The Politics of Security and the Art of Judgment in the Writings of Herman Melville and Janet Frame

by

Philip Loosemore

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

English Department
University of Toronto

© Copyright by John Philip Loosemore 2011
The Politics of Security and the Art of Judgment in the Writings of Herman Melville and Janet Frame

Philip Loosemore

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
University of Toronto

2011

Abstract

This dissertation pairs a nineteenth-century American writer, Herman Melville, and a twentieth-century New Zealand writer, Janet Frame, to consider points of overlap between two novelists who were unusually sensitive to the problem of political thinking and decision in situations of state emergency. Consisting of three chapters on Melville’s later maritime fiction (Moby-Dick, Benito Cereno, and Billy Budd, Sailor) and two interleaving chapters on Frame’s late autobiographical and fictional writings (An Angel at My Table and The Carpathians), the dissertation explores how, in the work of these writers, figural work builds around interlinked questions of emergency and judgment. Both writers are interested in situations of peril when the fragility of bodily life is exposed and when the coherence of given political orders is tested. Both probe the response of the human legislative urge and the limits of the power of judgment in the time of crisis and exception, producing narratives of the tense moment of executive decision. Their literary forms heighten awareness of the mechanisms, frameworks, and effects of different modes of judgment--whether cognitive, moral, legal, aesthetic, or
political--under emergency conditions. Out of this engagement with the nexus of judgment and security, both writers ask what might happen if we were to abide with precariousness and insecurity rather than default to the often destructive praxis of security. Melville and Frame also push the capacities of language and form in their attempt to represent the possibility of modes of judgment adequate to such political renewal. In their rhetoric and formal structures--including their experimental “disfiguration” of narrative lines--and in their creation of intricate, reflexive literary voices, these writers imagine what it would mean to come up against the limit of, and even to overturn, accepted categories of knowledge and thought, of calculation and judgment.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and to the University of Toronto for supporting my doctoral work.

For their invaluable assistance at different stages of this project, I wish to thank Elizabeth Harvey, Victor Li, Deidre Lynch, Heather Murray, and Paul Stevens, all at the University of Toronto; Allan Hepburn at McGill University; and Thomas Allen at the University of Ottawa. For their support of this project and their kind hospitality, I am grateful to Alex Calder, Jan Cronin, and Judy McFall McCaffery at the University of Auckland; Pamela Gordon and Denis Harold at the Janet Frame Literary Trust; Sarah Shieff at the University of Waikato; Jane Stafford and Mark Williams at Victoria University of Wellington; and Louise Grenside and Lydia Wevers at the Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies at Victoria University.

I could not have completed this dissertation without the support of my family, friends, and loved ones. I particularly wish to thank Brooke Dufton; Dianne and Patrick Gallagher; Gordon Jocelyn; Barbara, Jocelyn, John, and Sarah Loosemore; Mark McCans; and Rebecca Tierney-Hynes.

Finally, I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the members of my committee, Paul Downes, Chelva Kanaganayakam, and Naomi Morgenstern, for all of their advice, encouragement, and critical feedback.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** .................................................................................................................................................. 1

**Chapter 1** – Agon: Preventive Force and the Decision on Security in *Moby-Dick* .......................... 16

**Chapter 2** – Atomic Pacific and “The Age of the World Target”: Judgment and Narrative Power in *An Angel at My Table* ............................................................................................................. 57

**Chapter 3** – Judgment, Security, and the Theatre of Revolution in *Benito Cereno* ................. 92

**Chapter 4** – Security of Being and the Overturning of Judgment in *The Carpathians* ...... 135

**Chapter 5** – Security War and Executive Decision in *Billy Budd, Sailor* ................................. 174

**Bibliography** .................................................................................................................................................. 219
Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the idea of political judgment as it relates to the imperative of political security in the literary art of two major writers, Herman Melville and Janet Frame, who, though rarely if ever paired together in critical studies, shed a good deal of light on one another not only in terms of political insight, but also in terms of narrative and stylistic technique. In each of the chapters that follow, I explore, from one angle or another, how Melville and Frame question the mechanisms, frameworks, and effects of the power of judgment as it relates to issues of violence and political security.

Reading Melville and Frame

The dissertation consists of five chapters alternating between Melville and Frame. The three chapters on Melville unfold a chronological reading of the later maritime fiction. I analyze Moby-Dick (1851) in Chapter 1, Benito Cereno (1855) in Chapter 3, and Billy Budd, Sailor (1886-91) in Chapter 5. In the interleaving chapters, I analyze the development and extension of some of Melville’s central political insights in two late works by Frame, namely the second volume of her autobiography, An Angel at My Table (1983), in Chapter 2, and her novel The Carpathians (1987) in Chapter 4. This interlocking pattern is ideal for a project that tries to examine points of overlap between writers and periods without insisting on the presence of direct influence (by Melville on Frame) or direct response (by Frame to Melville), or on the purely linear, chronological development of political concepts.
I see Melville and Frame as mutually revealing writers because of what I would characterize as their shared interest in the force of necessity in judgments that deal out death or authoritarian repression in emergency situations, and because of their shared interest in the problem of finding a way around this imperative. In their fiction, both writers incessantly interpret acts of judgment. They scrutinize and size up, for example, how individuals reach decisions in contexts where bodily life and political ways of being are at stake. They feel around the edges of the contexts of judgment, from acts of barely conscious perception to complex ideological fictions such as natural law. They grapple with the human predicament of vulnerability and the desire for security. They critique the complex speech acts that surround the unleashing of violence by state security apparatuses.

Such continuities between the writers are illuminating, the more so given the considerable geographical, cultural, and temporal distances involved, distances that throw their related efforts into sharp relief. The differences between the writers, too, are important and instructive. For instance, one might, as I do in chapter one below, read *Moby-Dick* as a comment on the ideology of preventive, self-defensive violence playing out in a global theatre where the equatorial Pacific becomes a site of spectacular destruction in a kind of autoimmune ignition of hyper-securitizing energies. Melville’s own philosophies of potentiality, action, and sovereign mastery can in turn, as I will further explore below, be understood in terms of Daniel Webster’s 1841 rule on anticipatory self-defense in international law. The process of interpreting what the novel can say to us today about global, or at any rate international, wars of prevention is then implicitly enriched, as I hope to show, through a reading of Frame’s postwar, nuclear-era
meditations on potentiality and destruction in *An Angel at My Table* and *The Carpathians*. Historical differences clarified by Frame’s corpus allow us to locate more precisely how Melville’s wide-ranging speculations resonate today, and similarly allow us to articulate more precisely how modern issues of security *praxis* inform a reading of Melville’s fiction.

But Frame represents more than just the afterlife of--or a foil to--Melville’s response to emergency. For while Melville will, for example, play with the idea of a disruption to politically repressive judgment, Frame pushes further in this direction than he does, allegorizing the impossible *overturning* of the power of judgment, allegorizing too the profound or utter renewal of cognitive and perceptual capacities imagined to follow in the wake of such an overturning. This is not to say that Frame is somehow a more relevant or more daring writer than Melville, but it is to say that in the terms set forth by this dissertation, she offers something distinct. That is why, as I have suggested, the two chapters on Frame do not stem from questions of influence and response between the two writers. This project is about areas of overlap and meaningful difference, in terms of formal technique, philosophical preoccupation, and narrative method, between the major works of two writers who share unexpected but fruitful points of contact.

Another connection between Melville and Frame is that they are both world writers in multiple senses: well-travelled as individuals, their major fictions often display extended geographical vision as well as deep historical consciousness. Melville was, of course, one of nineteenth century America’s most cosmopolitan and globally-oriented writers. In so much of his fiction and poetry, Melville gazes away from America: towards Britain, the Atlantic, the Middle East, and above all the Pacific and the South Seas. Not
surprisingly, scholarship has long situated him in global and Pacific contexts. The more recent of this work has occurred against the backdrop of a post-national model of American literary studies that explores the disruption of cultural, geographical, and temporal boundaries associated with the nation state. Such a model seems tailor made for a work like, for example, Benito Cereno, which gazes from 1855 (the time of writing) back to 1799 (the temporal setting), and which tells a tale of slave rebellion and a projected return to Senegal (making it Atlantic in orientation), yet which takes place on the Pacific side of Cape Horn and registers American engagement with Pacific trade routes, as if to suggest that profits from enterprise in the Pacific basin are somehow integral to the at first benevolent and misguided, and later on consciously and harshly repressive, intervention of “the American” (Captain Delano) aboard the Spanish imperial slave ship the San Dominick.

With its trans-oceanic interests and investments, the fiction of America’s “Pacific

---


3 In such ways, works like Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick, with their sensitivity to different oceanic histories, keep steady pace with the present. In November 2009, America’s self-styled “first Pacific President” noted a “shift” in foreign policy when he reminded his Japanese audience that “The United States of America may have started as a series of ports and cities along the Atlantic Ocean, but for generations we have also been a nation of the Pacific.” Melville knew this well. “Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-suntory-hall.
man,” as Charles Olson called Melville,⁴ corresponds closely with the fiction of Janet Frame, a Pacific writer who was often creatively sustained by American culture and literary life. Frame’s early travels away from her native New Zealand, as recounted in her autobiography, took her to Britain and Spain; then from the 1960s onward, she also traveled frequently to the United States, staying for lengthy visits with friends, such as her patrons the Marquands, and drawing material and artistic sustenance for her creative work on sojourns to such artists’ colonies as Yaddo in New York State.⁵ Frame was quite interested in American literary culture and urban life. She set one novel, Daughter Buffalo, entirely in the United States and employed dual American and New Zealand settings for two others, Living in the Maniototo and The Carpathians. The latter novel, the final work of fiction Frame was to publish in her lifetime, tells the story of wealthy New Yorker Mattina Brecon’s journey to the fictional town of Puamahara, New Zealand, to conduct research into the myth of the Memory Flower. A story of an American in the Pacific by a New Zealand writer, The Carpathians not only belongs to New Zealand, Pacific, and postcolonial canons, but also compels us to think about the extent to which it might be considered a specifically American novel.

The Carpathians asks that we think about a wider definition of American literature than assumptions about national literary canons generally allow for, and not only because of its American setting (much of the novel takes place in New York City) and American protagonist. Writing in Auckland in 1987, Frame produced the novel in the midst of two important American-themed crises generated by the Labour government elected in 1984: the turmoil of major economic reforms and the ANZUS crisis. The economic reforms

---

⁴Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), 113.
⁵See, for example, Michael King, Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame (Auckland, New Zealand and Harmondsworth, UK: Viking / Penguin Books, 2000), 317-20.
radically deregulated New Zealand’s highly insulated markets in order to solicit global capital inflows, marking a major shift towards U.S.-style consumer capitalism and neo-liberal economic policy attuned to perspectives of Washington-based agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Meanwhile, starting in February 1985, the government made good on its election commitment to ban nuclear-capable and nuclear propelled ships (American and otherwise) from New Zealand ports and waters. The American government asserted that this measure was adopted in violation of New Zealand’s pact with the United States and Australia. The ANZUS crisis ensued. In different ways, directly and indirectly, Frame’s novel registers these economic and political developments. I will explore these matters further in chapter four below. Here, the point I want to emphasize is that this dissertation would treat America and the Pacific as fluid categories, finding in Frame an “American woman” to complement Melville’s “Pacific man.”

That said, my main preoccupations are not cosmopolitanism, oceanic histories, or diaspora. The broad goal of the dissertation is to indicate, through close textual readings of the major fiction of Melville and Frame, some possible approaches to the question of how these writers’ literary imaginations engage with the resources of political thought—however provisional must be the bracketing-off of transnationalism and diasporic identity in addressing such approaches. In other words, the cluster of ideas around transnationalism that I take as one rationale for bringing Melville and Frame together may well be important to the political questions I raise, and may represent an area for

---


further study in any comparative work on these writers, but it nevertheless lies beyond the scope of this dissertation so far as a detailed engagement is concerned.

Judgment, Security, and Potentiality

Throughout the dissertation, I analyze Melville’s and Frame’s figural and allegorical explorations of how judgment works in security crisis. The particular security problematic that informs my discussions is the sovereign decision on the state of exception.\(^8\) Not every chapter draws explicit attention to this problematic, but it nevertheless informs all of my readings insofar as the concept of the decision on the exception encapsulates the very relation between judgment and security. What is indeed an apparent truism, that judgment qua subjective decision is intimately bound up with the problematic of security as the ultimate craft or techne of sovereign power, is the root assumption behind the well known and influential, if controversial, dictum from Carl Schmitt’s Political Theology that I am invoking here, “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.” Schmitt’s sovereign is “he who decides” on neither more nor less than the question of political security, “determining definitively,” in Schmitt’s formulation, “what constitutes public order and security,” and “determining when they are disturbed.” The sovereign is the power that decides “what constitutes the public interest or interest of the state, public safety and order”; and the “exception, which is not codified in the existing legal order, can at best be characterized as a case of extreme peril, a danger to the

---

\(^8\) The “state of exception” has been the subject of much recent theoretical discussion and debate, as for example in Giorgio Agamben’s ontological and biopolitical interpretation of Carl Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty in Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985). See Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
existence of the state, or the like.”⁹ Championing what he calls the “decisionistic and personalistic element in the concept of sovereignty,”¹⁰ Schmitt claims, in sum, that sovereignty is generated by the subjective decision on security (or insecurity). His major effort is to delineate the calculation and control exercised in a subjective decision to suspend the constitution in response to a security emergency that threatens the very durability and existence of the state of law and order.

The paradigmatic case for my purposes would be the French National Convention’s decree of 10 October 1793 that announced the suspension of the Constitution of 1793 (itself never ratified), and that marked the real beginning of what would become a rapidly accelerating withdrawal of legal protection in the name of safeguarding the patrie in the series of legal suspensions that effectively generated the repression and violence of the Terror. Indeed, not least because of the temporal settings of some of Melville’s maritime fiction, a key historical referent for this dissertation is the era of revolutions and its global-reaching security wars, though the notion of prudential, reason-of-state politics relevant to my argument reaches further back to Hobbes, if not to Vitoria and beyond.

As the example of the Terror illustrates, exception refers to a threat to the survival of the state, and the decision on the exception is a manifestation of the latent power of the sovereign to suspend the constitution. Sovereign power, according to this theory, is equivalent to the potential to decide on the exception, a kind of perpetual preparedness to overcome contingency through determination. Potentiality in this reading can be understood quite simply as a negative mode of actuality. But potentiality has other,  

⁹ Schmitt, Political Theology, 5, 9.  
¹⁰ Ibid., 48.
contrasting meanings. For example, potentiality can be understood as equivalent to indeterminability; equivalent, that is, to an openness to the unpredictable and the unforeseeable. This contrast—potentiality as unfulfilled actuality versus potentiality as the unforeseeable—has important political implications. To take again the case of Carl Schmitt’s theory. Schmitt is attuned to the unpredictable in the sense that his whole theory rests on the idea that the “precise details of an emergency cannot be anticipated, nor can one spell out what may take place in such a case.” 11 But the burden of his argument is to prove that under the condition of (unforeseeable) urgent necessity, sovereignty is a power of determination, or rather sovereignty is power as determination—the determination of the limits of the state. 12

The contrasting notion of potentiality as indetermination or indeterminability underlies one of the most rigorous critiques of Schmitt’s concept of decisionism, namely Derrida’s unraveling of Schmitt in his Politics of Friendship. Without rehearsing Derrida’s argument in detail here, it suffices to point out that Schmitt and Derrida present, in effect, two opposed versions of the inauguration of the political realm. Where subjective decisionism (Schmitt) presupposes a more or less stable, pre-constituted Self exercising calculation and control, for Derrida, as he states in a well known definition, the “decisive or deciding moment of responsibility supposes a leap by which an act takes off, ceasing in that instant to follow the consequence of . . . that which can be determined by science or consciousness,” thereby “free[ing] itself . . . by the act of its act.” 13

---

11 Ibid., 6.
Implicitly and explicitly, I will come back to this opposition repeatedly throughout the dissertation. These two alternative political fictions, I will argue, provide illuminating vocabularies and frameworks for understanding Melville’s and Frame’s investigations of sovereignty, decision, and security. Melville and Frame, I will suggest, expose some of the dangers and some of the promises of these alternative versions of the nexus of security and judgment. Both writers understand the violence and injustice that can follow from instrumentalist decisionism (of the kind associated with Schmitt), a mode of judgment that, like Derrida, they are compelled to critique severely. But the end of such critique is not as simple as merely substituting an affirmative attitude towards finitude and unpredictability, for such an attitude carries dangers and problems of its own.

Melville and Frame are interested in the kinds of ideological fictions through which instrumentalist, objectifying, hyper-self-securing decisionism is woven into political life. These fictions are crucial. One of the key points about the French Terror, for example, was that the violence unleashed by sovereign decision was paradoxically construed as inevitable, as stemming from forces beyond sovereign control: the “salvation of the people” and the force—what Robespierre calls the “entitlement”—of sheer “necessity,” that recourse to the last resort when all reasonable alternatives appear to be exhausted.\textsuperscript{14} What does this conjunction of salvation and necessity mean? For one thing, it means that a certain discourse—natural law—elevates prudential politics. Or that the idea of a moral imperative legitimates the reason-of-state preservation of power. As we will see, the consequences and implications of this kind of elevation and legitimation are tracked repeatedly in the work of Melville and Frame.

The intertwining of morality and the principle of necessity, an intertwining which locates the sovereign decision as something paradoxically compelled by higher, external forces, tends to preempt arguments against the executive decision to concentrate power. The recourse to moral tradition and to the principle of necessity strikes at dissent as it effects a monopoly on the decision on the exception. As former President Bush stated on September 14, 2001 in reference to the attacks a few days before on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, “[O]ur responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.”\(^{15}\) Of course, what such a categorical statement clarifies is the very fact that any state security crisis will tend to involve competing claims and the clash of opposing wills: Security is once again inextricable from judgment, judgment in the sense of ongoing questioning and interpretation.

With that point in mind, a few more terminological distinctions may be helpful at this stage. By security, in this dissertation, as will already be clear, I mean state security, the strategic protection of life by the state apparatus. (That is, the strategic protection of valued life through the control of enemy or inimical life, the latter being exposed variously to repression, violence, and destruction in the name of the safeguarding of the former.)\(^{16}\) Security for my purposes refers both to the process of safeguarding a target (an individual or population, the state or its material sites) by protecting it from danger, and the process of constraining or neutralizing a target (for instance, an enemy, be it external or internal) by fixing it in place, controlling it, or destroying it. By judgment, I mean variously cognitive, ethical, legal, aesthetic, and political judgment. At root, I have in


mind the simple, broad, common understanding of judgment as an intellectual process through which one arrives at a conclusion, proposition, claim, pronouncement or decision in a situation of doubt that is made up out of fundamentally unreproducible particulars (as opposed to, say, logical deductions and mathematical conclusions). In my usage, the term judgment is almost, if not quite, interchangeable with other distinct but related terms such as perception, recognition, evaluation, thinking, interpretation, and above all decision-making. For my purposes, the important thing about judgment is that, to the degree that it does indeed constitute a practice dealing in complex, unreproducible particular cases, its conclusions are always contingent, provisional, and open to debate. For example, true political judgment, as John Brenkman reminds us, is at bottom a process that mixes, “according to no fixed principle, attention to facts, concern for the law, opinions self-interested and disinterested, and persuasion.” It is in the gaps thus occasioned, and in the chance to recognize, or do political work with, anomalies that push against a given system of reference, that writers like Melville and Frame seek to challenge the power of claims of necessity made in the name of the subject of security.

Overview of the Argument

I begin from the point that in the fiction and other writings of Melville and Frame, aesthetic power rises and figural work intensifies around interlinked questions of judgment and political security. Both writers are interested in those moments of peril when the fragility of bodily life is utterly exposed and when the capacity of sociopolitical

organization to endure crisis is put to the test. They are also, in their different ways, both interested in examining alternatives to those claims for the necessity of violence that are liable to be raised with great conviction at such moments. In Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Ahab’s project of combined retribution and preemption, designed to intercept and destroy inimical life, emerges in the wake of violence and terror. His quest is predicated on the idea that enemy capability can be preempted by a fixed quantity of one’s own potentiality. Ishmael’s lyric meditations offer a counterdiscourse to the security compact that authorizes the violent preventive strike; this counterdiscourse charts a different, troubling, yet ultimately affirmative idea of potentiality and unpredicability. In *An Angel at My Table*, Frame critiques a devastating clinical perspective that she personally suffered under, a form of determinative judgment (the operation of subsuming the particulars of experience under universal categories) that she surprisingly, but subtly and artfully, connects to the political judgments and modes of representational thinking that underlie the problem of nuclear arms in (both “hot” and “cold”) warfare. Her critique takes the form of her creative disruption of this regime of judgment through the story of her walkout from a place of employment. In *Benito Cereno*, the violence of counter-rebellion (Delano’s assault on the *San Dominick*) explodes in the climactic exposure of the pent-up and thinly concealed violence of rebellion. Melville again weaves into the text a counterdiscourse to authoritarian violence and the determinative judgment that authorizes it--counterdiscourse, in this instance, as a deconstruction of determinative judgment. In *The Carpathians*, an always precarious security (security of place, security of Being) collapses in the event of a curiously localized apocalyptic ruin (evocative of nuclear destruction). In Frame’s narrative, this event must be contained and controlled
lest it spread worldwide; yet, as I argue, Frame insists on this event’s metaphorical value for an imaginative renovation of the concepts underlying potentially repressive acts of recognition, evaluation, and judgment. And in *Billy Budd, Sailor*, opposed political orders and opposed concepts of sovereignty collide in the turmoil of revolution. Through his complex figural work and formal interlacing of moral parable and political allegory, Melville, as I argue, critiques the ideological fictions inherent in the political violence of the revolutionary emergency measure.

Melville and Frame, I argue, imaginatively test the response of the human legislative urge in the time of crisis, as well as the limits of the power of judgment, producing masterful “inside narratives” of the tense moment of sovereign decision. Their literary forms heighten awareness of the inner workings of different modes of judgment activated under severe pressure--whether moral, legal, aesthetic, or political judgment. And out of this engagement with the nexus of judgment and security, both writers ask what might happen if we were to abide with precariousness and insecurity rather than default to the often destructive praxis of security. It is not that their novels are devoted to a politics that would promote danger and instability and oppose safety and security. Instead, as I try to clarify throughout the dissertation, the point is that their novels resonate with a politics attuned to the violence, injustice, tragedy, and above all insecurity often wittingly or unwittingly invited by the heavy work of making-secure.

Restlessly experimental, Melville and Frame also strain the capacities of language and form in their quest to represent the possibility of modes of judgment adequate to such political renewal. In their figural work and formal structures--including their experimental “dis-figuration” of narrative lines--and in their striving after complex,
supple, reflexive literary voices, these writers, as I hope to show, imagine what it would mean to come up against the limit of, and even to overturn, accepted categories of knowledge and thought, of calculation and judgment.
Chapter 1
Agon: Preventive Force and the Decision on Security in Moby-Dick

September 2002: The Doctrine of Preemption and the Decision on Security

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the idea of decision as it relates to the imperative of political security in Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick (1851). Drawing on Hobbesian social contract theory as well as contemporary theorizations of potentiality, corporeal vulnerability, and military targeting, I read Ahab’s quest for retribution as a project of preemption or prevention designed to intercept and destroy the destructive potentiality of inimical life. I then argue that Ishmael’s lyric meditations offer a counterdiscourse to the Ahabian security compact, a counterdiscourse that foregrounds a largely positive yet nevertheless disconcerting idea of an engagement with unpredictability and the potential for danger.

This chapter, then, is about the opposed philosophies of security, and of Being, that are braided together in perhaps one of the greatest and most exuberant of nineteenth century American novels. By way of framing the discussion, though, I begin in mid-September 2002, over a hundred and fifty years after the first publication of Moby-Dick and in a context that at first might seem very remote from the novel, when the White House released the National Security Strategy of the United States of America (2002), a document specifying the economic, political, military, and other factors the administration deemed critical to American security interests in light of the new “security
environment” ushered in most immediately by the events of September 11. Among other policies, the Security Strategy advocates preemptive, or rather preventive, military strikes to forestall the acquisition and deployment of weapons of mass destruction by “rogue states and terrorists.” This military expedient is seen, in turn, to belong to a larger political and ideological war in which the U.S. has assumed the triple responsibility to “defend the peace [of the world] by fighting terrorists and tyrants,” “preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers,” and “extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent,” as former president Bush claims in his preamble.

In section 5 of the National Security Strategy, which outlines the doctrine of preemption, the National Security Council purports to respond to “new deadly challenges [that] have emerged from rogue states and terrorists” since the 1990s. In the Cold War, the reader is informed, the risk-averse nature of the adversary meant that “[d]eterrence was an effective defense.” In distinction, deterrence “based only upon the threat of retaliation is less likely to work against leaders of rogue states more willing to take risks.” This new state adversary is one for whom “weapons of mass destruction” are not

---

1 This chapter thus joins a number of recent efforts to interpret Moby-Dick in relation to 9/11. See, for example, Carolyn L. Karcher, “Moby-Dick and the War on Terror,” in Whole Oceans Away: Melville and the Pacific, ed. Jill Barnum, Wyn Kelly, and Christopher Sten (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2007), 305-315; Denis Donoghue, “Moby-Dick After September 11th,” Law and Literature 15, no. 2 (2003): 161-88; and Andrew Delbanco, Melville: His World and Work (New York: Vintage, 2005), 12-14, 165-66.


“weapons of last resort” but rather “weapons of choice”; at the same time, the avowed tactics of the nonstate terrorist enemy are “wanton destruction and the targeting of innocents” (NSS, 15). Invoking centuries of recognition within the realm of international law that “nations need not suffer an attack before they can lawfully take action to defend themselves against forces that present an imminent danger of attack,” the Security Strategy argues for a departure from precedent. For while “[l]egal scholars and international jurists,” the authors state, “often conditioned the legitimacy of preemption on the existence of an imminent threat--most often a visible mobilization of armies, navies, and air forces preparing to attack”--now the concept of imminent danger or threat must be stretched and transformed to meet the new realities: “We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today’s adversaries” (15).

What is particularly distinctive about rogue states and terrorists, according to the Security Strategy, is that they “rely on acts of terror and, potentially, the use of weapons of mass destruction--weapons that can be easily concealed, delivered covertly, and used without warning.” Within this context, the Security Strategy indicates in a famous passage that the United States has long maintained the option of using preemptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security. The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction--and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively. (NSS, 15)
Even if there is uncertainty as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack, there will be preemptive actions to counter such attacks, including, the Security Strategy will go on to hint broadly, very narrowly targeted military strikes against that enemy. In order to “support preemptive options,” section 5 concludes, “we will . . . build better, more integrated intelligence capabilities to provide timely, accurate information on threats, wherever they may emerge,” and “continue to transform our military forces to ensure our ability to conduct rapid and precise operations to achieve decisive results” (16).

Preemptive military operations, like the threatened enemy attacks in the first place, are markedly, rhetorically temporal (rapid) and spatial or localized (precise). What is more, they proceed from a form of attempted global mastery in which intelligence capabilities provide timely information on threats “wherever they may emerge” (emphasis added). In other words, even if the “time and place of the enemy’s attack” remain uncertain--indeed, precisely because the time and place cannot be anticipated (“acts of terror” may “potentially” include the use of weapons of mass destruction “without warning”)--the United States will, it is implied, time and place its own preemptive, self-defensive strikes. As Bush stated in a portion of a speech delivered three days after the September 11 attacks and placed as an epigraph to section 3 of the Security Strategy, the “conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others. It will end in a way, and at an hour, of our choosing” (NSS, 5). 4 Sovereign power means choice about timing.

4 Epigraph in italics in the original. The key phrase “time and place of the enemy’s attack” is repeated in the updated National Security Strategy of 2006, first in the “Summary of National Security Strategy 2002,” where the entire sentence is repeated verbatim: “The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction--and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack”; and later in section 4, “The Need for Action”: “Our strong preference and common practice is to address [nuclear] proliferation through international diplomacy. . . . If necessary, however, under long-standing principles of self defense, we do not rule out the use of force before attacks occur, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s
Sovereign is the one who decides on the time.

Sovereign power as it gets articulated in the National Security Strategy, then, is the power of timing and placing attacks, of choosing the hour of the end. Sovereign and quasi-sovereign powers threaten the U.S. with attacks of uncertain time and place. These attacks are resolutely spectral. They do not exist as such, but they are real and have real effects; they are not materially present, but neither are they purely ideal; they do not yet exist in time and place, yet they wholly consist in these. However that may be, the United States military will counter, forestall and prevent the attacks through its own command of times and places, gathering, to emphasize the point, timely information on threats wherever they may emerge and performing rapid and precise operations at the hours of its own choosing. The United States, it seems, will in sovereign fashion bring specific times and places to a type of deliberately destructive fulfillment.

In justifying its strategy of preemption, the former administration had occasion to remark on a famous doctrine of national self-defence and the preemptive strike that was formulated in 1841, almost exactly ten years before the first publication of Moby-Dick, by Daniel Webster, then the U.S. Secretary of State under President John Tyler. (Webster, we may note here in passing, was a friend of Melville’s father-in-law Lemuel Shaw, and great admirer of Thomas Melville [sic], the author’s grandfather, whom Webster thought to be, as he termed it, a “personification of the spirit of 1776.”)\(^5\) Webster’s doctrine briefly emerged into public view again in September 2002, when former National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice stated, “Anticipatory self-defence is

---

not a new concept. You know, Daniel Webster actually wrote a very famous defense of anticipatory self-defense.⁶ (In fact, important and relevant articulations of the concept of anticipatory self-defence go back at least as far as Vitoria’s early sixteenth century commentaries on Aquinas.)⁷ The defence to which Rice refers is outlined towards the end of Webster’s lengthy missive of 24 April 1841 to Henry Fox, British Minister in Washington, over the December 1837 incident of the Caroline, when the British set fire by night to a vessel moored on the American side of the Niagara River and cast it adrift over the Falls, with at least one fatality. In response to an American protest over the violation of national sovereignty, the British claimed self-defence, on the grounds that the steamboat had been transporting supplies to rebels on Navy Island in sympathy with the Upper Canada Rebellion. The most famous portion of Webster’s challenge to that claim reads as follows:

It will be for [Her Majesty’s] Government to show a necessity of self-defence, instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation. It will be for it to show, also, that the local authorities of Canada,--even supposing the necessity of the moment authorized them to enter the territories of the United States at all,--did nothing unreasonable or excessive; since the act justified by the necessity of self-defence, must be limited by that necessity, and kept clearly within it.⁸

---


⁷ See Totten, First Strike, 100-106.

Webster’s notion of preemptive self-defence establishes a certain time of necessity, a necessity of the moment. The time of necessity, Webster suggests, is infinitely short—immediate, instant, overwhelming, leaving no moment for deliberation and no choice of means, in effect no means of choosing. Leaving no space for judgment, the time of necessity therefore translates into a passive decision, a kind of non-autonomous freedom to defend oneself. Rice presumably invoked Webster in 2002 because his idea of an instant, overwhelming necessity of self-defence, a necessity occasioned by a threat virtually in the act of imposing itself (“leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation”), corresponds to what the National Security Strategy, being unveiled that September, calls the “concept of imminent danger”; and because Webster offers a rationale for striking self-defensively on the basis of this necessity.

As we have seen, the Security Strategy declares that the U.S. “must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today’s adversaries” (emphasis added). By adapting the concept of imminent to mean not quite that which is near at hand or visibly on the horizon (no longer the visible mobilization of forces preparing to attack), least of all that which is on the threshold of imposing itself, the Security Strategy performatively enunciates a new, updated, adapted time of necessity. (“To forestall or prevent . . . hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively” [emphasis added]). The Security Strategy stretches open or extends indefinitely that Websterian instant which leaves no choice of means and no moment for deliberation. To forestall the enemy’s hostile acts, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively. Necessity does not impose itself with or as the passive

on 67. On Webster’s Rule and the story of the Caroline, see Totten, First Strike, 11-21. On some of the key differences between the historical context in which Webster wrote and the historical, postwar contexts in which the Rule has been revived, see ibid., 21-26.
decision of Webster’s no choice of means and no moment for deliberation. Instead, the United States will in its own time actively decide if there is a necessity of anticipatory measures to be taken against the uncertain (wholly potential and spectral) time and place of belligerent acts. And it will, in the event of the necessity, have ensured its own ability (potentiality) to achieve the decisive type of result--the result that settles an issue once and for all, or that, like a decision, resolves difficulties at a stroke, or a strike.

Despite its performative rhetoric of temporality, despite its self-conscious assumption of power over time, the Security Strategy claims simply to be acknowledging and responding to a security situation brought about in the first place by the adversary. The authors imply that they adapt the concept of imminent threat not because they desire to do so but because they are compelled to do so--compelled by nothing less than the enemy’s capabilities: “We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today’s adversaries” (emphasis added). The adaptation is necessary (“We must”), not because the enemy is necessarily literally on the verge of striking, but because the enemy, in its capabilities and objectives, embodies a sheer, terrifying and terrorizing potentiality to strike at an uncertain time and place. As noted above, the United States will therefore increase its intelligence capabilities to provide “timely, accurate information on threats, wherever they may emerge,” and will continue to transform its military forces to ensure its “ability to conduct rapid and precise operations to achieve decisive results” (emphasis added).

What the National Security Strategy outlines is, in part, a virtual war, a war of potentialities, though one that of course translates into material destruction in real times and places. In the contemporary security environment, sovereign is the power that
decides upon a potentiality that marks an exception or necessity. The U.S. shall attempt to control the virtual time and place of the enemy’s uncertain attack by destroying enemy potentiality through actual strikes, and shall leave its own potentiality, its intelligence capabilities and its ability to conduct rapid and precise operations, hovering planet-wide (hence wherever threats may emerge).

One corollary is that, preoccupied as it is with potentiality, the National Security Strategy finds itself excessively preoccupied with actuality in the sense of action: the “greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction--and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action” or “preemptive actions”; thus, to forestall hostile “acts,” the United States will “act” preemptively (and the “purpose” of its “actions will always be to eliminate a specific threat to the United States or our allies and friends”) but it “will always proceed deliberately, weighing the consequences” of its “actions” (NSS, 15-16).

A certain phenomenology of action is suggested here, one that assumes the integrity, constancy, and pre-given security of the subject. It suggests a rationally controlled actor that assesses risk, proceeds deliberately, weighs consequences, and generates intentions or performs actions with purpose (we will come back to this signifier) in the detached awareness of reflective consciousness. And it locates a stable and fixed position from which to direct all security measures against the in-securing capabilities of the enemy.

**November 1851: Decision and Preemption in Moby-Dick**

With these points about the National Security Strategy in mind, I would like to turn now to Moby-Dick, and in particular to the scene of its recent completion in the Berkshires in the autumn of 1851.
Near the end of a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne composed, in mid-November 1851, in joyful response to the senior writer’s own letter of sympathy and praise for the recently published *Moby-Dick*, Melville pauses to voice his sense of his own irrepressible creative ambition, in the process announcing his cheerfully uncompromising stance toward his own work:

Lord, when shall we be done growing? As long as we have anything more to do, we have done nothing. So, now, let us add Moby Dick to our blessing, and step from that. Leviathan is not the biggest fish;--I have heard of Krakens.

