

The Bellipotent as Heterotopia, Total Institution, and Colony : *Billy Budd and Other Spaces in Melville's Mediterranean*

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French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault first defined the concept of "Heterotopias" in his 1967 lecture titled "Des Espaces Autres" ("Of Other Spaces"). Unlike utopias, heterotopias are real places that are different from all the sites that they reflect, and they represent a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live. Michel Foucault famously concluded that the best example of a heterotopia is a boat: "The ship is the heterotopia par excellence," poetically adding: "In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates." In *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Melville gives us the Bellipotent, the epitome of a negative heterotopia, where dreams dry up—we say goodbye to the Rights of Man—espionage takes the place of adventure, and anxiety is produced although not by pirates but by the police. This ship is a heterotopia not of illusion but of crisis, not of compensation but of deviation. This heterotopia is not a great reserve of the imagination but another real space.

Unlike Foucault, Melville is not interested in the discursive nature of heterotopias as "other spaces" but in the material reality of the heterotopia as an actual space, or what Erving Goffman would call "a total institution": "A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (xiii).¹ For Goffman, such institutions have encompassing tendencies: "Their encompassing or total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests or moors" (Goffman 4). A ship, for both Foucault and Goffman, can and does become a "space Other" that reflects and contests social and political debates. And Melville reminds us that the driving force behind the naval enterprise is none other than economic. In that sense, the ship as a heterotopia of financial interest correlates with another example of heterotopia, according to Michel Foucault, and that is the colony:

[C]olonies are . . . extreme types of heterotopia, and if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development . . . , but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. (Foucault)

Few writers have been able to make those two heterotopias—the boat and the colony—talk back the way Melville does. In *Billy Budd*, the captain and master-at-arms replicate, in their interactions with the common sailor, the dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized. Those two heterotopias, ship and colony, thus constitute reflections of the space One, the space considered

neutral or unmarked, “our” space. And those reflections are not free from the valences of desire. The construction of the colonial subject in discourse and the exercise of colonial power through discourse demand an articulation of forces of difference that is both social and sexual. According to Homi Bhabha, this articulation is crucial, given that the colonized body is always, iteratively inscribed (simultaneously, although uneasily, uncomfortably) in the economy both of pleasure and desire and of domination and power.

Billy Budd, Sailor is informed by, lays bare, and denounces discourses of the dangers and the attractions of the barbarian, the colonized subject as a desirable sexual Other, as a fixed subject, and as a subject that cannot speak. And I would like to reflect on some of the possibilities, excitements, and also the problems I find when I read the novella in light of postcolonial theories. Among these issues are the possibilities of agency and power for the barbarian if the barbarian turns to his advantage the desire that the agent of civilization is trying to repress: in other words, the potential of the barbarian’s manipulation of Western desire as a strategy to disempower the “civilized.” And I would also like to reflect on the reality of the Other as a subaltern that cannot speak.

My first premise is that the narrator of Billy Budd, Sailor makes it clear that both Captain Vere and the master-at-arms Claggart read the body of the beautiful sailor Billy Budd not as the body of a fellow compatriot but as the body of a barbarian: “Billy, in many respects, was little more than a sort of upright barbarian” and “And, as elsewhere said, a barbarian Billy radically was” (BB331, 397). This strategy is part of what Goffman describes as the need of RODRIGO ANDRÉS superiors to dehumanize those they supervise / control / administer / rule. More specifically, one way in which:

human materials differ from other kinds, and hence present unique problems, is that however distant the staff tries to stay from these materials, such materials can become objects of fellow feeling and even affection. There is always the danger that an inmate will appear human; if what are felt to be hardships must be inflicted on the inmate, then sympathetic staff will suffer. (This, after all, is one rationale officers give for keeping social distance from enlisted men.) (Goffman 81)

Equally important for Goffman is that the person who enters—or is forced to enter—the total institution must not be considered an actual citizen, but somebody who deserves, who must be in that institution:

The interpretative scheme of the total institution automatically begins to operate as soon as the inmate enters, the staff having the notion that entrance is prima facie evidence that one must be the kind of person the institution was set up to handle. A man in a political prison must be traitorous; a man in prison must be a law-breaker; a man in a mental hospital must be sick. If not traitorous, criminal, or sick, why else would he be there? This automatic identification of the inmate is not merely name-calling; it is at the center of a basic means of social control. . . . The staff problem here is to find a crime that will fit the punishment. (84-85)

