reflected in the Prologue and the Epilogue. 'Who has blessed me? Who saved me?', asks Vere at the beginning. And at the end, 'He has saved me, and blessed me, and the love that passes understanding has come to me'. The evil to which such love strangely provides a remedy pervades the opera in the two themes to which Forster's note points us: the mystery of mankind being 'lost' in an unfriendly and clueless universe (for which the infinite sea is the symbol); and the Fate which dooms men to suffering. This is the significance of the ill-used Novice. He is condemned to flogging for no good reason. 'Lost for ever on the endless sea', his suffering elicits one of the most moving musical sequences in the piece—the dirge in Act I. His subsequent part in the action—to entrap Billy—is likewise due to Fate:

> Why had it to be Billy, the one we all love? Why am I in this cruel and hateful ship instead of safe at home? Oh, why was I ever born? Why? It's fate, it's fate. I've no choice. Everything's fate.

So Claggart is 'doomed' to annihilate Billy, whom 'fortune' has caused to cross his path. The almost liturgical repetition of the words 'We've no choice' by the ship's officers at the trial underlines the theme. For Vere the point is reinforced musically by the fraught restatement of a variant of the Novice's 'dirge' theme to express the captain's state of mind as, at the end of the Trial Scene, he accepts the court's verdict, and reaches the conviction that he has no option but to destroy 'Beauty, Handsomeness, Goodness': he is 'lost with all hands on the infinite sea'. Finally, Billy, in his reflections on his own condition, recognizes that it was Fate (presumably through the medium of his stammer) that caused him to strike down 'that Jemmy Legs', and Fate that obliged Captain Vere, in turn, to strike him down.[12]

That the strength to stand firm in the face of such a hostile universe can be found in what, in the widest sense, must be described as human love gives expression to Forster's own philosophy, stated in his essay 'What I Believe':

> I have, however, to live in an age of faith—the sort of epoch I used to hear praised when I was a boy. It is extremely unpleasant really. It is bloody in every sense of the word. And I have to keep my end up in it. Where do I start?
>
> With personal relationships. Here is something comparatively solid in a world full of violence and cruelty.[13]

The rest of this article is devoted to tracing how, in the course of work on the libretto, the crucial personal relationship between Billy and Vere was built up.

[11] 'Letter from E. M. Forster', *Griffin* (monthly organ of the Readers Subscription Service in the USA), i (1951), 4–6. Cf. Brett, op. cit., p. 142 n. 17. On the significance of Fate in Forster's view of Melville, one may also cite a letter from Forster to Lionel Trilling dated 16 April 1949: 'Melville's main note is Fate, but the note has an overtone to it' (*Selected Letters*, ii, No. 389).

[12] Some have found the irrationality of attributing Billy's downfall to the stammer over which he has no control a stumbling-block. But as a symbol of blind Fate, its point, to my mind, lies precisely in its irrationality.

[13] This famous essay, first published in 1938, was reprinted in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, London, 1951 (repr. Harmondsworth, 1965).

THE LIBRETTO DRAFTS

The Britten–Pears Library at Aldeburgh holds a large amount of material, both manuscript and typescript, which comprises successive stages in the writing of the libretto for *Billy Budd*. A large part of this material has been deposited by Eric Crozier, who shared the writing of the libretto with E. M. Forster. The archivists of the Britten–Pears Library with Crozier's help have laboured to produce order out of what must have been an unruly collection of loose papers, and the following description is based on their work, for which all researchers must be grateful.[14] The descriptions and further analysis of relationships between the papers are, however, my own, and responsibility for any errors must rest with me.

The Aldeburgh archivists have distinguished eight stages in the evolution of the materials (short of the revision of 1961 which reduced the original four-act opera to two acts):

1. Earliest materials (January 1949).
2. Synopsis (five scenes).
3. Draft Libretto (three acts).
4. Complete Draft Libretto (three acts). Three copies.
5. Libretto (four acts). Crozier's copy.
6. Libretto (four acts). Britten's copy.
7. Supplementary materials.
8. Final Libretto (four acts). Two copies.

1. Earliest materials

The three loose sheets which issued from the very first meeting of the three collaborators, Britten, Forster and Crozier, in January 1949. They comprise a list of characters, a tabulation of Melville's dramatic incidents, and a sketch of a sailing-ship.[15]

2. Synopsis (five scenes)

Typed synopsis of the action (3½ pages), together with more extended synopses and lists of characters for Scene 1 (the impressment and scourging) and Scene 2 (between decks, the fight, Claggart's intervention and the instruction to the afterguardsman to tempt Billy). Material for Scene 1 is typewritten, that for Scene 2 in manuscript.

3. Draft Libretto (three acts)

A series of draft scenes in manuscript. These include the earliest draft for Vere's Prologue in Forster's hand. This text (which is reproduced in Crozier's article) survives largely unchanged in the first three paragraphs of the final version. The series of draft scenes in manuscript (mostly Forster's) include two drafts for part of Act II scene 2 (the Trial Scene), one in Crozier's hand and one in Forster's. Presumably these manuscripts are part of the materials produced during that intensive fortnight's work at Aldeburgh in March 1949 described by Crozier. This work resulted in:

4. Complete Draft Libretto (three acts)

Typed libretto in three copies (Crozier's, Britten's and Forster's). This is dated 'March 1949' by Eric Crozier. (The words 'First Draft, March 1949' appear in manuscript on the title-page of his copy.) This version may therefore conveniently be referred to as the March Draft. All three copies are marked. Forster's shows

[14] Mention should also be made of the fascinating and authoritative account written by Eric Crozier of the working methods which ultimately produced the libretto: see 'The Writing of *Billy Budd*', *Opera Quarterly*, iv/3 (Autumn 1986), 11–27.

[15] Described ibid.

extensive passages scored out with alternative drafts in his hand, most of which appear to have been incorporated at the next (typed) stage.

5. Libretto (four acts), Crozier's copy

The title-page of this typescript carries the words 'Second version—August 1949' and may therefore be referred to as the August Draft. Its text largely reproduces the manuscript alternative versions found alongside the March Draft (Item 4 above).