This is a long letter, but you are not at all bound to answer it. Possibly, if you do answer it, and direct it to Herman Melville, you will missend it--for the very fingers that now guide this pen are not precisely the same that just took it up and put it on this paper. Lord, when shall we be done changing?  

Writing, as Melville imagines it in this brief and no doubt spontaneous fragment of private correspondence, is the endless assembly or invention of “nothing” right up to the sudden, if long-anticipated, consummation of the writer’s life in the final achievement of “anything more to do.” Writing can only slide between nothing and everything, and while it is the perpetual in-between, it nonetheless doesn’t seem to admit of any compromise between the highest point of development and the nothing that precedes it. And yet, writing also means ongoing movement and transformation, and continual, surprising self-generation: “Lord, when shall we be done growing? . . . [T]he very fingers that now guide

---

this pen are not precisely the same that just took it up and put it on this paper.” The telos may arrive without mediation, groundless and absolute, out of an otherwise endless dwelling in nothing, but it is nevertheless gained by means of the gradual process of writing, the unwinding of literary language, the blossoming and unfolding of the writer. Or as Melville had put it to Hawthorne in another letter the previous June: Since the commencement of his vocation as a writer in his twenty-fifth year, “[t]hree weeks have scarcely passed . . . that I have not unfolded within myself.”

And this process means that the writer is a creature of enormous power, in Melville’s view. To repeat: “[T]he very fingers that now guide this pen are not precisely the same that just took it up and put it on this paper.” Writing makes the writer new and therefore strange to himself and to others. It makes the writer into a kind of perpetually moving target difficult or impossible to hit: “[I]f you . . . direct [your letter] to Herman Melville, you will missend it.” Melville imagines himself as an object or end-point, as the potential target, destination, or, of course, simply addressee, of Hawthorne’s letter, though Hawthorne is not “bound to answer,” is not under obligation to “direct” a letter to Melville. Were Hawthorne to direct such a letter, it would quite possibly fail to reach its intended destination, for Melville, in the process of unfolding through language, has created himself as an ever-transforming subject that can never be securely fixed in place. The result must be, according to Melville, a missending on Hawthorne’s part, a misrecognition, an example of what Samuel Weber, referring to the basis of the correspondence theory of truth in Plato’s Thaeatetus, calls a “certain divergence or

---

10 Melville, Correspondence, 193.
distance between the thing to be cognized and the thought or representation of it.”  

Hawthorne’s impression or representation of Melville never quite corresponds to, never quite keeps up with, the “thing” in itself. *Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus* (Aquinas): Truth is the equation, adequation, or levelling of thing and intellect, object and understanding. Writing, as Melville would have it, somehow maintains the gap or divergence between *res* and *intellectus*, thing and representation, with the writer always keeping ahead of the possibility of equation, always causing the target-seeking other to miss the mark. Melville imagines himself as being unreachable, as remaining ahead of the other’s representational targeting, cut off from the targeting judgment implied by the other’s language. Writing, Melville senses, thrusts the writer into undeterminable territory, ontologically speaking, and above all forestalls the emplacement, securing, or subjection of the writer.

Melville’s compressed analysis is structured partly around the difference between two types of *end*. First, there is end as the fulfillment of an internal process of development (the writer’s dreamt-of achievement of anything and everything left to do). Second, there is end as the external, seemingly pregiven mark or target at which one takes aim (the writer as object or objective). The letter suggests that Melville, as writer, seeks one type of end (fulfillment) while evading status as the other (targeted mark). More than that, he seeks his own fulfillment as if by means of keeping out of the other’s sights.

We often think of the relation between self-fulfillment and targeted object the other way around. We often think in terms of some entity, whether an individual or a

---

collective, attempting self-fulfillment and self-security by trying to seize control of an object or event or situation identified at a greater or lesser distance from the self. This is the basic interrelation that Samuel Weber scrutinizes in his book *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking* (2005): the interrelation between the ultimate aim, on the one hand, and the targeted aim, on the other—between *telos* and *skopos*, in the Greek lexicon Weber employs. Weber asks what happens when the sovereign jurisdiction of *telos* is understood to be coterminous with the ability to survey, command, and strike the other as *skopos*. What happens when the ultimate goal of self-realization coincides with the action of taking aim at and hitting the designated mark, perhaps violently and even lethally, as so often in the military context, for example?

*Targets of Opportunity* is about a tendency in the Western metaphysical tradition, from at least Plato onwards, to figure cognitive processes themselves as attempts at “hitting the mark, making the point: targeting.”12 It is about the cognitive work involved in the desire to exert control for the present and future over a given object at a distance, an object that has been secured in the field of vision. As Weber argues, to secure an object in the field of vision means to identify it as both separable from its context, and as subject to one’s own conscious intentions. And yet, to avoid failure or mishap, targeting always depends on external and uncontrollable factors that lie beyond the will, desire, and intention of the one doing the targeting. And if sources of causation beyond human rationality and comprehension are part of the condition of successfully hitting a mark, then every target, far from being self-contained, always belongs to a larger network of events and situations, and every act of targeting is at least partly unpredictable not only in

---

terms of its chances of success, but also in terms of its ramifications and aftereffects.

Weber’s thesis is that when targeting, especially the instrumentalist “targeting of opportunity,” becomes the “paradigm of all action,” a crucial opportunity is missed. Above all, what gets missed is an opportunity to act in accordance with an understanding of the ways in which the mark involved in any act of targeting is “never simply present but always involved with other marks and other opportunities.”¹³ Weber argues that alternatives to a destructive and short-term-oriented targeting mentality (whether in military, economic, or other spheres) open up through one’s sensitivity to the larger network that always lies outside any particular field of vision. Such alternatives require an engagement with opportunity that is not necessarily goal-directed, and that is based on the acknowledgment that scopic activity, while on occasion necessary and useful in limited ways, need not—in one way of thinking must not—coincide with ultimate ends.

We may seem to have drifted far away from Melville’s letter of November 1851, except that this letter likewise envisions the scenario of targeting and supplies its own distinct version of an alternative to the achievement of telos through the mastery of skopos and the acquisition of the target, in this case by imagining the contingency and waywardness of the mark itself. Melville provides a miniature account of a target (skopos) that cannot be sighted by the other, that remains ungraspable in its contingent unfolding. The target remains secure thanks to its own insecurity. It is safely harboured, as it were, in its displacement and in the unpredictability of its movements. Its very errancy and unpredictability are tied, finally, to the “unfolding” that it experiences through a paradoxically busily sustained postponement, a dwelling in “nothing” that turns out to be a ceaseless, unpredictable flowering toward an ultimate goal whose arrival

could never be predicted--a goal, then, which cannot be seized or reached as such:

“[W]hen shall we be done growing . . . when shall we be done changing?”

It is perhaps no accident that Melville should have composed such lines, with their nascent theory of targeting (or anti-targeting), so soon after finishing Moby-Dick, the immense and roaming yet finally also intensely focused story of tele-sco-pic pursuit, the ultimate novel of targeting. Ahab’s tragic drama is the story of a commander who conflates telos and skopos in hazard- ing the targeted destruction of an ultimate enemy at what is repeatedly referred to as “the set time and place.” He is a targeter of opportunity who seeks to destroy the Other for the fulfillment of the Self. Moby-Dick, Melville’s most extensive and sustained meditation on security and danger and on the philosophy of potentiality ever at work in conceptions of security and insecurity, is, finally, the story of a sovereign commander achieving the time and place of an attack against an object of terror: It is a novel about choosing the hour of the end. Targeting as crucial techne of sovereign power is the essence of the novel’s drawn-out action.

Moby-Dick is a story, moreover, of sovereign power amassed in response to fear and the threat of violence, and of sovereign power claiming legitimacy for a preventive, defensive violent strike that tries to annihilate sources of insecurity--and that thereby tries to repress the fundamental relationship that security always bears to insecurity. As Michael Dillon writes in Politics of Security, “We stand too uncritically under the prejudice of the opposition between security and insecurity. . . . [W]e can never think security without insecurity, and vice versa. . . . We are dealing here . . . with a unified agonal relationship of mutual definition rather than a dialectical relationship in which one
term overcomes the other.” Ahab, I would argue, represents the prejudice of this opposition; he epitomizes the (entirely natural) yearning for the triumph of security over insecurity, a yearning fulfilled, Dillon warns, at the risk of burying the important agonal relationship of mutual definition.

Ahab’s self-securing and blindly certain act of destructive targeting is difficult and perilous, indeed fatal, and in that sense open to danger. Yet its purpose is to contain and overmaster corporeal and psychic vulnerability. Its aim is to establish dominance over the source of threat, mastery of chance, and control of times and places. Consider that Ahab’s “supreme purpose” in pursuing the hunt originates in the interfusing of his torn body and gashed soul (an image of the soul as cleft, slashed flesh), which occurs when “Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock” and mad Ahab is “seized” with “final monomania.” The attempted strike emerges as the decision (“supreme purpose”) of a leader whose power is made incarnate (“[his] sultanism became incarnate in an irresistible dictatorship” [147]) through bodily injury, disablement, and exposure to terror and violence.

Ahab’s response to injury and threat is to direct the passions of his crew against his enemy in the violent, absolutist reduction of plurality of a Hobbesian defense compact. Herein lies part of Moby-Dick’s resonance today. The “Hobbesian fear” or “just fear” tradition of political security, a predominantly realist approach to international relations, currently appears to be in the ascendant—particularly in the aftermath of the events of 9/11, and not least with the reiteration and extension of the doctrine of

---

preemption and prevention. The renewal at the beginning of the twenty-first century of a more comprehensive doctrine of preemption, one of the most ideologically and materially significant components of the Bush administration’s security strategy, was equivalent to a renewal of the Hobbesian defense compact that, however premodern and absolutist the fantasies of its original architect, still arguably undergirds the security praxis of modern democratic regimes. In other words, Hobbesian political theory—described by Ian Baucom in terms of “an obligation to seek to expel or contain the fearsome by contracting our shared passions . . . to a commonwealth, or state, or other sovereign power that pledges to deliver us from fear so long as we accede to its reasons of state”—was reenergized in the wake of the September 11 attacks and given form in the justification of preemptive—that is, preventive—force. Post- (if not pre-) 9/11 American security ideology has been overwhelmingly Hobbesian. Ahab’s response to injury, vulnerability, and danger is to assert a right to violence and self-defense in a targeted strike against presumed evil’s capabilities. This assertion,

---

16 The term “Hobbesian fear” is from Herbert Butterfield, “The Tragic Element in Modern International Conflict,” in History and Human Relations (London: Collins, 1951), 9-36, quotation on 21. On the “just fear” tradition, see Mark Totten, First Strike: America, Terrorism, and Moral Tradition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 106-11, 123-28, 138-45. Realism refers to a worldview that takes as given the struggle for power between states, the anarchic nature of that struggle, the offensive military capability of states, uncertainty between states as to each other’s intentions, and guiding all, a basic motive of survival. See John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” International Security 19, no. 3 (1994-1995): 5-49, esp. 9-10. A seminal statement of defensive realism (the idea that the state’s drive to increase its own security appears threatening to other states and therefore produces instability) is Kenneth N. Waltz, Theory of International Politics (New York: Random House, 1979). The idea that security praxis—the work of making secure—may lead to insecurity, on which defensive realism builds, is known as the security dilemma. On the security dilemma, see Herbert Butterfield, “The Tragic Element in Modern International Conflict,” 9-36; John H. Herz, Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951); and Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). The major proponent of offensive realism (the idea that, given thearchy of the international system, states will always seek to maximize their power in relation to other states) is John J. Mearsheimer, in The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York: Norton, 2001).


taking as it does the form of a compact or oath among the members of the crew, in
particular the harpooners and mates, when they are made “parties to [an] indissoluble
league” (MD, 166) in the carefully staged ritual on the quarter-deck, generates the
“Multitude” as “united in one Person,” as Hobbes might have said, the “Judgments” of all
submitted to Ahab’s singular “Judgment.” Now if, then, as critics have lately suggested,
the Ahabian oath of violence and revenge is indeed analogous to the compact or covenant
that generates the Commonwealth in Leviathan, an important qualification is that the
covenant on the Pequod arises less from a voluntary transfer of a presumed “natural right
of self-preservation” than from the force of Ahab’s subjective will-to-will, the calculative
control that he exercises to regulate and secure his target in a situation of uncertain
outcome. So it is not quite the case that, in more strictly Hobbesian fashion, Moby-Dick
represents fearful individuals seeking to transfer to the sovereign their natural right to
self-preservation. It is closer to the mark to say that Ahab shrewdly and charismatically
“forme[s] the wills of them all, to . . . mutuall ayd against their enemies abroad” (L, 227-
28) for self-serving ends. But the point is that a unified, absolutist sovereign “Judgment”-
defined minimally as the decision on the concrete case imposed as an act of dominion is
formalized, by covenant, for the wielding of the “strength and means of them all, as
[the sovereign] shall think expedient” (L, 228), all in the name of security, or for the sake

It may be asked in what sense Ahab’s violent strike allegorizes a security measure as opposed to a purely punitive measure. Ahab’s quest, typically understood as an offensive, reactive search for vengeance and psychic restitution (he is a colossal egotist, a madman, a narcissist, a dictator), can also be understood as a preventive, spectral war on potentiality akin to the modern strike of anticipatory self-defence. The sovereign “purpose” (i.e. Ahab’s “one supreme purpose” [MD, 202]) that cannot, to Starbuck’s dismay, be “wedge[d] aside” (169), translates through a “deepeningly contracted” “lunacy” into a “thousand fold more potency than ever [Ahab] had sanely brought to bear upon any one reasonable object” (185). This potency (capacity, potentia) is brought to bear on an actual, identifiable and localizable mark (the skopos). But more than that, it is brought to bear on a sheer potentiality, an “incarnation of . . . malicious agencies,” a “visibl[e] personifi[cation]” of “intangible malignity” and “all evil” (184). Though it may be the culmination of a quest for “monomaniac revenge” (187, emphasis), as Ishmael calls it, the strike on Moby Dick resonates with the modern discourse of the preventive security measure. The militaristic strike in Moby-Dick is launched against, not just a particular, identifiable evil thing (as it would be in the case of a quest for vengeance or restitution), but against all that is inimical and potentially destructive--hence terrifying: Moby Dick breeds a “peculiar terror”; “repeated disastrous repulses” “accumulate[e] and pil[e] their terrors upon [him]” (180); his association to “supernatural agencies” endows

---


him with “new terrors” (181) just as his “unexampled, intelligent malignity” invests him
with “natural terror” (183). This terrifying or terrorizing potentiality is coterminous with
an ability to transcend or control time and space, as in “the unearthly conceit that Moby
Dick was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one
and the same instant of time” (182), and not only “ubiquitous, but immortal (for
immortality is but ubiquity in time)” (183). What Ahab’s injury precedes, then (or rather,
what it produces), is not just a desire for vengeance and an offensive and reactive attack,
but a purpose (sovereign decision) to intercept potentiality, to purge a time-transcendent
and -space-transcendent “evil.” Ahab responds to an imperative to neutralize the
potentiality of a terrorizing “evil” in his attempt to assert spectral control over times and
places.

Ahab’s self-destructive or autoimmune security measure--autoimmune in that the
strike proves fatal to the Pequod, and always looked like a suicide mission, as Starbuck
knows (see MD 164, 514-15)--involves Ahab’s own aspiration to match Moby Dick’s
ubiquity and permanence. Ahab nurtures this particular fantasy through his own process
of timing and placing the strike:

Had you followed Captain Ahab down into his cabin after the squall that
took place on the night succeeding that wild ratification of his purpose
with his crew, you would have seen him go to a locker in the transom, and
bringing out a large wrinkled roll of yellowish sea charts, spread them
before him on his screwed-down table. Then seating himself before it, you
would have seen him intently study the various lines and shadings which
there met his eye. . . . At intervals, he would refer to piles of old log-books
beside him, wherein were set down the seasons and places in which, on various former voyages of various ships, sperm whales had been captured or seen. (MD, 198)

The seasons (times) and places of the globe are appropriable. Though it might “seem an absurdly hopeless task thus to seek out one solitary creature in the unhooped oceans of the planet,” yet Ahab is able to “arrive at reasonable surmises, almost approaching to certainties, concerning the timeliest day to be upon this or that ground in search of his prey” (198).

This timely information, to adopt the idiom of the National Security Strategy, means that “not only at substantiated times, upon well known separate feeding-grounds, could Ahab hope to encounter his prey; but in crossing the widest expanses of water between those grounds he could, by his art, so time and place himself on his way, as even then not to be wholly without prospect of a meeting” (MD, 200, emphases added). These substantiated times and well known places, it turns out, are antecedent, extra prospects . . . ere a particular set time and place were attained, when all possibilities would become probabilities, and, as Ahab fondly thought, every probability the next thing to a certainty. That particular set time and place were conjoined in the one technical phrase--the Season-on-the-Line. For there and then, for several consecutive years, Moby Dick had been periodically descried, lingering in those waters for awhile, as the sun, in its annual round, loiters for a predicted interval in any one sign of the Zodiac. (200, emphases added)

If a chance opportunity does not present itself at one of these seasons and places of extra
prospect, Ahab may still reach the telos of his quest there and then where possibilities become near certainties, at the particular set time and place, what becomes a deliberately secured, consciously targeted theatre of execution in more than one respect. Against the terror of Moby Dick’s ubiquitous and immortal potentiality of intangible malignity, Ahab, by his art, may repeatedly place and time himself all the way to the proper set time and place of the strike, a strike that, in the fulfillment of sovereign purpose, neutralizes enemy potentiality in a destructive actualization of sovereign potency.

**Counterdecision and Community**

Ahab, I have been arguing, launches a distinctly defensive and preventive, as well as offensive and reactive, strike. Troubling the distinction between aggression and defence, he attempts to wield his own potency or power to destroy enemy capability in the wake of an attack that has left him vulnerable and exposed to his own painful limitations. I have also argued that Ahab imposes his purpose on the crew through recourse to the fiction of the social contract, according to which he binds the wills of the crew members to his judgment on security. The creation of the contract entails an oscillation between compact and dominion, agreement and coercion. In the wake of the contract, Ahab reasserts his own shattered ipseity or sovereign mastery. This mastery in turn manifests as a fantasy of control over space and time, and is destined to culminate in a sovereign choice upon the “hour of the end.”

All the while that Ahab’s tragic drama is unfolding, and with it the story of the vicissitudes of Ahab’s sovereignty, Ishmael’s comic meditations--his “lyrical
poeticizing,” as John Bryant characterizes his language--establishes a voice that in its wandering, essayistic “growing” and “changing” (to cite again the terms of Melville’s letter analyzed above) manages to stop in its tracks--or at least defer--the relentless hunt for the time and the place of target. This voice, significantly, conforms, as I will try to demonstrate, to a type of collective or communality operating beyond the reason-of-state contract between sovereign protector and obedient subject. In Ishmael’s survival (“The drama’s done. Why then here does any one step forth?--Because one did survive the wreck”), a different way of reaching the end lives on. This form of progression and achievement works neither by suppressing, nor by acting out against, a relationship to vulnerability, threat, and unpredictability. Instead, it works exactly by protecting that relationship. Ishmael engages with, but does not try to master, instability and danger. That is perhaps why in the “Epilogue”--the last word of the survivor--there are images of, among other things, a supernaturally contained but visibly ever-present and perhaps even ineradicable danger, the “unharming sharks . . . [that] glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks [that] sailed with sheathed beaks” (MD, 573).

Against the Ahabian version of self-fulfillment, there plays out in the novel another version neither dissociated from, nor set in opposition to, the insecurity to which it bears a fundamental relation--a poetic and poeticizing way of “unfolding,” “changing,” and “growing” in constant negotiation with insecurity. In Ishmael’s essayistic interruptions of drama and narrative, as I will argue, there is to be found a vocabulary for a politics of insecurity, an approach to Being that would involve seeing the relationship between security and insecurity as agonal rather than dialectical, in Michael Dillon’s

terms, and that would involve counteracting enmity, violence, and the heat of anger with something other than an Ahabian (or rather, as I have suggested, Hobbesian) defense compact. If the defense compact, and the speech acts and judgments that surround it, establish security as a category itself entitled to protection at all costs, Ishmael’s lyric meditations, seeking a rather different relationship to vulnerability and danger, put that category into question. In the process, they throw into relief the kinds of opportunities lost when the Hobbesian “just fear” approach to security dominates political life.

Hobbesian-style decision, judgment, and purpose are in the first place never absolute. They can be contested or thwarted, as in Starbuck’s hope, alluded to above, that Ahab’s “heaven-insulting purpose” may be “wedge[d] aside” (MD, 169). In fact, Melville goes further than to suggest that sovereign decision and determination are always open to dispute, for he imagines decision not as freedom of subjectivity, but rather as (a possibly undesirable) freedom from subjectivity, therefore as intrinsically open, indeterminable, and surprising: something that “shocks” the one who decides. Perhaps the best example is the description of Ahab’s night terrors, when Ahab appears as split between a “supreme purpose” that has “forced itself . . . into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own” and a “common vitality” that flees “horror-stricken” from this “unbidden and unfathered birth”:

[A]t such times, crazy Ahab, the scheming, unappeasedly steadfast hunter of the white whale; this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, was not the agent that so caused him to burst from it in horror again. The latter was the eternal, living principle or soul in him; and in sleep, being for the time dissociated from the characterizing mind, which at other times employed it
for its outer vehicle or agent, it spontaneously sought escape from the
scorching contiguity of the frantic thing, of which, for the time, it was no
longer an integral. But as the mind does not exist unless leagued with the
soul, therefore it must have been that, in Ahab’s case, yielding up all his
thoughts and fancies to his one supreme purpose; that purpose, by its own
sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of
self-assumed, independent being of its own. Nay, could grimly live and
burn, while the common vitality to which it was conjoined, fled horror-
stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth. (MD, 202)

Ahab is dis-positioned. His own supreme purpose--what I have been reading as an
analogue of the sovereign decision--fashions his personhood, rather than the reverse.

Jacques Derrida’s critique of Schmittian decisionism, a critique which, as I
suggested in the Introduction, amounts to an alternative myth of the inauguration of
sovereign power, is helpful in clarifying what Melville is trying to do in this scene. The
true decision, Derrida claims, “signifies in me the other who decides and rends,” and
“must surprise both the freedom and the will of every subject--surprise, in a word, the
subjectivity of the subject, affecting it wherever the subject is exposed, sensitive,
receptive, vulnerable, and fundamentally passive, before and beyond any decision.” It is
therefore “not only always exceptional, it makes an exception for/of me.”25 It is not that
the sovereign is “he who decides on the exception,” but rather that the decision “makes
an exception” of the sovereign. According to this revisionist fiction of sovereignty (if
sovereignty can properly be said to exist according to such a fiction), a true decision can

emphasis in original. See also Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’”
only occur to the degree that it remains unpredictable right through the ontologically void instant of its making, no matter how much knowledge, preparation, deliberation—Derrida’s terms are “science or consciousness”—are brought to bear on it. If the result is not to consist of the “unfolding of a calculable process,” it must emerge from the “ordeal of the undecidable,” as Derrida states. The decision, in short, is a “leap” that “frees itself.”

Melville anticipates this particular fiction of power: Ahab’s supreme purpose, the living principle of sovereign decision in him, emerges as the “other” that makes an exception of him, the other who decides and rends. In its depiction of the site or origin of the decision on security, Moby-Dick captures the way conscious intention and unitary aim may be fundamentally destabilized.

This construction of Ahab’s split subjectivity is part of Melville’s larger series of speculations on contingency. (Ishmael’s meditations in particular try to chart the yield, valuable for politics, of the image of the “surprised” subject, as we will see.) Yet Ahab’s tragic drama—as opposed to Ishmael’s comic poeticizing—is ultimately about how one may cover over or deny this root relationship to vulnerability and contingency. The exemplary means of achieving such repression is through a fiction of ipseity, a “posture of mastery,” to borrow a phrase from Patchen Markell. This posture corresponds to the phenomenology of action that I referred to above in my discussion of the National Security Strategy. Like the National Security Council, Ahab understands action as something performed as a bold repudiation of the otherwise apparent restrictions imposed

---

26 Derrida, Politics of Friendship, 68.
28 Derrida, Politics of Friendship, 69, emphasis removed.
by contingency and human limitation: “He tasks me,” Ahab says of Moby Dick; “I will wreak [my] hate upon him. . . . I’d strike the sun if it insulted me. . . . Who’s over me? Truth hath no confines” (MD, 164).

In sum, Ahab’s vulnerability, and the instability of the ground of his decision, keep erupting into view even as he pushes further and further toward a perilous encounter: The text would seem in this respect already to deconstruct the whole idea of a self-protective strike aimed from the fixed height of sovereign mastery. Ahab’s drama could be interpreted in this way as a proleptic critique of the modern-day ideology of the preemptive strike. Ahab nevertheless embodies the rational, the autonomous, and the calculative. His purpose (the “purpose” of his “action,” to invoke the relevant terms from the National Security Strategy) signifies the force that constitutes sovereignty as the decision to strike and to pursue the “extraordinary case” (MD, 161). Sovereign decision converges, at the “proper time and place,” with the “command” of the “wide expanded survey” of sovereign height, from where it (that is, the decision or purpose) “fixedly gleamed” (536, 538) over the whole crew. Backed by such dominion, the security compact is itself secure, the agency or potency behind the compact “domineer[ing] above” (536) its members, no matter the fractures that would seem to open up a space of productive instability, if not dispute and contention.

It is left to Ishmael to explore the real alternatives to Hobbesian security. His comic meditations constitute an implicit challenge to Ahabian ideology.

There are formal and conceptual dimensions to this challenge, which I take up in turn. The first point worth noting is that Ishmael’s challenge results in more than a contest between voices and ideologies. As John Bryant puts it in “Moby-Dick as
Revolution,” Melville does not simply present “variant worlds in radically different voices,” Ahab’s world and voice against Ishmael’s. Rather, one voice enfolds the other, with “Ishmael’s comedy fram[ing] Ahab’s tragedy, so that in fact Ahab’s tragic drama is a projection of Ishmael’s comic sensibility.”

But, as Bryant notes, none of this is to say that Ishmael fully, dialectically subsumes Ahab to everyone’s relief. Instead, as Bryant claims, one is “made to inhabit the passions of conflicting ideologies”; one is “always caught between Ahab and Ishmael,” and, “unnerved by the struggle,” made to “[live] on after the experience” rather than permitted to transcend it. Read in the light of Michael Dillon’s terminology cited above, Bryant’s analysis suggests that Moby-Dick pursues the agon rather than the dialectic of existential (in)security. The formal alternation between comic meditation and tragic drama in Moby-Dick, in all its philosophical and political as well as aesthetic significance, is agonal.

At the level of form, Ishmael interrupts the hunt for the ultimate target throughout the vast “Cetological Center” of the novel. Though the novel is dense with narrative incident--an attempted lethal strike against an almost mythic and cosmic target; virtuosic scenes of the deepwater hunt; the rondo-like recurrence of the Pequod’s “gams” with encountered vessels--nevertheless, as readers know, the action repeatedly slides into Ishmael’s essayistic, studiedly improvisational discourses on things cetological, nautical, and philosophical, particularly throughout the long middle between “Cetology” (ch. 32) and “Does the Whale’s Magnitude Diminish?” (ch. 105). This overarching formal alternation between narrative and essay provoked the animus of many of Moby-Dick’s first readers, who often declared that the essay chapters detracted from the story, or that

---

30 Bryant, “Moby-Dick as Revolution,” 80, 71.
31 Ibid., 71-2.
they were problematically unorthodox. Decades later, many scholars of the Melville revival generally wished to explain away the digressive chapters, as they were termed.

More recent major critics, from F. O. Matthiessen, Howard P. Vincent, and Walter Bezanson at mid-century to Samuel Otter and John Bryant today, have accounted for them in distinctive ways, demonstrating the creative processes and formal necessities that might be said to underlie Ishmael’s excurses, probing the politics embedded in the joyously excessive yet bluntly familiar voice that comes through in them.

At the narrative level, then—or rather the level of narrative disruption—Ishmael


Samuel Otter, in Melville’s Anatomies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), demonstrates that the cetology chapters are far from digressive or tangential. He shows how, in these chapters, Melville “takes the reader on a fantastic voyage around the surface and inside the body of the whale” and “tells the story of a quest for knowledge anchored in bodies and animated by the search for racial secrets” (134, 133); see 101-71. John Bryant, in Melville Unfolding: Sexuality, Politics, and the Versions of “Typee”: A Fluid-Text Analysis, with an Edition of the “Typee” Manuscript (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), writes that these chapters “are lyrical and meditative yet jaunty and comic, and they allow Ishmael to sing out his presence; they build a voice that can speak for both Ahab and the crew . . . These late insertions to Moby-Dick take readers far afield, it would seem, but they perform an important narrative function. They are not just ramshackle shanties; they are songs” (202). For a related point, see also John Bryant, “Melville Essays the Romance: Comedy and Being in Frankenstein, ‘The Big Bear of Arkansas,’ and Moby-Dick,” Nineteenth-Century Literature 61, no. 3 (2006): 277-310; see esp. 285-86.
defer the fulfillment of the Ahabian contract. At the conceptual level, Ishmael’s enfolding, agonal meditations haunt or critique the Ahabian security compact. Borrowing again from Ian Baucom, who in turn is drawing on Judith Butler’s recent work on security issues in her book Precarious Life, I would claim that this Ishmaelian “other” is attuned to an “experience of precariousness, of insecurity, of knowing that we cannot secure ourselves from being undone,” and thus stands for the “refus[al of] that [Hobbesian] offer of exchange, through which our various states, commonwealths, and sovereign authorities make us safe from fear if we will license them to quarantine (or annihilate) all that we have been instructed to hold inimical to ourselves.” Of course, Ishmael himself is a member of the security compact; and he joins the hunt in a wild, violent attempt to exorcise his fear: “I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul” (MD, 179). But within Ishmael’s meditations on vulnerability and precarious life are nevertheless to be found, as I will argue in the remainder of this chapter, an attempt to modify and redirect the energy of fearsome, fearful preventive force.

First, let us pause to consider in more detail Butler’s account of what it might mean to refuse the Hobbesian security compact. In “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” one in a sequence of essays in Precarious Life that responds to the event of 9/11 itself and that critiques the predominantly bellicose reaction to that event, Butler argues for the idea of generating a sense of political community out of the “thrall in which our relations with

---

36 Butler, it should be stated, does not explicitly reference Hobbes.
others hold us” and out of the “vulnerability” and “exposure” of “bodily life.” Such corporeal vulnerability, she clarifies, is vulnerability to the “touch of the worst order”:

[W]e all live with . . . a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt. . . . [The] denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery . . . can fuel the instruments of war. . . . [Therefore we] must attend to it, even abide by it, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself.38

Butler argues for the crucial role of hesitancy, unpredictability, vulnerability, otherness, and exposed corporeality in the making of the subject and the making of the decision or decisional event. She does so neither to argue for a supposed poverty or deficiency of the subject, nor, obviously, to embrace yielding to risk and violence; but rather to open up space for a politics that moves beyond the violent purifications, exclusions, and necessities of security ideology, whether the latter emerges as the sense of the secure subject; the secure decision, purpose, or action; or the secure homeland.

Ishmael, to put the point in Butler’s words, seeks a “possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss.”39 It should be noted that the idea of this possibility comes through in passages of Moby-Dick that do not necessarily address the kinds of issues of enmity and extreme violence that Butler is confronting. The insecurity and danger that Ishmael meditates on is not always a matter of political violence. In the “Cetological Center” of the novel, what Ishmael is thinking through, above all, is risky

38 Ibid., 28-29.
39 Ibid., 20.
labour. Dangerous labour would seem to have little to do, overtly, with political conflict and violence. (By contrast, Moby Dick’s “malicious agencies” and the hunt to destroy them combine to produce a clearer political allegory in the novel.) Yet if we approach the text in a certain way, we see that Ishmael offers in these passages a language that points to sustaining an alternative relation to insecurity, and a vocabulary that goes to the heart of the political issues of injury, violence, contract, decisionism and dominion that structure the Ahabian worldview.

Between the two formal threads of the novel that we have been looking at--Ahab’s revenge drama and Ishmael’s comic meditations--the concept and language of potentiality form the crucial hinge. A reflection on potentiality is one important form in which Ishmael’s pressure on Ahab occurs, as for instance at the conclusion of “The Line,” a chapter on one of the dominant images of security and danger in the novel.40

Again: as the profound calm which only apparently precedes and prophesies of the storm, is perhaps more awful than the storm itself; for, indeed, the calm is but the wrapper and envelope of the storm; and contains it in itself, as the seemingly harmless rifle holds the fatal powder, and the ball, and the explosion; so the graceful repose of the line, as it silently serpentine about the oarsmen before being brought into actual play--this is a thing which carries more of true terror than any other aspect of this dangerous affair. But why say more? All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only

40 There are several forms of (in)security on the “line” in Moby-Dick: there are the whaleboat lines that endanger the oarsmen (“The Line,” “Stubb kills a Whale”), that entangle Pip (“The Castaway”), and that kill Ahab (“The Chase--Third Day”); there is the navigational “Log and Line” (520-22) that snaps in the hunt for Moby Dick; and the “Line of the Pacific” (381), the equator, that will prove Ahab’s fatal destination.
when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life. And if you be a philosopher, though seated in the whale-boat, you would not at heart feel one whit more of terror, than though seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side. (MD, 281)

What can be most terrifying with respect to the multiply-symbolical line is not the harm that it causes when brought into actual play but rather the force of an ineradicable future risk, a risk that cannot be appropriated or mastered: “[T]he graceful repose of the line, as it silently serpentines about the oarsmen,” “carries more of true terror than any other aspect of this dangerous affair.” Normally this potentiality, the “silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life,” is only acknowledged in the passing instant of its actualization in “the swift, sudden turn of death.” Moby-Dick, I would argue, thinks of itself as laying bare more consistently this potentiality-of-insecurity, this “thing . . . of true terror.”

Ishmael, it turns out, imagines community to be predicated on, rather than predicated on the eradication of, the terror of potentiality, what he elsewhere calls “dangerous liabilities” (MD, 320). The phrase “dangerous liabilities” occurs in “The Monkey-rope,” one of the many chapters to detail the hazards of the labour or whaling.41 “The Monkey-rope” explains and illustrates a mechanical task of the whaling operation, namely how the blubber-hook gets inserted in the slaughtered whale preparatory to the task of “cutting in.” In this scene, the insertion is performed by Queequeg, who “flounders about, half on the whale and half in the water, as the vast mass revolves like a

---

41 Other notable chapters to describe these hazards include “First Lowering,” “The Line,” “Stubb kills a Whale,” “The Dart,” and “The Grand Armada” on the dangers of the deepwater hunt; and “Cutting In,” “Cistern and Buckets,” “The Try-Works,” and “Stowing Down and Clearing Up” on the dangers at various stages of processing.
tread-mill beneath him” (319). As Queequeg’s “bowsman,” it falls to Ishmael to “attend upon him while taking that hard-scrabble scramble upon the dead whale’s back.” From the “ship’s steep side,” Ishmael “[holds] Queequeg down there in the sea, by what is technically called in the fishery a monkey-rope, attached to a strong strip of canvas belted round his waist.” Ishmael elaborates,

It was a humorously perilous business for both of us. For, before we proceed further, it must be said that the monkey-rope was fast at both ends; fast to Queequeg’s broad canvas belt, and fast to my narrow leather one. So that for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake. So, then, an elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother; nor could I any way get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed.

