

# ***Billy Budd: from H. Melville to E. M. Forster, or Plutarch's way to Plato***<sup>1</sup>

Pau Gilabert Barberà<sup>2</sup>  
Universitat de Barcelona (University of Barcelona)

To Montserrat Reig & Jesús Carruesco

As classical philologists and contemporary citizens who are much used to going to the cinemas, theatres, auditoriums and opera houses of our cities, we have already seen on both the screen and the stage –whether well performed or not is another question- many mythological or historical characters of Ancient Greece and Rome such as Medea, Orpheus and Euridice, Ariadne, Oedipus, Julius Caesar, etcetera. On the other hand, the case of a play with a contemporary theme and contemporary characters, which after having become an opera libretto – such as *Billy Budd*- shows classical references not belonging to the original text is rather unusual. E. M. Forster, the author of well-known novels such as *A Room with a View*, *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*, etcetera, had already analyzed Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* in his essay *Aspects of the Novel*<sup>3</sup>, and in 1947 had reviewed it for the BBC on the occasion of William Plomer's edition. It is not surprising, then, that when he was asked to write –in association with Eric Crozier- the libretto of an opera whose music would be composed by Benjamin Britten, he thought of the last novel of the great American writer<sup>4</sup>. And yet –keeping in mind the title of my communication-, Melville, at least explicitly, never quotes Plutarch in *Billy Budd* while Forster does, so that this brief reflection of mine aims at discovering both the etiology and the meaning of such an addition or, perhaps better, it aims at proposing a reasonable hypothesis.

Melville makes his readers face the disagreeable circumstance of Evil hindering Goodness, and he presents a world, the human one, where the fight for men and women's dignity should never cease<sup>5</sup>. The unfortunate personal story of Billy Budd, a sailor who is pressed into service on an English war ship whose mission is to prevent the spirit of the French Revolution from reaching England, turns to be the best proof of this. In spite of being young, good and handsome, Billy will be the victim of Evil's envy which becomes incarnate in certain men of devious mind such as Claggart, and he will be the victim as well of the rigorous Articles of War according to which someone accused of insubordination and disaffection must be hung regardless of a good deal of reasonable doubt about the existence of a real fault. The story deals with men in wartime who are expected to show courage and loyalty. Therefore, the presence of Plutarch and the wide range of virtues in his *Lives* becomes absolutely logical, thus paying furthermore a fair homage to one of the greatest classics. Melville, however, writes only that Billy, a foretopman, the handsome sailor, all strength and beauty, was always outstanding and "... in a gale, there he was, astride the weather yardarm-end, foot in the Flemish horse as stirrup, both hands tugging at the earing as at a bridle, in very much the attitude of young Alexander curbing the fiery

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was published in the *Actas del VIII Simposio Internacional de la Sociedad Española de Plutarquistas*. Málaga: 2005, pp. 737-746.

<sup>2</sup> Ordinary teacher in the Classical Greek Department at the University of Barcelona. *Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes* 585, 08007 Barcelona. Telephone: 934035996; fax: 934039092; e-mail: [pgilabert@ub.edu](mailto:pgilabert@ub.edu); personal web page: [www.paugilabertbarbera.com](http://www.paugilabertbarbera.com)

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 7.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding all this, see e.g.: Lago, M. *E. M. Forster*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> As an introduction to the author and his work, see e.g.: Hardwick, E. *Melville*. Barcelona: Mondadori, 2002 (first ed. New York: Viking Penguin, 2000), and on *Billy Budd*: Yanella, D. *New Essays on Billy Budd*. Cambridge: C. U. P., 2002.

Bucephalus”<sup>6</sup> (322). The quotation, then, is not explicit, but the reference to Plutarch’s *Life of Alexander VI*, 1-8 is quite clear and, as a consequence, it is easy to infer that Captain Vere reads Plutarch’s *Lives*, since “... never going to sea without a newly replenished library, compact but of the best... books treating of actual men and events no matter of what era –history, biography...” (340). Notwithstanding, in spite of inferring as well that the rigorous character of Captain Vere is only understandable by relating it to those behaviours praised by Plutarch, the truth is that Melville stops here, while Forster seems to think that, concerning this story of sailors in war times who are expected to show courage under any circumstances, Plutarch should play a more significant role.