6. Libretto (four acts), Britten's copy

This text is defective, lacking pages 1–8, 10–11, 13, 15, 17 and 25–29 in the typed pagination. It includes, however, a complete text of the Trial Scene (now renumbered Act III scene 2). It is typed on a different machine from Item 5, but the typed text in the two items (so far as Item 6 survives) is the same. It seems therefore that Item 6 is Britten's working copy of the August Draft. It is very heavily marked, with passages scored through, and alternative versions written in, mostly in Britten's hand. In the Trial Scene, the amendments to this version are incorporated in the Final Libretto.[16]

7. Supplementary materials

A miscellaneous set of notes and drafts for isolated passages (e.g. for one of the shanties) whose place in relationship to the earlier items appears to be uncertain.

8. Final Libretto (four acts), two copies

The two copies (both in typescript) are labelled by the Aldeburgh archivists 'Final Copy 1' and 'Final Copy 2'. The first is almost clean, the second heavily amended. At first sight it appears that the second is simply the first corrected for the press, but on closer inspection it is clear that the texts, though very similar, are not identical. Nor is the second version with corrections quite identical with the published text. The relation between Final Copy 1 and Final Copy 2 and the relation of each to the version actually set by Britten and published pose an intricate (and, I suspect, fundamentally uninteresting) problem. So far as I have traced them the differences are tiny and of no particular significance. Where in this article it has been necessary to quote from this stage, I have chosen Final Copy 1 as showing marginally the more interesting variants on the way to the final form of words actually set by Britten.

While, in the foregoing, reference has occasionally been made to the various hands in the manuscripts, no attempt is made here systematically to assign responsibility for changes to various members of the trio. It is clear from Crozier's account that Forster was recognized as master of the libretto, and this is borne out by the fact that very substantial portions of the surviving manuscript drafts (subsequently incorporated in typescript) are in Forster's writing. On the other hand, there was extensive discussion between the three men at nearly every stage (until at the end a temporary coldness developed between Britten and Forster), and it should not necessarily be assumed that an idea originated with the author in whose hand it

[16] Shortly after this article was accepted for publication, Forster's copy of the August Draft of the libretto appeared on the market, and in December 1988 was acquired by the Britten–Pears Library. It contains the August Draft complete, and the extant pages from Britten's copy show that the typescript of the new document is a carbon copy of the latter. (The identification of the text of Britten's copy (Item 6) as simply a part of the August Draft found in full in Crozier's copy (Item 5) is confirmed by a comparison of the full Forster copy with Crozier's. Though done on different typewriters, the text of the two documents, except for a few minuscule corrections of punctuation and spelling, is identical throughout.)

Forster's copy of the August Draft contains a number of amendments in his hand, most of which are also found in Britten's copy, though what survives of the latter contains a good deal of additional rewriting not found in the Forster copy.

The newly acquired document raises interesting questions about the authorship of various specific changes. In so far as they affect the present article, these have been noted at the appropriate points.

appears. For the purpose of this article, it is generally sufficient to study changes in the successive drafts simply as a guide to the interpretation of different emphases in the evolution of the libretto as a joint enterprise.

To trace and evaluate every variant in the mass of material at Aldeburgh would be a mammoth task. The papers cover every aspect of the opera, going far beyond the scope of this article. I have concentrated on those passages which illuminate the key relationship between Billy and his captain, and in particular have compared in more detail the versions of the one scene (the Trial Scene—Act II scene 2 in the two-act version) in which Billy and Vere meet. Within the foregoing classification of materials, these versions may be itemized as follows.

A. Initial Draft: Crozier MS (found in Item 3 above)
B. March Draft: Typescript (found in Item 4 above, Britten's copy)
C. August Draft: Typescript (found in Item 5 above)
D. Final Draft: Typescript (found in Item 8 above, Final Copy 1)

The drafts at the first two stages also include copious notes—virtual rewritings—in Forster's hand. The relationship between Forster's and Crozier's drafts at Stage A is not clear, but the fact that the Forster MS begins part-way through the scene (with the death of Claggart) may indicate that he was commenting on the Crozier draft and supplying an alternative continuation. However that may be, the Forster version at Stage A is copied in the typescript referred to as 'B. March Draft' above (and for this reason is not listed separately). Similarly, Forster's copy of the March Draft contains extensive rewriting which is copied in the typescript of the August Draft. While I have not checked passages other than the Trial Scene, it seems likely that, apart from very minor changes, the typescripts for Items 4 (the March Draft) and 5 (the August Draft) as a whole incorporate throughout a copy of the Forster MSS found at the respective preceding stages. These typescripts have accordingly been treated as points of consolidation, which embody the conclusions reached in the discussions and manuscript drafts which precede each of them.[17] Unless otherwise stated, quotations reproduce the typescript text in any given item, without regard to manuscript amendments.

BILLY

Clearly, if the general interpretation outlined so far is to work, the two central characters, Billy and Vere, must be capable of entertaining love for one another. Since at least one writer has claimed that 'Forster wanted to emphasise the idea that Billy's sexual interests were normal',[18] it may be well to deal with this point at the outset, since the libretto drafts provide some pertinent material.

Billy is a large character, if a little naïve—positive, outgoing, concerned with 'working and helping, working and sharing',[19] 'king of the world'. His anger is kindled at injustice (on behalf of others as well as himself) or at the suggestion of disloyalty. But he is not a 'do-gooder'. Forster himself, in a radio discussion broadcast in

[17] The following are the microfilm references for the various drafts of the Trial Scene discussed:

A. Initial Draft: Microfilm A61, frs. 85–90
B. March Draft: Microfilm A61, frs. 159–67
C. August Draft: Microfilm A62, frs. 54–61
D. Final Draft: Microfilm A62, frs. 214–19

[18] Noel Bradley, 'The Non-Clinical Test of a Clinical Theory: Billy Budd, Novel and Libretto', *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, vii (1980), 233.

[19] Could Forster have written this without being conscious that in *Maurice* he had used the word 'share' in its Edwardian sense of engaging in homosexual sex?

1960, spoke of his concern in depicting Billy 'to make goodness interesting'. Now goodness for Forster assuredly did not exclude sex, but Billy is basically unaware of the sexual interest that his presence arouses. He does not care what he is called, and seems oblivious of the sexual innuendo in the terms 'Baby' and 'Beauty'. He is certainly too naïve to pick up the designs which Claggart has upon him and which are so obvious to those around him. He responds unaffectedly and emotionally to goodness and kindness, and that is the basis of his desire to come close to Vere: 'He's good is he? and goodness is best, and I'm for it, Starry Vere, and I'm for you'.

