

FRANCESCO CARACCIOLO, FENIMORE COOPER
AND "BILLY BUDD"

I

At the beginning of his delightful essay on Emma Liona, in the fourth volume of *Fiori Freschi*, Mario Praz has written:

La prima volta che incontrai Emma Liona fu in un manualetto di storia ad uso delle scuole secondarie inferiori, che, per meglio imprimere la succinta narrazione nella mente giovanile, metteva in grassetto tutti i nomi dei personaggi. Sicché nel bel mezzo del paragrafo che in poche righe spacciava la Repubblica Partenopea, tra gli Austro-Russi che m'apparivano in forma d'arruffata e ferocissima aquila quadricipite e di orde cosacche i sanfedisti del Cardinale Ruffo che mi ricordavano i fedelini, l'abietto Re Nasone con la sua perfida Regina, s'assisteva al dramma dei patrioti napoletani orribilmente traditi da Nelson per istigazione di Emma Liona. Questo misterioso personaggio aveva per me caratteristiche piuttosto zoologiche che umane: me l'immaginavo acquattata come una leonessa nell'angolo della gabbia napoletana, a leccarsi le labbra grondanti del sangue di Caracciolo e di Cirillo. Il povero Caracciolo pendeva appiccato all'albero di trinchetto della *Minerva*, e intanto a bordo del *Foudroyant* Nelson con la tendina nera sull'occhio, pranzava con Emma Liona. Salgari in tutte le sue avventure di corsari e di Malesi non aveva mai narrato un episodio così feroce. E misterioso anche. Perché nel manualetto scolastico Emma Liona restava, e non poteva non restare, un'esplicabile intrusa che minacciava di guastar la reputazione di quella flotta inglese che, non molte pagine dopo, trovavamo intenta a favorire lo sbarco dei Mille a Marsala.

This "episodio feroce e misterioso" fascinated Fenimore Cooper and Herman Melville as well as Mario Praz, and it is the center of a knot of historical problems and literary analogies that begin in Neapolitan history and end by involving Bri-

tish naval history, the American Navy's most celebrated mutiny, one of Cooper's sea novels, and the last prose work of Herman Melville – the unfinished "Billy Budd". Now that we have a reliable text of "Billy Budd" and other documents about Cooper and Melville, we can finally take up the knot with some confidence¹.

The most obvious strand to seize first is Fenimore Cooper's *The Wing-and-Wing*, a romance set in the Mediterranean ("that unrivalled sea" Cooper called it) at the time of the Parthenopean Republic. The work seems not to be known in Italy although another sea story, *The Two Admirals*, also published in 1842, was translated and published by the Società Editrice Partenopea in 1854. When he wrote these books, Cooper had been back in the United States for almost a decade, after some eight years of European residence, and he was the center of a storm of invective, lawsuits, and personal attacks by the American press. His satires of American society had angered the editors of newspapers pledged to both political parties, and his *History of the Navy of the United States of America* (1839) had angered the powerful family of Commodore O. H. Perry because Cooper had refused to describe the Battle of Lake Erie in a manner that would increase Perry's fame at the expense of another Captain in the action, an officer whom Perry had commended for heroism immediately after the battle. When he could escape from the courtroom (in which his opponents at times whiled away delays by reading Cooper's latest novel), he let his mind return to Naples and Sorrento where he had spent the last four months of 1829, living in the house "detta di Tasso".

The keystone in the structure of Cooper's book is the scene in which Francesco Caracciolo is hanged from the yardarm of the *Minerva* on June 29, 1799. Cooper followed

1. The text is the Hayford-Sealus edition published by the University of Chicago Press, 1962, a paperback reprinting is available in the Penguin English Library, 1970. Also see JAY LEYDA, *The Melville Log*, New York, 1951; JAMES F. BEARD, ed., *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper* (6 vol.), Cambridge, Mass., 1960-1968; HARRISON HAYFORD, *The Somers Mutiny Affair*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1959.

