

The Dirty Work of a Telltale:  
Narrative Ethics in Melville's *The Confidence-Man* and *Billy Budd*

by

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For Isaac Stensrud,  
who came into this world, wide-eyed and bum-chinned,  
to reaffirm for me the primacy of our curiosity,  
but also to remind me that we can't let our quests get in the way of  
an occasional nap.

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## Abstract

In Melville's final two works of fiction, *The Confidence-Man* and *Billy Budd*, narration itself is presented as an ethical act. Drawing primarily on the theory of Emmanuel Levinas, this thesis explores the ethical dynamics of intersubjective narrative exchanges as they are portrayed in these novels. Both novels depict unethical exchanges in which characters attempt to narrate accounts of their interlocutors in such a way as to render the alterity of these others comprehensible. This model of narration is based on an ideological confidence in self-sufficiency that precludes ethical communication. Against this violent mode of narration, Melville's ironic narrative technique in these novels suggests a model of ethical narration that maintains the alterity of the other and appeals for communication with a plurality of other voices.

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Jessica, I promise that now—finally—we can talk about something else.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Herman Melville's final two works of fiction, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* and *Billy Budd, Sailor*, are marked by a heightened self-reflexivity: the meta-fictional observations always present in the author's work become even more central, a culmination of the “increasing focus on textuality” that Peter J. Bellis argues “marks a subordination of thematic (external) issues to the process of [. . .] representation” in Melville's fiction of the 1850s (13). Indeed, Melville's interrogations of the nature of narrative representation become a vehicle for his thematic explorations, embodying what Bellis describes as Melville's “indirect but powerful response to a political and cultural impasse [. . .], a crisis of representation” (13). It is my contention, however, that Melville considered this “crisis of representation” primarily as a crisis of communication. Kenneth Dauber offers an excellent analysis of Melville's conception of authorship, arguing that the increased focus on the difficulty of communication in his later work marks the author's own frustration about and insistence upon communicating with an increasingly indifferent readership.<sup>1</sup> There is an on-going debate between critics who believe that Melville's work represents an “insistence on the 'sovereignty' of the individual” embodied in “uncompromisingly individualistic novels” (Samson 230), and those who argue that Melville's work represents “a devastating parody of self-reliance” (Adamson 91) that insists that the individual's efforts to overcome what Ahab describes as a social “moral inter-indebtedness” (*Moby Dick* qtd. in Adamson 91) will always result in Ahabian monomania. This debate points to the centrality of the tension between the

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<sup>1</sup> See Dauber (192-228).



rights of the individual and the needs of society in Melville's fiction.<sup>2</sup> As I argue, however, Melville's concern with communication becomes central to his social critique, which is, at its core, an appeal for the reconsideration of intersubjective ethics.

For Melville, the intersubjective encounter serves as a microcosm of social structures, but to posit the interpersonal exchange as microcosmic is not to give priority to his critiques of given forms of social organizations: on the contrary, Melville consistently judges socio-political theories on the basis of the ethics of the models of selfhood—and, by extension, intersubjectivity—that they produce. This interconnection between social ideology and conceptions of selfhood is made clear by William V. Spanos in his analysis of *The Confidence-Man*. Spanos offers a genealogy of “antebellum American optimist thinking” that links a confidence in this assimilatory power of selfhood to the teleology of American exceptionalism by tracing the “imperialism” of American thought from the Puritans' teleological view of history through to the Emersonian idealization of self-reliance (170), demonstrating the mutual dependence of American imperialist models of self- and nation-hood. Similarly, in her reading of the novel, Wai Chee Dimock argues that *The Confidence-Man* presents a vision of “the hero of individualism, the imperial self” (182), which, she argues, is modelled on the free-market ideology of nineteenth-century American capitalism (176-214). Both critics point to the ethical failures that result from these ideology-inscribed “imperialistic” models of selfhood, and their analyses have contributed to this project's vision of the interconnectedness of ideology, social structure and intersubjectivity. Throughout this study, however, I will look to the broader philosophical context of the nineteenth-century to

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<sup>2</sup> Wai Chee Dimock offers a book-length study of the opposition between society and the individual in *Empire for Liberty*. See also Bellis (1-15).

supplement the decidedly American emphases of Spanos and Dimock's analyses. Source studies underline the eclecticism of Melville's tastes; he read widely, by no means constraining himself to the literature and philosophy of America, or of the English-speaking world, for that matter.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, records indicate that Melville's insatiable philosophical curiosity led him to spend hours debating and discussing philosophy with his acquaintances, conversations through which he gained some familiarity with currents in philosophy that he may not have encountered directly in his readings.<sup>4</sup> A subsidiary aim of this project, then, will be to draw connections between some of the major currents in eighteenth and nineteenth-century European philosophy—idealism, romanticism, aesthetic theory—and Melville's critical-philosophical thought. While I will not venture to speculate as to whether or not Melville was directly familiar with the work of the theorists discussed herein, it should become apparent that Melville's critique of nineteenth-century Western ideology looks beyond the American context, even when the targets of his social criticism remain local.

For Melville, then, the immediate locality acts as a *locus* for the interchange and evaluation of larger social, global, and universal ideas, and the most localized relationship is that between two people. Furthermore, Melville insistently depicts intersubjective encounters as narrative exchanges, a troping that becomes inescapable in *The*

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<sup>3</sup> See John Samson's *White Lies* and John Wenke's "Ontological Heroics" for discussions of Melville's reading (1-21; 572-73). The Northwestern-Newberry editions of *Correspondence* and *Journals* contain documents that establish the variety of Melville's literary taste, as well as editorial comments that track down the literary allusions contained within his letters and journals in order to establish something of a chronology of his reading. The most obvious sign of Melville's eclectic reading habits, however, can be found in his work: in the characteristic density and variety of the allusions in his fiction.

<sup>4</sup> A famous entry from Hawthorne's journals refers to Melville's tendency to "reason on Providence and futurity" (qtd. in Samson 222), while Melville's equally famous letter to Hawthorne refers to their talks of "ontological heroics" (*Correspondence* 196). But Melville's philosophical discussions were not limited to his relationship with Hawthorne. Again, readers are directed towards *Correspondence* and *Journals*, in which Melville frequently relates his philosophical and literary discussions with others.

*Confidence-Man*: throughout the novel, characters are called upon to “[g]ive” their stories (99); they take lived experience and “make [. . .] a story of it” (103); they debate whether their interlocutor has told “his true story” (103); they judge their interlocutors on the basis of their ability to tell “a good story” (160); they turn to a “little story [to] help” when unable to communicate their “meaning clearly” (139); they are “tyrannized” by “story-teller[s],” to the point that “the story would seem to make its narrator” (208); they question the motives of the story-teller (“If your purpose, Charlie, in telling me this story, was to pain me, and keenly, you have succeeded” [221]); indeed, even denotative language is perceived as narration, insofar as it tells the interlocutor something of the speaker's motives (“Your statement [. . .] tells a very fine story” [56]). The layering of narratives leads to a novel that is, like the port road leading off of the steamship aboard which the novel is set, “walled up with story on story of dusk” (91).<sup>5</sup> But the layering of narratives is not limited to *The Confidence-Man*, as the preponderance of scenes of narrative exchange in *Billy Budd* has led Barbara Johnson to describe the novel as a “snowballing of tale-telling” (95). Representations of narrative exchange, then, are central to the narratives of both of Melville's final two novels.<sup>6</sup> In what follows in this introduction, I first trace the theoretical models of narrative ethics this thesis engages, and then turn to the ways in which these models can provide an analytical framework with which to study these two novels.

Bellis rightly recognizes that one of Melville's “primary themes” is “the nature

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<sup>5</sup> This meta-fictional moment can be read as a hint to the readers that, in disembarking from the *Fidèle* upon finishing the novel, they will have gained no privileged insight—no clarity—as sorting through the novel's layering of narratives leads only to further obfuscation.

<sup>6</sup> Following the Norton Critical Edition, I will refer to *Billy Budd* as a (short) novel throughout this work.

and limits of the self” (1), and he goes on to argue that Melville's writing career can be understood as “driven by [. . .] a continual examination and reexamination of a single complex of issues—the problem of identity, of defining and representing the self” (4). Bellis concludes that “[w]hatever Melville's texts may ultimately succeed or fail in representing, they are a passionate embodiment of the *desire* for a secure identity on which to ground social and personal relations” (15), but in Melville's final two novels, “social and personal relations” are represented as the only “grounds” for uncovering the nature of the self, and ultimately the limits of this self-knowledge.<sup>7</sup> The subject always represents itself for the other;<sup>8</sup> as Judith Butler explains in her reading of Adriana Cavarero's theory of ethics, “[i]f I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no 'you' to address, then I have lost 'myself.' In [Cavarero's] view, one can tell an autobiography only to an other, and one can reference an 'I' only in relation to a 'you': without the 'you,' my own story becomes impossible” (32). Butler asserts that the intersubjective narrative exchange can be essential to the formation of “ethical bonds” (20): “An account of oneself is always given to another, whether conjured or existing, and this other establishes the scene of address as a more primary ethical relation than a reflexive effort to give an account of oneself” (21). Butler's case for the centrality of narrative exchanges to ethical relations is complemented by Adam Zachary Newton's call for a critical re-

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<sup>7</sup> Writing of *Moby Dick*, Dauber argues that “its heroics are not quite of the ontological kind of which Melville writes in a well-known letter to Hawthorne, but of the ethical kind” (193), suggesting a primacy of ethics before ontology that I will elaborate on through my reading of Emmanuel Levinas. See also Lindberg for an analysis of Melville's conception and critique of socially-constructed identity in *The Confidence-Man* (15-47)

<sup>8</sup> Handwerk offers the following justification for his use of impersonal pronouns when referring to the “subject”:

In general I have used *it* and *itself* as the pronominal referents [. . .] for *subject*[.] This choice is dictated by fidelity to the Lacanian critique of the subject, where such usage is becoming standard. Besides the connotations of a de-personalized subject that this usage is intended to foster, it has the further advantage of allowing me to evoke a subjectivity that is not restrictively marked by gender-encoded pronouns[.] (2)

Following Handwerk, I will use “de-personalized” pronouns for “the subject” throughout.

orientation within literary studies to examine the ethical dimension of narrative. In *Narrative Ethics*, Newton advances a theoretical model for understanding narration as an ethical act. Newton argues that a proper theory of narrative ethics must look beyond “moral thematics” and into “the realm of ethical confrontation” (4): a “theory of narrative ethics,” he argues, should be “concerned with the intersubjective dynamics of narrative, and their ethical implications, independent of the 'moral paraphrases' which they may invite or which can be ascribed to them” (32-33). Together, Butler and Newton's theories inform my argument that interpersonal narrative exchanges are essential to the formation of ethical bonds, and that an exploration of the dynamics of interpersonal relations is essential to any critical approach to narrative representations. I will argue that this reciprocal relationship between narrative and ethics is represented in Melville's final two novels.

Both Butler and Newton draw on the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, and Levinas's work also informs my conception of ethics in this thesis. Levinas famously argues for the “primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man” (*Totality* 79).<sup>9</sup> For Levinas, the face-to-face encounter with the other existent represents an encounter with the “presence” of an infinite alterity, the Other (78; 43): “The absolutely other is the Other. [. . .] Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger [. . .], the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself” (39). “Being at home with oneself” is related to what Levinas refers to as “the exercise” or “imperialism of the same” (124; 39), the subject's drive for comprehension

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<sup>9</sup> The use of exclusive gender-specific language is a problem for both Levinas and Melville, one that is doubtless due in part to the linguistic norms of the historical periods in which they wrote. Nevertheless, this language points to certain ideological limitations of their respective ethical projects, though there is not sufficient space for a discussion of this issue here.

and possession of that which is outside of itself. Levinas argues that “[a] calling into question of the same [. . .] is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics” (43). The experience of the encounter with alterity represents an opening of the self to the other in discourse, and forms the basis of an irreducible ethical bond: “The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation” (201). The ethical force of the face-to-face encounter is not based on vision,<sup>10</sup> which works towards the reduction to the same, but in “the welcome of the face which language presupposes” (189):

Language is universal because it is the very passage from the individual to the general, because it offers things which are mine to the Other. To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundation for possession in common. [. . .] The world in discourse is no longer what it is in separation, in the being at home with oneself where everything is given to me; it is what I give: the communicable, the thought, the universal. (76)

Levinas refers to this ethical valence of language as its “expressive function” (73), or what Newton refers to as “Saying” (3): in its expressive capacity, “language presupposes interlocutors, a plurality” (*Totality* 73). This conception of language as an ethical force is contrasted with the understanding of language as a force of “[t]hematization and conceptualization” (46)—“Said” (Newton 3)<sup>11</sup>—according to which language would work at “conveying the coherence of concepts,” thereby “suppressing 'the other,' who breaks this coherence and is hence essentially irrational” (72-73). Drawing on Levinas's

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<sup>10</sup> See Levinas (*Totality* 189-93), along with my discussion in the proceeding chapters.

<sup>11</sup> While the terms are drawn from Levinas, I follow Newton in capitalizing “Saying” and “Said” throughout this thesis.

linguistic theory, Newton understands narrative as part Said—the stated “proposition”—and part Saying—the “staged performance,” the “level of intersubjective relation” (3). For Newton, the categories of Saying and Said are related, respectively, to Stanley Cavell's conceptions of “acknowledging” and “[k]nowing, whereby the former entails “acknowledging the separateness of others, and thus admitting a certain helplessness before them,” while the latter refers to the desire to “assimilate [the] separateness” of the other (43). Newton's adaptation of Levinas's theory of linguistics-based ethics to a theory of narrative ethics allows for the evaluation of the ethics of intersubjective narrative exchanges.

In *The Confidence-Man* and *Billy Budd*, Melville represents characters that can be considered as embodiments of alterity: the Confidence-Man, in his many guises, and Billy Budd. These characters seemingly have no pasts, no histories—no stories; they are unaccountable figures, Levinasian Strangers.<sup>12</sup> The encounters of these absolute others with their interlocutors indeed serve as a “calling into question of the same” (43): face-to-face with the unaccountable other, these characters are rendered unable to account for themselves. Bellis sees Melville's later works as pointing to the “impossibility of ever knowing or representing identity” (11). Yet Bellis's study does not fully explore the socio-ethical implications of the dissolution of stable, knowable, and representable subjectivities in *The Confidence-Man* and *Billy Budd, Sailor*, and thus the question remains: what becomes of *accountability* when selves are understood to be *unaccountable*? Butler argues that insofar as “we are formed in the context of relations that become partially irrecoverable to us, [. . .] that opacity seems built into our

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<sup>12</sup> See Robert K. Martin's *Hero, Captain, and Stranger* for a discussion of the archetypal figure of the stranger in Melville's nautical fiction.

formation and follows from our status as beings who are formed in relations of dependency” (20). Thus far from precluding the possibility of ethical relations, the subject's inability to fully account for itself may actually be a necessary condition for forming ethical connections: “Indeed, if it is precisely by virtue of one's relations to others that one is opaque to oneself, and if those relations to others are the venue for one's ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds” (20). In *The Confidence-Man* and *Billy Budd*, however, the ideology of individualism causes the interlocutors of the novels' unaccountable figures not to admit to the inability to offer a full account of the self, but rather to attempt to render the other accountable to the self by offering a narrative reduction of this other. Judith Butler explains that in the Levinas-inspired ethical theory of Cavareto,

The question most central to recognition is a direct one, and it is addressed to the other: “Who are you?” This question assumes that there is an other before us whom we do not know and cannot fully apprehend, one whose uniqueness and nonsubstitutability set a limit to the model of reciprocal recognition offered within the Hegelian scheme and to the possibility of knowing another more generally. (31)

*The Confidence-Man* and *Billy Budd* posit that an imperialistic model of selfhood transforms this question—“Who are you?”—to the imperative, “Tell me who you are.” Moreover, the asking often becomes a telling: “This is who you are.” This will to interpersonal knowledge, which I refer to as narrative violence in this thesis, consists of assimilating the other by rendering an account of this subject that works to suppress the



dialogic, ethical valence of language: the Saying; it aims to possess the other, by the denial of the other's alterity, through an act of narrative reduction. Such a reductive narrative act constitutes an imperialistic conquest of the other by the same, to employ Levinasian language, through the telling of the other's story in the self's terms. This imperialistic impulse characterizes the intersubjective narrative exchanges depicted by Melville in *The Confidence-Man* and *Billy Budd*.

Through the narrators of these novels, however, Melville seeks an alternative to this violent mode of narration. I will argue that Melville sees an ethical dimension in irony that allows narratives to avoid the imperialistic drive.<sup>13</sup> Based primarily on his reading of Friedrich Schlegel, Gary J. Handwerk develops a theory of irony that suggests the possibility of developing intersubjective ethical bonds through the subject's recognition of its inability to offer a full account of itself—a model of narrative ethics that complements Butler's theory of ethics based on the subject's realization of its own opacity. Handwerk argues that what he deems “*ethical irony*”

focuses on how verbal incompatibilities set up and provoke a deeper interrogation of self-consciousness. For ethical irony, an incompatibility in discourse suspends the question of identity by frustrating any immediate coherence of the subject. [. . .] Ethical irony begins with the recognition that this state [of undecidability] necessitates an expansion of the frame of reference [. . . and] such expansion of context can only effectively occur through the interrogation of another subject. [. . .] Hence the subject requires another subject, requires an entrance into dialogue, if it is going to

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<sup>13</sup> Bryan C. Short offers a compelling analysis of the ethical development of Melville's rhetoric in *Cast by Means of Figures*.

chart its own meaning. (2-3)

The narrators in both *The Confidence-Man* and *Billy Budd* are equivocal, sardonic, and self-reflexive—they are ironists. Furthermore, their awareness of the limitations of their points of view—evinced by their constant reflections on the limitations of narrative representation—lead them to appeal outwards: to other texts, other authors, and, ultimately, to their readers. The recognition of their inability to fully represent and comprehend the characters and events they narrate leads them to initiate dialogue. The narrator of *Billy Budd* aims at the “[t]ruth uncompromisingly told” (167), but through his acknowledgement of the partiality of his representation, he recognizes that attaining any semblance of truth requires a *compromise* with others. For Melville, then, the ultimate truth of reality—the Absolute—should not be experienced as what Levinas refers to as “totality,” a unity of all experience discovered through the development of self-consciousness, but rather as the production of “infinity” (26), an irreducible alterity that forces the subject to recognize its own limits and to admit to a fundamental dependency on and obligation to the other. Through the narrators of his last two novels, Melville develops and, of course, ironically undermines a theory of ethical ironic narrative communication, and the novels themselves serve as an attempt to enact a mode of ethical ironic communication with his readership.

The goal of this project, then, is to outline and examine Melville's attempts to develop a model of ethical narration to counteract the violence of reductive narratives. Ultimately, Melville's refusal of reductive modes of narration serves as a critique of the ideological structures undergirding the models of selfhood that produce these narratives. Through the depictions of intersubjective encounters in *The Confidence-Man* and *Billy*

*Budd*, Melville establishes the scene of narrative exchange as a primary site for the negotiation of ethical obligations. These encounters underline the subject's inability to account for the other, lived experience, and, ultimately, itself, but the interlocutors of Melville's unaccountable figures often respond by attempting a violent reduction of the subjectivity of the other through a form of narrative mastery that aims at comprehension. Melville protests against such forms of narrative reduction through his own narrators, who, aware of the limitations of their perspectives, invite dialogue—a “talking back” to the text. Melville, however, is aware that, as Handwerk notes, irony can denigrate into “indeterminacy” (16), a deferral of moral judgement that would lead to a form of relativism incapable of distinguishing between ethical and unethical human relations. Furthermore, Handwerk argues that “indeterminacy [can] itself become authority” (16), an ethical failure that occurs when ironists place themselves outside and in control of the paradoxes they represent (39). The narrator of *The Confidence-Man* represents this type of authoritative ironist, and in this final novel published during his lifetime, Melville is only able to represent ethical ironic communication *ironically*—through negation. In *Billy Budd*, however, Melville emphasizes the need for judgement both through the direct appeals of the narrator to his readers and indirectly through the events depicted in the narrative. However, insofar as the novel points to the impossibility of subjective judgement to obtain objective accuracy, judgement becomes an intersubjective, dialogic act. The communicative act of coming to such judgements serves as a renunciation of self-reliance, and thus Melville's narrative method in *Billy Budd* and *The Confidence-Man* acts as a performative critique of the ideological structures and social institutions that valorize unencumbered individual autonomy.

Newton delineates the “triadic structure of narrative ethics”: “The triad comprises: (1) a narrational ethics (in this case, signifying the exigent conditions and consequences of the narrative act itself); (2) a representational ethics (the costs incurred in fictionalizing oneself or others by exchanging 'person' for 'character'); and (3) a hermeneutic ethics (the ethico-critical accountability which acts of reading hold their readers to)” (17-18). These three dimensions of narrative ethics mirror the three movements of this thesis, although the inter-relations between these levels of the narrative act means that some overlap will be inevitable. The following two chapters focus primarily on “narrational ethics” (Newton 18), as they concern the dynamics of the intersubjective narrative exchanges represented within the novels. In the second chapter, I will examine the depictions of intersubjective encounters in *The Confidence-Man*. The unaccountable protagonist of the novel—the shape-shifting Confidence-Man of the novel's title—serves to disrupt the self-confidence of those he encounters, causing them to question their self-conceptions, and thus their ability to account for themselves. Ironically, however, the *confidence* of the Confidence-Man aligns his self-conception with the model of imperialistic selfhood that Spanos argues is derived from “American optimist thinking” (170)—the very model of self-assurance that the Confidence-Man works to disrupt in others. The Confidence-Man sees narrative unaccountability as a lack of moral accountability, not as a call for the recognition of ethical interdependency. Furthermore, in the second half of the novel, the Confidence-Man's interlocutors become increasingly self-confident, leading to what Gary Lindberg describes as the “confidence games” that “convert dialogue into a test of strength” (25; 24). The novel presents a series of unethical intersubjective exchanges underwritten by an ideologically inscribed confidence in teleological progress to be

achieved through self-reliance,<sup>14</sup> which serves to halt both the formation of ethical bonds and, ironically, broader social progress.

The third chapter will focus on the encounters between the “Handsome Sailor” (103), Billy Budd, and the other characters in Melville’s posthumously published novel. An illiterate foundling whose stutter impedes his ability to communicate, Billy embodies unaccountable alterity, yet the novel’s action centres on the attempts of those he encounters to force him to account for himself, to render him accountable, and, finally, to violently—murderously—account for him. Billy’s alterity is marked by his singular physical beauty, an attribute that halts the exercise of comprehension in those he encounters. The novel depicts the acts of narrative violence perpetrated against Billy by the Master-at-arms Claggart and Captain Vere, which culminate in an act of narrative murder: Claggart’s accusation of insubordination and Vere’s courtroom testimony ultimately lead to Billy’s execution. Relying on the philosophical works of Friedrich Schiller, I will argue in this chapter that, again, the “calling into question of the same” by the figure of alterity fails to lead to ethical relations (*Totality* 43), and is instead counteracted by an ideologically-inscribed and State-sanctioned drive to shore up the power of the self by reducing the force of alterity presented in the other.

My fourth and fifth chapters are concerned primarily with “representational ethics” (Newton 18), as they focus on the narrativization of lived experience by the narrators of the novels, as well as the meta-fictional ruminations of these narrators on this process. The fourth chapter focuses on the narrator of *The Confidence-Man*. This novel contains three chapter-length “authorial” asides from the narrator in which he reflects on the difficulties of representing lived experience in fiction. Through his discussion of the

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<sup>14</sup> Again, readers are directed towards Dimock and Spanos for explorations of this ideological complex.

necessary representation of the “inconsistencies” of his characters (75), the narrator establishes his desire to produce ethical, non-reductive accounts of those he represents. The narrator's theory of human inconsistency represents a theory of ironic narration, and it is here that I will introduce a theory of ethical irony based on Handwerk's reading of Schlegel. Handwerk traces the development of Schlegel's conception of irony as the Romantic philosopher attempts to escape the fall of irony into unethical “indeterminacy” or “authority,” and the “freezing” of these two alternatives “into a static polarity, where indeterminacy would itself become authority” (16). Ultimately, the narrator of the novel sees indeterminacy as a source of authority, as he maintains a position above the ironic paradoxes that he represents, making him what Handwerk deems a “systemic ironist” (39).<sup>15</sup> Through the depiction of the narrator's duplicities, it becomes clear that his mode of narration is not entirely ethical, yet Melville is only able to establish an alternative, ethical model of narration ironically, by establishing the narrator as an unethical ironist.

The fifth chapter of this project analyzes Melville's narrative technique in *Billy Budd*. Like the narrator in *The Confidence-Man*, the narrator of *Billy Budd* reflects constantly on the process of narrativization, and for him the stakes are even higher: ostensibly, he is narrating historical events, and he aims to counteract the reductive narratives of Billy's story that appear in the only other available accounts: a ballad written by a fellow sailor and an official naval report, both of which erase the fundamental alterity that Billy represents. Thus, unlike the narrator of *The Confidence-Man*, the narrator of *Billy Budd* does not remove himself from the paradoxes he presents. Indeed, the narrator attempts to judge the characters and events he depicts, although he constantly

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<sup>15</sup> Will Kaufman offers a reading of Melville's ironic method in *The Confidence-Man* that points to Melville's misgivings about the ethics of irony (41-69).

underlines the partiality of the judgements he produces. Through his direct appeals to his readers to supplement his judgements, the narrator demonstrates the ethical dimension of his irony, and establishes a mode of reading that requires judgement to escape indeterminacy, but re-inscribes judgement as an ethical, intersubjective process. Moreover, the narrator's judgements are generally misguided, an irony that belongs to the author rather than the narrator: through the depiction of the narrator's misapprehension of the meaning of the events he represents, Melville calls for an active—and interactive—corrective reading. This move from narrational to reading practices marks a shift from representational to “hermeneutic ethics” (Newton 18). The brief concluding chapter appended to the end of this thesis attempts to extrapolate a theory of intersubjective ethics from the preceding examination of Melville's conception of narrative ethics that extends beyond the world of fiction: to show how ethical irony can become the basis for the recognition of a need for social change. The model of ethical ironic narration that Melville develops over the course of his final two works of fiction posits that the individual's inability to adequately account for himself, for the other, and for experience requires the recognition of a fundamental dependency on others. Melville's final two works thus enact a critique of the ideology of individualism, calling upon the readership to reconsider the ethics of their own intersubjective relations and to question the social norms as well as the State laws that limit ethical interaction.<sup>16</sup> This reconsideration, this questioning, Melville's work shows, must take the form of communication.

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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of irony's potential as a political force, see the conclusion to Kaufman's *The Comedian as Confidence Man* (232-42).

## Chapter 2

### Face Values:

#### Accountability in a Confidence Culture<sup>17</sup>

*The Confidence-Man* consists in large part of a series of dialogic encounters between characters, or rather one character—in his many guises—and his various interlocutors. Many critics have pointed to the formal similarities between the novel's episodic philosophical encounters and the Socratic dialogue (Agnew 198). Handwerk notes that through the dialogues, “Socrates created not written works but dynamic, self-questioning human subjects” (39), and indeed the Confidence-Man, cast as the Socratic figure, is set on disrupting the unquestioned beliefs of those whom he engages in often confrontational interviews. But what distinguishes the Melvillean dialogue is the novel's consistent reminders that belief constitutes a contingent ground for constructing subjectivity, especially in Melville's America, where, as Lindberg argues, traditional forms of social organization and the cultural authorities that they produce have ceded to a relatively groundless order founded on principles of freedom and individuality (32): aboard the microcosmic *Fidèle*, identity is negotiable and vulnerable; a matter, as the boat's name suggests, of faith (Lindberg 45). For the Confidence-Man's marks, then, the stakes of what Lindberg describes as the “game of confidence” are high (32):<sup>18</sup> they risk not just social position and cultural power, but also their very self-conception (32; 45), and hence the novel's debates about the relationship between belief, subjectivity and

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<sup>17</sup> The phrase “confidence culture” in the title of this chapter is borrowed from Gary Lindberg (181). Lindberg's analysis of the novel, along with the readings of Dimock, Spanos, and Tanner cited below, inform my reading of *The Confidence-Man* as a social critique of the nineteenth-century American ideology of confidence.

<sup>18</sup> Lindberg's troping of the competitive encounters of the novel as “confidence games” has been picked up by a number of critics (25), including Julia M. Wright (79), Rachel Cole (388), and John Bryant (341). In my own analysis of the work, I will also borrow Lindberg's phrase.



sociality take on a performative dimension as, to pick up on the novel's insistent pecuniary tropes, the characters find themselves—that is, their selves—invested in the novel's philosophical exchanges, its verbal transactions.

Moreover, the dialogic encounters of the novel are presented as narrative exchanges. As outlined in the preceding introduction to this project, Butler asserts that the intersubjective narrative exchange is foundational in the establishment of ethical obligation: “An account of oneself is always given to another, whether conjured or existing, and this other establishes the scene of address as a more primary ethical relation than a reflexive effort to give an account of oneself” (21). Butler's use of the word “account” points to the inter-related ethical and narrational valences of “accounting,” a term which, along with its variations, appears over forty times in *The Confidence-Man*. Indeed, the face-to-face encounters that structure the novel see the characters attempting to give accounts of themselves, and negotiating interpersonal—though rarely symmetrical—relations of accountability through the exchange of narratives. Recalling Newton's suggestion that a study of narrative ethics must look to “the realm of ethical confrontation” (4), this chapter explores the intersubjective dynamics of these narrative exchanges that see the characters negotiating, demanding, and avoiding ethical obligation.

In this chapter, I read *The Confidence-Man*'s depictions of intersubjectivity through a variety of ethical theories. The failure of Levinas's face-to-face encounters to establish ethical bonds underwrites Melville's parody of the Hegelian “pure recognition.” Furthermore, through his rewriting of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Melville undermines self-reliance. The resultant ethical failures of these various models of

intersubjectivity add to Melville's problematization of interpersonal relations in nineteenth-century America. Ultimately, while the Confidence-Man frequently succeeds in causing his interlocutors to question their identity by proving them unable to offer full accounts of themselves, thereby establishing the need for the other, the ideological basis of the social order to which the characters of the novel belong and the model of intersubjectivity that this order underwrites prevent them from establishing new, ethical interpersonal bonds.