So far there is no reason to exclude a sexual interest in either men or women, and at an early stage there seems to have been an intention to provide Billy with a girl friend. In his ballad, 'Billy in the darbies', Melville had inserted a brief reminiscence of 'the eardrop I gave to Bristol Molly'. Picking this up, the March Draft gives Billy the following words when the Novice, in tempting him, reminds him of how the pressed men had been forced to leave their families and friends: 'Bristol Molly there was as I gave an ear-drop to, but she'll have found plenty of others by this time. Oh, I'd like well if Moll was in hammock with me.'[20] The same draft retained the reference to 'Bristol Molly' in the ballad. The ballad reference, however, is marked for deletion in Britten's copy of the March Draft, and both passages are deleted in Forster's copy of this draft. Neither is found in the August Draft.

It has been suggested that a heterosexual interest can be founded on the verse of the sea shanty given to Billy alone.[21] True, he sings, 'Oh Anna Susannah! I'll find you a bed by and by'. But shanties are communal activities, not expressions of personal taste. The composition of the sea shanties seems, in fact, to have caused problems, in particular over the extent to which they might refer to girls. Lago and Furbank record quite an exchange of correspondence on this subject, ending with a letter to Crozier (dated 19 December 1950) in which Forster writes: 'I look forward to seeing your re-draft of the shanty and expect it will now come right. It was a question of shifting the atmosphere. I agree that Moll might shift it too much—especially if Ben uses her in the poem in Act IV.'[22]

The August Draft has a blank with the single word 'Shanty' at the relevant point.[23] Item 7 above in the Aldeburgh archive contains four alternative drafts for shanties (by different authors), only one of which (three stanzas on a love affair) is markedly interested in relations between the sexes; it was not used. The last of the set approaches the final version, and shows the verse on Susannah ('I'll find you a bed by and by') assigned to Billy.[24] It would seem that the minimal reference to a girl was admitted to qualify the song for acceptance as a shanty, but no significance

[20] Microfilm A61, fr. 139.

[21] Bradley, op. cit., p. 243.

[22] *Selected Letters*, ii, No. 395, and p. 243 n. Dr Donald Mitchell has suggested to me that another reason for the difficulty over the shanties may have been in finding words which were suitable for musical setting— a point to which Britten always gave particular attention.

[23] Microfilm A62, fr. 88. Neither Britten's nor Forster's copy is annotated at this point.

[24] Microfilm A62, frs. 142 & 144. The papers acquired by the Britten–Pears Library in December 1988 include a number of letters from Britten to Dr Kenneth Harrison, then a don at King's College, Cambridge. A letter dated 2 March 1951 thanking Harrison for his proposals for shanties makes it clear that Harrison was the author of the set of verses included in Item 7 of the Aldeburgh archive ('We're off to Samoa . . .'); with some modifications, these were adopted as the main shanty in Act I scene 3. Britten's letter specifies the order of stanzas (different from that proposed by Harrison), and in particular makes the dramatically significant transposition of the stanza 'We're anchored off Scilly' (which stood second in Harrison's draft) to be the conclusion of the sequence, thus focusing attention on Billy. Britten's comment on the stanza is worth quoting: it 'starts slowly making mock love to Billy & then cheers up considerably at—"for all he's a catch on the eye" ' (letter to Kenneth Harrison dated 2 March 1951 in the Britten–Pears Library copyright © the Britten–Pears Foundation, not to be reproduced without the written permission of the Britten–Pears Foundation). This appraisal is clearly reflected in the score.

should be attached to it. A glance at the musical setting confirms this view. Billy's words 'Oh Susannah, I'll find you a bed by and by' occur only as an unaccented phrase at the end of a cadence (three bars before fig. 85). By contrast, at the conclusion of the shanty episode the verse about 'Billy' is introduced by a succession of suggestive *tenutos* on the words 'My Aunt willy-nilly was winking at Billy'. This is followed by considerable elaboration and emphasis on the words 'She'll cut up her Billy for pie, For all he's a catch on the eye'—words which, in the mouths of an all-male chorus, carry scarcely concealed homosexual overtones.

It would seem from all this that the final decision to exclude Moll was a considered one, and its likely purpose was to avoid too strongly shifting the atmosphere to suggest a heterosexual interest on Billy's part. We do not have to hold that Billy was 'a homosexual' in the modern exclusive sense. But the way had to be left open for the main theme: a positive and indeed idealized form of homosexual love to be implicit in the relationship between Billy and Vere. Billy *might* have had an affair with Bristol Molly, but it would have blurred the perception of the main theme to say so.

VERE AND SALVATION

The way is now open to consider that theme itself: that Vere was able to find a form of healing or salvation through his relationship with Billy, as described at the outset of this article. Such an idea was not set down all at once. That Vere should live on and that the drama should be relived through his memory is reflected in what appears to be one of the earliest surviving parts of the libretto—a draft in Forster's hand of the Prologue, with the added note 'NB. In the story Vere dies soon after, but he had better live on'.[25] But that initial draft, while it dilates on the conflict of good and evil, does not refer to the possibility of salvation. This thought is only added in the manuscript redraft of the Prologue (in Forster's hand), attached to the first typed draft of the libretto (the March Draft), in which the following words are given to Vere: 'I have been lost on the infinite sea. Who has rescued me, who blessed me?'[26]

A similar development can be traced in the Epilogue. The first draft of this to appear is as an expansion (in Forster's hand) of the March Draft. The relevant sentences read:

> God has blessed me and also admonished me. For I could have saved him . . .
>
> I have erred, but pardon has come to me, and the wisdom that passes understanding.[27]

There is no direct reference here to the idea that Billy might be the agent of salvation, nor to the power of love. But in the final version the reference to God (as in the Prologue) has been dropped, and 'love' has taken the place of 'wisdom':

> . . . For I could have saved him. He knew it, even his shipmates knew it, though earthly laws silenced them.
>
> O what have I done? But he has saved me, and blessed me, and the love that passes understanding has come to me . . .

