

## Captain Vere and Pontius Pilate

B. D. Tucker

### 1

“For that law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible.” So spoke Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere in Melville’s *Billy Budd*. And so, in somewhat different circumstances, might Pontius Pilate have spoken to his subordinates in first century Palestine. That a parallel between Captain Vere and Pontius Pilate must have presented itself to Melville’s mind seems inevitable, if Billy himself is seen as a figure of Christ.

Symbolism clusters about Billy in great profusion, it is true, but that Billy is primarily a Christ figure, and that his death is intended to be seen as a kind of atonement like Christ’s is clear to most critics. He is called a peacemaker; he is hated by and defeats the counterpart of Satan, Claggart; he forgives those who execute him; he achieves a kind of resurrection in the memories and the ballads of his shipmates; and the spar from which he was hung is venerated as a part of the true cross.

Billy is called by many names: Apollo, Hyperion, young Adam, Isaac and others. H. Bruce Franklin, in *The Wake of the Gods: Melville’s Mythology*, has pointed out the connection between Billy Budd’s name and the Celtic god, Hu, “the ‘Celtic Apollo,’ known also

as Beli and Budd,"<sup>1</sup> and has demonstrated convincingly the parallels. But interesting as all these may be in the many layers of interpretation with which Melville clothes his story, the primary symbolism, it seems to me, remains the figure of Christ. The parallels have been extensively treated in many articles and books.

"Morally, philosophically, emotionally, socially, Melville's search for the complete man is not the search for the knightly hero, but for the Governor," writes Milton R. Stern. "The Governor must repress man's anarchic atheism and must reorient man's frantic activities."<sup>2</sup> In *Billy Budd*, the Governor is the captain of the ship, Edward Vere. He is the one who judges Billy (even though in the trial he is a witness), and he it is who sets the punishment. The parallel with Pontius Pilate is clear.

I have not read by any means all of the enormous amount of criticism on *Billy Budd*, but in what I have read, I have not seen this parallel between Captain Vere and Pontius Pilate treated. So, at the risk of repeating what someone else may already have written, I should like to draw out these parallels in the hope that they may shed some light on Captain Vere's character, and also Melville's view of the world. It is obvious that Vere is treated in a most sympathetic way, even though his failures are not concealed, and it may be that in the mind of Vere we can see something of the mind of Melville. I suspect that he sympathized with Pilate in the gospel story, just as many recent writers have sympathized with Judas.

About Pontius Pilate we know very little except what is recorded in the New Testament. There is a brief reference to him in Philo and several in Josephus, both contemporary first century Jewish writers.<sup>3</sup>

Neither mentions the crucifixion of Jesus in connection with Pilate, but their pictures of his character are in accord with what we learn in the New Testament. The only Roman historian to mention Pilate is Tacitus, and he specifically says that it was under Pilate that Jesus was executed.<sup>4</sup> However, as Tacitus wrote about 115 A. D., it is very probable that his sources were Christian, and this reference does not add anything to our knowledge of Pilate. Nevertheless, in spite of the paucity of historical evidence, there is no reasonable doubt about the historicity of Pilate and his part in the death of Jesus as recorded in Tacitus and in the Gospels.

There are, of course, many subsequent Christian writings about Pilate and many legends. They add nothing, however, to our knowledge of the historical Pilate, and the legends can be dismissed from the point of view of historical knowledge, though they are very interesting in other ways. Probably Melville's knowledge of Pilate was confined to the record of the Bible, but even the brief references there would be highly suggestive to an imagination like his. Especially would Melville be fascinated by the moral problem of Pilate, just as he was with Vere's. For the purposes of this paper it is unnecessary to deal with any but the New Testament records of Pilate and the picture of him which they give.

## 2

In looking at the parallels between Vere and Pilate, let us first look at the similarity of their official positions. Both were in command of their respective jurisdictions. Vere was, of course, captain of the H. M. S. *Bellipotent*<sup>5</sup>, a "seventy-four" in the British Navy. Pontius

Pilate was governor or procurator of Judea, a small district in Palestine. As such, he was representative of the Emperor and responsible for maintaining law and order. In this his position was similar to Vere's, who was very conscious that he was acting in the name of the King. Both had extensive discretionary powers in carrying out their duties, including the authority to administer the death penalty. Both, by virtue of their offices, were often cast into the role of judge.