## I

According to Levinasian ethical theory, the face-to-face encounter presents an encounter with an infinite alterity, the Other, which challenges the ability of the self to reduce all difference to identity: "A calling into question of the same [. . .] is brought about by the other." (*Totality* 43). This experience of irreducible alterity forms the basis of ethical obligation: "the presence before a face [. . .] can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands" (50). Over the course of his masquerade aboard the *Fidèle*, however, the Confidence-Man's intersubjective encounters elicit no profound ethical re-orientations from his interlocutors as he approaches his marks with a masked face and his empty hands out-stretched while avidly preaching the necessity of human generosity. Indeed, the novel as a whole re-inscribes Levinas's face-to-face encounter as a mask-to-mask; rather than experiencing an awed sense of obligation before the "mystery" of alterity ("Time and the Other" 50), the novel's interlocutors engage in a competitive game, the goal of which is to unmask the other, to see *through* the face before them.

Levinas contends that the ethical force of the face-to-face encounter is not related to the sight of the face. For Levinas, “vision in the light is precisely the possibility of forgetting the horror of this interminable return [of the “*there is*” of “infinite spaces”], this *aperion*, maintaining oneself before the semblance of nothingness which is the void, and approaching objects as though at their origin, out of nothingness,” for “[t]he void of space is not the absolute interval from which the absolutely exterior being can arise” (*Totality* 190-91). Vision does not lead to the “vertigo” of the encounter with infinite alterity (190)—the Other—but rather a reassurance of the self. “Vision moves into grasp” (191); the “void of space” it crosses “is a modality of enjoyment” (191), enjoyment being the realm of “the world possessed by me” (75).<sup>19</sup> The characters in *The Confidence-Man* aim at this type of grasping of the other, as they treat the face of the other as a readable sign.

The novel, however, suggests that the face is an opaque obstacle to comprehension, rather than a transparent sign. Van Wyck Brooks decries the novel's “clutter of faceless characters” (qtd. in Renker 72),<sup>20</sup> a *seemingly* misplaced criticism given the narrator's penchant for describing the faces of the *Fidèle's* passengers and marking their changing countenances as they interact with one another. Yet Brooks's

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<sup>19</sup> Levinas contends, however, that vision itself does not entirely “fit in the schema of [. . .] enjoyment” (*Totality* 189-93).

<sup>20</sup> Brooks's comment invokes the standard critical line that the characters in *The Confidence-Man* lack any distinguishing signs of personality—that they are all, in fact, “interchangeable” (Dimock 208). While such an argument overlooks Melville's masterful creation of ideolects in the novel, Tanner's observation that the characters in the novel are frequently represented as “pastless,” “unfamiliar,” and “devoid of interiority” is nevertheless accurate (90). Yet the seeming flatness of the novel's characters does not mean that we are not to read their encounters as enactments of human problems; conversely, it would seem that Melville created this character type of the unaccountable stranger specifically to represent the problematics of ethical relations in mid-nineteenth century America. Tom Quirk explains that Melville often developed the “latent ‘significances’” he saw in social reality into thematic fodder for his fiction (10), a process that seems in keeping with the narrator in *The Confidence-Man's* assertion that the novelist's goal is to show “more reality [. . .] than real life itself” (186). The seemingly flat characters thus represent a fictional exaggeration of the nature of subjectivity Melville perceived in American social life.

comment is ironically accurate if the face is understood as an outer expression of interior character. The visages that the characters display to one another are shown to be mutable masks, whether consciously adopted or not. Lindberg notes that the novel's narrator constantly reminds the reader that any "guesses" as to the interiorities of the characters he presents "are only hypotheses" (32). Indeed, the narrator draws attention to the illegibility of the face by constantly prefacing any conclusions he draws from a character's facial expressions with a hedging "as if"—a phrase that occurs over fifty times in the novel. Elizabeth Renker argues that Melville's rejection of the idea that the face is expressive of inner character is part of a larger critique of "sentimental ideology," which understood "[p]roper conduct" as a drive for "a perfect 'transparency' of character, a sincerity that was readable through face-to-face encounters" (73). At one point in the novel, the Confidence-Man tells his interlocutor that "[y]ou can conclude nothing absolute from the human form" (225), and the novel as a whole reiterates this skeptical message; Gustaaf Van Cromphout goes so far as to align the novel with the philosophy of "other-minds skepticism" (37). Hence the Confidence-Man's assertion that "honesty's best voucher is honesty's face" is rejected by one of his marks: "Can't see yours, though," his eventual victim replies as he "peer[s] through the obscurity" of not just the underlit room, but of intersubjective incommensurability itself (81). Renker also notes, however, that the social valuing of transparency underwrote the era's emergent scientific methods aimed at discerning human nature from outward appearances (73), demonstrating that this cultural confidence in the possibility of attaining transparent selfhood also instilled a suspicion about the opacity of the other. This seeming paradox—that confidence leads to distrust—is one of the irreducible ironies at the heart of Melville's satire of American culture, and

the depiction of the failed communications between the passengers aboard the *Fidèle* demonstrates the deterioration of ethical relations that results from such confident skepticism.

Early in the novel, the Confidence-Man, appearing as a black beggar with a physical disability, panhandles amidst a crowd of passengers.<sup>21</sup> This beggar, Black Guinea, physically embodies the supplicating “destitution” that Levinas argues is at the basis of the subject's recognition of ethical obligation, communicated in the encounter with the Other: “The face in its nakedness as a face presents the destitution of the poor one and the stranger” (*Totality* 213). According to Levinas, this destitution is not conceptualizable; it remains an alterity outside of the self's powers of comprehension: “this poverty and exile which appeal to my powers, address me, do not deliver themselves over to these powers as givens, remain the expression of the face” (213). A voice from the crowd, however, does not trust the “expression” of Black Guinea's face; it accuses the beggar of being a fraud (21). This skeptical voice, belonging to a one-legged Tennessean, is rebuked by a Methodist preacher from the crowd admonishing him for his lack of charity. The Methodist accuses the Tennessean of having a “one-sided view of humanity” (23), and he takes up the other side—the charitable, trusting view of man—himself. Indeed, the men introduce and embody the two opposing values of skepticism and confidence that are debated for the remainder of the novel,<sup>22</sup> although these values

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<sup>21</sup> Susan M. Ryan argues that the suspicion of the appearances of others manifests itself in nineteenth-century benevolence pamphlets, which urge would-be alms-givers to ascertain the credibility of the recipients of their charity prior to making any donations, as the outward marks of need could be feigned. She reads the scene featuring Black Guinea as a textual reproduction of this cultural suspicion (697-706). For a further analysis of Melville's ironic use of benevolence and reform themes, see David S. Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance* (135-65; 275-308; 540-60).

<sup>22</sup> The values of skepticism and confidence are troped throughout the novel in the “head vs. heart” binary, a symbolization of the conflicting demands of reason and inclination that, as we shall see, persists into *Billy Budd*.

are shown to be mutually dependant—if not indistinguishable—rather than diametrically opposed. The argument between the two men centres around the reliability of appearances: the Methodist asks of the Tennessean, “But why not, friend, put as charitable a construction as one can upon the poor fellow? [. . .] He looks honest, don't he?” “Looks are one thing,” the Tennessean replies, “and facts are another” (22). “[A]s to your construction,” the Tennessean continues, “what construction can you put upon a rascal, but that a rascal he is?” (22). The Tennessean, however, has no “facts” to support his accusation of “rascality”; instead, it is a “construction” based on his indiscriminate skepticism. And, like the Methodist, the Tennessean sees his prejudices confirmed by the “looks” of Black Guinea; indeed, even the beggar's outward marks of otherness—racial difference and physical deformity—are denied by the Tennessean: “He's some white operator, betwisted and painted up for a decoy,” the Tennessean proclaims (21). Like the “charitable construction” of the Methodist, the skeptical accusations of the Tennessean are shown to be *confident* projections of predetermined beliefs. The asymmetrical face-to-face encounter—literalized in the height differential between the upright inquisitors and Black Guinea, doubled-over by his physical impairment—offers no transcendent experience of alterity, but rather an opportunity for, in Levinasian terms, the “reduction of the other to the same” (43), a reduction that takes narrative form in the opposing accounts that the two men offer of Black Guinea's interiority.

As outlined in my introductory chapter, Levinas sees language—more specifically, conversation, discourse—as the basis of ethical obligation: “the relation with the Other, discourse” represents “the appeal coming from the other to call me to responsibility” (213). He separates this “expressive” function of language from the

modality of language as an instrument of “[t]hematization and conceptualization,” which “are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other” (46). This latter function of language views “the Other as my theme” rather than “the Other as my interlocutor” (195). As the Methodist and the Tennessean debate the identity of Black Guinea, the beggar himself is not called upon to speak for himself. Indeed, the two men and the others from the crowd rarely address Black Guinea at all, and when they do, the address takes the form of interrogation rather than ethical communication. Black Guinea is objectified—referred to consistently in the third person, often with derisive epithets acting as pronouns—and rendered the “theme” of the men's conversation: he becomes a site for the projection of the two men's beliefs, as they offer their conflicting accounts of Black Guinea's identity.<sup>23</sup> Levinas argues that the apperception of the objects of sensible experience can act as a step towards objectivity, and, by extension, “dispossession”: “The conceptualization of the sensible arises already from [the] incision of my own substance, my home, in [the] suitability of the mine for the Other, which prepares the descent of the things to the rank of possible merchandise” (76). In the exchange between the Tennessean and the Methodist, however, Black Guinea—a human being—becomes the objectified merchandise, as the two interlocutors exchange accounts of him, and *barter* over his meaning. Black Guinea, “der dog widout massa” (18)—a free black—is subjected to the conceptualizations of the two men, who debate over their conflicting accounts of the beggar in an attempt to retain self-possession; Black Guinea becomes a narrativized object of exchange, his subjectivity enslaved by the two men as each aims to reaffirm his self-mastery through the narrative possession of the other. Their motivating values of

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<sup>23</sup> See Van Cromphout for a parallel discussion of Black Guinea's “dehumanization,” in which he argues that “[a]t no point is [Black Guinea] treated as anything but an object” (41).

confidence and skepticism are shown to be conterminous: both aim at the “reduction of the other to the same” (*Totality* 43).

As Levinas notes, however, the Said is unable to contain the infinite alterity of the Other: “The word that bears on the Other as a theme seems to contain the Other. But already it is said to the Other who [. . .] has quit the theme that encompassed him, and upsurged inevitably behind the said” (195). Hence the attempts by the Methodist and the Tennessean to thematize the alterity presented by Black Guinea place limits on the beggar's subjecthood, but ultimately cannot encompass the infinity of the Other. This recognition of the impossibility of fully accounting for the other, however, leads those in the crowd gathered around Black Guinea to re-double their efforts at definitively identifying the beggar. The Methodist labels the Tennessean a “Canada thistle,” to which the one-legged man retorts that “the seedy Canada thistle has been pretty well shaken among ye: best of all. Dare say some seed has been shaken out; and won't it spring though?” (24). Indeed, the proverbial seed of doubt is planted in the crowd. The beggar's face clearly has not engendered any sense of profound ethical obligation in the audience members, who have gathered around as spectators while money is thrown into his open mouth. But this face is also suspected of being painted, *masked*. Black Guinea's undecidable alterity certainly establishes an asymmetrical relationship of obligation, but it is the othered Guinea who is rendered accountable to the individuals comprising the crowd, a reversal of the ethical relation posited by Levinas. The audience's distrust is driven by their desire for confidence, and Black Guinea is called upon to deliver further proof of his identity: to *account for himself*. Yet the story that Black Guinea offers also fails to satisfy the crowd. Bellis's reading of the novel effectively demonstrates the



impossibility of establishing identity in a narrative universe wherein texts and selves rely upon one another for authentication, thereby endlessly deferring ontological authority. In the scene with Black Guinea, Bellis argues, we see such an ontological chain of verification unfolding (168): his face requires authentication from his story, which requires authentication from some identifying papers—presumably papers that would confirm his alleged status as a free black—or at least someone who will vouch for his identity. In the following chapter, such a friend, willing to confirm Black Guinea's story, appears: the Confidence-Man, in his next incarnation as John Ringman. Black Guinea successfully accounts for himself, but he is only able to do so through his quasi-mystical—at least *unaccountable*—ontological manoeuvres, and of course the question remains as to who will account for Ringman. The scene featuring Black Guinea not only shows the failure of the face-to-face encounter to produce an ethical bond and the corollary production of unethical accounts of others, but also begins the related problematization of personal accountability—in the ethico-narrative sense—that is central to the novel's satirical project.

## II

In *The Confidence-Man*, “accounting” serves as a polyvalent thematic crux. Dimock offers a reading of the troping of “accounting” in the *Confidence-Man* that elucidates how the use of the term in the novel transforms the ethical into the economic,<sup>24</sup> but the term has a larger narrative valence that remains to be fully explored.<sup>25</sup> The most

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<sup>24</sup> For additional readings of the novel as a critique of free-market economics, see the works by Jean-Christophe Agnew, Michael LeBlanc, and Rick Mitchell listed below.

<sup>25</sup> In the development of her theory of “the autonomous self [. . .] as a personified site of accounting” (185-86), Dimock indirectly comments on the narrative valence of “accounting” over the course of her

elementary form of currency aboard the *Fidèle* is language, and stories are exchanged much more readily than money. Yet the exchangeability of the story severs the narrator from the narrative: the story one offers can never be fully one's own.<sup>26</sup> Introducing one of the novel's interpolated stories, the teller, Egbert, laments his inability to narrate the tale in his own language: "I wish I could [tell it] in my own words, but unhappily the original story-teller here has so tyrannized over me, that it is quite impossible for me to repeat his incidents without sliding into his style" (208). In a novel featuring a chapter-length meta-fictional aside on the scarcity of genuine literary originality, the "original story-teller" becomes a mythical, or at least inaccessible figure;<sup>27</sup> instead, the "tyrannical" power to which Egbert refers seems to be a characteristic of language itself. But it is a power that the Confidence-Man, a master rhetorician, harnesses in his exchanges—not to account for himself, but to challenge his marks' confidence in their ability to provide accurate accounts of themselves.

*The Confidence-Man* problematizes the act of self-narration—both telling *one's self* to the other and telling *oneself* who one is. Whether or not the narratives exchanged within the novel's debates are directly concerned with the identities of the teller and his interlocutor, interpretation often takes the form of the interrogation of identity, leading to

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analysis of the interpolated story of John Moredock, the Indian Hater (180-85).

<sup>26</sup> Dimock argues that "speech in *The Confidence-Man* has almost nothing to do with the speakers" (207). Referring specifically to the "[m]ythic stories" and interpolated tales found in the novel, Bryan C. Short similarly notes the disconnect between narrator and narrative; he argues that the "parables" in *The Confidence-Man* "are told, feigned, retold, reported, embedded within other tales, and circulated in a way which robs them of their ethical and temporal location, their access to a believable past" (140). Edgar Dryden argues that Melville saw this severance of the self and the account of the self that the individual produces as an inevitable outcome of self-representation, one that Melville points to through his narrators: "By the act of turning his experience into a story, [the narrator] places himself outside of that experience—in effect, treats it as though it belonged to someone else" (qtd. in Bellis 12).

Furthermore, Bellis argues that this "gap between the writing and written selves"—and, by extension, the narrating and narrativized selves—exists in all acts of autobiography and self-narration (9-11).

<sup>27</sup> Stephen A. Barney also offers a discussion of the impossibility of determining the "original story-teller" of the novel's interpolated tales (158-61).

a codified negotiation of the dynamics of power and the demands of obligation that structure intersubjective relations. Furthermore, the tone of these negotiations is overtly competitive, as each character struggles to offer an account of himself that renders the other accountable to him, establishing what Dimock describes as an “imperial” selfhood that aims ultimately to erase the very “grounds for an adversarial relation” (184-85). This version of intersubjectivity—underwritten, as Dimock and Spanos have demonstrated, by a complex of free market ideology and a cultural faith in teleological progress<sup>28</sup>—leads to the failure of interpersonal encounters to establish ethical bonds, as an imperialistic impulse drives the characters' attempts to comprehend and master the alterity that Levinas posits as the inducement to ethical engagement. These two opposing models of intersubjectivity—Levinasian and imperialistic—represent two conflicting conceptions of recognition. As outlined in my introduction, Judith Butler explains that in the Levinas-inspired ethical theory of Adriana Cavarero, “[t]he question most central to recognition is a direct one, and it is addressed to the other: ‘Who are you?’” (31). *The Confidence-Man* posits that the normative view of American imperialist selfhood replaces this question—“Who are you?”—with the forceful, “who in thunder are you?” (137), and, eventually, the imperative, “Tell me who you are,” or, as the Confidence-Man-as-herb-doctor puts it, “give me your story” (99; emphasis added).

Considered in terms of Levinasian ethics, the intersubjective encounters in the novel thus represent ethical failures, as their “imperialist structure” points more to the model of intersubjectivity that has been read in G.W.F. Hegel's philosophy (Dimock 201).

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<sup>28</sup> Dimock demonstrates how this “imperialist” vision of selfhood takes the form of an “economics of selfhood” insofar as it reflects the logic of the American free market economy (178). Furthermore, she argues that there is an “absolute congruence between the imperialist structure of selfhood in Manifest Destiny and the capitalist structure of selfhood in individual accountability” (201). See also Spanos's genealogy of “American optimist thinking” alluded to in my introduction (170).

According to Hegel's "pure conception of recognition" (231), the encounter with the other offers the chance for the recognition of what Butler calls the "structural similarity" between self and other (27), a recognition of the self in the other, translated to an understanding of the other in the self—what Hegel describes as the moment of "duplication of self-consciousness within its unity" central to the progression towards pure self-consciousness (231). Butler offers a version of the majority reading of Hegel's work, according to which,

The Hegelian other is always found outside; at least, it is *first* found outside and only later recognized to be constitutive of the subject. This has led some critics of Hegel to conclude that the Hegelian subject effects a wholesale assimilation of what is external into a set of features internal to itself, that its characteristic gesture is one of *appropriation* and its style is that of imperialism. (27)<sup>29</sup>

Levinas certainly sees this assimilatory impulse in Hegel's work. Levinas argues that the Hegelian subject always works to re-affirm self-possession, even when faced with alterity: "Hegelian phenomenology, where self-consciousness is the distinguishing of what is not distinct, expresses the universality of the same identifying itself in the alterity

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<sup>29</sup> Butler offers an alternate reading of Hegel that challenges the assumption that the Hegelian model of selfhood is entirely assimilatory and imperialistic, arguing that it instead represents a model of personhood based in a social dependency that renders the individual unable to account for herself; she concludes that

[w]hat is recognized about a self in the course of [the intersubjective encounter] is that the self is the sort of being for whom staying inside itself proves impossible. One is compelled and comported *outside oneself*; one finds that the only way to know oneself is through a mediation that takes place outside of oneself, exterior to oneself, by virtue of a convention or a norm that one did not make, in which one cannot discern oneself as an author or an agent of one's own making. (28)

Levinas, however, sees this compulsion of the subject outside of itself in "Hegelian phenomenology" as no more than an extension of the "*way* of the same," insofar as it presents "[t]he possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me" (36-38).

of objects thought” (36). Furthermore, Levinas rejects the Hegelian schema of intersubjective recognition: for Levinas, the face-to-face encounter at once destabilizes the individual's confidence in his identity and establishes an asymmetrical relationship of obligation that goes beyond the Hegelian recognition of the “existent in front of me” as an individual possessing “a freedom identical to and at grips with mine” (“Time and the Other” 50). The face of the other “exceed[s] *the idea of the other in me*” and reorients the ethical relation towards other subjects (*Totality* 50). Hegelian recognition, for Levinas, represents an unethical reduction of the other to the terms of the same.

*The Confidence-Man* presents a similar critique of the Hegelian model of recognition. Indeed, the Confidence-Man's *performance* of recognition constitutes Melville's *reductio ad absurdum* rebuke to the Hegelian dialectic of selfhood by stripping the scene of recognition of all but its underlying assimilatory impulse.<sup>30</sup> Levinas rejects Hegel's positing of intersubjective struggle as the primordial scene of human interaction: “The first revelation of the other [ . . . ] does not consist in grasping him in his negative resistance and in circumventing him by ruse” (197). Melville, however, demonstrates that the ideological complex undergirding American confidence leads to the struggle for mastery that Hegel describes, as the Confidence-Man, preaching the ideology of confidence, does indeed aim to “circumvent” his victims through a series of “ruses” designed to disarm their “resistance.” While reaching into his pocket for a coin to offer

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<sup>30</sup> I do not mean to suggest here that Melville is critiquing Hegel directly, but rather that he rejects the model of intersubjectivity that is embodied in the German philosopher's theory. Sterling Stuckey and his collaborator Joshua Leslie, however, note the “deafening” “Hegelian echo” in *Benito Cereno* (qtd. in Stuckey 54), and Stuckey cites a journal entry from 1849 that confirms that Melville was indeed familiar enough with Hegel's thought to discuss it over “whiskey punches” with some friends (Stuckey 54; Melville qtd. in Stuckey 54): “*last night* about 9<sup>1/2</sup> P.M. Adler & Taylor came into my room [ . . . ]. We talked metaphysics continually, & Hegel, Schlegel, Kant &c were discussed under the influence of the whiskey” (*Journals* 8).

Black Guinea, a country merchant, Henry Roberts, drops a business card onto the deck of the ship, which Black Guinea covers with his “stump” until Roberts leaves (25). The following chapter opens with the Confidence-Man, now disguised as John Ringman, addressing the merchant by name: “How do you do, Mr. Roberts?” (26). After Roberts admits that he does not “know” the other who has approached him, the Confidence-Man replies, “Is it possible, my dear sir, [ . . . ] that you do not recall my countenance? why yours I recall distinctly as if but half an hour, instead of half an age, had passed since I saw you. Don't you recall me, now? Look harder” (26). In noting the merchant's inability to recognize his “face”—which Roberts had indeed “seen” in another mask less than “half an hour” ago—the Confidence-Man again draws the reader's attention to the folly of looking to the face as a stable signifier of identity, but it is this very confidence in the face as a stable marker of identity that he exploits in his own feigned recognition of Roberts.

Ringman proceeds to utilize the knowledge he has garnered from Roberts's business-card in an attempt to legitimize his claim to recognition (27), and to quell the merchant's doubts, he embellishes an entire story of their past acquaintance—a fictional account presented as a narrativized *recounting*. Instead of appealing to the merchant to offer an account of himself—by asking him, “Who are you?”—the Confidence-Man accounts for him—by telling him, “This is who you are.” Furthermore, when Roberts fails to recognize himself in the account that the Confidence-Man has produced, the Confidence-Man ventures to convince the merchant that he must have received a brain injury that “erased” his “tablet” (28), just as the Confidence-Man works to return

Roberts's self-conception back to a Lockean *tabula rasa*.<sup>31</sup> After telling the story of his own experience recovering from head trauma, Ringman explains that the “memories” he has just “recounted” of the incident are not his own, but those supplied by others: “For the knowledge of those particulars I am indebted solely to my friends, in whose statements, I need not say, I place implicit reliance, since particulars of some sort there must have been, and why should they deceive me?” (28). Ringman encourages Roberts to allow others to account for him. When Roberts admits that he had suffered from a debilitating fever around the period in question, the Confidence-Man replies, “That brain fever accounts for it all” (29); he has successfully managed to offer an account of Roberts that renders the latter accountable to the former—in the novel's ethico-economic sense. The reader of the novel is not made privy to the account of himself that Ringman relates to Roberts in seeking a loan. Instead, the narrator just presents what he can deduce of the story from Roberts's facial expression as the merchant hands over his money to Ringman (29-30),<sup>32</sup> the content of the story is superfluous,<sup>33</sup> as Ringman, having rendered Roberts accountable to him, remains himself unaccountable—both un-narrativizable and irresponsible.

The genial merchant proves an easy target for the Confidence-Man, and thus serves as a ready way for Melville to introduce the rules and the stakes of the competitive confidence games in which the characters partake. In the Confidence-Man's subsequent

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<sup>31</sup> For an illuminating discussion of memory, identity, and autobiography, see Bellis (8-11)

<sup>32</sup> In keeping with the novel's propensity for tautology, which Renker analyzes (78), Ringman's story is later re-told by Roberts to the Confidence-Man in another guise.

<sup>33</sup> In his analysis of this scene, Lindberg claims that “[t]o give us our first lesson in what stories mean, the narrator omits the content and presents instead the transaction for which the story serves as instrument. [. . .] [S]tories appear as the instruments by which the tellers effect their own ulterior purposes, and this emphasis on function shifts out interest from the tale to the telling, from content to methods, from 'truth' to implications” (29). Effectively, Lindberg argues that the representation of story-telling in the novel invites a critical shift to an examination of the intersubjective dynamics of the narrative scene of address.

battles with increasingly skeptical figures, the Hegelian dialectic is stalled in its initial competitive phase as the Confidence-Man's marks are confident in their own ability to account for themselves, and attempt to render the Confidence-Man accountable. Aboard the *Fidèle*, intersubjective encounters remain unethical, in the Levinasian sense, due to a cultural confidence—again, based in a cultural distrust—in the ability to render the other knowable, a confidence that the Confidence-Man exploits in the very process of challenging it. Hegel's dialectic of mutual recognition is also halted by the confidence of the subject in its ability to account for the other, but in the novel's representations of these scenes of recognition, the confidence that the Confidence-Man both employs and unsettles is his interlocutors' confidence in their ability to know themselves. Early in their exchange, Ringman proposes that Roberts check his business card to confirm his own identity. “I hope I know myself,” Roberts replies, to which Ringman counters, “And yet self-knowledge is thought by some not so easy” (27). The “Renewal of an Old Acquaintance” referred to in the title of this chapter thus alludes to Ringman's efforts to re-new—that is to make new again—Roberts's confident “acquaintance” with himself (26). The Confidence-Man's performances of recognition serve to show his opponents that their confidence in self-knowledge is no more than “hopeful” thinking by proving them unable to account for themselves.

### III

The encounters between Pitch the Missourian bachelor and the Confidence-Man, in no less than three incarnations, demonstrate the ability of the Confidence-Man—a Levinasian Stranger, an embodiment of alterity—to effect a “calling into question of the



same” that ultimately serves to disrupt confidence in self-knowledge. These encounters serve as a thematic crux that enacts, in microcosm, the paradoxical thrust of the entire novel. Jonathan Cook notes that the novel has two distinct movements (70): in the first half, the Confidence-Man's marks are all ordinary passengers readily duped by the Confidence-Man, who both takes their money and destabilizes their self-conceptions; in the second half, the characters that the Confidence-Man encounters are, if not outright grifters, at least wily players of the confidence game themselves whose self-conceptions and money-purses are carefully guarded “behind the secure Malakoff of confidence” (72).<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, whereas the first half sees the Confidence-Man metamorphosing between incarnations every few chapters, he remains in the guise of the cosmopolitan for the entire second half. Some Melville scholars have noted that this disjunction between the two halves is a result of the author changing his intentions mid-way through the writing process (Bryant 322), but the symmetry that is set up by the novel counters the assumption that “Melville loses control of the figure of the Confidence-Man” in the novel's second half (Spanos 180).<sup>35</sup> In the most convincing of the many allegorical readings of the novel, Cook explains that the polyvalence of the allegorical associations elicited by the Confidence-Man can be accounted for if he is understood as representative of an ambiguously dualistic God (60), a Dionysian figure who embodies the roles of both “civilizer and destroyer” (69). While both sides of the Confidence-Man's personality are operative throughout the novel, it would seem that the tendency to destruction

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<sup>34</sup> For a thorough discussion of the “Malakoff of confidence” as an ideological barricade against new ideas, see Spanos (169-70).

<sup>35</sup> The symmetry of the novel's form is cemented by the presence of two framing episodes at the beginning (the scenes featuring the deaf-mute and Black Guinea) and the end (the cosmopolitan's encounters with the Barber and the old man) of the novel, which differ dramatically from the rest of the content in the respective halves they appear in.

predominates in the first half—as the Confidence-Man works primarily to “destroy” his marks' confidence in their ability to know themselves and others, a confidence that ironically deters social cohesion—while in the second half, as Tom Quirk notes, there are points at which the ironic discrepancy between the cosmopolitan's message and Melville's proclaimed social values seems to subside (16-17). At least the cosmopolitan's attempts to create a social order that values philanthropy *seem* more genuine in the face of the “genial misanthropes” that he encounters. Pitch's appearance straddles the two halves of the novel (*Confidence* 182). In keeping with the structure of the Confidence-Man's interviews throughout the novel's first half, Pitch's encounters with the Confidence-Man enact the failure of the experience of the alterity presented in the face of the other to establish ethical relations, but they also underline the assimilatory impulse of the Hegelian dialectic of selfhood. The PIO (Philosophical Intelligence Office) man's rhetorical mastery eventually convinces Pitch to renounce his assumed stance of misanthropy, but the realization that he has been duped leads him to re-adopt—and re-double his commitment to—the skeptical outlook that the Confidence-Man unsettles.

Pitch the Missourian bachelor is first introduced in Chapter 21, “A Hard Case.” The chapter's title can be read a number of ways, referring at once to Pitch's tough exterior—that is his rough physical appearance, his seemingly calloused manner, and his expounded philosophical inflexibility—as well as to the fact that, for the Confidence-Man, Pitch represents a difficult instance for the selling of confidence: a hard shell requiring a hard sell. Indeed, Pitch explicitly issues a challenge to the Confidence-Man: “wagging [the tail of his raccoon-skin cap] almost into the herb-doctor's face,” Pitch commands the doctor to look “[a]t this coon. Can you, the fox, catch him?” (116). It

would seem that Pitch, as the raccoon, an animal traditionally associated with both masks and unmasking, is well-suited for interaction with the Confidence-Man. Pitch is also associated with the bear: he is described as “somewhat ursine in aspect” and he also sports “a shaggy spencer of the cloth called bear's-skin”(111), although significantly, as Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer note, “bear's-skin” is in fact a woolen material (111n), suggesting that, as the PIO man will attempt to prove, Pitch may be a gregarious sheep in a solitary bear's clothing. The bear is explicitly related to skepticism in the novel (56), but as Adamson notes, the bear is also commonly a figure of solitude (41). The bear is, of course, a symbol of strength as well, and indeed Pitch is convinced that there is strength *in* his skeptical solitude. For Pitch, bachelorhood symbolizes the achievement of an idealized conception of independent masculinity. Pitch associates masculinity with rational empiricism, and he values this epistemological approach over any Romantic reliance on nature; thus he relishes the “professional triumph” of the medical doctor standing over the “lank yarb-doctor” (112). If for Pitch a reliance on nature symbolizes a sort of impotent masculinity, it is because nature is itself represented as an emasculating femininity, and hence is a force that must be mastered by rationality: “Nature made me blind and would have left me so,” he explains to the herb-doctor. “My oculist counterplotted her” (114).<sup>36</sup> Pitch's hunting rifle embodies his phallogocentric worldview according to which he understands all social interaction in binary terms of upright independence and “soft” dependence (116). Hence Pitch's apparent disgust as he “eye[s] in silence” “the old miser leaning against the herb-doctor with something of that air of trustful fraternity” (113), later commanding “go lay down in your grave, old man, if you

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<sup>36</sup> Melville's thematic preoccupation with the opposition between nature and reason will be taken up in greater detail in the following chapter's discussion of *Billy Budd*.

can't stand of yourself. It's a hard world for a leaner" (116). "Fraternity," for Pitch, represents co-dependency, a state of mutual obligation that he rightfully sees as undermined by the "hard world" of nineteenth-century America.<sup>37</sup>

The old miser, who the herb-doctor must repeatedly remind to "[s]tand up a little" as he "lean[s] rather hard" (113), is meant to represent an undesirable degree of dependence, but in Pitch's "hard world," any social interaction is equated with a loss of the personal independence that he idealizes. Furthermore, for Pitch, the delineation of social roles is only superficial; any membership in society represents an abdication of freedom. Through the voice of the slave Davus in *Satire 2.7*, Horace, whose writings on servants Pitch alludes to in his encounter with the PIO man, suggests that society is comprised of multiple loci of power that cannot be understood in the reductive terms of unilateral relationships of mastery:

And over and above what I have said, add something of no less weight:  
whether one who obeys a slave is an underslave, as the custom of your  
class names him, or a fellow-slave, what am I in respect of you? Why,  
you, who lord it over me, are the wretched slave of another master, and  
you are moved like a wooden puppet by wires that others pull.