The substitution of Billy for God as the agent of blessing and salvation is quite startling (at any rate, against a background of traditional Christianity), but it is fundamental to Forster's world view and the philosophy described above. Moreover, the

[25] The text is reproduced in Crozier, 'The Writing of *Billy Budd*', p. 13.
[26] Microfilm A61, fr. 256.
[27] Microfilm A61, fr. 375.

biblical overtones in 'the love that passes understanding' do not, I think, carry a Christian message but, rather, declare that the love between the two men is the reality to which such mystical language properly refers. Forster accepted the sense of doomed fatality and the pervasiveness of evil in the world that he found in Melville. But his solution was not to draw a parallel between the innocent victim on board the *Indomitable* and the atoning sacrifice of 'the lamb of God' to which Melville alludes.[28] He is concerned instead with the earthly and particular experience of love between Billy and Vere. It is a very human love which is 'Billy's solution'.

But this vision could not be developed in the opera without two radical shifts away from Melville's presentation. First, Vere had to be shown to be more than the impersonal agent of naval discipline. He had to be a figure capable of human warmth, one who could inspire loyalty to the death and even love. As Forster himself put it, the first task was to 'rescue Vere from Melville'.[29] Secondly, space had to be made somehow for a more positive relationship between Billy and Vere than is to be found in Melville—a by no means easy task, given not only the discipline required in a fighting ship but also the social distance between officers and men which historical verisimilitude demanded. A study of the successive drafts of the text for the Trial Scene shows how the librettists gradually developed these two elements in the story.

Much the more difficult was Vere's character, for in the end it has to be his authority as captain which carries responsibility for executing the judgement of the drumhead court that Billy must die. The first solution, advanced in the incomplete Initial Draft, was to shift from Vere to his officers all the statements in Melville which suggest the overriding duty of obeying naval law and of disregarding the claims of natural justice. It is then left to Vere to raise doubts: the 'mystery of iniquity'; the plea of natural justice on behalf of one obviously innocent: the private conscience. The difficulty here is that ultimately Vere has to order the execution. Indeed, this fact appears to be recognized, at least indirectly, even in the Initial Draft, which makes Vere express his first reaction at the moment of Claggart's death in the quotation from Melville, 'Struck dead by an angel from God. Yet the angel must hang.' The idea that the officers should bear the brunt of advocating unrelenting application of the law (though their viewpoints gradually come to be differentiated in degrees of severity) is one which survives into the final version, with the references to the Mutiny Act, the Articles of War and the King's Regulations, and the almost liturgical refrain 'We've no choice'.

The ambiguity of Vere's position is, however, clarified in the March Draft by establishing his acceptance of responsibility for the execution, while allowing him to show an awareness of transcendental mysteries of good and evil revealed in the affair, which go beyond the mundane considerations of human law by which he himself is bound. On the one hand he recognizes Billy's goodness and the 'mystery of iniquity' involved in Claggart's desire 'to destroy handsomeness, beauty and goodness'. On the other hand, he bluntly replies 'No' when asked by his officers if he wishes them to acquit Budd, and is allowed to say:

[28] The extent and nature of the Christian element in Melville, and indeed in the opera, is problematical and material for a separate essay. In my view Melville is fundamentally a non-Christian fatalist, who nevertheless saw some parallel between the fate of Billy and that of Christ on the Cross. Forster, though occasionally showing in his letters an awareness of parallels with the Christian story, omitted from the libretto the hints of a Christianizing interpretation he found in Melville. (The fact that the Billy of the libretto hears, uncomprehending, from the chaplain the story of the 'good boy hung and gone to glory' is neither here nor there.) That Forster and Britten did not see eye to eye on these mysteries is suggested by Forster's letter of 30 September 1948 to Britten: *Selected Letters*, ii, No. 385.

[29] In a letter to William Plomer, quoted in Brett, 'Salvation at Sea', p. 135.

I must not too closely consider these mysteries. As mysteries let them remain. I serve the King and my course is laid out for me. I must pursue it inflexibly. Honour, tradition, the safety of my ship. The exigencies of war compel me. Poor lad! Poor lad! May God grant him strength.[30]

It is also of interest that the March Draft briefly floats the solution (offered by the surgeon in Melville) that Billy should be put in irons until the *Indomitable* rejoins the main fleet and the matter could be resolved by higher authority. Vere, however, rejects this, urging (for reasons that are not entirely clear), 'If he is to be condemned it must be here. If his blood is to be on another's head, let it be on mine.'[31] Once the verdict is pronounced, Vere in this draft is given a monologue expounding in somewhat heavily theological terms the idea that his little ship, the *Indomitable*, is the battleground for the cosmic forces of good and evil. Through all this, Vere, unable to find any way of saving Billy, is shown as a man of passion and sensitivity, deeply aware of the human cost of the decision which he feels obliged to make in the execution of his duty as a naval officer.

In the August Draft, however, the suggestion of delay until the matter can be referred to the admiral is dropped completely. It is indeed unanswerable, and if allowed to surface would make Vere's resolute refusal to save Billy (already difficult) wholly unacceptable. For the purpose of the opera we have to be convinced that judgement must be delivered immediately. This is achieved by the addition of words which appear for the first time in the August Draft: 'Our enemy is near and the prisoner must be tried at once'.[32] The audience will, of course, interpret these words in the light of the earlier expressions of the fear of mutiny (Spithead and the Nore) and the demonstration, afforded by the encounter with the French ship, that hostilities are imminent. If, therefore, no alternative to immediate judgement is presented to our minds, we may concur in accepting the necessity.