English writers in spelling the name Caraccioli, and in giving the Sicilian Admiral's age as about seventy at the time of his execution². Melville likewise believed that Caracciolo had been an old man, and his story "Billy Budd" grew out of a ballad and headnote, commenced in 1888, that describe an old sailor's reverie during which he reviews the events of his life that have led up to his condemnation for mutiny. In revising and expanding the work, Melville made the condemned man a young sailor who had been impressed into the British Navy, just as Cooper's novel contains protests against impressment by the British as well as an impressed sailor who is the hero's closest companion. Cooper uses the Caracciolo hanging to increase the suspense of a later scene in which his young "hero" (a Frenchman named Raoul Yvard) is about to be hanged on charges of which he is innocent. Nelson, feeling some remorse over the execution of Caracciolo, grants a last-minute reprieve, of which Cooper says:

Nothing gave the British admiral greater pleasure than to be able to show mercy, the instance to the contrary already introduced existing as an exception in his private character and his public career; and it is possible that an occurrence so recent, and so opposed to his habits, may have induced him the more willingly now to submit to his ordinary impulses, and to grant the respite asked with the greater promptitude³.

More importantly, Cooper's romance, Melville's novella, and most nineteenth-century histories of the Caracciolo affair raise doubts about the fairness of the court-martial; all include a suggestion that the execution may have been precipitous, and all show the highest-ranking officer (Nelson in history

2. This error about age probably came from Caracciolo's plea, widely quoted, that his forty years of loyal service to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies should be weighed against a few weeks of fighting for the French and the Parthenopean Republic. Some later historians, acknowledging that he was only 47 years old when convicted of treason and executed, then accused him of lying about his length of service, apparently not knowing that at the age of 5 he was a *Guardiamarina Sopranumerario* in Naples.

3. *Wing-and-Wing*, Ch. XXIII. There are so many American editions (all corrupt) of Cooper's works that citation by chapter seems wise.

and Cooper's book, Captain Vere in Melville's) exerting what might be considered improper influence on the members of the courtmartial board. Since Cooper had been doing research about the British Navy, as well as having lived on the Bay of Naples, his specific sources are impossible to trace, but Melville's copy of Robert Southey's *Life of Nelson* contains his markings and a note written by Mrs. Melville: "This book is kept for reference from 'Billy Budd'"⁴. Southey describes the Caracciolo affair as "the only blot" upon Nelson's "public character", and concludes:

Doubtless, the British Admiral seemed to himself to be acting under a rigid sense of justice; but, to all other persons, it was obvious that he was influenced by an infatuated attachment - a baneful passion which destroyed his domestic happiness, and now, in a second instance, stained ineffaceably his public character⁵.

A second history that Melville is known to have consulted praises the behavior of Captain Hardy toward Caracciolo chiefly in order to contrast Hardy with Nelson: "Unhappily, the mind of another person, equally well-disposed when in health, was now possessed by a demon, who had the power to expel every generous feeling, and substitute in their stead the worst of those vindictive passions which degrade human nature"⁶.

In brief, the English historians' answer to the problem of Nelson's behavior was as French as the Parthenopean

4. MERTON M. SEALTS, *Melville's Reading*, Cambridge, Mass., 1950, p. 95.

5. ROBERT SOUTHEY, *The Life of Nelson* (reprinted with an introduction by Henry Newbolt who takes issue with Southey on this very point) Boston and New York, 1916, p. 216.

6. WILLIAM JAMES, *The Naval History of Great Britain*, London, 1837, vol. II, pp. 276-278. Cooper also knew this work, describing James as "authority for nothing - or next to nothing. This I can demonstrate from his own book . . ." (*Letters and Journals*, IV: 154). Modern historians agree with Cooper, and one example may show why. James says that Caracciolo's court-martial had to take place on the *Foudroyant* because "the love which the Sicilian seamen bore to Caracciolo" would have made a court-martial on a Neapolitan ship dangerous. He then proceeds to describe the hanging of Caracciolo on the Neapolitan frigate, *Minerva*, a few hours later.

Republic itself: *cherchez la femme*. Both repeat the untrue story that Lady Hamilton was a spectator at the execution.

What only Cooper, Melville, and Neapolitan historians such as Giuseppe Porcaro have seemed to realize is that accusing Lady Hamilton merely transfers the question of motivation. If Horatio Nelson, rather incredibly, was a mere instrument of Emma Liona's revenge, what were *her* motives? Southey's rather weak and Victorian suggestion is that her "attachment to the Neapolitan court" and consequent hatred of that court's enemies caused her to forget "what was due to the character of her sex"⁷.