That need of social control is what moves both Claggart and Vere to censor Billy’s behavior as an impressed common sailor and to force into him both the best and the worst attributes of the

nature of something he is not: a sea soldier. Goffman states that the subordination of the person entering the total institution must be immediate:

An important part of the theory of human nature in many total institutions is the belief that if the new inmate can be made to show extreme deference to staff immediately upon arrival, he will thereafter be manageable—that in submitting to these initial demands, his “resistance” or “spirit” is somehow broken. (This is one reason for the will-breaking ceremonies and welcome practices.)
(Goffman 89)

Billy Budd's fate will therefore be tragically sealed early, as he happens to immediately displease his superiors in a military institution that recruits sailors against their will by stating his misinterpreted “And good-bye to you too, old Rights-of-Man” (BB327). My second premise is that Billy Budd resembles the figure of the subaltern à la Spivak: the subaltern who cannot speak. In Billy's case, the subaltern cannot speak because the subaltern literally cannot speak. As Mary Gordon rightly pointed out, Billy Budd stutters and strikes because he cannot defend himself through language. Moreover, the subaltern is not given a voice by the narrator. Captain Vere and Billy Budd have a closeted interview of which nothing is revealed to the rest of the men on board or to the reader. And finally, this subaltern speaks but does not express. He manages to utter “God bless Captain Vere!” (BB400) without stuttering because, as neurolinguistic research shows, subjects who stutter do not do so when they sing, when they recite poetry, and, interestingly in this particular case, when they are not producing from their left hemisphere.² Billy can thus feel empowered to speak without stuttering only because he is using language borrowed, not necessarily internalized; he is therefore barely producing sounds that he has been drilled to articulate.

Colonial realities permeate a text that Melville conceived, wrote, but unfortunately could not finish in the midst of what historian Eric Hobsbawm labels “The Age of Empire.” Edward W. Said reconfirmed these dates by providing data of the dimensions of imperialism for 1870 to 1890. Interestingly enough, the colonial policies of the “Age of Empire” went hand in hand with a celebration of Western masculinity, and its parallel process of the denial of femininity, and of traits and features considered feminine in men. According to David F. Greenberg, “youth were to fight for empire and rule the colonies. To do this, they had to steel themselves, and that meant suppressing nurturant, ‘feminine’ traits . . . Male effeminacy was taken as a sign that the nation was losing its ability to sustain military expansion” (Greenberg 391-92). As Melville ironically had his narrator phrase it, “Well, the heart here, sometimes the feminine in man, is as that piteous woman, and hard though it be, she must be ruled out” (BB388). Greenberg shows that a similar concern over masculinity haunted the United States in the late nineteenth century as the country became a world power with expansionist ambitions: “In the decades following 1879, most American states amended their sodomy statutes or passed new legislation for the first time criminalizing oral sex and, in some cases, mutual masturbation” (Greenberg 400-1). The type of hegemonic mentality that was taking shape in the West in the last decades of the nineteenth century alienated the colonized subject not only turning it into a cultural and racial Other, but also objectifying it as a sexual—and exotic—Other and leaving it thus outside the realm of proper civilization. The dynamics of this strategy were clearly defined by Roland Barthes: “Sometimes—rarely—the Other is revealed as irreducible . . . There is here a figure for emergencies: exoticism. The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle . . . Relegated to the confines

of humanity, he no longer threatens the security of the home" (Barthes 152). The aim of turning the colonized subject into a sexual object is part of an imperial project since, according to Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), the colonial discourse turns the colonized subject into a population of degenerates in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. And that is why, "an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness" (qtd in Mercer 353). This assumption of the "fixity" in the Western concept of the colonized Other is a combination of both rejection and, of course, fascination. According to Kobena Mercer: "Both positions, whether they overvalue or devalue . . . visible signs . . . , inhabit the shared space of colonial fantasy" (Mercer 353). This combination lays bare the vulnerability and the dependences of the civilized subject on the colonized subject: "Western ethnocentrism, predicated on the desire for mastery, entails the denial and disavowal of that upon which it depends for its existence and identity" (358).