More remarkable, in the August Draft Vere's reference to his duty to the king and to the exigencies of war is reduced to the words 'Death is the penalty for those who break the laws of earth'.[33] One cannot but surmise that, in the end, neither the life-long pacifist who was later to write the *War Requiem*, nor the writer whose creed bade him put his friend before his country, could accept the thought that naval regulations or wartime emergency could be made to justify the killing of an innocent man. For them this, it seems, had to be seen as part of the evil decreed by an irrational fate. But they are prepared to allow (as I think Melville was not) that Vere's decision may have been mistaken—hence the words of the Epilogue, 'For I could have saved him'. While raising the issue of Vere's freedom to have acted otherwise, and so throwing into ambiguity the ultimacy of Fate, this concluding statement substantiates the portrait of Vere as a real person, and transforms his part in the action into a genuinely human tragedy.[34]

The August Draft still retains more of the philosophical speculation about the cosmic struggle than was allowed to appear in the final version, and it is worth

[30] Microfilm A61, frs. 165 and 167.
[31] Microfilm A61, fr. 166.
[32] Microfilm A62, fr. 57.
[33] Microfilm A62, fr. 61.
[34] This point was given some emphasis in a BBC radio discussion between the composer and his librettists, first broadcast on 22 November 1960 and repeated in part on 3 June 1987. All three agreed that while Claggart was (all but) pure evil, and Billy (all but) pure goodness, Vere was more subject to the ambiguities of real experience than either, and a truly tragic character. He had a choice of action and finally came to realize that he had made a tragic error. In this discussion, Britten also said that it was the element of conflict in Vere's mind which drew him to the story.

quoting Vere's speech from this draft in full to illustrate the extent of the transformation achieved in the final form:

> I accept your verdict: but I have seen what you cannot see: iniquity overthrown, the divine judgment from heaven. Cooped in this narrow cabin, I have beheld the mystery of goodness, and I am afraid. The powers of the spirit, the invisible legions, descend from the heights and arise from the depths, this ship of mine, this tiny Indomitable, is their battlefield, my ship floating on the sea and the sea is but part of the world, and the world but a speck in space. Eternity surrounds me. I am nothing, yet in my presence goodness has triumphed, the angel of God has struck.
> And the angel must hang.
> Death is the penalty for those who break the laws of earth, and I who am king of this fragment of the earth, this floating monarchy, exact death. I will not save him. Beauty, handsomeness, goodness, it is for me to destroy you. Poor lad, poor lad, may God grant him strength! (*He moves towards the room where BILLY is waiting*). No No! God grant *me* strength, me, Edward Fairfax Vere, Captain of the Indomitable, lost with all aboard upon the infinite sea.[35]

The relationships of this passage with the earlier drafts and with the final version are complex, and a full analysis would be tedious. But in the transition from the August Draft to the Final Draft (which is all but identical with the published version) some very significant changes in the material given to Vere call for comment.

To begin with, in the Final Draft the following speech for Vere (almost entirely new) is inserted immediately after the death of Claggart and before the officers arrive:

> The mists have cleared. O terror, what do I see? Scylla and Charybdis, and the straits of Hell. I sight them too late; I see all the mists concealed. Beauty, handsomeness, goodness coming to trial. How can I condemn him? How can I save him? How? My heart's broken, my life's broken. It isn't his trial, it is mine. It is I whom the devil awaits.[36]

This insertion profoundly alters our appreciation of Vere's position. In the August Draft he is almost a spectator of events outside his control. He observes the struggle between goodness and evil taking place on his little ship, a mere speck in space. He is obliged to declare 'I will not save him', but seems to have almost no choice in the matter. But in the Final Draft, we see into his soul and are shown the deep inward torment the decision is bound to cost him. We know (from the radio discussion of 1960) that it was this feature of the story that drew Britten to it. It would seem, therefore, that it is no accident that this speech first occurs in the libretto drafts in Britten's hand, inserted in his copy of the August Draft[37] — a key moment, one cannot but feel, in the process (discerned by Philip Brett and Andrew Porter[38]) whereby the composer shifted the focus of interest from Billy to Captain Vere.

But the hellish choice between Scylla and Charybdis is concerned not only with the possibility that an essentially innocent man must be hanged. It also concerns one who has come to mean more to Vere than just one seaman among many. This is

[35] Microfilm A62, fr. 61.

[36] Microfilm A62, fr. 215. The text is quoted in the version listed by the Aldeburgh archivists as '8: Libretto, Final Copy 1'. The reader will note some minute differences between this and the final, printed, version, but the only one of significance is the fact that the printed version reiterates (as does Final Copy 2) the word 'mine' in line 4 of the extract — a further stage in the process of intensifying Vere's personal anguish.

[37] Microfilm A62, fr. 116. A comparison of this document with Forster's copy of the same draft (p. 36) tends to support the suggestion that Britten was the innovator here. Britten's manuscript note shows the deletions and revisions which are the mark of composition, while in Forster's copy the speech is inserted in a neat hand, with all the appearance of being a fair copy taken from elsewhere.

[38] Cf. Brett, op. cit., p. 135 n. 8, and Andrew Porter, 'Britten's "Billy Budd" ', *Music & Letters*, xxxiii (1952), 112.

shown by the placing as well as by the content of this speech. Its insertion before ever the trial begins links it closely with the preceding dialogue between Vere and Billy, in which (as is argued below) they discover a hitherto unrealized depth of love and respect for one another. It is only this depth of feeling which will account for Vere's cry, 'My heart's broken, my life's broken'. The speech is a new and moving revelation of the intense personal stress under which Vere labours.

The changes (both omissions and additions) made to Vere's speech after the trial point in the same direction. In the Final Draft this reads as follows:

> I accept their verdict. I accept their verdict. Death is the penalty for those who break the laws of earth. And I who am king of this fragment of earth, of this floating monarchy, have exacted death. But I have seen the divine judgment of Heav'n. I've seen the iniquity overthrown. Cooped in this narrow cabin I have beheld the mystery of goodness. And I am afraid.
> Before what tribunal do I stand if I destroy goodness? The angel of God has struck and the angel must hang through me. Beauty, handsomeness, goodness, it is for me to destroy you. I, Edward Fairfax Vere, Captain of the *Indomitable*, lost with all hands on the infinite sea. I am the messenger of death, the messenger of death. How can he pardon? How receive me?[39]

The August Draft[40] had retained a considerable emphasis on somewhat speculative and even metaphysical thoughts about a cosmic conflict between invisible powers, of which Vere appears to be little more than the instrument. In the new draft, this element has virtually disappeared, even though Claggart's death is still seen as a divine retribution upon evil. On the other hand, there is an expanded recognition of Vere's personal responsibility for the impending execution. 'Before what tribunal do *I* stand . . . ?' The angel must hang—'*through me*'. The addition of the words 'I am the messenger of death . . .' underlines the significance of the decision for the personal relationship between Billy and Vere.