So strongly and metaphysically did I conceive of my situation then, that while earnestly watching his motions, I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two: that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another’s mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death. Therefore, I saw that here was a sort of interregnum in Providence; for its even-handed equity never could have sanctioned so gross an injustice. . . . I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or
other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die. (320)

The word “liabilities” here refers to Ishmael’s exposure or subjection to the possibility of injury and death in his partnership with Queequeg. The tie that binds in a social compact or “joint stock company” does not eradicate threat. Rather, it shines a clearer light on ineradicable threat.

Melville’s “dangerous liabilities” names a responsibility or obligation (li-ability deriving from the Latin ligare, to tie or bind) that potentially (the Latin suffix bilis denoting capacity, tendency, or capability) requires self-sacrifice. Thus the dangerous liabilities would seem to be, to draw on a recent articulation of a philosophy of potentiality, “things that exist but that, at the same time, do not exist as actual things; [that] are present, yet [that] do not appear in the form of present things.”42 The liability-potential does not refer to a prefigured act or to a predictive likelihood. Ishmael’s liability is not structured in the image of a real or actual event. It is not a possibility that may or may not be avoided, that may or may not attain factual existence. As a current condition of exposure and subjection, of responsibility and obligation, the liability possesses its own proper reality and thingness, the reality of the virtual: a virtuality that Ishmael cannot “any way get rid of”—indeed cannot get rid of even when the particular task that gives rise to his insight comes to an end: “I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes.”

Neither manipulable nor securable, the dangerous obligation under which Ishmael

---

finds himself indicates the condition of a future that never arrives and to which Ishmael is
subjugated. The dangerous liability, I would argue, corresponds in structure to the
“dangerous perhaps” of decision that Derrida, who takes up the phrase from Nietzsche,
identifies as an unforeseeable happening or radical arrival that “suspend[s]” the very
“thesis of existence”--a “perhaps” that does not “present itself” but of which we could say
“there is a chance of there being one.”43 The dangerous liability, the situation of every
mortal, is a virtuality wholly divorced from a logic of actualization; it is the future as, and
as utterly bound to, indeterminability and risk. To enter into relations with others is to
experience insecurable insecurities, to become bound or bonded to the in-securing force
of dangerous liabilities that cannot any way be eliminated, any more than the sheer
potentiality that manifests within the line, silently serpentining as its shadowy and
graceful repose.

The Hour of the End

I have been arguing that the (formal and conceptual) interruption of Ahab’s
preventive strike on enemy potentiality involves thinking about a different kind of
political community than one rooted in Hobbesian fear. By way both of bringing my
argument full circle and of continuing to read Moby-Dick against the grain of modern
American security praxis, I would like to conclude by considering how this alternative
community would hold to different spatio-temporal rhythms than the appropriation and
mastery of space and time implied by the commitment to “choose the hour” of one’s self-
fulfillment. I will further consider how this Ishmaelean version of community breaks
open the representational mode of judgment that violently masters situations and objects,

43 Derrida, Politics of Friendship, 38-39, emphasis in original.
in favour of a widened perspective that encompasses plurality. To address these points, the following, concluding section of the chapter will outline how Melville characterizes an alternative mode of judgment.

The image of a time and place that cannot be definitively located—let alone set apart, commanded, surveyed, or made proper for possession—comes uniquely to light in “The Pacific” (ch. 111). This brief chapter, which opens with the words, “When gliding by the Bashee isles we emerged at last upon the great South Sea” (MD, 482), marks the beginning of roughly the last seventh of the novel and initiates a sequence of twenty-five chapters and epilogue in which the Pequod, having travelled across the Atlantic and Indian oceans and through the Sunda Strait and the Java and China seas, voyages to its destruction in the equatorial Pacific, the stage upon which Ahab climaxes his pursuit of Moby Dick.44 A paean to the world’s largest ocean, “The Pacific” stills the novel’s action in a final essayistic excursion before the narrative climax. From this point until the epilogue, Ishmael’s voice will become an increasingly transparent medium of Ahab’s drama. But “The Pacific” is almost all Ishmael— with the exception of the fourth and final paragraph, when Ahab’s sovereign purpose seems to reassert itself:

[S]tanding like an iron statue at his accustomed place beside the mizzen rigging, … [Ahab] consciously inhaled the salt breath of the new found sea; that sea in which the hated White Whale must even then be swimming. Launched at length upon these almost final waters, and gliding towards the Japanese cruising-ground, the old man’s purpose intensified

44 For a useful overview of the Pequod’s voyage, see Herbert G. Eldridge, “‘Careful Disorder’: The Structure of Moby-Dick,” American Literature 39, no. 2 (1967): 145-62. Eldridge isolates “The Pacific” as one of four chapters essential to tracking the Pequod’s course in detail; the other three are “The Spirit-Spout” (ch. 51), “The Grand Armada” (ch. 87), and “The Hat” (ch. 130).
itself. His firm lips met like the lips of a vice; the Delta of his forehead’s veins swelled like overladen brooks; in his very sleep, his ringing cry ran through the vaulted hull, “Stern all! the White Whale spouts thick blood!”

(483)

Ishmael’s discourse shifts abruptly from his own paean to his commander’s purpose; and, by implication, from what Ishmael calls the “sweet mystery” of the ocean, a repository of culture and history, to the idea of a distinctly visible “globe” or geometric totality, a presupposed grid of time and space, understood as media for the fulfillment of sovereign purpose or decision.45

But if Ahab’s purpose, and thus his activity of timing and placing, surface in the chapter’s coda, they are contained, agonally, within a larger, counteracting, Ishmaelean structure and Ishmaelean metaphysics, much as, to return to Bryant’s thesis, Ahab’s tragic drama itself is contained within Ishmael’s enfolding, lyrical meditations. The Pacific ocean, we read near the beginning of the chapter, rolls the midmost waters of the world, the Indian ocean and Atlantic being but its arms. The same waves wash the moles of the new-built Californian towns, but yesterday planted by the recentest race of men, and lave the faded but still gorgeous skirts of Asiatic lands, older than Abraham….

Thus this mysterious, divine Pacific zones the world’s whole bulk about; makes all coasts one bay to it; seems the tide-beating heart of earth. Lifted

45 I am drawing here partly on a distinction between globe and world offered by Victor Li in “Elliptical Interruptions: Or, Why Derrida prefers Mondialisation to Globalization,” The New Centennial Review 7, no. 2 (2007): 141-54: “A brief examination of the etymology of the word ‘globe’ establishes its root in the Latin word globus or ‘ball,’ a self-contained, spherical object. The word ‘global’ also suggests inclusiveness and completion, conveying a sense of the earth as an all-encompassing whole. Monde takes us back etymologically to the Latin mundus, or ‘world,’ a word dense with social and religious meanings but lacking the geometric totality imparted by ‘globe’ or ‘global’” (142).
by those eternal swells, you needs must own the seductive god, bowing your head to Pan. (MD, 482-83)

The ocean, in Ishmael’s tropes, consists of a world-encompassing system of spatio-temporal rhythms and intervals: the waves that knit together distant geographies and their respective accumulations, thick or thin, of history; the action of the tide-beating heart; and the sense of global division and distribution that the verb zones conveys along with its additional and even predominant meaning here of encirclement. This ocean “rolls the midmost waters of the world,” the innermost waters, in position the very middle waters: for the Pacific is a trunk or body with appendages, namely the arms of the Indian and Atlantic oceans. More theoretically it is also, the word midmost suggests, a space without determinate end or frontier; a pure, unbounded middle: The Pacific, mysterious, divine, unfathomable, far from being determined by an act of measurement, itself performs the division--zoning--that creates the world. Put in modern terms, Ishmael’s rhetoric enlarges the Pacific to a planetary network.46

No causal power precedes the Pacific; nor, however, does it emerge ex nihilo:

46 This passage from “The Pacific,” then, demonstrates what Gesa Mackenthun in “Chartless Voyages and Protean Geographies: Nineteenth-Century American Fictions of the Black Atlantic,” in Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean, ed. Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun (New York: Routledge, 2004), 131-48, describes as the impulse in Melville’s writing to “transnational spatiality” and “modern temporality”: “In condensing various historical moments and geographies, Melville’s narratives suspend linear time and the artificial divisions of space, replacing them with a transnational spatiality, as well as a ‘modern’ temporality in which the present is shot through with images from the past and, in Moby-Dick, prophetic images of the future” (144). For recent analyses of Melville and globalization, see Paul Lyons, “Global Melville,” in A Companion to Herman Melville, ed. Wyn Kelly (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2006), 52-67; and Charles Waugh, “‘We Are Not a Nation, So Much as a World’: Melville’s Global Consciousness” Studies in American Fiction 33, no. 2 (2005), 203-28.

I borrow the Benjaminian terminology of the “pure middle” from Peter Fenves, Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics series (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 255. In the final paragraph of the novel’s first chapter, “Loomings,” the word “midmost” evokes or foreshadows Moby Dick’s supreme or sovereign position. As in “The Pacific,” the word “midmost” in the first chapter is associated with the particular bundle of images of spectrality, imagination, and global consciousness: “[T]he great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air” (MD, 7).
rather, a ghostly source of power, a dense aggregation of kinetic phantoms, sets the
Pacific’s eternal swells in motion. In typically allusive, alliterative, intricately rhythmic
language, Ishmael portrays the ocean as a spectre-crammed vastness:

There is, one knows not what sweet mystery about this sea, whose gently
awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath; like those
fabled undulations of the Ephesian sod over the buried Evangelist St.
John. And meet it is, that over these sea-pastures, wide-rolling watery
prairies and Potters’ Fields of all four continents, the waves should rise
and fall, and ebb and flow unceasingly; for here, millions of mixed shades
and shadows, drowned dreams, somnambulisms, reveries; all that we call
lives and souls, lie dreaming, dreaming, still; tossing like slumberers in
their beds; the ever-rolling waves but made so by their restlessness. (MD,
482)

In this series of figures, the source of the power of the “divine Pacific [that] zones the
world’s whole bulk about” is this mass of “unreal” yet “virtually” existent appearances--
shades and shadows, or spectres; dreams, or fancies; and instances of sleep-walking or
unwilled gesture (“somnambulisms”) and pure states of absorption (“reveries”) somehow
lent phantom form. As phantoms, these figures take no place; they cannot be identified as
self-contained (they are “drowned dreams, somnambulisms, reveries”). They are not
actual. Even so, they are caught up in relation to the actual. But not in dialectical
opposition. Insofar as they constitute the “gently awful stirrings” of the ocean’s spatio-
temporal pulses or “waves,” they are closer to existing as a kind of productive, agonal
potential that could never be appropriated or actualized, a structural possibility that is not
merely a deficient or incomplete form of the real. The “ever-rolling swells” of the ocean—the “same waves,” we recall, that “wash the moles of the new-built Californian towns, but yesterday planted by the recentest race of men, and lave the faded but still gorgeous skirts of Asiatic lands, older than Abraham”—are traces of this potentiality, a potentiality that could never be timed or placed, never located as self-contained, but that both produces and confounds distinctions of time and place in a rhythmical expansion, such that distances of time and space are simultaneously established and broken down, instituted and deserted: Every there and then becomes a here and now as the “tide-beating heart of earth” links distant points of history and location as the “same.”

Such time and place cannot be reconciled to a time and place set apart; nor reconciled to a proper time and place appropriated to some purpose. Nor does the latter, appropriative mode of conceiving time and place survive the former, alternative one. For on these “final waters,” at the “Season-on-the-Line,” Ahab “stoop[s] to clear” the line that “with igniting velocity” has run “foul”: “but the flying turn caught him round the neck” (MD, 572); and so, “caught in the swift, sudden turn of death,” Ahab perishes on the Line, becoming a shade or shadow, a drowned dream or somnambulism under the eternal swells of the midmost waters on which Ishmael, floating on the margin, manages to live—to survive abandoned, another orphan.

---

Chapter 2
Atomic Pacific and “The Age of the World Target”: Judgment and Narrative Power in An Angel at My Table

[Michael King’s Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame] is a book about a woman who feared being judged, and who suffered deeply because of wrong judgments, whose professional life and enormous gifts were then marshalled for decades to challenge and evade a world, variously crippled by those who judge. The Place of Judges is where most of us live. Those few who resist and erect a counterworld know language is their ultimate and often their only weapon, a living, vibrant force for defiance—the writer as perpetual revolutionary against the zombie-speech of convention.¹

--Vincent O’Sullivan

In this chapter, I work towards a reading of a biographical event in the life of Janet Frame that has come to be known as the walkout, an event that I will interpret as Frame’s spontaneous protest against a regime of determinative judgment.² I also critically examine Michael King’s retelling of this same event in his biography of Frame. King, I argue, reproduces the determinative mode of judgment that Frame calls into question in her representation of the walkout in An Angel at My Table. I conclude by reflecting on how King’s version, as narrative, renders the event readable and accountable, and how

² The phrase “walk-out” is Mike Lloyd’s. See Lloyd, “Frame Walks Out.”
Frame’s version, while still in narrative form, plays with the idea of a disjunctive force that would interrupt narrative’s power of ordering and “making sense” out of events. I connect this material to a larger set of political questions that I began to address in the previous chapter. I do so first of all by framing my reading of the autobiography through a discussion of Janet Frame’s response, in some of her fiction and poetry of the 1960s, in particular her novel *Intensive Care*, to American military presence in the Pacific and to the dawn of the atomic era. August 6, 1945 was a significant date in Frame’s life. In her reconstruction of the effect of that day, she positions the event of the first combat use of atomic weaponry in relation to the comparatively minimal event of the workplace walkout. In some ways, the burden of this chapter is to demonstrate how Frame’s design of the relevant chapter of *An Angel at My Table* (“1945 [One]”) indicates this odd correspondence.

Significantly, the event of the bomb also marks the culmination of a certain “politics of vision--of viewing the world,” as Rey Chow puts it in *The Age of the World Target*, a politics of vision that identifies the world as a target upon which there may be unleashed a destructive potentiality at once sublimely immense and yet, paradoxically, wholly measurable and calculable. In Frame’s chapter “1945 (One),” the contiguity of, on the one hand, the “spectacular illumination of the ceremonies of death” that is the atom bomb, and, on the other, the episode of the walkout, means that Frame invites us to read the politics of vision (which is also to say the politics of judgment) at work in each circumstance as mutually relevant. The representational thinking that seeks to master the world-as-globe (an Ahabian approach to power) and that signifies a will to world

---

domination is linked, however incongruously, to the inspector’s assessment of Frame’s capability as a teacher in a classroom in Dunedin in August 1945. Frame’s walkout, in short, is an event with wider political implications than may at first be apparent.

The hinge between the first and second halves of this chapter, where the first half deals with Cold War rhetoric of nuclear armament and disarmament and the second with the biographical story, is the event of atomic destruction in the Pacific. The spectre of atomic destruction in the Pacific is also a hinge between Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and 1960s-era New Zealand critiques of nuclear armament and nuclear capability. By way of a transition from Melville to Frame, I will begin the next section with a short explanation of this seeming anachronism.

**Security and Destruction in the Pacific, 1851-1969**

In chapter one, we saw that Ahab’s equatorial Pacific, the “proper time and place” of the Season-on-the-Line, is a zone of ultimate achievement as well as ultimate destruction. At the so-called “final waters,” the Pacific becomes a site of judgment in the sense of doom in Ahab’s ever-spiraling and paradoxically self-destructive attempt at security and fulfillment. The targeting of enemy capability at this site nevertheless depends on a form of global mastery according to which Ahab is able to “time and place himself” across the “widest expanses of water,” until he reaches the “set time and place” where “possibilities” slide into “certainty” and where he is able to unleash his “thousand fold more potency” on his target.  

Such relays between targeting, long range navigation, security, violence and

---

catastrophe, as bound up with American intervention in the Pacific, were the stuff of public concern and debate in the New Zealand of the late 1960s where Janet Frame matured as a writer. For instance, in a monograph called “Omega: Nuclear Warfare Subsystem or International Navigational Aid?” published in April, 1969 by the New Zealand Labour Party, Owen Wilkes, responding to the 1968 announcement that the U.S. navy was seeking a location in New Zealand for a navigational radio antenna, repeats the charge voiced in then-current public protests that this equipment was part of a “worldwide navigation system” designed “to provide guidance to Polaris-equipped nuclear submarines,” and that construction of the transmitter in New Zealand automatically made the country “an accomplice in any future American nuclear war” and therefore “liable to suffer a nuclear attack ourselves, either to disable the transmitter or as retaliation for permitting its installation.”⁵ (Why Wilkes believes a nuclear bomb would be the likely weapon of choice for tactically disabling the transmitter is unclear.) Put in a Melvillean idiom, Wilkes is saying that to participate in augmenting the U.S. military’s capacity to time and place its strikes of a thousand fold more potency across the widest expanses of water is to become a target of destruction--destruction as nothing less than total (nuclear) “annihilation.”⁶

In the same month that Wilkes’ monograph was published, Frame was nearly halfway through a four month stay at the Yaddo artists’ colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, where she was working on the novel that would become *Intensive Care* (1970). The third and final section of this novel takes place in a futuristic New Zealand recovering from the ravages of nuclear war (World War III, “the Greatest War”), when

---

⁶ Ibid., 14.
“so many [were] dis-solved--in a breath of white dust blown away by the southwest wind.” The novel depicts the legislative efforts of the federal government to implement a massive eugenics program in response to the effects of the destruction, a program within the parameters of which those classified as “humans” are to be separated from those classified as “animals.” In 1969, then, the monograph anticipating nuclear war and the novel visualizing its possible aftermath intersect on the question of how to govern in the shadow of the ultimate security crisis (the ultimate exception) that nuclear destruction represents.

It could be said that Wilkes, in his warning against New Zealand complicity in any “future American nuclear war,” and Frame, in her imaginative vision of the aftereffects of nuclear destruction, both register, or at any rate respond to, the intense Cold War anxiety to which the activist New Zealand literature on disarmament of the period attests. The tone of apocalyptic reckoning is captured, for example, at the beginning of Lawrence Ross’s “Open Letter to World Statesmen,” dated June 1, 1963 and placed at the head of Ross’s pamphlet World War III and the Southern Hemisphere, a document that addresses the probability and possible effects of nuclear war: “Mankind stands poised in super readiness for a total war which could lead to total human extermination.” The pamphlet goes on to characterize anticipated conditions of “mass death, starvation, suffering, disease, [and] communication and transportation breakdown,” the resulting “panic and anarchy,” and the inevitability of unchecked

---

“[m]urder, looting and theft . . . [and] cannibalism” in the wake of nuclear strikes.9

If Ross envisions a descent into absolute anarchy, it is relevant to Frame’s own treatment of the nuclear issue to note that propaganda of the period often channeled anxiety by rhetorically reestablishing principles (archai), essentially through classifying--and distinguishing between--the different forms of destruction to be expected in the event of thermonuclear detonation. For example, another 1963 pamphlet called The Bomb: A New Zealand View, details the projected reach and effects of blast damage (“Most of the casualties in a nuclear attack would be caused by collapsing buildings”), fire radius (“Nuclear weapons . . . would cause second and third degree burns over a vast area”), radiation and fallout (“Symptoms [of radiation sickness] which appear within four hours after . . . exposure include nausea, vomiting, and sometimes diarrhoea”), and firestorm (“For those who survived the immediate heat and blast of a nuclear explosion, the next great problem would be the firestorm”).10 Complete with cartographic and statistical analyses, such materials try to provide at least minimal order in advance of what seemed like an imminent, cataclysmic “dis-solving” of life in the Pacific.

In Intensive Care, Frame does not dwell on the event of the bomb blast and the projected destructive aftereffects. The novel is instead about the political regime that follows the disaster, and about the mode of judgment that prevails in that regime. Specifically, it pictures a hyper-acceleration of calculative thinking (the classifying impulse) among the survivors. (I return to this point below.) But this same cognitive transformation occurs against the backdrop of “mass destruction” (IC, 221) in both hemispheres (see 219), and of the “devastation of the North Island” with its dead and

---
9 Ibid., 17.
10 The Bomb: A New Zealand View, compiled by Mary Woodward (n.p.: The New Zealand Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, [1963]), 4-5.
wounded (213), and in the aftermath of what Frame’s visionary speaker Milly Galbraith refers to as the “bomb that leaves a glare in the sky and blinds you, but not if you hide in concrete under the earth with air excluded and supplies for many days until the bomb loses its deadly power and you come out on the earth and you have all the fresh air you have saved in containers, but the earth is razed into an unfamiliar desert and you have to start all over again the task of building the western world safe for democracy” (243). As imaginary eyewitness account and dystopian fiction, Frame’s novelistic engagement with the anxieties of the nuclear age extends in different directions than the anti-nuclear propaganda, but shares with the latter a Pacific-centered, Southern hemispheric critique of the arms race, warning of boundless physical suffering and destruction on the scale of near-extinction.

Despite different uses of language, Frame and the anti-nuclear campaigners connect in terms of their critical efforts and social consciousness. Such different directions as Frame is able to pursue have to do with the resources of fiction and the literary imagination. Consider, for instance, Frame’s creation, in the sentence just quoted, of the naïve yet perceptive voice of the eyewitness. The sentence’s syntax is designed to deliberately obscure logical relationships. Its tone is calibrated to ironize liberal political justifications of arms manufacture. To put the first point of this paragraph in reverse: Despite related critical efforts and social awareness, the novel and the anti-nuclear pamphlet inhabit, as one would expect, different epistemological spheres.

There is an at least putative divergence, then, between polemics and poetics. Interestingly, evidence of a (perhaps inadvertent) reconnection is to be found in the polemical literature itself. This reconnection occurs when the polemical literature
registers the potentiality of imaginative language, the potentiality inherent in experimentation with language, to open up alternatives to the seeming imperative of nuclear armament.

To properly illustrate this point, we need to briefly consider the philosophy of potentiality articulated in some of the anti-nuclear literature. In a section on “The Probability of War” in World War III and the Southern Hemisphere, for example, Ross states,

Whereas certain leaders have the power to start war, they may be quite incapable of stopping its birth should unpredictable and uncontrollable events suddenly occur. Thus future history, if there is one, may not condemn Kennedy and Khruschev for the holocaust so much as consider them as two of the more prominent pawns caught in the irresistible [sic] human and technological flood tides which moved aimlessly to the clash of self-extinction.

With the panorama of destructive potential in the world today and potential rapidity of its release, we may never learn what was the triggering incident, country, or sequence of events leading to World War III. This may make it very difficult for Southern Hemispheric powers to assign blame and take a political and military position.  

Specific world leaders may have the capacity to begin war, but such power stands in inverse proportion to their (in-)ability to stop a war that begins from a chain events falling outside their calculations and beyond their will. Unpredictable and uncontrollable events (not surprisingly) throw into relief a fundamental in-capability. (In Moby-Dick, as

---
11 Ross, World War III and the Southern Hemisphere, 14.
we have seen, Ishmael is able to imagine the affirmative political life of such limits to capability.) And this incapability is in turn defined in relation to large forces at once irresistible and aimless (a kind of radically uncertain certainty), equivalent to a sheer destructive potential whose magnitude scrambles the power of judgment and renders impossible any stable “positioning” of oneself.

What action is possible under the threat of this disabling potentiality? In the context of his own pessimism and resignation, Ross hints at what is, for him, the only meaningful possibility: “Although hope and the verbal search goes on for ways out of the crisis . . . the multiplying sources of disaster make total war much more likely than stable peace . . . Other than continuing the imaginative search for alternatives to war, small nations, like New Zealand, can do little to stop the highly probable battle of the world colossi.” The “verbal search . . . for ways out of the crisis” and “imaginative search for alternatives to war” signify a potentiality counterpoised, uselessly but defiantly, to the potential of self-extermination. By the terms verbal search and imaginative search, Ross undoubtedly refers to his own pamphlet and similar polemical efforts, in particular his specific “proposals to prevent war.” But it is not difficult to detect that this characterization of his own efforts would have him mapping the same terrain as the nation’s literary artists. It is in this sense that, as I’ve suggested, polemics meets poetics: Adherents of either one tend to value creative or rhetorical potentiality as a (perhaps tragically insufficient) means of recovery.

Without being didactic, Frame undertakes an “imaginative search for alternatives to war” in her literary work--not just in Intensive Care, and not only in the context of the

---

12 Ibid., 14-15.
13 Ibid., 1.
post-Cuban-crisis era of the Cold War in the 1960s. In this regard, we might consider her poem “People Are Ill, Dying,” published in *The Pocket Mirror* (1967), a poem which evokes the sickness from nuclear fallout in a complex entanglement of images of the “mushroom,” of “skin . . . peeled from the flesh,” the “rain of centuries of hate,” and the conceit of humankind “fried by bomb’s explosion” consuming itself into “nothingness”:

People are ill, dying. The skin
like that of a mushroom
is peeled from the flesh. The body
is not poisonous after all.

It sprang up overnight
under the sky in the dew
where a warm sheep
snuggled asleep
and in its center stalk
a worm lay.

Mysterious night origins
rain of centuries of hate
dung and dew
the worm in the pillar
the ceiling of flesh
the sun on the roof.

Is this proof
that man is an edible fungus,
a mere breakfast treat
to be fried by bomb’s explosion,
eaten by nothingness of death?\(^{14}\)

This poem is, in part, a meditation on the ways in which “man” becomes the “breakfast treat” of his own grasping powers. It is also a sardonically mournful “prevision” of the effects of future thermonuclear war. At the same time, it might be read as a response to post-war nuclear testing in the Pacific by France, Britain, and the U.S. And it might, above all else, be read as a response to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not least on the grounds that, as we shall see when we turn to *An Angel at My Table* below, American mass atomic destruction at the culmination of the war in the Pacific theatre in 1945 lent a severe shock to Frame’s artistic and literary sensibility, shaping, on her own account, her artistic vision and her approach to language. Without being overtly political or overtly allegorical, the poem encompasses a wide range of reference. A modern Pacific answer to Blake’s “The Sick Rose” (the worm in the stalk), “People Are Ill, Dying” is a song of experience for the nuclear era, and as such, an imaginative verbal search for attitudes and perspectives that might resist the panorama of destructive potential in the “age of the world target.”

Rey Chow’s *The Age of the World Target*, cited above, is itself, in its Heideggerean argument, about the epistemic shift of August 1945 when, “in the wake of the atomic bombs[,] the world [had] come to be grasped and conceived as a target--to be destroyed as soon as it [could] be made visible.”\(^{15}\) I would say that in much of her work,


\(^{15}\) Chow, *The Age of the World Target*, 12.
Frame writes against this epistemic shift, and offers what Chow might call a “‘poetic’ resistance to the steady instrumentalization of the world.”16 Of course, the idea that Frame’s work marks a “poetic resistance” to conformity, to techno-bureaucratic domination, and so on, is well established, if it is not in fact the underlying assumption of most criticism on Frame.17 What has not been dwelt on, to my knowledge, is how Frame responded to the specific discourse of nuclear power and political security in the Pacific; what her insights into this discourse offer in terms of a concept of potentiality that pushes against the “exploitative, ordering attitude” that underpins technological domination;18 and finally, what it is, specifically and in formalist terms, about her imaginative search that yields this concept of potentiality. These are the factors that I continue to address in the remainder of this chapter.

Potentiality, Judgment, and New Zealand Security

In the twilight of the Cold War, and in the aftermath of the 1985 termination of U.S.-New Zealand defence cooperation stemming from New Zealand’s ban on nuclear-

---

16 Ibid., 12.
17 For recent versions of the thesis, see for example Marc Delrez, Manifold Utopia: The Novels of Janet Frame, Cross/Cultures 55 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002), who argues that Frame uses language to access the space beyond “accepted knowledge” in the construction of “a form of utopianism”--a new version of humanity (xv). Simone Drichel, in “‘Signposts to a world that is not even mentioned’: Janet Frame’s Ethical Transcendence,” in Frameworks: Contemporary Criticism on Janet Frame, ed. Jan Cronin and Simone Drichel, Cross/Cultures 110 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), 181-212, builds on Delrez’s argument by critiquing his sense of a “totality” at work in Frame’s oeuvre, and thus tries to recover something even more radical in Frame’s approach. In an argument that takes account of Frame’s critical distance from ideas of transcendence (and with particular reference to Intensive Care), Drichel reasserts the claim that we might “understand Frame’s work . . . as utopian narratives that gesture towards a new way of being human” (209). This basic perspective has always predominated in one form or another in Frame studies; for example, it informs many of the essays in Bird, Hawk, Bogie: Essays on Janet Frame, ed. Jeanne Delbaere (Aarhus, Denmark: Dangaro Press, 1978). Monique Malterre’s essay “Myths and Esoterics: A Tentative Interpretation of A State of Siege,” in Bird, Hawk, Bogie, 89-93, is representative: “Frame . . . appears somewhat of an iconoclast. . . . [She] rejects the materialism of advanced technological societies . . . [and] tries to point the way back to substance and identity by revalidating the experience of solitude and contemplation” (89).
18 The phrase in quotations is from Chow, Age of the World Target, 12.
armed or powered ships from its ports, a very different attitude to verbal search and potentiality qua capability is to be found in an assessment of an important New Zealand military exercise called Golden Fleece that was conducted in the central North Island in January and February 1989. Exercise Golden Fleece was designed to test the New Zealand Defence Force’s readiness for independent and joint-force operations in the South Pacific. In this assessment, subtitled “Lessons and Limitations,” Peter Jennings argues that there are “important limitations to the military’s capability for force projection,” and asserts that there is a “significant gap between governmental rhetoric about the [army’s Ready Reaction Force/Integrated Expansion Force] and the actual capabilities of the armed forces,” in other words a “shortfall between commitment and capability.”

Jennings is arguing, in essence, that verbal commitment in the form of governmental rhetoric needs to be realigned with actual capability--not, of course, through an adjustment of the former, but rather through an augmentation of the latter.

Jennings’ working paper is littered with the word capability (“the capability of the armed forces”; “capability for force projection”; “capabilities for conducting operations”; “capability to independently respond”; “force projection capability”; “capability to provide logistic support”; and so on) for the simple reason that the success of military action (and of security praxis), right along the spectrum from “operations” to “wars,” is determined in the first place by resources and training: by power, capacity, and ability.

---


20 Ibid., 1, 2, 3. Thus, statistical reports of nuclear force capability tend to comprise a key part of anti-nuclear campaign literature of the kind analyzed above. For example, a booklet called A Review of the Pacific in an Unstable World (Wellington, NZ: Campaign Against Nuclear Warships in New Zealand, 1977) records that “The USA has between 8000 and 12000 tactical and strategic warheads stored and deployed in the Pacific basin. . . . There are 122 ships in the Pacific fleet capable of carrying and firing nuclear weapons” (22).
(Wars are always wars of potentiality, whatever else they may be.) More significantly, as an assessment of this capability, the paper implicitly links potentiality to the question of judgment: Security or defence capability is a quantity to be measured (judged), just as the gap between rhetorical commitment and present ability is a space to be calculated.

Capacity and ability in the military sense are surely never divorced from judgment--from aims, goals, and intentions--both with respect to the idea of reaching targeted levels of capability, and with respect to the idea of gauging whether military capability is adequate to sovereign desire: “The purpose of a military exercise,” Jennings writes, “is to test capabilities against objectives.”21 As the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy states in a distinct but related formulation that we encountered in Chapter 1 above, “We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today’s adversaries.”22 The juxtaposition of these phrases, one from a New Zealand defence document and one from an American security document, underscore the obvious but important point that in the military context, the assessment and refinement of one’s own capability to meet objectives goes hand in hand with both the ongoing measurement of enemy capability, and with the interception of the latter when necessary (“if necessary”) in order to thwart enemy objectives.

To test capabilities against objectives is to treat potentiality as something accessible to calculation and to determinative judgment, as something that can be known and cognized--and as something that can be realized as an act, realized in actuality.

Military capability is a latency, a possibility, that can become other than what it is, in a future that one by definition “expects,” “hopes to foresee, to calculate or even to bring

about.”23 I borrow the preceding words, out of a different context, from one in a series of linked essays by Samuel Weber on Walter Benjamin’s concept of potentiality. In another essay, Weber further defines such possibility or potentiality as a “negative or deficient mode of actualization.”24 Putting these two notions together, we may describe possibility in the following terms: Possibility is fulfilled as actuality, in the future that the subject aims to calculate or to bring about. Weber also offers a contrasting notion of possibility, namely, possibility as “an event that in its singularity can happen but can never be reliably predicted or foreseen,” an event that is fundamentally “unforeseeable, unpredictable, unfathomable.”25 I take up the difference between these versions of possibility further in the discussion that immediately follows.

By definition, both meanings of possibility circle around a notion of temporality. If the first meaning--possibility as object of calculation--is arguably the strongest meaning of capability that inheres in the phrase, “the capability of the armed forces,” it must be said that when the military thinks about the future, it thinks in terms of a medium in which measurable levels of capability (future capability itself, not just actualization) can be reliably predicted. Capability, in the military sphere, is a bounded, determinable quantity that can be augmented or diminished in the future or in the “long term,” “managed” within a “framework” according to sovereign “plans” for “development.”

I am alluding, in the phrases just quoted, to the “Long Term Development Plan” (LTDP) update released by the New Zealand Ministry of Defence in 2008, the document that introduces the “Capability Management Framework (CMF)” and that defines it as a

---

“governance and management system for capability development.”²⁶ For our purposes, the key point to note is that there are at least three ways in which the “Development Plan” implicates capability in sovereign judgment and vice versa. First, as a management framework, the CMF is really a framework for judgment or calculation, “outlin[ing] responsibility, accountability and processes for identifying capability requirements, capability definition, delivery of capability.”²⁷ But the CMF is not just a framework for the judgment of measurable capability. It is also (this is the second point) a “process” that anchors the LTDP—the map for development—to the site of sovereign decision: “The Defence Capability Management Framework . . . is the key process used by Defence to ensure that the LTDP remains a core decision making tool for the Government.”²⁸ In the arsenal of tools that inform sovereign decision making, the “Long Term Development Plan” is evidently central; and the key process to ensure that it remains so is the Capability Management Framework. The third point has to do with the thoroughly modern fact that the “networking of military capabilities is essential for a modern defence force.” This imperative has led to the introduction of the “Network Enabled Capability Strategy (NEC),” which is designed to “link sensors, decision makers and weapon systems to help people, units and platforms work together more effectively.”²⁹ To enable capability through networking means to link sensors and combat resources to decision makers. Sovereign objective and measurable capability are nodes in the network.