Moreover, perhaps Pitch, who, we are told, is "acquainted [. . .] with philosophy and books" (111), is familiar with Hegel's argument in "Lordship and Bondage" from the *Phenomenology of Mind*, according to which the slave is freer than the master, insofar as the master relies on the slave to achieve his creative ends:

[J]ust where the master has effectively achieved lordship, he really finds

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<sup>37</sup> For a psychoanalytical reading of the misanthropic rejection of "inter-indebtedness" in *The Confidence-Man* and other works by Melville, see Adamson (37-100).

that something has come about quite different from an independent consciousness. It is not an independent, but rather a dependent consciousness that he has achieved. [. . .] The truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the consciousness of the bondsman. This doubtless appears in the first instance outside itself, and not as the truth of self-consciousness. But just as lordship showed its essential nature to be the reverse of what it wants to be, so, too, bondage will, when completed, pass into the opposite of what it immediately is: being a consciousness repressed within itself, it will enter into itself, and change round into real and true independence. (Hegel 236-37)

It would seem that Pitch's views on society and servility correspond with those expressed by both Hegel and Davus, as Pitch believes that gaining membership in the social formation of nineteenth-century America implicitly produces a loss of self-mastery regardless of whether one is granted the socially determined role of free master or bonded slave: "Slaves? [. . .] won't have 'em. Bad enough to see whites ducking and grinning round for a favor, without having those poor devils of niggers congeeing round for their corn. Though, to me, the niggers are the freer of the two" (117).<sup>38</sup> For Pitch, the only defence against the limp "ducking" and "congeeing" of social servility is an independent uprightness, a "hard" stance of rationalistic self-reliance, the philosophical fixity that, for him, expresses an essential, immovable selfhood: "My name is Pitch," he will repeatedly tell the PIO man, "I stick to what I say" (122). Here Pitch is not only invoking the "stickiness" implied by his name, but also re-asserting his belief in the stability of the self

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<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of how the novel relates to the mid-nineteenth century slave-debates, see Helen Trimpi's *Melville's Confidence-Man and American Politics in the 1850s*.

referred to by this name, a continuity of selfhood that is not unrelated to the consistency of character that is, at different points, desired, debated, and denied by the characters and the narrator in the novel. Furthermore, what Henry Sussman refers to as Pitch's "literality," evinced by his repetition of his name as though it were a stable signifier capable of referring to a stable signified—his identity—(40), shows his confidence in language as a Saying-less Said, and, by extension, in his ability to offer an account of himself. Over the course of his encounter with the PIO man, however, Pitch's confidence in his ability to autonomously produce an account of himself is thrown into question.

The PIO man's ostensible goal in his encounter with Pitch is to sell the Missourian a servant, a sale that would, according to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, ironically represent the induction of Pitch into a state of dependency. This irony is *performed* by the PIO man, who at the beginning of the encounter presents himself in the role of slave, casting Pitch as the master, but effects a role reversal through his rhetorical *mastery* of Pitch, who is rendered servile to the logic of the PIO man as he agrees to purchase a servant. This shift in the power dynamic is troped as a shift from the PIO man's "soft" servility to a "hard" mastery, as the scene is rife with phallic imagery. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that "the men in *Billy Budd*, rather than having erections, tend to turn into them, or to turn each other into them" (125). She deems the homosocial order aboard the *HMS Bellipotent* an "economy of erections" (125), a description that seems even more apt for the social order of the *Fidèle*, a ship whereupon all intersubjective encounters are troped as business transactions, and men "unbend" and "shoot up erect" or offer "low, shabby bows" as they negotiate and exchange social positions (201; 119). Prior to parting with Pitch, the herb-doctor offers him a warning that is replete with

phallic language: "There is strength in [your thoughts], but a strength, whose source, being physical, must wither. You will yet recant" (115). Pitch dismisses this caution, concluding that the herb-doctor is "soft" (116), but the warning proves prescient, as the Confidence-Man, in the guise of the PIO man, will work to effect a softening of Pitch's physical and philosophical rigidity.

At the beginning of the chapter in which the PIO man appears, he is presented as the "ducking" and "congeeing" servant that Pitch abhors, as he is shown "crouching" and "[slinking] obliquely behind" Pitch (118). The narrator notes the PIO man's "obsequiousness," and observes that he wears a "small brass plate" "collar-wise by the chain," suggesting the collars and chains of slavery. Furthermore, the narrator describes the PIO man in the "canine" terms that have been associated with slavery since the appearance of Black Guinea early in the novel, noting that he seems to "wag his very coat-tails behind him" (118); the Confidence-Man is clearly performing the part of the doglike slave that Pitch assigned him in their previous encounter. The PIO man goads Pitch on, as he "point[s] somewhat proudly ashore" to the "free-state" in which his office is set up (119). "Free, eh?" Pitch counters, "You a freeman, you flatter yourself? With those coat-tails and that spinal complaint of servility? Free? Just cast up in your private mind who is your master, will you?" (119). As Helen Trimpi notes, Pitch, unconsciously picking up on the PIO man's "canine deprecation," speaks to him like a master speaks to his dog (Trimpi 155; Melville 118): "Come up here, come, sir, come," Pitch calls (the narrator adds) "as if to his pointer" (119). Pitch unwittingly assumes the role of the (dependent) master that he so adamantly rejects.

Pitch's assumption of the role of master is also evident in the intersubjective

dynamic of the conversation between the two men. As he relates his negative experiences with servant boys and rants about the depravity of humanity, Pitch forcefully asserts his dominance by interrupting the PIO man each time he tries to speak. But, the narrator tells us, “[h]aving until now vented himself mostly in plaintive dissent of canine whines and groans, the man with the brass-plate seemed beginning to summon courage to a less timid encounter” (123). And although “his maiden essay [. . .] was not very encouragingly handled” (123), the PIO man is eventually able to convince Pitch to allow him to speak—by appealing to Pitch's faith in the empirical method:

“Well, then, sir, the peculiar principles, the strictly philosophical principles, I may say,” guardedly rising in dignity, as he guardedly rose on his toes, “upon which our office is founded, has led me and my associates, in our small, quiet way, to a careful analytical study of man, conducted, too, on a quiet theory, and with an unobtrusive aim wholly our own. That theory I will not now at large set forth. But some of the discoveries resulting from it, I will, by your permission, very briefly mention; such of them, I mean, as refer to the state of boy-hood scientifically viewed.”  
(125)

Note also that the PIO man's increasing rhetorical power is marked by a change in posture. The PIO man makes a final gesture of servility in admitting that he thus far had deferred from speaking because he learned from his dealings with “masters, gentleman masters” that there is a “precedence of [. . .] persons” (125), but the PIO man's *rhetorical mastery* of Pitch has clearly already commenced and his deference grows increasingly ironic. Perhaps picking up on Pitch's penchant for analogies, the PIO man introduces his



office's "analogical theory" (131). The analogy is of course a rhetorical figure that points to the similarities between two things, but insofar as it requires two disparate objects for comparison, analogy is dependent upon difference. The analogy is a rhetorical figure that performs the elision of difference into similarity, ironically the very eliding that Pitch fears might result from joining a democratic society based on the seemingly paradoxical principles of equality and individual freedom. Furthermore, the analogies that the PIO man employs, which "proceed [. . .] from the physical to the moral" (125), often border on the ridiculous,<sup>39</sup> as when the replacement of baby teeth by "sound, beautiful ones" in adulthood is used to evince that any "transient moral blemishes" in children will be replaced upon maturity by "beautiful and pleasant virtues" (128). Bryan C. Short points to the sylleptical nature of many of the PIO man's analogies (149), something that Pitch also objects to—at first: "But is analogy an argument? You are a punster [. . .], you pun with ideas as another man may with words" (128). But the PIO man persists in sharing the analogies that he uses with his "patrons" (124), until it becomes quite clear that it is in fact Pitch who is being patronized. At one point the PIO man chastises Pitch after the latter has a violent outburst: "Sir, if passion is to invade, surely science must evacuate" (125). But the PIO man's arguments work to uncover the fact that Pitch's reasoning—his rational account of himself—actually consists of the rationalization of his passions, just as his physical and philosophical rigidity serve to cover up certain latent anxieties. The Confidence-Man works to uncover these anxieties by exposing Pitch's inability to

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<sup>39</sup> In his reading of *The Confidence-Man* as "a negative allegory, a Romantic allegory," Barney relates the reconceptualization of allegory in the Romantic era to the fact that "[a]fter the seventeenth century, the principle of analogy—of the validity of representation by similitude, and of the validity of the correspondence of spirit and matter—perished" (146). The PIO man's ludicrous analogies, then, which move from "the physical to the moral," can be read as synecdochic representations of the novel's ironic overdetermination of its own allegorical meaning. For a further discussion of the relationship between allegory, irony, and ethics, based on a reading of the work of Paul De Man, see Handwerk (10-14).

sufficiently account for himself, a linguistic mastery that, in effect, renders Pitch servile to the Confidence-Man, thereby stalling the self-other dialectic in the competitive stage of lordship and bondage.

#### IV

The PIO man, like Pitch, demonstrates an understanding of the superficiality of the socially determined roles of master and slave. It seems that he has undoubtedly read the Horace cited by Pitch, maybe a little more closely than the Missourian. Looking again to *Satire 2.7*, we find another passage spoken by Davus that seems to express Pitch's philosophy:

Who then is free? The wise man, who is lord over himself, whom neither poverty nor death nor bonds affright, who bravely defies his passions, and scorns ambition, who in himself is a whole, smoothed and rounded, so that nothing from outside can rest on the polished surface, and against whom Fortune in her onset is ever maimed.

Davus's description of the free man, however, is followed by a line of questioning that blurs into accusation: "Of these traits can you recognize any one as your own? [. . .] come, say, 'I am free, am free.' You cannot; for you have a master, and no gentle one, plaguing your soul, pricking your weary side with the sharp spur, and driving you on against your will." Through his performed reversal of the master-slave dynamic, the PIO man presents a similar line of questioning to Pitch, who is forced to acknowledge the limitations of his autonomy. Furthermore, as Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer point out, the scene in which Davus speaks these lines is set during the Saturnalia festival, a

time when traditional social roles were temporarily reversed (*Confidence* 121n). The *Fidèle*, as Jean-Christophe Agnew remarks, represents the sort of carnivalesque space described by Bakhtin wherein traditional social roles and power relations are reversed (200). Julia M. Wright notes the role of the masquerade in the Medieval carnival models on which she claims Melville draws (75). Wright, drawing on Larzer Ziff, argues that while in the traditional masque “because only costumes antithetical to identity are acceptable, the disguise points to identity even as it points away,” the Confidence-Man's “Protean” masquerade does not simply invert, but rather subverts stable identities (77). Aboard the *Fidèle*, the PIO man performs a reversal of the roles of himself-as-slave and Pitch-as-master in order to show not just the reversibility, but also the fundamental instability of these roles on the ship—and, by extension, in a young nation. Ultimately, this performed role reversal serves to force Pitch to relinquish his own self-mastery, as the PIO man's combined arguments—his “hard case” for confidence—work to expose the soft dependency beneath Pitch's hard, independent exterior. Yet, while the PIO man exposes the malleability of the roles of master and slave, the encounter never escapes the dynamic of the master-slave dialectic; it only points to the impossibility of an equitable synthesis. The power differential is simply reversed, not replaced by a relationship of mutual ethical obligation, due to the Confidence-Man's manipulation of the moment of recognition.

The Confidence-Man's performance of recognition employs a use of language that limits its capacity to establish ethical discourse. According to Levinas, “[l]anguage is not enacted within a consciousness; it comes to me from the Other and reverberates in consciousness by putting it in question” (204). Language permits the subject to “come to

[the Other] across the world of possessed things [. . .] because it offers things which are mine to the Other” (76): “Utilizing a sign [. . .] permits me to render [. . .] things offerable, detach them from my own usage, alienate them, render them exterior” (20). The Confidence-Man aims to “alienate” Pitch from his language, to show that Pitch cannot communicate in a Saying-less Said, thereby throwing Pitch's self-possession into question. However, the Confidence-Man achieves this goal through the *possession* of Pitch's words; despite the dialogic structure of their encounters, the Confidence-Man does not attempt to establish true ethical dialogue, but rather to control the meaning of the linguistic excess of Pitch's account of himself in order to perform a rhetorical mastery. Indeed, the herb-doctor first engages Pitch in conversation because he has “caught [Pitch's] words” (112), “the words,” the herb-doctor later says, that Pitch “allowed to escape” (116). Captured by the herb-doctor, these “escaped” words are manipulated by the Confidence-Man in his later disguises in order to undermine the very beliefs that Pitch uses them to express. The herb-doctor's encounter with Pitch serves the novel's shape-shifting protagonist as an opportunity for some rhetorical *reconnaissance*—to borrow the French term that implies both recognizing and reconnoitring,<sup>40</sup> and is hence particularly apt for the subsequent incarnations of the Confidence-Man's deceptive performances of researched recognition. The Confidence-Man contaminates Hegel's “pure conception of recognition” by instilling a fundamental *duplicity* into the moment “of duplication of self-consciousness within its unity” (231), thereby stalling the self-other dialectic in its initial competitive phase.

The rhetorical manipulations of the Confidence-Man thus represent a barricade to

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<sup>40</sup> I use the word “reconnaissance” here only because of this useful dual etymology, not to invoke the theorizations of the term in the work of Jacques Lacan and, subsequently, Louis Althusser.

ethical dialogue, and his semantic trickery is underwritten by a refusal of the ethical appeal for discourse that Levinas argues is presented in the face-to-face encounter. For Levinas, the encounter with alterity in the face of the other demands ethical obligation by establishing discourse: “[t]he face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no ‘interiority’ permits avoiding. It is that discourse that obliges the entering into discourse” (201). The presentation of the self to the other in the face-to-face encounter, he argues, represents “the privileged case of a presentation of being foreign to the alternative of truth and non-truth” (202). The face-to-face encounter, then, represents the establishment of a discourse outside of the “ambiguity of the true and the false” (202): “What we call the face is precisely this exceptional presentation of self by self, incommensurable with the presentation of realities simply given, always suspect of some swindle” (202). But, again, the face-to-face moment is replaced, in the world of the *Confidence-Man*, by the mask-to-mask, as the Confidence-Man, confident in his ability to know the other, treats the face as a decipherable sign rather than an inducement into ethical communication, and uses the information he garners from his interpretations of the other's face to further his swindles. The Confidence-Man is constantly shown reading the faces of others and adjusting his own expressions in response: “the herb-doctor [. . .] eyed the Missourian with a kind of pinched expression, mixed of pain and curiosity, *as if* he grieved at his state of mind, and, at the same time, wondered what had brought him to it” (115; emphasis added); for the con-artist, the visage is a canvas. Furthermore, for Pitch, with his principle of “confidence in distrust” (113), all moments of recognition are tainted with suspicion, as he likewise does not see, but rather attempts to *see through* the other. It is unsurprising then that we see Pitch “squaring himself with both hands on his

rifle, used for a staff, and gazing in the herb-doctor's face with no more reverence than if it were a target" (117). The gun imagery here points to an escalation of the structure of intersubjective exchange from merely competitive to combative, violent, and this degradation of the "scene of address" explains the failure of the face to engender ethical discourse (Butler 21).

Pitch's combative stance, however, is also defensive: he aims to protect his autonomy from the contamination of discourse. Newton contends that Saying is always "the site of surplus, of the unforeseen, of self-exposure" (3), and it is the Saying that Pitch attempts to suppress that The Confidence-Man calls to the bachelor's attention in order to disrupt Pitch's self-assurance. The language in which Pitch accounts for his views exceeds his conscious self-knowledge; he offers an account of himself that is beyond his control, an account for which he cannot account. The Confidence-Man exploits this surplus of Pitch's narrative—its subconscious subtext—in order to induce Pitch to abandon his self-imposed banishment from the social order. The Confidence-Man, a master of semantic duplicity, has read the dual meanings latent in Pitch's character. Pitch's name, for example, signifies not just his preferred definition of "stickiness," but also refers to "inclination," a word which itself can refer to either an angle deviating away from the verticality which Pitch idealizes, or to a mental or emotional propensity—a pre-rational predisposition (OED). If for Pitch his rifle symbolizes firm, rational, self-control, his constant "snapping" of the "rifle-lock" whenever he grows agitated suggests that he may very well not be able to control when it shoots (142). Indeed, "the impulsive bachelor" goes "off like a rocket" when he perceives some feigned weakness in the PIO man (121). Cook points to an instance in the novel in

which Melville “parodies the perils of improper regulation of semen which haunted the antebellum male with fears for his success, his sanity, and even his life” (195),<sup>41</sup> and John Carlos Rowe notes that through “the crude banter of Mississippi rivermen,” Melville suggests “a pun on philanthropy as a sort of buggery or otherwise infertile sexuality” (qtd. in Cook 195). Certainly the text’s persistent innuendo implies that Pitch, who tells the PIO man that he wishes not to buy any more boys because he “want[s] no more more wild vermin to [. . .] waste [his] substance” and complains that he found one of his previous servants “sucking the embryo life from [his] spring eggs” (122), may be using his misanthropy to mask a different kind of love-of-men and to hide his anxiety about these “infertile” sexual desires. The PIO man employs analogies that consistently conflate moral and sexual maturity as he tries to sell a boy to Pitch, and the imagery of pubescent boys “bud[ding] forth” causes the bachelor to “soften” his stance against servants and admit that he “may have been a little bit too hard upon” the boys that he previously “discharged” (128; 131; 122). For Pitch, Sussman argues, the phallus represents the ideal of the “thoroughly dependable and stable sign” (41), and hence it is ironic that the phallic imagery of the PIO man’s analogies effects the softening of Pitch’s ontological rigidity, which leads to his eventual admission that the account of himself that he has offered does not match his conflicted being; as Sussman concludes, the PIO man “empties the ideal he represents—that of representational language—in the same gesture by which he invokes it” (42). Certainly the phallic overtones in the exchange that sees Pitch renouncing his misanthropy are hard to miss.

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<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of how this concern with the “spend[ing]” of semen relates to a “[n]ineteenth-century [. . .] economic interpretation [of] male sexuality” that underwrote a “cult of earnest productivity,” as well as a theorization of Melville’s “subversive” critique of this cultural complex (16), see Robert K. Martin (12-16).

“Glad to find you a little softening, sir. Who knows now, but that flexile gracefulness, however questionable at the time of that thirtieth boy of yours, might have been the silky husk of the most solid qualities of maturity. It might have been with him as with the ear of the Indian corn.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” excitedly cried the bachelor, as the light of this new illustration broke in, “yes, yes; and now that I think of it, how often I've sadly watched my Indian corn in May, wondering whether such sickly, half-eaten sprouts, could ever thrive up into the stiff, stately spear of August.” (131)

Pitch's “softening” marks an admission of dependency, a recognition that is mirrored by Pitch's assent to buying a servant from the PIO man.

Through a manipulation of Pitch's language, which points to Pitch's inability to adequately account for himself, the PIO man causes the bachelor to renounce his self-mastery. Although Pitch still clutches his rifle, he has been sufficiently disarmed. He allows the PIO man to use the biography of St. Augustine, whose writings on Original Sin Pitch claims as his “text book” (130), to disprove the doctrine of natural depravity, and he accepts as “a kind of reasonable” the PIO man's argument that “[i]f hitherto, sir, you have struck upon a peculiarly bad vein of boys, so much the more hope now of your hitting a good one” (132), an argument that is a complete travesty of the empirical method. The narrator describes the PIO man “rising [. . .] in eloquence as his proselyte, for all his pretenses, sunk in conviction” as the transaction nears completion (132); although the bachelor continues to claim that his purchase of a servant is no more than “pure[. . .] scientific experiment” (133), Pitch pays in advance for the delivery of a boy,



and the transaction is sealed by the bachelor's vow of "perfect and unquestioning confidence" in the PIO man (133). Pitch, in agreeing to buy a servant, becomes a master, which, according to Hegel's logic, represents a state of dependency; Pitch has been induced into social relations, thereby forfeiting his claim to self-sufficiency. The Confidence-Man, who has manipulated the structure of the scene of address in order to achieve a mastery of Pitch, finalizes the process by having Pitch agree to a polyvalent obligation: the PIO man demands that Pitch's financial obligation be buttressed by an admission of interpersonal dependency, a placing of confidence in the Confidence-Man. Yet the Confidence-Man himself remains above these obligations: he has no intention, it can be assumed, of delivering a servant to Pitch, and insofar as his discourse with the bachelor consists of a disconnected rhetorical manipulation instead of an ethical communication, the PIO man demonstrates his ability to maintain a mastery over the other that fortifies rather than weakens self-assurance.

## V

The intersubjective dynamic that I have identified leads to an impasse in the progress of both self-consciousness and cultural development. David H. Evans argues that the confidence man, as an American incarnation of the traditional trickster figure, played an especially important role in forming nineteenth-century American culture: "By inspiring an extension of belief supported by no prior foundations, which is then answered by a corresponding extension of belief, which elicits another response—ad infinitum—the confidence man brings into being a community that becomes its own evidence, and whose existence is the direct result of the fact that it is believed to exist"

(40). But in Melville's novel we are made privy to multiple scenes in which the characters that the Confidence-Man has duped come to the realization that they have been had. After the PIO man's departure from the scene, for example, the suddenly omniscient narrator offers us a glimpse into Pitch's thoughts as he replays the preceding encounter in his mind and concludes that "his too indulgent, too artless and companionable nature betrayed him. Admonished by which, he thinks he must be a little splenetic in his intercourse henceforth" (135). Indeed, Pitch is portrayed in a state of utter ontological consternation as "[h]e ponders the mystery of human subjectivity in general" (134). The Confidence-Man has successfully unfixed Pitch's rigid belief in self-reliance, but Pitch's realization that his revelation was wrought by dishonest means leads him back to his "general law of distrust" (135): he is shown "leaning over the rail" (134), no longer able to stand on his own, but having again renounced any reliance upon others.

The PIO man has shown Pitch that he is unable to offer a full account of his self, and this recognition of the inability to account for oneself can, according to Levinas and Butler, serve as the grounds for ethical relations. As outlined above, Levinas proposes that the experience of the irreducible alterity of the other introduces an infinite sense of obligation by throwing into question the sufficiency of the self. And, as explained in the introduction to this project, Butler similarly contends that the realization of the opacity of the self—an opacity due in part to the fact that the subject is formed in "irrecoverable" "relations of dependency" (20)—grounds ethical obligation. Moreover, in the act of accounting for oneself, the opacity instilled by an irretrievable dependency on others is compounded by the fact that "the very terms by which we give an account [. . .] are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of

unfreedom and substitutability within which our 'singular' stories are told" (Butler 21); a social dependency limits narrative agency. In order to establish Pitch's inability to escape the obligations of interpersonal dependency, the PIO man points to Pitch's failure to remove language from the polysemy of social signification, to establish, that is, a Saying-less Said. The competitive dynamic of their exchange, however, means that no ethical re-orientation—no renewed intersubjective accountability—results from the undermining of Pitch's ability to account for himself.

I have identified the similarities between this competitive mode of intersubjectivity and the Hegelian self-other dialectic. Butler offers an alternate reading of Hegel that challenges the assumption that the Hegelian model of selfhood is entirely assimilatory. She argues that the reading of the Hegelian dialectic of selfhood as imperialistic overlooks the social character of its eventual synthesis:

It is important to see that the struggle for recognition as it is staged in the *Phenomenology* reveals the inadequacy of the dyad as a frame of reference for understanding social life. After all, what eventually follows from this scene is [. . .] a social account of the norms by which reciprocal recognition might be sustained in ways that are more stable than either the life and death struggle or the system of bondage would imply. (28-29)

Butler concludes that the dyadic scene of recognition consists of a recognition of an opacity that leaves the self unable to offer a full account of itself, and, by extension, a recognition of a dependency upon others that might form the prelude to a new socio-ethical synthesis (28-29). But *The Confidence-Man* consistently implies teleological structures only in order to undermine narratives of human progress; the novel's gestures

towards purposiveness only serve to underline the purposelessness of history and individual human experience.<sup>42</sup>

Pitch's encounters with the Confidence-Man point to the failure of social relations to transcend the competitive dyad in the American "confidence culture" (Lindberg 181). Pitch encounters the cosmopolitan in a chapter that Melville, in an earlier draft, titled "The Rifle and the Pipe" (Renker 88). These two phallic symbols are central to the episode, as the cosmopolitan attempts to induce Pitch to trade his destructive rifle for a productive communal pipe, which the cosmopolitan claims will offer inspiration to one seemingly short on spirit. In the Hegelian system, Spirit represents "self-conscious mind," and the process of individual progression is based on the development of self-consciousness—the consciousness of Spirit—towards "Absolute Knowledge or Spirit knowing itself as Spirit" (Baillie 31; 41; Hegel 808). Yet, according to Butler, in the process of the development of self-consciousness, the self recognizes that this progression requires the recognition of a dependency on others (28-29), and thus Spirit drives ethico-social progress as well.<sup>43</sup> In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville expresses his doubt that such a synthesis of the autonomous individual and the ethical society is possible—at least not in nineteenth-century America. As Dimock demonstrates, the

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<sup>42</sup> Melville's skepticism about the teleological progress of his nation is best represented in the setting of the novel: a boat, representing a microcosm of America, propelled *up* the Mississippi river, against the current. More specifically, Melville's rejection of dialectical reasoning as a means of progressing beyond the combative stage of intersubjectivity can be read in his depiction of the debate between two characters as to whether the herb-doctor is a knave, a fool or a genius. A third party interjects to try to mediate between the two men, but instead of producing a synthesis of the two men's conflicting perspectives—"May he not be knave, fool, and genius altogether?" one of the interlocutors asks, and is ignored—the encounter becomes "a sort of triangular duel, and end[s], at last, with but a triangular result" (98).

<sup>43</sup> Bainard Cowan offers a history of the influence of the Hegelian dialectic on progressivist movements in America that traces this alignment back to the 1850s (2). Cowan's analysis shows that Hegelian theory was utilized by the proponents of the "antebellum American optimist thinking" that Spanos argues *The Confidence-Man* criticizes (170-71).

American faith in the teleological progress towards a synthesis of these paradoxical terms (autonomous individual and ethical society) in fact underwrites the “imperialist structure of selfhood” and its corollary competitive model of intersubjective relations (201). To admit oneself unable to fully account for oneself before the other does not lay the grounds for a new ethical relation of mutual accountability, but acts instead as a concession, an invitation, to employ Dimock's concept of “personified accounting,” for the other to account for you, thereby “discounting” your subjectivity (179). Aboard the *Fidèle*, the dialectic of ethical progress is arrested due to the fact that the social norms structuring the characters' intersubjective encounters are based on the competitive model of recognition.

The Confidence-Man destabilizes his opponent's self-conception by demonstrating the mark's inability to offer an account of himself due to the limitations of self-knowledge and the sociality of language. According to Butler, this realization of the opacity of the self can also serve as a recognition of a fundamental dependency, and, ultimately, ground a new ethical orientation. However, the structure of the intersubjective relations belonging to the social order in which the Confidence-Man enjoins his interlocutors to place their confidence is diametrically opposed to this relationship of mutual dependency; aboard the *Fidèle*, as I have shown, the unaccountable face of the other is no more than a “target,” and the inability of the other to account for himself invites exploitation. The Confidence-Man's canvassing for confidence enacts this double-bind: he uses the rhetoric of benevolence in order to solicit social trust, but his encounters are structured, as Dimock argues, by the logic of the market and its erasure of accountability (186). Insofar as this method fails to engender a renewal of the social

order, the Confidence-Man, understood, following Cook, as a civilizer-destroyer figure, embodies the stalled dialectic of American history: as a civilizer, he calls for the foundation of social relations that limit the autonomy of the individual, acting as an agent of the teleological progress towards the union of individuals in an equitable social organization; yet the faith in progress that he preaches, as Dimock and Spanos demonstrate, underwrites an individualistic mode of being that prevents the synthesis necessary for progress. Hence when the cosmopolitan offers Pitch the pipe, apparently trying to convince Pitch to rejoin the ranks of humanity, Pitch, having realized that he has been duped by the PIO man, is back to his policy of distrust, and refuses to smoke with the cosmopolitan. His final suspicion-cum-recognition of the cosmopolitan as a cynic, “a Diogenes in disguise” (144), throws into question which of the two characters is the philanthropist and which is the misanthrope alluded to in the chapter's title, according to which the former aims to “convert” but only manages to “confute” the latter (136). Ostensibly, Pitch is the misanthrope whom the cosmopolitan aims to “convert” to confidence, as the Confidence-Man only manages to “confute” Pitch's ability to rationally account for his distrust. Yet the title can also be read as an ironic reversal, which suggests that Pitch is the philanthropist who has confuted the cosmopolitan's misanthropic logic of confidence. Both of these readings, however, reduce the fundamental fluidity, even interchangeability, of the terms. For if Pitch has “confuted” the Confidence-Man, it is at best a Pyrrhic victory. As Cook argues of John Moredock, the character from the tale of misanthropy that Pitch invokes, the bachelor's experience “paradoxically illustrates the seeming necessity and dire moral consequences of living according to a policy of radical mistrust” (184). This paradoxical result represents the failure of intersubjective exchanges

to establish ethical bonds that would transcend the dyadic scene of address.