Indeed, with a very good knowledge of the Classics that he studied first at Tonbridge and later on at King’s College of Cambridge<sup>7</sup>, Forster reads the reference to Alexander’s Bucephalus and decides immediately to specify the authorship of some of the books of Captain Vere’s library: “(The Boy goes out. Vere resumes his reading.) Plutarch... the Greeks and the Romans... their troubles and ours are the same. May their virtues be ours, and their courage! Oh God, grant me light, light to guide us, to guide us all!” (155)<sup>8</sup>. And some pages later, he adds: “(Vere reading) At the battle of Salamis... the Athenians... with vastly inferior numbers against the power of Xerxes... the Athenians” (160). So that, when from the “Indomitable” a French ship is finally sighted, it is logical once more that, after the First Lieutenant asks both rhetorically and menacingly: “Men! Who’ll volunteer to board’em in the smoke? Who’ll be the first on board the Frenchie ship? Sing out your names!” (177), man after man cries out his name, including Billy, the foretopman, who says: “Here is another! I’m coming down to you, Billy Budd! I’ll come down from the birds” (178). Consequently, Captain Vere may certainly be proud of his men since, although they are not great if compared with the heroes of Antiquity –in fact they act in the hope of something more immediate than the eternal honour and glory-, they share with them both courage and resolution. And, yet, after having moved from the ancient and ideal model to its contemporary concretion, we should continue to ask ourselves: is this the sole reason Forster may have to transform a veiled reference into a conscious explicitation? I do not believe it and, therefore, I hasten to search for other ones which, in my opinion, and by reason of the intellectual baggage of the English novelist<sup>9</sup>, might make us think of a “Platonization” both

---

<sup>6</sup> Herman Melville. *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*. London: Penguin Books, 1985. All the quotations will correspond to this edition and the numbers between brackets refer to it. Plutarch says what follows: Plutarch’s text says what follows: καὶ μικρὰ μὲν περιλαβὼν ταῖς ἡνίαις τὸν χαλινόν, ἄνευ πληγῆς καὶ παραγαμοῦ προσανέστειλεν ὡς δ’ ἑώρα τὸν ἵππον ἀφεικότα τὴν ἀπειλήν, ὀργῶντα δὲ πρὸς τὸν δρόμον, ἀφείς ἐδίωκεν, ἤδη φωνῇ θρασυτέρα καὶ ποδὸς κροίσει χρώμενος (“Then with a little pressure of the reins on the bit, and without striking him or tearing his mouth, he held him in hand; but when he saw that the horse was rid of the fear that had beset him, and was impatient for the course, he gave him his head, and at last urged him on with sterner tone and thrust of foot” –translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g.: Furbank, P. N. *E. M. Forster. A Life*. Oxford: O. U. P., 1979, chapters 3 and 4; and Beauman, N. *E. M. Forster. A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, chapters 5, 6 and 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Billy Budd*. Barcelona: Fundació Gran Teatre del Liceu (bilingual edition), 2001. All the quotations of the libretto will correspond to this edition and the numbers between brackets refer to it.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. everything I explain in “Grècia i amor platònic a Maurice d’E. M. Forster, o la grandesa i els límits de l’Antiguitat com a inspiració” (Greece and Platonic Love in E. M. Forster’s *Maurice*, or the limits and greatness of Antiquity as a source of inspiration). *BELLS (Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies)*, vol. 5 (1994), pp. 39-56, and vol. 6 (1995), pp. 71-88 –the English version is available at [www.paugilabertbarbera.com](http://www.paugilabertbarbera.com). And as an introduction to his work, see e.g.: Royle, N. *E. M. Forster*. Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 1999; Tambling, J. *E. M. Forster*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1995; King, F. *E. M. Forster*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1978

of the story and of the main characters, in which Plutarch, in spite of having lived some centuries after the Athenian philosopher, nevertheless becomes the right way to reach him, since Plutarch's legacy is much more than just his *Lives*.

Anyway, Forster knows that Melville himself quotes Plato with regard to the wicked nature of Claggart, sailing master and cause of Billy Budd's misfortune: "In a list of definitions included in the authentic translation of Plato... occurs this: 'Natural Depravity: a depravity according to nature', a definition which, though savouring of Calvinism<sup>10</sup>... Now something such an one was Claggart" (353-4)<sup>11</sup>. Forster creates his Claggart regardless of Melville's model, that is to say, he does not quote Plato, but he adds a good amount of Platonic imagery -or perhaps better Platonic-Christian imagery. Indeed, Claggart reflects on Billy as follows:

"Oh beauty, oh handsomeness, goodness! Would that I never encountered you! Would that I lived in my own world always, in that depravity to which I was born... But alas, alas! The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehends it and suffers... I am doomed to annihilate you... I will mutilate and silence the body where you dwell. It shall hang from the yard-arm, it shall fall into the depths of the sea... With hate and envy I am stronger than love... I have you in my power, and I will destroy you" (165-6).