The relentlessly bureaucratic, acronymic language of the “Long Term Defence Plan” gives one the unsettling impression (and this an effect of the rhetoric, not, needless

²⁷ Ibid., 9, sec. 4.3.
²⁸ Ibid., 9, sec. 4.1.
²⁹ Ibid., 11, sec. 4.8.
to say, an empirical fact) that the decision makers have been as good as “programmed,”
and that having made “the preparations for Classification . . . [and] the actual
Classification,” they render “calculations with a computer’s accuracy” (IC, 214, 213)
when it comes time to make the decision. By borrowing these latter phrases from
Intensive Care, I mean to point to the way in which Frame, writing at the end of the
1960s about the security crisis of the atomic-targeted Pacific, registers the idea, prevalent
at the start of the new millennium in the New Zealand Defence Forces rhetoric, of
capability as a substance (as opposed to a modality), a substance that enters into the goal-
directed calculations of sovereign judgment. In the final third of Intensive Care,
mathematician Colin Monk, one of three narrators of this section of the novel (besides
Milly Galbraith and Sandy Monk), is a scientist responsible for programming the Central
Computer that will separate the New Zealand survivors of World War III into the
categories of human and animal on Classification Day, in accordance with the protocols
of the Human Delineation Act. In the once again naïve but perceptive language of Milly
Galbraith, some people after the “Deciding Day” will be “allowed to go on living in
houses with mothers and fathers and food and television sets and electric heaters and
gardens outside,” and some will be “called Animals to be put in cages, stared at, killed,
eaten, or sent to factories to be made into shoes and shoelaces and lampshades and soap
and even teacups and saucers” (IC, 234). It is a question of one’s “content”:

The newborn were to be classified at birth for a primary judgment and at
five years for a secondary judgment which would be final, though in the
early stages of the Act there would be annual reclassification and, later,
regularly, reclassification or “pruning” where the animal content was
thought to have increased. (218)

In this modern, secular, bureaucratic version of the Christian apocalypse and Day of Judgment, a version disturbingly reminiscent, moreover, of the verdicts pronounced on the new prisoners disembarking in the Nazi camps, the Classification Day is a judgment not of deed and conscience and faith but of characteristics, resources, and potentiality:

On . . . the Deciding Day, everyone will be counted and tested and with all the information gathered the computer with all our history inside it will look at each one and say sharply like a soldier, Human, Animal, Human, Animal, depending on what you are. . . . (240)

In *Intensive Care* Frame constructs her post-nuclear dystopia around the idea of a “Deciding Day” that slots survivors on the basis of coded characteristics (*IC*, 216) -- that is, on the basis of possibility.

But there is that contrasting meaning of possibility that we noted above. By way of considering this alternative meaning in relation to *Intensive Care*, it is interesting to note that the novel’s scene of production (the site of creative potentiality) was very much at odds with its bleak vision. At Yaddo, Frame worked on *Intensive Care* in an idyllic space of spring renewal: “The days are warm,” she wrote to a friend, “the skies are blue and the pine trees . . . sparkle in the sun. Leaves are slowly budding.”

She worked under the protection of an organization devoted to nurturing the kind of potentiality -- the imaginative search -- that cannot be measured, determined, or augmented in precise quantitative terms, that cannot be construed as a substantive, and that, to repeat Weber’s alternative definition of possibility, looks forward to “an event that in its singularity can

---

happen but can never be reliably predicted or foreseen,” remaining fundamentally “unforeseeable, unpredictable, unfathomable.”\textsuperscript{31} As she described the colony in a letter to Frank Sargeson on April 12, 1969, Yaddo was a place of sustenance, community, and security made to sustain and release artistic potentiality: “In a world where people don’t really care what happens to artists, a spell at Yaddo has helped some to regain confidence in themselves, for here, by order of the Yaddo Corporation, everyone is \textit{cared for}.”\textsuperscript{32} The intensive \textit{care} of Yaddo, a gift of hospitality, marks a framework that would never seek to “manage” capability in the bureaucratic, quantitative sense. How, I go on to ask in the subsequent sections of this chapter, does \textit{this} philosophy of potentiality play out in Frame’s life and work, and what are its implications for Frame’s approach to the nexus of judgment and security?

\textbf{The Walkout}

The dropping of the atomic bomb was memorable for Frame in a way that she perceived it was not for her friends and colleagues, who, in Frame’s account, preferred immediately to forget. Her memory of it--her experience of it--was central to her artistic sensibility. At the beginning of “1945 (One),” the first of four successive chapters in \textit{An Angel at My Table} to focus on that pivotal year in her life, Frame imagines how as children she and her siblings were “lyric poets forced to realise the possibility of epics” and to “[include] these epic possibilities in our ordinary thinking.”\textsuperscript{33}  “I mention this,” she

\textsuperscript{32} Quoted in ibid., 339, emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{33} Janet Frame, \textit{An Angel at my Table}, vol. 2 in Janet Frame: The Complete Autobiography (London: Women’s Press, 1990; this edition first published in 1989 by Century Hutchinson), 143-287, quotation on 181; hereafter cited as \textit{AT} in the text. Frame is referring to her and her siblings’ childhood game of inscribing their dwelling as “name, street, town--Oamaru, North Otago, Otago, South Island, New Zealand,
goes on, “because 1945, a year that began for me as a personal lyric, ended through accident of circumstance, of national and world events, as an epic embracing the universe, the planets and the stars. . . .” Frame is referring to the commencement of the atomic era on August 6:

My personal lyric began its silent terrifying progression towards the planets and the stars. At the beginning of the month when I was to celebrate my twenty-first birthday, my coming of age, the war was suddenly over, having pursued me through all the years of my official adolescence, as part of the development of my body and mind, almost as an ingredient of my blood, leaving its trace everywhere, even in my hair and my (picked or bitten) fingernails. There was the usual spring snowfall that year, killing the newborn lambs but letting the early crocuses survive. Everyone rejoiced that the war had ended, and it was enough to rejoice and not notice or think about the fact that the atom bomb had been born, it also given its own life and responsibility. My coming of age was lit by the mushroom fire that made shadows of all those caught in its brightness; a spectacular illumination of the ceremonies of death, ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust.’ (187)

In Frame’s figurative sketch, the somatic impact of war partly constitutes her as a cognitive subject and poet. The war goes into her make-up as a perceptual and thinking being: It is “part of the development of [her] body and mind,” an “ingredient of [her] blood, leaving its trace everywhere,” even in her hair and her fingernails. The war

the Southern Hemisphere, the World, the Universe, the Planets and Stars,” what she calls a “simple journey in words and, perhaps, a prophecy of being” (181).
therefore helps to fabricate the particular modes of perceiving and judging the world that Frame will exercise in her maturity, after the war’s culmination in the brightness of the mushroom fire of nuclear destruction. The latter is an epic possibility that alters Frame’s ordinary thinking and that happens to coincide with her assumption of a new legal subjectivity and social role, a new life and responsibility. Her own coming of age is parallel to that of the bomb.

Two brief paragraphs later, Frame details what, given the context, must be understood as the first significant act of her newly gained maturity, an act therefore inseparable from the implications of the atom bomb and the way the bomb’s “spectacular illumination” has forever altered her perspective and perception. At the end of the school year, the young college student and apprentice teacher performs a “walk-out,” as Mike Lloyd terms the event. Frame describes the scene in Dunedin, where she is completing her training for a career as a primary school teacher and must now face the inspector’s visit. She has been dreading this moment, for above all, the reticent Frame cannot bear to be judged and found wanting, as she has admitted earlier in the chapter. Teaching per se is not the issue: “I delighted in the children at school and in teaching. . . . I revelled in the children’s art and in their poetry” (AT, 183). The problem is her “timidity among people, especially among those who might be asked to judge and comment on my performance as a teacher,” including fellow staff members (183-84). In other words, even as she celebrates the creative potentiality of her pupils, she dreads the assessment of her own capability as a teacher. Frame has managed this problem with nothing less than the aid of her own creative capacities. “My fear of being ‘inspected’ by the headmaster or inspector,” she writes, “inspired me to devise a means of postponing the day of
reckoning, by inventing a serial story which I could continue whenever I heard the steps of authority approaching along the corridor, so that a visit by the headmaster to a class sitting rapt with attention . . . might ‘prove’ my ability as a teacher” (184, emphasis added).

But the official visit cannot be postponed indefinitely. A different strategy will finally be required. Frame closes chapter 7 of the autobiography--“1945 (One)’’--with these words:

And now the year was passing quickly with the school inspector’s crucial final visit soon to be faced. Inevitably, one bright morning of daffodils and flowering currant and a shine on the leaves of the bush along Queen’s Drive, where I walked to school each morning, of a hint of warm gold in the sharp lemon-coloured sunlight, I arrived at school to find that it was the Day of Inspection, and at midmorning the inspector and the headmaster came to my classroom. I greeted them amiably in my practised teacherly fashion, standing at the side of the room near the display of paintings while the inspector talked to the class before he settled down to watch my performance as a teacher. I waited. Then I said to the inspector, ‘Will you excuse me a moment please?’

‘Certainly, Miss Frame.’

I walked out of the room and out of the school, knowing I would never return. (AT, 187)

The Day of Inspection (the Classification Day, the Day of Deciding, as one might say in the language of Intensive Care) is inevitable. Yet tucked between the “Inevitab[ility]” and
the “Inspection” itself, there is that “bright morning” in which Frame seems to linger as
in an alternative, consoling world, suspended in a state of heightened perception. The
prose wobbles, the genitive phrase “of a hint of warm gold in the sharp lemon-coloured
sunlight,” ambiguously parallel (because tenuously connected in Frame’s syntax) to the
phrase “of daffodils and flowering currant . . . ,” intruding just where the syntax and
rhythm of the writing have led the reader to anticipate the main clause. Perceptual hyper-
acuity activates the overflowing of syntactical bounds, as if the flux of raw perceptual
experience resists the organization and order which would otherwise contain it.

This particular--in a loose sense “poetic”--mode of perception contrasts sharply
with the inspector’s. The inspector “settle[s] down to watch [Frame’s] performance as a
teacher.” “To watch,” in this case, is not simply to observe or to see but to oversee, with a
set of interpretive commitments and criteria for classification in mind--that is, to pass
judgment in the sense of an authoritative opinion, evaluative statement, or decisional
intervention as an act of power that has immediate practical consequences in other,
nominally subordinate, people’s lives. On this Deciding Day, as Frame the author of
Intensive Care might have written, the student teacher’s capability will be “counted and
tested,” all the “information gathered.”

Frame clearly experienced the inspector’s mode of judgment as negative.
Obviously, there would never be a way to somehow, say, “have done” with such a mode
of judgment once and for all, nor, indeed, any reason to desire altogether to have done
with it even if we could.\footnote{I am alluding here to the title of an essay to which I return in Chapter 4 below, namely, Gilles Deleuze,
“To Have Done with Judgment,” in Essays Critical and Clinical, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 126-35.} But that is not to say that to be the object of such a decisional
intervention may not, in certain circumstances, be a terrifying experience. Frame takes a
stand against this mode of judgment, resisting the Day of Inspection when she walks out, standing up for a different kind of potentiality. The walkout itself is an event, singular and unforeseen. It is an act preceded by a capability resistant to foreknowledge and cognition, hence to calculation--an act, moreover, that not only transpires out of, but also further opens up, the sheer possibility that Weber teaches us to read as unforeseeable, unpredictable, or unfathomable. The “three weeks of pure freedom” (188) that follow Frame’s abrupt departure mean time in which to nurture such possibility--to indulge in classes and music recitals, and to “read and [write]” (188)--that is, to pursue her “secret desire to be a poet” (182). The refusal to submit to the inspection can thus be read as the poet’s spontaneous, unpredictable protest against the restrictive regime of judgment under which she felt she was living.

**Judgment in the “Life” of Janet Frame**

A very different reconstruction of Frame’s life in the spring of 1945, and a very different approach to narrative (and its work of marshalling events within an overarching schema) occur in Michael King’s biography, *Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame*. For our purposes, the first key point is that King’s chronology differs from Frame’s. In chapter 8 of *An Angel at My Table*, “1945 (Two),” Frame relates how, after the walkout, she supplies a doctor’s certificate to explain her absence from the school, and how she then proceeds to enjoy her “three weeks of pure freedom.” But when “school again loomed before me,” Frame writes, “I was forced to realise that suicide was my only escape” (*AT*, 188). She swallows pills one night and then wakes up the following morning “with a roaring in my ears and my nose bleeding,” but with “a feeling
of wonder and delight and thankfulness that I was alive” (188). In her psychology course at the university, the students are learning the art of writing “condensed autobiography” (189). The young Frame writes about her suicide attempt, knowing that John Money (named John Forrest in An Angel at My Table), her course instructor and the then-object of her infatuation, will read the account. The alarmed and sympathetic Money, together with two officials from the University, urges Frame to admit herself to the Dunedin hospital. In due course she is committed to the psychiatric hospital, Seacliff, the place “where the loonies went” (190).

In King’s chronology, by contrast, the suicide attempt occurs one Saturday night in July, the most immediate impetus being Money’s absence from the Saturday morning laboratory class. In August, after Frame submits the autobiographical exercise which details the suicide attempt, Money begins to counsel her on his own. It is in this context that Frame comes “to Money’s office in the attic of one of the university’s old ivy-covered professorial houses on 19 September,” as King writes by way of setting the scene for the walkout: “She told him that she had walked out of her classroom at Arthur Street the previous week ‘as the inspector walked in’. This was in part a consequence of her deep fear of being judged; but it was related, she said, to the fact that she was even more unconfident than usual because Money had passed her in the street the previous day without recognising her.”

35 Money, King goes on to recount, makes a compromise arrangement with the school headmaster, Mr. Gilling, and the Board inspector, Mr. Hunter, allowing Frame to finish out the year without penalty. All appears to be resolved. But in October, with continued threats of suicide, Frame is committed to the psychiatric ward at the hospital. When her mother comes to collect her at the end of the month,

35 King, Wrestling with the Angel, 65-66.
Frame panics and screams at her. She is forbidden visitors, “held incommunicado” until an assessment on November 2, at which point committal proceedings are begun under the so-called Mental Defectives Act, and Frame is escorted to Seacliff.\(^36\)

In King’s version, an entirely different sense of the walkout emerges. King alludes to the walkout only in passing. He contextualizes it in relation to Frame’s alleged mental breakdown and, more importantly, in relation to the part her relationship to John Money is supposed to have played in that experience. As Mike Lloyd observes, the walkout for King does not stand out as such, it is not an event worthy of particular remark. It is a minor index of “a continuation of an existing pattern” of mental deterioration. King, Lloyd concludes, frames “the walk-out as just one further step leading to ‘an unravelling’ (as [King’s] chapter is titled). This unravelling is, of course, Frame’s first diagnosis of mental illness and first period of institutionalisation in a mental hospital.”\(^37\)

King states in an endnote that Frame’s own chronology does not always precisely match the official records that remain from the period--clinical notes and hospital records, for example. He indicates that his “reconstruction of Frame’s life in the latter part of 1945 is drawn largely from Money’s contemporary notes, with occasional reference to the Autobiography in instances where I believe it to be soundly based.”\(^38\) The evidence must be sifted and weighed by a mediating judgment, verified as “soundly based” or not. And rightly so, in the sense that King is composing a “historical-style biography,”\(^39\) any example of which must, by definition, be judged as factually accurate

\(^{36}\) King, Wrestling with the Angel, 64-71.
\(^{37}\) Lloyd, “Frame Walks Out.”
\(^{38}\) King, Wrestling with the Angel, 532, n. 33, emphasis added.
\(^{39}\) Lloyd, “Frame Walks Out.”
or inaccurate. King is responding legitimately to certain (widely accepted and culturally sanctioned) institutional protocols and standards. Nor, to be clear, do I raise King’s methodology as necessarily problematic in and of itself. And yet, given the precise episode from Frame’s life in question here (the events surrounding her first entrance into hospital, the subsequent misdiagnosis of schizophrenia, and the beginning of her deep personal suffering in the postwar New Zealand psychiatric system), King’s articulation of the judgment on whether her chronology is “soundly based”—reasonable, rational, responsible—might be read as echoing the same (clinical or medical) judgment that King is turning into narrative form. (I argue that we may detect this echo despite the fact that King is of course not assessing Frame’s mental stability in his decision on whether particular passages of her autobiography may be considered chronologically reliable for his purposes.) After all, Frame, it was decided in the Spring of 1945, was not of sound mind. Her choices and behaviours, as when she screamed at her mother and refused to leave the psychiatric ward of Dunedin Hospital (a key event precipitating her removal to Seacliff), were, we could say, judged not to be soundly based.

**Narrative Sense**

In order to analyze the mode of judgment that underlies King’s narrative, I want to shift my focus for a moment to the grammatical concept of person. The reason for this shift is that a certain trick of grammar seems to be involved in the exercise of the power of determinative judgment, a trick of grammar that Frame brings to light in an interesting way. As if in an anticipatory provocation to King, Frame had already, in the autobiography, tied the power of judgment to the effacement of first personhood that she
imagines she underwent at the time. Frame is writing about the doctors’ decision to commit her to Seacliff:

I became an instant third person, or even personless, as in the official note made about my mother’s visit (reported to me many years later), ‘Refused to leave hospital.’

I was taken (third-person people are also thrust into the passive mood) to Seacliff in a car that held two girls from borstal and the police matron, Miss Churchill. (AT, 191)

Such language interrupts and highlights the inner workings of the conventions of the “officials,” critically distancing the reader from the conditions of a certain genre of clinical writing. The “secret” people at Seacliff like Frame have “no legal or personal external identity” (AT, 193); many have “no name, only a nickname, no past, no future, only an imprisoned Now” (194). In the first volume of her autobiography, To the Is-Land, as Frame reminds the readers of An Angel at my Table, “I constantly use the first person plural--we, not I. My time as a student was an I-time. Now, as a Seacliff patient, I was again part of a group, yet more deeply alone, not even a creviced ‘I’. I became ‘she’, one of ‘them’” (194). Frame has become an “instant third person” in the “dwelling-place of those judged insane” (193).

If we were to read this passage against King’s biography, we might say that King appropriates personhood as he mines but also “corrects” a “deviated” first person account behind Frame’s sardonic critique of this circumstance lies one of the most poignant of near-misses in Frame’s life, what would almost certainly have been a fundamental erasure of identity and suppression of voice, personhood, and perspective. At Seacliff, famously, Frame was slated for a prefrontal leucotomy operation; that is, until a hospital superintendent read in a Dunedin paper that she had won the Hubert Church Memorial award for prose, whereupon she was taken off the operation list. (Let us call this a powerful example of aesthetic judgment trumping clinical judgment.) See King, Wrestling with the Angel, 111-13.
in preparing his “instant third person” rendition of the life. Establishing the framework for interpretation and norms for appraisal, the third person account, in this instance, is what I would call, following Davide Panagia, “narratocratic.” Narratocracy is the term Panagia supplies for the “privileging of narrative as a genre for the exposition of claims and ideas in contemporary political thought.”

Narratocracy is a prevailing regime of perception in the theoretical analysis of political phenomena. It offers the narrative line which is the story line that determines the trajectory of an action, but it is also the stenographic mark that traces a figure (of speech, of thought, of script, etc.) across a blank page; it is an outline that renders an object, event, practice, or person at once visible and available for accountability. This is what it means to delineate or give an account of something, and this “giving an account” orients the perceptibility of an appearance and our postures of attention to it. The story line thus incises itself onto a field of vision and begins the work of conviction. Narratocracy, or the rule of narrative, is the organization of a perceptual field according to the imperative of rendering things readable.

I am not, of course, suggesting that the third person narrative voice per se is inherently aligned with narratocracy, any more than I am suggesting that there are grounds for claiming that the first person (narrative) voice always inherently disrupts a narrative line. The point I am making is that in An Angel at My Table, the first person voice of (misdiagnosed) “madness” represents a threat to legibility, readability, and

---

42 Ibid., 12.
accountability--to the integrity of the narrative line, and to the “norms for appraisal” through which “an object, event, practice, or person” is rendered “at once visible and available for accountability.”

King’s mimetic historiography, I argue, employs the norms for appraisal that render the biographical subject available for accountability, while Frame’s performative version, which strains against mimesis and the narrative line, subjects these norms and their political work to scrutiny. King assumes narrative control of a particular sequence of events (Frame’s crisis at the school, her suicide attempt and interaction with Money and the school officials, her entrance into the hospital system, and so on), and fuses multiple perspectives or traces of perspectives (Frame’s first person account, clinical notes and hospital records) within an authoritative, “soundly based” third person narrative. To repeat Lloyd’s point, King locates the departure from the classroom in relation to an existing pattern. (“[T]he walk-out is a continuation of an existing pattern that leads to an unraveling.”) King subsumes the particular (Frame’s abrupt departure) under the general rule (the existing pattern), determining what counts as empirical evidence and which category each piece of evidence should be sorted into. It is in this respect that he deploys the conditions of possibility for value--the consequence of which is that Frame’s departure from the classroom becomes the sign of an unravelling. His “instant third person” narrative is thus epistemologically bound to the determinative judgment that Frame’s own version pushes against.

**Against Judgment**

**Narrative:** 2 a. An account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order
and with the establishing of connections between them; a narration, a story, an account. (OED)

In recounting the walkout and its aftermath in *An Angel at My Table*, Frame offers what Lloyd calls a “story” of “an abrupt change, that is an epiphany” (“epiphany” as both “genre and social practice”). Her concern is not to “[tell] the events in the correct order,” but to “producing live emotions and feelings about how writers are created,” feelings which in turn become “possible materials for the building of writing culture.” Lloyd argues that Frame’s story “can be read as providing practical instructions for building writing as a ‘community of resistance,’” in that Frame “both describes how she effected her own resistance, and reproduces a moral tale about the writerly life.” This “moral tale” or “parable” is designed, on Lloyd’s account, to “construct [a] communit[y] of readers” by “forcing from the reader an immediate empathetic response, not a judgment in terms of rationality or beliefs.” Frame, Lloyd concludes, writes to “engage a community of readers, or . . . a community of writers-to-be, who are provided with a story and a guideline for how to construct the imaginative life, in contrast to the ordinary world of judgment.” In the classroom in 1945, then, Frame interrupts the determinative judgment of the inspector who has settled down to watch her performance. In the process, she generates the conditions in which she can realize her desire to be a poet. The historical event of the walkout, like the retelling of it four decades later, is meant to shore up the realm of the imaginative life.

The question is whether the terms *story* and *guideline* do justice to the disjunctive force of Frame’s chapter. In one sense, Frame does indeed offer a story of the day she walked out. Moreover, she is engaged across the three volumes of her autobiography in

---

43 Lloyd, “Frame Walks Out.”
creating a (chronological) narrative of her life—by definition (as per the epigraph posted to this section of the chapter) an account of some of the principal events and facts of her life, “given in order and with the establishing of connections between them.” As Frame states in the very first chapter of *To the Is-Land*, she is going to create a “record with its mixture of fact and truths and memories of truths.”

And yet, it is characteristic of Frame’s autobiography that webs of causation and relations between events continually come apart and threaten to break down. For example, in her perception of her own life, none of the actors, events, or ideas that make up her history can ultimately be separated out, ordered, rendered readable or coherent as such:

> Writing an autobiography, usually thought of as a looking back, can just as well be a looking across or through, with the passing of time giving an X-ray quality to the eye. Also, time past is not time gone, it is time accumulated, with the host resembling the character in the fairytale who was joined along the route by more and more characters, none of whom could be separated from one another or from the host, with some stuck so fast that their presence caused physical pain. Add to the characters all the events, thoughts, feelings, and there is a mass of time, now a sticky mess, now a jewel bigger than the planets and the stars.

If I look through 1945 I see the skeleton of the year and shadowing it with both the shadow of death and of life, the atom bomb, the homely crocuses surviving in the late spring snow, birthdays and deathdays, and

---

two or three other events bringing those dreamed-of planets and stars
within the personal world of myself and many others in New Zealand.

(\textit{AT}, 191-92, emphases in original)
The “mass of time,” a “sticky mess” and super-planetary “jewel,” represents an accumulation of “characters,” “events,” “thoughts,” and “feelings” that could never, to cite again from the definition of narrative, be “given in order . . . with the establishing of connections between them.” Thus, chapter 7 of \textit{An Angel at My Table} establishes a relationship between, on the one hand, the atom bomb, that is, the “shadow of death,” and on the other hand, the event of the classroom departure; and yet, as the very oddness and incongruity of this supposed relationship underscore, the emphasis does not fall on narrative trajectory, causal forces, and the work of explanation. Frame’s figural work alone--“My personal lyric began its silent terrifying progression towards the planets and the stars”; “My coming of age was lit by the mushroom fire that made shadows of all those caught in its brightness”--tilts the presentation away from a narrative accounting and toward lyrical meditation.

But more to the point--for there is nothing in figuration that resists the narrative line as such--Frame’s real interest, in terms of the reconstruction of her past, is frequently arguably less the narrative events themselves than those intensities of perception and immediacies of sensory impact that do resist, or that provide an alternative to, the narrative line--whether the somatic traces of war, the hint of warm gold in the sharp lemon-coloured sunlight that syntactically defers the story of Frame’s arrival at school, and so on. Frame does not, or does not always, look back at a temporal succession of events so much as she looks with X-ray vision across and through a mass of time that
cannot be parsed or made straightforwardly legible.

To buttress the imaginative life against the ordinary world of judgment through an affective, shaping, and rhetorical interruption that disrupts mimesis and pushes at the limits of narrative form is a revolutionary move, as writer and critic Vincent O’Sullivan suggests (see the epigraph to the present chapter). The “Place of Judges,” writes O’Sullivan in a passage of his review of King’s biography, “is where most of us live. Those few who resist and erect a counterworld know language is their ultimate and often their only weapon, a living, vibrant force for defiance—the writer as perpetual revolutionary against the zombie-speech of convention.” The hypothesis expressed in O’Sullivan’s juxtaposition of tropes is that the conviction in an external perspective (the “Place of Judges”) from which, in all sovereign detachment, events, situations, and individuals can be surveyed, controlled, measured and assigned their lots, inevitably belies an almost magical (“zombie-speech”) and irresistible entanglement in deep and unseen determining logics. In short, the judge, as O’Sullivan would have it, is pure proxy. (We will encounter this figure of the “proxy judge” in Melville’s tales of the inception of political modernity in the era of revolutions—Captain Delano in Benito Cereno, Captain Vere in Billy Budd, Sailor).

King could never be said to utter the “zombie-speech of convention” in the sense O’Sullivan means by that phrase (nor is King the target of O’Sullivan’s passage). But King too maintains conviction in the external perspective of sovereign detachment from which, in this case, to weigh and measure the data flowing from multiple historically embedded points of view—letters, interviews, notes, records, clippings, and

---

autobiographical writings—in the construction of an authoritative account of a life. At specific points, this account subtly replicates a form of judgment that radically shaped the subject’s life—a form of judgment, in turn, associated with convention and pre-given concept and rule. King’s authority, which I am reading in terms of sovereign judgment, is tied to common sense—as in, the sense of the community—his judgment conditioned by the a priori.

We have entered the territory of a relation between sovereignty (“those who judge”) and submission (“zombie-speech of convention”) as it plays out at the level of the individual subject. Focusing on the notion of the affective, disjunctive event, we have begun to explore Frame’s deconstruction of this relation. We have also begun to explore how narrative as a principle of order, coherence, and accountability gets called into question by this deconstruction. In the next two chapters I extend my analysis of these issues by turning to Melville’s Benito Cereno and then Frame’s The Carpathians, one of Frame’s central efforts to construct a so-called counterworld against the ordinary world of judgment. Both of these works, like An Angel at My Table, will push at the bounds of narrative; both, too, will be centrally concerned with the notion of how the disjunctive event calls received modes of perception and judgment into question, and even forges them anew.
Chapter 3
Judgment, Security, and the Theatre of Revolution in Benito Cereno

Probing the conditions of perception, evaluation, and sense-making, Herman Melville offers an incisive critical assessment of democratic and revolutionary judgment in his novella Benito Cereno (1855).¹ I call Benito Cereno an assessment of democratic and revolutionary judgment for the simple reason that it tells the story of “the American” (Captain Delano) who misrecognizes, or misjudges, a situation of slave rebellion in the era of revolutions. In the present chapter, I analyze that assessment, and I consider the role that theatricality plays in it. In this novella, as I argue, theatricality is inseparable from the issue of judgment, and vice versa. (Delano is an unwitting spectator in a theatre of revolution.) I explore this dimension of the text by turning to the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville and Walter Benjamin. The theatre, at least the democratic theatre, is a place of revolts, as de Tocqueville wrote a decade or so before Melville composed Benito Cereno. It is a place where literary canons are overturned; where dramatists go beyond the accepted norms of human nature to capture the singularities of a particular people; where a multitude of wills and judgments clash. Some eighty years after the first, serial publication of Benito Cereno in Putnam’s Monthly Magazine, Benjamin would likewise characterize a theatre of revolution--epic theatre--in which the illusion of the natural is overturned through suspension and disruption and through the revelation of the

conditions, or inner workings, of ideology and social convention. In its own distinct way, Melville’s, or rather Babo’s, revolutionary theatre overturns accepted categories of judgment. It does so by revealing the rhetorical conditions of that which has been accepted as natural and original. At the same time, Delano’s own nominally democratic, revolutionary mode of judgment (he is “the American” in 1799) ironically brings the singularities he encounters back under what de Tocqueville might have called the same laws of the calculable order, rendering the revolutionary transformation before him invisible to himself: Melville ultimately tells a story of repression rather than emancipation.

I will argue that Benito Cereno at once gestures towards the possibility of overturning judgment and dramatizes the tragic foreclosure of that possibility. Benito Cereno, I suggest, is a parable of the missed opportunity (an opportunity presented by political emergency) for overturning a repressive regime of judgment. It is a story about the repressive judgment rendered by the representative of a recent and successful democratic revolution upon the actors of another emancipatory movement. As such, it is partly a judgment upon that democratic revolution, an interrogation of where--and why--it might have fallen short. In other words, Benito Cereno offers a critical assessment of political decision making and judgment in American democracy at a crucial moment in the nation’s political evolution.

At the heart of the chapter, as I have indicated, lies an attempt to understand Melville as an intermediary figure between de Tocqueville and Benjamin. Reading Benito Cereno though de Tocqueville’s and Benjamin’s musings on theatre and revolution helps to clarify the subversive gesture in Melville’s ambivalent story of
revolution. Melville’s story, I hope to suggest, accomplishes in prose what epic or
democratic theatre is meant to accomplish in the theatre itself: It *estranges* the
reader/spectator from social conditions, so that these may be critically analyzed.
Renovating prose fiction through the medium of theatricality, Melville estranges us from
the conditions of judgment in his meditation on race, democracy, and revolution.

**The “Place for Seeing” and the Conditions of Judgment**

With good reason, readers of *Benito Cereno* have come down hard on Captain
Delano for his inability to figure out what is really going on aboard the *San Dominick*,
whose coerced Spanish sailors and former slaves now in authority are all performing their
original roles of dominating white mariners and enslaved Africans according to the
designs of the ship’s actual commander, the ostensible servant Babo. Until the last,
Delano has not the slightest idea that a successful slave rebellion has taken place. More
importantly, once he does realize the truth, he remains blind to the larger implications of
the event. Critics have therefore often focused on Delano’s cognitive, interpretive, and
moral failures. “How can he be so stupid?” asks Jonathan Elmer. “How can he fail to see
that, when the Ashantee clang their hatchets together, this is a threat, not an amusement?
Does he not realize that the servant’s open razor hesitates at the fainting captain’s neck
not from solicitude but in a conscious crystallization of menace?” Elmer’s rhetoric recalls
E. F. Carlisle’s judgment that the American’s “failure” to “comprehend” the situation
“results from the stupidity and foolishness basic to his character,” from his “ignorance . .
. and blindness,” and, in short, from the “inadequacy” of this “Great American Boob.”
The failure to comprehend has been attributed to Delano’s persistent acts of misreading
and misperception. In Peter Coviello’s estimation, despite “brief interpretive successes, or the appearance of them,” Delano is guilty of “dimwittedness and a more particular readerly incompetence”; Ezra F. Tawil states that Delano “completely misapprehends the reality aboard” the San Dominick, locked as he is in his “fatal self-deception,” and “misperceptions.” Delano’s inability could be inevitable. Jean Yellin, for example, claims that Delano is “blind to evil and unable to learn from his experience.” Or his inability could be more willful, and more the result of his predilections and habits. As Joyce Adler suggests, “Delano is a man who does not like to dwell upon unpleasant things or puzzle himself about complicated truths. . . . [H]e . . . sees things on the San Dominick in black-and-white simplicity . . . [and closes] his eyes to all hints of complex and unhappy things.” However one is to account for it, the one thing that seems clear about Delano is that he possesses, as Elmer states, a wholly “undiscerning point of view.”

It is possible, though, to overstate the case for Delano’s foolishness, inadequacy, dimwittedness, incompetence, self-deception, blindness, myopia, obtuseness, stupidity, and undiscerning point of view. Delano’s is a deeply prejudiced and racist worldview. As a consequence, he does indeed fail during his time on the Spanish ship to become conscious of the truth of what is hidden in plain sight—the fact that the theatrics and deceptions he senses aboard the San Dominick are controlled by Babo, and that the Africans are in authority. Such suspicions as he entertains revolve almost entirely around

---

Benito Cereno; the Africans are “too stupid” to enter into “complicity” with the Spanish.\(^3\)

The categories according to which Delano appraises the behaviours, incidents, and signals he encounters are overtly racist. Whites are “shrewder”; blacks, “stupid” (\textit{BC}, 75). Under his own naturalizing regime of appraisal,\(^4\) Delano therefore constantly misses the mark and misinterprets clues. The closer Delano comes to the truth, the more he unconsciously represses that truth according to the transcendent criteria and, at best, conventional and myopic moral vision that govern his thinking. This is a political point that Eric Sundquist ties to Melville’s formal strategies: “[B]y unwittingly articulating, through the narrative voice suspended in his consciousness, suspicions that move closer and closer to the literal truth of events aboard the \textit{San Dominick}, Delano participates in a continued act of suppressed revolt against belief in the appearance presented to him and consumes irony in the rhetorical gesture of tautology.”\(^5\) One corollary, though, to the idea that the narrative voice can be said to “move closer and closer to the literal truth of events” is that Delano’s scrutiny of the situation onboard the \textit{San Dominick} is extremely close, his insight and analysis at times penetrating. “[B]lunt-thinking” (46) though Delano is said to be, and a “man of such native simplicity as to be incapable of satire or irony” (51), it does not follow, considering his wide-ranging speculations on power and authority, that Delano’s mind is not also capable of subtlety. Even as he gets so much so fundamentally wrong, it is not clear from his analysis of the power structure of the ship,


as I hope to demonstrate, that stupidity and foolishness are basic to his character, that he completely misapprehends the reality before him, or that he sees things in black-and-white simplicity, for example. It is in fact worth attending to the occasional intricacy and sophistication of Delano’s thoughts and judgments.

Jonathan Elmer begins, like other critics, by appearing to excoriate Delano for his stupidity. Crucially, however, Elmer’s claim is not that Delano is unusually undiscerning or obtuse: “Melville’s tale ultimately suggests that the most profound question is not how Delano could be so stupid, but rather, how could he—and we—not be?” Combining Alain Badiou’s theory of the event with the influential interpretation by Yellin, Sundquist, and others of Benito Cereno as an allegory of the Haitian Revolution, as well as recent reflections on the historiography of the Revolution by such figures as Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Laurent Dubois, Elmer reads Melville’s story as confronting the “problem of the indiscernible event.” The phrase indiscernible event should be understood as a kind of condensed analytic proposition: All events, in the rigorous sense of the term, are indiscernible. An “event worthy of the name,” as Elmer puts it, has “indiscernibility” as an “essential trait.” In Badiou’s parlance, an event emerges as the void of the given situation. It does not belong to the field of knowledge that circumscribes the normal situation. The event cannot be accounted for by the regular or calculable order. It cannot be equated with the structural stability epitomized by the fixed forms and regularity associated with the concept of Nature.