By contrast, Giuseppe Porcaro grapples honestly with the problem of Lady Hamilton's motives, reporting

opposte opinioni; secondo alcuni la bella ambasciatrice fu, si dirà, uno strumento in mano della Regina per influire sulla condotta di Nelson, secondo altri invece fu questi a valersi della sua amante per ottenere dalla prepotente Carolina quanto riteneva giovevole ai suoi intenti, alle sue mire, agli interessi della sua patria⁸.

According to Porcaro, the original sentence of the court-martial was "al carcere a vita".

Orazio Nelson, però, ne ordinerà la morte. Anche se pieno di astio e di livore contro l'eroismo marinaio, non avrebbe voluto arrivare a tanto, lo vuole invece la sua amica, non dimentica d'essere stata ferita nel suo amore proprio di donna irresistibile che da Caracciolo è stata respinta a suo tempo. Implacabile, la bieca Lady, ottiene che si ordini al Thurn d'impiccare l'ammiraglio ribelle e traditore nonostante la già emessa sentenza, che dovrebbe essere irrevocabile, quello stesso giorno, all'antenna dell'albero maestro della *Minerva*. Nelson, cieco innamorato e compiacente, ordina al tedesco Thurn che un Consiglio di guerra di 5 ufficiali da lui presieduto rinnovi il dibattito e giudichi il prigioniero "per

7. SOUTHEY, *op. cit.*, p.215.

8. GIUSEPPE PORCARO, *Francesco Caracciolo*, Napoli, 1967, p.72. This history draws on "storici studiosi e critici insigni, a cominciare dal Cuoco, dal Lomonaco, dal Lemmi, dal Conforti, dal Croce ecc. per finire al Pontieri, al Cortese, al Caldora, al Salvati e ad altri non meno illustri". p. VIII.

diserzione e ribellione al suo legittimo sovrano". Il giudizio nuovo, come già il primo, è breve e ridicolo. La sentenza è morte⁹.

Even though Giuseppe Porcaro later insists that "soltanto sul nome di Nelson pesa il sangue di Caracciolo", he never really tries to erase the charges he has made against "la bieca lady".

II

Mixed as it is, the situation here presented by Porcaro seems to be a fair equivalent of Cooper's understanding of these events. In the preface to *Wing-and-Wing*, he makes Nelson himself something of an innocent in the clutches of an evil woman:

Nelson seems to have lived and died under the influence of the unprincipled woman who then governed him with the art of a siren. His nature was noble and his moral impressions, even, were not bad; but his simple and confiding nature was not equal to contending with one as practised in profligacy as the woman into whose arms he was thrown, at a most evil moment for his reputation.

There is nothing more repugnant to the general sense of right, than the prostitution of public justice to the purposes of private vengeance. Such would seem to have been the reason of the very general odium attached to the execution of Admiral Prince Caraccioli, who was the victim of circumstances rather than the promoter of treason.

In the novel itself, Cooper strengthens his apology for Nelson by asserting repeatedly the power of passion and

9. *Ibid.* p. 133. In his sympathy for Caracciolo, Porcaro describes his reasons for joining the Parthenopeans in terms that give him a striking resemblance to Billy Budd. "Egli accetta con fiducia disciplina e semplicità d'animo la nuova lotta e si limita ad affermare con ardore missionario la necessità di rivendicare la purezza alla Patria." (p. 107). "Egli che militò sempre e vinse sotto la bandiera del diritto, non la disertò che per un istante, non indotto da maturato consiglio, da deliberato proposito, ma travolto dalla forza degli avvenimenti, non con la perfidia del settario, ma con l'ira da Coriolano" (p. 111).

showing how it diverts from their duties not only Nelson but the French atheist Raoul. Speaking of passion in the thomistic terms familiar to us from the literature of the English Renaissance, Cooper says, "This was the weakness of passion; and Raoul submitted to its power, like feebler-minded and less resolute men, the hero becoming little better than the vulgar herd under its influence". (Ch. XXVI) Nelson, he insists, is "high-minded and just" except when he was under "a malign influence to which there has already been allusion". (Ch. XIX) Since Cooper was still begging the question of Lady Hamilton's motives, however, he summoned those powers of invention on which he prided himself and created as his heroine Ghita Caracciolo, the legitimate but hitherto unsuspected daughter of Francesco Caracciolo's illegitimate son. (In excusing himself for this high-handed addition to the Caracciolo family, Cooper claimed the liberties granted a writer of romances and mentioned "Italian practices" that make Ghita's history no insult to "the *morale* of Naples").