The jurisdictions of both Pilate and Vere were parts of larger units. In the case of Pilate, his district of Judea was part of the Roman province of Syria, and Josephus records that the Syrian legate Vitellius deposed Pilate in 36 A. D. because of his executions of certain Samaritan leaders. Luke also records that Pilate transferred Jesus' trial to the jurisdiction of the tetrarch of Galilee, Herod Antipas, who happened to be in Jerusalem at the time (Luke 23:6-12). This may be compared to Captain Vere's appointing of Lieutenant Ratcliffe to preside at the drumhead court, though, of course, the reasons were quite different.

It would have been within Pilate's discretion to refer the case of Jesus to a higher authority and so postpone judgment to a later and calmer time. The New Testament records that a later procurator of Judea, Porcius Festus, referred to the court of Caesar the case of Paul, who was a Roman citizen (Acts 25:12). It will be recalled that the surgeon of the *Bellipotent* felt that an immediate trial was impolitic and that Captain Vere should "postpone further action in so extraordinary a case to such time as they should rejoin the squadron, and then refer it to the admiral." The squadron was of course, Captain Vere's larger unit.

The reasons why Pilate and Vere did not postpone their respective cases or refer them to a higher court were similar. Prior to Jesus, there had been a number of leaders who claimed to be the Messiah. They had urged their Jewish followers to revolt against the Roman yoke, and these rebellions had only been put down with considerable bloodshed.<sup>7</sup> Pilate was no doubt afraid of another such rebellion, and therefore agreed to the execution of Jesus, even though he considered him innocent.

Captain Vere was likewise influenced by similar considerations. As Melville relates in some detail, there had occurred earlier in that same year, 1797, the Great Mutiny at the Nore, in the mouth of the Thames.<sup>8</sup> This was not only an unprecedented blot on British naval tradition, but it had occurred during the war with France, when England was depending on the navy for protection and at a time when British sailors might have been expected to submerge personal grievances for the greater patriotic good. The revelation of the deep resentment of the men against inhumane conditions, in which imprisonment and flogging with the cat-o'-nine-tails were a part of the system, came as a great shock to their officers and the government. It was because of this recent event that Captain Vere decided that immediate and unambiguous discipline was needed, and that postponement might look like softness.<sup>9</sup>

Enough has perhaps been said now to indicate the similarities in position of Pontius Pilate and Captain Vere. Both were in positions of almost absolute local authority. Both were dealing with unstable situations, in which rebellion had recently occurred and seemed again incipient. Both were emotionally inclined to absolve the accused whom

they were forced to judge, but both were compelled by circumstances to condemn to execution men whom they believed in their hearts to be innocent.

## 3

Next let us see if there are discernible any similarities in character in Pontius Pilate and Captain Vere. The Bible seldom describes people, and we learn about them through their actions and, to some extent, their words. So it is with Pilate. Our first impression is that he was a rather weak character, although the considerations given above might temper that opinion. He clearly wishes to be rid of the responsibility for this troublesome case; tries to have Jesus released, since it was customary to give amnesty to at least one prisoner on feast days; sends him to Herod Antipas to judge; and declares himself innocent of the condemnation. Again we have the impression of an indecisive person who does not want to shoulder responsibility. His question, "What is truth?" (John 18:38), strikes me as being possibly dilettantish. These are the impressions one gets from an uncritical reading of the New Testament record, and with the possible exception of the last point, there does not seem to be much similarity with Captain Vere.

Philo and Josephus give a very bad character to Pilate, accusing him of murder, rape, inhumanity and misuse of funds. Of course they were not wholly impartial witnesses. It is interesting that the New Testament seems to soften the condemnation of Pilate, gradually shifting the responsibility for Jesus' death from the Roman governor to the Jewish authorities. Mark, the earliest writer, seems to divide the blame equally between Pilate and the Jews. Matthew, writing some-

what later, brings in Pilate's wife, who sends a message to her husband to "Have nothing to do with that righteous man" (Matthew 27:19). Not only does Pilate imply that Jesus has done no evil, but he washes his hands in water and says, "I am innocent of this man's blood" (27:24). Only Matthew records these incidents. In Luke Pilate three times states that he finds no crime in Jesus and neither did Herod Antipas. Furthermore, according to Luke, the mocking of Jesus was done by Herod and his soldiers and not by Pilate. John also records that Pilate declared Jesus innocent and tried to release him.