We observe these dynamics in Melville's text. Billy Budd, a simple mirror of the vision that both Claggart and Vere project on him, is interpreted by both men as an exotic figure. In spite of being as British as the captain or the master-at-arms, he is treated by them as a colonized subject. One of the strategies used by Claggart and Vere to allow themselves such psychological license is to refer to the unknown origins of Billy, turning him into a subject that is not "historical" but "natural." Toni Morrison has warned us in *Playing in the Dark* (1992) that de-historicizing is one of the classic strategies used in the creation of distorting inventions stemming from, and resulting in, a profound ignorance of the Other: "Dehistoricizing allegory. This produces foreclosure rather than disclosure" (Morrison 68). And this strategy allows Claggart to associate Billy Budd with sexual excess. Whereas Billy Budd had initially been described as angelic and innocent, ever since the incident of the "ejaculation" (BB350)—that is, the spilling of the soup—in the context of full camaraderie with the other sailors, Billy is detested by Claggart. The master-at-arms seems erotically provoked by Billy's sexual potential and his capacity to promote fellowship among sailors. At the same time, Billy's geniality irritates Claggart, who feels excluded—we speculate—not only because of Billy's apparent lack of interest but also because of his own impossibility to participate in a fellowship from which he is forced to move away due to his rank in a hierarchical society. One of the greatest paradoxes of colonialism is that its dynamics of justification implies the vulnerability inherent in the desire of being desired. According to postcolonial critic José Piedra: "The caretakers fantasize that their services have been solicited The Self wants the Other to want Him/Her; and that . . . can be interpreted as a position of both weakness and power" (Piedra 380).

Claggart's hatred makes Billy Budd the problem. His excess, not Claggart's attraction to him, makes Billy's sexual appeal understandable; he is a lesser subject, a body that is disciplinable. The stereotype of the noncivilized subject as instinctive, impulsive, uncontrollable, immoral, and irrational works, once again, so that the civilized subject defines himself in opposition by having control of mind and spirit over the body. This dynamic informs the argument by which Vere justifies the need to execute Billy Budd: he must control Billy's uncontrollable bodily impulses: uncontrollable because he stutters and therefore cannot control his speech organs; uncontrollable because he cannot prevent the accidental spilling of the soup; uncontrollable because he cannot stop his fist from striking Claggart dead. These dynamics of denial and repression create, according to Piedra, a tension that might end up blowing up and—here lies

the threat for the colonizer—revealing the authentic erotic relation between colonizer and colonized, and the erotic dependence of the former on the latter.

In *Billy Budd*, the tension created by desire that is felt, denied, and repressed by Claggart towards Billy Budd explodes with the desperate accusation in front of the captain, who perceives that that accusation is false—Vere will publicly validate Billy Budd: “I believe you, my man” (BB383)—and that Claggart is moved by a “passion, and passion in its profoundest” (356) that has turned him into someone dominated by his feelings for Billy Budd instead of someone who acts as a dominator, in control. Piedra manages to see the capacity—even though it may be involuntary—that the colonized may have to seduce the colonizer as a possible source of action for the former against the latter. Under this viewpoint, Claggart’s words about Billy Budd—“A mantrap may be under the ruddy-tipped daisies” (372)—are not surprising. Piedra may be right in considering that the hypothetical desire, especially if that desire ever takes the form of love, can become a potential of power if cleverly, cunningly used by the colonized. Yet Melville, disappointed by nineteenth-century colonial history, gives a realistic answer to this theory: “Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban” (BB365). “Fate and ban” make impossible the usage of his erotic body by the otherwise speechless subaltern as a tool for the self-examination of the colonizer.

Melville’s story tells us that power is not in the exploitation of sexual allure (a mantrap). Power is in the articulation of language. But in this “total institution,” Billy Budd cannot speak in self-defense. And language is only mastered by the master. Vere kills Billy Budd with the law, which is to say, language. He sentences Billy to death with his verdict (verdictum, Vere’s dictum)—“the angel must hang” (BB378)—and legal jargon will officialize the language of those in power. The Bellipotent, a total institution in Goffman’s terms, operates as a Foucauldian heterotopia in which the crises and anxieties of a world divided between colonizers and subalterns mirror the real world.

Melville’s readers then and now inhabit. In total institutions, as in colonies, to borrow words from socialist and feminist critic Michèle Barrett: “The critical question is ‘can the hegemonic ear hear anything?’ rather than the literal one of ‘can the subaltern speak?’” (Barrett 359). Billy Budd differs from Spivak’s subaltern in that he has not internalized the wretchedness of his condition, and that is why he strikes. Yet he is unable to speak anything other than his submission to Captain, Institution, Majesty, Nation, and Nation as Metropolis—“God bless Captain Vere!”—and the rest is for ballad writers to invent.

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