Once Cooper has sent Ghita aboard the *Foudroyant* to beg a stay of execution for her grandfather, her purity and innocence contrast with Lady Hamilton's corruption as strongly as Billy Budd's do with Claggart's evil. In an interview similar to that of Jeanie Deans and the Queen, in Scott's *Heart of Midlothian*, Ghita's purity, like Jeanie's, proves dangerous. When Lady Hamilton accuses Ghita of "romantic notions of duty" in coming to plead for a grandfather who does not know she exists, Ghita unfortunately answers that she herself has not thought about the connection before "unless it was to mourn for the sin of my grandmother; and even now, it has come to cause me to mourn for the cruel fate that threatens the days of her partner in guilt". Lady Hamilton replies:

"Thou art bold, to speak thus of thy parents, girl; and they, too, of the noble and great!"

This was said with a flushed brow, and still more lowering look; for, haply, there were incidents in the past life of that lady

which made the simple language of a severe morality alike offensive to her ears and her recollections. (Ch. XIII)

Cooper stresses the fact that Lady Hamilton was necessarily Nelson's translator in all interviews with Italians, and in spite of Lady Hamilton's promise to repeat to Nelson what Ghita has said, Cooper comments:

It is probable that Nelson never knew precisely what passed between Ghita and the lady mentioned At all events, like every other application that was made to the English admiral, in connection with this sad affair, that of Ghita produced no results. Even the mode of execution was unchanged; an indecent haste accompanying the whole transaction, as in the equally celebrated trial and death of the unfortunate Duc d'Enghien. (Ch. XIV)

There existed no necessity for the hurry in which everything had been done; no immediate danger pressed and an example would have been more impressive had there been less of the appearance of a desire for personal vengeance, and more of the calm deliberation of justice in the affair. (*Ibid.*)

After praying for Nelson, Francesco Caracciolo is hanged while among the crews assembled to watch the execution there is a tense quiet.

The deep-seated and unresisting habit of discipline suppressed complaint; but there was a general conviction that some act was about to be committed, that it were better for humanity and justice should not be done; or, if done at all, that it needed more of form, greater deliberation, and a fairer trial to be so done as to obtain the commendation of men A low rumor had passed that a malign influence prevailed in the fleet; and that a great and proud spirit had got to be mastered by the passion that so often deprives heroes of their self-command and independence. (*Ibid.*)

Ghita Caracciolo has, however, an even more important function in the novel than stimulating Lady Hamilton's malignity, for she embodies the strengths and certainties of an ardent Catholic while Raoul, her lover, is a Frenchman whom Ghita refuses to marry so long as he persists in his revolutionary atheism. Melville set up the conflict between

religion and law, on the one hand, and atheism and anarchy on the other, through the speeches and actions of Billy Budd and Captain Vere, as opposed to the mutineers, revolutionaries, and the ship *Athée* that kills Vere. Cooper dealt with this conflict more obviously by simply attributing belief and unbelief to two young people of the opposite sex and by naming the hero's lugger *Le Feu-Follet* (*Il Fuoco Fatuo* in Italian, as one character explains). Throughout the novel, we are tantalized by the possibility that Ghita's undeniable charms may lure Raoul Yvard into giving up atheism and lawlessness and embracing the true faith along with her beautiful body, but the book ends, as it should, with his death. (When Commodore Shubrick wrote that the women in his family were unhappy because the two lovers were not united at the end, Cooper replied, "As for marrying Ghita to that atheistical scamp, Raoul, the ladies must excuse me. I preferred killing him and putting her in a convent")¹⁰.