Attempting to escape this paradoxical impasse, Van Cromphout argues that although the novel establishes the impossibility of ever knowing the self or the other, Paul's message of charity from Corinthians, which the deaf-mute invokes in the messages he inscribes on his board in one of the novel's opening scenes, establishes the moral norm suggested by the novel: a charity that does not require any authentication, but is instead based on a spirit of pure generosity (12-13).<sup>44</sup> But, as Daniel Hoffman argues, the Confidence-Man's interviews throughout the novel demonstrate that Christian values are simply "inoperable" in a fallen world (331), or at least, I would add, in the confidence culture of nineteenth-century America. The cosmopolitan's encounter with the transcendentalist philosopher Mark Winsome demonstrates the incongruity of the Pauline message of charity and the American idealization of self-reliance.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, as Dimock and Spanos both explain, the cosmopolitan's exchange with Winsome proves that the understanding of personhood suggested by Winsome's philosophy models the self after the "perfectly instinctive, unscrupulous, and irresponsible" snake whose beauty Winsome so admires (Dimock 176-79; Spanos 194-204; Melville 192). In the midst of their conversation, the two are approached by a beggar. The cosmopolitan purchases one of the man's tracts—"quite in the transcendental vein," he tells Winsome, as he hands the

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<sup>44</sup> Cook argues that the lack of "a clearly defined moral norm" is central to *The Confidence-Man's* satirical project (18-19).

<sup>45</sup> The critical consensus rightly sees Winsome as a caricature of Ralph Waldo Emerson, but as Richard Boyd Hauck argues, "[t]he characterization of Mark Winsome in the book does not seem to reflect the relatively temperate view expressed" by Melville in a letter to his editor (114). Hauck concludes that "[i]t must follow that what is being attacked in the character of Mark Winsome is some aspect of Emersonian mode of thought that was not appropriate to the world Melville perceived" (114). Lindberg locates the "aspect" of Emerson's thought that Melville disagreed with in their contrasting conceptions of the relationship between the self and society, conceptions that he argues are embodied in the characters of Winsome and the Confidence-Man: "Emerson postulates a being who can exist quite independent of social relations; Melville counters with an agent who exists only in the mutability of those relations" (43).

beggar a shilling, ironically suggesting that he's *buying* Winsome's philosophy—but Winsome “repulse[s]” the suppliant with his countenance: “an expression of keen Yankee cuteness, now replacing his former mystical one, lent added icicles to his aspect. His whole air said: 'Nothing from me'” (197). Winsome's face acts as a dismissive barrier rather than an ethical summons. Levinas contends that one “can recognize the gaze of the stranger [. . .] only in giving or in refusing” (77). Winsome's refusal, however, is based on a self-sufficient act of recognition that reduces the alterity presented in the face of the supplicating other, the very alterity that Levinas argues must be recognized, even if the encounter is to result in an unethical refusal. Winsome does not simply act unethically, as this would require the admission of interpersonal obligation that he chooses to refuse; instead, he places himself above the ethical encumbrances of the scene of address. He relates to the cosmopolitan that he would not give his money to this petitioner because he recognized him as a “scoundrel”: “I detected in him, sir, a damning peep of sense—damning, I say; for sense in a seeming madman is scoundrelism. I take him for a cunning vagabond, who picks up a vagabond living by adroitly playing the madman” (197-98).<sup>46</sup> Winsome's confidence in his ability to read and account for the other precludes ethical engagement. The cosmopolitan—who during one of Winsome's obfuscatory speeches takes up his wine-glass and “steadily look[s] through its transparency” (195)—can see through Winsome's philosophy, but his arguments for charity and accountability cannot penetrate Winsome's shield of confidence.

The models of selfhood that the Confidence-Man works to disrupt throughout the first half of the novel are re-asserted by his interlocutors in the second half. These

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<sup>46</sup> Winsome's language of “detection” anticipates the appearance of the “counterfeit detector” in the final chapter of the novel (246), a device that, as Bellis demonstrates, embodies the ironies of the confidence of the *Fidèle's* passengers in their ability to distinguish truth from falsity (170).



interlocutors are the novel's other confidence men, insofar as they embody different expressions of the American confidence culture's normative view of selfhood. Their ability to withstand the cosmopolitan's rhetorical arsenal points to the limits of the “federat[ing]” side of the Confidence-Man's project (137).<sup>47</sup> Towards the end of the novel, the cosmopolitan is able to convince the barber to temporarily take down his sign, but as soon as the cosmopolitan leaves his shop, the barber hangs it back up, and its confident message of skepticism is re-affirmed: “NO TRUST” (12). The novel's structure is thus not one of teleological progress, but rather of symmetry.<sup>48</sup> In the final chapter of the novel, the old man with whom the cosmopolitan converses explains the structure of the copy of the Bible that they are consulting: “turning the leaves forward and back, till all the Old Testament lay flat on one side, and all the New Testament flat on the other, while in his fingers he supported vertically the portion between” he explains that “all this to the right is certain truth, and all this to the left is certain truth, but all I hold in my hand here is apocrypha” (241). The irony is that *The Confidence-Man* expresses its deepest “truth” right at its apocryphal centre, as nighttime falls and Pitch contemplates the irreconcilability of personal autonomy and an ethical society.

## Conclusion

In *Pierre*, the narrator laments the fact that “mere illustrations [of problems] are almost universally taken for solutions” (293). Spanos argues that Melville's social critique in *The Confidence-Man* “gives ontological priority to the Question over the Answer”

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<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of the cosmopolitan's introduction of himself as a sort of “federat[or]” (Melville 137), “the very spirit [. . .] of 'fusion'” (Tanner 91), see Tanner's essay on *The Confidence-Man* in *The American Mystery*.

<sup>48</sup> Barney similarly argues that the novel has a “circular” form (169).

(212), yet he reads the ending of the novel as an invitation to “a radically different [. . .] way of comporting oneself toward being” that not only “acknowledges the nothingness of being and the analogous identitylessness identity of human being [. . . but also] thinks this nothing and identitylessness positively” as a means of escaping “the catastrophic end of American civilization” (210). Spanos thus seemingly takes Melville's illustration as a solution. Melville certainly does not suggest any programme for achieving the state of being that Spanos proposes; instead, as I have demonstrated, he shows that the emergence of such a conception of selfhood is constantly quashed by the social norms that undergird American social interactions. John Bryant has famously labelled *The Confidence-Man* as Melville's “problem novel” (316). The problem illustrated in and enacted by the novel is the problem of *relating* to the other—telling the self to the other, negotiating the other's account of itself: ultimately, the problem of establishing grounds for ethical relations in a confidence culture. *The Confidence-Man* offers no ultimate solution to this problem, yet as the narrator in *Pierre* notes, the illustrations of problems are “perhaps [. . .] the only possible human solutions” (293). In chapter four I will argue that Melville's illustration of the problem of ethical accountability through *The Confidence-Man*'s unaccountable narrator serves as a critique of the socially normative view of intersubjective relations, a critique that suggests a partial solution in its ironic illustration of the problem. In the following chapter, however, I will turn my attention to the depictions of intersubjective exchanges in *Billy Budd*, a novel that again poses the problem of the relationship between narrative accounts and ethical accountability.

## Chapter 3

### Losing Human Expression:

#### Narrative Violence in *Billy Budd*

Whereas *The Confidence Man* drew much of its cultural resonance from its contemporary setting in the developing market society of 1850s America, Melville's final unfinished work of fiction, the posthumously published *Billy Budd*, is set aboard a British naval ship at the end of the eighteenth century. Despite this chronological and geographical discrepancy, *Billy Budd* sees Melville continuing his expansion—and concomitant complication—of the themes introduced in the preceding chapter: the implications of social, political, and economic structures for the ethics of intersubjective encounters. The novel's many direct references to revolutionary, Enlightenment writings and historical allusions to the French Revolution and the Nore and Spithead British naval insurgencies suggest that, as Brook Thomas argues, Melville saw this period of European political upheaval as an ideal historical setting for presenting “the conflict between the demands of individual freedom and the need of society to be governed by rational, impartial laws” (*Cross-examinations* 201). Thomas refers to this as a “familiar” conflict for readers of nineteenth-century American literature (201), including, as I have shown, readers of Melville's fiction. Where Thomas's excellent analysis links the novel's historicized depiction of this conflict to the development of Anglo-American legal thought from the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, this chapter will look to the philosophical developments of the late eighteenth century—specifically, the work of Friedrich Schiller—to explain why Melville chose to set *Billy Budd* in this particular historical period.

The end of the eighteenth century is generally held to mark the end of the ascendancy of Enlightenment thought, and the beginning of the rise of Romanticism, with its emphasis on feeling over rationality.<sup>49</sup> Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) is the German philosopher's reaction to the violent excesses of the French Revolution and marks a significant challenge to the Enlightenment faith in rationality,<sup>50</sup> although it does not call for the replacement of reason with feeling, but rather the mediation of these two seemingly opposing forces by a third drive. Schiller theorizes two primary drives that underlie human behaviour and social interaction: "the sensuous drive," associated with matter, feeling, and inclination (79), and "the formal drive," aligned with ideas, reason, and duty (81). According to Schiller, if either of these drives dominates the individual's motivations, he becomes divided and his moral development will be stalled (85n). Schiller contends that the reconciliation of these two drives requires the interposition of a third drive, "the play-drive," characterized by aesthetic contemplation (101). For Schiller, a balance of the needs of the individual with those of the society would be struck if the society began to produce the right kind of individual: if a society is able to develop the play-drive within all of its citizens, an "aesthetic State" will be instituted, characterized by individual freedom within a framework of formalized laws, laws realized through the exercise of a higher, moral rationality developed in accordance with natural inclination (215).

The opposition of reason and feeling is consistently troped in Melville's fiction as

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<sup>49</sup> Drawing on Peter Gay, Aidan Day challenges this "crude association between the Enlightenment and an exaltation of reason" by demonstrating the role that sensibility played in the philosophies of major Enlightenment thinkers (67; 64-78).

<sup>50</sup> The fifth letter of the volume sees Schiller directly addressing the "contemporary events" that inspired the project (25; 25-29).

the conflicting demands of the head and the heart,<sup>51</sup> and *Billy Budd* represents the author's most comprehensive—although not conciliatory—engagement with this inner struggle of human motivation. Throughout the novel, the narrator describes the actions of both Captain Vere and John Claggart, the master-at-arms, in terms of the conflicting demands of reason and feeling. The former, with his confidence in the power of “measured forms” for both motivating proper human conduct and controlling the masses (166), represents the apotheosis of the formal drive, while the latter, the lustful Claggart with his “depravity according to nature” (128), represents an overwhelming preponderance of sensual inclination.

Both of their inner conflicts are structured around their respective, though interwoven, encounters with the novel's titular character, the impressed sailor Billy Budd. As David Greven argues in reference to one of Billy's nicknames, “Billy is Beauty, a trope rather than a person” (30), underlining the dehumanization implicit in Schiller's contention that “the appeal to this [aesthetic] sense, even by living things, must be through sheer appearance” (199). Billy's beauty, however, does not offer a Kantian disinterested aesthetic experience. Billy is another of Melville's unaccountable characters,<sup>52</sup> a foundling with an unknown history whose stutter makes him physically incapable of offering an account of himself, but his physical beauty is the impetus for what Barbara Johnson describes as the novel's “snowballing of tale-telling” (95). Billy's beauty acts as a sort of floating signifier, and its meaning is assigned and negotiated through the stories that the characters and the narrator create for themselves and share

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<sup>51</sup> While many critics have identified the dilemma between reason and feeling at the core of *Billy Budd*, the reading provided by Thomas “question[s] the very terms of the conflict between head and heart” (*Cross-examinations* 220). My reading of this dilemma follows from Thomas's analysis.

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of the role of the figure of “the Stranger” in *Billy Budd* see Martin (107-24).

with each other. Indeed it would seem that Billy's role in the story is to elicit stories and interpretations. Johnson argues that *Billy Budd* is a novel about reading (97), but interpretation in the novel often takes the form of narration, and so it would seem that the novel is just as much about telling as reading, or rather that the novel suggests that such a distinction cannot always be sustained.<sup>53</sup> However, the representations of the narrative act in the novel suggest that narration often implies, in Levinasian terms, “[t]hematization and conceptualization,” which belong to the “exercise” or “imperialism of the same” (*Totality* 46; 124; 39). Levinas's ethical theory will form the basis of my discussion of what I, drawing on Newton's Levinas-inspired work on narrative ethics, have termed narrative violence: the attempt to produce a narrative account of another subject that reduces the alterity presented by this subject to the same. Billy's unaccountable beauty elicits such violent narratives from his interlocutors. Billy Budd, as an unaccountable other, represents a disruptive force that challenges self-assurance and, by extension, social order. However, insofar as he represents no resistance to the assimilatory drives of those he encounters—Billy's stutter renders him physically incapable of “speaking back to power”—he also offers the opportunity for the individuals who outrank him and the State of which they are representatives to re-assert their autonomy.

After exploring the intersection of Billy's beauty and his alterity in an attempt to connect (but not synthesize) the thought of Schiller and Levinas,<sup>54</sup> I will argue that in *Billy Budd*, Melville stages a Schillerian drama of the conflicting forces of duty and inclination and their interaction with the supposedly mediating force of the beautiful.

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<sup>53</sup> Samson similarly argues that “Billy Budd [. . .] is himself the 'text' of the narrative, the subject each tries to understand and re-present” (224-25).

<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, the space allotted here will not allow for a full discussion of the similarities and differences between the respective systems of these two thinkers. My hope is that the comparisons that arise over the course of this project suggest some fruitful avenues for future study.

Through the characters of Claggart and Vere, however, Melville points to the inability of aesthetic contemplation to mediate between the sensuous and formal drives in individuals in which one or the other rules; Claggart we are told, is the only individual aboard the *Bellipotent* “intellectually capable of adequately appreciating the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd,” with “[o]ne person excepted” (129)—*presumably Vere*.<sup>55</sup> But their *appreciation* takes on the character of what Levinas points to as the “etymological sense” of *comprehension* (72): “grasping,” “possession” (80; 172). The accounts these characters offer of Billy attempt to suppress the “expressive” quality of language that defines the ethical moment of the face-to-face encounter as theorized by Levinas (73), and thus represent a desire to assimilate the other to the self through a pretense to a narrativeless narration, a Saying-less Said. Furthermore, the similarly reductive ends of Claggart and Vere point to the collapse of the very distinction between reason and feeling that structures Schiller's system—an irony outlined in detail by Thomas, whose analysis I will draw upon. Melville's allegorization of social development in the West following the revolutionary period does not look forward to the mediation of feeling and rationality that characterizes Schiller's utopian aesthetic State, nor does it simply suppress one side of the opposition in favour of the other; rather the two forces are shown to be not just unopposed, but twinned in their imperialistic impulses: a joint-force that mandates not just the political and military conquests that Thomas identifies (244-45), but also the conquest of the other in the realm of intersubjective encounters.

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<sup>55</sup> Melville is deliberately ambiguous as to the identity of this “one person excepted,” opening up the possibility that Vere is not capable of “appreciating” Billy Budd's significance. Vere himself, however, is confident in his ability to “appreciate” the meaning of Billy, and critics who read Melville's “one person excepted” to refer unambiguously to Vere thus put *their* confidence in the *Bellipotent's* Captain.

## I

John Samson observes that Melville's representations of the narration of events anticipates the work of twentieth-century scholars like Hayden White and Michel Foucault, theorists who question the possibility of producing objective accounts of lived events free from the ideological biases of their narrators (5-6; 14-15). Indeed, *Billy Budd* presents an image of narration that suggests that there are no pure, factual accounts of lived events: no innocent narratives. Billy, who is presented as the embodiment of “such innocence as man is capable of” (124), is thus free from the moral entanglements of narration. Not only is Billy “illiterate” (110), but prior to the events recounted in the novel, Billy's history—his story—is a mystery, a lacuna rather than a narrative:

Asked by the officer, a small brisk little gentleman as it chanced, among other questions, his place of birth, he replied, “Please, Sir, I don't know.”

“Don't know where you were born? Who was your father?”

“God knows, Sir.”

Struck by the straightforward simplicity of these replies, the officer next asked, “Do you know anything about your beginning?”

“No, Sir. But I have heard that I was found in a pretty silk-lined basket hanging one morning from the knocker of a good man's door in Bristol.” (109-10)

The question of Billy's origin recalls Butler's theorization of the subject's inability to offer an adequate account of itself: “If we are formed in the context of relations that become partially irrecoverable to us, then that opacity seems built into our formation and follows



from our status as beings who are formed in relations of dependency” (20). But for Billy, who, we are told, “seemed to have little or none” “[o]f self-consciousness” (110), this foundational opacity represents a freedom from dependency, and thus from moral obligation: Billy's inability to account for himself seems to render him ethically unaccountable. Furthermore, as Johnson argues, “Billy maintains his purity only through constant, though unconscious, censorship” (89).<sup>56</sup> Hence while Billy is disturbed by his clandestine meeting with a seemingly mutinous afterguardsman (most likely one of Claggart's agents), he does not report the incident because he worries “that it would savor overmuch of the dirty work of a telltale” (135). When Billy does recount the incident to the Dansker, the narrator reports, it is “only a partial and anonymous account” that he gives, “the unfounded scruples above referred to preventing full disclosure to anybody” (135). For Billy, tale-telling, the act of narration, is a moral trespass, and he feels “an innate repugnance to playing a part at all approaching that of an informer against one's own shipmates” (150). Billy's self-censorship makes him reluctant to offer any accounts of others in an imperialistic manner that renders them accountable.

Billy's reluctance to narrate, however, also prevents him from engaging others in ethical discourse. Levinas argues that if one were to focus strictly on language's ability to “convey[. . .] the coherence of concepts” (72-73), the Said, then “the function of language would amount to suppressing 'the other,' who breaks this coherence and is hence essentially irrational” (73). But this understanding of language ignores its “expressive function” (73), Saying, in which language “precisely maintains the other—to whom it is addressed, whom it calls upon or invokes” (73); “[I]anguage institutes a relation

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas offers a parallel argument: “Rather than offer a narrative that sentimentalizes Billy's innocence, Melville puts Billy's innocence on trial. From that trial we learn [. . .] how the desire of people like Billy to *appear* innocent allows them to be controlled” (*Cross-examinations* 220).

irreducible to the subject-object relation: the *revelation* of the other” (73). In this sense, “language presupposes interlocutors, a plurality” (73); “[t]heir commerce is not a representation of the one by the other” (73). If, as Johnson argues, “Billy maintains his 'plotlessness' [. . .] through a complex act of filtering” (88), then he is aided in this process by his “vocal defect” (*Billy Budd* 111): “under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling [Billy's] voice, otherwise singularly musical, as if expressive of the harmony within, was apt to develop an organic hesitancy, in fact more or less of a stutter or even worse” (111). Billy lacks the ability to respond to the call of the other to account for himself, and he is therefore cut off from the realm of discourse that Levinas posits as the basis of ethical relations. But although he exists in what Samson describes as a “prenarrative state” (225), Billy is nevertheless narrativizable. Indeed, even before he is introduced into the novel, Billy has been narrativized; his type—“the 'Handsome Sailor’” (103)—is given by the novel's narrator, and all that remains is to particularize through further narration, an act that the others aboard the *Bellipotent* feel incessantly compelled to perform. Like the Handsome Sailor, Billy is a “signal object” (103), “signal” implying “constituting or serving as a sign” in addition to “striking, remarkable, notable” (OED).<sup>57</sup> As those he encounters negotiate his meaning, Billy is denied volition, his subjectivity reduced in the process of his objectification. Lacking the voice even to respond, Billy is forced to assume the meanings assigned to him and the accounts given of him.

Billy's otherness is further limited by his physical beauty. For Levinas, beauty belongs to the realm of totality, of the same, rather than the ethical force of infinity, the

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<sup>57</sup> Adamson's reading of Billy as a “commonly held ego ideal” similarly points to this dual process of admiration and projection that the young sailor elicits (219). Greven also offers a discussion of the role of the “signal object” that describes the mixture of appreciation and interpretation evoked by the Handsome Sailor (23; 44). Finally, Martin notes that Billy's “blankness is a kind of slate on which others inscribe their desires” (108).

Other (as discussed in my introduction), and is thus opposed to language: “To disclose a thing is to clarify it by forms: to find for it a place in the whole by apperceiving its function or its beauty. The work of language is entirely different: it consists in entering into relationship with a nudity disengaged from every form, but having meaning by itself, [ . . . ] signifying before we have projected light upon it” (74). However, Schiller's *Aesthetic* letters, as Stephen Boos notes, represent an attempt to reconcile ethics and aesthetics, an essay at the integration of two spheres that Kantian philosophy holds separate (16). Schiller believes that the interpolation of the play-drive between the conflicting demands of sense and reason will lead to a higher, moralized but autonomous rationality (161; 171).<sup>58</sup> Schiller defines beauty as “living form,” the transcendent combination of material reality with ideas derived by the intellect;<sup>59</sup> but he warns that “a human being, though he may live and have form, is far from being on that account a living form” (101); it is only when an individual “please[s] us simply as we contemplate him and by the sheer manner of his being [ . . . that] we are judging him aesthetically” (143n). While Schiller would argue that this aesthetic contemplation is not an objectification, insofar as it takes no count of the individuality of the aestheticized being, it is undeniably a dehumanization, the unethical reduction of the alterity of the other

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<sup>58</sup> There is a significant ambivalence as to the development of rationality in the *Aesthetic* letters: throughout roughly one half of the work, Schiller suggests that the play-drive is necessary to mediate between the demands of nature and the demands of reason, but in the latter half of the novel he describes a teleology that sees man developing through the stages of the “physical state” and “the aesthetic state” to the “moral” state, which consists of an ideal form of moral reasoning (171). It would seem, then, that the debased reasoning of the formal drive represents a hazardous mis-step in this progression towards the freedom of the moral state, one that can be avoided through the interposition of the play-drive in the passing from nature to this moral rationality.

<sup>59</sup> Schiller offers the following definitions of the respective “object[s]” of the sensuous and formal drive:  
 The object of the sense-drive, expressed in a general concept, we call life, in the widest sense of this term: a concept designating all material being and all that is immediately present to the senses. The object of the form-drive, expressed in a general concept, we call form, both in the figurative and in the literal sense of this word: a concept which includes all the formal qualities of things and all the relations of these to our thinking faculties. (101)

against which Levinas warns.

But this particular ethical limitation is a result of the “purely aesthetic experience” (153); the ethical failings of the impure aesthetic fetishization of the other, as Melville presents them in his final novel, are even more grievous. Schiller delimits two separate valences of the beautiful and their respective effects: “energizing beauty”(113), which has a “tensing effect” (111), and “melting beauty” (113), which has a “releasing effect” (111). “Ideal beauty” will contain an admixture of both of these modes of the beautiful in equal proportion (111),<sup>60</sup> prompting a “lofty equanimity and freedom of the spirit, combined with power and vigour” (153). Real-life aesthetic experiences, however, are rarely “purely aesthetic experience[s]—whether the cause lies in the object or in our own response or, as is almost always the case, in both at once” (153). Among his fellow crew members, Billy's beauty has a melting effect; Thomas argues that far from inspiring mutiny, as Claggart alleges, Billy assuages the tensions among the crew (222)<sup>61</sup>—a phenomenon that Captain Graveling, the commander of the merchant ship employing Billy at the time of his impressment, attributes to Billy's physical presence: his beauty (106-107). However, Billy also represents a disruptive force aboard the *Bellipotent*, insofar as the combination of his beauty and his alterity render him a desirable object that

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<sup>60</sup> In “Ideal beauty,” it should be noted, this mixture also represents a transcendent unity. Schiller explains that,

Ideally speaking, [. . .] these two effects [of melting and energizing beauty] must be reducible to a single effect. Beauty is to release by tensing both [sensuous and formal] natures uniformly, and to tense by releasing both natures uniformly. This already follows from the concept of a reciprocal action, by virtue of which both factors necessarily condition each other and are at the same time conditioned by each other, and the purest product of which is beauty. [. . .] Ideal Beauty, though one and indivisible, exhibits under different aspects a melting as well as an energizing attribute. (111-13)

<sup>61</sup> Thomas makes this argument through his reading of the scene of Billy's execution, and particularly Billy's “blessing” of Captain Vere prior to his hanging (*Billy Budd* 163): “We can only imagine what would have followed if Billy had condemned Vere rather than blessed him, but it is certainly possible that if Billy had not blessed the captain his sentence, which was calculated to discourage a mutiny, might well have provoked one. Instead, with Billy's consent, Vere is able to silence oppositional voices in the crew” (*Cross-examinations* 222).

the “exceptional character[s]” in positions of power on the ship are unable to possess (118). The remainder of this chapter will focus on the attempts of Claggart and Vere to dominate, and, ultimately, destroy Billy through conceptualization, often in the form of narrativization.

## II

As mentioned above, Claggart, the narrator tells us, is “capable of adequately appreciating the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd,” which the Master-at-arms perceives as Billy's “innocence” (129; 130). Claggart reads Billy's innocence in his “prenarrative” beauty (Samson 225), his contentless form; for Claggart, Billy is “*nothing more than innocent*” (130; emphasis added). But, while “in an aesthetic way [Claggart] saw the charm of” Billy's innocence (130), this aesthetic experience is far from transcendent; instead, it “intensifie[s] his passion” (129). Claggart's response to Billy—a mix of desire and repulsion, a combination of “envy and antipathy” that finds its “lodgement [. . .] in the heart not the brain” (129)—is due to an imbalance of the Master-at-arms' motivating drives. Claggart's nature, the narrator reports, is “surcharged with energy” (130), and his encounter with Billy provides the tensing effect—eroticized in the novel as an “erecting” (142)<sup>62</sup>—of energizing beauty due to Claggart's disproportionate nature. Claggart is ruled by the sensuous drive, as evinced by the “provocation” of his “profound passion” by Billy's spilled soup in one of the novel's most overtly erotic scenes (130).<sup>63</sup> Describing the ethical limitations of the sensuous drive, Schiller writes that a

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<sup>62</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sedgwick's famous essay on *Billy Budd* in *The Epistemology of the Closet* contains a reading of the profusion of phallic imagery in the novel.

<sup>63</sup> Along with Sedgwick, Adamson (8), Greven (43-36), and Martin's analyses offer a sampling of the diverse readings of the overt homoeroticism of this scene (112-13).

man still overly reliant on this force, “[u]nacquainted as yet with his own human dignity, [. . .] is far from respecting it in others; and, conscious of his own savage greed, he fears it in every creature which resembles him. He never sees others in himself, but only himself in others” (173). As Samson argues, Claggart “reads Billy exclusively from his own viewpoint and egoistically assumes that Billy has the same invidious motives that he himself does” (225). Hence “when the master-at-arms noticed whence came that greasy fluid streaming before his feet, he must have taken it—to some extent wilfully, perhaps—not for the mere accident it assuredly was, but for the sly escape of a spontaneous feeling on Billy's part more or less answering to the antipathy on his own” (130). Claggart's misrecognition of Billy as an other in his own image—in effect a projection that acts as an objectification insofar as it denies the alterity of the other existent—leads the former to imagine himself engaged in the sort of self-other dialectic outlined in the previous chapter.

This dialectic culminates in the face-to-face confrontation in which Claggart accuses Billy of attempting to inspire the crew to mutiny. This encounter represents what Butler deems the “scene of address” (12), the “realm of ethical confrontation” to which Newton claims any proper theory of narrative ethics must look (4). The intersubjective dynamic of this encounter is established through the novel's depictions of Claggart's lustful gazes as he “dwell[s] upon” the passing Billy (137). The narrator reports that Claggart's “melancholy expression” while looking upon Billy “would [sometimes] have in it a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban. But this was an evanescence, and quickly repented of, as it were, by an immitigable look” (137). The objectification implicit in the “tribute of a pause and stare” (104), which

the narrator claims is elicited by the type of the Handsome Sailor, is made explicit in Claggart's "immitigable" stare, which recalls the "avidity proper to the gaze" as described by Levinas (50).<sup>64</sup> As outlined in the preceding chapter, Levinas postulates that vision is a "mode[. . .] of enjoyment [. . .] and possession" (172). In this sense enjoyment is analogous to the sensuous in Schiller's system, as "[t]he good of the Senses can only make one man happy, since it is founded on appropriation" (217). As "the mutually confronting visages" of Billy and Claggart square off in Vere's private cabinet while Claggart accuses Billy of conspiracy (144), Claggart's

eyes, removing not as yet from the blue dilated ones, underwent a phenomenal change, their wonted rich violet color blurring into a muddy purple. Those lights of human intelligence, losing human expression, were gelidly protruding like the alien eyes of certain uncatalogued creatures of the deep. The first mesmeristic glance was one of serpent fascination; the last was as the paralyzing lurch of the torpedo-fish. (144)

Combined with the phallic image of the "torpedo-fish," Claggart's "paralyzing" gaze marks the master-at-arms desire for a unilateral sexual possession of Billy. Greven describes Claggart's "sexual hunger" for Billy's beauty (45), and indeed Claggart's gaze represents a desire for consumption<sup>65</sup>—for the appropriation of the other to the same—at the same time as his eyes express the diminution of his own humanity. Claggart's possessive gaze represents an ethical failure, one heightened by his act of narrative violence, an act that is reciprocated by the physical violence of his murder.

For Levinas, however, the ethical appeal of the face of the other is not based in its

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<sup>64</sup> Adamson's psychoanalytic reading of the role of the gaze in the novel, while vastly different in approach, draws many of the same conclusions as my own (218-21)

<sup>65</sup> See Greven for a discussion of the consumptive nature of the gaze in *Billy Budd* (15).

visible aspect, but rather in its linguistic appeal. Levinas stresses the importance of “distinguish[ing] look and language, that is, the look and the welcome of the face which language presupposes” (189). The language of Claggart's accusatory narrative, however, suppresses the expressive function of language; again, Cavareto's ethical question, “Who are you?”—an appeal that Butler argues recognizes the alterity of the other existent (31)—is transformed in Claggart's accusation into a declarative: “This is who you are.” While Levinas contends that “the presence of the Other is equivalent to [the] calling into question of my joyous possession of the world” (75-76), and, by extension, of the individual's self-conception (195), Claggart's accounting of Billy's mutinous plans to Vere serves to *strengthen* the Master-at-arms' sense of self: “bridling—erecting himself as in virtuous *self-assertion*—he circumstantially alleged certain words and acts which collectively, if credited, led to presumptions mortally inculcating Budd” (142; emphasis added). When Vere calls upon Claggart to “tell [Billy] to his face what you told of him to me,” Claggart “advance[s]” upon Billy with “the measured step and calm collected air of an asylum physician approaching in the public hall some patient beginning to show indications of a coming paroxysm” (144). Within this metaphor of the scene's power dynamic, Claggart is the rational doctor, reading his mad patient and producing a diagnosis to which he has exclusive access. However, as the narrator notes in describing Claggart's character, “[t]hough the man's even temper and discreet bearing would seem to intimate a mind peculiarly subject to the law of reason, not the less in his heart he would seem to riot in complete exemption from that law, having apparently little to do with reason further than to employ it as an ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational” (128). Beneath his rational exterior, Claggart, under the control of the sensuous drive, is



himself experiencing a paroxysm of feeling—of rage, lust, envy, spite. To assuage what Greven describes as the “panic of identity” instigated by Claggart's encounter with Billy (34), Claggart aims not just for a violent narrative mastery, an attempt to “contain the Other” “as a theme” (Levinas 195), but also, insofar as his accusations “mortally inculpat[e] Billy” (142), for a narrative murder: “To kill,” Levinas argues, “is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely” (198).<sup>66</sup> With ethical discourse suspended, Billy—the unaccountable figure rendered physically incapable of accounting for himself—responds with a violent act of his own: the blow to Claggart's head that abruptly quells the conflicts of the master-at-arms's heart.