It is quite clear that Claggart belongs to the "cave" of depravity, but the Light invades the darkness, just as Plato imagined that one of his prisoners might be dragged out from the cave to see It<sup>12</sup>. First, the sailing master seems to complain that the Light shines in his dark world. Later on, the everlasting Light of which Billy is a Platonic reflection will illuminate finally a way that the others will follow, but now Claggart is certain of his triumph and, in fact, he will cause Billy, or at least his body, to be hung. If only Claggart would had let himself be seduced by Billy's beauty, grace and goodness, since after all Melville already believed that he could even have loved the young man!:

"When Claggart's unobserved glance happened to light on belted Billy... that glance would follow the cheerful sea Hyperion with a settled meditative and melancholy

---

and Edwards, M. E. M. Forster. *The Novels*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> With regard to everything related to Calvinism in H. Melville's work, as well the relation between Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Claggart's essential features of Claggart, see e.g.: Thompson, L. *Melville's Quarrel with God*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973, chapter XI.

<sup>11</sup> Pl. *Definitiones* 416, 19-20: κακοφυΐα κακία ἐν φύσει καὶ ἀμαρτία τοῦ κατὰ φύσιν. Νόσος τοῦ κατὰ φύσιν, following the edition by J. Burnet. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907, rpr. 1967.

<sup>12</sup> *Republic* 516a-b: 'And if', said I, 'someone should drag him thence by force up the ascent which is rough and steep, and not let him go before he had drawn him out into the light of the sun, do you not think that he would find it painful to be so haled along, and would chafe at it, and when he came out into the light, that his eyes would be filled with its beams so that he would not be able to see even one of the things that we call real?' 'Why, no, not immediately', he said. 'Then there would be need of habituation, I take it, to enable him to see the things higher up. And at first he would most easily discern the shadows and, after that, the likenesses or reflections in water of men and other things, and later, the things themselves' (εἰ δέ, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, ἐντεῦθεν ἔλκοι τις αὐτὸν βία διὰ τραχείας τῆς ἀναβάσεως καὶ ἀνάντους, καὶ μὴ ἀνεΐη πρὶν ἐξελεύσειεν εἰς τὸ τοῦ ἡλίου φῶς, ἄρα οὐχὶ ὀδυνασθαί τε ἄν καὶ ἀγανακτεῖν ἐλκόμενον, καὶ ἐπειδὴ πρὸς τὸ φῶς ἔλθοι, αὐγῆς ἄν ἔχοντα τὰ ὄμματα μεστὰ ὄραν οὐδ' ἄν ἔν δύνασθαι τῶν νῦν λεγομένων ἀληθῶν; / Οὐ γὰρ ἄν, ἔφη, ἐξαίφνης γε. / Συνηθείας δὴ οἶμαι δέοιτ' ἄν, εἰ μέλλοι τὰ ἄνω ὄψεσθαι. Καὶ πρῶτον μὲν τὰς σκιάς ἄν ῥᾶστα καθορῶ, καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο ἐν τοῖς ὕδασι τὰ τε τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τὰ τῶν ἄλλων εἶδολα, ὕστερον δὲ αὐτὰ -translated by Paul Shorey, *Loeb Classical Library*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970).

expression, his eyes strangely suffused with incipient feverish tears. Then would Claggart look like the man of sorrows. Yes, and sometimes the melancholy expression would have in it a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban” (103).