Parenthetically it should be said that the Gospels were written down at a time of intense rivalry between Jews and Christians. In some cases the Jews persecuted the Christians, and in others they accused them of fomenting rebellion against Rome. This controversy, and the fact that the Christians wanted to get into the good graces of Rome, undoubtedly colored the details of the narrative and accounted for the partial exoneration of Pilate. Tragically, it also contributed to the later Christian persecution of the Jews at a time when Christians seem to have forgotten that Jesus and all the apostles were themselves Jews.

All this would have very little to do with *Billy Budd* were it not for the fact that this exoneration of Pilate continued even further in later Christian writings, including the apocryphal literature. Thus the so-called "Acts of Pilate," sometimes called the "Gospel of Nicodemus" portrays the contrition of Pilate and his conversion.<sup>10</sup> Finally the Eastern Church beatified Pilate's wife (given the name of Procla), and the Coptic Church made both Pilate and Procla saints and declared Pilate a martyr. This conversion of Pilate to Christ (in later

Christian tradition only—there is not a shred of historical evidence) is interesting from the point of view of Melville's story, for Captain Vere also seems to be converted to the man he condemned to death, and in his last moments is heard murmuring, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd."<sup>11</sup> Whether Melville knew of this apocryphal literature or not, I am not sure, but the last sections of the story and "Billy in the Darbies" show that Melville was well aware of the mutations and changes that history is subjected to as it evolves into "official reports" and legends.<sup>12</sup>

So far we have not found many similarities between the Pontius Pilate of the New Testament and Captain Vere in Melville's story, that is, with regard to their characters. As a novelist, though, Melville would be struck by the similarity of their situation, and he would not be limited just to the meager description of Pilate in the New Testament. To Melville there would have been one fact which would have been at least as important as the New Testament record. Pontius Pilate was a Roman.

In a conversation with the purser, the surgeon at one point says, "It is at once imaginative and metaphysical—in short, Greek."<sup>13</sup> In describing Captain Vere's intellectual and literary tastes, Melville writes, "his bias was toward those 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."<sup>14</sup> In these two sentences perhaps we can see two contrasting attitudes which may generally be associated with Greece and Rome. To Greece belonged the glories of metaphysical philosophy and the imaginative genius which produced the greatest masterpieces of literature and art. The areas

in which Rome excelled Greece were more practical, in engineering, in governing and administering a great empire and in creating and codifying a body of law.

As a well educated Roman, Pilate could probably speak Greek and may have had some acquaintance with Greek philosophy and the classics. But as an administrator his concern was to keep order, to restrain fanatics and impractical idealists, and to keep the machinery of the empire moving. With one deflating question, "What is truth?," Pilate's scepticism tried to undercut the whole of Greek metaphysical philosophy and Jewish prophetic faith. As a practical administrator faced with concrete day-to-day problems, he had no use for speculation or mysticism. The forms and institutions of the empire were the important things for the maintenance of peace and order.

Captain Vere also, like Pilate, distrusted those "invading waters of novel opinion social, political, and otherwise, which carried away as in a torrent no few minds in those days."<sup>15</sup> He deemed them "insusceptible of embodiment in lasting institutions, but at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind." "'With mankind,' he would say, 'forms, measured forms, are everything; and this is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood.' And this he once applied to the disruption of forms going on across the Channel and the consequences thereof."<sup>16</sup> Like the Romans, Vere was a practical man, even though he had an intellectual streak, and he was "thoroughly versed in the science of his profession." He was an "officer mindful of the welfare of his men," but always concerned with form and order, "never tolerating an infraction of discipline."<sup>17</sup> From what we know of Pilate's

character he was an average Roman administrator with a moral weakness, but we can see much in Vere that was true to the best tradition in Rome, the same qualities which made Shakespeare's Mark Antony exclaim, "This was the noblest Roman of them all"<sup>18</sup> about another person who had been forced to bring about the death of a man he loved.