III

"I wonder if my evil art has raised this monster", Melville wrote in mock horror when a sperm whale sank a New Bedford whaleship soon after the publication of *Moby Dick*, and a similar eery coincidence occurred when Cooper published *Wing-and-Wing*. The American edition had been in print only a couple of weeks when the U. S. Navy brig *Somers* entered New York harbor, anchored, and refused to allow communication between the crew and their friends and

10. *Letters and Journals*, IV:328. Cooper adds, "My wife and my sister - a couple of tolerant christians they are! - say that I have been too liberal to the catholics". The sense of humor that Cooper has been accused of not having breaks through in this novel, as does his keen sense of the ludicrous situations to be found in history. Commenting on the ships assembled in the Bay of Naples, he writes, "A Russian force had come out of the Black Sea, to act against the French, bringing with it a squadron of the Grand Signor; thus presenting to the world the singular spectacle of the followers of Luther, devotees of the Greek Church, and disciples of Mohammed, uniting in defense of 'our rights, our firesides, and our altars!'" (Ch.XIV)

relatives until a messenger had gone to the Capitol. The messenger was Lt. Guert Gansevoort, second in command of the *Somers* and a first cousin of Herman Melville. The report he carried to Washington described an attempted mutiny aboard the *Somers* and the summary shipboard hanging of three men, one of whom was Philip Spencer, the 19-year-old son of the U. S. Secretary of War.

The Commander of the *Somers*, Lt. Gansevoort's superior officer, was Cooper's old antagonist (in the controversy over the naval *History*), Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, a relative of the Perry family. Cooper had been preparing a rebuttal to Mackenzie's attacks on his history, but once he discovered that there would be a Board of Inquiry and Court-Martial involving Mackenzie, he delayed publication in order not to prejudice the trials. This did not mean that he could avoid involvement in the case, however. He was a longtime friend of the Gansevoort family, particularly of Guert's uncle Peter, and as America's ranking naval historian he was asked to write a review of the official investigation once it was over. Even those readers who were not familiar with Cooper's inflexible honesty could rest assured of a disinterested review since he was wedged upright between two enemies. John Spencer, the father of the hanged midshipman and currently Secretary of War, had formerly been head of the New York school system and had banned Cooper's history from the schools as "controversial" and had ordered the use, instead, of Captain Alexander Slidell Mackenzie's pro-Perry history. In addition to all this, once the news of the "mutiny" and executions became public, the anti-Cooper press (which meant most of the New York and Boston newspapers) dragged his name into print, and some of them accused Cooper's novels of being responsible. For example, the Washington correspondent of the New York *Herald* wrote on Dec. 18, 1842, just four days after the arrival of the *Somers*:

How much of the crime of this young man may be attributed to the miserable trash that the country is daily deluged with in the shape of romantic adventures of pirates, banditti, exploits of

celebrated highwaymen, freebooters, etc.? . . . I think Cooper's "Red Rover" and "Water Witch" have done an incalculable amount of mischief. . . . I do not think that "La Feu Follet", [sic] Cooper's last work, is free from the same powerful objection¹¹.

On Jan. 23, 1843, the editor of the New York *Courier and Inquirer* also implicated Cooper's novels, describing him as a man who had "by his writings, done more to foster a taste for Piracy than any other person" in the United States, and concluding:

His *Red Rover* and his *Le Feu-Follet* are works in which a Pirate's life is painted in the most fascinating colors, and could young Spencer now be heard, we doubt not but he would point to Mr. Cooper's *Red Rover* as one of the prominent causes for his determination to war against civilized society¹².

Cooper's *Le Feu-Follet* (*Wing-and-Wing*) could not have had any influence since the *Somers* was at sea, near the Virgin Islands, and Lt. Gansevoort had reported the "conspiracy" to Captain Mackenzie two days before the book was published on Nov. 28, 1842.

According to his classmates at the college from which Spencer had been expelled, he was fascinated by codes, plots, passwords, and tales of piracy, all of which make him sound like a prototype of Tom Sawyer. There are other, more serious, records and reports, however, and it seems clear that he had vicious tendencies and that his parents had put him on board the *Somers* in a desperate attempt to reform him. Once at sea, he talked about seizing control of the brig (reportedly the fastest ship in the U. S. Navy) and turning pirate. His conversations were reported and the final result was that not only Spencer but two crew members (one of whom was almost certainly innocent) were hanged when the ship was only a few days out of St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. The Board of Inquiry