Calvinist predestination, then, has ruined a romantic passion, but, after all, everything seems to indicate that it existed as such. Nowadays, literary criticism speaks openly about the clear homoeroticism in Melville’s novels. They certainly deal with masculine ghettos where men meet themselves and where they inevitably –and joyfully!- love themselves too. As having been a sailor himself, Melville confesses that in a ship there are true ties among men and, furthermore, they are very firm<sup>13</sup>, so that he sees quite clearly how this young man, who both saves and captivates, must be literarily modelled. He is: “strength and beauty” (322); “aged twenty-one”, “welkin-eyed” (322,23); “the jewel of ‘em” (324); “they all love him” (325); “Apollo” (326); “adolescent expression, all but feminine” (328); “he showed in the face that human look of reposeful good nature which the Greek sculptor in some instances gave to his heroic strong man, Hercules... the mobile, and every chance attitude and movement, something suggestive of a mother eminently favoured by Love and the Graces” (329); “masculine beauty” (331); “athletic frame” (348); “Baby”... “the old sea Chiron... instructing his young Achilles<sup>14</sup>” (349), etcetera. Forster, on the other hand, did not dare to publish while living –he died in 1970- his great novel of homoerotic exaltation, *Maurice*, but here he goes as far as possible: “a beauty, a jewel, the pearl of great price, he is a king’s bargain” (147); “fine young chap” (148); “the big lad” (149); “take off that fancy neckerchief” (153); “that sweet pleasant fellow” (171); “the flower of masculine beauty and strength” (183); “Baby Budd the men called him. Billy Budd they loved him” (191), etc.

As seen before, Plato’s antiquity and prestige were for Melville the guarantee of a right definition. For Forster, on the other hand, Plato was always much more, even when in *Maurice* thinks that he must correct the ascetic excesses of Platonic love. In my opinion, *Billy Budd* gives him a new opportunity of dignifying by means of literature a sort of ideal masculine love which in some way was also his<sup>15</sup>. Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* are always the classical references since they deal with masculine friendships in which each one would die for the other, and they even deal with armies that are invincible on account of being made up of lovers and their beloved<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, the fact of quoting Plato would have implied an explicitation of homoeroticism not belonging as such to Melville’s novel, leaving aside, furthermore, that the

---

<sup>13</sup>See e.g. Rollyson, C & Paddock, L. *Herman Melville A to Z*. New York, Facts on File, Inc., 2000, p. 19 “*Billy Budd* and bisexuality”; Thomson, G. *Male Sexuality under Surveillance*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2003 and Haberstroh, Ch. J. *Melville and Male Identity*. Toronto, London: Rutherford. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980.

<sup>14</sup> Concerning the Classical Mythology in Melville’s works, see e.g.: Sweeney, G. M. *Melville’s Use of Classical Mythology*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> I write “in some way” because Forster often fights, as in *Maurice* –see once again the above-mentioned article of mine-, against the “uranic” excesses of Platonic Love by vindicating the physical and spiritual nature of every human love.

<sup>16</sup>Mainly *Phaedrus*’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium* 178e-179: ‘So that if we could contrive to have a city or an army composed of lovers and their favourites, they could not be better citizens of their country than by thus refraining from all that is base in a mutual rivalry for honour; and such men as these, when fighting side by side, one might almost consider able to make even a little band victorious over all the world’ (εἰ οὖν μηχανή τις γένοιτο ὥστε πόλιν γενέσθαι ἢ στρατόπεδον ἐραστῶν τε καὶ παιδικῶν, οὐκ ἔστιν ὅπως ἂν ἀμεινον οἰκήσειαν τὴν ἑαυτῶν ἢ ἀπεξόμενοι πάντων αἰσχυρῶν καὶ φιλοτιμούμενοι πρὸς ἀλλήλους, καὶ μαχόμενοί γ’ ἂν μετ’ ἀλλήλων οἱ τοιοῦτοι νικῶεν ἂν ὀλίγοι ὄντες ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν πάντας ἀνθρώπους -translated by W. R. M. Lamb. *Loeb Classical Library*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983).

country where the opera was to be performed for the first time, England, probably would not have forgiven him such boldness yet. Consequently, my risky hypothesis –I must recognize it, since after all it cannot be proved- is that Forster, when he creates a Captain Vere who reads Plutarch, might be saying -at least to all those who are sensible to such veiled suggestions- that, if he has read Plutarch's *Lives*, he might have read as well Plutarch's *Eroticus*, since later on this captain will finally find his salvation thanks to the Beauty, Grace and Goodness incarnate in a young man, Billy, who will be in this story the true captain or guide.