### III

Captain Vere presides over the confrontation between Claggart and Billy, seemingly as the physical embodiment of “the third party” Levinas claims to be present in the experience of absolute alterity in the face of the other: “the presence of [. . .] the whole of humanity,” which ensures “justice” (213). But because Vere exists physically, rather than just as a metaphysical presence within the Other, the justice he represents is not the call of infinite obligation imposed by the encounter with absolute alterity (Levinas 213), but a limited, intellectual, *formalized* justice. In Vere's dilemma of judgement we see the forces of intellect and feeling combating for dominance, but ultimately he is a man who believes that “[w]ith mankind, [. . .] forms, measured forms, are everything” (166). As Schiller argues,

Once you postulate a primary, and therefore necessary, antagonism

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<sup>66</sup> In a different context, Johnson offers a corresponding argument about the violent potential of narrating the other: “to describe perfectly, to refer adequately, would be to 'hit' the referent and thus annihilate it” (92).

between these two drives [the formal and the sensuous], there is, of course, no other means of maintaining unity in man than by unconditionally subordinating the sensuous drive to the rational. From this, however, only uniformity can result, never harmony, and man goes on for ever being divided. (85n)

Ultimately it is the uniformity of naval law for which Vere suppresses his sensuous drive, although, as his rhetoric in the trial scene shows, he believes that this law coincides with his own conservative, rational nature. Vere's faith in his own reasoning supports his belief that he is able to rationally comprehend the motivations of others. He attempts to confirm his suspicion that Claggart has fabricated the story of Billy's conspiracy by arranging the face-to-face encounter in his cabin, seeking empirical evidence in order to rationalize his feeling-based inclination. For Vere, in Levinasian terms, the "relation with the face" represents "an object-cognition" (75); he stands between the men in order to be able to "scrutinize" their faces (*Billy Budd* 144), demonstrating his confidence in his ability to "thematize" the other (Levinas 172).

But as the violence of the confrontation he has arranged unfolds before Vere, his faith in his intellect wavers. He must call in the Surgeon, an external rational authority, to "verify" what he "thought" (146): that Billy had killed Claggart. Vere, austere in his concern for the upholding of military custom in the preceding scene, begins to speak in exclamatory phrases, deserting formal logic for analogy: "It is the divine judgement on Ananias! Look!" (146).<sup>67</sup> The Surgeon is "[d]isturbed by the excited manner he had

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<sup>67</sup> The allusion here would seem to be to the story of Ananias and Sapphira from Acts 5 (*Billy Budd* 146n), wherein the couple sell a property and keep a portion of the money for themselves instead of turning the whole amount over to the Apostle Peter. Discovering the lie, Peter states that Ananias "hast not lied unto men, but unto God" (*KJV* Acts 5:4), and upon hearing this pronouncement, Ananias, like Claggart, is

never before observed in the *Bellipotent's* Captain” (146). Later, “recall[ing] the unwonted agitation of Captain Vere and his excited exclamations, so at variance with his normal manner,” the surgeon questions whether Vere had become “unhinged,” “not mad, indeed, but yet not quite unaffected in his intellects” (147). In this state of “agitation,” Vere pronounces his judgement of Billy instantly, unequivocally, although in language that combines the mythological and the legal: “Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!” (146). Even before he has rationalized his decision,<sup>68</sup> Vere has suppressed his natural inclinations and sided with duty: his duty to the naval order. Vere's reason does not confirm the laws he upholds, but instead is merely a product of them. Furthermore, the pre-rational basis of this decision suggests that Schiller's dualistic explanation of human motivation cannot adequately account for human behaviour, as the distinction between the rational and the sensual is difficult to ascertain in the world of lived experience, where both inclination and duty are overdetermined.

Nevertheless, while the drumhead court deliberates on a verdict, Vere offers a rationalization for this decision in the form of a speech delivered to the other jurists—a speech that at once implores and performs the suppression of the sensuous drive. Vere

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“[s]truck dead” (*Billy Budd* 146), judged directly by God. However, Joseph Adamson also identifies the parallels between the action of the novel and the story of Paul's encounter with Ananias son of Nedebaios, the high priest who “plots against Paul [. . .] and falsely accuses him of being an agitator among the Jews in Damascus; struck on the mouth by Ananias's men, Paul prophesies: 'God shall strike you'" (290; Acts 23:3 qtd. in Adamson 290). Paul is struck for announcing his prioritization of his duty to God (“I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day” [*KJV* Acts 23:1]), but he revokes his call for divine justice upon his judge due to his religious duty—drawn from the book of Exodus—to recognize civic authority: “I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shall not speak evil of the ruler of thy people” (*KJV* Acts 23:5). This latter story posits representatives of the State as intermediaries and arbiters between natural morality and formal law. Taken together, the two stories add to the overdetermination of duty, justice, and judgement developed in *Billy Budd*.

<sup>68</sup> Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. argues that Vere's “reasoning afterward proceeds from his instinctive 'decision' and exists to justify it legalistically; but the decision itself expresses deeper elements than reason” (“The Definitive” 119). He concludes that “intellection in the book is not polar to spontaneity, but based on it” (119), an observation that coincides with my own reading of the novel as a deconstruction of the distinction between Schiller's formal and the sensual drives.

presents his analysis of the situation as though it was the result of cold reasoning, as though the fact that Billy must hang is a logical, though unfortunate, inevitability. He attempts to rhetorically manipulate his speech, aiming to empathize with the other jurists by establishing the existence of a shared language—to form a connection through narrative. Again, Vere looks out onto the faces of the jury members in the mode of “objective cognition” (*Totality* 85), reading them as he calculates how best to impose the forms of his thought onto the wills of the others: “After scanning their faces he stood less as mustering his thoughts for expression than as one inly deliberating how best to put them to well-meaning men not intellectually mature, men with whom it was necessary to demonstrate certain principles that were axioms to himself” (152). Vere's demand for the suppression of the natural—which, Schiller argues, “demands multiplicity” (19)—is paralleled by his confidence that a singular rhetoric—a rhetoric based in reason, which “demand[s] unity” (19)—can appeal to all of the individuals composing the jury, whom, it is suggested, are ruled by their natural instincts: “Turning, he to-and-fro paced the cabin athwart; in the returning ascent to windward, climbing the slant deck in the ship's lee roll, without knowing it symbolizing thus in his action a mind resolute to surmount difficulties even if against primitive instincts strong as the wind and the sea” (152).<sup>69</sup> But Vere's language and his learning betray him:

When speak he did, something, both in the substance of what he said and his manner of saying it, showed the influence of unshared studies modifying and tempering the practical training of an active career. This, along with his phraseology, now and then was suggestive of the grounds

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<sup>69</sup> Referring to this passage, Richard H. Fogle notes that “Vere's movements symbolize his resistance against an inappropriate yielding to nature” (58).

whereon rested that imputation of a certain pedantry socially alleged  
against him by certain naval men of wholly practical cast[.] (152-53)

Despite his calculations, Vere is unable to establish a connection with his shipmates. Vere lacks the narrative means—or rather, as Schiller would have it, the *aesthetic education*—needed to reconcile these opposing demands.<sup>70</sup>

Vere's ability to communicate with others is limited, and this limitation is related to Vere's reading practices, and ultimately his conception of narration. Vere's “post of authority” (118), we are told, draws him towards certain types of literature:

With nothing of that literary taste which less heeds the thing conveyed than the vehicle, his bias was toward those books to which every serious mind of superior order occupying any active post of authority in the world naturally inclines: books treating of actual men and events no matter of what era—history, biography and unconventional writers like Montaigne, who, free from cant and convention, honestly and in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities. (118)<sup>71</sup>

“In this line of reading,” the narrator reports, “he found confirmation of his own more reserved thoughts” (118). Insofar as Vere only reads that which confirms his beliefs,<sup>72</sup> it would seem that he aims to protect his thoughts from the reasoning that new ideas would require. Schiller distinguishes between the reason of the “intellect,” the divisive and

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<sup>70</sup> For Schiller, aesthetic education does not consist of instruction *per se*. Instead, the method of aesthetic education is “to subject man to form even in his purely physical life, and to make him aesthetic in every domain over which beauty is capable of extending her sway” (165). As I argue below, Vere's intellectualism is decidedly opposed to aestheticism, and this lack of exposure to the aesthetic contributes to his inability to communicate through narrative with his fellow jurors.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas notes “[t]hat Vere interprets his authoritative texts selectively” by drawing attention to “passages from Montaigne” that “do not confirm Vere's belief that the law serves rationality and order” (*Cross-examinations* 237).

<sup>72</sup> Brodtkorb and Thomas also note the conservatism of Vere's reading habits (“The Definitive” 122; “*Billy Budd*” 205).

possessive force which characterizes the formal drive, and the higher, moral rationality which results from the mediation of the sensuous and formal drives (127n). Vere, we are told, has “a marked leaning toward everything intellectual” (118). Vere's intellectual drive informs his reading practice, as Vere believes that reading consists of nothing more than an unproblematic process of extracting the conceptual matter expressed by the author. In the description of Vere's reading practices there is reference to a separation of narrative matter and manner—here, “the thing conveyed” and “the vehicle”—and it is implied that, despite the rhetorical manipulation in which he partakes, Vere believes in the possibility of *pure* writing, “free from cant and convention” (118)—matter expressed *without* manner. Indeed, Vere's moral sense is to some extent comprised of “certain principles that were axioms to himself” (152), and it would seem that literature for Vere is nothing more than a transparent “vehicle” for expressing such axiomatic insights (118). Vere reads literature as pure Said, what Levinas refers to as no more than “a discourse about moral themes” (213); the alterity of its Saying is reduced by Vere's rational reading. For this reason Vere does not like the ambiguities—the *play*—of fiction, a fact that, as Thomas has pointed out, the narrator hints at through the subtle connection of prose fiction with revolutionary politics in his description of Vere's reasons for preferring factual narratives and expository writings (“*Billy Budd*” 209): “His settled convictions were as a dike against those invading waters of *novel* opinion social, political, and otherwise, which carried away as in a torrent no few minds in those days, minds by nature not inferior to his own” (118; emphasis added). As I have argued, *Billy Budd* expresses a skepticism about the possibility of the purely factual account, but it is a skepticism that Vere does not share: Vere believes that language has the ability to communicate unambiguously

concepts between rational subjects. And Vere's lack of a reconciliatory aesthetic drive inhibits his ability to cross the “space between” his own intellectual nature and the instinctual impulses of his audience (127). Certainly Billy does not offer Vere a pure aesthetic experience. Whether or not Vere is the other man aboard the *Bellipotent* who “appreciat[es] the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd” referred to by the narrator (129), Vere is clearly confident in his ability to “appreciate” Billy's significance. Indeed, Vere appreciates Billy Budd *only* as a moral phenomenon, a sign whose moral meaning he is to deduce. Upon first encountering Billy, the narrator reports, Vere feels that “in the nude,” Billy “might have posed for a statue of young Adam before the Fall” (142). In his description of beauty as “living form,” Schiller argues that “[a] block of marble, though it is and remains lifeless, can nevertheless, thanks to the architect or the sculptor, become living form” (101). Vere, though, is not this life-giving sculptor; his desire is to set Billy in stone, to remove his life and render him into a form that can be intellectually conceptualized and fit into a comprehensible narrative pattern—seemingly an inversion of the sensual want expressed in Claggart's “paralyzing” gaze, although Vere's appetitive desire to be able to gaze upon the naked body of Billy, stripped also of any semblance of volition, again blurs the distinction between the sensuous and the formal drives.

#### IV

Over the course of Vere's speech to the other jurists, the distinction between the sensual and the rational breaks down. The “substance” of Vere's speech concerns the two conflicting moral forces that he believes to be the cause of the “troubled hesitancy” preventing his “coadjutor[s]” from making a decision (152-53). In no uncertain terms,

Vere lays out the dilemma between duty and inclination, or, as he puts it “the clash of military duty with moral scruple—scruple vitalized by compassion” (153). But while Vere confesses that he “share[s]” in this “compassion” (153), he stresses that one must be “mindful of paramount obligations [and] strive against scruples that may tend to enervate decision” (153). Duty trumps inclination: “for us here, acting not as casuists or moralists, it is a case practical, and under martial law practically to be dealt with” (153). Vere aims to convince these “naval men of wholly practical cast” that the decision to hang Billy is no more than a pragmatic one (153), indeed one that is pre-decided by their military allegiances. The dilemma, he concludes, is between sentimentality and rationality, and the rational, aligned with the order of the law throughout Vere's speech, must triumph: “let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool” (154). In subordinating the inclination of the individual to the individual's duty to the military order, Vere goes so far as to suggest to the other men that “in receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents” (153). Schiller argues, however, that duty developed in accordance with moral reason should not impinge on the will of the individual (217). In her Kantian reading of the novel, Lilian Alweiss argues that *Billy Budd* “is concerned with what Kant calls the duty of right and not the duties of virtue” (213):

The story describes the painful conflict between internal (personal) laws and the (external) laws of the State. [. . .] Kant, just like Vere, realizes that we do not live in an ultimately just world—the Kingdom of Ends—which moral theory advocates. Kant is aware that we practical human beings are never able to obtain the moral ideal. The existing legal order is thus never



entirely compatible with our notion of virtue. As human beings are inclined to evil, it is necessary to promulgate positive laws ensuring that we can coexist in accordance to a universal law of freedom. (213)

What Alweiss fails to note, however, is that the “positive laws” embodied by the naval code run counter to the “universal law of freedom” (213).<sup>73</sup> Their basis is not the free exercise of reason that Schiller argues characterizes the aesthetic State, but rather, as Thomas argues, a forceful, militaristic drive in the guise of rationality (*Cross-examinations* 244).

As Vere presents his case for the conviction of Billy, “the three men [of the jury] moved in their seats, less convinced than agitated by the course of an argument troubling but the more the spontaneous conflict within” (154); Vere's reasoning fails to convince the men that their duty to the naval order is the “paramount obligation” (153), and in fact only serves to call to consciousness the inner dilemma that the men are facing. Vere pauses and, “abruptly changing his tone” (154), continues. Vere shifts his rhetorical approach, abandoning his attempt to empathize with the other sailors and instead adopting a line of argument designed to showcase his superior intellect, to intimidate his shipmates and to reassert his own naval and moral authority—a shift from *pathos* to a forceful *ethos*. While he “[c]oncisely [. . .] narrated” the story of Claggart's death in his

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<sup>73</sup> Thomas offers a list of the ironies that he argues Melville exposes in *Billy Budd*, ironies that point to the opposition between the “positive laws” of the naval order and the rational “universal law of freedom” (Alweiss 213):

Although Vere claims that his system of justice stands for liberty, it denies Billy Budd the rights of man. Although it stands for law and order, it allows prisons to be emptied of lawbreakers and defies the law of nations by impressing innocent sailors in order to man the ships that are supposed to protect its law and order. Although its institutions are supposed to represent rationality against a revolutionary power's irrationality, it is ruled by the Mutiny Act, which Captain Vere himself calls the “child of war,” a most irrational force. Finally, although, as Vere claims, the officers who administer its laws owe allegiance to the king, not nature, that very king is reputed to be mad. (*Cross-examinations* 215)

capacity as the trial's sole witness (150), since assuming his dual role as a jurist and prosecutor, Vere had to this point only referred to the circumstances of the murder euphemistically (“the case is an exceptional one” [153]) and subjunctively (“If [. . .] we are bound to regard the death of the master-at-arms as the prisoner's deed” [153]). But as he shifts his rhetorical approach, Vere again offers something of a narrative, albeit a reductive one: “To steady us a bit, let us recur to the facts.—In wartime at sea a man-of-war's-man strikes his superior in grade, and the blow kills” (154). Yet, as the narrator of the novel says of the naval historian's account of the Nore mutiny, Vere's version of the murder is “less a narration than a reference, having to do hardly at all with details” (112). Indeed, all of the details—the *facts*—of Claggart's murder have been removed from Vere's “factual” account; the individuals involved have been reduced to their respective ranks, to naval abstractions, as “War looks but to the frontage, the appearance. And the Mutiny Act, War's child, takes after the father” (154). Levinas introduces the term “ontological imperialism” to describe Western philosophy's faith in the rational ability to comprehend the other, thereby diminishing this other subject's alterity (44). He argues that reason, as it is conceived of within philosophies which take ontology as their basis, functions to “neutraliz[e] the other and encompass[. . .] him”; this “neutralization of the other which becomes theme or object [. . .] is precisely its reduction to the same” (43), and thus rational cognition “move[s . . .] into enjoyment and possession” (87).<sup>74</sup> Like Claggart's accusation, Vere's reductive account of the murder is an act of narrative violence insofar as it erases the subjectivities of those who are represented within the

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<sup>74</sup> Levinas, like Schiller, posits an alternative, ethical rationality, opposed to the reductive reasoning embodied in ontological philosophies, although he warns that “[a]lready *of itself* ethics is an 'optics.' It is not limited to preparing for the theoretical exercise of thought, which would monopolize transcendence” (*Totality* 29).

narrative. Vere's reasoning has the same effect as Claggart's narrative, which also, it should be recalled, was delivered in a calm, reasonable manner that concealed its irrational motivation.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, insofar as he insists that Billy must be executed, Vere, like Claggart ultimately aims not just to possess, but to “annihilate” the young sailor.<sup>76</sup> While he is present at the drumhead court, Billy casts an “appealing glance towards Captain Vere” (151), a look that recalls Levinas's theorization of the Other's “gaze that supplicates” in “the epiphany of the face” (75); this epiphany is the presentation of the infinite that constitutes “the primordial *expression*, [. . .] the first word: 'you shall not commit murder’” (199). Vere, however, dismisses Billy from the courtroom, cutting off the discourse elicited by the face of the Other, in order to ensure the other's execution. “Reason speaking in the first person,” Levinas states, “is not addressed to the other, conducts a monologue” (72). The rationality of Vere's monologue before the other jurists, however, does not entirely cover the imperialistic drive for absolute power that Levinas argues motivates “the temptation to murder” (199): “Murder exercises a power over what escapes power” (198). Drawing on both textual and historical evidence, Thomas demonstrates how the “British rule of law and order serves the very forces of chaos and irrationality that it claims to wage war against” (“*Billy Budd*” 208). As Richard H. Fogle observes, the novel's narrator emphasizes how “[i]n carrying out the provisions of the naval code by which he is bound, [Vere] apparently violates it in a number of instances” (52). Fogle concludes that “form [. . .] violates form to secure the ends of form” (60);

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<sup>75</sup> Referring to the novel's description of Claggart's ability to disguise his irrationality quoted above, Thomas argues that “[i]f we use the technique of indirection advocated throughout the book and apply this definition to Vere instead of Claggart, we have an almost perfect fit” (“*Billy Budd*” 208).

<sup>76</sup> Again, Johnson's reading of the novel comes to a similar conclusion: “Vere's judgement *is* an act of murder. Captain Vere [. . .] kills [. . .] precisely by means of speaking” (102)

likewise, Vere's forceful "reasoning" violates rationality in order to re-assert the authority of the law, the legitimacy of which is rooted in its pretense to rationality. Furthermore, the rationality of the law cannot be questioned due to the authority that it possesses. Hence when the surgeon suspects Vere of madness, he is unable to voice his concern: "No more trying situation is conceivable than that of an officer subordinate under a Captain whom he suspects to be not mad, indeed, but yet not quite unaffected in his intellects. To argue his order to him would be insolence. To resist him would be mutiny" (147). If Vere is understood as the embodiment of formalized law, the self-supporting authority of the State ruled by law becomes apparent.

When Vere's reasoning fails to convince the other jurists to condemn Billy to death, his advocacy of what he believes to be the rational approach takes on a forceful character; his speech rhetorically *performs* the paradox, the irony, of the forceful rationality of the order of the law. As Merlin Bowen argues, Vere reduces the court he has gathered to an "instrument of his will" (67). Vere grows condescending towards the other sailors and speaks as though it is nothing more than obstinacy that prevents them from seeing what should be an obvious truth: "thus strangely we prolong proceedings that should be summary" (154). He refuses to acknowledge the validity of any objections that the other sailors present to him, as he makes it clear that it is *imperative* that they sentence Billy to hang as the maintenance of order depends upon it: "Your clement sentence [the sailors of the lower ranks] would account pusillanimous. They would think that we flinch, that we are afraid of them—afraid of practicing a lawful rigour *singularly demanded* at this juncture, lest it should provoke new troubles" (155; emphasis added). Again, his forceful rhetoric works towards the same ends as the sentence he insists

upon—the maintenance of order, of unity—and he *impels* the others to come to the same conclusion: “You see then, whither, prompted by duty and the law, I steadfastly *drive*” (155; emphasis added). The novel's narrator speculates that it is this final appeal to the jurists' naval duty—which, given their superior ranks, Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. describes as an appeal to “the instinct of self-preservation in the guise of reason” (“The Definitive” 120)—that overwhelms their moral inclinations and convinces the men to sentence Billy to hang, “though at bottom they dissented from some points Captain Vere had put to them” (155):

[T]hey were without the faculty, hardly had the inclination, to gainsay one whom they felt to be an earnest man, one too not less their superior in mind than in naval rank. But it is not improbable that even such of his words as were not without influence over them, less came home to them than his closing appeal to their instinct as sea-officers: in the forethought he threw out as to the practical consequences to discipline[.] (155)

Vere's forceful rhetoric and his violent narrative do not synthesize the two opposing moral forces of duty and inclination, nor do they demonstrate *rationally* that a *rational* appeal to duty is superior; instead, the formal and sensuous drives collapse into an imperialistic and profoundly unethical mode of being that works to buttress its own legitimacy and expand the range of its power. To attempt to fully account for what drives this mode of being, however, would be to solve “the mystery of iniquity” (151); instead *Billy Budd* works to overdetermine human motivation, maintaining the mystery—the infinity—of the subject, while expressing a skepticism that the encounter with this infinite opacity will guarantee ethical intersubjective relations.

## Conclusion

Schiller distinguishes between “the dynamic State,” aligned with the sensuous drive and maintained by force, and “the ethical State,” based on the formal drive and controlled by law (215). But just as the novel works to deconstruct the reason-feeling dichotomy, *Billy Budd* also complicates the distinction between the social orders that Schiller believes to grow out of these forces; the microcosmic social order aboard the *Bellipotent* is maintained by force disguised as rational law. It is an irony of which Schiller is not entirely unaware:

[I]n the dynamic State of rights it is as force that one man encounters another, and imposes limits upon his activities; [ . . . ] in the ethical State of duties Man sets himself over against man with all the majesty of the law, and puts a curb upon his desires. [ . . . ] The dynamic State can merely make society possible, by letting one nature be curbed by another. The ethical State can merely make it (morally) necessary, by subjecting the individual will to the general. (215)

Schiller, like Melville, recognizes that the ethical State simply represents the formalization of the relationships of mastery that define the dynamic State. But in the move to the abstraction of capital-M Man in his description of the ethical State, Schiller loses sight of the legally approbated relations of intersubjective domination that continue within this system. He overlooks the individuals like Claggart, whose disciplinarian role within the naval ranks serves to cover up the sensuous impulse for possession; within Schiller's model, the Claggarts are abstracted as protectors of the general will. Contrary to

Schiller, Melville's interest in different schemes of social organization is focused precisely on their effects on the individual subject and its relations with others; his concern in *Billy Budd* is not, as some critics have argued, with the moral implications of the sacrifice of the individual for the general good (*Cross-examinations* 198; 224; Adamson 210; 254; Claviez 33; Bowen 62),<sup>77</sup> but, more broadly, the ethical implications of thinking in such terms as “the general.”

Schiller contends that both the dynamic and ethical States fall short of the ideal aesthetic State, which is the teleological goal of his model of social evolution. The aesthetic State, characterized by the transcendence of the opposition between the individual and society, will be achieved only once Man's aesthetic sense has been developed (215-19). Conversely, in *Billy Budd*, the State works to annihilate the beautiful, thereby stalling its development towards the ideal with the aim of maintaining its own authority. Billy “Beauty” Budd must die to ensure the continuance of State power. Following Billy's “ascen[sion]” after he is executed, the narrator describes the sky in terms that strikingly recall Schiller's metaphor for living form:<sup>78</sup> “the circumambient air in the clearness of its serenity was like smooth marble in the polished block not yet removed from the marble-dealer's yard” (167). While many critics see *Billy Budd* as a

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<sup>77</sup> My parenthetical citation groups them all together, but the critics listed here offer an assortment of divergent takes on Melville's attitude towards utilitarianism.

<sup>78</sup> There is some evidence that Melville was familiar with Schiller's work, although how much of it he read directly can only be conjectured. Melville makes a caustic reference to Schiller's aesthetics in *The Confidence-Man*: “Yes, with you and Schiller,” the cosmopolitan tells Winsome, “I am pleased to believe that beauty is at bottom incompatible with ill” (191). In the commentary on a letter written by Melville in 1851, Lynn Horth, the editor of *Correspondence*, notes that “[i]n his discussion of the 'aristocracy of the brain,' Melville seems to have had in mind the quality pointed out in Wolfgang Menzel's criticism of Schiller” (189). Furthermore, Horth remarks that “[a] letter from August Melville [. . .] mentions that Schiller's *Ghost-Seer*—which [Herman] Melville had brought home from London—was one of books being read aloud during the long winter evenings at Arrowhead” (189). Horth notes that the letter does not mention “whether Melville participated in these readings” (189), but Melville does make reference to the plot of the novel in a journal entry from 1856 (*Journals* 64). The editors of *Journals* also note the existence of a copy of Schiller's *Poems and Ballads* with “jotted annotations” indicating Melville read from the volume (200).

parable about the incompatibility of innocence and a fallen world (Greven 41; Martin 110; *Cross-examinations* 224-25), in my Schillerian reading it is rather a tale of the incongruity of the individual in society and pure form—that is the impossibility of the human being existing as living form. Billy's ascension marks a separation: his life has ended, and form ascends back to the realm of the Ideal. Yet despite his skepticism towards the synthetic or mediatory power of beauty, Melville does not believe that art is incapable of impacting human lives. As I hope this project has been able to demonstrate, Melville's work reflects a mind convinced that narrative has a powerful ethical valence, and his own narrative art can be read at once as both an ethical appeal and, though free from didacticism, an appeal *about* ethics. As Hawthorne famously wrote, Melville “can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other” (qtd. in Samson 222). An ironist, Melville does not believe in the power of art to transcend paradoxes, but rather to portray them,<sup>79</sup> but he also does not believe that these dilemmas are to be left open to the free play of the imagination; there is an imperative to judgement underlying his works. In the fifth chapter of this thesis, I will look to the ironic critique—the serious play—of Melville's narrative technique in *Billy Budd*, his final reflection on and exercise of the ethical power of narrative. First, however, I will examine Melville's narrative method in *The Confidence-Man*, in which the narrator's abdication of narrative responsibility ironically points to the imperative to judge that *Billy Budd*'s narrative represents.

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<sup>79</sup> Boos concludes his discussion of the aesthetic theories of Schiller and Hegel by noting that the reconciliatory impulses present in the work of these two philosophers “underplay[ . . . ] the standpoint of irony”: “Irony is the awareness of the essentially paradoxical nature of human action and self-consciousness. According to this view, it is not the task of art to reconcile such paradoxes but to present and expose them” (26).



## Chapter 4

### Satanic Irony:

#### The Ironic Ethics of *The Confidence-Man*

To a person who hasn't got it, it will remain a riddle even after it is openly confessed. It is meant to deceive no one except those who consider it a deception and who either take pleasure in the delightful roguery of making fools of the whole world or else become angry when they get an inkling they themselves might be included. In this sort of irony, everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden . . . It contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication. It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke.

-Friedrich Schlegel on Socratic irony

(qtd. in Colebrook 54)

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated;” but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he

gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to and fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other.

-Nathaniel Hawthorne

(qtd. in Samson 222)

In response to Orion Books' release of *Moby Dick in Half the Time* in 2007, a version of Melville's classic novel edited to “retain all the elements of the original: the plot, the characters, the social, historical and local backgrounds and the author's language and style” (qtd. in Searls), Damion Searls published “; or the Whale” in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, “an abridgment that preserves the elements missing from that list—digression, texture, weirdness—by keeping every chapter, word, and punctuation mark of Melville's original *Moby Dick; or The Whale* that was removed from Orion's edition.” Some critics would probably argue that Melville beat Searls to the punch with the publication of *The Confidence-Man* in 1857, a novel that eschews traditional understandings of plot and character in order to revel in philosophical digression, textual play, and, yes, general Melvillean “weirdness.” Indeed, Renker notes that the novel has gained a reputation—more specifically it has become “notorious”—for its “unreadability” (72). Yet the problem of readability is in many ways one of recognition.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Bryant offers some contemporary appraisals of the novel, and concludes that “the reviews of *The Confidence-Man* registered neither total adulation nor contempt but on the whole a kind of troubled bemusement” (332). He relates this “bemusement” to a “confusion over [the novel's] form, style, and

Bryant hesitates before labelling *The Confidence-Man* a novel due to its deliberate undermining of novelistic conventions (316). Cook offers an extensive list of all of the genres and modes that Melville employs over the course of the work (16), but these generic touchstones ultimately furnish the reader with narrative conventions to read the novel *against* rather than within. The novel's thematization of the problematics of intersubjective recognition is thus mirrored by the problematization of the recognition of the text itself.<sup>81</sup> The goal of the novel's estrangement, however, is not the alienation of the reader.<sup>82</sup> Instead, it represents an ethical appeal from the author to the audience: an appeal for the abandonment of self-sufficiency in hopes of avoiding the ethical failings of the “imperialist” models of selfhood outlined in my previous discussion of the novel (Dimock 201). But Melville realized that a direct appeal to his readers, in the authoritative voice of *the author*, would recreate the very ethical failures that he aims to critique. In a famous letter to his publisher, Melville laments that “an author can never—under no conceivable circumstances—be at all frank with his readers” (qtd in Samson 1). While ostensibly a complaint about the contemporary literary market, Melville's comment also points to what Renker describes as Melville's frustrated desire to “tell[. . .]