11. HAYFORD, *The Somers Mutiny*, p. A-5. *Le Feu-Follet* was an alternate title for *The Wing-and-Wing*.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

and a Court-Martial acquitted Commander Mackenzie, thereby exonerating also the committee of officers who had agreed with Commander Mackenzie that the men should be hanged. Besides Lt. Gansevoort, this committee consisted of the Surgeon, the Purser, three Midshipmen, and the Acting Master, M. C. Perry, the 21-year-old nephew of Commander Mackenzie. The surgeon committed suicide in the gun-room of the *Somers* three days after the final acquittal of Mackenzie. Guert Gansevoort's mother described him as exhausted and quoted his talk of his fears for "those apprentices, those *children*, entrusted to the care of the Officers; for whose safety we were responsible, to their country, & to their parents; to many of whom, before we sailed, I had pledged myself, to extend parental care & advice"¹³. Following the official inquiries, Guert Gansevoort, though a hero at Vera Cruz in 1847, generally drank more than he should have and was once removed (in 1856) from command of his ship because of drunkenness. He died in 1868, one year after his retirement from the Navy, and his life from the time of the *Somers* affair on seems to support Thurlow Weed's statement about him: ". . . a bright, intelligent, high-principled and sensitive gentleman, and a most promising officer of the navy, spent the best part of his life a prey to unavailing remorse for an act the responsibility of which belonged to a superior officer". Weed's statement, not available until the publication of his autobiography in 1883, is based on a conversation with Guert's cousin (also an officer in the Navy and lost at sea shortly after this) who said Guert had obtained a "reluctant conviction of the accused" from the committee of officers only after Commander Mackenzie ordered him to do so. Cooper, reviewing the official records of the entire trial, concluded that Guert was, at worst, a "wonder monger".

13. Letter to Peter Gansevoort, Jan. 2, 1843, in LEYDA, *The Melville Log*, p.161. The *Somers*, manned mostly by apprentice boys, was returning from a training cruise off the coast of Africa when the "mutiny" was threatened. Documentation about the *Somers* is scattered through Harrison Hayford's *The Somers Mutiny Affair* unless otherwise noted.

While all this was going on, Herman Melville was a harpooneer on the *Charles and Henry* in the South Seas, and by the time he returned Guert had adopted the lifelong policy of refusing to discuss the *Somers* mutiny, even when he was drinking heavily. Guert is the prototype for "Tom Tight" in *John Marr and Other Sailors*, the book of poetry in which Melville's ballad, "Billy in the Darbies", presumably would have been included had Melville not started to rework the material. Melville probably borrowed Billy's last name from a Cooper novel that appeared as a serial under the title *The Islets of the Gulf; or, Rose Bud*, the subtitle being the name of the heroine. From *Wing-and-Wing* he helped himself to, among other things, Raoul Yvard's "clean white lazzarone garb" and he placed the condemned Billy Budd between cannons just as Raoul awaited his own execution "supported by a piece of eighteen on each side as becomes a seaman who is about to die"¹⁴.

Not to go into tedious details, we can point out several things that are quite clear from all the available documents. One is that Captain Vere is definitely not based on Commander Mackenzie, who emerges from the records as a combination of cant and stupidity, a man so clearly unfit for command that it is difficult to understand the wide public support (led by such liberals as Catherine Maria Sedgewick and Richard Dana) whipped up in his favor. Vere is based on the character of Horatio Nelson. Melville rid his story of the distracting presence of a woman (either acting from private motives or as the "marionetta" of Maria Carolina, as Mario Praz describes Emma Liona) in order to get at the pure principle involved. In so doing, he brings out one point Cooper had stated, in *Wing-and-Wing*, in his own words, but did not attribute to Nelson, closely as it represents Nelson's views:

14. Ch. XXII and Ch. XXI. The Melville-Cooper relationship has largely been neglected. Melville's portrait of Cooper (as Pitch, the Missouri bachelor -- Missouri being the "Show Me" state and Cooper having written a book on impressions of America as seen by a "traveling bachelor") in *The Confidence Man* should alone reassure readers about Melville's accurate understanding of Cooper's mind and works.