## 4

We have examined the parallels in official position and in character of Pontius Pilate and Captain Vere. Now let us look at their actions and words and see whether there are any similarities. We have already noted that the creating and codifying of a body of law was one of the great achievements of Rome, and the moral problems of both Pilate and Vere are deeply connected with the law. In both cases they were dealing with more than one kind of law. Pilate declared that he could not find Jesus guilty according to Roman law. According to John (19:7) the Jews then said, "We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God." Here was a seeming conflict between two kinds of law, Roman law and Jewish law. Pilate had previously told the Jews to judge Jesus according to their own law (John 18:31), but they had countered that they were not allowed by Roman law "to put any man to death."

Captain Vere is also troubled by more than one kind of law. It is not so much the conflict between civil law and military law that vexes Vere's conscience. It is a hypothetical "natural law" or "natural justice" which appeals to his heart, his feelings. "But in natural

justice is nothing but the prisoner's overt act to be considered? How can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?" But Vere realizes that in their situation they are not governed by natural justice, but by martial law. "Do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature?" he asks, and answers his own question, "No, to the King ... We proceed under the law of the Mutiny Act. In feature no child can resemble his father more than that Act resembles in spirit the thing from which it derives—War." For all his aversion to it, however, Vere believes that this law must be obeyed, these forms observed and these institutions honored. "Let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool,"<sup>21</sup> he counsels, for that way lies anarchy, the break-down of civilization, the upheaval which he saw convulsing France and which he was fighting.

In the conflict between the Roman law and the Jewish law, between Pilate's desire to avoid condemning Jesus and the intransigence of the Jewish leaders, Pilate declared his own innocence. He had questioned Jesus both in the presence of the Jews outside his palace, and privately within (where the Jews would not enter for fear of defilement from Gentile contact). According to Roman law Pilate asserted that he found nothing worthy of death. He therefore told the Jews to try Jesus according to their own laws. This was in accordance with Roman custom in Palestine where a large amount of self-government was allowed, as long as it did not threaten the peace nor the collection of tribute for Rome. Now the Jewish governing council, the Sanhedrin, had already tried Jesus before they brought him to Pilate, and they had found him guilty. In reality Pilate knew this, and the Jews had

told him this at the very beginning: "If this man were not an evil-doer, we would not have handed him over." (John 18:30). For the death penalty, however, an order was needed from the Roman procurator, and it was this that Pilate was reluctant to give. Finally he tacitly consented, but in a final display of weakness and hypocritical desire to evade responsibility, "he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.'" (Matthew 27:24)

Captain Vere also, in one sense declares his innocence in the face of conflicting laws, but he does so in a very different way from Pontius Pilate. After declaring that, in his opinion, Billy is "innocent before God" according to the natural law which informs Vere's own conscience, the Captain goes on to say that, nevertheless, in becoming an officer of the King he ceased to be a natural free agent, and that he must be obedient to another law. "When war is declared, are we the commissioned fighters previously consulted?" he asks. "We fight at command. If our judgments approve the war, that is but coincidence. So in other particulars. So now. For suppose condemnation to follow these present proceedings. Would it be so much we ourselves that would condemn as it would be martial law operating through us? For that law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible. Our vowed responsibility is in this: That however pitilessly that law may operate in any instance, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it."<sup>22</sup>

In saying that he is not responsible for the martial law by which Billy Budd was condemned, Captain Vere is not cowardly trying to evade responsibility like Pilate. He himself insisted on the trial, when

he could have referred it to the Admiral's court. He virtually dictated the death sentence to the three officers whom he had appointed to be in charge of the drumhead court. And it was he himself who privately communicated the sentence to the prisoner, not concealing from him "the part he himself had played in bringing about the decision." Of this scene Melville writes, "The austere devotee of military duty, letting himself melt back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity, may in end have caught Billy to his heart, even as Abraham may have caught young Isaac on the brink of resolutely offering him up in obedience to the exacting behest." On emerging from the prisoner's compartment Captain Vere's face was seen to be "expressive of the agony of the strong."<sup>23</sup> Whatever the nature of "the mystery of iniquity" or the evils of war, he did not try to evade bearing his portion of the guilt.