To sum up, what we witness in these successive drafts is the transformation of a somewhat detached and philosophical observer of a metaphysical conflict into a man deeply and personally involved with a fellow human being—a devoted comrade—whom he still feels obliged, out of an overriding sense of his duty as a naval commander, to allow to suffer an unmerited death. No wonder he cries 'It is I whom the devil awaits'.[41]

VERE AND BILLY

The evolution of Vere's character, which is by no means easy to follow and which seems to have given the librettists considerable trouble, is matched by a development in the presentation of Billy's relationship to Vere. By comparison, this is a straightforward drive towards increasing warmth. For the fullest exposition of this relationship we have to wait for the only moment in the opera when the two men

[39] Microfilm A62, fr. 219.

[40] Quoted above, p. 374.

[41] Vere's failure to save Billy has been understandably criticized, and it can be debated whether the opera provides an adequate justification for his action. That the philosophical implications of the story continued to trouble Britten is suggested by the fact that for his next work he turned to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. The obvious link with *Billy Budd* is provided by Melville's text, which makes just this comparison at the moment of the veiled interview. But its deeper significance lies in its answer to the suggestion that God might lead his faithful follower Abraham to believe it his duty to sacrifice his own son—just as, in a sense, Vere sacrificed Billy. While for Forster the answer was to confront a barbarous universe which was capable of such a demand with stoic fortitude, grounded in human love, one wonders whether Britten still sought a quasi-religious response, for which the miraculous deliverance of Isaac provided the symbol. If so, the Canticle (Op. 51) provides a pendant to the opera (Op. 50) with a religious function similar to that performed by the 'Christianizing' chorus at the end of *The Rape of Lucretia* or the 'Resurrection' appearance of the boy at the end of *Curlew River*.

meet. But it is prepared for indirectly by a number of points where Billy is shown to have come under Vere's notice.

In the discussion between the officers in Act II scene 2, we learn that Billy's exuberance has already made its mark on Vere, who is confident that the new recruit's farewell to *The Rights of Man* was nothing more than youthful high spirits. He has thus already made a positive appraisal of Billy when Claggart approaches with his accusations of mutiny. In reply, Vere not only says that he has received good reports of the foretopman but adds: 'I have seen many men in my time, and I trust him'. It is a perverse misreading of the situation when Claggart replies: 'You do but notice his outwards, the flower of masculine beauty and strength'. The evolution of this passage in the successive libretto drafts will, however, repay further study, providing a further example of the intention to build up the significance of the personal relationships between the three principal characters as far as the meagre opportunities provided by Melville would allow.

The March Draft makes no reference to Vere's personal expression of trust in Billy, or to Claggart's second (and stronger) suggestion that the captain's judgement is bemused by the foretopman's beauty. What we find is simply the following (after Claggart has named the alleged mutineer):[42]

> VERE. William Budd? There's a yard arm for a false witness, Master-at-Arms.
> CLAGGART. Sir, sir! Your honour!
> VERE. Nay, you're mistaken, your police have deceived you. Don't come to me with so foggy a tale. That is the foretopman I get good reports of—cheerful, willing, serviceable, popular.
> CLAGGART. You have but noticed his outwards, your honour—his pleasant looks, his frank temper. They are but a mask. A man-trap lurks under those ruddy-tipped daisies.

Vere then calls Mr Redburn to discuss the weather, and is only persuaded to interview Billy Budd by what amounts to a threat of resignation from Claggart, who gives notice that he will seek another ship and says: 'I cannot maintain order here without your honour's confidence'.

The manuscript amendments to this text (in Forster's hand), which are then embodied in the August Draft,[43] introduce the words (on Claggart's part) 'You do but note his outwards, your honour, his *flower of masculine beauty and strength*'. The threat of the yard-arm for a false witness is now transposed to follow these words—a subtle psychological insight implying that the insinuation that Vere is unduly moved by the young sailor's handsome physique has touched him on the raw. This, not Claggart's resignation threat, is what now motivates Vere to interview Billy with a view to clearing the matter up.

But only at a very late stage are the two strands in this dialogue (Billy's moral uprightness and his physical beauty) finally disentangled. In Britten's copy of the August Draft we find a complex reworking of the passage in Britten's hand.[44] This not only introduces (for the first time) Vere's personal expression of trust in Billy,

[42] Microfilm A61, frs. 157–8.

[43] Microfilm A61, fr. 339, & A62, fr. 52.

[44] This includes manuscript additions to the typescript and a manuscript note on the opposite page (verso of the preceding) designed to clarify the intended order of speeches. I believe that the text above correctly interprets the intention of these alterations. (Microfilm A62, frs. 108–10.) Forster's copy of the August Draft (p. 33) shows the same material written in a neat hand on the opposite verso blank page, with minimum disturbance of the typescript. A comparison of the two copies suggests that here again Forster may have been simply recording changes initiated by Britten.

but divides the speeches so that Vere first rebuts the suggestion of deceit on Billy's part and then responds more roundly to the sexual innuendo of Claggart's rejoinder:

VERE. Budd, *Billy* Budd, foretopman?
CLAGGART. The same.
VERE. Nay you're mistaken, your police have deceived you—don't come to me with so foggy a tale. That's the young fellow I get good reports of.
CLAGGART. Pleasant looks, good temper—they are but a mask. He is deep, deep, *that foretopman.*
VERE. *Master at Arms, I cannot agree. I have seen many men in my time and I trust him.*
CLAGGART. You do but note his outwards, your honour, the flower of masculine beauty and strength. A mantrap lurks under those ruddy-tipped daisies.
VERE. Claggart, take heed what you speak. There's a yard-arm for a false witness.

The words in italics are new. In the first line the typescript has 'William', and the warmer 'Billy' is substituted in Britten's hand. The words 'your honour' following Claggart's 'You do but note his outwards' are deleted in pencil.[45] This deletion adds to what might, perhaps must, be construed as insolence in a subordinate,[46] and supports the idea of an intended sexual innuendo in the words 'the flower of masculine beauty and stength'. The end product of this development is a delicate but clear psychological progression. Vere at first simply states his confidence in Billy's loyalty. Claggart's suggestion of deceit elicits a stronger expression of trust, whereupon Claggart hints at a somewhat less honourable motive for Vere's attitude, prompting the latter to threaten the Master-at-Arms with the yard-arm.