. . . It is a truth which all experience confirms that nothing renders justice so terrible, and consequently so efficient, as its promptitude and certainty. When all its requirements are observed, the speediest exercise of its functions is the most conducive to the protection of society, the real motive for the existence of all human regulations of this nature; and it is the great merit of the much-abused English ordinances that the laws are rarely made stalking-horses for the benefit of the murderer or the forger; but, that once tried and convicted, the expiation of their crimes awaits the offenders with a certainty and energy that leave the impression on the community that punishments were intended to produce. (Ch. XVII)

Nelson's idea of good government, which he was trying to teach Il Re Nasone and Maria Carolina, was based on such English ordinances. There was not doubt that Caracciolo had attacked British and Neapolitan ships, including *La Minerva*, his own former flagship. That he had been trained under Rodney in the British fleet and had commanded the fleet for the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies aggravated, rather than mitigated, his guilt in Nelson's eyes. For a precedent for Captain Vere's behavior, we have only to look at a dawn execution ordered by St. Vincent off Cadiz on July 9, 1797. On this occasion, Vice-Admiral Thompson had objected to an execution on Sunday and had been ordered from the fleet; Nelson reacted differently, saying, "Had it been Christmas Day, instead of Sunday I would have executed them"¹⁵. It is in the same spot, off Cadiz, that Captain Vere orders the execution of Billy Budd.

By having Captain Vere stress "forms", Melville answers Cooper's (and the historians') objection to the method of Caracciolo's trial, Cooper having protested the "appearance of a desire for personal vengeance" and a lack of "the calm

15. And yet, Southey goes on to assure his readers, "Never was any Commander more beloved. He governed men by their reason and their affections. They knew that he was incapable of caprice or tyranny. . . . Severe discipline he detested, though he had been bred in a severe school; he never inflicted corporal punishment, if it were possible to avoid it, and when compelled to enforce it, he, who was familiar with wounds and death, suffered like a woman", p.304.

deliberation of justice". Not even the most impassioned advocate of Billy Budd can accuse Captain Vere of a desire for personal vengeance or a lack of calm deliberation. (As to whether or not it is justice, Cooper had answered that question for himself in *The Pioneers* when Judge Temple, acting in the public interest, has to condemn Natty Bumppo even though Natty is only technically guilty and is morally innocent while his accuser [Hiram Doolittle] is, like Claggart, clearly corrupt). Of the very lawsuits in which he was embroiled while writing *The Wing-and-Wing*, Cooper had written:

There is but one legal public, and that acts under the obligations of precise oaths, through prescribed forms, and on constitutional principles. Let "excitement" be flourished as it may, this is the only public to which I shall submit the decision of my rights. (*Letters and Journals*, III: 282)

Melville and Cooper seem to have agreed that inflexible law, orderly trial, and quick and certain punishments and rewards are needed in this earthly life, and Cooper assuages our feelings about Natty's "victimization" in *The Pioneers* by duplicating the trial scene in Natty's call to heavenly judgment in *The Prairie*. Melville compresses both earthly and heavenly justice in one narrative, through Captain Vere's instant assessment: "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang"! and his later statement that "At the Last Assizes" a "more merciful" law "shall acquit" Billy Budd.

Melville's religious faith was, to put it mildly, less robust than Cooper's, but both authors would have considered blasphemous the "higher court" appealed to by such newspapers as the *New York Herald*, which wrote that Commander Mackenzie's case yet must "come before the tribunal of a far higher authority than a Court Martial, or even the Supreme Court of the United States. It must come before the tribunal of public opinion..."¹⁶ Public opinion, misled by

16. *Somers Affair*, p.154. The drawing mentioned in this paragraph and the midshipman's testimony are on pages 210 and 211.

false and malicious reports of Nelson's actions at Naples, had been wrong about Nelson; public opinion had been wrong about the *Somers* mutiny; and public opinion, at the time Melville was writing "Billy Budd", was going even more wildly wrong, led by the popular, sentimental press that had belatedly exhumed the *Somers* affair. An article published in 1889, entitled "The Murder of Philip Spencer", was illustrated by a drawing that shows Spencer as a boy of twelve, at the most, not as the expelled college student, almost twenty years old, that he was. Such an article naturally ignored the ample official records and testimony that support a fellow-midshipman's statement that Spencer seemed to have an "inbred if not an inborn inclination to the vicious" and that Shakespeare's phrase "a most inherent baseness" fit him well.