Indiscernible in itself, the event is retroactively recognized when it is named

---

6 Elmer, “Babo’s Razor,” 55.
7 See Yellin, “Black Masks”; Sundquist, To Wake the Nations, 135-82.
8 Elmer, “Babo’s Razor,” 57.
9 Ibid., 57.
10 Ibid., 76.
through an act of interpretive decision or intervention. Such an act is in turn always open to dispute, if not outright repression. Thus, for example, the Haitian revolution does not simply exist as a fact or complex of facts that can be known within the order of knowledge of its present moment; nor does it begin as a preformed plan or teleological aim, for instance general emancipation, on the part of the revolutionaries. Rather, it remains undecidable, even, or especially, to the revolutionary actors themselves. It is a product of nomination. An effect of interpretation, and always open to interpretation and reinterpretation, the Haitian revolution, as contemporary planters’ accounts and a good part of the longer historiographical tradition demonstrate, could also always be ignored, be “said” not to have been, through silence or misnaming or misunderstanding. Along similar lines, if the event of the slave rebellion remains indiscernible to Delano not only during his time on the San Dominick but also, in an important sense, in the aftermath of the climactic “flash of revelation” that “illuminat[es] . . . every enigmatic event of the day,” as Melville’s narrator puts it, it is because Delano is a vehicle of this form of repression--an agent of the state, as Elmer argues, who naturalizes or normalizes the otherwise strange particulars he encounters. In this case, he interprets any irregularities he may have witnessed on the San Dominick as belonging to, by virtue of being enfolded within and contained by, the larger natural order. Elmer points to Delano’s final conversation with Benito Cereno: “But the past is passed; why moralize upon it?” he urges Don Benito; “Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves” (BC, 101). Thus, even when the “truth” of the situation is fully revealed to him, “now with scales dropped from his eyes” (85), Delano fails to grapple with the new political reality.
Elmer’s argument helps us to see that if in fact we need to draw finer distinctions with respect to the very real failures and inabilities with which critics charge Delano, that failure is most of all a failure of judgment--especially a failure or inability to reason from particulars. We might consider Delano’s misguided response (but also, in tension with claims for his stupidity and dimwittedness, his sheer responsiveness) to the status of security on the San Dominick. Shortly after boarding, for example, he notices “some prominent breaches not only of discipline but of decency” and ascribes them “to the absence of those subordinate deck-officers to whom, along with higher duties, is entrusted what may be styled the police department of a populous ship” (BC, 43).

True, the old oakum-pickers appeared at times to act the part of monitorial constables to their countrymen, the blacks; but though occasionally succeeding in allaying trifling outbreaks now and then between man and man, they could do little or nothing toward establishing general quiet. The San Dominick was in the condition of a transatlantic emigrant ship, among whose multitude of living freight are some individuals, doubtless, as little troublesome as crates and bales; but the friendly remonstrances of such with their ruder companions are of not so much avail as the unfriendly arm of the mate. What the San Dominick wanted was, what the emigrant ship has, stern superior officers. But on these decks not so much as a fourth mate was to be seen. (42-43)

Soon after, having just preceded Benito Cereno to the poop deck at the latter’s invitation, Delano turns about and is “struck by one of those instances of insubordination.” Five boys, three Africans and two Spaniards, are sitting together on the hatches scraping a
platter. “Suddenly, one of the black boys, enraged at a word dropped by one of his white companions, seized a knife, and though called to forbear by one of the oakum-pickers, struck the lad over the head” (47).

When Benito Cereno fails to punish the act, Delano thinks to himself: “Is it . . . that this hapless man is one of those paper captains I’ve known, who by policy wink at what by power they cannot put down? I know no sadder sight than a commander who has little of command but the name” (BC, 47). Because Delano is unable or unwilling to ascribe a post-political identity of almost any kind to the Africans (one of his crucial assumptions about them is, “There’s naked nature, now” [61]), he cannot conceive of the oakum-pickers as forming one of the ship’s primary authorized security forces. Nor can he imagine that they might have a virtual monopoly on legitimate force, even if they are unable, or for their own purposes for some reason do not wish, to establish general quiet. (For example, the boy’s strike with the knife, as a sudden and unpredictable violent act, constitutes a challenge to their authority and their monopolization of the direction of force.) Nor does Delano register the actual power imbalance between the blacks and whites, displayed so clearly to him in the so-called “misrule” of the place (40) and, again, in the sudden outbreak of unpunished violence on the part of the Africans. Nor, finally, does he entertain the possibility of the literal truth of his own surmise that Benito Cereno is a “commander who has little of command but the name.” He does not suspect, in short, that many of his categories of thought have ceased to apply. He fails to deal with particulars in their particularity.

If we are to say that Delano is appraising and judging the situation of the foreign ship, beginning the moment he climbs the side of the ship and his “one eager glance took
in all the faces, with every other object about him” (38), it must be said that he looks less like a judge, with the sheer cognitive capacity and developed faculties we tend to associate with the idea of an effective judge, than a proxy for some overarching framework. Something crucial, we feel, is missing from his mental operations. He lacks the ability, as Hannah Arendt might have said, to “put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair.” Only an unprepared leap towards a new grasp of the sudden violence he witnesses, of the “misrule” of the ship, of the “haplessness” of supposed authority--only such a leap would allow for Delano’s “reconciliation with reality,” to borrow a phrase from Maurizio D’Entrèves. This reconciliation could have meant, among other things, reconciliation with the reality of the political identity and political skill of the Africans, even the reality of the injustice of their oppression, in which he is intimately involved.

A Stranger Enters

There is a still more important issue raised by what we could call the “condemnation” move in criticism of Benito Cereno. Although it is justifiable at one level to apply such epithets as stupid and obtuse to Delano, there is also a way in which those terms inadvertently do injustice to the brilliance of the postrevolutionary theatre that Babo directs and controls. Babo capitalizes on the fact that universals come before

---


particulars in Delano’s mode of judgment, that Delano is unable to relinquish the conventional categories of interpretation which have in fact been undermined by the Africans’ political action. Delano’s judgment is inadequate in several respects to political crisis. It is thereby entirely adequate to Babo’s purposes. The (safe) gamble of the more knowing and competent Babo, Atufal, and their fellow revolutionaries is that the visitor from the foreign ship will possess an ignorance and prejudice of which they may take advantage. Delano’s inability to discern the truth is in large measure a testament precisely to Babo’s combined dramaturgical skill and political power.

Of course, the fact that Babo’s agency is a factor in Delano’s confusion does not make the latter’s ignorance less real. But it remains the case that when he boards the ship, Delano happens upon a presentation, however frayed, of the normal situation of Spanish authority over the African slaves. This presentation has been elaborately conceived and executed to trick any outsider who should board the ship, as the deposition finally reveals:

Babo . . . the better to disguise the truth, devised many expedients, in some of them uniting deceit and defense. . . . [A]mong other devices, was the device of presenting Atufal, his right-hand man, as chained, though in a moment the chains could be dropped. . . . [I]n every particular he informed the deponent what part he was expected to act in every device, and what story he was to tell on every occasion, always threatening him with instant death if he varied in the least. . . . [A]gain and again he harangued the Spaniards and his companions, informing them of his intent, and of his devices, and of the invented story that this deponent was to tell, charging
them lest any of them varied from that story. . . . (109)

Delano witnesses a series of self-consciously performed gestures, acts, and utterances. He takes them to be original, to be ("mere") expressions of the natural and the normal. When the cracks appear, as in moments of sudden violence by blacks against whites, or in Benito Cereno’s unaccountable and suspicious behaviour, the reiteration of the set of norms is evidently powerful enough to maintain the deception. Actor and spectator are locked in symbiosis. The dramaturge has calibrated the performance very precisely for this (type of) spectator.

Certainly, Delano makes for an odd or ambiguous spectator, for he is by no means physically removed from the events unfolding on the theatrical stages that are the ship’s decks. On the contrary, he is woven into the muthos, the plot ("plot" in more than one sense), unfolding around him. To understand in greater detail the nature and effect of the presence of this spectator, I want to consider the relation between Benito Cereno and a theory of drama that emerged, some eight decades after the story’s first publication, in a sociopolitical and linguistic context removed from, though nevertheless hardly altogether alien to, Melville’s antebellum America. In his remarks on Brechtian epic theatre in several essays, lectures, and notes produced in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin characterizes a modern theatrical form that produces “astonishment” rather than the “empathy” that Benjamin, after Brecht, associates with Naturalism in contemporary German drama. The audience of epic theatre, “instead of identifying itself with the hero,” is “called upon to learn to be astonished at the circumstances within which he has his being,” Benjamin states. Epic theatre does not aim at the mimetic representation of social life. It seeks to reveal underlying causes and conditions of social relations. As Benjamin puts it, its task
is “not so much to develop actions as to represent conditions,” where “to represent” conditions means not to “reproduce” them mimetically, as in the school of Naturalism, but to “uncover” them--or as Benjamin adds parenthetically, “to make them strange.”

Epic theatre, then, as a theatre that effects separation from conditions, is a theatre of estrangement. How does this estrangement come about? Through the intrusion of none other than the stranger. Benjamin illustrates with the “primitive example” of a “family scene”:

Suddenly a stranger enters. The woman was in the process of crumpling up a pillow in order to throw it at the daughter; the father was in the process of opening the window in order to call for the police. At this instant the stranger appears at the door. “Tableau,” as one would have said around 1900. That means: the stranger stumbles now upon the situation: crumpled linens, open window, demolished furniture. Instead of the development of a sequence of actions, we get the unveiling or discovery of conditions through an interruption by a stranger.

The interruption of the stranger, as Benjamin implies in other, related writings, enables a critical judgment of social conditions. Returning to the “family scene” in his essay, “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin argues that, by bringing the action to a “standstill in mid-course,” the “uncovering of the conditions” through interruption

---

“compels the spectator to take up a position towards the action.”¹⁵ In other words, the moment of estrangement forces the spectator to take up a position of authority in relation to the action, to affirm an opinion about it, to render judgment upon it. (As Benjamin puts it elsewhere, the distances created by interruption are “detrimental to illusion among the audience. These distances are meant to make the audience adopt a critical attitude, to make it think.”¹⁶) The epic theatre thus “alter[s] the functional relationship between stage and audience,” turning spectators into “collaborators” rather than passive recipients. Their judgments amount to active interpretive decisions which affect, or intervene in, the space of the stage. This alteration, what is more, is meant to have political effects in the world. For example, the point of the Brechtian so-called “alienation device,” or Verfremdungseffekt, to which epic theatre is closely allied, was to “[lay] bare society’s causal network” for critical analysis, as Brecht himself stated.¹⁷ Its task, Peter Brooker comments, was to “reveal a suppressed or unconsidered alternative; to show the possibilities for change implicit in difference and contradiction.”¹⁸

Delano, I want to claim in what immediately follows, is a precursor of the Benjaminian stranger who enters, and who thereby interrupts processes and brings the action to a standstill in mid-course. Critics have often been closely attuned to the element of interruption in Benito Cereno. For Sundquist, the novella is a story of the “precarious suspension” of authority; Elmer, picking up on Sundquist’s phrase, describes the

¹⁵ Benjamin, Understanding Brecht, 100-101, emphases added.
¹⁶ Benjamin, Understanding Brecht, 38, emphasis added.
¹⁸ Brooker, “Key Words,” 194.
“suspense of sovereign power” aboard the San Dominick. From a Benjaminian perspective, suspension and suspense of sovereign power are intrinsic to a theatre of revolution. This point is important, because it is in the critical space opened up by the theatrical, virtualizing suspension or interruption, that a way around, through, or beyond the forces of naturalization may be found.

In Benito Cereno, Delano, the agent of the state (to repeat Elmer’s phrase), mistakes illusory effect for natural condition. The revolutionary actors would seem, in fact, to create what we had best call a theatre of naturalism rather than a middle nineteenth century (or late eighteenth century) forerunner of epic theatre. (I will return to this point below.) The revolutionaries do not disrupt the theatre of naturalism with a type of epic theatre. Instead, they reiterate the norm as (if it is) a product of nature.

But in doing so, from their position of power and authority, they reveal the norm to be a contingent “repeated echo” (I borrow this phrase from Jonathan Culler) rather than some ur-reality or an original. Babo’s theatre is one in which the natural is revealed as performatively crafted to eyes which have found a certain vantage point. It is also, therefore, a theatre of revolutionary judgment, one which puts the naturalizing mode of judgment on trial. I hope to suggest here, then, some of the ways in which the politically significant suspension of power on the ship as analyzed by critics such as Sundquist and Elmer is enmeshed in the equally politically significant notion of theatricality that pervades the story, beginning with the crucial moment when Delano intrudes on the scene:

---

Always upon first boarding a large and populous ship at sea, especially a foreign one, with a nondescript crew such as Lascars or Manilla men, the impression varies in a peculiar way from that produced by first entering a strange house with strange inmates in a strange land. Both house and ship, the one by its walls and blinds, the other by its high bulwarks like ramparts, hoard from view their interiors till the last moment; but in the case of the ship there is this addition; that the living spectacle it contains, upon its sudden and complete disclosure, has, in contrast with the blank ocean which zones it, something of the effect of enchantment. The ship seems unreal; these strange costumes, gestures, and faces, but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave. (BC, 38)

Is it possible to say with Benjamin that suddenly--meaning, of course, unexpectedly--a stranger enters here and, interrupting ongoing action, unveils the conditions of life and subverts the illusion of the natural? Melville’s scenario at once resembles and significantly diverges from Benjamin’s. To take the most basic point of difference, the stranger’s entrance in Melville’s text is far from sudden. The living spectacle of the San Dominick has been elaborately conceived and executed exactly for the arrival of this stranger.21 Anticipating the intrusion of either a representative or perhaps a group of representatives of the American ship, Babo prepares everyone on board the San Dominick for their roles, forcing Don Benito under threat of death to act

21 A remark by Hannah Arendt in her posthumously published Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) is pertinent in this respect: “We . . . are inclined to think that in order to judge a spectacle you must first have the spectacle--that the spectator is secondary to the actor; we tend to forget that no one in his right mind would ever put on a spectacle without being sure of having spectators to watch it” (61-2).
the “part” of principal owner and “free captain of the ship,” as we have seen, and “devis[ing]” other “expedients” to “disguise the truth” (BC, 95). These and other “arrangements” are “made and matured during the interval of two or three hours, between their first sighting the ship and the arrival on board of Captain Amasa Delano” (95). What Delano’s anticipated interruption necessitates, then, is the theatrical staging or enactment of the so-called original (indeed interrupted) monarchical, imperial-colonial, slave-based political order.

A second difference between Melville and Benjamin, then, is that the standstill which the Melvillean interruption produces is not quite a tableau of events in their mid-course, but rather a tableau of an historical, pre-revolutionary past which assumes the form of an ongoing (and in that regard uninterrupted) yet curiously stalled or stagnant present. In other words, this interruption entails a reversal along the diachronic axis of historical events. This staging of the past, which is made possible only by the new power structure in which the Africans are in command, in turn institutes that former, normal order as virtual, as unreal, its strange costumes, gestures, and faces, but a shadowy tableau, as one would have said around 1855.

This brings us to a third major point of difference between Melville and Benjamin, which is that Delano, far from being shocked or astonished into a critical view of the scene before him by virtue of his own perception of the scene’s theatricality, does not realize--at least, not at first, and not in the right way--that he is watching a performance. He does not divine that what he views is not “itself.”

And so it would seem, as I have already suggested, that Babo’s theatre is, quite simply, a precursor not of epic theatre, but of the late nineteenth century theatre of
Naturalism that Brecht and Benjamin pushed against. And yet, this is a scene that parades its theatricality; Delano knows at some level of consciousness, as Melville’s framing technique conveys, that the scene is an “unreal . . . shadowy tableau.” Moreover, despite the fact that interruption, in Melville’s scenario, also means apparent if deliberate political retrogression, and despite the fact that this retrogression forecloses the critical awareness of the spectator, it is still the case that when the stranger enters—and here Melville closely anticipates Benjamin’s remarks—there occurs an interruption of processes which, in generating the scene or space of the San Dominick as theatrical and in highlighting its theatricality, uncovers the so-called natural order as constructed and contingent—uncovers it, that is, for everyone but Delano himself.

Delano, then—who is not just the American but also “the visitor” (BC, 38, 52, 53), “the stranger” (59, 62), and bearer of “a stranger’s presence” (81)—fulfills the role of the stranger who enters and who by virtue of his spectatorship reveals conditions that had been suppressed or unconsidered. The trick is that to the stranger himself, these conditions remain suppressed and unconsidered. Delano hovers ambiguously between revolution and counterrevolution, his entrance and his position as spectator generating a theatre of revolution that he fails to detect. We can see here afresh, perhaps, the pertinence of Sundquist’s vocabulary and particular juxtaposition of terms in his observation that “Delano participates in a continued act of suppressed revolt against belief in the appearance presented to him” (emphasis added). Within Delano, the cycle of revolt and suppression is continuous, the oscillation between the two poles permanent.

The reader, meanwhile, is privileged to know or to suspect, and to have confirmed by the time of rereading (which is to say, of synoptic viewing), that Delano’s entrance
interrupts the goal of revolutionary action, brings that action to a standstill in mid-course, and causes the reinstatement of the normal situation as the virtual. One of Melville’s own critical interventions, in other words, was to stage an interruption for the benefit of the reader, whom Melville places, through the technique of theatrical framing, in the position of spectator.

Like Benjamin’s and Brecht’s epic theatre, the theatre of the San Dominick is about the interrelation between judgment and revolution. But it is also a theatre in which the protection and maintenance of revolutionary transformation ironically depend on a staging which, far from soliciting a critical relationship to the natural order, reinforces a passive relationship to it. To maintain the goal of revolution, Babo must be careful not to alienate his audience from its conditions. Delano must accept what he thinks of as the conditions of life as undisturbed and unquestioned, if not unquestionable. The political effectiveness of the story as a whole, meanwhile, lies partly in its second tier of spectatorship—the way it provokes its reader to “adopt a critical attitude, to make it think,” in Benjamin’s words (the way it “solicit[s] . . . our own interpretive decision,” as Elmer says) through the disclosure of the conditions of Delano’s counter-emancipatory judgment.

**Benito Cereno’s “Reserve”: Sovereignty and Submission as Theatricality**

In the theatre of the San Dominick, revolutionary (or evental and disruptive) and counter-revolutionary (or naturalizing) modes of judgment are at once mutually dependent and contradictory. That is why “the crisis aboard the San Dominick is a crisis in which . . . [a]uthority and submission have entered into a generalized oscillation that
no one, not even Babo, can control,” as Elmer puts it. How does the oscillation of authority and submission, or sovereignty and subjection, relate to the novella’s pervasive preoccupation with theatricality? Delano’s entrance compels the theatrical representation of the normal situation of slavery that the rebellion had overturned. Babo has designed the theatre—the theatrōn, the place for viewing—for the contemplation of a stranger who will view in a certain way; designed the spectacle for a very particular type of spectatorship and speculation. Babo’s creation of a spectacle for Delano’s consumption is possible because of his revolutionary authority. But that spectacle is the mimesis of the state of bondage. Authority and bondage thus become peculiarly entangled and confused.

On the San Dominick, to be sovereign will mean to be able to make yourself appear to be in submission, the better to exercise your power at the proper time and place. Delano realizes this much. He suspects that Benito Cereno’s weakness and ineffectuality are really signs of his strength and absolute power: The most “savage energies” of Don Benito and his crew may be “couched” under the “aspect of infantile weakness” by means of “craft,” Delano thinks to himself (BC, 52). Delano, of course, has hit on the structure of power on the San Dominick, the layering of sovereignty, submission, theatricality and potentiality. Except that, owing to his relentlessly determinative mode of judgment and the conventional, a priori categories which presuppose the powerlessness and pre-political identity of the Africans, he misrecognizes and misattributes authority and the locus of power. It is in fact precisely the authority and political identity of the Africans which facilitate this misrecognition. And this misrecognition is important, in turn, to the survival of that same authority. To maintain revolutionary transformation, Babo presents a theatrical facade of submission. Progress means retrogression;

retrogression, progress. Hence the sense of stagnation or paralysis apparent everywhere on the San Dominick. This suspense, in the word generally preferred by critics, is therefore another sign of the complex interplay of submission and sovereignty. When Delano contemplates what he thinks of as Benito Cereno’s “pervading reserve” (we will return in a moment to this specific term), he is contemplating a displacement of the oscillation of sovereignty and subjection that his own intrusion has activated in Babo and the revolutionaries.

Delano keeps to determinative judgment, subsuming the particular under the universal. He accounts for strange phenomena according to conventional, unquestioned categories. The result is that while he repeatedly thinks in sophisticated terms about the nature of power onboard the ship, he persists in believing that only the Spanish captain, rather than Babo or any other African, could direct and control that power. He is all the more perplexed, therefore, to find himself trying to account for Benito Cereno’s evident (and actual) lack of control. Since only Benito Cereno can wield absolute power on the ship, Delano is driven to explain the evidence for this lack of control as evidence of a sinister plot, a scheme and show of diminished authority.

Put in general terms, Delano understands power and misunderstands authority. He is even close, at first, to understanding the situation of authority on the ship. He witnesses and recognizes Benito Cereno’s “impair[ed] . . . authority” (BC, 40) over the Africans. He also recognizes the virtuality (one could say, theatricality) of power aboard the San Dominick, a virtuality captured, as we will see in a moment, by the repeated word “reserve.” He does not, however, relate or connect these observations correctly. To relate them correctly might mean to see that Benito Cereno’s impaired authority is a symptom
of the Spanish captain’s being, like everyone else on the ship, an avatar--in the modern sense of a character in a virtual community--playing a part under the master, Babo.\textsuperscript{23} Instead, theatricality, particularly in the pejorative sense--schemes, tricks, nefarious plots, sinister masquerades, evil designs--becomes the name for an inversion whereby Benito Cereno’s seeming debility and lack of authority are in fact the very sign of his--but only his--power and political shrewdness.

Delano has recourse to the concept of theatricality to explain Benito Cereno’s apparent weakness and ineffectiveness as a leader in a context in which “enigmas and portents” and “phantoms” are all around and are producing a sense of foreboding and “ghostly dread” (\textit{BC}, 55). Trying to explain Benito Cereno’s symptoms of illness, Delano thinks about how “even to the degree of simulating mortal disease, the craft of some tricksters had been known to attain. To think, that, under the aspect of infantile weakness, the most savage energies might be couched” (52). Delano has begun by believing that “had Benito Cereno been a man of greater energy, misrule would hardly have come to the present pass.” For the “debility . . . of the Spanish captain, was too obvious to be overlooked. . . . His mind appeared unstrung, if not still more seriously affected.” He is thus a figure of both authority and subjection: “Shut up in these oaken walls, chained to one dull round of command, whose unconditionality cloyed him, like some hypochondriac abbot he moved slowly about. . . .” (40). In other words, Delano will account for the apparent lack of energy and the strange posture of sovereign submission, or submissive sovereignty (“chained to one dull round of command”) by viewing them as masks for the “most savage energies” that threaten him.

In fact, of course, it is the **Africans’** seeming lack of authority (for example, Atufal’s chains and Babo’s servility) which is a mark of power. (They have ordered the performance of the normal situation.) While Delano recognizes at some level that the Spanish captain is a mastered and subjected creature, he does not realize that it is to Babo’s command--to Babo’s “juggling play” (BC, 74), in a phrase from the famous shaving scene--that the Spaniard is chained. Or at least that it is Babo’s juggling play that chains Benito Cereno to the latter’s own (false) position of command. The craft of a trickster is a political craft, at first requiring, and also strengthening and extending, political identity. The Africans have no political identity, in Delano’s view. They do not, so far as Delano is concerned, control the theatre of power that he senses all around him.

Theatricality, political violence or force, and determinative judgment are closely interlinked in *Benito Cereno*, then. Delano explains Benito Cereno’s clearly demonstrated deficiency in energy by supposing violent energies to be deliberately, threateningly concealed through the medium of theatricality. The *San Dominick* is a theatre of power--a place for viewing paradoxically concealed displays of power--designed to lull a certain kind of spectator into a false sense of security. Ruptures in the performance thwart this attempt to create a false sense of security, and the spectator is repeatedly made suspicious. Of course, the spectator is none the wiser for these suspicions. Still, the suspicions move closer and closer to the literal truth of events aboard the *San Dominick*, to repeat Sundquist’s point. That is because Delano’s thoughts on the concealed display of power are complex and nuanced.

Delano is quick to feel personally slighted by the Spanish captain’s “cloudy languor” and “sour and gloomy disdain”; but also quick to ascribe this behaviour, “in
charity,” to the “effects of sickness,” and to recognize that he has not, in fact, been especially singled out for rude treatment: “At bottom it was Don Benito’s reserve which displeased him; but the same reserve was shown towards all but his faithful personal attendant” (BC, 41). Melville draws attention to the word reserve, repeating it at least six times in the space of less than a page, along with such appositives as “self-restraint,” and the more general appositives “demeanor” and “manner.”

The term reserve as applied to social behaviour does indeed signify self-restraint, not to say unfriendliness, at least in this context. But an alternative connotation—an object or energy or capacity stored up for future use; for example, military reinforcement, what we analyzed in the last chapter as military capability—also emerges in Delano’s reflections as the American captain obsesses over the implications of the Spaniard’s behaviour:

Thus, the Spaniard, regarded in his reserve, seemed as the involuntary victim of mental disorder. But, in fact, his reserve might, in some degree, have proceeded from design. If so, then here was evinced the unhealthy climax of that icy though conscientious policy, more or less adopted by all commanders of large ships, which, except in signal emergencies, obliterates alike the manifestation of sway with every trace of sociality; transforming the man into a block, or rather into a loaded cannon, which, until there is call for thunder, has nothing to say. (BC, 42)

Reserve in the sense of a lack of sociality, a reticence, an abstention from expression, is also an obliteration of the manifestation of sway. This obliteration is icy though conscientious policy, part of the repertoire of command. “[R]egarded in his reserve,”
Benito Cereno might be the “involuntary victim” of an organic process, a “mental disorder.” But his “reserve” might also be deliberate “design,” an instance of the craft or **techne** of governance, shrewdly implemented. In the one scenario, Benito Cereno is the figure of involuntary submission; in the other, of sovereign power.

“Viewing him in this [latter] light,” Delano surmises,

> it seemed but a natural token of the perverse habit induced by a long course of such hard self-restraint, that, notwithstanding the present condition of his ship, the Spaniard should still persist in a demeanor, which, however harmless, or, it may be, appropriate, in a well appointed vessel, such as the San Dominick might have been at the outset of the voyage, was anything but judicious now. But the Spaniard perhaps thought that it was with captains as with gods: reserve, under all events, must still be their cue. But more probably this appearance of slumbering dominion might have been but an attempted disguise to conscious imbecility—*not* deep policy, but shallow device. But be all this as it might, whether Don Benito’s manner was designed or not, the more Captain Delano noted its pervading reserve, the less he felt uneasiness at any particular manifestation of that reserve toward himself. (BC, 42)

Reserve is an appearance of slumbering dominion and a sign of sovereign elevation—the craft of the gods. It is a threateningly present absence, what we could call, thinking back to Lawrence Ross’s pamphlet *World War III and the Southern Hemisphere* analyzed in the previous chapter, a measurable, if massive, destructive potential. It is not necessarily the result of deep policy; not necessarily a carefully prepared implementation of
sovereignty as a sheer display of potentiality. It may instead be but a shallow device.

Either way, it is a technique. In summation, reserve in the sense of a symptom of natural phenomena and organic process would signify Benito Cereno’s subjection; but Delano comes to believe that reserve—whether it be deep policy or shallow device—is instead a sign of the Spaniard’s sovereignty.

Delano continues to choose between organic illness, meaning weakness, and conscious craft, meaning strength, as possible explanations for the source of mystery on the ship. Like his reserve, Benito Cereno’s “singular alternations of courtesy and ill-breeding” appear to be a sign either of total submission or of extreme power, remaining, in Delano’s mind, “unaccountable, except on one of two suppositions—innocent lunacy, or wicked imposture” (BC, 52). If the Spaniard’s conduct is an “intentional affront,” as Delano increasingly believes, then the “idea of lunacy” must be “vacated.” “But if not a lunatic, what then?” Delano wonders. “Would a gentleman . . . act the part now acted by his host? The man was an impostor. Some low-born adventurer, masquerading as an oceanic grandee; yet so ignorant of the first requisites of mere gentlemanhood as to be betrayed into the present remarkable indecorum. That strange ceremoniousness, too, at other times evinced, seemed not uncharacteristic of one playing a part above his real level” (52). Shot through with a lexicon of theatre, invention, craft, spectacle, performance, and ritual—“the part now acted”; “impostor”; “masquerading”; ceremoniousness”; “playing a part”—this passage demonstrates Delano’s persistent awareness of the artifice, doubleness, and theatricality of what he views. It also, of course, demonstrates his misunderstanding of the purpose and true configuration of that theatricality. But it furthermore demonstrates his intuition as to a general link between
theatricality and political power. Much as reserve is a sign that Delano must urgently interpret, so that he can figure out whether it is a sign of illness or of latent power, so weakness may be a sign of debilitating sickness or of the (theatrical) craft of a trickster as the art of concealing savage energies.

Pondering Benito Cereno’s possible “sinister scheme” (BC, 55) against himself and against the Bachelor’s Delight, Delano realizes how elaborate the deception would have to be: “If Don Benito’s story was throughout an invention, then every soul on board, down to the youngest negress, was his carefully drilled recruit in the plot: an incredible inference. And yet, if there was ground for mistrusting his veracity, that inference was a legitimate one” (56). The “invention” and performance of this “plot” is a military, or rather piratical, strategy. The “general distress” of the ship might “be affected”; the “undiminished Spanish crew, alleged to have perished off to a remnant,” might be “at that very moment lurking in the hold” (56). “Upon gaining [the] vicinity [of the Bachelor’s Delight], might not the San Dominick, like a slumbering volcano, suddenly let loose energies now hid?” (56). The entire ship is a sign of power in reserve, a sign of capability, an enchanted, unreal appearance of slumbering dominion, its energies hidden but ready to be suddenly let loose in an orgy of violence, destruction, and death. Delano’s hypotheses lead him to the precise truth of how power is staged in the theatre of the San Dominick. His mode of judgment, however, leads him to misattribute the authority behind that staging. Thus, as I will explore from a slightly different angle in the next section, Benito Cereno works to uncover the conditions of a nominally democratic and republican mode of judgment which facilitates a repressive reaction.
The Democratic Theatre and the Judge

Benito Cereno, I have been arguing, posits various links between theatricality and judgment. We recall from the “shadowy tableau” passage that as with the case of the “strange house with strange inmates in a strange land,” the “living spectacle” of the ship may be treasured up and protected—kept intimate, secret, and “interior,” “hoarded from view.” But this protective deferral only intensifies the effect of the “sudden and complete disclosure” at “the last moment.” The term “disclosure” suggests not only an undoing of the protective hoarding, but also a calling-to-account, a revelation—a sudden and unanticipated opening-up to judgment indissociable from the transformation of the “interior” into a theatrical scene. (“The ship seems unreal; these strange costumes, gestures, and faces, but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave.”) Benito Cereno is the story of how Delano stands on the very threshold of apprehending this essential unreality, yet does not cross over into an awareness of how the medium of theatricality really operates around him, let alone an awareness of how, as spectator, he is constitutive of the medium of theatricality.

That Benito Cereno will be about that missed awareness is suggested by the narrator’s characteristic hesitations and circumlocutions immediately following the “shadowy tableau” passage: “Perhaps it was some such influence as above is attempted to be described, which, in Captain Delano’s mind, heightened whatever, upon a staid scrutiny, might have seemed unusual” (BC, 38, my emphasis). What might have seemed “unusual” or exceptional, what might have demanded the movement from the particular to the general and the creation of the rule or the category, might also have been heightened by the theatricality of the scene. Theatricality should have uncovered
conditions--disclosed them suddenly and completely--and made them strange. Except that Delano’s judgment, the judgment provoked by this particular “sudden and complete disclosure,” ironically further conceals conditions even as it uncovers them.

Still, Melville’s extended geographical vision in Benito Cereno makes a “stranger” of “the American.” This is true of Melville’s maritime fiction generally. In the theatres of Melville’s ships, the conditions of American democracy are estranged from the reader/spectator. The Greek term theatrōn, it is well known, designates a place for seeing, from thea—a verb meaning to see or to look upon; and also a substantive meaning a sight or spectacle.24 Judgment in the sense of a detached, synoptic view of a spectacle or sequence of actions—of a muthos, or plot—is inherent in the experience of spectatorship. Hannah Arendt reminds us of the “indisputable fact that no other sense” than sight “establishes such a safe distance between subject and object”; “distance,” she states, “is the most basic condition for the functioning of vision.”25 Hierarchical relations and fantasies of separation and control would thus seem to be built into the experience of spectatorship and theatricality. That, at least, is how Melville thinks of the situation.

The relation between theatre and the estrangement of democracy is not merely fortuitous. In Moby-Dick, for example, the Pequod is not only a mobile space for dramatic representations of tyranny—a theatre where dramatic scenes and soliloquies about the seizure, and the ensuing problems, of autocratic power are performed—but a mobile place from which to observe, at least potentially, any and every part of the

“unhooped oceans of this planet” in the fulfillment of tyrannical desire.\(^\text{26}\) It possesses, like any ship, a certain “visual sweep from the . . . mast-heads” (MD, 199) by means of which to survey and command. Near the end of the novel, when his “whole life was now become one watch on deck” (537), Ahab at last has himself hoisted to the royal mast, from where he “gazed abroad upon the sea for miles and miles,—ahead, astern, this side, and that,—within the wide expanded circle commanded at so great a height” (538). The Pequod is a theatre in the sense of being a place where sovereign elevation occurs, with its power to command and control from a distance.

This elevation and detachment, as the story of relations on the Pequod would have it, are incompatible with democracy. This idea is suggested not only by the story of power relations on the Pequod, but even more directly in the situation of a fellow Nantucket whaleship called the Bachelor, which arrives on the scene in a late chapter of the novel. The immensely successful crew of this ship, having stowed the last possible makeshift containers of sperm oil, are parading their jubilation before the other whalers on the ground before embarking on the voyage home. At this point of ultimate fulfillment, the labour-power of the Bachelor’s Delight’s crew transforms into a kind of democratic impulse, festive and theatrical, with drumming, dancing, roaring, jigging, and the “tumultuous” destruction of the try-works (likened to the “Bastile” [sic]). The crew performs not only for the other whalers on the cruising ground, but for its own spectator-captain: “Lord and master over all [the] scene, the captain stood erect on the ship’s elevated quarter-deck, so that the whole rejoicing drama was full before him, and seemed

merely contrived for his own individual diversion” (MD, 494). If there is a democratic impulse on the ship, it is controlled and contained within a hierarchical power structure expressed spatially (the captain is “elevated”) and visually (the “whole rejoicing drama was full before him,” available to him in a synoptic view), with the spectator in the position of “[l]ord and master.” The potentially un-restrainable democratic impulse, with its excesses and its revolutionary destruction of symbols of despotic power, is thus rendered secure, overseen or over-sighted by the commander. The Bachelor is a theatrōn, a place where a spectacle occurs, but a spectacle that, in being thus looked upon, is also controlled, its power either diminished or appropriated, and rendered the stuff of comical diversion.