But these rather brief references do no more than suggest that Vere may have taken more than a passing interest in the young foretopman. It rests with the dialogue at the beginning of the Trial Scene—which is wholly the invention of the librettists—to develop a relationship which has so far only been foreshadowed indirectly. Achieved in a remarkably short space of time, and still falling far short of the full expression we should expect if the protagonists were a man and a woman, it is nevertheless a dramatic expansion and indeed transformation of what we find in the novel. The idea takes its rise from what in Melville is no more than a thought in Billy's mind as he enters the captain's cabin. 'The only thing', writes Melville, '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.' In the opera this is transformed into a dialogue between Vere and Billy, whose development through successive drafts is very revealing.[47]

The Initial Draft of the Trial Scene libretto makes nothing of Melville's hint. There is no exchange between Billy and Vere. Rather, Billy's entrance is followed almost immediately by that of Claggart, who at the captain's command launches straight into his accusation. The March Draft begins to elaborate, having Billy, before Claggart enters, state his hopes for promotion and the honour of it, either as captain of the mizzen-top or as the captain's coxswain. But Vere tells him immediately that he must put such thoughts out of his mind.

In the August Draft, Billy goes further. Now the expected honour is not just promotion but the personal association with Captain Vere: 'Oh the honour—and you telling me'. The foretopman then goes on to promise his personal devotion as

[45] The name 'Billy' and the deletion of 'your honour' are not found in Forster's copy.
[46] Claggart has, after all, already in the opening scene expressed his contempt for the officers.
[47] The relevant references are Microfilms A61, fr. 85; A61, fr. 159; A62, fr. 54; A62, fr. 214.

coxswain: 'I'd serve you well. Indeed I would. You'd be safe with me. You could trust your boat to me. Couldn't find a better coxswain—that's to say I'll look after you my best.' Britten's copy of the August Draft has a manuscript insertion at the point where Billy offers to be the captain's coxswain. Vere interjects 'Why?', to which Billy's response becomes '*To be near you.* I'd serve you well . . .'[48] This is included in the Final Draft, which is further expanded by Vere's expression of disbelief in Claggart's accusations, and a yet fuller avowal of devotion by Billy:

> I'd die for you—so would they all. Aren't I glad to be here! Didn't know what life was before now, and O for a fight! Wish we'd got that frigate I do, but we'll catch her another day. Sir! Let me be your coxswain! I'd look after you. I'd look after you well. You could trust your boat to me. You'd be safe with me. Please, sir!

The authors' intentions are revealed by the steady development of the relationship between the two men as draft succeeds draft. At each stage there is a significant increase in what can only be described as ardour on the young sailor's part, until in the final version Vere responds with what in effect is a positive appreciation of the young man's loyalty. It is also noticeable that, as the dialogue develops, so Billy ceases to play the role of submissive, dog-like subordinate assigned to him by Melville, and comes more and more to speak with his captain on terms of equality—a portrayal as remote (one imagines) from the historical realities of shipboard life in 1797 as it is close to the idealization by Edward Carpenter, and by Forster's circle, of relationships which transcend class barriers, particularly when those relationships are homosexual.[49]

Before leaving this scene we should note that the heightening of Billy's personal devotion is to be observed in the treatment of his appeal to his captain to save him. The March Draft simply has:

> 1ST LT. Very well Budd, any questions?
> BILLY. Aye, Captain Vere will you save me?
> 1ST LT. Questions must be addressed to the court, not to the Captain.[50]

There is little change in the August Draft, but the threefold expansion in the Final Version makes Billy reiterate in his captain's presence the avowal first expressed at the end of the first scene: 'I'd have died to save you'.

As I have already suggested, the idea of a relationship deeper than that between officer and subordinate must perforce be developed in a remarkably short space (even when allowance is made for the artificiality of operatic time). Perhaps this is one reason why, in the original four-act version, the muster scene was introduced at the end of Act I scene 1. This at least gave Billy an opportunity to see the captain before his last fateful encounter, and add his personal shout of loyalty to that of the chorus: 'I'll follow you. I'll serve you, I'm yours, I'll die for you.'

But if my argument is right so far, it is particularly significant that, in producing the two-act version, librettist and composer brought a new dimension to the

[48] Microfilm A62, fr. 114. This insertion does not appear in Forster's copy.

[49] Cf. Carpenter, 'The Place of the Uranian in Society', *Selected Writings*, i, esp. pp. 237 ff. A love which transcends social class was of course the theme of Forster's novel *Maurice*, which, though written in 1913, remained unpublished until after his death. In an unpublished letter, probably written in June 1951, to '4 Crabbe Street, Aldeburgh', Forster requests the return by registered post of the manuscripts of *Arctic Summer* and *Maurice*. It would seem, therefore, that Britten and Pears were among the few friends to whom Forster showed the manuscript of the latter. (The letter—unlisted in Mary Lago, *Calendar of the Letters of E. M. Forster*, London, 1984—is in the Britten-Pears Library.)

[50] Microfilm A61, fr. 165.

vehemence and ardour of Billy's affirmation even though Vere is not present.[51] Not only is his zeal now kindled by Vere's goodness (a new note introduced by Donald), but in this later version Billy alone says he would *die* for Vere. Moreover, it is not now simply a case of dying for a naval commander for the sake of his country, but a more personal note enters with 'I'd die *to save you*'. These words carry Billy's dedication beyond the call of patriotic duty, and beyond the heroism called forth by a Nelson, such as is to be found in Melville. The difference in the two texts is no doubt in part explained by the fact that in the one case Vere is present, having enthused his sailors with a rousing oration, whereas in the other he is absent. But the difference in Billy's tone is still remarkable, and surely significant for what is to come. In the four-act version he affirms: 'I'll follow you, I'll serve you, I'll die for you, Starry Vere!' But in the two-act version his words are expanded to read:

> Star of the morning, star of the morning . . . Leading from night, leading to light . . . Starry I'll follow you . . . Follow thro' darkness, never you fear . . . I'd die to save you, ask for to die . . . I'll follow you all I can, follow you for ever!

This personal devotion is reiterated by Billy at the very end of the act, where, reflecting on his hope of promotion to the mizzen-top, he says, 'Think of that, near Captain Vere himself, God bless him'.

TOGETHER AGAINST FATE

The developments I have traced through the libretto drafts establish the importance and increasing depth of the relationship between Vere and Billy. But the climax is reserved for the moment when the two men meet behind closed doors at the end of the Trial Scene. What passed between them we are left to imagine as the orchestra delivers the famous sequence of chords which conclude that scene. The way in which those chords cohere (as I believe) with the preceding musical argument is material for a further article. That they in some sense signify a positive resolution of the tensions of the drama is indicated by the statements given to the two protagonists which follow—Billy's meditation on Fate, and Vere's Epilogue.