There are all sorts of curious details and coincidences in the material Melville was working with. Spencer, like Caracciolo, had asked to be shot rather than hanged; this was denied in both cases. The pieces of the mast of the *Bellipotent*, treated like relics of the cross in "Billy Budd", remind one of Nelson's famous casket, made from the mast of the *Orient*; the casket (a different one) in which Nelson's body was returned to England was broken up and distributed as relics among his own seamen. The execution of Francesco Caracciolo was commemorated in song at San Carlo in the spring of 1808; the executions aboard the *Somers* were followed by a poem (full of references to stars) of praise for Commander Mackenzie in the *New York Weekly Tribune* of Dec. 24, 1842, and by a ballad sympathetic to the "Mutineers" in the *New York Herald* in 1843. Yet it was a rare execution in those days that did not inspire some poetic effort, and Melville may have written his own ballad without knowing any of the others.

As he worked on the manuscript, granting the women's magazines their innocent little-boy victim, attributing Spencer's "most inherent baseness" to Claggart, assigning to Captain Vere the capacity for remorse he found in Guert Gansevoort and that Cooper and Southey had found in Nelson, Melville was trying to get at the moral situation of

Horatio Nelson in the Bay of Naples. If we, as readers, say that Nelson-Vere was wrong, that there are extenuating circumstances that call for the application of some "natural" law that should take precedence over solemn oaths and institutionalized laws, we are sharing our ground with Captain Mackenzie's defense attorney, who pleaded,

The high seas furnished no learned jurists with whom he might consult. But he had with him a volume of nature's laws, written by the finger of God on the human heart. In that volume he read that necessity ordains its own controlling canons; that they who seek unlawfully to slay, may themselves be slain without formal process... (*Somers Affair*, p. 150)

Commander Mackenzie himself had testified that he was responsible for the executions and that "... I fully meet that responsibility, trusting to the consciousness of rectitude within my own bosom, which has never for one moment forsaken me or wavered". His actions and this pious defense made Mackenzie a public hero at the time. He was condemned, however, and necessarily in private, by other officers in the U. S. Navy. Fenimore Cooper reported to Commodore Shubrick, "I have conversed with eleven captains and commanders, every man of whom is dead against him. I sustained him *at first*; but it was on very different facts from what have since appeared". Four members of the court-martial board of twelve men voted to convict Mackenzie, and a number of officers were excused from serving on the board when they told the Secretary of the Navy that their minds were already made up and that they would vote to hang Mackenzie himself¹⁷.

Actually, we do not have to consider Philip Spencer an innocent victim in order to be shocked by the *Somers* affair. As Cooper wrote of Mackenzie, "I do not accuse him of intentional departures from the truth, but he has an obliquity of mind and an obtuseness of morals that are almost as bad". Cooper's conclusion, written to Commodore Shubrick, would

17. COOPER, *Letters and Journals*, IV:362 and IV:413. Naval service was Cooper's first career and remained a major interest all his life.

have been Melville's: "I think the affair one of the most discreditable events ever occurred in the service, since it exhibits a *demoralized quarterdeck*"¹⁸. In marked contrast, Melville's Captain Vere is consistent with the Nelson who wrote to St. Vincent, then First Lord of the Admiralty,

You and I are on the eve of quitting the theatre of our exploits; but we hold it due to our successors never, whilst we have a tongue to speak, or a hand to write, to allow the Navy to be, in the smallest degree, injured in its discipline by our conduct. (Southey, p. 307).

Southey closes his famous biography, we remember, by quoting Hesiod's description of the superior humans of the golden age who live on in spirit, guarding less perfect mortals from evil.

A useful connection between history and art has been recently made by Helen Gardner, who writes: "Events are not in themselves tragic. They are calamitous, shocking, pitiful, or terrible, but not tragic until the imagination has worked on them"¹⁹. Cooper's imagination, applied to the Caracciolo execution, produced a romance with moral extensions, while Melville's was still in the process of forming tragedy out of the events of Nelson's life and the grievous muddle of the *Somers* affair when he died.

KAY S. HOUSE

18. *Ibid.*, IV:437 and IV:357. The italics are Cooper's.

19. *Religion and Tragedy*, New York, 1971, p.18.