Indeed, about Vere Melville simply says: "Vere though practical enough upon occasion would at times betray a certain dreaminess of mood" (339), but Forster enlarges the meaning of the substantive "dreaminess" to the extent of transforming him into a character who is essentially "noetic" and much used, then, both to analysis and to intellectual inquiry:

"I am an old man who has experienced much. I have been a man of action and have fought for my King and country at sea. I have also read books and studied and pondered and tried to fathom eternal truth. Much good has been shown me and much evil, and the good has never been perfect. There is always some flaw in it, some defect, some imperfection in the divine image, some fault in the angelic song, some stammer in the divine speech. So that the Devil still has something to do with ev'ry human consignment to this planet of earth" (136).

For a man who, like Vere, tries to fathom eternal truth and finally sees the tragic result of Billy's stammer, his great desire, a genuine Platonic or Platonizing one, consists of going beyond any sort of defect or imperfection in order to attain the final rest belonging to Perfection. After all, he is a captain and his duty is to guide his men, but: "... what have I done?... Confusion... I have tried to guide others rightly, but I have been lost on the infinite sea" (136). Therefore, the sea is certainly very large and broad, but one could say that he has been lost on it just like Plato's prisoners in their cave and, also like them, he only sees shadows round him. "I don't like the look of the mist" (172), he will say, and very soon Claggart will accuse Billy; the physical mist prevents the Indomitable from pursuing the French war ship that the sailors have just sighted, thus becoming "blind" and, what is still more significant: "Disappointment, vexation ev'rywhere, creeping over ev'rything, confusing ev'ryone. Confusion without and within" (184)<sup>17</sup>. It is quite evident, therefore, that this Forsterian Vere reads Plutarch's *Lives* since, as read before, the Greeks and Romans troubles are ours and we should imitate their virtues and courage, but this is the second time that he yearns for the Light, thus presenting the mist that he often suffers as a sailor as the great metaphor or allegory of a dark or imprisoned mankind –like in a cave- who walks with blind eyes in search of both a luminous final goal and a successful illuminating Agent.

In fact, Vere already knows the Agent, and he may have known how to recognize him without abandoning Plutarch's guidance, simply by moving from Plutarch's *Lives* to his *Eroticus*. He has found in it beautiful examples of masculine comradeship: "... a man filled with Love has no need of Ares to fight his enemies; if he has his own god with him, he is *Ready to cross fire and*

---

<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, in Melville's *Billy Budd*, the mist, in spite of being also metaphorical, is modelled in a more realistic way: "Says a writer whom few know, 'Forty years after a battle it is easy for a non combatant to reason about how it ought to have been fought. It is another thing personally and under fire to have to direct the fighting while involved in the obscuring smoke of it. Much so with respect to other emergencies involving considerations both practical and moral, and when it is imperative promptly to act. The greater the fog the more it imperils the steamer, and speed is put on through at the hazard of running somebody down" (391).

sea, the air itself, on behalf his friend, wherever the friend may bid him” (760D)<sup>18</sup>. And Forster’s Billy says: “Starry Vere, I’ll follow you, through darkness, never you fear... I’d die to save you, ask for to die” (155) or: “I’d serve you well... You’d be safe with me... I’d look after you my best... I’d die for you –so would they all... and oh for a fight!” (185).

Billy will save the others or he will save above all Captain Vere -who will be forced finally to dictate his death penalty- with that sort of forgiveness belonging to an angel, who notwithstanding “must hang” (378), writes Melville (129). “God bless Captain Vere” (400), he makes him say just before an “ascension” which is extraneously free of convulsions and ejaculation, and he adds that the saviour’s last words are accompanied by “the rare personal beauty of the young sailor, spiritualized now through late experiences so poignantly profound” (400). “Father, forgive them because they do not know what they are doing” and a bit later, “Everything has been accomplished” said the Redeemer according to the Gospels just before giving his soul definitively to the Almighty God, and the truth is that Melville thinks of Billy Budd as a contemporary Lamb of God<sup>19</sup>:

“... the last signal... At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn” (400-401).

Forster, on the other hand -and without betraying his Melvillean nature-, transforms Billy into a Platonic visionary who glimpses that plane of the truth of Plato’s *Phaedrus* (248b-c)<sup>20</sup>:

“But I had to strike down that Jemmy Legs –it’s fate. And Captain Vere has had to strike me down –fate... 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... Farewell to this grand rough world! Never more shipmates, no more sea, no looking down from the heights to the depths. But I’ve sighted a sail in the storm, the farshining sail that’s not fate, and I’m contented. I’ve seen where she’s bound for. She has a land of her own where she’ll anchor for ever. Oh, I’m contented. 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 all, and that’s enough” (195).

