

att in the contemporary "dayes of treuthe" deserve the censure of the carping critic. While Low's reading is possible, and its implications about the intention of the whole sonnet attractive, I can accept it as a "fourth complication" only if he means it to be no more complicated than that.

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### "Reading" in *Great Expectations*

To the Editor:

The flurry of self-congratulation with which *PMLA* now opens has perhaps resulted in an academic consumerism which leads us to distrust "significant" and "of interest to the entire profession" as we have learned to doubt Madison Avenue's "whitest," "brightest," and "totally new process." Judgments of significance or interest are necessarily in part subjective, and therefore, understandably, scholars may differ in these matters. I would hope, however, that accuracy of fact and attentiveness to the text would be criteria that readers could unquestionably expect of *PMLA*. This, unfortunately, is not true of Max Byrd's article, "'Reading' in *Great Expectations*" (*PMLA*, 91, 1976, 259-65).

Byrd writes, "Wemmick's reading the newspaper aloud to his Aged Parent both mirrors and corrects Pip's reading aloud to Magwitch: despite the old Man's deafness, despite the absence of an intelligible language between them, Wemmick communicates with a father" (p. 265, n. 8). In *Great Expectations* (Ch. xxxvii), the roles are, in fact, exactly reversed: it is the Aged who reads to Wemmick. Rather than showing us a son who subjects a deaf old man to an unintelligible experience, Dickens clearly indicates the great tact and the generous love with which Wemmick contrives to make his father feel not only wanted but needed.

As a prelude to the newspaper reading, Pip and Miss Skiffins are entertained at tea. "The responsible duty of making the toast was delegated to the Aged," we are told, "and that excellent old gentleman was so intent upon it that he seemed to be in some danger of melting his eyes." After all have enjoyed the "hay-stack of buttered toast" so prepared, Wemmick asks his father to read, explaining to Pip that "this was according to custom, and that it gave the old gentleman infinite satisfaction to read the news aloud." Wemmick adds, "I won't offer an apology, for he isn't capable of many pleasures." The Aged, we are told, is "so busy and so pleased that it was really quite charming." What follows is one of Dickens' characteristically memorable scenes. The old father reads proudly, endangering himself and the newspaper by the closeness

of the candle, watched over by Wemmick's "untiring and gentle" vigilance, and "quite unconscious of his many rescues."

Byrd's reversal of the facts results in his overlooking the most important values in this scene. It is a tribute to Dickens' humane understanding that he shows us vividly how Wemmick's generosity is most evident in his efforts to make his father feel useful, and to preserve for him as far as possible the paternal role of feeding and instructing his son. While it would obviously be easier to take the role of reader, Wemmick goes to much trouble to give his father dignity. The contrast with Pip is indeed marked, and especially in Pip's condescension toward Joe. Wemmick's loving pride in his father, his acceptance of him without reserve, provides an exemplum which Pip will finally be able to follow with Joe and Magwitch.

"Reading" is indeed our stock in trade, as we are reminded in the Editor's Column. Let it be our first concern to do it carefully.

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*Mr. Byrd replies:*

I am sorry for the mistake, but consoled by the fact that the reversal actually strengthens my point that Wemmick's scene of reading improves upon Pip's. In any case, the mnemonic lapse of a single footnote hardly seems to call for so enthusiastic a correction.

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*Billy Budd*

To the Editor:

Joyce Sparer Adler's "*Billy Budd* and Melville's Philosophy of War" (*PMLA*, 91, 1976, 266-78) is an inaccurate reading. What has not accorded with her thesis simply has been ignored: Complexities have been ironed out with a steamroller. The result is to equate the author with some contemporary protestor against the Establishment. I should like to point out the following:

1. Melville's "hatred of war" is in strong contradiction to his exultation in its glories. This is quite clear in his encomium to Nelson in Part IV, a section totally overlooked by the critic. Nelson's victory at Trafalgar is hailed as one "unmatched in human annals." Strange language indeed for one whose "philosophy" was opposed to war.