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humor,” citing one critic who described the novel as a “tangled web of obscurity” (332). These reviews all point to the difficulty of *recognizing* the novel upon its first appearance. For his full discussion of the reception of the novel, see Bryant's “*The Confidence-Man*: Melville's Problem Novel” (331-34). For more contemporary reviews of the novel, see Reynolds (150-51), Brodtkorb (426), Trimpi (3), and Renker, who offers excerpts of reviews from both the time of its original publication and the twentieth-century rediscovery of Melville's work (71-72).

<sup>81</sup> This performative valence of the text is related to what Short describes as Melville's questioning of “the common literary distinction between theme and form” (167).

<sup>82</sup> Lindberg offers an analysis of the novel's “estranging” of the world for its readers (19). Estrangement is not just a rhetorical effect achieved by the novel, however; it is also a theme. After engaging in a role-playing exercise with the Confidence-Man, Charlie Noble states that “this little episode of fictitious estrangement will but enhance the delightful reality” (185). The scene draws attention to the self- and cultural estrangement caused by the “fictitious” role-playing that comprised nineteenth-century American life, which, as Rick Mitchell argues, complicated the distinction between reality and fiction that Noble attempts to re-assert (61). For further discussions of the “theatricalization” of identity in the social world presented in the novel (Van Cromphout 40), see Cook (193), Lindberg (39-41), and Agnew (195-203).

the truth that can't be told" (xvi).<sup>83</sup> However, Melville's inability to tell *the* truth also represents a refusal to tell *a* truth that would suspend ethical discourse. Melville associates "frank" speech with narrative violence, insofar as an author's claim to "frankness" is a self-confident affirmation of his or her authority over the meaning of the text, and thus a renunciation of the need for another subject: in this equation, the reader, as interlocutor, is reduced to a passive recipient of the author's meaning. This chapter will focus on the ironic narrative method that Melville develops in *The Confidence-Man* to counter this tendency towards authorial autonomy.

In the opening section, I will examine the novel's three chapter-length asides on fiction-writing. Over the course of his reflections on authorship, the narrator describes a method of fiction-writing that aims to represent characters in their "inconsistency" (187), a refusal of the reductive narrative practices that characterize the intersubjective exchanges within the novel. In these chapters, and throughout the novel, the narrator appeals directly to his readers, establishing a process of reciprocal meaning-making between authors and readers. Furthermore, the narrator's refusal to offer a definitive account of the other results in an ironic mode of narration. This mode of narration also appeals outwards to the reader because it foregrounds the narrator's inability to resolve the paradoxes that he presents.

The second section of this chapter consists of a brief overview of Romantic irony, a philosophical, aesthetic and narratological alternative to idealism, which, Milton R.

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<sup>83</sup> Drawing on Melville's letters and essays, Renker offers a discussion of Melville's frustration with his inability to "be frank" with his readers (xvi). Attempting to ascertain the veracity of the writings in which Melville proclaims his inability to speak the truth thrusts one into the undecidability of the "liar's paradox," a variation of which Wright views as the intrinsic interpretive barrier at the heart of *The Confidence-Man* (75). But even this paradoxical impasse points to the desire *and* inability to tell the truth that is central to the author's work.

Stern argues, Melville associated with imperialistic “monomania” (qtd. in Wenke 586). Drawing on the work of Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, Handwerk develops a theory of “ethical irony” (3), according to which the individual subject's inability to overcome “verbal incompatibilities” (2)—ironic paradoxes—points to a fundamental “dependence of the subject on others” in the interminable process of coming to know both the self and the nature of reality (16). Handwerk's theory of ethical irony represents a conception of an ethical bond formed on the basis of the mutual recognition between subjects of their respective inability to adequately account for themselves. For the German Romantics, Claire Colebrook explains, literature is capable of *representing* the fundamental *inability to represent* the “flux and dynamism” of existence (52): “unlike other created things, which simply *are* and retain no evidence of their becoming, true poetry presents itself *as fallen*, that is, as other than or detached from the process that generates it” (50). “True poetry,” in this sense, is not limited to poems; Schlegel saw the novel, with its “displays of divergent voices,” as an ideal vehicle for ironic representation (Colebrook 69). The model of irony suggested by the ironic narration of *The Confidence-Man*, as Brodtkorb notes, coincides in many instances with the Romantic conception of irony (“*The Confidence-Man*” 433).

Melville is a persistent ironist, however, and he feels compelled to test the limits even of this ironic method. Cook argues that the metafictional reflections contained in the three chapters of narratological reflection represent an “*ars poetica*” explicating and justifying Melville's fictional methods (199), but this equation of the author with the narrator is problematic. In the third section, therefore, I will argue that Melville points to the ethical and epistemological limitations of the narrator's ironic method, and the manner

in which the narrator's ironic mode of narration betrays the conception of author-audience relations that he develops in his narratological asides.<sup>84</sup> Handwerk contends that “[e]thical irony can [. . .] provide an alternative between indeterminacy and authority” (16), the two polarities that he recognizes irony has a tendency to degrade into. In *The Confidence-Man*, these two polarities correspond, respectively, with skepticism and confidence, the two terms that form the paradoxical thematic crux of the novel. *The Confidence-Man*'s narrative both alludes to and performs the fall of irony into these two undesirable states, and draws attention to the resultant failures of ethical recognition and moral judgement. Melville, however, is never able to rise above the ironic paradoxes and the paradoxes of irony that his novel points to, as the pairing of the two quotations in the epigraph to this chapter proves: Schlegel's description of Socratic irony fits *The Confidence-Man* perfectly, yet Hawthorne's description of Melville's vacillation between “belief” and “unbelief” casts Melville as one of the “harmonious bores” that can neither grasp nor accept the indeterminacy of irony (qtd. in Samson 222; qtd. in Colebrook 54). Ultimately, as I will argue in the concluding section of this chapter, Melville is only able to point to an ethical form of narration through negation—by pointing to the limitations of the various alternative models of both sincere and ironic narration.

## I

The primary focus of the novel's three chapters of narratological critique is the creation of characters—fictional characters, to be sure, but the narrator's argument for the

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<sup>84</sup> Reynolds notes the development of Melville's use of paradoxes from metaphysical questing to ethico-ironic questioning: “In [his] earlier works Melville had invested his culture's paradoxes with metaphysical meaning and heroically tried to confront and resolve this meaning. In the later works he turns from the problem of philosophical meaning toward the effects of stereotypical paradoxes on human psychology and behavior” (298).

importance of representing lived experience in novel-writing, that is, his argument for a limited literary “mimesis” (Cook 199), blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. Furthermore, as Rowe argues in his reading of *Pierre*, Melville saw the novel as a force of ideological “naturaliz[ation]” (196-97), and the narrator's criticism of the authorial practices of his contemporaries therefore extends beyond the realm of fiction. As outlined above, Melville considered narrating an ethical act, and saw the reduction of the other's subjectivity through narration as an ethical failure—an act of what I have deemed narrative violence. Hence the narrator's meditations on creating characters in *The Confidence-Man* have an ethical valence: they represent a distilled theory of narrative ethics. Chapter 14 consists of a justification for the inconsistency of one of the novel's characters, a merchant whose self-confidence is shattered by his encounter with the Confidence Man in the guise of the Black Rapids Coal Company man; he leaves their conversation feeling “mortified at having been tempted [. . .] into making mad disclosure—to himself as to another—of the queer, unaccountable caprices of his natural heart” (74). The narrator's chapter-length aside acts as a comment on the “unaccountable” changes—and, by extension, the recognition of the inability to account for themselves—that the Confidence Man's interlocutors experience.

The narrator's target in this section is the supposedly realistic school of fiction that believes “there is nothing a writer of fiction should more carefully see to [. . .] than that, in the depiction of any character, its consistency should be preserved” (75). Throughout the chapter, consistency is related to a pretense to rationality, which recalls Levinas's argument that reason, at least as it is conceived in ontological philosophy, insists upon the reduction of difference to the same, and is therefore unethical (43). Levinas associates

this mode of reason with light, which grants visibility and, by extension, comprehension, and thus possession of that which is outside of the subject (43). Melville's criticism is aimed at the novelist who represents "human nature [. . .] in a clear light, leav[ing] it to be inferred that he clearly knows all about it" (76).<sup>85</sup> Such "fiction, where every character can, by *reason* of its consistency, be *comprehended at a glance*" (75; emphases added), serves to render human nature—and thus each human being—into, in Levinas's terms, an "object' of a cognition" (62). The narrator questions the rationality of such an approach: "But this, though at first blush, seeming reasonable enough, may, upon a closer view, prove not so much so" (75). Since the nineteenth-century literature with which the narrator compares his narrative art presents itself as "fiction based on fact," and since it is a "fact, that, in real life, a consistent character is a *rara avis*" (237), there must be an explanation other than a rational adherence to empirical evidence: "If reason be judge, no writer has produced such inconsistent characters as nature herself has" (75). The demand for consistency is based instead on what Spanos deems "the will to power over difference" associated with the epistemological imperialism encoded within optimistic philosophies of self-reliance (170). The narrator makes this imperialistic goal clear in his condemnation of the "psychological novelists" who "challenge astonishment at the tangled web of some character, and then raise admiration still greater at their satisfactory unraveling of it" (76). The narrator suggests that such writers feel they attribute "a kind of honor" to humanity by "represent[ing] human nature" in "transparency," but he

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<sup>85</sup> As Spanos points out, light in the novel is also associated with revelation (169), which is opposed to rationality: "In short, with all sorts of cavers, it was best, both for them and everybody, that whoever had the true light should stick behind the secure Malakoff of confidence, nor be tempted forth to hazardous skirmishes on the open ground of reason" (*Confidence* 72). Yet insofar as both revelation and reason are presented in the novel as conterminous—both produce a self-confidence that denies the need for interaction with others, and in fact lead to the reductive comprehension of others—the distinction between these two terms is blurred, a paradoxical alliance confirmed by their containment within the same symbol.



ironically intones that “if these waters of human nature can be so readily seen through, it may be either that they are very pure or very shallow” (76). Water is the drink of choice of both Pitch and Winsome (140; 196),<sup>86</sup> who idealize its transparency; faith in transparency is thus directly linked with the confident self-reliance that Melville rejects.

Against this faith in the ability to read and render the transparent other the narrator posits a mode of narration that recognizes the “obscurity” (76)—the *opacity*—of the other.<sup>87</sup> “In view of its inconsistencies [. . .] human nature [. . .] is past finding out” (76), and the novelist's job is to offer characterizations that recognize these inconsistencies and represent them in their incomprehensibility. Van Cromphout notes that “Melville repeatedly [. . .] draws his readers' attention to the utter inaccessibility of the characters [. . .] to the narrator” (38), but here the narrator suggests that the admission of this inaccessibility is at the foundation of ethical narration. The narrator contends that “[t]he grand points of human nature are the same to-day they were a thousand years ago. The only variability in them is in expression, not in feature” (77). But the narrator dismisses theories that have “for their end the revelation of human nature on fixed principles” (76), in effect rejecting what Levinas describes as Heideggerian ontology's privileging of Being over being (45);<sup>88</sup> his interest is in the “expressions” of human nature, as they present the disruptive force of alterity to what Levinas describes as “the logical hierarchy” of scientific classification, the “absolute difference” that “appears against the ground of the common genus” in the encounter with the Other (194). The other subject, in

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<sup>86</sup> The novel consistently tropes the transparency vs. obscurity binary as water vs. wine, although these two symbols, like all of the symbols in the novel, are overdetermined over the course of the novel.

<sup>87</sup> Renker offers a parallel discussion of the opposition between transparency and opacity of character in the novel (73-74).

<sup>88</sup> Levinas argues that in focusing on the nature of existence (Being), Heidegger overlooks the primacy of the intersubjective relations between existents (beings) (45).

the narrator's mind as in Levinas's theory, presents an obstacle to totalization.

The narrator's criticisms are not reserved for authors; readers of novels are also subjected to opprobrium in similar terms. Again, reason is related to consistency: it is the “sensible reader” who disparages inconsistency in a novel's characters (75). “Sensible” here clearly connotes rationality rather than sensation, as “the distaste of readers [for inconsistent characters] in books, can hardly arise from any sense of their untruthfulness. It may rather be from perplexity as to understanding them” (75). Again, these rational readers desire narratives that render human beings as knowable, possessable objects, and thus represent the style of reading against which the narrator protests. What I would like to stress, however, is that behind the narrator's occasional, bitter chiding lies the expressive act itself: the appeal of the “author” to the audience for a negotiation of a relationship of reciprocal responsibility despite mutual unaccountability, in a combined epistemological-narrative sense. The narrator's self-reflexive intrusion into the tale he tells is framed as an “apology” (77), a fundamental communicative act and an admission of responsibility. The narrator's comments are directed towards “a certain voice which methinks I hear” (186), a voice encompassing his readership and his critics. Furthermore, while there is a certain instructive thrust to the narrator's appeals to the “class” of readers with which he “sides” (186)—what Rachel Cole refers to as Melville's “education” of his interpellated “ideal readership” (393; 395)—there is also a renunciation of didactic authorship:

[A]fter poring over the best novels professing to portray human nature, the studious youth will still run risk of being too often at fault upon actually entering the world; whereas, had he been furnished with a true delineation,

it ought to fare with him something as with a stranger entering, map in hand, Boston town; the streets may be very crooked, he may often pause; but, thanks to his true map, he does not hopelessly lose his way. (76-77)

A novel, to maintain Melville's navigational metaphor, does not provide a moral compass. Yet the narrator does moralize the *relationship* between authors and readers. While he rejects the imperative implied by those who insist that authors “have no business to be perplexing readers” (76), he also refers to the “grateful reader” whose conception of the world is expanded through reading and the need to “pardon” the “well-meant endeavor” of the author who aims to please his audience (237; 187); the relationship is one of ethical recognition and reciprocity, rather than moral necessity.<sup>89</sup>

This conception of the author-audience relationship is also implicit in the chapter titles that announce these narratological asides. Brodtkorb cites these “ironical chapter headings” as signs of “the despair of [the novel's] author,” that is, as textual incarnations of Melville's disenchantment with his reading public (“*The Confidence-Man*” 430-31).<sup>90</sup> However, Dauber argues that Melville's bitterness about being ignored by the reading public and rejected by the critical establishment does not prompt him to give up his goal of “writ[ing] democratically” (194).<sup>91</sup> Instead, Dauber argues, Melville considers “no answer, even, as but the continuation of a dialogue” (193); he “conceives of noncommunication as communication too” (219). Hence the chapter titles show the narrator admitting the impossibility of unilateral communication, but also acknowledging

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<sup>89</sup> The narrator, however, admits that his appeal to the reader as other is not pure, insofar as the other he addresses is a projection of his imagination rather than an actual interlocutor: “so precious to man is the approbation of his kind, that to rest, though but under an imaginary censure applied to but a work of imagination, is no easy thing” (187). This aside suggests a limitation—though it does not represent a refutation—of looking to the author-audience relationship as a site of intersubjective ethics.

<sup>90</sup> For a discussion of this disenchantment and its effects on Melville's fiction, see Renker (xvii).

<sup>91</sup> See Dauber (192-94).

his inability to demand a response from the reader; the author *needs* an audience, but the author cannot *command* his audience, a message implied in the title of Chapter 44: “In Which the Last Three Words of the Last Chapter Are Made the Text of the Discourse, Which Will Be Sure of Receiving More or Less Attention From Those Readers Who Do Not Skip It” (236). The author can only say his piece; he cannot ensure that his message will be granted “attention,” or even read for that matter. Furthermore, the titles to chapters 14 and 33—“Worth the Consideration of Those to Whom it May Prove Worth Considering” and “Which May Pass for Whatever it May Prove to Be Worth,” respectively (74; 186)—indicate that literary value (here, “worth”) is not an attribute of the artifact itself, nor a realized cultural consensus; rather, valuation is subject to the assessment of the individual. The narrator's address, here, is not to his readers—the general—but to *the* reader—the particular. Just as he rejects narrative depictions of characters that reduce their differences, the narrator's appeal to his audience also aims to recognize the other *as* other.

While the narrator recognizes the reader in his or her particularity, this does not constitute a simple transfer of the authority over the text's meaning from author to the individual reader;<sup>92</sup> instead, the narrator of *The Confidence-Man* suggests that meaning is to be negotiated between the author and the multiplicity of readers who engage with his work, as no individual is capable of ascertaining the full meaning of a text.<sup>93</sup> The recognition of the reciprocity of the author-audience relationship leads the narrator of the *Confidence-Man* to abdicate the authority implicit within the contemporary conception of authorship. In the discussion of “original characters in fiction” contained in Chapter 44,

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<sup>92</sup> Short offers the most compelling reading of the novel's “dispers[al] of authority” (137-52).

<sup>93</sup> See Van Cromphout and Cole for discussions of the nature of such a negotiation (47; 391-398).

the narrator narrows the scope of authorial originality: most characters created by novelists “are not, in a thorough sense, original at all” (237). And while Quirk speculates that the subtext of the chapter suggests that in the Confidence-Man, Melville has created the elusive original character (14-15), this character was not generated from the author's having “seen much” or “seen through much”: “to produce but one original character, he must have had much luck,” for “[t]here would seem but one point in common between this sort of phenomenon in fiction and all other sorts: it cannot be born in the author's imagination” (*Confidence* 238). The narrator's comments serve as a corrective to the perceived apotheosizing of the artist's imagination within Romantic philosophy, which constitutes another incarnation of the ideology of self-reliance.<sup>94</sup> Ostensibly, as Cook notes, the three chapters of meta-fictional reflection call for “a balance between creative originality (*poesis*) and a direct imitation of life (*mimesis*)” (199). However, mimetic art does not guarantee objectivity, as it is also prone to errors related to the limitations of the subject, limitations that also restrict the reader from ascertaining the factuality of the artist's representations: “It must call for no small sagacity in a reader unerringly to discriminate in a novel between the inconsistencies of conception and those of life. As elsewhere, experience is the only guide here; but as no one man can be coextensive with *what is*, it may be unwise in every case to rest upon it” (75).<sup>95</sup> Since “no one man”<sup>96</sup> is

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<sup>94</sup> Handwerk offers a corrective discussion of Romantic subjecthood that serves to counter this prevalent misapprehension of the Romantic conception of the self (4-6).

<sup>95</sup> That the individual can become “coextensive with *what is*” is of course the central conceit of Hegel's Absolute idealism, which, as previously explained, holds that through the development of Spirit, the individual can ultimately become “coextensive” with the Absolute. John Wenke argues that the adoption of idealism, in Melville's view, should lead to a recognition of “shifting meanings and relativistic values”: “Melville's use of correspondence presents not a fixed equation of material fact and spiritual truth; rather, it offers a way of reading reality symbolically, which becomes manifest through multiform psychological projection. We know ourselves *through* the meanings *we* ascribe to the dumb blankness of experience” (584). In Melville's fiction, those who do not recognize the relativity of their systems of correspondence suffer from what Wenke deems the “egomania” of the “absolutistic quester” (586; 585);

capable of comprehending the complete “*what is*” of existence, truth is opened up into a multiplicity of truths to be evaluated through the dialogue of voices, a dialogue incited by the narrator through his ironic speech—the “prosy, [. . .] smoky” language into which the narrator “retir[es],” and suggests the reader follow (238). However, as I will argue in section three of this chapter, the narrator's ironic, equivocal narration throughout the rest of the novel also points to the moral shortcomings of the model of writing and reading that he establishes in the novel's narratological asides. Through these asides, the narrator discredits the models of narration and reading that are related to the “reduction of the other to the same” (*Totality* 43), suggesting instead that the recognition of the multiplicity of truth may be an ethical alternative to a reductive—and inevitably unsuccessful—attempt at achieving objectivity. The novel as a whole, however, serves to question the ethics and the adequacy of such an ironic conception of truth.

## II

Melville's ironic method is best understood in the context of two of the dominant aesthetic theories of the nineteenth-century: Hegelianism and German Romanticism. Within his philosophical system, Hegel argues that art plays an important role in revealing the Absolute and thus in the development of self-consciousness (Inwood xxvi). Art has the capacity to provide the individual with the insight that the oppositions

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as Stern summarily puts it, “idealistic vision results in personal vision; personal vision results in separation of self and community; separation results in monomania; monomania results in a sterilizing and frantic quest for the attainment of vision according to the dictates of self” (qtd. in Wenke 586). The adoption of idealism thus leads to the imperialistic self-reliance that *The Confidence-Man* works to expose.

<sup>96</sup> Women are notoriously absent from Melville's fiction, and apparently they are not to be found in his idealized readership, either. The only reference to female readers in the narratological asides is a disparaging comment against the reading habits of “school misses” (170), a reference, Cole notes, that is used to negatively describe and interpellate Melville's ideal audience (395).

represented by apparent paradoxes are illusory, and thus works to resolve seeming opposites into a synthetic unity; it is a force of dialectical progress (Boos 23-26). For Hegel, Michael Inwood explains, true art represents the artist's vision in purely “sensory [. . .] terms” (xxviii); “the decline of art” in Hegel's time is marked by its fall into “reflective, conceptual [. . .] terms,” an inappropriate rapprochement of art and philosophy (xxvii; xxviii; xxvi-xxviii). Eventually, Inwood explains, “reflective men break loose from such attachments [to their culture] and succumb to irony; reflection reveals the limits of merits of the other side and the limits of one's own” (xxix). Inwood's description of the Hegelian ironist so aptly fits the narrator of the *Confidence-Man*—and, to some extent this narrator's creator—that it bears quoting at length:

The reflection of the ironist [. . .] never ceases; he reflects on societies, philosophies, religions, and types of art; he reflects on the criteria for assessing them, and on the criteria for assessing those criteria. Thus the reflective artist becomes an ironist, without attachment to any definite cause or way of life. He is not a pagan or a Christian, but a *tabula rasa*, which can take on any subject-matter or artistic style. (xxix)

For Hegel, Inwood explains, “[a]ttempts to produce ironical art result only in feeble art” (xxix); the ironist's art cannot drive progress.

While Melville would certainly relish the role of a broken cog within the machine of teleological progress, his fiction suggests that he did not share Hegel's view of the impotence of ironic art. Hegel's contemporaries from the school of German Romanticism offer an image of art that points to the power of irony that Melville attempts to channel into his fiction. Handwerk argues that while “most critics [writing on the German

Romantics] have continued to operate from the Hegelian schema wherein irony is an aesthetic expression of the individual subject,” this view is based on a misapprehension of the Romantic conception of subjecthood (5).<sup>97</sup> Handwerk offers an alternative reading of Schlegel's Romantic philosophy that argues that Romantic irony is in fact a movement away from self-sufficiency and towards mutual dependency. Schlegel sees irony, Handwerk explains, as “a negation that completes the partial by raising it to a paradox that confutes our notions of identity and thus incites us to extend them” (35). Handwerk uses the term “ironic self-consciousness” to define the condition of “a subject aware of and enacting its status of inadequacy in regard to an Absolute whose presence it can conjure only through engagement in a dialectic of intersubjectivity” (36)—although, significantly, it is “a nonsynthetic dialectic” (15). Based upon his reading of Schlegel's work, Handwerk defines the “purpose of all irony” as “an intentional decentering of the subject that operates as an opening out to the other” (42-43). Handwerk refers to this valence of irony as “ethical irony”: “*ethical irony* focuses on how verbal incompatibilities set up and provoke a deeper interrogation of self-consciousness. For ethical irony, an incompatibility in discourse suspends the question of identity by frustrating any immediate coherence of the subject” (2). The dialectic of self-consciousness becomes a dialogue: “the subject requires another subject, requires the entrance into dialogue, if it is to chart its own meaning” (3). Ethical irony thus “attacks the notion of the subject as equivalent to a conscious intentionality or a personal self-consciousness” (3). Through his reading of Schlegel, Handwerk develops a conception of an ethical bond of accountability between individuals based on the mutual admission of the impossibility of

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<sup>97</sup> Handwerk's analysis of the Romantics, it should be noted, is decidedly idiosyncratic, as the framework of his own theory of ethical irony informs his readings of Romantic philosophy.



offering any more than a partial account of the self.

### III

Over the course of the development of his theory of ethical irony, however, Handwerk recognizes that not all irony is ethical. Handwerk warns that irony can degenerate into “indeterminacy and authority,” and these two opposing terms can “freez[e . . .] into a static polarity, where indeterminacy would itself become authority” (16). In his reading of Schlegel, Handwerk links indeterminacy with the skepticism of Socratic irony, or what Handwerk terms “negating irony” (39). The dialogic structure of *The Confidence-Man*, as detailed in the last chapter, recalls Socrates's use of the elentic method. As Claire Colebrook explains, the German Romantics privileged the “genre of dialogue,” which “present[s] voices and personae rather than fixed propositions or a single *theoretical* viewpoint” (52): for the German Romantics, Socratic “[i]rony was not just signalling the opposite of what was said; it was the expression of *both sides or viewpoints at once* in the form of contradiction or paradox” (53-54). Handwerk explains that Schlegel's theory of negating irony was influenced by Socrates and the Socratic method (38-39): “What Schlegel particularly admired in Socrates was his ability to translate [his] ironic consciousness into fertile inspiration of others, to provoke a manifoldness *outside* himself. [. . .] Socrates created not written works but dynamic, self-questioning human subjects” (39). As I argued in my previous discussion of the novel, the Confidence-Man—ironically through his ostensible efforts to instil confidence—disrupts the self-confidence of his interlocutors by inciting “self-questioning” in those he encounters. Beyond the presentation of these dialogues, however, the novel as a whole

works on the same driving principle that Handwerk attributes to the method of elenchus: “The Socratic method is to destroy any isolated opinion by bringing it into a contact with a broader or alien context” (38-39). In the opening scene of the novel, the deaf-mute beggar—debatably the first incarnation of the Confidence-Man—writes “Charity thinketh no evil” on the slate he carries (11). He then proceeds to erase all but the word “Charity” and inscribe a new phrase behind it, a process he repeats three more times: “The word charity, as originally traced, remained throughout uneffaced, not unlike the left-hand numeral of a printed date, otherwise left for convenience in blank” (12). This scene constitutes a metafictional representation of Melville's ironic narrative strategy: over the course of the *The Confidence-Man*, words and concepts recur between scenes, but unlike the deaf-mute's complementary definitions of charity, the contexts in which they appear render the definitions offered incompatible, ultimately separating word from concept.<sup>98</sup> This process of overdetermination projects the novel's Socratic questioning outwards and onto the reader,<sup>99</sup> who is forced to recognize the incongruity among the separate meanings elicited by a single term. Handwerk argues that negating irony has an ethical

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<sup>98</sup> I draw here on Lindberg, who offers a reading of this scene in which he argues that the piling up of “predicates” behind the word, combined with the litany of “attributes” elicited from the audience by the deaf-mute himself, introduces the relationship between language, truth and identity presented by the novel: “The search for identity and the search for truth turn out to be shell games, with predicates and attributes as the shells” (16). In his essay on *The Confidence-Man*, Lindberg contends that this “shell game” represents the structuring principle of the entire novel (15-47). Sussman argues that this opening scene “instigates a crisis of interpretation” (32), a crisis that Bellis explores at length in his deconstructive reading of the novel (165-86). Agnew also notes that the linguistic “shell game” referred to by Lindberg can be seen embodied in the form of the novel itself: “Episodes do not build on one another so much as they refer to one another, an allusiveness that only adds to the elusiveness of the narrative as a whole” (197). See also Dimock for a discussion of the “circulat[ion]” of language in the novel (206-10).

<sup>99</sup> Writing on *Moby Dick*, Dauber argues that “a certain skepticism [is] precisely what Melville appeals to his readers *through*” (193), and his reading of Melville's later fiction presents a vision of ironic communication relatively consistent with my own. Spanos also sees the ethical valence of the novel's ironic narrative, as he argues that through the ironies of *The Confidence-Man* “Melville retrieves at least the possibility of [. . .] *questioning* [. . .] from the secondary status, if not the oblivion, to which is has been relegated by the naturalization of the American exceptionalist masquerade and the American answerers [. . .] it has spawned to serve its fundamentally misanthropic ends” (178).

valence, insofar as it “open[s] up conceptual gaps it fails to fill, creating a space for the other subject, the interlocutor” (39). However, Handwerk explains, Schlegel eventually abandoned negating irony, due to the fact that the “ironic skepticism” it engenders “provides no sense for how a more objective discourse might be made present” (39); Socratic irony results in indeterminacy, an unacceptable outcome for Schlegel (38).