## 5

To what extent do the parallels between the Roman governor and the English captain illuminate the character of Vere? In the contrast between the two, the virtues of Vere stand out all the more clearly. Both were faced with similar problems, and in both cases a sentence of execution resulted. But the motives and methods of the two were completely different. For selfish reasons Pilate tried to avoid making any decision and finally made a show of abdicating all responsibility for the sentence. He showed little understanding of the problems of the Jews, nor of the character of the condemned man. If he was really convinced of Jesus' innocence according to Roman law, he was guilty of a miscarriage of justice. His record of brutal assassinations

in the years that followed make it difficult to see Pilate's behavior in a favorable light.

The more we contemplate Vere's conduct in the case of Billy Budd, however, the clearer it becomes that his motives were of the highest. He was a man of great courage and integrity who understood the issues involved in all their depth and complexity, and who would not allow emotional attachments nor worldly prudence to deflect him from his known duty. Vere refused to evade the responsibility of the decision even though he might have done so with impunity, and even though he knew that his motives would be misunderstood and the result unpopular.

The theme of sacrifice runs all through the story. In the background is the sacrifice of Christ, the righteous man giving his life for others. The sacrifice of Isaac is mentioned and the unquestioning obedience of his father Abraham to a seemingly immoral behest. Then in beautiful counterpoint to the story is given the exposition of the sacrifice of Nelson at Trafalgar, adorning himself as a priest for the altar.<sup>24</sup> And then, of course, there is the sacrifice of Billy Budd, the innocent handsome sailor, whose death seems to bring a benediction to all and to be a reenactment of the atonement of Christ.

And yet, though Billy's death had something of tragedy in it, it could not bear the weight of the world's sorrows. For Billy in his innocence was almost mindless, and could not comprehend a tenth of that sorrow or the evil which caused him to die. Indeed, as Melville says, "the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation."<sup>25</sup> And this, it seems to me, indicates that the greater sacrifice was made by Captain Vere who suffered "the

agony of the strong.”

The sacrifice of Vere was made in the context of the war with France, and to his mind the roots of civilization and the future welfare of mankind were at stake. For him the forms that bound the community of men and women together were as sacred covenants which could not lightly be broken. Idealists and fanatics might destroy the old, imperfect institutions in France in the name of liberty and equality, but Vere foresaw that this would only bring about anarchy, chaos and new institutions of tyranny.

Through his study of history he saw that mankind had built up certain ordered forms, the bonds of society to check the demonic forces of selfishness, hatred and lust, and that mystery of iniquity which tempts man in his pride to destroy all that is best in life. What Vere also saw was that history often requires leaders of courage and integrity, to lead mankind in obedience to those forms, and to sacrifice themselves that the forms that protect mankind from himself and that enhance life may endure and be redeemed and purified. With Nelson the moral example and the sacrifice were consummated in one act in the victory of Trafalgar. In Vere the moral example and the selfless act of duty were made in conjunction with the sacrifice of Billy, and Vere's own sacrifice was hidden, though never more real than then, until his own death later. To Melville, living obscurely in the midst of the rampant individualism and destructive greed of late nineteenth century America, there seemed to be a great need for leaders like Vere, who would not weakly and selfishly wash their hands of responsibility like Pilate, but who would set a moral example and sacrifice themselves for the good of all.

## Notes

1. H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1963, p. 193.
2. Milton R. Stern, *The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1957, p. 206.
3. These are summarized in the article on "Pilate" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, New York, Abingdon Press, 1962, Vol. III, p. 811.
4. Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1947, p. 4. Tacitus mentions this in *Annales*, xv. 44, in connection with the Neronian persecution of 64 A. D. He writes, "Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed at the hands of the procurator Pilate in the reign of Tiberius."
5. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1967, p. 323. In other editions of Melville's unfinished manuscript, the ship is called the *Indomitable*. If Franklin's suppositions about the Celtic gods are correct, *Bellipotent* seems preferable because of the association with the god Beli, and also, of course, with its Latin meaning.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 379.
7. Acts 5:36-39.
8. p. 332 ff.
9. p. 380 f.
10. Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1924, pp. 94-146.
11. p. 406.
12. pp. 406-409.
13. p. 402.
14. p. 340.
15. p. 340.
16. p. 404.
17. p. 338.
18. *Julius Caesar*, Act V, Scene v, line 68
19. p. 387.
20. pp. 388-389.
21. p. 388.
22. pp. 387-388.
23. p. 392.
24. p. 336.
25. p. 392.