But in the era in which Melville was writing Moby-Dick and Benito Cereno, these were certainly not the only terms in which democracy was being rendered strange, in which its conditions were being uncovered. Such an effort was also being made by another writer who himself “entered a strange house with strange inmates in a strange land” in democratic America and “disclosed” its “interior” for anatomization and public consumption in Restoration France, and who developed a compelling account, fifteen years before Melville’s story and nearly a hundred years before Benjamin’s writings on epic theatre, of the interrelation of theatre, revolution, and judgment. “The people reign over the American political world as God rules over the universe,” de Tocqueville writes near the beginning of volume one of Democracy in America: “It is the cause and the end of all things; everything rises out of it and is absorbed back into it.”27 The unified, uniform, and all-encompassing entity of “the people” in de Tocqueville’s image is

---

something like Melville’s “blank ocean,” or “the deep” (“everything rises out of it”), just as the “political world” which de Tocqueville’s sovereign “people” creates and absorbs is not unlike the “living spectacle” that “emerge[s] from,” and is “receive[d] back” by, the abyss.

That de Tocqueville’s “political world” might somehow resemble Melville’s shipboard “living spectacle” is confirmed in the second volume of Democracy in America, in a chapter entitled, “Some Observations on the Theatre Among Democratic Peoples,” in which de Tocqueville suggests that “drama” and “the people” in American democracy exist in a symbiotic relationship. To begin with, the theatre registers political revolution in advance of all other literary media: “Of all forms of literature it is generally the drama that is first affected by the social and political revolution upsetting an aristocratic order, and its influence is always conspicuous there” (DA, 489). More importantly, the democratic theatre stages its own revolts: “In written works aristocratic canons will be modified little by little in a gradual and, so to say, legal way. In the theatre they will be overthrown by revolts” (490). In what may be a tautological but nonetheless useful formulation, the theatre in democratic America is revolutionary theatre. The drama registers revolutionary transformation (the “drama, more than any other form of literature, is bound by many close links to the actual state of society” [493]), but also, in literary terms, effects such transformation.


29 Where de Tocqueville speaks of literary canons “overthrown by revolts,” today we might speak of the performative power of theatre and literature generally. De Tocqueville’s argument is in this way a kind of anticipatory qualification to J. L. Austin’s famous statement in How to Do Things with Words, 1962, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) that the “performative utterance will . . . be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy” (22, emphases removed from original).
The revolts of the theatre introduce a complication to the idea of the unified sovereignty of the people announced early in volume one of *Democracy in America*. If the (corporate, singular) people in America is absolute and indivisible--the “cause and the end of all things”; that out of which the entire political world rises and into which it is absorbed--a special characteristic of American democracy, as revealed in the theatre, is its composition from a multiplicity of wills and conflicting judgments. A place of revolts, the democratic theatre is also a place of multiple, idiosyncratic judgments--a multitude of individual wills:

Such a multitude [as the democratic people], composed of such varied elements and scattered so widely over the land, cannot acknowledge the same rules or submit to the same laws. No agreement is possible among judges so numerous, who never know when they may meet again and who all like to judge for themselves. All literary rules and conventions are shaken by the impact of democracy, but in the drama they are entirely abolished, leaving only the caprice of each author and each audience. (*DA*, 491).

But if this situation disrupts sovereign indivisibility, it paves the way for democracy’s unique, revolutionary power. Where aristocratic audiences want to see “certain aspects of human nature,” with the rest “banished from view,” democratic audiences “like to see the same medley of conditions, feelings, and opinions that occur in life” (491). Democratic audiences, then, want to see represented the manifold “conditions . . . that occur in life.”

In what we could read as an anticipation of Benjamin’s writings on epic theatre, de Tocqueville is not just saying that democratic audiences like to see the conditions that

---

30 See Weber, “‘God Bless America!,’” 35-36.
occur in life, but that they like to see the conditions of life revealed. For the “writers for the democratic stage do go beyond the limits of human nature” in this milieu of broken “rules and conventions.” And they do so “in a different direction from their predecessors”: “Seeking to represent in minute detail the little singularities of the present and the peculiar characteristics of particular people, they forget to sketch the basic features of mankind” ([DA. 491]). De Tocqueville, then, locates the power of the “writers for the democratic stage”--architects of the “revolts” of the theatre--in their apprehension of the “singularities of the present and the peculiar characteristics of particular people” to the exclusion of the “basic features of mankind.” And he locates the power of the democratic theatre itself in two places: first, in the theatre’s paradoxical concentration of a “multitude” of “such varied elements” all “scattered so widely”--that is, a concentration of individuals who “cannot acknowledge the same rules or submit to the same laws”; and second, in its entire “abolish[ment]” of all “literary rules and conventions,” a destruction which “leav[es] only the caprice of each author and each audience.”

The San Dominick is clearly a floating theatre, as Delano senses from the beginning. Another question is whether this Spanish slave ship, symbol of the power of “His Majesty” and object of concern to the “vice-regal courts” ([BC. 89]), a ship overtaken by revolutionary Africans who then mimic their own former enslavement in a theatrical performance, and re-taken by “the American” as a service rendered, in effect, to the Spanish throne--another question, to repeat, is whether this ship is a democratic theatre.

Toquevillian rules and conventions have been at once shaken by the impact of democracy--by which I mean the impact of the former slaves’ political action, even if it is not clear that theirs is a specifically democratic uprising--and in a sense, indeed, entirely
abolished, but also reiterated and reinstated. In this unusual context, the last thing the American exercises, as it happens, is the caprice to judge for himself that de Tocqueville identifies as the new norm of democratic theatre. Perhaps, to repeat de Tocqueville’s insights, democratic Americans, forming a people of varied elements, and scattered so widely, quite definitively cannot submit themselves to, or band themselves together under, the unified order of the same laws. That is one reason why they like to dramatize the singularities of the present and the peculiar characteristics of particular people. Yet Melville’s American, through his particular form of judgment, forces the unification of, shall we say, the varied and scattered particulars and singularities on the San Dominick that do not otherwise fit the same laws of nature. At the same time, Delano’s failure is a failure to attend in full to the singularities of the present and the peculiar characteristics of particular people. (He will finally reconcile the events of the day with the natural order.)

Meanwhile, the dramaturge of the San Dominick (Babo, the “writer” of the revolutionary and emancipatory stage) creates the de Tocquevillean singularities of the present, the “phantoms” and “portents” which Delano vaguely perceives but cannot fully recognize, precisely by sketching the so-called basic features of mankind, a picture of the undisturbed generality. (His “forget[ting] to sketch” them would have meant unpredictable risk for himself and his fellow revolutionaries—as well as almost certain death for Delano.) In other words, Babo imitates the limits of human nature—meaning the calculable order recognizable to Delano—as part of his carefully crafted project to go beyond such limits. His theatrical trick is to ironically prevent Delano from realizing that

31 In Jonathan Elmer’s Badiouian terms, Delano renders the “presentative intensity” of Babo’s political theatre as “ineradically opaque,” absorbed back into the “blank ocean” which zones it” (“Babo’s Razor,” 78).
he (Delano) is witness to a radical revolutionary situation. Babo’s theatre has indeed overthrown the regular order by revolts—but it has done so precisely by (theatrically) disguising itself in the cloak of regularity.

**Rhetoric, Perspective, and Theorein: Performance and Reflective Judgment**

Let me pause to reiterate some of the key points of my argument. In Benito Cereno, the suspension of judgment delays authoritarian repression. The Africans’ temporary suspension of the project of liberation, a suspension in the form of a theatrical spectacle of the normal situation of their enslavement on board the San Dominick, deliberately and strategically synchs with Delano’s particular modes of cognitive and political judgment. The suspension presents Delano with what he expects to see (whites in control, blacks enslaved), causing his judgment to misfire. This carefully solicited mis-recognition both postpones the possible violence of colonial intervention and presents the Africans with an opportunity to extend their power through the plotted capture of the American ship. Thus, the protection and extension of the slave uprising depend on a certain feature of Delano’s faculty of judgment—a feature that Melville regards as one of the conditions or mechanisms of political repression. The revolutionaries’ presentation of the normal situation has been made-to-order, so to speak, for just such a judge as Delano, one who judges almost purely in determinative fashion, purely by recognition of the rule. The revolutionary actors, I have argued, gamble on the possibility that any flaws in their presentation—singularities and particulars that might reveal the ruse—will go misrecognized or unrecognized according to the spectator’s inability to account for anomalies. Ironically, although the safeguarding and extension of the revolutionary
project indeed thus depend on this rule-bound form of judgment, Delano’s acts of misrecognition only further enable brute repression in the end. The fact that Delano’s particular mode of judgment is distinctly unproductive of new knowledge means that he never grasps the significance of the revolt, even when the “scales” are “dropped from his eyes” in the “flash of revelation” at the climax of the tale. *Benito Cereno* is thus the story of a missed opportunity for the full overturning of a counter-emancipatory form of judgment.

Delano’s failure, I will argue here, is a failure, or lack, of aesthetic, reflective judgment. Reflective judgment, in Kant’s term, generates knowledge, or supplies the universal, by creating the rule from particulars rather than applying pregiven rules to particulars. I will take as my definition of aesthetic judgment Linda Zerilli’s account of the “faculty of presentation or figuration, that is, the capacity to create forms or figures.”32 This faculty enables judgments quite different than cognitive, utilitarian, means-end judgments and judgment by rule. But more than that, it stands as the hidden, paradoxical basis of logical, determinative judgment: “Without the initial non-concept-guided synthesizing activity of the imagination, there would be no concept formation, no objective knowledge,” Zerilli writes.33 The very ground of cognitive discourse is imaginative, productive, world-creating aesthetic judgment (the “imaginative search,” to use Ross’s term from the previous chapter).

To begin to characterize how *Benito Cereno* registers a bifurcation of forms of judgment, I want to consider the very opening of the novella. We begin with objective, factual narration: “In the year 1799, Captain Amasa Delano, of Duxbury, in

---

Massachusetts, commanding a large sealer and general trader, lay at anchor, with a valuable cargo, in the harbor of St. Maria” (BC, 35). At the moment Delano goes on deck to view the strange ship coming into the bay, we are brought into proximity with his perception. At precisely this point, metaphor destabilizes the hitherto indicative, apodictic quality of the novella’s language: “The morning was one peculiar to that coast. Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter’s mold” (35). Delano initially thinks metaphorically. Of course, it is not always clear, in Melville’s manipulation of free indirect discourse, whose voice—Delano’s or the narrator’s—we are hearing, whose perspective we are sharing. At many points, however, the distinction is clear, as in the description of Delano’s approach to the foreign ship, which occurs as a sequence of perceptions obviously in Delano’s mind:

Upon gaining a less remote view, the ship, when made signally visible on the verge of the leaden-hued swells, with the shreds of fog here and there raggedly furring her, appeared like a white-washed monastery after a thunder-storm, seen perched upon some dun cliff among the Pyrenees. But it was no purely fanciful resemblance which now, for a moment, almost led Captain Delano to think that nothing less than a ship-load of monks was before him. Peering over the bulwarks were what really seemed, in the hazy distance, throngs of dark cowls; while, fitfully revealed through the open port-hoes, other dark moving figures were dimly descried, as of

Black Friars pacing the cloisters.

Upon a still nigher approach, this appearance was modified, and the true character of the vessel was plain—a Spanish merchantman of the first class; carrying negro slaves, amongst other valuable freight, from one colonial port to another. (36)

Delano “knows,” of course, that he is looking at a ship. The ship appears to him “like a white-washed monastery” (emphasis added), where monastery is merely a term of comparison. But the resemblance is not simply fanciful: Delano almost thinks that “nothing less than a ship-load of monks was before him. Peering over the bulwarks were what really seemed, in the hazy distance, throngs of dark cowls” (emphases added). He knows that his own metaphor is parasitic on something primary and original that he is struggling to make out, yet he is close to regarding the metaphorical image itself as an original which is then clarified: upon a “still nigher approach, this appearance was modified, and the true character of the vessel was plain” (emphases added).

The opening of the novella is structured around an oscillation between objective rational fact and metaphorical imagination. Delano’s first perceptions are metaphorical. But the novella will be about modifying first appearances, and about the return to the safe ground of the true and the plain. The current flows from rhetoric to rationality, from imagination to a putatively opposed clarity. It is not the truth of what Delano sees that is at stake, then, so much as his mode of thinking—metaphorical versus rational. The passage describing Delano’s approach to the San Dominick, I would suggest, is symbolic.

of the novella as a whole. *Benito Cereno* will become a story about the shutting-out and shutting-down of imaginative association in the quest for plainness and truth.

While the opening paragraphs of the story establish that Delano is perfectly capable of thinking imaginatively and metaphorically, Delano’s inclination, to underscore the point, is to strip away metaphor in order to uncover the true and the plain, culminating in the revelation which illuminates in “unanticipated *clearness*” (my emphasis) the truth of the enigmas for which Delano has been trying to account. Prior to the revelation that undermines Delano’s regime of judgment (let us note that the regime of judgment survives this undermining and emerges the stronger), Delano’s ongoing attempt to clarify the enigmatic events of the day proceeds as a series of thoughts and judgments that involve the subsumption of particulars under certain established categories of thought.

These categories lead him into error. As we have seen, for example, he is unable to consider the possibility of the Africans’ political identity and political power: the Africans are “too stupid” for political art. This racist presupposition is an example of one of the principles or archai that ground Delano’s determinative mode of judgment. Such a pregiven or “primary assertion” is thus one of the bases of Delano’s rational inquiry, rational speech, rational process--his search for the safety and security of clearness. Such an assertion, that is to say, is a basis of discovering the true and the plain. When Delano comes across an African mother and child, his reaction is described as follows: “There’s naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love, thought Captain Delano, well pleased. . . . These *natural sights* somehow insensibly deepened his confidence and ease” (*BC*, 61, emphases added). The *sight* of the *natural* goes to work below Delano’s conscious perception (“somehow” and “insensibility”). The sight of the natural manipulates his
judgment. We could say, borrowing from Ernesto Grassi, that Delano’s assumption here (“There’s naked nature, now”), is “immediately a ‘showing’”--a sight (“natural sights”)--and “thus in the original sense ‘theoretical’ [theorein--i.e., to see].”

As it turns out, this presentation of the natural is indeed a showing--and, to repeat, “thus in the original sense ‘theoretical’ [theorein--i.e., to see]”--albeit in a way that Delano never suspects (he is virtually incapable of suspecting it). Babo and his fellow revolutionaries, the reader knows, theatrically represent the sight of the natural, revealing the so-called natural and original to be both rhetorical and performed. As a showing, then, the natural in Benito Cereno is rhetorical and theoretical--and inherently theatrical, that is, performed, if not performative.37

The revelation at the climax of Benito Cereno is a revelation of more than one thing. First, it “illuminat[es],” for Delano, “every enigmatic event of the day” in “unanticipated clearness.” What this moment of revelation in all its clearness echoes, I argue, is the switch in Delano’s perception upon his first approach to the ship, when the “appearance was modified, and the true character of the vessel was plain”--a switch, I have claimed, between metaphorical and rational modes of seeing and judging. The final revelation is the achievement of this suggested but deferred moment of ultimate transformation from imaginative to rational seeing. With it comes the extension of “infinite pity” to Benito Cereno and the harsh repression of the revolutionaries. But the revelation also reveals that the normal order on the San Dominick has been a substitution and a rhetorical trope, with the masters of the ship performing “like” slaves and the

dominated Spanish mariners acting “as if” they were in control. That power is “like” submission and submission “like” power is something Delano knows, at some level (he sees Benito Cereno, we recall, as “Shut up in these oaken walls, chained to one dull round of command”). But he does not, upon the “flash of revelation,” acknowledge the rhetorical basis of what he takes for truth and certainty. He does not acknowledge the rhetorical, imaginative basis of the archai that have conditioned his judgment—where nature is a theatrical sight or theoretical and rhetorical showing.

Benito Cereno is a story about a crisis that calls for judgment so that meaning and order of some kind may be restored. The mode of judgment conditions the kind of order that is made out of the crisis. The clearness of (determinative) judgment means the stripping away of metaphor, and will be equated, in the narrative, with political repression. Metaphor will be equated with the opening of the possibility of new forms of freedom, beginning with a theatrical suspension and reversal that throw sovereignty and submission into indistinction. (Each is “like” the other, in an anti-rational “logic” of figuration.) Liberation--violent and destructive liberation, as the case may be--is tied up with imagination and affirmative rhetoric, that which is immediately a showing. But the novella is less about the development of this possibility than its effacement or white-out in the clearness and illumination of the fulfillment of cognitive discourse. Janet Frame, we will see in the next chapter, confronts this same situation of determinative versus imaginative judgment, and in a sense picks up where Melville left off (and where she herself had left off in the story of the walkout), narrating in The Carpathians an event of the full overturning of cognitive judgment.
The spectacle of the San Dominick is a shadowy tableau. The calculable order becomes a shadowy illusion, as the revolutionaries sketch or perform for the American what he expects to see as the basic features of mankind and the limits of human nature. The spectacle—with the costumes, gestures, and faces worn and performed for the American—is the means by which the Africans protect or hoard from view their true, living power. There are at least two “sudden and complete disclosure[s]” of the spectacle of the San Dominick. The first disclosure, the most immediate referent of the “shadowy tableau” passage, occurs when Delano crosses the “high bulwarks” and with his “eager glance [takes] in all the faces, with every other object about him.” The second sudden and complete disclosure occurs with Delano’s flash of revelation (BC, 85), when the spectacle is revealed to Delano as spectacle (a spectacle, moreover, that has “hoard[ed] from view” “until the last moment” the true “interior” significance of what has been going on that day), and Babo’s “political world” is “illuminat[ed] in unanticipated clearness” (85)—only to be violently repressed, its true significance passed over in silence and reduced to shadow. For Delano hovers ambiguously between revolution and counterrevolution, between imaginative vision and a cognitive discourse that lends itself to repressive tactics, and between “democracy in America” and authoritarian repression on the seas.
Chapter 4
Security of Being and the Overturning of Judgment in The Carpathians

The interpretation of Janet Frame’s The Carpathians that I undertake in the pages of this chapter is connected most immediately, as one might expect, to the points I made about Frame’s An Angel at My Table in Chapter 2. I build on that reading in several key ways. Like the autobiography, the novel raises questions around the problem of calculative judgment. In The Carpathians, as I argue in terms drawn especially from Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals, Frame combines economic and theological discourses to construct the foundation of calculative judgment as the creditor-debtor relation. I go on to examine how Frame envisions narrative as a scheme which transmits guilt, hence which perpetuates the regime of judgment. I close by considering how Frame imagines interruptions to narrative power and determinative sense-making. Such disruptions, for Frame, take the form of a rhetorical or aesthetic impact analogous to the sudden protest of the walkout as analyzed in Chapter 2.

Crisis and Political Community

In making this argument, I am also building quite directly on my interpretation of Benito Cereno. Melville’s novella is about the forms of unjust treatment that can follow from making sense of a situation according to pregiven criteria. It is also, in terms of some of its more subterranean gestures, about how such repressive judgment might be disrupted or countered. The Carpathians maximizes the idea of disruption, brings its
potential more fully to light. We might say, for purely heuristic purposes, that it is as if Melville poses the problem and Frame the solution.

There are other important connections between **Benito Cereno** and **The Carpathians**. Both posit the idea of the American in the Pacific who, by virtue of his or her intrusion, suspends the normal, naturalizing order of things and creates the possibility of critical distance. And both construct this Benjaminian topos of the stranger who enters by working with the idea and implications of the blocked first person voice and the manipulation of perspective involved. (Both works share something in common with **An Angel at My Table** in this respect). By way of introducing **The Carpathians** and framing a key aspect of my discussion of the novel, it is worth returning to Melville for a moment and pausing on this aspect of **Benito Cereno**.

Melville’s novella as a whole renders a first person account (the historical Captain Delano’s **Narrative**) into a story told in the third person. Melville is self-conscious about this transformation. His use of limited perspective, free indirect discourse, and interior monologue keeps the first person voice tantalizingly close to the surface. Hence, the novella does not merely delete one voice for another, but plays with the alternative epistemologies and perspectives implied by first and third person voices (or, one might say in this case, the alternative epistemologies implied by homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators). Within this framework, or rather as a momentary departure from it, Benito Cereno’s deposition, meant to inform the “tribunal, in its final decision” (**BC**, 89), performs a double containment or suppression of the first person voice. This “Declaration of the first witness” (89), Benito Cereno’s direct account of the history of the **San Dominick**, is recorded in the third person. One could argue that the third person
rendition employs a grammatical distancing effect. The switch to the third person is a resolutely technical manipulation, a manipulation that, while perhaps conventional for this particular legal genre, harmonizes with the tribunal’s suspicion that the captain’s account is not, so to speak, soundly based:

Some disclosures therein were, at the time, held dubious for both learned and natural reasons. The tribunal inclined to the opinion that the deponent, not undisturbed in his mind by recent events, raved of some things which could never have happened. But subsequent depositions of the surviving sailors, bearing out the revelations of their captain in several of the strangest particulars, gave credence to the rest. So that the tribunal, in its final decision, rested its capital sentences upon statements which, had they lacked confirmation, it would have deemed it but duty to reject. (89)

The deposition also represents the closest direct access the reader ever has to Babo’s thoughts and motivations, even as it contains and warps those thoughts and motivations for the ideological purposes of the Spanish court. Babo has refused to speak--has refused to supply a voice for appropriation. The one thing Benito Cereno and Babo share in the closing pages of the story, after the deposition, is silence. The Spaniard’s “melancholy sometimes ended in muteness” on certain topics; on others “he never spoke at all” (101). Babo, upon his capture, “uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words”; and within a few months he has “met his voiceless end” (102). The judgment of the tribunal is monolithic. It symbolizes the silence of other political voices, including Bentio Cereno’s melancholy voice and Babo’s revolutionary one, and closes off, and guards against, political crisis.
Now, to repeat a point I made in Chapter 2 above, there is nothing inherently calculative, judgmental, or narratocratic about the third person voice, and nothing inherently disruptive, liberating, or absolutely singular about the first person voice. Yet such are the terms in which Melville often poses the difference between these voices in *Benito Cereno*. There are qualifications and exceptions. For instance, in some of the interior monologues in *Benito Cereno*, when heterodiegetic third person narration slides into homodiegetic first person narration, it is a first person voice that reconfirms Delano’s racist presuppositions: These “first person” moments are surely more calculative than disruptive. But Delano’s is a misguided yet always alertly questioning first person voice that gets folded into the judgment of the third person voice. The drive of *Benito Cereno* is from the plurality of potentially disruptive first person voices to the closure of the homogenous third person judgment of the tribunal.

In a related but distinct way, Frame’s novel interrogates the politics of certain conventions of third person heterodiegetic narration. Throughout the novel, characters are constantly trying to seize the point of view within the overall framework of those conventions. *The Carpathians*, as noted in the Introduction above, tells the story of how the wealthy New Yorker Mattina Brecon journeys to Kowhai Street in the small town of Puamahara, New Zealand to research the myth of the Memory Flower. The research expedition takes up the first two thirds of the novel until the event of the midnight rain of language, a crisis representing the collapse of the world’s symbolic systems. The final third of the novel focuses on Mattina’s relationship to her husband Jake; on Jake’s unending, and endlessly unsuccessful, struggle to complete his second novel; and on Mattina’s death and Jake’s own pilgrimage to Puamahara. The story in the first two thirds
up to the crisis point is told in occasionally (and minimally-but-significantly) disrupted third person omniscient narration. But a significant portion of it is told, via the metafictional Wheatstone manuscript, in the form of a simultaneous continuation and disruption of third person omniscient narration, a narration that paradoxically “originates” in an “impostor” who is really “nothing and no-one,” and in whom “all points of view are burgled because the impostor has no point of view.”¹ The paradox initiates Mattina’s “dimensional overturning and disarray,” leaving her to ponder “the demolishing of logical thought, [and] its replacement by new concepts starting at the root of thought, [which] would cause the natural destruction of known language” (C, 119).

Just such a demolishment and destruction immediately follows in the event of the midnight rain of language, the surreal event that concretizes Mattina’s abstractions in an image of all the world’s signifying systems falling in bits and pieces to the ground.

Mattina witnesses this event: She is one of only two characters, besides Dinny Wheatstone the Official Imposter, to maintain perspective or cognitive awareness in Kowhai Street. I will return to these issues of point of view and narrative voice below.

For now, the main point is that Frame’s experiments with voice, perspective and language deconstruct the idea of narrative cohesion through an ongoing de-centering, a dissolution of structure into a state of crisis.²

The rain of language is a disorienting, bewildering experience, a “midnight terror” (C, 130) that leaves most residents of Kowhai Street reduced to “screams, shrieks, wailings” (125) and Mattina herself reduced to “sob[s]” (128), even as it opens a productive possibility of “new knowing, new thinking and feeling, and a new language”

---
(129): It is at once “calamitous but liberating” (119). Frame’s ambivalence here is important, because it helps us to avoid a too-easy assertion that for Frame (and for Melville), the mode of judgment I have been referring to as determinative and calculative is somehow intrinsically oppressive and destructive, and that the acknowledgment of contingency and unpredictability is somehow intrinsically liberating and productive. I have been arguing all along that Melville and Frame do, in fact, characterize how plural, meaningful ways of life can be silenced under sovereign, subjectively-oriented determination, and how calculative, representational thinking can usher in violence; and I have also been arguing that both authors explore the positive yield of a judgment power associated with creative potentiality and aesthetic impact, a judgment power that might affirm freedom from determination. But the distinctions involved are not entirely straightforward. Unpredictability and disruption of cognitive regimes would mean really not knowing what is to come—a challenging and frightening, possibly undesirable, even “calamitous” way of being. The point is that, critiquing the often destructive impulse to overmaster and eradicate this challenge of the unknown, Melville and Frame ask what it would mean to build political community out of the process of abiding with the unknown instead, for better or for worse, materially speaking.

How, Frame asks in *The Carpathians*, would one abide with ultimate uncertainty? The midnight rain is a crisis—meaning, variously, the unstable condition; the decisive stage or sudden variation; the point when conflict reaches maximum tension. (We have seen different representations of crisis in the writings of Frame and Melville: exposure to sudden, terrorizing violence in *Moby-Dick*; the situation preceding the walkout in *An Angel at My Table*; the revelation of a power vacuum in *Benito Cereno*. ) Crisis ushers in
judgment: The word crisis itself is from the Greek for discrimination, decision, or
judgment; and in some of its obsolete meanings in English, crisis is indeed synonymous
with both judgment and criterion of judgment.\(^3\) That synonymity is present in The
Carpathians: “The only judgment likely to be made [about the people of Kowhai Street],”
we read, “. . . was a diagnosis of mass hysteria or insanity. . . . There might be those who
would judge them as better dead, who might even with to induce a ‘merciful’ death”
(129, emphasis added). Yet this crisis is, at the same time, more fundamentally, a state of
emergency that cannot be decided upon (that does not disclose a latent power to
determine or demarcate boundaries) precisely because it overthrows all categories of
knowledge:

A new language, a new people, a new world; and perhaps the end of
known civilisation as human cognition, no longer supporting and
supported by the words of the former languages, and for a time refusing to
accept the apparently illogical, senseless, near-is-far, heavy-is-light, fights
for the survival of both habitual processes of thought and their attendant
languages. The threatening war was not Star Wars or atomic war, but war
in a world suddenly deprived of its standards of sanity moulded within its
written and spoken languages. (119)

What sort of political community, the novel asks, is possible on this basis?

**Crisis in the Pacific: Addresses from Wellington**

In a Wellington sermon called The True Use of Warnings that was prompted by a
large earthquake in New Zealand on 16 October 1848, Bishop George Selwyn several

times invokes the idea of the **suspension** of the laws of nature and the **unchaining** of the links “by which God binds his creatures.”

The suspension and unchaining are for Selwyn signs of the immanence of God’s Judgment, which for Selwyn is more important than the physical devastation. The damage of even the most powerful and destructive earthquake itself is negligible, for death alone is nothing to fear: “There is no real danger in an earthquake, in a fire, in a storm, in lightning, in a deluge, beyond that . . . of the most trifling wound.”

Nor, according to the rather intriguing analogy to earthquake that Selwyn draws, is it the lesson of political unrest that one should merely “fear the evil of the times”: Preaching in November 1848, in the immediate aftermath of the distant European revolutions, Selwyn compares the convulsions of nature, on the one hand, and of society, on the other. (“In Europe,” he states, “all the laws of social order have been disturbed, and the foundations of the great deep of human society have been broken up”). Earthquake and political instability are evidence alike that “the chain is loosened by which God binds his creatures,” thus that one must fear, not disaster itself, but the “judgment to come.” The earthquake, like the revolution, is a state of exception: “For all these laws to which we trust day by day, perfect and beautiful though they be, may be suspended in a moment.” As such, it signifies that “the day of judgment is at hand.”

Affirming the “Providence of God” through the knowledge that “there are powers in nature, which, if they were once unchained, could destroy mankind in a moment,” Selwyn exhorts his listeners to interpret the earthquake, fire, pestilence, and political

---


5 Ibid., 5-6.

6 Ibid., 9, 8.

7 Ibid., 9.

8 Ibid., 3, 9.
insurrection as admonishments to the faithful to “redeem the time,” that is, “to account for the time which they spend, whether it be used advantageously, or wasted unprofitably.”⁹ If crisis is judgment, judgment is an accounting, a trial of moral beings by God.

For geological reasons, earthquake is a familiar trope of crisis in New Zealand, as Frame herself registers in The Carpathians: “Leaning back in her chair, Mattina gripped the edge of the table as if to steady herself in the shock of an earthquake. . . . Was this how it would be? Was this how any disaster would be, how she would behave when it happened? In a country of earthquakes there was constant talk of disaster, with the earthquakes, the volcanic eruptions, being used to mask other disasters more feared, perhaps more expected” (C, 128). As in Selwyn’s The True Use of Warnings, earthquake triggers associations to “other disasters,” and enters into metaphoric and symbolic webs of meaning, becoming an objective correlative of, say, security crisis in an existential sense.

But the earthquake is also quite simply and terrifyingly a very real, literal, material threat.¹⁰ On 19 October 1987, at precisely the same moment that Frame was completing work on The Carpathians in Auckland, and fourteen odd decades almost to the day after the “Great Earthquake” that provoked Selwyn’s sermon, then Prime Minister David Lange drew attention to this point in the course of outlining for an audience in Hawaii the “comprehensive” (as opposed to purely military-oriented) approach to security being adopted by his government: “[E]vidence shows that the existence of a modern state can be threatened in various ways. In our case the risks of

---

⁹ Ibid., 2, 5.
¹⁰ As of the time of writing, the most recent serious earthquake, which occurred in Christchurch on February 22, 2011, claimed 181 lives.
catastrophic damage from volcanic or seismic activity are substantial.”

Lange, as the voice of authority for his nation, has something in common with Selwyn, who speaks for the (then-) central power of the Church. Moreover, Lange, like Selwyn, connects the point about “seismic” insecurity to the issue of revolutionary turmoil, for he is speaking less than a month after the second coup in Fiji that ended the monarchy: “The events of 14 May and 25 September,” he said in his address, “lend unwelcome support to the decision to shift the focus of our security concerns to the South Pacific.” Finally, as the very invocation of the “decision . . . [on] security concerns” might suggest, Lange like Selwyn registers the fact that the multiple security issues facing the nation--his list includes “natural disaster, military action and economic crisis”--prompt some version of sovereign judgment: “We concluded that a broad approach was needed”; “we announced a set of principles that gave formal expression to that decision”; We decided that, in formulating policies to safeguard our security, we would take account of all matters that could affect the welfare and orderly government of New Zealand”; “the novel element . . . was the decision to treat all possible threats on a common basis”; and so on.

In the modern secular situation, Lange is posing a basic question in his address that is not so far removed from the thrust of Selwyn’s mid nineteenth century sermon: “What does security mean for a small state in the South Pacific?” Appropriate to his position, not to mention his socio-historical context, the Prime Minister regards seismic activity, political or state instability, economic crisis, and so forth, as worldly, non-

---

12 Ibid., 11.
13 Ibid., 6-7.
14 Ibid., 5.
metaphorical threats—threats, moreover, that do pose real danger, that are far from “trifling,” as Selwyn would have said. But as threats, as precipitants to crisis, they call for accounting and decision precisely according to a kind of modern political theology, that which provides a framework within which such threats can be assessed, interpreted, and acted upon.

To state the obvious, neither Janet Frame nor, presumably, almost anyone else would argue that there is anything amiss about such accounting, decision, and action; or that the government ought to do less than to safeguard national security and to protect the welfare and orderly government of New Zealand; or, finally, that it should stop anywhere short of protecting life and assessing damage in the event of emergency from natural disaster, military action, or any other source. Nevertheless, Frame is interested in examining some of the assumptions of this posture—assumptions which, as we know, are potentially realized destructively and unjustly in some situations. She examines these assumptions by imaginatively uncoupling—by unchaining—crisis from judgment. As such, she explores the “disaster of unbeing, unknowing” (C, 129). How that uncoupling or unchaining works is the basic question I address in the remainder of this chapter.

For Selwyn and for Lange, when the “chain is loosened,” judgment power is hyper-activated. For Frame, when the chain is loosened, the framework of judgment is the very thing that is coming apart. This coming apart may give rise to movement or decision of a kind, but only in the sense of passive response. The unraveling of the framework of cognition and judgment in The Carpathians is equivalent to the “unleashing of possibilities and impossibilities” (C, 123, emphasis added)—a potentiality-as-fission that marks a creative ability indissociable from inability:
I, Dinny Wheatstone, author of this imposter record . . . study the primer of possible impossibility, the meaning of the meaningless, as if the Gravity Star . . . obliterates the significant signs and print of the alphabets of all language, leaves a smooth language of nothingness and also of possible impossibility for a new world to walk on, making new footprints, or talk of making with new tongue-prints. (57)

Returning, then, to a concept of potentiality that we have encountered before--namely the concept of undecidability articulated in Derrida’s critique of Schmitt--we could call Wheatstone’s renewal of decisional potential (cognitive awareness) a leap by which an act originates, a leap that in its very origination ceases to follow the outcome of whatever could be resolved by knowledge, arche, or predetermination; a moment of decision that “frees itself . . . by the act of its act.”15

Constitutive inability, straining against determinative judgment, is the factor that accounts for a crucial motif in the second half of The Carpathians, Jake’s incapacity as a writer:

Then recalling the experience of the midnight rain, [Mattina] thought of the small crusted heap of letters and words lying on her table and how, discovering them in the night, she had given her thoughts almost entirely to memories of her past life and Jake’s almost unbelievable struggle to meet the expectations of himself and others by writing his second novel. . . . Her sight of the heap of alphabet letters and punctuation marks had reminded her of Jake sitting in a wealth of millions of words and unable

for so long to grasp more than a handful. (C, 151)

Creative potentiality as Frame understands it—or the imaginative search, to recall the term from Chapter 2 above—could never be actualized as a calculable unfolding, a determination by “science or consciousness.” It is an interruption of action-as-determination: a suspension that brings judgment to a standstill. In the following section, I offer a more detailed reading of the nature of that suspension and its relation to knowledge—or rather, to unknowing—in The Carpathians.

Suddenly a Stranger Enters

Like Melville’s early fiction, The Carpathians is about the figure of the American as a stranger and spectator in the Pacific. Indeed, strangers multiply in Kowhai Street: The Townsends “were strangers too” and perhaps would “always be strangers” (C, 22); Hercus Millow is “almost a stranger” (39); Dinny Wheatstone is “a stranger here” (42). Mattina, Frame’s narrator informs us, “noted that the residents she had met had spoken of themselves as strangers. . . . Perhaps strangers never became at home in Kowhai Street?” (39). At the same time, and here the others in Kowhai Street differ from Mattina, the residents “cherish their street,” and “cling” to their “familiar place,” their “place of being” (16). The “strangers” in Kowhai Street “desperately” attempt to “forge links” in the face of the power of “distance” to “transform . . . feeling and knowing into nothingness” (16).