The importance of Billy's meditation at this point for Forster is underlined in a letter to his friend Bob Buckingham dated 7 February 1952, in which he wrote:

> Do you remember the passage in Act IV *after* the Darbies where he ends, 'I'm strong, and I'll stay strong and that's all and that's enough?' It's immensely important to the opera and to my view of things, and, I think, to Melville's . . .[52]

Billy's two paragraphs, to which Forster here refers, bring to completion a number of ideas which have gradually become more significant as the opera has progressed.

First, there is Fate, which, as we have seen, is the engine of tragedy throughout the opera. Then there is the fact that it is as equals that Billy and his captain now stand before this ineluctable power. This is movingly implied when the young man who is about to die says:

> We are both in sore trouble, him and me, with great need for strength, and my trouble's soon ending, so I can't help him longer with his. Starry Vere, God bless him—and the clouds darker than night for us both.

It is a remarkable utterance and not at all the language of a junior sailor about his commanding officer. Up to the point of the veiled interview, Billy has shown

[51] It was a particularly suggestive exercise of directorial discretion in the Scottish National Opera's 1987 production to introduce Vere at this point, at the top level of the set, as a silent observer of the men's homage.

[52] Unpublished letter in King's College Library, Cambridge.

commitment, admiration, devotion. Vere has acknowledged loyalty and goodness as well as beauty. There has been emotion on both sides—Vere's agony at the prospect before him; Billy's protestation that he is ready to sacrifice his life. But they have remained officer and subordinate. In these last reflections Billy goes further. He sees Vere and himself standing *together*, sharing a similar wretchedness and strengthening one another in adversity (a dimension which is not to be found in Melville's allusion to the father–son relationship of Abraham and Isaac). In the opera, Billy's words at this point testify that in some mysterious way they have now found one another as men. They have even reached the point where, although one is obliged according to the laws of earth to condemn the other to death, the condemned one can say, 'Starry Vere, God bless him'.[53]

Then there is the far-shining sail which is not Fate—the gleam of hope which (as Forster's note with which I began makes clear) is *love*. And Billy has seen it. Where and how? The answer seems to be in what Melville calls 'the something of healing' which passed between Vere and Billy in the closeted interview. Somehow they must have attained a relationship, be it mutual respect, be it love, which enabled both of them to accept and do what had (as it seemed) to be accepted and done. Even this pitiless call of duty is embraced within 'the dear love of comrades'.[54] While any interpretation must be subjective and hazardous, that, it seems to me, must be the import of the succession of elemental triads which stands guard over the interview—elemental because they reflect basic questions about existence and the ultimate affirmation with which it is possible to confront a hostile universe.[55] Their strength belongs as much to Vere as to Billy. It seems to follow that what Vere has done for Billy (notwithstanding the impending fearful penalty exacted by law and Fate) is as significant as what Billy does for Vere.

This line of interpretation is confirmed by the musical treatment of Billy's monologue and of what follows. As Billy speaks we hear the 'interview chords' in the orchestra, briefly introduced at first as if to confirm his vision of safe anchorage (six bars after fig. 116), but ringing out with unmistakable clarity at the words 'I'm strong . . .' (fig. 117). The implication seems plain. It is in consequence of what Vere has given him in the interview that Billy can affirm: 'Don't matter now being hanged, or being forgotten and caught in the weeds. Don't matter now. I'm strong, and I know it, and I'll stay strong, and that's enough.' Billy, it appears (and here the stakes are raised again), has found the strength to face not only suffering but annihilation. The threat of dissolution is outweighed by the confident strength born of love—a love through which he becomes stronger than Fate.

The other side of the relationship is presented by the appearance of a modified but clearly recognizable version of the interview chords as Vere himself enters during what is virtually a funeral march in the introduction to the final scene.[56] Without the intervention of Billy's meditation against those same chords a few moments

[53] Billy here reaches in private the affirmation which at the moment of execution he is to declare publicly. Its meaning for Forster is expressed in a hitherto unpublished letter, in which he wrote to Britten: 'Billy's last cry is insoluble for it was not articulate. It was compassion, comprehension, love.' (Letter of 8 August 1951, in the Britten–Pears Library.)

[54] While there are profound differences, is there not also some parallel with the many stories of heroes in ancient Greece who embraced death in battle rather than bring shame to their (male) lovers?

[55] The word 'elemental' is Donald Mitchell's: see Donald Mitchell, 'More off than on "Billy Budd" ', *Music Survey*, iv (1951–2), 408.

[56] Few commentators seem to have included this passage in their consideration of the interview chords. But the eight triads enunciated by the brass and woodwind (against the insistent rhythms and shifting harmony of the timpani and strings) provide different harmonizations of the arpeggio of E major. While the key has changed from the original F major, the reminiscence here of the interview chords is for this listener unmistakable.

before, we might have heard them in the execution scene simply as an announcement of the moment when Vere fulfils in actuality his role as 'messenger of death'. But with the insight gained from Billy's words they may (I venture to think, *should*) be heard as a daring reminder of the bond forged between the two men. It is also significant that the key is now E major, which earlier in the opera is associated with Billy.[57] This reminiscence underlines the significance of the chords here as a recall of *Billy's* devotion. The memory of the veiled exchange which had strengthened Billy now strengthens Vere in his resolution to go through with what he has come to believe is his inexorable duty. It also prepares for Billy's climactic response, 'Starry Vere, God bless you'.

Finally, when in the Epilogue Vere reflects upon this tragic encounter and sees again, in tranquil recollection, 'what Billy has shown him' (as Forster's note puts it), his music is a combination of the melody in which Billy affirms his vision of the far-shining sail and reminiscences of the interview chords. In Vere's reliving of the experience, the themes of his own strengthening presence and Billy's response are united, as they had been for Billy in the closing hours of his life. Thus Vere comes to realize—and this is his salvation—that even though he was fated to commit what he now sees as a tragic error, Billy's devotion and the power of his spirit to utter a blessing even at the moment of death have brought a strange assurance that all is not lost.

[57] I owe this observation to Dr Donald Mitchell.