2. Melville's sympathies—these are only with the mutineers insofar as their grievances are just, but he is thoroughly opposed to violence on their part. And again he iterates his deep opposition to rebellion. In-

deed, he points out in the very passage that eulogizes Nelson the altered conduct of the mutineers:

... these thousands of mutineers were some of the tars who not so very long afterwards—whether wholly prompted thereto by patriotism or pugnacious instinct, or by both—helped to win a coronet for Nelson at the Nile, and the naval crown of crowns for him at Trafalgar.

In the very next sentence he speaks of Trafalgar as granting absolution to the mutineers for their previous rebellion against authority. How does this accord with a view that sees Melville as totally sympathetic to mutinous sailors?

3. Melville's treatment of the *zeitgeist* is manifold, complex, dynamic—dialectical in a word. He reiterates the circumstances in order to avoid any simplistic interpretation of events. That he is far from being opposed to hanging for mutiny is demonstrated very clearly in the text. In a paragraph immediately following one on Vere's culpability, Melville cites a mutiny that occurred in the American Navy in *peace time* (the frame of *Billy Budd* is not war but authority), in 1842. A midshipman and two petty officers were hanged. Although, Melville adds, the circumstances were different the "urgency felt, well warranted or otherwise, was much the same." Melville, to be sure, is not in accord with Vere's unseemly haste to put Billy to death. But he is firmly on the side of the maintenance of authority on the high seas and, inferentially, in civil society.

4. Melville's philosophy of history, not dealt with by Adler, is most pertinent to his handling of the tale. More than once Melville begs off an exact recital of events: History, he implies, is often ineluctable. "Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges." He claims, therefore, not to be so much writing fiction as dealing with fact. In Adler's article there are no indications of Melville's ambiguities and evasions.

5. Captain Vere is roughly handled and pertinent facts supplied by Melville are omitted. To begin with, Vere was an intellectual who loved books. He loved especially works dealing with "actual men and events of no matter what era." Second, a genuine believer in tradition and in law, Vere did not oppose "innovators" (radicals) simply because "their theories were inimical to the privileged classes." Rather, he opposed them because "they seemed to him incapable of embodiment in lasting institutions, but at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind."

Melville's highlighting of these qualities in Vere is crucial to his complex view of history. Vere is no brutal, murderous reactionary. But he did act with great haste. Aberrational is Melville's word. Yet, again and again, Melville does not let us forget the context:

That the unhappy event which has been narrated could not have happened at a worse juncture was but too true. For it was close on the heel of the suppressed insurrections, an after-time very critical to naval authority, demanding from every English sea-commander two qualities not readily interfusible—prudence and rigor. (Pt. xxxii)

In the powerful scene at which the officers wrestle with their consciences regarding Billy's fate, Vere is hardly despicable for making the conflict clear—between (human) Nature and the duty to the King. He urges his men to condemn Billy because of the recent Nore Mutiny. "You know what sailors are. Will they not revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore?" he asks. "Your clement sentence they would account pusillanimous."

Max Scheler has written eloquently of tragedy as arising from situations with no possible solutions. Vere's situation—like that of Billy's—is profoundly tragic. Such, I deeply believe, was Melville's view.

In conclusion, I should only like to add that I find a connection between *Bartleby* and *Billy Budd*. In both works Melville was probing the limits of unconventional behavior, of the deliberate defiance of constituted authority. It seems to me that in the former work Melville, while sympathizing with the scrivener, is also saying that the paradox of nonconformity is that it cannot exist without conformity. Likewise, without authority there can be no rebellion. Thesis demands antithesis. The truth probably is that while Melville was deeply understanding of rebels he was even more convinced that society required law and tradition.

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*Ms. Adler replies:*

The range of human response to the same phenomenon is sometimes amazing. I find an abhorrence of war in *Billy Budd, Sailor*, as in Melville's work as a whole, and believe that it played a central role in the workings of his poetic imagination. To me the meaning of Melville's last work resides in its narrative, imagery, and dynamic form; I find that no part of the work has meaning except as part of the artistic conception of the whole. Sidney Shanker denies that Melville was opposed to war and sees in *Billy Budd* an "exultation in its glories," as extreme a statement of the traditional "testament of acceptance" view as I have ever read. He approaches the work as if it were an editorial or legal brief defending law and tradition against any change.

Now if my essay with its detailed development and documentation could not change Shanker's way of