If the typical resident of Puamahara is a stranger who attempts desperately to reconcile him- or herself to a place of being, a normative universe, there is another type of stranger, the wholly “unknown,” who marks the “boundaries” (C, 16) of the
community by virtue of his or her exclusion. The James’ autistic daughter Decima is a silent figure “on the edge of town,” in the novel’s oft-repeated phrase: “Fifteen,” her mother remarks. “And unknown. That’s the pity. Unknown by herself or anyone” (73, emphases added); “I never realised how important it is to be known and to know’” (73, emphases in original). So there is the stranger who struggles to belong, and there is the stranger who is utterly unknown and unknowable. Mattina, meanwhile, is an intermediary figure between these two. A foreigner on a temporary stay, she is a “stranger” in the sense of a “guest” (20), someone who ought temporarily to belong; but she is also an intruder and, like Decima, a figure of the unknown: “‘Decima has never spoken,” [Gloria James] said, almost directing an accusation against Mattina, the intruder, the unknown” (73, emphases added). Significantly, it is the journey of this intermediary figure to the “edge of town” (113)—to Decima’s territory (or rather threshold)—near the end of Wheatstone’s imposter typescript, that seems most immediately to precipitate the “dimensional overturning and disarray” (119) that characterizes the event of the midnight rain of language. Mattina, then, is the stranger who enters into a normative situation, interrupting its processes and throwing the established yet delicately balanced and precarious system of knowledge into doubt. (In this respect she is heir to Melville’s Delano.)

Mattina suffers a general and “uncontrollable need to know” (C, 105). Her various “desperate searches” and “urgent journeys” (to Nova Scotia, the Bahamas, Hawaii, Portugal, Spain, and now New Zealand) stem from an “urgency” within her which demands “that she ‘know’ how the rest of the world lived” (19). In Puamahara, she meets the various residents of Kowhai Street and becomes involved in their lives, thus
The assuaging her own “urgent need to know the lives of those distant from her” (19, emphasis added). Like Benito Cereno, then, The Carpathians self-consciously addresses the idea of the relief of the cognitive urge, of the need to organize experience and generate knowledge. Mattina Brecon, like Captain Delano, enters into a situation that by virtue of its unfamiliarity and strangeness demands endless interpretation and judgment. In their different ways and different circumstances, both Mattina and Delano—American strangers and visitors far from home—undertake desperate searches for knowledge through determinative judgment—that is, through the organization of intuitions into coherent knowledge through the application of concepts or universals to particular cases. As we have seen, Benito Cereno is a parable of the political implications, above all the implications for a politics of security, of satisfying the cognitive urge through unremitting recourse to determinative judgment. At the same time, Melville’s novella gestures towards the productive possibilities of what I have been calling a rhetorical or aesthetic impact that would interrupt determinative judgment. The Carpathians develops these lines of thought, exploring what would happen if determinative judgment were not merely disrupted but demolished, so that the judge were thrust into a state of radical insecurity: not, as with Delano, a state of not knowing and needing to know, but a state of “unknowing” (C, 129, my emphasis).

**Guilt Narrative**

To unknow, in The Carpathians, is to lose (the security of) perspective. Perspective is always rooted—taking place from some vantage point. At the beginning of the novel, we learn that Kowhai’s residents “cherish their street, [and] cling to their place
of being, their point of view,” depending “for their being on their certainty of place” (C., 16). The security of the “place of being” and “point of view” is what keeps one from “fall[ing] into the darkness at the edge of the earth . . . never [to] be known again” (16).

That security, however, comes at a cost, Frame insists. This point emerges through the novel’s urgently contemporary biopolitical vocabularies of resource management, tourism, consumer capitalism, and psychiatric medicine. The Carpathians, as critics have noted, had a definite topical ring at the time it was published. Part of Frame’s achievement was to respond discerningly to the programme of massive economic reforms initiated by the fourth Labour government in 1984, reforms that saw the swift and radical opening of New Zealand’s very highly protected and regulated economy to international goods and capital markets through the embrace of a U.S.-style liberal market.16

But Frame’s insights go well beyond the immediate context in which she was writing, as demonstrated in the following passage, which records Mattina’s thoughts as she strolls along the main commercial street:

Mattina felt there was an American air, also, in the glittering store displays, the advertising lures; here, the faces of the shoppers reflected more eagerness, a hunger for the ‘goods’--the word that in early American usage meant only the stuff, the material, for clothing. Here, the shoppers stared in the windows as if appraising works of art, things of beauty; the gleam of the ‘goods’ was hypnotic--washing machines draped with blue

and red satin ribbons, other appliances labelled ‘award winning’--for smoothness, freshness, fingertip control. . . . Once into Tyne Street she was again among the windows praising smoothness, freshness, lemon-scentedness, the desire to wash the earth and its contents with instant freshness . . . Now here was . . . ‘Little old Noo Zealand’ trying to wash its and the world’s guilt away in award-winning machines. . . . Puamahara, in Mattina’s opinion, was demeaning itself by trying to adopt the fragrance of elsewhere to conceal the apparent or invisible bloody deeds. (C, 47-48)

Here, the goods, by virtue of the system in which they circulate, are fully implicated in the bloody deeds, yet remain the means of atonement for the guilt produced by those deeds. Frame’s language suggests a spiral whereby redemption in the form of spending--spending that saves, to borrow from Samuel Weber’s analysis of the logic of American consumerism\(^\text{17}\)--atones for but also, crucially, advances or exacerbates the guilt that consumers accumulate through their involvement in the bloody deeds. This involvement occurs in terms of the onward march of extraction, production, and consumption, as well as the appropriation of Maori land--“wells were drilled in the greenest pastures. . . . Mines everywhere. Gold, precious stones in the Coromandel, scheelite up Central, coal on the Coast” (20). And it also occurs as the attempt to maintain a necessary conformity that shunts to the side those, like the autistic Decima James (“in the Manuka Home out of town” [70, emphasis added]), who constitute a threat to conformity and the sovereignty of the moral majority--that is, who constitute what political theorist Patchen Markell

might call a “source of vulnerability, . . . [and] of possible alienation and self-loss.”

What get concealed, finally, are not only the “bloody deeds” themselves, but also the fact that the very process of attempting to redeem this moralized debt only perpetuates the fall--a fortunate fall, however, that demands redemption again at the next turn of the spiral. In Frame’s economic theology, the redemptive work of atonement perpetuates a guilt that demands ongoing if not escalating levels of repayment.

Redemption thus also perpetuates an entire system or doctrine of judgment with its moralized creditor-debtor relation. This system of judgment, in other words, feeds off the very attempt to pay back once and for all the debt incurred through the bloody deeds. As Kowhai Street resident Renée Shannon comments at one point to Mattina, “It’s so nice to be living under the sky. There might be inequality, real poverty, and all those new finance houses where the windows are curtained with dollar notes, and the bankers and foreign exchange dealers wear clothes patterned with polyester dollars . . . but so far we all have our fair share of sky” (63). Whatever may be untenable about the redistribution of wealth in the capitalist economy (an example of “the apparent or invisible bloody deeds”) will be mitigated, Renée believes, by the greater justice of the fair share. But in the phrase fair share, what we should probably hear above all is the implied sequence of measurement, division, and apportioning; the aura of a fantastic tribunal that allots to each his or her due.

In The Carpathians, the doctrine of judgment is encrypted in guilt narrative. In Frame’s invented Maori legend of the Memory Flower in Chapter 1 of the novel, the community experiences a Fall into memory and postlapsarian narrative that goes hand-in-hand with the affirmation, if not the dawn, of causal thinking and rationality:

---

There is a legend of Maharawhenua or Memory Land with its town of Puamahara or Memory Flower. A young woman, chosen by the gods as collector of the memory of the land, journeys to a region between the mountains and the sea to search for the memory; and as in all legends, the helpers, human, animal, insect or vegetable who are themselves guardians of the inner world of searches, make or find time to stand at convenient places--corners, crossroads, shores, boundaries--to offer advice, to warn, to encourage and inform; and many times to demand a sacrifice with no promise of reward. The journey is one of choices, judgments, of logic--if . . . then . . . and also . . . if not . . . therefore; the small words that have little use alone become instruments of power.

The legend describes how the young woman released the memory of the land when she picked and tasted the ripe fruit from a tree growing in the bush: where Eve tasted her and Adam’s tomorrow, the woman of Maharawhenua tasted the yesterday within the tomorrow, and realising that her search was over, she called together the people of the land. For many years with no human function but that of a story-teller, she recounted the memory, and one day when the listeners returned, they found the memory-collector had vanished and in her place a tree grew with one blossom named, then, the Memory Flower from which, it is said, fruit invisible to most eyes from time to time may grow. (C, 11)

The woman of Maharawhenua, undertaking the “search for the memory” and pausing at certain thresholds and points of intersection (“corners, crossroads, shores, boundaries”),
encounters spaces where choices must be made, consequences assessed, and decisions taken, as articulated in the small words of conjunctions and adverbs. On their own, these small words have minimal force, or little use; yet they become instruments of power in the inner world of searches, comprising as they do the language of causal thinking, of anticipation, of means-end thinking, of calculation, and of judgment and choice (“if . . . then . . . and also . . . if not . . . therefore”).

Within the linguistic structure of choice, judgment, and logic (thinking in general as well as the art of reasoning), memory becomes a kind of enabled latency or virtuality. Memory, as Frame’s reference to Genesis 3 implies, stands for a moralized indebtedness (to the past, to tradition, to the community ancestors). Narrative encodes guilt; guilt is perpetuated by narrative, by the “story-teller.”19 In short, communal memory and genealogy are transmitted in postlapsarian narrative form, with the woman who “picked and tasted the ripe fruit” becoming the “story-teller” who “recounted the memory.”

Presumably unbeknownst to the modern residents of Puamahara, collective indebtedness structures their community: “[A]lmost as a reinforcement of the legend, Maharawhenua and Puamahara are natural horticultural areas where the fertility of the soil is fed by the crushed bones of vanished rivers and the blood of former generations” (C, 12, emphasis added). Modern-day Puamahara blindly activates the indebtedness coded in the narrative of Maharawhenua:

In Puamahara the legend of the Memory Flower, rediscovered and reinforced by the Tourist Centre, became the town’s treasure. Cities, many

knew, have thrived more on their legends than on their gold, oil, gemstones. At the entrance to a city’s harbour, a statue depicting a loved story will entice more tourists than a street of wealthy merchants. The legend of Puamahara and Maharawhenua was seized, retold, enhanced, illustrated. A plaster sculpture of a tree with one large blossom suspended from the topmost branch was hastily erected at the entrance to the orchards on the edge of town. Puamahara, the Memory Flower. (12)

The legend becomes a kind of credit on which Puamahara may capitalize through a series of retellings; the legend is there to be seized and retold in a piling-up of treasure: It amounts to the “sudden possession of a tale arranged to entice tourists and to make more money for Puamahara” (14, emphasis added). Narrative—-the “legend” or “tale”—is the object of an exchange, or rather an appropriation, in which a particular cultural debt is put to work to literally turn a profit.

In The Carpathians, then, the “Place of Judges,” to borrow Vincent O’Sullivan’s metaphor again (see the epigraph to Chapter 2 above), as a regime of calculation and account-making, is a narratocratic space; and the “zombie-speech of convention” (a homogenizing capitalist discourse), is a narratocratic language. And in Frame’s imagination, the regime of calculation disintegrates precisely in tandem with the unravelling or de-formation of the narrative line. The Carpathians never, of course, entirely relinquishes narrative mode. I am not arguing that the novel is able to “have

20 Chris Prentice, in “Janet Frame’s Radical Thought: Symbolic Exchange and Seduction in Living in the Maniototo and The Carpathians,” in Frameworks: Contemporary Criticism on Janet Frame, ed. Jan Cronin and Simone Drichel, Cross/Cultures 110 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), 155-80, picks up on Jean Baudrillard’s notion of “reversibility” to argue that Frame’s novels “continually ‘reverse’—undo, dissolve—the characters, settings, and narrative episodes that figure them forth” and thus “challenge the reader/the social world from a space of alterity to signification and discourse” (156).
done” with narrative. My more modest claim is that Frame’s novel gestures towards the de-formation of narrative structure in various paradoxical figures of disfiguration, as at the opening—and indeed throughout—the episode of the midnight catastrophe: “If I were writing this story, Mattina thought, the words might have begun already to burn, and though still legible they would sink into the flames as if they desired their own oblivion” (C, 125). Frame furthermore breaks the integrity of narrative cohesion by overlapping the third person heterodiegetic narrative voice with Wheatstone’s imposter typescript, as noted above, and by revealing both of these at the end (that is, both the typescript and the narrative as a whole) to have been an invention of “John Henry Brecon,” Mattina’s son: “And perhaps the town of Puamahara, which I in my turn visited, never existed?” John Henry writes in his concluding remarks (196).

Wheatstone’s manuscript, which occupies part two of the novel, appears in tone, narrative chronology, and perspective simply to be a continuation of the heterodiegetic narrative, except that Wheatstone’s own first person voice of madness (she is “a bit funny peculiar” [C, 40] as Hercus Millow says; “She’s crazy” [44], Mattina thinks after meeting her for the first time) repeatedly erupts parenthetically into the text, as in a key passage cited above: “(I, Dinny Wheatstone, author of this imposter record . . . study the primer of possible impossibility. . . .)” (57). The “imposter record” as a whole is itself a narrative, or a portion of a narrative. But it is a portion which destabilizes narrative’s own capacity for the Panagian “work of conviction,” narrative’s capacity to render the event “at once visible and available for accountability.” And it achieves this destabilization by interrupting the system of representation. Like the “instant third person” passage in An Angel at My Table, Wheatstone’s parentheses function as Benjaminian interruptions
detrimental to the illusion of naturalistic representation. They also indicate the intrusion of the strange and the unknown; of the singular, even revolutionary, voice of madness; and thus anticipate the Gravity Star’s “work of transforming being, thought, language” (125).

These disfigurations of the narrative line interrupt a system of guilt and redemption, of credit and debt, a system that is also, as we have begun to see, a system of judgment--indeed the system of judgment qua the determinative variety. One question worth answering in further detail, then, is precisely why the creditor-debtor relation is an apt figure for the ground of determinative judgment. In the following section, I propose an approach to this question by turning to a text by Nietzsche written almost exactly a hundred years before The Carpathians, a work which, like Frame’s novel, offers a revaluation of taken-for-granted values and a critique of the power and labour of value judgment.

**Debt, Calculability, and the Doctrine of Judgment**

We may find our way to Nietzsche’s text by noting that to the degree that The Carpathians declares the epoch of capitalism as the epoch of universal or global indebtedness, troped as guilt, the novel finds a striking precursor in Walter Benjamin’s posthumously published fragment of 1921, “Capitalism as Religion,” which claims that the permanent cult of capitalism--celebrated endlessly as a series of feast days “without truce or mercy”--is the first instance of a cult to produce not atonement but guilt, a guilt so universal that it draws God into the burden of it and precludes any reformation or
Benjamin is drawing in his fragment on what he calls the “demonic ambiguity” on which Nietzsche’s argument turns in the Second Essay of the *Genealogy of Morals* (1887)—namely that the German *Schuld* means debt as well as guilt (the “major moral concept *Schuld* [guilt] has its origin in the very material concept *Schulden* [debt],” Nietzsche famously declares). The Second Essay concerns the question of how guilt and bad conscience originated. To put Nietzsche’s elaborate theory in succinct terms, the “prehistoric” notion of economic debt (the “contractual relationship between creditor and debtor, which is as old as the idea of ‘legal subjects’ and in turn points back to the fundamental forms of buying, selling, barter, trade, and traffic” [499], as Nietzsche claims), eventually gets “moralized” into guilt, a process that culminates with the idea of indebtedness to the Christian deity. Guilty conscience arrives, Nietzsche argues, when this moralized and infinite debt to the deity gets internalized as an ultimate and exquisite form of self-torture. Benjamin, we could say, brings Nietzsche full circle: The progression from (material) debt to (moral) guilt culminates in debt-as-guilt and guilt-as-debt under the universal regime of the econo-religion Capitalism. For Benjamin, moral guilt finds its fullest expression in the economic system of total, perpetual debt that is

---


In the images of the “glittering store displays, the advertising lures,” and the “hypnotic” “gleam of the ’goods’” that will “wash” the “world’s guilt away,” Frame registers the notion of what Benjamin describes as a “purely cultic religion” in which “[t]here is no day that is not a feast day, in the terrible sense that all its sacred pomp is unfolded before us,” commanding “the utter fealty of each worshipper” (“CR,” 288). The notion that New Zealand is “trying to adopt the fragrance of elsewhere to conceal the apparent or invisible bloody deeds” resonates with Benjamin’s claim that the “cult” of capitalism “makes guilt pervasive”: “A vast sense of guilt that is unable to find relief seizes on the cult, not to atone for this guilt but to make it universal” (ibid.).


---
Capitalism, itself a “parasite of Christianity in the West” (“CR,” 289). The twofold point here is, first, that The Carpathians, as we have already seen, constructs the speech of convention as an econo-theological discourse; and second, that this discourse, with its structural creditor-debtor relation, may be construed, in figural terms at least, not merely as one system of judgment among others but as the very condition of judgment per se. Nietzsche helps us to articulate this latter point. It was Nietzsche in the Genealogy of Morals, argues Gilles Deleuze, “who was able to lay bare the condition of judgment: ‘the consciousness of being in debt to the deity,’ the adventure of debt as it becomes infinite and thus unpayable. Man does not appeal to judgment, he judges and is judgable only to the extent that his existence is subject to an infinite debt.”

Let us examine this point more closely. Nietzsche writes,

the feeling of guilt, of personal obligation, had its origin . . . in the oldest and most primitive personal relationship, that between buyer and seller, creditor and debtor: it was here that one person first encountered another person, that one person first measured himself against another. (506,

---

23 Debt is surely an indispensible, inevitable component of almost any economic system. But in the capitalist age, debt reigns supreme, from the “heavier and heavier mass of debts which weighs on the following generation,” as the romantic-conservative, strongly anticapitalist Adam Müller put it in 1816 (quoted in Löwv, “Capitalism as Religion,” 65), to what appears as the culmination of debt capitalism in the contemporary system of commoditized credit and speculative debt, in which, for example, an investor may purchase debt with further debt raised by posting as collateral the very debt being purchased in the first place. In the modern, abstracted global economy, as Brett Neilson puts it in “The Magic of Debt, or, Amortize This!,” Eurozine, http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-09-20-neilson-en.html, debt is an absolute structural necessity. See also Rick Wolff, “Personal Debts and U.S. Capitalism,” Monthly Reviewing, http://www.monthlyreview.org/nurzine/wolff151005.html.

24 It may be significant here that Frame’s personal memories of the Great Depression--an economic crisis that in essence grew out of chain of insolvencies in a situation of deflation and massive overindebtedness--would inevitably be associated with the intense Christadelphian preoccupation with Judgment Day. As Michael King observes, Frame’s Christadelphian mother Lottie “sought meaning in [that] present-day catastroph[e]” by “relating [it] to the revelations in the New Testament which prefigured the Second Coming of Christ and the Day of Judgement” (Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame [Auckland, New Zealand and Harmondsworth, UK: Viking / Penguin Books, 2000], 21-22, quotation on 21).

emphasis in original)

In what remains an imaginatively suggestive hypothesis, however dubious it may be from a purely anthropological perspective, Nietzsche argues that this “primitive personal relationship” marks the very opening-up of cognitive judgment: “Settling prices, determining values, contriving equivalences, exchanging--these preoccupied the earliest thinking of man to so great an extent that in a certain sense they constitute thinking as such” (506, emphasis in original). Exchange and contract produce the custom of “comparing, measuring, and calculating power against power. The eye was now focused on this perspective” (506, emphasis added).

The finite material debts accrued under this more limited gaze may be acquitted. But with the invention of an infinite, unpayable debt toward divinity--above all the Christian deity--the power of comparing, measuring, and calculating for the purposes of limited contracts is extended, as it were cosmologically and theologically, into a total system of judgment. To briefly review the key stages as Nietzsche conceives of them: First, the “civil-law relationship between the debtor and his creditor” transfers to the “relationship between the present generation and its ancestors” (GM II, 524); the “conviction reigns that it is only through the sacrifices and accomplishments of the ancestors that the tribe exists--and that one has to pay them back. . . . [O]ne thus recognizes a debt that constantly grows greater” (524-25, emphases in original). (These formulations provide a good context for understanding “guilt narrative,” as I have called it, in Frame’s legend of Maharawhenua.) Then, as the power of the tribe increases, the ancestors “are bound eventually to grow to monstrous dimensions . . . [and] in the end the ancestor must necessarily be transfigured into a god” (525, emphasis in original). Finally,
the “advent of the Christian God, as the maximum god attained so far, was therefore accompanied by the maximum feeling of guilty indebtedness on earth” (526). Under a debt that can never be fully paid, the final judgment is deferred endlessly; and it is this postponement that makes judgment a total doctrine, a perpetual practice. “The condition of judgment,” Deleuze concludes, “lies in a supposed relation between existence and the infinite in the order of time. The power to judge and to be judged is given to whomever stands in this relation.”26

This last point suggests how the transcendent principle of judgment implied in the cosmic debtor-creditor relation may be appropriated by the self-assumed guardians of a given order. Such a fantasy of transferred power, as it were, is actually to be found in some of the popular religious discourses circulating in the New Zealand of Frame’s youth. For example, in a sermon printed in Auckland in the 1920s called The Judgment, Irish evangelist William P. Nicholson claims that “if ultimate judgment is the future judgment [of God], still there is judgment going on right now.” As in the Nietzsche-Deleuze line of thinking, judgment stems from the transcendent plane, and is also taken over in the workaday world: “We have our various courts and judges and law officers. Why? Because we demand judgment or justice. . . . It is in us, that ‘something’ that cries out for judgment. Where did we get that? We got it from the One who created us.”27 In The Carpathians, the “power to judge and to be judged is given,” one way or another, to the residents of Kowhai Street. In their collective capacity, they uphold what Nietzsche might have called the “pledge” of normative rule: “[T]he community . . . stands to its members in that same vital basic relation, that of the creditor to his debtors. One lives in a

26 Deleuze, “To Have Done with Judgment,” 127.
community, one enjoys the advantages of a communality, . . . one dwells protected, cared for. . . . What will happen if this pledge is broken? The community, the disappointed creditor, will get what repayment it can” (GM II, 507). Thus, while the residents of Puamahara who form the moral majority appear to be the debtors and sinners (the “judged” seeking redemption, trying to “wash” their own and “the world’s guilt away”), they also, we recall, conceal the bloody deeds of their ongoing Fall precisely by imposing upon and containing alterity, by securing conformity in their “fully manufactured, precast phrases and sentences,” by pushing the misfits and the odd (those who do not measure up) out to the margins, to the institutions on the edge of town. To secure the place of being means to police the borders of the community, the homeland and its economy, or the oikos; and to expel or control whatever poses a threat to conformity and regularity.

Such threats include, for example, Decima James and also the young murderer from the Manuka Home. The latter robs and kills a terminal cancer patient and Kowhai Street resident, the “penultimate Madge,” just as Mattina arrives in Puamahara. The murderer poses a threat to point of view (“The penultimate Madge, being dead, has no point of view . . . the self that spoke, explained, described” [C, 27, 32]); Madge’s perspective has been robbed by “the eighteen-year-old man (on leave from the Manuka Home) who burgled her house and murdered her” [27]). The residents manage to assimilate this threat to selfhood, so that the “turmoil surrounding the murder gradually lessened as the town concentrated on the murderer ‘with a mental history’, his capture tempered with compassion but serving a gourmet helping of We knew it, We always knew it, We warned them, Something has to be done in future to protect us from him and others like him” (57). The security praxis of judgment as self-righteous condemnation
takes form in the choric repetition of the known (“We knew it, We always knew it”), and in what the novel elsewhere calls the “powerful small words hunting in twos or threes” (42), words “fully manufactured in precast phrases and sentences” (53) (again, “We knew it, We always knew it, We warned them”).

**Sovereignty, Judgment by Proxy, and the Rupture of the Doctrine of Judgment**

This frenetic securing of the place of being through evaluative, censuring, adverse judgment is clearly a combined attempt at mastery and warding-off of vulnerability. But if the securing of the place of being is thus tied to a fantasy of sovereignty, it is still the case that this very attempt at mastery implies the surrender of the Framean subject to precast language--to zombie-speech. The question remains as to how and why, in *The Carpathians*, the cognitive subject oscillates like so between sovereign agency and surrender, why this subject’s supremacy or ascendancy entails conformism and submission. To offer one approach to this question, I want to return once more to the *Genealogy of Morals* and in particular its deconstruction of the fantasy of sovereign mastership, a key part of Nietzsche’s larger critique, in the work as a whole, of seemingly self-evident moral prescriptions and his so-called “revaluation of all values.”

Early in the Second Essay, Nietzsche presents his well known theory of the sovereign individual. The sovereign individual is the one with the “right to make promises,” who believes him- or herself free and autonomous, “like only to himself, liberated . . . from morality of custom, . . . [with an] independent, protracted will,” but who, even to claim such autonomy, “must first of all have become calculable, regular, necessary, even in his own image of himself, [so as] to be able to stand security for his
own future, which is what one who promises does” (GM II, 495, 494, emphases in original). The sovereign individual appears to be “supramoral” (GM II, 495), but only to the degree that he (Nietzsche’s masculine pronoun) is predictable (otherwise he would not be able to bear the “responsibility . . . [of] the right to make promises” [494], would not be able to “stand security for his own future”). And he is predictable, his behaviour is calculable, only to the degree that he has been shaped and conditioned by a very particular power: the “morality of mores and the social straitjacket” (495).

In the sovereign individual, “society and the morality of custom at last reveal what they have simply been the means to” (GM II, 495, emphasis in original). Any notion, therefore, that the sovereign individual’s mastery implies real autonomy or the power of autonomous choice, is erroneous. He is simply the “ripest fruit” of the “tremendous process” of this “morality of mores,” merely the perfect example of a certain “breed” of “animal” (494-5). As David Owen explains, “the freedom enjoyed and exemplified by the sovereign individual is only available to persons who . . . have internalized the norms constitutive of the social practices and institutions in and through which they act.”

In short, calculability achieved through pregiven norms paradoxically grounds the mastery of the so-called sovereign individual.

To the extent that the sovereign individual is, in his or her extended cognitive development, the sovereign judge, Nietzsche presents a figure of what we have called the proxy judge. This judge’s eye, in Nietzsche’s image, is focused on a certain perspective, producing the gaze that oversees and measures and weighs the “third person,” like the measuring eye of the inspector or the biographer, and that renders this third person “visible and available for accountability” according to preset “norms for appraisal” (to

28 David Owen, Nietzsche’s “Genealogy of Morality” (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2007), 101.
repeat Panagia’s terms). But this focus derives precisely from a habit of “comparing, measuring, and calculating power against power,” a habit that has conditioned the viewer, that has made him or her, in effect, a synecdoche of the calculable and the regular, of the morality of mores and the social straightjacket, a synecdoche of what in Chapter 3 above we called the universalist criteria, the archai or principles that ground determinative judgments.

The significance of this paradoxical relation between sovereignty and calculability is that to somehow dismantle the calculable and the regular would mean to halt the ever-escalating drive toward sovereignty’s “ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership,” to borrow Hannah Arendt’s definition. Since it is “not one man, but men” who “inhabit the earth,” “[n]o man can be sovereign,” Arendt writes; hence, to ward off vulnerability and otherness--Arendt calls this the “attempt to overcome the condition of non-sovereignty” and to “overcome the consequences of plurality”--leads not to “sovereign domination of one’s self” but to “arbitrary domination of all others” (in Frames idiom, the “bloody deeds”).

Nietzsche’s sovereign individual is the one who has the right to “ordain the future in advance,” for which purpose “man must first have learned to distinguish necessary events from chance ones, to think causally . . . to decide with certainty what is the goal and what the means to it, and in general be able to calculate and compute” (GM II, 494). To loosen the bind of sovereign domination (to unchain it) and walk out of the jurisdiction of the sovereign tribunal will mean to blur necessity and chance, to trouble means-end thinking, and to undo mechanisms of calculation and computation in an embrace of difference, contingency, and openness to the unknown and the unforeseen.

---

In fact, Frame’s Kowhai Street residents are always on the brink of this undoing. As readers know, the satire that is *The Carpathians*, though indeed a satire, does not simply slide into caricature, and if the residents utter the zombie-speech of convention from the Place of Judges, they are also complex, tormented figures: One thinks of the Townsends’ nostalgia for the Midlands and how “distance bring[s] such weight of longing to their lives” (C, 22); or of the Hanuere’s cultural dislocation (26); or of Madge’s speaking the “language of another age” (30); or Hercus Millow’s memories of suffering in the Second World War (64-9); or Gloria James’s anguish over Decima (73); and so on.

And if the residents secure their place of being by crediting the fiction of a ground on which they may seize the point of view, this very movement also begins to reveal certain faultlines and fragilities, so that the vulnerability the residents had been attempting to eradicate begins to break through:

Slightly alarmed, seizing the point of view, Dorothy wondered, Are we quite happy, thank you? The country awaited further discoveries of oil, to make itself independent; wells were drilled in the greenest pastures while the grazing Herefords looked on, licking their flanks, rolling their honey-filled eyes. Mines everywhere. Gold, precious stones in the Coromandel, scheelite up Central, coal on the Coast, while the memory-mines remained overgrown, inaccessible to all but those able to mine centuries of time; and those who at least tried, tearing at the undergrowth and the overgrowth with a desperation that drew blood from themselves and the surface of their own limited memory. . . . And this is me, my point of view? Dorothy
wondered. (C, 20)

In this implied parallel between the seizing of point of view and the seizing or stockpiling of resources, Frame suggests that cognitive determination is a “setting-in-order” in Heidegger’s sense, a mode of representational thinking whereby the subject constitutes itself as sovereign in relation to its objects in an ever-spiralling attempt at empowerment and mastery.\(^\text{30}\) We might call this the art of judgment as the culmination of metaphysics. Dorothy’s is the Nietzschean “eye . . . focused on [the] perspective” of “comparing” and “measuring” and “evaluating”—the eye of the “creature that measures values, evaluates and measures,” of the “‘valuating animal as such’” (GM II, 506).

But the remoteness or limitation of memory and Dorothy’s own hesitation (“And is this me, my point of view?”) begin to suggest a rupture in this entire economy of judgment, and the possibility of a caesura that would throw into relief how the appropriation of point of view—of the “self that spoke, explained, described”—generates a fiction of presence that covers up the “truth of disbelief, of deception of being, of self . . . of all time and space.” For in the logic of the novel, each resident of Kowhai Street is “nothing and no one.” Putative mastery and self-presence, together with the comforts and pieties of life in Puamahara, it turns out, only thinly overlay a terror at this fundamental insubstantiability. Thus, as we have seen, the residents of Kowhai Street desperately “cling to their place of being, their point of view. . . . [depending] for their being on their certainty of place” (C, 16). When the security of place is ruptured by the intrusion of the strange into the knowable and known (breaking the security or certainty of “We knew it, We always knew it”), then the work of determining values and contriving equivalences,

to use Nietzsche’s terms, begins to disintegrate along with “thinking as such.”

_The Carpathians_ is about what happens when authoritative knowledge, preorganized rules of evaluation, and normative conditions are all undone upon the sudden intrusion of the stranger and the intrusion of the unknown into the known situation, or, if one likes, upon the consequent generation of a cognitive crisis. Frame imagines this scenario specifically as a crisis of _security_, as we have already seen:

The threatening war was not Star Wars or atomic war, but war in a world suddenly deprived of its standards of sanity moulded within its written and spoken languages. . . .

There was little to be done. . . . A helplessness would encompass the peoples of the world as if a great fire (starting here in Puamahara, the home of the Memory Flower) were to spread throughout the language (and language reinforces memory, rebuilds its weakened foundations), leaving the earth littered with the ashes of words, of letters, phrases, loved and unloved in all languages. . . . (C, 119)

In its figure of atomic war—“the earth littered with the ashes of words, of letters, phrases”—this passage belongs to the genre of apocalypse. And at the heart of the novel is the surrealistic midnight terror of the rain of language, when all the world’s alphabets and semiotic systems temporarily materialize, disintegrate, and tumble down on Kowhai Street in the form of jewels, seeds, and dung. The transformation spares no resident except Mattina and the imposter novelist Wheatstone, who, as noted above, alone maintain a traditional point of view or perspective in this unusual situation. All others are plunged onto “the other side of the barrier of knowing and being” (129).
This catastrophe is beyond crisis, because no judgment is adequate to it. Instead, it extends to the stage of a complete reversal and the overturning of an entire cognitive discourse, first of all through the destruction of the mechanisms of calculation and perception as the Gravity Star (Frame’s astrophysical metaphor) bears its “overwhelming unacceptable fund of new knowledge from millions of light-years and centuries of springtime” (C, 125). Thus, for example, “there was an apparent failure of the concept of distance to become reality” (127). The eye, we might say, is focused in no perspective, as such: No work of “comparing, measuring, and calculating power against power” can be performed. Near and far, now and then change places ceaselessly. Language and cognition are demolished in a discomfiting vision of ruin and rebirth that leaves the residents screaming in inarticulate terror and pain. The Carpathians, in short, imagines what it would mean to have done with cognitive and determinative modes of judgment.

Yet from the “succession of horrifying human cries” there emerges a “hint” of the reinstitution of a new “order”: “Mattina realized that no part of the chorus had words of any recognisable language; yet within and beyond the chorus, there came a hint, an inkling of order, a small strain recognisable as music, not a replacement of what had been lost but a new music” (C, 126). Signification of particulars halts in the revelation of signification itself, tantamount to a ruination of language that creates new, hitherto unthinkable possibilities in its immanence: “[And yet] Mattina wondered what might happen if by morning all the world’s words had fallen upon every corner of the world, if everyone had been transformed into a similar state of unbeing and unknowing, if a universal process of new knowing, new thinking and feeling, and a new language might then fall, transforming life on earth to a new stage, unknowable yet” (129). The “prospect
of total change” is, we recall, not merely “calamitous but liberating” (119, emphasis added). The apocalyptic midnight rain of language is destructive and bewildering (a “midnight terror,” a “disaster” [128]), but also affirmative and creative (heralding a “new stage, unknowable yet,” signifying a “new language” [129]).