A state of ironic skepticism proves inadequate for Melville, too, as he also saw it as incapable of achieving anything resembling “truth.” For Schlegel, Handwerk contends, negating irony “acts as a disintegrative force, exploiting failed connections to intimate the Absolute” (39). Claire Colebrook explains that the German Romantics, unlike Hegel, saw the fall into irony as a “*felix culpa*” (49). The ironic discrepancy between the individual's fragmentary creative representation and the irreducible becoming of the existence represented is the source of the human conception of the Absolute: “it is only in diverse life itself, in all its difference and fragmentation, that we get any sense or idea of some whole or origin” (Colebrook 49). Insofar as no single representation is capable of adequately representing the Absolute, no representation has a claim to authority, and thus, Colebrook concludes, “Romantic irony tends to emphasise the equivocality of voice” (61). However, in the discussion of human nature in Chapter 14, the narrator rejects the idea that a plurality of contradictory voices can lead to anything resembling the truth of “*what is*”: “the fact [. . .] that in all ages such conflicting views have, by the most eminent minds, been taken of mankind, would, as with other topics, seem some presumption of a pretty general and pretty thorough ignorance of it” (76). Melville realizes, as Schlegel ultimately did as well, that the indeterminacy of equivocality cannot lead to the attainment

of objective truth.<sup>100</sup>

What is ultimately more troubling to the author, however, is that equivocity causes the dissipation of the operative truths needed for moral judgement. Indeed, while the narrator's *equivocations* result from a mode of narration free from the imperialistic drive that leads to acts of narrative violence, they also represent a refusal to utter a definitive moral judgement. Consider the narrator's discussion of the “goodness” of the “Gentleman With Gold Sleeve-Buttons”:

[N]othing in his manner bespoke him righteous, but only good, and though to be good is much below being righteous, and though there is a difference between the two, yet not, it is to be hoped, so incompatible as that a righteous man can not be a good man; though, conversely, in the pulpit it has been with much cogency urged, that a merely good man, that is, one good merely by his nature, is so far from there by being righteous, that nothing short of a total change and conversion can make him so; which is something which no honest mind, well read in the history of righteousness, will care to deny; nevertheless, since St. Paul himself, agreeing in a sense with the pulpit distinction, though not altogether in the pulpit deduction, and also pretty plainly intimating which of the two qualities in question enjoys his apostolic preference; I say, since St. Paul has so meaningly said, that, “scarcely for a righteous man will one die, yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die;” therefore, when we repeat of this gentleman, that he was only a good man, whatever

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<sup>100</sup> Barney draws a similar conclusion about the coincidence of Melville and the Romantics' conceptions of irony: “In Melville's version, in the Romantic paradox, suspicion alone can withstand untruth, but suspicion, a devilish power itself, can never see truth” (165).

else by severe censors may be objected to him, it is still to be hoped that his goodness will not at least be considered criminal in him. (44-45)

The narrator does establish an ideal—righteousness—that the character in question fails to attain, but by the end of this dizzying sentence,<sup>101</sup> the inattentive reader may have forgotten that the behaviour of the Gentleman described in the preceding paragraphs suggests that he may not be a “good man” at all.<sup>102</sup> Dauber contends that in Melville's fiction after *Moby-Dick*, the author “looks not to overwhelm [opposition] with his one truth, but to overdetermine it, to provide us with an array of truths any one of which we may choose” (225). However, this choice requires that the reader first distinguish the “array of truths” from the barrage of falsehoods that appear within the narrative; the equalization of voices implicit in equivocity would render the reader unable to distinguish a “surly philanthropist” like Pitch from a “genial misanthrope” like Winsome (182). Ironically, the necessity for judgement is elicited by the narrator's equivocations. As previously mentioned, the phrase “as if” appears in the novel over fifty times, and similar variants of this conditional hedging phrase serve to up the count. The narrator's entire narrative is seemingly hypothetical,<sup>103</sup> but it does not invite what Ishmael describes as the “pondering repose of If” (535). Instead, the “iffiness” of the text invokes an active response, as the reader is called to weigh the alternatives to (and implied by) the narrator's conditional descriptions of his characters' motivations.

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<sup>101</sup> John T. Irwin notes that “[o]ne of Melville's favorite tricks from *Moby-Dick* onward is to construct sentences of such ambiguous complexity that they function as syntactic mirrors in which an unselfconscious reader can always find his own prejudices reflected without ever being aware that he has projected them there in the process of interpretation” (qtd. in Wright 87).

<sup>102</sup> Drawing on R.W.B. Lewis, Brodtkorb points out that goodness is overdetermined even further in this passage through the Biblical reference: “the good gentleman with gold buttons [. . .] somehow, before Melville is through describing his goodness, becomes associated with those who crucified Christ” (431).

<sup>103</sup> For another discussion of the hypothetical nature of the narrator's discourse, see Lindberg (32).

For this reason, Bellis argues that “[t]he narrator continually insists that his own text is equivocal and self-contradictory, dependent on the reader's interpretive activity for its meaning and coherence” (185), but the conscious agency implied by the “insistence” Bellis attributes to the narrator is misplaced. Certainly the narrator “insists” on the necessity of his readers for interpretation in the narratological asides discussed above, but through the narrator's “smoky” prose (*Confidence* 238), Melville shows how this authorial abdication of authority over the text's meaning can degenerate into a refusal of moral judgement. As outlined above, Newton argues that Saying is “the site of surplus, of the unforeseen, of self-exposure” (3), and thus the site to be explored by those interested in understanding narrative ethics; Saying both exposes and complicates the motives, conscious or otherwise, of the Say-er. Through the “surplus” of the narrator's language Melville points to the (ironic) moral inadequacy of the narrator's seemingly ethical ironic narrative approach: despite his verbosity, the narrator does not seem to *say* anything—his *voice* is lost in equivocation. The narrator's convoluted style—characterized not just by the endless hedging phrases and frequent use of the conditional tense, but also by litotic sentence structures (Short 145), historical references, and obscure (and often obscuring) literary allusions<sup>104</sup>—instantly raises the reader's suspicions about his reliability, and, by extension, his responsibility. His prose seems to be meticulously calculated in an effort to defer any accountability for the account he offers.<sup>105</sup> The narrator thus denies his role in the reciprocal process of meaning-making that he establishes through his narratological asides, thereby violating the very contract between author and reader for which he set the

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<sup>104</sup> See Van Cromphout for an additional discussion of the narrator's ambiguous style (42).

<sup>105</sup> R. W. B. Lewis famously refers to the “self-erasing style” of the narrator's prose (qtd. in Van Cromphout 42). Drawing on Lewis, Dimock argues that Melville “says nothing for which he might be held accountable” (207), but her attribution of this refusal of accountability to the author rather than the narrator leads her to overlook Melville's critical intention in the novel.

terms. The notion that the narrator of the novel is himself a sort of confidence man has become a critical commonplace.<sup>106</sup> The narrator is *confident* in his ability to offer an account of his characters that refuses the narrative reduction of others, but this confidence sets him above his own ironies, a positioning that, according to Handwerk, Schlegel sought to eliminate from his evolving conception of irony: “any such claim to be above the fundamental conflicts of one's own discourse is the greatest (conscious or unconscious) irony of all” (36). This view is what leads Schlegel to push beyond his conception of “systemic” irony (Handwerk 36-38). Handwerk defines “systemic irony” as “an elaborate patterning” through which

[t]he sense of being limited by the finite is resisted by an endless proliferation of mutually sustaining antitheses, no one of which is central and whose structural similarity [. . .] is enriched by progressive extension into all spheres of human language and activity. Irony acts here to justify the juxtaposition of apparently unrelated contexts through its doctrine of the limited extensibility of polarities, that is, the idea that any set of terms can acquire systemic validity only through application to an ever-widening realm of situations, which necessarily leads to their progressive redefinition, if not outright replacement. (38)

While their processes are similar, what separates negating and systemic ironies is the position of the ironist; indeed, it is in order to eliminate “the implied omniscience” of the systemic ironist that Schlegel developed the idea of negating irony (38), in which the Socratic figure “is caught up in the process of interpretation and can never attain a

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<sup>106</sup> Bryant cites some examples of this established reading (338). See also Wright (75), and Kuhlman, who offers the common variation in which Melville is identified as a confidence man (113).

position outside itself or himself” (39). Unlike the overall negating effect of the novel's discourse—from which, I will argue below, Melville is unable to remove himself—the narrator's confident narrative implies a mastery of the paradoxes he represents; in his aside on inconsistency, even, he assumes his ability to represent—while denying his capacity to resolve—the paradoxes of existence. The narrator's staging of his story proves him to be confident in his skepticism, and thus above the paradoxical ethical entanglements of the intersubjective encounters he describes.

While the narrator's confidence in his systemic irony simply results in the refusal of moral engagement, through the character of Winsome we see that “the implied omniscience” of the systemic ironist can lead to the epistemological confidence that underlies the imperialistic drive towards the subsumption of the other into the same (Handwerk 38), and thus ethical failure. Handwerk warns that “indeterminacy [can] itself become authority” (16), and with Winsome, Melville shows how the relativism implied by the narrator's theory of ironic “inconsistency” can be exploited and rendered into a mode of subjective autonomy. Winsome's philosophizing demonstrates that the Romantic conception of irony can be used in the service of self-sufficient progressive models of self-consciousness—an alliance that Melville ascribes to Emersonian Transcendentalism. Recalling the language of the narrator's aside in Chapter 14, Winsome dismisses the cosmopolitan's accusation of inconsistency:

I seldom care to be consistent. In a philosophical view, consistency is a certain level at all times, maintained in all the thoughts of one's mind. But, since nature is nearly all hill and dale, how can one keep naturally advancing in knowledge without submitting to the natural inequalities in



the progress? Advance into knowledge is just like advance upon the grand Erie canal, where, from the character of the country, change of level is inevitable; you are locked up and locked down with perpetual inconsistencies, and yet all the time you get on[.] (194-95)

In Winsome's philosophy, the "inequalities" of nature are the source of the "advance into knowledge"; they do not limit the individual's ability to "get on." Indeed, in his analogy, it is the inconsistencies that propel the boat forward, as "the duller part of the whole route is what the boatmen call the 'long level'—a consistently-flat surface of sixty miles through stagnant swamps" (195). For Winsome, the inconsistencies of nature are reduced to opportunities for the progression of self-consciousness, and through this progression, he reduces the contradictions he encounters not by eliminating them, but by transcending them: safe aboard a boat, the subject in Winsome's analogy is akin to the systemic ironist who, in "the position he has adopted, a transcendent one" is "above paradox" (Handwerk 39). Again, the ability of such an ironic approach to garner objective knowledge is questioned, as the *Cosmopolitan* enquires "after all these weary lockings-up and lockings-down, upon how much of a higher plain do you finally stand? Enough to make it an object?" (195). Yet unlike the skeptical negating ironist, or even the narrator, himself a confident systemic ironist, Winsome sees in indeterminacy not the forestalling of judgement, but rather an invitation for the extension of his will into the sphere of defining the other; the containment of indeterminacy through irony has, as Handwerk warned, become the basis of authority. Indeed, the question of consistency arises as Winsome attempts to justify his judgement of Frank Goodman through a series of contradictory "doctrine[s]" (190-94); Winsome proffers an account of the other, but denies the

accountability for this account, an ethical failure that is repeated in the encounter with the beggar discussed in the second chapter of this thesis. The final irony is that the narrator, with his ironic method of representing inconsistency as indeterminacy, is unable to pronounce a moral judgement of Winsome; he cannot call him to account.

### Conclusion

Melville is not a systemic ironist; he is profoundly engaged in the ironic paradoxes—and, more to my purposes, the paradoxes of irony—that his text presents.<sup>107</sup> During his encounter with Pitch, the Confidence-Man renounces irony: “irony is so unjust; never could abide irony; something Satanic about irony. God defend me from Irony” (142). The irony here, of course, is that the Confidence-Man, potentially an incarnation of Satan, is himself an ironist. Furthermore, as Stephen A. Barney observes, these lines form a “part of the novel's program of self-criticism” (166). In his later novels, Melville feels compelled to write in an ironic manner that renounces the tendency towards the reductive narrative violence of the unironic text, yet he remains painfully aware of the moral limitations of ironic communication. Through irony, Melville seeks to recognize the other subject in its alterity—both within the text and in its communicative dimension projected outwards to the reader—but he cannot abide the fall of irony into indeterminate equivocity, as this would entail the renunciation of the individual's ability to pronounce necessary moral judgements. In place of the univocity of narrative violence and the equivocity of indeterminate irony, Melville aims for a polyvocality that could sustain an open-ness to the alterity represented by other existents without the suspension

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<sup>107</sup> Thomas also notes how Melville's entanglement in the novel's paradoxes: “as the reflexiveness of the book illustrates, Melville himself cannot escape the conditions he describes” (*Cross-examinations* 191).

of judgement.<sup>108</sup> Dauber contends that “Melville reconstitutes” irony “as a mode of democratic solidarity” (201-202), and, according to Handwerk, such a model of democratic irony has a parallel in Schlegel's writings. Schlegel's final model of irony—marked by a “terminological shift” from “irony” to “conscience”—is what Handwerk deems “ethical irony” (40):

What this ethical irony adds is a reminder of the limited, even inessential, status of the individual subject. It counterbalances the self-centeredness possible with [. . .] systemic irony and the relativism implicit in negating irony—all of which can suggest that the ironist in in some sense at the end of his pursuit of knowledge. To the possibly empty or despairing openness of negating irony it adds an invitation to the other to participate in the process of self-unfolding that moves out beyond the individual. (41-42)

Handwerk maintains that ethical irony is a force for communal progress, but in opposition to Hegel's model of social progression through the development of self-consciousness, it is not a teleological process: “irony remains an endless regress, an eternal process. There is no absolute spirit in Schlegel's world” (42). In his own theorization of ethical irony, Handwerk argues that while irony does not lead to an ultimate grasp of absolute truth, it nevertheless provides the grounds for pragmatic moral judgements:

[I]rony is not just an attitude or an expression of some perceived truth but is also a reaction that endeavors to define a situational truth, what will suffice here and now. In avoiding absolutes, it attempts first to see other

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<sup>108</sup> Short argues that “polyvocality” gives way to “glossolalia” in the novel (145), a fall into the uncommunicative meaninglessness against which the novel mounts its ironic protest.

than before and thus to break open static situations. Self-consciousness may not coincide with social reality, but neither should it lag too far being.

(16)

While Melville would place a limit on the power to produce operative consensus attributed to irony by Handwerk, Melville's ironic practice works to establish this consensus in the face of its impossibility.<sup>109</sup> But in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville is only able to suggest such a model of ethical irony *ironically*, through the negation of the other models of narrative—sincere and ironic—that he represents throughout the novel.

In *Billy Budd*, however, Melville attempts to employ ethical irony directly through the narrator's technique of “indirection” (*Billy* 127). *Billy Budd* represents Melville's final statement on the ethics of narrative representation, and for this reason a discussion of the narrative technique of *Billy Budd* will serve as a means to re-trace the novelist's ethico-narrative explorations and consider the implications of their culmination in Melville's final work of fiction.

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<sup>109</sup> See Dauber (192-222; esp. 202; 212; 220-21)

## Chapter 5

### Best Done by Indirection:

#### Towards a Theory of Narrative Ethics

Like the narrator of *The Confidence-Man*, the narrator of *Billy Budd* provides a number of self-reflexive “authorial” asides, prompting Thomas to note that “[l]ike *The Confidence-Man*, *Billy Budd* is considered a proto-modernist text because of its reflection on its own forms” (194). As in the modernist works that followed, the self-reflexivity present in *Billy Budd* marks the author's concern with the imperative to communicate despite the realization of the impossibility of pure communication.<sup>110</sup> But while the narrator of *The Confidence-Man* reflects on the nature of fictional representations, *Billy Budd's* narrator is ostensibly offering an account of historical events. His observations on the ethics of narrativizing thus belong to what Newton refers to as “a representational ethics,” which concerns “the costs incurred in fictionalizing”—more broadly, narrativizing—“oneself or others by exchanging 'person' for 'character'”: “the gains, losses, and risks taken up when selves represent or are represented by others” (18). *Billy Budd*, then, goes even further than *The Confidence-Man* towards establishing a continuity between lived experience and fictional narrative, and even more firmly establishes narrative exchange—whether of fictional, conversational, or historical accounts—as an ethical moment producing real consequences for the lives of those involved. This assertion of the ethical implications of narration is not just represented within *Billy Budd*;

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<sup>110</sup> I draw here again on Dauber, who argues that “Melville conceives of noncommunication as communication too” in his discussion of the progression of Melville's conception of authorship (219; 192-228). The quotation from Schlegel that forms the epigraph to my fourth chapter, in which he reflects on “the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication” (qtd. in Colebrook 54), demonstrates that Melville's supposed “proto-modernis[m]” was shared by the German Romantics (*Cross-examinations* 194).

insofar as the novel appeals outwards to its readers—for judgement and communication—*Billy Budd* enacts the model of ethical intersubjectivity suggested by its ironic mode of narration. An interrogation of the narrative method of Melville's final novel, then, will serve as a means to summarize Melville's narrative ethics, but also to determine how Melville's works present the ideal ethical relationship between author and reader, and the responsibilities attributed to each.

In the first section of this chapter I explore the ethical implications of the two appended versions of Billy's story that finish the novel: the “ragged edges” of the narrator's tale that, ironically, attempt to apply a reductive “symmetry of form” to the meaning of Billy's life (*Billy* 167). These two versions of Billy's life represent ethico-narrative failures, as they attempt to reduce Billy to a comprehensible, consumable object. In the second section, I look to the narrator's version of Billy's story, which counteracts these two unethical narratives by enacting a mode of narration in keeping with the theory of ethical irony elaborated in the preceding chapter. The following two sections concern the problem of judgement: the third section focuses on the judgement of the narrator within the novel, while the final section considers the novel's appeals for the judgements of readers from without. Judgement is required to avoid the ethical failings that would follow from the unencumbered moral relativism of ironic indeterminacy.<sup>111</sup> Through its depiction of the ethical implications of narration, the novel denies any aesthetic theory that sees the contemplation of fiction as open-ended play; it presents an ethical imperative to judge. The narrator, I argue, does proffer his judgement of the story he tells, but through his admission of the ironic partiality of his perspective, he opens up

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<sup>111</sup> For a discussion of the conflict between relativism and absolutism in Melville's work, see Wenke (581-87).

his judgement to the judgement of his interlocutors: his readers. Ultimately, the novel's ethical ironic narrative suggests that judgement should not represent an attempt to translate subjective thought into objective law by way of reasoning; rather, the novel suggests a model of intersubjective judgement, in which the individual recognizes the partiality of his or her subjective judgement and appeals to the other in a discursive attempt to approximate (but not achieve, for the process is continuous) truth and justice. This active intersubjective communication—not the judgements that it produces—represents the ethical core of Melville's theory of narrative ethics.

## I

*Billy Budd* ends with two supplementary versions of Billy's story: an “account of the affair” from “a naval chronicle of the time, an authorized weekly publication” (168), and “Billy in the Darbies,” a tribute written by a sailor with “an artless *poetic* temperament,” which was “rudely printed at Portsmouth as a ballad” (169). These two appended portrayals of the events recounted in the novel are narratives based, respectively, on the formal and sensuous drives. Again, however, insofar as they work towards the same end—reducing Billy and his death into objectively comprehensible terms—the presentation of these narratives subverts the distinction between these drives. Over the course of the novel, the narrator offers insight into and criticism of how these two drives translate lived experience into narrative. Through the depiction of the sailors' gossip, the narrator shows how the sensuous drive creates narratives that correspond to the needs and desires of the individual; as Schiller argues, “[f]eeling can only say: this is true for this individual and at this moment [. . .]. Inclination can only say: this is good for

you as an individual and for your present need” (83). Claggart, like Billy, becomes a target for speculation and hence interpretation among the ship's men. Claggart is another unaccountable figure; he lacks a history: “Nothing was known of his former life” (120), the narrator informs his readers. But the combination of Claggart's character, his position on the ship, and the mystery of his background causes the sailors aboard the ship to speculate, and thus to create a narrative explaining the mystery:

And indeed a man of Claggart's accomplishments, without prior nautical experience entering the navy at mature life, as he did, and necessarily allotted at the start to the lowest grade in it; a man too who never made allusion to his previous life ashore; these were circumstances which in the dearth of exact knowledge as to his true antecedents opened to the invidious a vague field for unfavorable surmise. (120)

As Johnson argues, in *Billy Budd* “gaps in understanding are never directly perceived as such by the characters in the novel; those gaps are themselves taken as interpretable signs and triggers for interpretation” (94). The rumour that circulates among the sailors attempts to account for the perceived moral ambiguity of Claggart: “Among certain grizzled sea-gossips of the gun decks and forecastle went a rumor perdue that the master-at-arms was a *chevalier* who had volunteered into the King's navy by way of compounding for some mysterious swindle whereof he had been arraigned at the King's Bench” (120). Moreover, this rumour is validated not by the ascertaining of its factuality, but due to its ability to account for the mystery presented by Claggart's personality and to justify the prejudices of the sailors against men in his position: “The fact that nobody could substantiate this report was, of course, nothing against its secret currency. Such a



rumor once started on the gun decks in reference to almost anyone below the rank of a commissioned officer would, during the period assigned to this narrative, have seemed not altogether wanting in credibility to the tarry old wiseacres of a man-of-war crew” (120). The narrator also lists a number of historical circumstances related to the impressment of criminals and debtors that do not corroborate the story, but increase its plausibility (120-21). Among the sailors, narratives are not granted credence due to their correspondence to the facts, to “truth,” but instead for their ability to account for mysterious phenomena in a way that confirms their prejudices and their moral judgements. Insofar as these narratives are used to make sense of the experience of the sailors' lives, they become operatively true; they form the basis of the men's actions, again showing how narratives are not separate from, but continuous with human interaction.

The novel concludes with the ballad written by one of Billy's fellow sailors. In no uncertain terms, the narrator relates the poem and its popularity with the sailors to feeling rather than factuality—to the sensuous drive: “Ignorant though [the sailors] were of the secret facts of the tragedy, and not thinking but that the penalty was somehow unavoidably inflicted from the naval point of view, for all that, they *instinctively felt* that Billy was a sort of man as incapable of mutiny as of wilful murder” (169; emphasis added). Again, the *lack* of factual knowledge is the incitement for narration: their “impression of him was doubtless deepened by the fact that he was gone, and in a measure *mysteriously* gone” (169; emphasis added). The ballad, written in the first-person from Billy's perspective, aims to present Billy's final thoughts, his rueful ruminations upon his impending death. The touches of humour add to the *pathos* of the ballad,

although, as Brodtkorb points out, they are hardly in keeping with Billy's character ("The Definitive" 120-21). Indeed, as Robert K. Martin argues, "[n]othing in the ballad conveys anything about Billy's life" (122). Johnson refers to the poem as the "mythification of Billy Budd" (80), and through this process of myth-making, his character—who he was—becomes secondary to his meaning—what he represents. Moreover, what he is made to represent corresponds to the sensual needs of those implicated by the representation: the poet and his fellow sailors. Martha M. Umphrey describes the ballad as "an artifact of Billy's idealization": "in Freud's terms, this ballad expresses the sailors' fantasy of a lost love object" (429). The poem serves as a narrative version of the sensuous consumptive gaze that Greven describes in his discussion of the role of *The Handsome Sailor*:

*Billy Budd* suggests that looking is a ritualistic group activity that cyclically incites and sustains (male) community. Each time *The Handsome Sailor* appears, a group of sailors, arrested by his visual splendor, converge upon and surround him. Looking becomes an act of tribal male cannibalism (cannibalism being an early Melville trope in the sea fiction)—the sailors ingest the Handsome Sailor with their eyes. (15)

According to the narrator, the sailors do not remember Billy as a person; instead they "recalled the fresh young image of the Handsome Sailor" (169). Billy is posthumously reduced to an image, and the image is that of a type. The sailors' appetitive natures, seemingly ruled by the sensuous drive, also fit Schiller's description of individuals controlled by the formal drive, which aims to remove content from form in an act of universalization (81). The ballad fails as an ethical narrative because it tries to reduce the

other, Billy, to the self, whether that self is the poet or his reader. As its title ironically suggests, the poem shows Billy's subjectivity constrained by the "darbies" of representation.

In the novel, the ballad immediately follows the narrator's description of the official naval account of Billy's execution. The narrator informs his readers that this account from the "naval chronicle" is "all that hitherto has stood in human record to attest what manner of men respectively were John Claggart and Billy Budd" (169). Throughout the novel, the narrator casts doubt on the neutrality of the "human record" of history. Historical narratives in *Billy Budd* are not presented as objective, disinterested accounts of factual events, but as selective histories which often reflect the interests and allegiances of their authors.<sup>112</sup> After offering an account of the Nore mutiny, the narrator notes the event's absence from most naval histories:

Such an episode in the Island's grand naval story her naval historians naturally abridge, one of them (William James) candidly acknowledging that fain would he pass it over did not "impartiality forbid fastidiousness." And yet his mention is less a narration than a reference, having to do hardly at all with details. Nor are these readily to be found in the libraries. Like some other events in every age befalling states everywhere, including America,<sup>113</sup> the Great Mutiny was of such character that national pride along with views of policy would fain shade it off into the historical background. Such events cannot be ignored, but there is a considerate way

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<sup>112</sup> See Samson for a discussion of Melville's conception of historiography (1-21). Thomas J. Scorza also explores the opposition between the novel's depictions of historical narratives and the narrator's unconventional historiographical method (371-74).

<sup>113</sup> Here, as elsewhere, Melville reminds his contemporary American audience that even though the novel is set in the past and aboard a British ship, the issues raised are very much of their age and culture.

of historically treating them. If a well-constituted individual refrains from blazoning aught amiss or calamitous in his family, a nation in the like circumstance may without reproach be equally discreet. (112-13)

The narrator suggests that narrating such events is imperative, but he also implies that historical narratives can be used to serve national interests, or at least to “discreetly” report on historical blemishes in a way that limits the damage done to the national image and the authorities and institutions that undergird it. The purging of historical accounts of all “details” is an enactment of the formal drive's impetus to empty form of all content, leading to the formation of supposedly rational, universal laws (Schiller 81); it is an act of violent narrative reduction.

However, in *Billy Budd*, as I have argued, the laws in question are the irrational forms of the naval order, and hence require the constant forceful re-assertion of their rational status.<sup>114</sup> Thomas argues that Vere's version of Claggart's murder “establishes a clear chain of causality” (*Cross-examinations* 234), and this same causal logic structures the “official” naval version of the story. Within the syllogistic logic of the naval account, however, the law serves as both premise and conclusion: the narrative implies not only that Billy must die *because* it is the law, but also that Billy *must* die and *thus* it is the law.<sup>115</sup> This latter, self-legitimizing accomplishment of the rational rhetoric requires an appeal to natural moral inclinations through the re-insertion of details, although again the “facts” of the narrative represent the lack of a factual basis: “the medium, partly rumor,

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<sup>114</sup> As in Chapter 3, I draw here on Thomas's discussion of the irrationality of the naval order (*Cross-examinations* 214-15).

<sup>115</sup> I draw here on Thomas, who argues that the “use of history to deny alternative possibilities within history is one of the most subtle ways in which formalist legal thought legitimizes the status quo” (*Cross-examinations* 236). See also Thomas Claviez on Derrida and the performance of judgement (36-45).

through which the facts must have reached the writer served to deflect and in part falsify them” (168). Like the sailors' gossip, the official naval account relies upon rumour for its “factual” material,<sup>116</sup> and again the content of the speculations reflect the desired ends of those who create the narrative: here, the naval authorities. Hence Billy is presented as a foreigner posing as an Englishman, the “ringleader” of a mutinous band who stabbed Claggart in the heart, while Claggart is described as a patriotic martyr (168):

The enormity of the crime and the extreme depravity of the criminal appear the greater in view of the character of the victim, a middle-aged man respectable and discreet, belonging to that minor official grade, the petty-officers, upon whom, as none know better than the commissioned gentlemen, the efficiency of His Majesty's navy so largely depends. (168)

The account's alteration of the means of Claggart's murder—that is, the replacement of the factual fist to Claggart's head to the fictional knife to his heart—demonstrates the dependence of this formal narrative on an appeal to the sensuous. But to return, Billy must die because he is a threat to the naval order, and the maintenance of the naval order is proven necessary in the face of “the extreme depravity” of individuals like Billy (168). The “*authorized*” version of the events that transpired aboard the *Bellipotent* serves to reassert the institutional *authority* of the navy (168), ironically pointing to the precariousness of the law's “rational” status. Furthermore, the assent of the “commissioned gentlemen” is written into the interpellative narrative; like Billy, their role in the narrative is ascribed by the authoritative text. Discourse, the basis for Levinas of all ethical interaction, is denied through the naval account's silencing of dissent.

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<sup>116</sup> Although there is something of ironic naivete to the narrator's comment here: the reason for the account's “falsification” is surely to some extent ideological.

## II

The formal and sensuous drives, then, are shown by these two narratives to be not just conterminous, but also co-dependent. Lester H. Hunt refers to these two supplementary accounts of Billy's story as "outside narratives" (275), placing them in opposition to the "inside narrative" promised by the novel's subtitle (*Billy* 103). These "outside" narratives, however, are based on a faith in the ability to render what is exterior to the narrator comprehensible; they represent the grasp of totalization that Levinas associates with both reason and enjoyment, and hence the assimilation of the other into the same. Conversely, the narrator's version of the story works on the assumption of the irreducible alterity of its subjects; his *inside* narrative maintains and emphasizes the infinite exteriority of the other. The narrator works to counteract the narrative embodiments of the hybrid sensuo-formal drive, and like Schiller, he sees aesthetic contemplation (here, the contemplation of narratives) as a means of escaping the compulsion to possess that is made manifest in reductive narratives.

The nature of this contemplation as represented by the narrator, however, differs vastly from Schiller's depiction of the "purely aesthetic experience" (153). While Schiller sees the development of the aesthetic drive as a mediating force between the demands of duty and inclination, the aesthetic drive ultimately serves as a phase in the teleological development of self-consciousness towards the "triumph of form" (213). Schiller maintains that the impulse towards form that finds its culmination in the aesthetic State is distinct from the formal drive, but the differentiation breaks down in Schiller's description of pure aesthetic representation, which he deems the creation of pure

“aesthetic semblance” (197). For Schiller, the process of artistic representation is one of abstraction: “In a truly successful work of art the contents should effect nothing, the form everything” (155). The particulars represented in the work of art should serve only to induce contemplation of the general. Indeed, Schiller argues that “[s]ubject-matter [. . .] always has a limiting effect upon the spirit” (155). The goal of any artist, then, is to “make his form *consume* his material” (157; emphasis added), demonstrating the extension of the consumptive formal drive into the realm of the aesthetic. Furthermore, for a work of art to achieve pure semblance, it must renounce all ties to the material world: “Only inasmuch as it is honest (expressly renounces all claims to reality), and only inasmuch as it is autonomous (dispenses with all support from reality), is semblance aesthetic” (197). The ideal work of art, then, sees in reality only the raw material for representation, which the work of semblance must transfigure into abstraction.

The narrator of *Billy Budd*, of course, presents his story as a historical narrative, and his refusal to translate the material he represents into formal abstraction is ostensibly linked to its factual basis: “The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction can not so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges” (167). Yet, as demonstrated above, the novel suggests that there is an ethical valence to all acts of narration, and thus narratives are presented as continuous with the moral lives of the interlocutors exchanging them. The delineation between “pure fiction” and “fact” dissolves, as fictional—or at least non-factual—narratives are represented in the novel as means for individuals not just to contemplate the irresolvable dilemmas of existence, but also to establish courses of action in the material world. The narrator's reason for refusing

the “symmetry of form”—his desire for factual accuracy—is ethical, and his ethics similarly prevent him from offering definitive representations of his story's characters and their motivations. Defining the “exceptional characters” that people his narrative is something that the narrator admits is beyond the realm of factual narration (118): before describing Claggart, the narrator confesses that “his portrait I essay, but shall never hit it” (119); unable to fully account for Claggart, and unwilling to commit the ethical trespass of producing a reductive narrative account, the narrator opts instead for an “*adequate* comprehending of Claggart,” which is to be achieved through a narrative strategy of “indirection” (127; emphasis added). Johnson argues—conflating Melville with the narrator—that “[w]hat Melville says he will *not* do here is precisely what Billy Budd *does* do: hit John Claggart. It would seem that speaking and killing are thus mutually exclusive; Billy Budd kills because he cannot speak, while Melville, through the very act of speaking, does not kill” (92). Johnson continues that according to this logic, “to describe perfectly, to refer adequately, would be to 'hit' the referent and thus annihilate it; [ . . . ] to know completely would be to obliterate the very object known” (92). Johnson's encapsulation of the novel's ethical view of language recalls Levinas's ethics, according to which the discursive basis of the face-to-face encounter serves to prohibit murder, and hence my own theorization of narrative violence and murder.