First, the Calvinist determinism almost triumphs –it is the tribute that his source forces him to pay-, but Forster forgets it immediately and, afterwards, we attend the metaphysical passage from this splendid but rough world –in other words, the ballast of matter which even includes his shipmates, the sea and his “aerial” but ultimately earthly experience as a foretopman- until sighting the Light at the end, too sovereign to be subjected to any fate or destiny. When the

---

<sup>18</sup> *Plutarch’s Dialogue on Love*. Translated by W. C. Helmbold. Loeb Classical Library. All the quotations will correspond to this edition.

<sup>19</sup> Concerning transcendentalism in Melville’s works, see e.g.: Milder, R. “Melville’s Late Poetry and *Billy Budd*: From Nostalgia to Transcendence”. Milder, R. (ed.): *Critical Essays on Melville’s Billy Budd, Sailor*. Boston, Massachusetts: G. K. Hall & Co., 1989, pp. 212-223. See as well: Ladislaus, I. J. *The Quest for Spirituality in Herman Melville*. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> ‘But the reason of the great eagerness to see where the plain of truth is, lies in the fact that the fitting pasturage for the best part of the soul is in the meadow there, and the wing on which the soul is raised up is nourished by this’ (οὐ δ’ ἐνεχ’ ἡ πολλὴ σπουδὴ τὸ ἀληθείας ἰδεῖν πεδῖον οὗ ἔστιν, ἢ τε δὴ προσήκουσα ψυχῆς τῷ ἀρίστῳ νομῇ ἐκ τοῦ ἐκεῖ λειμῶνος τυγχάνει οὖσα, ἢ τε τοῦ πεπεροῦ φύσις, ᾧ ψυχὴ κουφίζεται, τούτῳ τρέφεται –translated by Fowler, H. N. *Loeb Classical Library*. London: William Heinemann Ltd., Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971).

travel ends, after a difficult navigation on the rough and unstable surface of the sea, just as everything subjected to “becoming” is unstable too, we shall find another surface, this time undoubtedly smooth, plain and firm, where the anchor will be dropped for ever.

This Platonizing Billy Budd of Forster’s has not had to follow the guidance of a *mistagogós* or master in metaphysical mysteries because, as Melville explains following in his turn the *Bible*: in him there is not “any trace of the wisdom of the serpent” (330) or, in other words: “not yet has been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge” (330). He was “a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company” (330-31). But, paradoxically, Captain Vere, in spite of being the guide, will certainly follow the way shown by Billy’s beauty and goodness, since *mutatis mutandis* he has been changed by the English novelist into the true lever towards the Idea for his Platonic *erastés*, Vere: “Oh what have I done? But he has saved me, and blessed me, and the love that passes understanding has come to me. I was lost on the infinite sea, but I’ve sighted a sail in the storm, the far-shining sail, and I’m content. I’ve seen where she’s bound for. There’s a land where she’ll anchor for ever” (196).

Had this Forsterian Captain Vere read Plutarch’s *Eroticus*<sup>21</sup>? In Forster’s *Billy Budd* we are told simply that he reads Plutarch’s *Lives*. However –if we must tell the truth-, it is surprising that someone who needs *exempla antiqua* of warlike courage for an age of bloody fight against the menace of the French Revolution yearns day after day for a metaphysical Light which, on the other hand, might demand another kind of hero. I have already quoted the long list of adjectives, names and comparisons by means of which Melville, and even more Forster, emphasize Billy’s beauty and heroic gentleness. Therefore, this Captain Vere who reads Plutarch might not need Plutarch’s *Lives* but another book, his *Eroticus*, which Forster might not have made explicit in order to avoid an obviously homoerotic tone, since the American writer seems to suggest it