Johnson's deconstructive reading, however, stops in a state of paralysis: if “language can retain its 'innocence' only by giving up its referential validity,” then “Melville can avoid murder only by grounding his discourse in ineradicable error” (92); “[d]irectness and indirectness,” she concludes, “are equally suspect and equally innocent” (93). But Johnson, in my view, misinterprets the narrator's method of indirection,



confusing it with indeterminacy. The narrator sees it as an ethico-narrative imperative to represent the characters of the novel, even while admitting that to perform such a task—to definitively “hit” a portrait—represents both an impossibility and an ethical failure. Nevertheless, the narrator's aim in relating the story of *Billy Budd* is to “essay” the “portraits” of all of the characters. To “essay” means both “to attempt” and “to put to the proof, try” (OED), and both of these meanings are operative in the narrator's use of the term: he *attempts* to represent the characters in question, but he also constantly *tests* and *tries* the portraits he produces, judging them and reflecting on their insufficiency.

Like *The Confidence-Man*, then, *Billy Budd* contains an ironic narrative, the narrator of which consistently undermines his own authority; but unlike the “systemic” ironist who narrates *The Confidence-Man*, *Billy Budd*'s narrator is very much involved in the dilemmas and paradoxes he presents. Brodtkorb describes the narrator of the novel as “a kind of amateur historian” (115), one who aims to get the story right, but is willing to acknowledge the limitations of his own knowledge (115-16). Insofar as the narrative works to counteract the biases it identifies in “authorized” historical accounts, Samson's description of *Billy Budd* as an “antihistory” seems more apt (15), but Brodtkorb's point stands: while the narrator of the novel readily admits to his inability to adequately relate the story he aims to tell, he also cannot abide a state of indeterminacy in which the story is not told, and hence in which judgement is withheld. The simultaneous admission of the inadequacy of the narrative he produces and affirmation of the necessity to narrate forms the basis of the narrator's appeal outside himself. Brodtkorb argues that “the narrator is engaged throughout in trying to understand his characters; in trying, that is, to get at the always problematic nature of the *other*” (116), but the narrator also recognizes that to

avoid the equally undesirable alternatives of the unethical reduction of the other into a narrativizable form and the moral flippancy of indeterminacy, his “essays” of the “nature of the other” must admit a dependency *on* others; the narrator is, in Handwerk's sense, an ethical ironist.

This dependency can be read in the novel's thick intertextuality, as the narrator supplements his own narrative with other narratives, and copious allusions. The narrator mourns the loss of Biblical scripture as a cultural touchstone—“if that lexicon which is based on Holy Writ were any longer popular, one might with less difficulty define and denominate certain phenomenal men” (127)—leading Gordon Teskey to argue that *Billy Budd* represents a narrative nostalgia for the explanatory capacity of Judeo-Christian myth (377). But Teskey's reading of the novel privileges the narrative's Biblical allusions while ignoring the numerous other allusions that are interlaced with the main narrative, and which help to elaborate the characterizations provided by the novel's narrator: these include the mythological (Apollo, Taurus, and the quasi-mythical tale of Alexander and Bucephalus); the literary (Radcliffe, Hawthorne, Tennyson); the philosophical (Plato, Burke, Paine, Bentham); and the historical (the accounts of the Nore and Spithead mutinies, the tales of the exploits of the naval commander Nelson, the numerous references to the French Revolution). The result, Brodtkorb contends in something of a Bakhtinian reading of the novel's intertextuality, is that these different narratives all constitute different voices, different languages, within the novel, and these “different languages may very well involve differing experiences of the world” (121). “[I]n *Billy Budd*,” he continues, “the various vocabularies out of various lexicons debate with each other and seem to reflect various experiences of particular phenomena in the story” (121).

The juxtaposition of all of these conflicting attempts to define the other actually results in the multiplication of the other's difference, and the narrative of *Billy Budd* thereby recognizes the other *in* his or her difference; the novel thus serves as a meditation upon the difficulty inherent in trying to distil such radical difference into literary representation.

However, through his appeals outwards to the reader, the narrator attempts to move beyond this state of intertextual indetermination. The narrator opens up his account to discussion through a recognition of the other: the reader. His ironic equivocations thus become ethical, insofar as they represent a discursive appeal. After debating *with himself* as to whether or not Vere “was really the sudden victim of any degree of aberration” when he pronounced his judgement of Billy, the narrator ultimately projects the imperative to judge onto the reader: “every one *must* determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford” (148; emphasis added). The narrator's story in many ways implies his judgement, but his awareness of its limitations compels him to call upon the reader to participate in the process of adjudication, and hence to judge his judgement.<sup>117</sup> to *try* the narrator's *essays* at the portraits of the novel's characters.

### III

Thomas Claviez argues that *Billy Budd's* “genealogy of reception and criticism can [. . .] serve as a small cultural history of ethics” (33). The various ethico-critical viewpoints all hinge on how the character of Vere is to be interpreted: whether he is a tragic figure, a utilitarian leader bound by duty to act against his inclination, or an ambitious authoritarian who needlessly sacrifices Billy's life for what boils down to

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<sup>117</sup> Johnson similarly notes that in the novel, “[j]udgement is [. . .] open to judgement” (108).

nothing more than self-interest. But these are not questions about Vere *per se* so much as they are questions about how he is presented—questions about how we are to read not just the narrative, but also the narrator and his sympathetic portrayal of Vere: is the narrator a textual incarnation of an aged Melville who has come to accept the necessity of sacrificing the individual to maintain the social order and guard against the heedless violence of revolution, or is he to be read ironically as the voice of a conservatism that Melville himself would abhor?<sup>118</sup> As Johnson has effectively demonstrated, this tension between literal and ironic reading is already built into the text; the opposition between these readings, she argues, is “one of the things the story is *about*” (97). What Johnson deems ironic reading, however, is limited to the simplistic irony of sarcasm, whereby, as Colebrook explains, irony represents no more than “signalling the opposite of what was said” (53). The tension she identifies between the literal and the ironic is more in keeping with the Romantic conception of irony as paradox whereby irony represents an “expression of *both sides or viewpoints at once*” (Colebrook 53-54).<sup>119</sup> Yet Johnson goes further to reject the very form of opposition:

It would seem, then, that the function of judgment is to convert an ambiguous situation into a decidable one. But it does so by converting a difference *within* [. . .] into a difference *between* [. . .]. A difference *between* opposing forces presupposes that the entities in conflict be knowable. A difference *within* one of the entities in question is precisely what problematizes the very *idea* of an entity in the first place [. . .]. In studying the plays of both ambiguity and binarity, Melville's story situates

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<sup>118</sup> Both *Critical Essays on Melville's Billy Budd, Sailor* and *Billy Budd and the Critics* contain numerous essays representative of these two camps (Midler; Stafford).

<sup>119</sup> See Colebrook for a further discussion of Romantic irony (45-71)

*its* critical difference neither within nor between, but in the *relation*  
*between the two*[.] (105-106)

Johnson, however, misconstrues “this relation between” “ambiguity and binarity” (106). The model of judgement presented by *Billy Budd* suggests that the call for judgement elicited by binary oppositions represents a means of overcoming binarism and discovering not ambiguity, but multiplicity. The ethical irony of Melville's narrative in *Billy Budd* requires what Dauber deems the “either/or of propositional logic” not in order to didactically present one of the two choices as superior (206),<sup>120</sup> but rather to emphasize the imperative to choose despite the irreducibility of the dilemma. Moreover, this irreducibility leads to the admission of the need for others in the process of judgement, thereby making of judgement a communicative process through which the terms of the opposition—and, by extension, its very status *as* an opposition—can be negotiated.

In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin describes the meta-fictional nature of the novel: “Behind the narrator's story we read a second story, the author's story; he is the one who tells us how the narrator tells stories” (314). Melville's “story” in *Billy Budd* represents an attempt to outline an ethical mode of narration, but it also presents a model of ethical reading. For Melville's project to be successful, he requires the narrator to pronounce his judgement of the action he narrates, while also recognizing the necessary partiality of this judgement. Were the narrator to directly state his judgement, as though his conclusions represented the inevitable outcome of deductive reasoning, the narrative would lose its ethical force. However, if the narrator was to withhold judgement, or to

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<sup>120</sup> Dauber offers an insightful reading of the development of the logic of Melville's rhetoric, although he mistakenly concludes that the narrator of *Billy Budd*'s “explanation of events” represents an “either/and” logic, “*unnecessary* and sufficient” (226). Instead, the novel suggests that the narrator's language is *necessary*, insofar as the novel posits that it is imperative that the events described within be accounted, and *insufficient*, insofar as the narrator requires others to come to an ethical judgement.

simply transfer the authority to judge to his readers, he would be, like the narrator of *The Confidence-Man*, a systemic ironist who abdicates all responsibility for the account he offers. Moreover, to fully realize the ethical appeal of the narrative form, Melville requires that his narrator's judgement be not only partial, but also, in some instances, misguided. If the narrator were able to come to the *correct* judgement—even while admitting a dependency on others in the process of coming to it—the relationship between the narrator and his audience would become unilaterally didactic: able to readily navigate the many voices that contribute to his appraisal of the story, the narrator would simply have to relay his findings to the passive audience.

As many critics have noted, the narrator of *Billy Budd* expresses sympathy for Vere.<sup>121</sup> He judiciously includes details that expose the limitations of this judgement, but the subversive potential of these ironies is clear only to the author (and *some* of his readers), not the narrator himself, who works consistently to justify Vere's actions in face of the criticisms that are consistently attributed to others: the Surgeon, his fellow officers, even the novel's readers. While the narrative equivocally alludes to the manner in which Vere “perhaps deviated from general custom” in preparing the tribunal that would judge Billy, the narrator's rehearsal of Vere's reasoning—according to which the “urgency” of the case required that expediency trump custom for the fulfilment of military duty (149)—dominates his account.<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, the narrator explains away any shortcomings Vere may have by referring to the Captain's religious devotion to the naval order: “But a true military officer is in one particular like a true monk. Not with more of

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<sup>121</sup> This sympathetic portrayal is often assigned to the author. See Fogle (57), Thomas (*Cross-examinations* 249), and any of the “testament of acceptance” essays found in Midler and Stafford's volumes.

<sup>122</sup> Hence Thomas notes that to focus on the subversive ironies of the narrator's account is to read the novel “against the grain” (*Cross-examinations* 220).

self-abnegation will the latter keep his vows of monastic obedience than the former his vows of allegiance to martial duty” (148). And even Vere's seemingly blind obedience to naval duty is mitigated through the scene of Schillerian transcendence that the narrator imagines in his depiction of the exchange between Billy and Vere, as the former is told the tribunal's sentence. The narrator presents a vision of reconciliation not just between Billy and Vere, but also a reconciliation *within* Vere:<sup>123</sup> “The austere devotee of military duty [. . . let] himself melt back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity” (157). In Schiller's terms, Billy's “melting beauty” (Schiller 113)—here again interpreted as innocence, as evinced by the allusion to the story of Isaac (*Billy* 157)—mediates between Vere's “formal” impulse towards the maintenance of the law and his sensuous “primeval” instincts. During this crucial scene, however, the narrator foregrounds the speculative nature of his account as he does nowhere else in the novel. Instead of offering an actual account of the meeting, the narrator surmises what happened based on what is known of the two men involved: “in view of the character of the twain briefly closeted in that stateroom [. . .] some conjectures may be ventured” (156).<sup>124</sup> Yet Billy and Vere, the narrator reminds the reader, “each radically shar[e] in the rarer qualities of our nature—so rare indeed as to be all but incredible to average minds however much cultivated” (156).

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<sup>123</sup> Determining the narrator's motivations for producing this scene proves difficult. Umphrey describes this scene as a “recuperative fantasy” (424), and claims that “[t]he *narrator's* fantasy of eros calls into question *Vere's* fantasy of law-as-violence” (425). Samson, however, criticizes the narrator for being “conservative” and self-serving, arguing that “[b]y stressing the tragic and otherworldly aspects of Billy's story, he diverts it away from revolution and toward an acceptance of the status quo” (227). Both, however, neglect to mention that in undermining the authority of his account, the narrator in fact invites such judgements.

<sup>124</sup> Although the narrator has access to all of the private encounters throughout the novel—Billy's midnight conversation with the afterguardsman, Billy's conversations with the Dansker, the communication of Claggart's accusation to Vere—what transpires during the private meeting between Billy and Vere inexplicably remains a mystery: “beyond the communication of the sentence what took place at this interview was never known” (156). Umphrey offers some intriguing speculation as to why this might be (424-27).

The narrator's speculation is thus based upon what the narrator knows of these two “phenomenal men” (127), but defining such “exceptional characters” (118), let alone attempting to deduce their motivations, is something that the narrator admits is beyond his narrative capacity. Hence the narrator's emphasis on the “conjectural” basis of his account marks it as a judgement, demonstrating his belief in the imperative to make such moral determinations in spite of the impossibility of achieving the complete knowledge that would make these judgements authoritative; while the narrator abjures his ability to fully comprehend the motivations of the others he represents, he nevertheless feels obliged to *essay* a judgement of the characters. Ultimately, however, the narrator's version of the encounter between Vere and Billy merely represents what *might have been*, and as the narrator himself says, “the *might-have-been* is but boggy ground to build on” (114).<sup>125</sup> While Brodtkorb notes “the narrator's qualifications, speculations, and hesitations” (122), unlike the narrator of *The Confidence-Man*, the narrator of *Billy Budd*'s equivocations do not result in a morally unacceptable equivocity. Through his ironic asides, the narrator hints at *what else* might have been, hints that concede the insufficiency of his capacity to judge, and summon the readers to judge for themselves, but also to judge his judgement.

#### IV

*Billy Budd*'s refusal of Aristotelian “moral anagnorisis”<sup>126</sup> has led some critics to read the novel as a series of unsolved and perhaps unsolvable moral dilemmas (Nuttall

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<sup>125</sup> This famous line serves as an ironic comment on fiction, insofar as the novel as a whole works to “build” intersubjective connections on the grounds of the fictional “*might-have-been*” of its narrative.

<sup>126</sup> A.D. Nuttall states that *anagnorisis* has the “general meaning 'recognition of the underlying truth'” (97). He develops the idea of “moral anagnorisis” through his reading of *King Lear* (97)



97).<sup>127</sup> Johnson places these critics into a third school of *Billy Budd* criticism—alongside the “testament of acceptance” and “testament of resistance” lines of interpretation—that “has devoted itself to the ambiguity in the story” (79). In his polemical response to Johnson's essay, Thomas places Johnson squarely within this group of critics who focus on the text's ambiguity. Thomas criticizes Johnson for positioning herself above the ironies of judgement in the text: she offers, he contends, “a way of reading that accounts for the different ways of reading *Billy Budd*. Her reading would seem to be a privileged and more enlightened reading” (“*Billy Budd*” 201). Thomas characterizes Johnson's “deconstructive strategy” as a call for “deferred judgment and interpretation” (199; 201), since, in his view, she believes that “[a] deferred interpretation stays 'truer' to the text because any interpretation involves a judgment that halts the play of the text's inherently ambiguous language” (201).<sup>128</sup> While Thomas frequently mischaracterizes both Johnson's reading and, more generally, the project of deconstruction, his conclusion that *Billy Budd* both contains sufficient information to allow for a judgement and appeals for such a judgement from its readers shows that the novel itself objects to the reduction of narrative to a space for textual play (203; 210).

But one need not look to the heady theoretical debates of the 1980s to find a theory of play that embodies the characteristics of deconstruction that Thomas—somewhat anachronistically—implies Melville opposes. Schiller presents a theory of

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<sup>127</sup> Johnson offers a list of critics who view the novel as, ultimately, ambiguous (151n).

<sup>128</sup> Johnson *does* note that the text appeals for judgement, but she concludes that “[t]he effect of [the] explicit oscillations of judgment within the text is to underline the importance of the act of judging while rendering its outcome undecidable” (101). Thomas's response to Johnson in “*Billy Budd* and the Judgment of Silence” remains the strongest cases against reading the novel as irreducibly indeterminate (199-211), although Thomas softened his position and admitted to the presence of some unresolvable ambiguity in the novel by the time he wrote the essays found in *Cross-examinations* (249). Claviez's reading serves as an interesting mediation between Johnson and Thomas, insofar as he demonstrates that deconstruction does not mean simple indeterminacy by drawing on Derrida to argue that the novel appeals for determinate judgement.

aesthetic play in his description of the “aesthetic determinability” that characterizes the individual's contemplation in the aesthetic state (145). Schiller differentiates between “aesthetic determinability,” which “has no limits, because it embraces all reality,” and “mere indetermination,” which is “without limits, because it is without reality” (145): “If, therefore, the latter—indetermination through sheer absence of determination—[is] thought of as an empty infinity, then aesthetic freedom of determination, which is its counterpart in reality, must be regarded as an infinity filled with content” (145). Aesthetic determinability, then, represents a form of indeterminacy similar to that of systemic irony—as well as that attributed to Johnson by Brooks: individuals in the aesthetic state, like systemic ironists, achieve a transcendence that allows them to contemplate the paradoxes of the infinite while simultaneously abdicating any responsibility for the moral dilemmas uncovered in the process. Unlike deconstructionists, however, Schiller attributes a utilitarian function to aesthetic play in the process of teleological individual and social progress that he outlines. For Schiller, aesthetic determinability is a step in the development of self-consciousness towards a higher form of reason: the “lawlessness” of free determination in the aesthetic state escapes the “alien laws” of the sensuous and formal drives, and is thus a stage of development towards the “autonomous law-giving from within” provided by “the faculty of ideas” (209n). The aesthetic stage of consciousness, then, is an exercise of autonomy that aims at the achievement of moral freedom. Ultimately, Schiller contends, the development of self-consciousness will culminate in an ethical social order: in the process of advancing into this realm of higher rationality the individual comes to recognize humanity, and “[d]esire widens, and is exalted into love” (213). But even here the imposition of limitations on free will is an act

of volition: in discovering its humanity, the subject achieves a “noble[. . .] victory over will,” but “must be *willing* to concede freedom” (213; emphasis added). In Schiller's view, the subject is autonomous: its relationship with the other is one of its choosing, not of dependency.

Schiller's model, then, offers a theory of aesthetic contemplation from Melville's age that valorizes an unethical indeterminacy, and moreover sees this indeterminacy as a stage in the development towards personal autonomy; it embodies the very conception of art that Melville's work counteracts. Indeed, Schiller's theory is a complete inversion of the mode of ethical ironic narration and reading I have identified as implied in Melville's work: Melville sees ethical obligation as placing limits on—rather than resulting from—individual freedom; he denies the ability of ironists to transcend the paradoxes they encounter and represent; he sees indeterminacy as a source of the individual's recognition of dependency on others, not a means of developing autonomy; and, finally, “free determination” is not a stage of development of self-consciousness, but a state of indeterminacy to be escaped through the development of ethical judgement—judgements that take into account their partiality and their dependency. The imperative to actively judge is emphasized in one of the novel's most famous passages. Reflecting on the urge to judge Vere's judgement with the benefit of hindsight, the narrator quotes from “a writer whom few know” (156)<sup>129</sup>:

Forty years after a battle it is easy for a noncombatant to reason about how it ought to have been fought. It is another thing personally and under fire to direct the fighting while involved in the obscuring smoke of it. Much so

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<sup>129</sup> The passage, as editor Dan McCall notes, is not quoted, but original (*Billy Budd* 156n), and thus Melville is himself the obscure author to whom the narrator refers.

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 though at the hazard of running somebody down. Little ween the snug card players in the cabin of the responsibilities of the sleepless man on the bridge. (156)

As Claviez points out, when the metaphor shifts in the second half of the quotation, the meaning changes dramatically (35):

To turn the speediness of a decision under gun smoke into the decision to put speed on a steamer in a fog turns speediness itself into something both utterly wrong and completely insane. Moreover, in another displacement, the non-combatant judging the scene forty years later is turned into the card player *on the ship*; that is, into someone who cannot afford being unconcerned about—because he is immediately effected by—the decisions made by some mad captain. (35)

Claviez rightly observes that this passage can be read meta-fictionally, with the reader cast as the “non-combatant” removed from the situation, presuming the ability to judge without “the obscuring smoke” of lived circumstances and, it is implied, without fear of the consequences of the judgement (34). If the readers are the “snug card-players,” however, then their fates are tied up with the judgements of the “man on the bridge.” Claviez identifies this passage as an ironic call for the judgement of the reader, but he sees the passage as a “trap” set by the author, who “deliberately creates a smokescreen for the willing reader” who does “not tak[e] time to read the text thoroughly” (35); Claviez does not note the communicative—the ethical—nature of the appeal. While Captain Vere

may have ignored and overpowered the voices that tried to communicate their reservations, the “captain” of the novel—the narrator as author-figure—repeatedly appeals to his readers for their input. The passage serves, then, not as a “trap,” but a call (albeit an ironic one) to escape from the “peril” of passive reading: an appeal for readers to put down their “cards” and pay attention to their surroundings; to talk with each other about their predicament; and ultimately, to advise the “man on the bridge,” whose misguided judgement is “imperilling” them all—to share in his “responsibilities.” The implication is that the audience must not feel so “snug” in their readerly “cabins.”

The narrator's self-reflexivity in *Billy Budd* underlines his self-awareness about the ethical implications of his act of narration, but through the numerous direct addresses to his readers, the narrator also points to his awareness of the role and resultant responsibilities of the reader. Newton's theory of narrative ethics represents a challenge to the separation of text and lived experience: “The 'logic' which binds narrative and ethics, then, is really a pragmatics, implying an interactive rather than a legislative order, a diachrony across the temporal world of the text and the real time of reading” (13). Newton argues that certain narratives have the ability to overwhelm the Said, and in the process they establish narration as a relational—an *ethical*—act: “Cutting athwart the mediatory role of reason, [these] narrative situations create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or *reader and text*” (13; emphasis added). For these narratives, “perturbation, not privilege, and accountability, as opposed to free access, define the conditions of reader response” (20). Drawing on Sartre, Newton posits a model of narrative “responsibility” that “links the correlative responsibilities of reading and

writing, of 'invention' and 'disclosure,' and grounds them in the obligation to be engaged, invested in somehow hooking literature up with the world” (23). His model thus acknowledges the permeability of the boundaries between fictional and “real” worlds, thereby “actively resist[ing] Kantian disinterest” (23)—and, I would add, Schillerian free determination. Newton refers to “the ethico-critical accountability which acts of reading hold their readers to” as “hermeneutic ethics” (18). He summarizes the “twofold” responsibility of readers: “In part it means learning the paradoxical lesson that 'getting' someone else's story is also a way of losing the person as 'real,' as 'what he is'; it is a way of appropriating or allegorizing that endangers both intimacy and ethical duty. At the same time, however, one's responsibility consists of responding to just this paradox” (19). The way out of this paradox that *Billy Budd* suggests is through a mode of reading that corresponds to Melville's ethical ironic mode of narration in the novel.

Throughout *Billy Budd*, the narrator repeatedly distinguishes his narrative from those of “pure fiction” (167). While such caveats ostensibly refer to the story's “historical” basis, they also serve as reflections on the nature of the narrative itself: even if the story's “history” is fictional, the fiction's telling does in fact overwhelm “the symmetry of form” in a novel where form is repeatedly linked with authority. Although the events the narrative recounts may not have “really” occurred, as we have seen, narration constitutes not just the production of a text but an intersubjective act, and thus the act of narrating can be understood as a historical event, an event that is re-enacted upon each subsequent reception of the tale, each subsequent reading of the text. Through the proliferation of narratives *within* his narrative and the equivocations of his prose, the narrator in *Billy Budd* effectively undermines his own narrative authority. Newton argues

that in certain narratives, “the story's narrator [. . .] gives the story's progressive transfer of authority to the reader as his or her problem” (21). In *Billy Budd*, the novel's narrator does not entirely deny his own authority, but he transfers *the problem of authority* to the reader.<sup>130</sup> As discussed above, the narrator calls upon the reader to pronounce judgement on Vere's sanity: “every one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford” (148). However, by constantly drawing attention to the instability of his own narrative, and by emphasizing his own perspectival limitations, the narrator also sets the story itself up as an object to be judged, as the reader must not judge just *by* the “light” the narrative “might afford” (148), but also *of* this light—that is, the reader must judge whether the narrative represents “the truth uncompromisingly told,” as well as what it might mean that such truth can only exist contingently—*relationally*; and, finally, what it might mean that the reader herself is implicated in this narrative relation of dependency. Furthermore, readers must not simply judge the guilt or innocence of Billy, nor just the judgement passed upon Billy by Vere, nor just the narrator and the ethics of his narrative, although the novel suggests that it is indeed imperative that readers do attempt such judgements; readers must also judge their own judgements, recognize their partiality, and appeal outwards to other readers and, more generally, other subjects. This communicative act has the force to establish ethical relationships beyond the context of any singular judgement; Melville's ethical irony, then, ultimately works towards the establishment of community.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Johnson similarly argues that the form of the novel “problematizes the very *idea* of authority” (81).

<sup>131</sup> Dauber qualifies Melville's ironic “solidarity with his community” in a manner that accounts for the author's alienation from his readership and rejection of his society's values (205; 220-28).

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

In his final two novels, Melville offers a critique of models of social organization that are based on a faith in teleological progress. Levinas separates theory into two categories: “theory as comprehension of beings[. . .] which reduces the other to the same, promotes freedom—the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other” (42), and “theory understood as a respect for exteriority” (43). This latter variation of theory he refers to as “critique”: “Its critical intention then leads it beyond theory [as comprehension] and ontology: critique does not reduce the other to the same as does ontology, but calls into question the exercise of the same” (43). Melville's depictions of intersubjective narrative exchanges serve as critiques of the *theoretical* underpinnings of ideologies of progress, self-reliance, imperialism—the ideologies of the same<sup>132</sup>—insofar as they point to the narrative violence and, more broadly, the ethical failures that such reductive ideology leads to in the realm of human interaction.

Melville's critique works through the ethical irony of his narratives. Levinas explains that critique works as “[a] calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—[. . .] brought about by the other” (43). Through his ironic mode of narration—his texts of alterity—Melville confronts his readers with their inability to offer adequate accounts of others, existence, and,

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<sup>132</sup> In his discussion of Melville's subversion of his culture's ideological assumptions through ironic narration, Samson declares Melville a “powerfully ironic critic of culture” (11). Dauber, however, qualifies this view of Melville: while most critics read “Melville's irregularity and experimentation [as] his deliberate criticism of his age,” they overlook “the imperative which nineteenth-century consciousness presented for Melville, the authority it held for him and with which, as an act of cultural faith, he never fully broke” (195). Dauber's reading points towards the conception of Melville as an ironist incapable of escaping the paradoxes he represents that I have developed through this project.



ultimately, themselves. Additionally, however, his novels also present an imperative to moral judgement, without which morality would fall into a form of relativism that is unable to distinguish between ethical and unethical modes of being. Melville thus presents an appeal for moral accountability, but this *accountability* must take into *account* the individual's dependency on and obligation to others—a state of ethical intersubjectivity that the novels themselves perform. Thomas argues that in *The Confidence-Man* and *Billy Budd*, Melville “adroitly exposes the contradictions in orthodox ideology by undercutting the authoritarian narrative point of view but offers no direct alternative to the order he undercuts” (*Cross-examinations* 222). But were Melville to didactically outline an alternative model of ethical social organization and human interaction, he would become another theorist; he would perform the same type of narrative reduction that his fiction undermines. Melville's “inability” to present a “direct alternative,” then, is rather a choice to refrain from the imperialistic drive of theory, a choice to recognize his own limitations: an admission of the need for, in Handwerk's terms, an “expansion of context” that “can only effectively occur through the interrogation of another subject” (2). While Melville does not “directly” offer an alternative model of social organization, nor anything resembling a program for social change,<sup>133</sup> through the reciprocal relationship of ethical obligation that his texts enact between the author/narrator and audience, he does offer a model of ethical intersubjectivity to replace the unethical mode of interaction based on the reductive drive towards comprehension. How this relationship might be brought out of fiction and into reality, how it might be embodied in an alternative social system, and how this social

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<sup>133</sup> Thomas notes that “Melville tempered his criticism of the status quo with a distrust of a revolutionary alternative” (*Cross-examinations* 246).

change might be brought about.<sup>134</sup> these are all questions that Melville's ethical irony, as a renunciation of the novelist's ability to offer singular answers, opens up to the interchange of ideas among his readers. Ultimately it is the individual reader—"every one"—who must produce a judgement "by such light as this narrative may afford" (148), but by underlining the insufficiency of the narrator's "light" to "afford" pure visibility—pure comprehension—Melville also calls into question the reader's ability to comprehend his text, even provisionally, without an appeal beyond the limits of the self—to *everyone*.

In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville is only able to point to this ethical mode of narration and reading ironically—indirectly. In *Billy Budd*, however, Melville employs a method of narrative "*indirection*" that both embodies and, through the depiction of the narrator's failure to produce a complete or accurate judgement, qualifies the communicative power of ethical irony (127; emphasis added). Ethical irony, in Melville's view, cannot guarantee right judgement, let alone attain absolute truth, but it does work to check the violent errors of judgement brought on by the self-confident judge—like the verdict of Captain Vere, who acts as a tribunal of one—and falsehoods based on the assumption of a deeper comprehension of the truth of others that transcends the need for communication—like Claggart's accusation. Johnson decries the tendency to "regard [*Billy Budd*] as its author's last will and testament," as this is to "grant it a privileged, determining position in the body of that author's work" (80). Such an approach, she argues, tries to apply the "symmetry of form" to Melville's career, while "far from tying up the loose ends of a confusing literary life, Melville's last words are an affirmation of the necessity of 'ragged edges'" (80). Melville's final *gesture*, then, is an appeal to explore

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<sup>134</sup> J. Hillis Miller writes that "[i]f there is to be such a thing as an ethical moment in the act of reading, teaching, or writing about literature, it must be *sui generis*, [. . .] itself a source of political [. . .] acts, not subordinated to them" (5)

the “ragged edges” of his work in an attempt to develop an ethical mode of intersubjectivity that might lead to genuine social change. The unfinished manuscript of *Billy Budd*, found tucked away in Melville's desk, represents an appeal not just to the editors who discovered it, but to his readership, to his community, to his species—ultimately, to each of us: an appeal to renounce confident self-sufficiency while accepting the personal accountability that ethical obligation entails.

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