---

<sup>21</sup> With regard to Forster’s knowledge of Plutarch’s *Eroticus*, it is only necessary to bear in mind his close personal and intellectual attachment to Edward Carpenter, the author of *Homogenic Love*, published in 1885 –when the trials against Oscar Wilde took place–, one of the first books in defence of homosexuality. The references to Plutarch’s *Eroticus* already appear on the first pages. Later on, he published *The Intermediate Sex*, *The Affection in Education* and *The Place of the Uranian in Society* –nowadays, we can read them thanks to the GMP (Gay Men’s Press) edition (1984), entitled *Edward Carpenter. Selected Writings. Vol. I: Sex. With an introduction by Noël Greig*. London, 1984 –in this new edition *Homogenic Love* appears *The Homogenic Attachment*, pp. 200-221. But, above all, leaving aside his teacher at Classics, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, and his writings, it is worth remembering that he knew John Addington Symonds’ *A Problem in Greek Ethics, Being an Inquiry into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion*, published in 1883 –and later on in 1901; this last edition was in its turn reedited in 1971 by Haskell House Publishers Ltd., New York–, where he explains the positive value of masculine love in Antiquity with many references to Plutarch’s *Eroticus* –see e.g.: Beaman, N. already mentioned, pp. 207-8. From John Addington Symonds’ *A Problem in Greek Ethics* Forster takes for instance the notion of the human body as a temple: “They had never been taught to regard the body with a sense of shame, but rather to admire it as the temple of the spirit, and to accept its needs and instincts with natural acquiescence. Male beauty disengaged for them the passion it inspired from service of domestic, social, civic duties. The female form aroused desire, but it also suggested maternity and obligations of the household. The male form was the most perfect image of the deity, self-contained, subject to no necessities of impregnation, determined in its action only by laws of its own reason and its own volition” (Haskell House Publishers Ltd., p. 53). E. M. Forster adopts this thesis at least in *The Longest Journey* when Stephen says to his brother: ‘Slip out after your dinner this evening, and we’ll get thundering tight together. I’ve a notion I won’t. It’d do you no end of good... There is also a thing called Morality. You may learn in the Bible, and also from the Greeks, that your body is a temple’ (1989. London: Penguin Books, p. 264-5). At any rate, with regard to E. M. Forster as homosexual, see e.g.: Martland, A. *E. M. Forster. Passion and Prose*. London: GMP, 1999 and Martin, R. K. & Piggford, G. (eds.). *Queer Forster*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

though he finally keeps it anonymous. To sum up: This Forsterian Captain Vere might well have read the following:

‘One might even say... that the sun’s activities are directly opposed to those of Love. For it is the sun that turns our attention from intelligibles to sensibles ... *It’s clear that we unwisely love/ The dazzling gleam we see on earth*, as Euripides says, *Because we have not known another life* or rather because of our forgetfulness of the realities of which Love is a recollection. If we awaken in the face of a great brilliant light, everything that has been seen in our dreams leaves our souls and vanishes; just so, when we pass from one life to another and are born on this earth, the sun seems to dazzle our memory and drug our minds... for the soul is persuaded that beauty and value exist nowhere but here unless it secures divine, chaste Love to be its physician, its saviour, its guide. Love, who has come to it through the medium of bodily forms, is its divine conductor to the truth from the realm of Hades here; Love conducts it to the Plain of Truth where Beauty, concentrated and pure and genuine, has her home. When we long to embrace and have intercourse with her after our separation, it is Love who graciously appears to lift us out of the depths and escort us upward, like a mystic guide beside us at our initiation. But while we are being brought safely to that higher ground, Love does not approach our souls in isolation by themselves, but through the body... These are merely mortal reflections of the divine, corruptible of the incorruptible, sensible of the intelligible. By showing us these in the form and hue and aspect of **young men radiant in the prime of their beauty** (νέων ὥρα), Love gently excites our memory... it... opens the way to acquiescence and affection. Nor it is long before lovers learn to disregard the body of the beloved; they move inward instead and have attach themselves to his character... They... have intercourse... to discover whether the beloved may have in his thoughts an image that is cut to the pattern of ideal beauty. If he does not, they have no more to do with him... But wherever they catch a trace of the divine, some emanation or beguiling resemblance, they are intoxicated with joy and wonder and pay court to it, basking in the memory of ideal beauty and renewing their radiance in the presence of that genuine object of love, blessed as it is and **beloved of all and worthy of all affection** (φίλιον ἅπασιν καὶ ἀγαπητόν)’ (764E-765D -translated into English by W. C. Helmbold. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969.

Let us remember it once again. Melville had already written: ***But they all love him*** (325). And Forster, in his turn, adds significantly: ***The flower of masculine beauty*** (183), so that: ***Baby Budd the men called him. Billy Budd they love him.*** Only a coincidence? My opinion is quite evident, but seeing that the honesty and humility always necessary in this cases force me to continue to speak of a hypothesis, I hope, at least, to have laid the basis for its credibility.