The midnight rain of language is symbolic of the breakdown of the “regimes of perception that structure one’s appraisals,”31 to cite Panagia’s terms again. The advent of the Gravity Star, as the narrator states near the beginning of the novel, will involve the “prospect of the sudden annihilation of the usual perception of distance and closeness, the bursting of the iron bands that once made rigid the container of knowledge, the trickling away of the perception of time and space” (C, 14). This figure of the container of knowledge suggests an ordering principle that might be likened to archival labour in the sense that Derrida puts forth in his address “Archive Fever.” The archive, Derrida observes, is a “gathering together” symbolic both of origin and of order, “commencement” and “commandment” (arche).32 At the heart of the archive, then, or of any established system of knowledge under which the particular (the singular object) may be subsumed and ordered--at the heart of the “rigid container of knowledge”--is what Ernesto Grassi, to repeat from a passage cited in Chapter 3 above, identifies as the “first archai [ultimate principles] of any proof and hence of knowledge,” which, precisely as “original,” are “evangelic,” inaccessible to rational proof: The arche is “immediately a ‘showing,’” an instance of “figurative” or “imaginative” speech.33 In The Carpathians,

“although at first the shape [of the container of knowledge] persists as if still bound, yet if you examine it you see the widening crevices in what was believed always to be the foundation of perception” (C, 14). The foundation of knowledge founders, and yet there is the “inkling of order, a small strain recognisable as music, not a replacement of what had been lost but a new music”—a new arche (order) formed out of what is in the purest sense archaic language (language of figures and images).

Not surprisingly, then, the reconstruction of order would be entrusted to “Poets who[, living] in unimaginable reality,” have “always known of the Gravity Star. . . . Ordinary perceptions are denied, overturned, the mind is thrust into a channel of the formerly unknowable because then unimaginable” (C, 12). Frame’s implied argument is that the reshaping of concepts and conceptions, the work of repair to an inadequate system of knowledge, is fundamentally a rhetorical and aesthetic task.\(^{34}\) In the wake of the disaster comes the imaginative search of the poets: “[T]he work of the artists must be . . . to build the imaginative density which would reach into and clothe the naked reality, restore the dimensions destroyed by the extraordinary events and discoveries within an ordinary town and country” (104).

* * *

\(^{34}\) I am borrowing this notion of “repair” to the conceptual framework from Samuel Fleischacker’s discussion of aesthetic judgment in A Third Concept of Liberty: Judgment and Freedom in Kant and Adam Smith (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). Fleischacker theorizes the moment “when our experience bucks our [conceptual] frameworks, when we have to repair a framework or start again” (25). This moment calls for aesthetic or reflective judgment, the judgment of particulars ungrounded from normative concepts: “What we do in reflective judgment is reinterpret an object that we feel we have hitherto insufficiently or inaccurately conceptualized. We open up conceptual applications that we previously took to determine the object; we shift the object into a different set of intellectual boundaries. We may also, thereby, shift the boundaries of our intellectual sets, our concepts, themselves” (27).
However literally impossible—and undesirable—the overturning contemplated in *The Carpathians*, the “work of the artists” is, of course, an everyday reality. The brief point on which I wish to close is that Frame’s own working conditions as an artist might be interpreted as constituting a more pragmatically-oriented critical relationship to the discourses she is challenging in *The Carpathians*. My example is the rhetoric of debt capitalism we encountered earlier in this chapter, and Frame’s conscious push against it through her involvement in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the same kind of artists’ working communities as the Frank Sargeson Centre in Auckland where she wrote *The Carpathians* itself on a fellowship in 1987.

What Frame saw as the homogenizing discourse of the market economy was often a source of personal annoyance for her. In public and private letters of the late 1960s, she vents her frustration with what she considered an incessant national economic chatter that was only increasing in volume with the push at that time to diversify agricultural product markets as Britain prepared to join the European Economic Community: “I’m tired,” she writes, “of New Zealand and its talk of overseas exchange and trade and sheep sheep sheep”; “Our country with its small population has an unequalled opportunity to practise being human instead of identifying itself always with its larger population of sheep and aspiring to Sheepity and Sheephood rather than to humanity.”

In the circumstance, Frame sought temporary refuge in America, returning in 1969 to the artists’ colony Yaddo in New York State (where, as noted in Chapter 2 above, she worked on *Intensive Care*). Yaddo, then as now, bore a peculiar relation to major aspects of the system Frame was trying to escape. Like capitalist credit money, the fellowship money awarded to the artist functions as a temporal force for the creation of

35 Quoted in King, *Wrestling with the Angel*, 333.
future imaginary values. This particular donation is therefore of a piece with the system of credit, debt, and financial speculation to which it otherwise seems to be at a tangent. And yet at the same time the artists’ colony carves out an alternative economy, for while the donation behaves like the productive potential of interest-bearing capital, nevertheless, one of its salient traits is that the value it is meant to help create is not supposed to be a return with surplus on the investment, nor is it meant to be calculable and regular, comparable and measurable. The donation does not enter into the fortunes of capital gains and losses; it is not expected to provide a return in that sense. In short, it is not a debt that turns a more or less calculable profit.

The artists’ colony is a material correlative to the exits, gaps, and overturnings that Frame would seek in the complex language of The Carpathians. Her removal to Yaddo is a walkout of sorts. Finding the import of the rhetoric all around her intolerable, she in effect says to her compatriots: “Will you excuse me a moment please?” We can imagine them responding, “Certainly, Miss Frame,” before she goes on her way.
Chapter 5
Security War and Executive Decision in Billy Budd, Sailor*

Hans Morgenthau [sic]: What are you? Are you a conservative? Are you a liberal? Where is your position within the contemporary possibilities?

[Hannah] Arendt: I don’t know. I really don’t know and I’ve never known. And I suppose I never had any such position. You know the left think that I am a conservative, and the conservatives sometimes think I am left or I am a maverick or God knows what. And I must say I couldn’t care less. I don’t think that the real questions of this century will get any kind of illumination by this kind of thing.¹

My fundamental argument so far has been that Herman Melville and Janet Frame critique the operation of subjective decisionism in the security emergency situation, and that they explore the possibility of opening up alternatives. In the present and final chapter, which consists of a reading of Melville’s Billy Budd, Sailor, a number of the themes we have been tracking in relation to this argument will reappear, above all the concept of potentiality; the notion of preemptive or preventive violence and the praxis of targeting; and the idea of the blurring of sovereignty and submission in the moment of the executive decision on the emergency. The reading of Billy Budd adds to this argument and to these themes by addressing the role of the discourse of natural law in Melville’s


critique, particularly as this discourse relates to the era of revolutions. And the theme of the era of revolutions, in turn, makes for a fitting conclusion to this dissertation. (Part of the background to the discussion of *Benito Cereno*, the revolutionary wars come to the fore with the discussion of *Billy Budd*, Melville’s most sustained and detailed engagement with their historiography.) As the very era that witnesses the opening of modern Western political life, the era of revolutions can be seen to have ushered in the most recognizably modern version of the whole problem of how judgment functions in the security emergency.

**Revolution and Counterrevolution**

Near the beginning of *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, the great moral parable and political allegory left unfinished at Melville’s death in 1891, the naive and good-hearted merchant sailor Billy Budd, a so-called “Handsome Sailor” whose one “imperfection” is a liability to stutter under the stress of “sudden provocation,” is pressed into service aboard the *Bellipotent*, a massive warship fighting against the fleet of the French Directory in the summer of 1797 under the command of the strict but upright Captain Edward Vere. Anxiety is elevated and discipline harsh aboard the ship, for it is just a few months since the mutinies of the Spithead and the Nore. Though Billy is generally very well liked in the service, for mysterious reasons he arouses antipathy in the *Bellipotent*’s master-at-arms, John Claggart, who proceeds to “lay little traps” for Billy, including sending an afterguardsman one night to provoke him with whispers of mutiny. At length Claggart lays before Vere a false accusation of Billy’s suspicious behaviour and intention to mutiny. When Vere arranges for Claggart to repeat the
accusation to Billy’s face, a tongue-tied Billy unintentionally kills the master-at-arms with a blow to the head that substitutes for the utterance he cannot make. Cognizant of the potential for rebellion among the crew, Vere coerces his drumhead court into delivering a guilty verdict and sentence of execution. Despite everyone’s compassion for the fundamentally loyal Billy Budd, the latter, exclaiming “God bless Captain Vere!” at the penultimate moment, is hanged at dawn.

It would never be possible to determine once and for all whether Billy Budd, Sailor sympathizes more with the commencement and expansion of radical reform in the name of the revolutionary rights of man, or with its containment; whether the novella is finally Melville’s “testament of resistance” or “testament of acceptance.”

Much as Billy Budd himself is at once the embodiment of British loyalism (upon his “forced enlistment,” he “with . . . loyalty makes no dissent”) and also the exemplary figure or “jewel” of the Rights-of-Man, so the novella as a whole seems to stand on both sides of the opposition between anti-radical or “old” Whig ideology and French revolutionary

---

theory that Melville reconstructs, an opposition alluded to in the narrator’s well known reference to Edmund Burke (anti-radical defence of the achievements of the Glorious Revolution) and Thomas Paine (defence of the natural rights theory of political authority): “The hardheaded Dundee owner [of the Rights-of-Man] was a staunch admirer of Thomas Paine, whose book in rejoinder to Burke’s arraignment of the French Revolution had then been published for some time and had gone everywhere.” Melville at once sympathizes with and closely interrogates both of his most direct political intertexts. Setting the novella in the immediate aftermath of the Nore mutiny, he also draws out the implications of the British debate from the perspective of 1797 and the unleashing and harsh repression of revolutionary terror, employing the mutiny as a trope for radicalism (“the enemy’s red meteor of unbridled and unbounded revolt” [BB, 54], as Melville’s narrator puts it) and the reaction as a trope for authoritarian repression (“Final suppression, however, there was” [BB, 55]).

But if, in the novella, monarchical authority repeatedly wins out over popular uprising, Melville’s concern is clearly with the ways in which the currents of revolution and counterrevolution, popular sovereignty and authoritarian order, the violence of radical liberty and the terror of repression, together flow into the broadly-speaking “Western” political culture in which, and indeed away from which, he had spent a lifetime in the middle to late nineteenth century traveling and reading, thinking, and writing. Billy Budd is finally less the story of the vindication of one side or the other of a given political antagonism than an “inside narrative” of the opening of what would be the era of modern democracy, human rights, and an evolving monarchical mode of

---

government--as well as total war, modern political terror, and the modern security state.

**Modern Political Revolution as Security War**

The civilian Billy Budd, then, enters the King’s service, “having been impressed on the Narrow Seas from a homeward-bound English merchantman into a seventy-four outward bound, H.M.S. *Bellipotent* (BB, 44-45). To correct a deficiency in its own “proper complement of men,” the military vessel seizes the opportunity of this encounter with the merchant ship Rights-of-Man. The *Bellipotent*’s Lieutentant Ratcliffe presses into service his own “first spontaneous choice,” the “jewel” (45, 46) of the Rights-of-Man, upon whom he “pounced, even before the merchantman’s crew was formally mustered on the quarter-deck for his deliberate inspection” (45). In order to pounce, one must first identify and take aim at—in short, target—a given object. At different points in *Billy Budd* certain figures, each representative of larger forces that might be said to be operating in the theatre of the “great prolonged wars of [the] time” (46) that forms the backdrop of the novella, take aim, finally deadly aim, at Billy Budd: Ratcliffe (the war effort), Claggart and his corporals (the internal police), Vere and the drumhead court (sovereign power). From his impressment through his arraignment and execution under the Articles of War, Billy is, as it were, a doomed military target.

We have seen throughout this dissertation that to secure oneself by seizing no less than striking an object is also to secure the object itself—whether to acquire it, neutralize it, fix it in place, or command it. Billy finds himself caught in an “outward bound,” other-directed, accelerating movement of securing. He is repeatedly gazed at, sized up, judged, objectified. As Handsome Sailor he is a “signal object” (BB, 43); he is the “special
object” capable of evoking Claggart’s “lunacy” (76), and the “object” of the “quick, fierce light” that “darted” from the “orbs” of Claggart’s eyes (88). This process intensifies when Claggart at “short range” subjects Billy to a “mesmeric glance” through which the latter is “transfixed” (98, emphasis added); and it climaxes when the security operation, so to speak, transfers from Claggart to Vere’s drumhead court, and Billy, having under aesthetic, moral, juridical and other forms of judgment been continually fixed at a point, secured in place, watched, objectified, guarded and gazed at, is finally overcome as a “pinioned figure arrived at the yard-end” (124).

Billy Budd, then, is a story about a form of representational thinking that attempts to master its objects and objectives. We have repeatedly encountered this particular relation between decision and security throughout this dissertation: decision as subjectively-oriented and determinative; security as the objective of determination. What Melville adds to the picture in Billy Budd is a sense of how representational thinking may underpin juridical and moral claims that paradoxically (but strategically) establish sovereign decision as predetermined. In this chapter, I look at how the discourse of moral law is implicated in the contradictions (the blurring of sovereignty and submission) at work in the decision on the exception. In unfolding this reading, I draw in particular on Burke, Paine, and Kant, picking up on the vocabularies of exception and necessity shared among these writers.

The revolutionary era that fascinated and creatively inspired Melville marked the emergence of a distinctly modern form of security war. For instance, in 1791, Edmund Burke--stating that the French revolutionary leaders have produced a security crisis not only in France itself but in Europe at large--claims that an “act of power . . . from
without” (emphasis in original) might surely be “given to [France] in pity”—in other words, for her own sake—but also “may be given by [France’s] neighbours on motives of safety to themselves. Never shall I think any country in Europe to be secure, whilst there is established, in the very centre of it, a state (if so it may be called) founded on principles of anarchy.” Burke’s dread prediction is that the “practice of assassination,” which the revolutionary leaders “have the impudence to call merciful” (emphasis in original), will become pervasive and generalized as the counterrevolutionary powers find themselves compelled to translate it into their own war strategy. Burke preemptively places the blame squarely on the revolutionaries: “[I]f ever a foreign prince enters into France, he must enter it as into a country of assassins. The mode of civilized war will not be practiced. . . . All war, which is not battle, will be military execution.”

Billy Budd, I suggest, allegorizes this recognizably modern, late-eighteenth century security war. As “jewel” of the Rights-of-Man, Billy is representative of the “homeward-bound” ideologies that the Bellipotent in its “outward bound” mission aims to defend the nation against. The defence of the monarchical order requires confronting the “invading waters of novel opinion social, political, and otherwise” (62)—above all the ideology of the rights of man, or what Burke calls the “principles of anarchy.” In the impressment scene, the “homeward-bound” reaches its destination within the “outward bound.” Or as the narrator states, Billy, “rated as an able seaman and assigned to the starboard watch of the foretop . . . was soon at home in the service” (49, emphasis added). Much of the remainder of Billy Budd is devoted to the story of how the powers of the

---

5 Burke, “Letter,” 276-77.
outward bound then set to work policing, securing, and finally liquidating this foreign
and ultimately inassimilable—though simultaneously native and ideal—representative of
the rights of man that has come home. The targeting, surveillance, and execution of Billy,
with the project security passing from the rogue master-at-arms to the official apex of the
ship’s power structure in a continuous project of metaphysical domination, are what we
could call Burkean acts of power performed on motives of safety, just as Billy’s violent
deed and subsequent execution may be read within the novella’s anti-radical Whig
framework as an almost perfect playing-out of the Burkean dialectic of radicalism’s
performance of assassination and anti-radicalism’s response of military execution.

Within this context, Melville’s political allegory offers insights into the problems
of decision—and of legal and ethical judgment—in the time of security crisis and political
emergency.6 Billy Budd is about the complex speech acts that surround the unleashing of
violence by the State security apparatus, and about the art of judgment and decision as the
ultimate craft or techne of sovereign power. At its climax, it becomes the story of a
sovereign decision for a preemptive security strategy (Vere’s “quick action” in calling the
drumhead court is designed to forestall the “awaken[ing]” of “any slumbering embers of
the Nore among the crew” [BB, 104]). It is in this respect the story of “violence

---

6 For a recent reading of Billy Budd as a story of the pull between “security” and “justice,” see Daniel J.
2470. Solove builds on Richard H. Weisberg’s analysis of Vere’s procedural errors in The Failure of the
Word: The Protagonist as Lawyer in Modern Fiction (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984) in
order to critique Vere’s argument for the necessity of Billy’s sacrifice. Weisberg argues that Vere, making
a series of procedural violations, “distorts the operative law” (146) through acts of “covert illegality” (156)
in an effort to realize a private, subjective urge to destroy Billy Budd. Richard A. Posner, in Law and
Literature, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) argues to the contrary that Vere’s
decision may be “[h]arsh, [and] perhaps precipitate . . . but not illegal” (213), and that Vere, bearing the
“awesome responsibility” of commanding a warship in a time of war, upholds “public duty” over “private
feeling” (218). In line with a recent critical trend that has begun to complicate such binaries (see note 2
above), I will argue that Billy Budd explores the “space between” illegality and legality, exception and
norm, as a way of staging the vexing problems of emergency decision.
justified,” to borrow from Hannah Arendt, “because it acts in the cause of necessity”:7 Billy’s execution is a “military necessity” (BB, 113), Vere claims, invoking a crucial juridical concept. Necessity, for our purposes, is the recourse to the last resort, and the plea to justify a severe action--often a juridically exceptional or obligation-breaching one--in order to safeguard the properly constituted State against (perceived) imminent or actual peril. Billy’s fatal strike has occurred “close on the heel of the suppressed insurrections, an aftertime very critical to naval authority” (102-103); hence, it produces not merely a case for adjudication, but also, or so Vere would have his officers believe, a genuine security crisis.

Closing his injunction to the court with the invocation of military necessity, Vere provides a very specific terminology for the aura of urgency and compulsion that has attended the case from the beginning. In a situation of necessity, by definition, resolute action and the immediate rendering of decision become imperative. As Vere states, “But while . . . thus strangely we prolong proceedings that should be summary--the enemy may be sighted and an engagement result. We must do; and one of two things must we do--condemn or let go” (BB, 112). In the normal situation, decision may be deferred; deliberative proceedings, prolonged. Strict protocol, as the Bellipotent’s surgeon recalls and as the officers tacitly agree, is to “postpone further action in so extraordinary a case to such a time as they should rejoin the squadron, and then refer it to the admiral” (101). Indeed, the case “was such that fain would the Bellipotent’s captain [himself] have deferred taking any action whatever respecting it further than to keep the foretopman a close prisoner till the ship rejoined the squadron and then submitting the matter to the

---

But the crisis means that the route of deferral, of checks and balances, is unavailable: “Feeling that unless quick action was taken on it, the deed of the foretopman, so soon as it should be known on the gun decks, would tend to awaken any slumbering embers of the Nore among the crew, a sense of the urgency of the case overruled in Captain Vere every other consideration” (104). In this particular situation, necessity does not entail subjective decision on extra-legal measures. On the contrary, the measure is fully legal (as Vere puts it, “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?” [110]). But it does entail irregularity. Vere’s military necessity names a compulsion to implement law by means of irregular procedure in a preemption of further threat to monarchical authority.

The concept of necessity, then, raises questions of what happens to—and perhaps of what happens through—agency and decision under severe temporal constraints. (To repeat Vere’s injunction: “we prolong proceedings that should be summary. . . . We must do; and one of two things must we do.”) At what point, Melville’s story implicitly asks, does a given security strategy actually become utterly indispensable? Who decides? What does it mean for an authority figure to make the decision to give him- or herself over to what appears as an unavoidable compulsion?

One response to these questions is that in Melville’s literary logic, the exception is the norm. That is, Billy Budd constructs the decision for preemptive political violence (the decision on the exception) as an absolute necessity within some sort of transcendent framework. And for Melville, that framework is morality, or natural law: Natural law re-
founds the exception, anchoring it to a valid pregiven system, thus transforming it into a norm.

Such a relation between necessity and natural law, or between necessity and morality, is to be found at work in one way or another in the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary discourses of the era to which Melville turns his gaze. For Burke, for example, affirmative revolution—that rarely acceptable “resort to anarchy”; that is, England in 1688 as contrasted with what Burke sees as the utter chaos of revolutionary France—is a revolution in which genuine or “supreme necessity” is “no exception to the rule,” for such necessity “itself is a part . . . of that moral and physical disposition of things to which man must be obedient by consent or force.”\(^8\) Within the proper moral order, the exception (“the first and supreme necessity”) is the rule. For Robespierre, affirmative revolutionary government—government “continually forced to deploy new resources rapidly, to confront new and pressing dangers” and thus “subject to less uniform and less rigorous rules”; that is, France after about October 1793—is “supported” by “the holiest of all laws: the salvation of the people; [and] by the most indisputable of all entitlements: necessity.”\(^9\) (In 1791, Paine, anticipating this chiliastic political rhetoric, had declared that the French revolution “rises into a regeneration of man.”)\(^10\) The exception (political terror) is thus an irresistible force brought to bear in the messianic defence of the patrie. For both thinkers, the dissolution of legal control in the affirmative revolutionary state is an exception that is no exception, the result of an irresistible call

---


from on high—the “moral disposition of things” that orders the world, in Burke’s view, or the “holiest of all laws” that legitimates a government “forced” (emphasis added) to “deploy new resources rapidly,” as Robespierre says.

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall argue that *Billy Budd, Sailor* scrutinizes these ideological justifications—justifications that allow the violence of the exceptional emergency measure, on either end of the political spectrum, to appear as absolute and irresistible. Violence, Melville suggests, comes to appear natural and unavoidable, if tragic, through the yoking together of practical necessity and the moral imperative. The exceptional (i.e. necessary) measure, whether for radical liberty (Billy’s decision to strike Claggart) or for the preservation of the established political order (Vere’s interpretive intervention before the emergency tribunal)\textsuperscript{11} emerges as unexceptional within a transcendent moral framework. Melville critiques this ideological move by bringing to light its paradoxes and internal tensions.

Refusing to accept such arguments as Burke’s and Robespierre’s on their own terms, then, Melville brings to the fore the ambiguities and paradoxes of these intimately related yet opposed types of rhetoric, as we shall see throughout this chapter. He does not do so cynically, as if merely to suggest that authority figures are bound to claim moral

\textsuperscript{11} In the strictest sense, Vere’s judgment does not constitute an extra-legal measure—indeed, quite the opposite (as Vere puts it: “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?” [BB, 110]). It does, however, involve serious irregularity, in that strict protocol, as the *Bellipotent*’s surgeon recalls and as the officers tacitly agree, is to “postpone further action in so extraordinary a case to such a time as they should rejoin the squadron, and then refer it to the admiral” (101). But the crisis brought about by Billy’s act of violence means that the route of deferral, of checks and balances, is unavailable: “Feeling that unless quick action was taken on it, the deed of the foretopman, so soon as it should be known on the gun decks, would tend to awaken any slumbering embers of the Nore among the crew, a sense of the urgency of the case overruled in Captain Vere every other consideration” (104). Vere’s decision amounts to the implementation of law by means of irregular procedure in a preemption of further threat to monarchical authority. I also mean something further by “exceptional measure” vis-à-vis Vere. As I will argue towards the end of the essay, Melville’s representation of an emergency tribunal convoked precisely to rigorously apply the codified law in fact highlights the idea of the arbitrary and exceptional sovereign decision as inescapably bound up with, if perpetually concealed by, the “norm.”
imperatives for whatever they wish to do. On the contrary, Melville is fascinated by, and sympathetic to, the experience of being seized by deeply felt moral and political convictions. He nevertheless critiques particular discourses that we might think of as helping to shape certain versions of that experience. Specifically, as I have already claimed, Melville suggests that natural law discourse is inseparable from the exceptional measure of modern security crisis (whether crisis is viewed as the threat posed to the revolutionary rights of man or the threat posed by them).12

Billy’s decision for a violent act, an act which momentarily puts sovereignty into question or crisis aboard the Bellipotent, is a trope, as we shall see, for the justice of the revolutionary state; Vere’s interpretive decision, as we shall likewise see, amounts to his exceptional determination of the application of the rule at an emergency tribunal he has convened. Yet each decision on the “exception” is cast as the imperative of a higher, irresistible power that has supreme moral as well as political status. Billy and Vere are never said to perform their critical acts and decisions of their own volition. In striking Claggart, Billy testifies, he “had to say something and . . . could only say it with a blow” (BB, 106, emphases added), while Vere’s stated responsibility is that “however pitilessly [the] law” (for which he is by his own declaration “not [otherwise] responsible”) may “operate in any instances,” he will “nevertheless adhere to it and administer it” (111, emphasis added). Freedom from constraint is thus paradoxically unconditionally compelled. Violence becomes imperative as response and responsibility are conjoined

12 Billy Budd has received limited but significant attention with respect to the idea of natural law. John B. Noone Jr. reads the novella in relation to the “systems” of Rousseau and Hobbes (“Billy Budd: Two Concepts of Nature,” American Literature 29, no. 3 [1957]: 249-62, quotation on 249). In a brief but important passage in Law and Letters in American Culture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), which I refer to again later in this essay, Robert Ferguson argues that Billy Budd sets up an opposition between natural law and positive law.
with the laws of nature. In the process, the sovereign decision emerges as a call from the presumed moral order and normative universe that cannot be resisted or refused. In his nuanced and elaborate figural registration of various discourses of natural jurisprudence—from the Enlightenment doctrine of natural right to the Stoic concept of the natural order to Kantian ethics—Melville, I will argue, grapples with the inner workings of political judgment, and with the fundamental blurring of sovereignty and subjection, norm and exception that it seems to entail, in the security emergency of revolution at the dawn of political modernity in the West.13

Nature and Art

Near the end of the novella, the crew of the Bellipotent performs a “spontaneous echo,” or “involuntary echoing,” of Billy’s final benediction in the moment before the

---

13 As in previous chapters of this dissertation, my point about the blurring of sovereignty and subjection is indebted to Jonathan Elmer’s reading of Billy Budd, part of a chapter on the figure of the “captive king” in Billy Budd, Moby-Dick, and Benito Cereno, in On Lingering and Being Last: Race and Sovereignty in the New World (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), esp. 108-113. On “exceptionalism” and “emergency” in Melville’s literary imagination, see William V. Spanos, Herman Melville and the American Calling: The Fiction after “Moby-Dick,” 1851-1857 (Albany: State University of New York, 2008). Spanos argues that Melville’s fiction of the 1850s “constitutes a sustained haunting” (17) of American exceptionalist ideology, which Spanos reads in terms of a hegemonic discourse stretching from the myth of Puritan election to a secularized form in Manifest Destiny and beyond, and which Spanos further associates with the post-9/11 climate of emergency and doctrine of preemptive war. Where Spanos’s conception of the national exceptionalist narrative would be underpinned by a theory of sovereign power as total or absolute, if vulnerable to resistance, John Brenkman, in a recent extended essay on post-9/11 political thought, views American sovereignty as inevitably already fractured: following Hannah Arendt, Brenkman suggests that “action in concert,” as much as singular sovereign exemption and will-to-power, is a guiding trope for political inauguration; he also argues that the executive decision on the exceptional measure (e.g. Guantánamo) and the claim for its necessity are immediately subject to the scrutiny and counter-decisions not only of the press and the public, but of the legislature and the courts (“Imagination of Power,” in The Cultural Conditions of Democracy: Political Thought since September 11 [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007], 51-77). For Brenkman’s incisive critique of the influential Carl Schmitt-Giorgio Agamben line of thinking on sovereign power and its recourse to absolute categories, see 55-64 (see also Schmitt, Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty, trans. George Schwab [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985]; and Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics series [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998].) Brenkman’s analysis is pertinent to Melville’s treatment of sovereignty and the logic of the exception for its emphasis on the contingency, complexity, and sometimes internal inconsistence of the political judgments that determine the point at which the state of exception meets the claim for necessity (see esp. 60-61).
latter’s execution on the makeshift scaffold: “Without volition, as it were, as if indeed the ship’s populace were but the vehicles of some vocal current electric, with one voice from alow and aloft came a resonant sympathetic echo: ‘God bless Captain Vere!’ And yet at that instant Billy alone must have been in their hearts, even as in their eyes” (BB, 123). As a loyal subject of the King, or perhaps as one who has transcended worldly politics, Billy sanctifies the monarchical sovereign violence by which he dies. Yet his unselfconscious creation of a unitary will under monarchical order also paradoxically precipitates a popular uprising—an eruption from the realm of nature against the art of monarchical domination. The sound of the one voice of the ship’s populace transforms, in the immediate aftermath of the execution, into the rumble of revolution, likened to the “freshet-wave of a torrent suddenly swelled by pouring showers in tropical mountains,” indicating, as per the novella’s clear strand of conservative historiography, “some capricious revulsion of thought or feeling such as mobs ashore are liable to” (126). Immediately prompting the “strategic command” of an officer, the noise is met by the “silver whistles of the boatswain and his mates,” signals which “pierced that ominous low sound, dissipating it,” bringing the crew to order once again (126). The sound of revolution, then, is the sound of pure nature, a “torrent suddenly swelled by pouring showers” (phusis: the self-emergent; that which “has the bursting open belonging to bringing-forth . . . in itself,” as Heidegger says). The sound of its repression (the silver whistles) is the sound of the art and craft, implementation, or techne of counter-radical sovereignty.15

15 I am borrowing my terms here from Jean-Luc Nancy, “War, Law, Sovereignty--Techne,” trans. Jeffrey S. Librett, in Re-thinking Technologies, ed. Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
This sequence, I would suggest, may be read as a figure for the novella as a whole, for its nuanced reconstruction of the opposition between revolution and counterrevolution as an opposition between ahistorical, prepolitical, quasi-mythic nature, on the one hand, and historical, postpolitical art, on the other. Critical analysis of this opposition matters partly because what the opposition really figures forth is a more fundamental tension between alternative traditions of natural law. The argument for the primacy of positive law and political art is by no means a refutation of the laws of nature per se. Vere’s Burkean argument to the drumhead court against the political uses of state-of-nature theory and in favour of postpolitical law and convention is itself a natural law argument, based ultimately in Stoic and Thomistic ideas of the natural moral order. Vere’s arguments for practical expediency and submission to the law emerge from Burke’s language of natural jurisprudence in the Reflections on the Revolution in France, in particular Burke’s trope of the inviolate oath of the eternal order. Meanwhile, the idea of prepolitical nature as the basis of authority--what Vere in his address to the court will call “inviolate Nature primeval” (BB, 110), in turn a metonym for state-of-nature theory--belongs to the Enlightenment doctrine of natural right that Paine espouses. Billy Budd, as I shall consider in more detail in the next three sections of this chapter, is a figure for this natural-right foundation of political authority, and more particularly for a natural virtue that transforms under the pressure of necessity into sovereign violence.

The Politics of Pure Nature and the Rights of Man

Internally riven and heterogeneous, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of
the Citizen of 1789, as some of its most careful students have observed, crystallizes tensions between positive law and natural rights, as well as between public power and private individual, resistance and authority. So far as Melville is concerned in *Billy Budd*, though, the Declaration of Rights is the document that enshrines natural rights as the absolute foundation of political power, where power is manifested above all as the unitary general will of the people. (Melville, as will already be clear from the example cited above of the crew’s “involuntary echoing” of Billy’s words in “one voice,” does not allegorize the volonté générale of article 6 in the stricter, Rousseauvian sense of an equality and uniformity born of the compromise and consensus achieved through egalitarian deliberation, but in the more precisely radical revolutionary, Robespierrian sense of an involuntary collective will emanating as the natural virtue of the peuple.) The “men of the French Revolution,” writes Hannah Arendt, “believed that they had emancipated nature herself, as it were, liberated the natural in all men, and given him the Rights of Man to which each was entitled, not by virtue of the body politic to which he belonged but by virtue of being born.” Self-founded (“a foundling” [*BB*, 52], his “entire family . . . practically invested in himself” [50]), “habitually living with the elements” and seemingly “one to whom not yet has been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge” (52), Billy is representative of “the natural in all men.” (The male-centeredness of *Billy Budd*, we may note here in passing, fits with Arendt’s recourse to the conventional gendering of the revolutionary subject for the era of the so-called “rights of man.”) Billy, in other words, is a figure for “nature” in the sense of an original condition of humanity, that which constitutes the moral ground of a logically

---

supplemental political art. ¹⁸ He is a figure, more precisely, for the Lockean “rights and privileges of the law of nature,” to cite the Second Treatise, which may find “greater security” in political society, but which are absolutely foundational.¹⁹

Natural rights, in the early modern and Enlightenment way of thinking that I am invoking here, are not merely temporally prior to the civil order, but ontologically superior to it. If civil rights “relate to security and protection,” as Paine claims in his gloss on the Declaration of Rights in part one of the Rights of Man, natural rights are their “foundation.” “Man,” Paine states, “did not enter into society . . . to have less rights than he had before, but to have those rights better secured.” ²⁰ (As stated in article 2 of the Declaration, incorporated into Paine’s text in English: “The end of all political associations is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man.”) ²¹ As the “jewel” of the Rights-of-Man, Billy is the very embodiment (a “welkin-eyed” example of physical perfection in his “fully developed frame” and “purity of natural complexion” [44, 50]) of the “natural” and the “imprescriptible.”

Drawing on exegetical theology, with Billy in the role of Adamic man, Melville tropes Paine’s notion of the “divine origin of the rights of man at the creation,” which one arrives at by stripping away the Burkean “reason[ing] by precedents drawn from antiquity,” as Paine states, in order to “come to the time when man came from the hand of his maker”: The “origin of man” is also the “origin of his rights.” To unveil these rights is thus a moral imperative. No mere revolution, in Paine’s eyes, the French

---

²⁰ Paine, Rights of Man, 86.
²¹ Quoted in ibid., 124.
Revolution actually “rises into a regeneration of man,” as we noted parenthetically above. Hence the formal intertwining of moral parable and political allegory in Billy Budd. As in Paine’s Rights of Man, the moral-theological and political strands of Billy Budd are tightly braided. Billy is not just a figure for “natural being” and “the natural in all men,” but for natural morality. As we learn in the second chapter, the relation between phusis (“simple nature” in the example that follows) and techne (“manufacturable . . . respectability”) is also a relation between moral purity and moral obliquity: “Habitually living with the elements and knowing little more of the land than as a beach . . . [Billy’s] simple nature remained unsophisticated by those moral obliquities which are not in every case incompatible with that manufacturable thing known as respectability” (BB 52). The narrator then recasts this Rousseavian hypothesis of the corrupting influence of artifice and social convention in terms of Judeo-Christian myth, phusis now identified with the prelapsarian state: “By his original constitution aided by the co-operating influences of his lot, Billy in many respects was an upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company” (52). Billy is emblematic of the phenomenon whereby “it is observable that where certain virtues pristine and unadulterate peculiarly characterize anybody in the external form of civilization, they will upon scrutiny seem not to be derived from custom or convention, but rather to be out of keeping with these, as if indeed exceptionally transmitted from a period prior to Cain’s city and citified man” (52-53, emphasis added). Billy the Adamic “upright barbarian” shows up as an exception within Cain’s city, bearer of “virtues pristine and unadulterate . . . exceptionally transmitted,” pure phusis to such counter-concepts as nomos (“custom or convention”) and techne (“Cain’s city and citified man”).

22 Paine, Rights of Man, 83-84, 127.
Virtue, Terror, and the Exception

For Melville, revolutionary violence is “exceptional” in a quite specific sense. Billy’s violence is the paradoxical outcome of an unconditional moral obligation to assume sovereign freedom in response to the security emergency of the threat posed to nature and the natural. In the analeptic tale of Billy’s arrival on the Rights-of-Man, as told by Graveling to Ratcliffe in the impressment scene in chapter 1, and in the accusation scene at the climax of the novella, the political and the sacred, never fully separable in Billy Budd, merge entirely in Billy’s fundamentally exceptional defence of natural “virtue.”

While virtue was an enormously complex and varied eighteenth century idea—equally prevalent in the writings of such opposed thinkers as Burke and Rousseau, for example—we should bear in mind the ascension of Robespierre’s very particular usage of the term in the radical republican phase of the revolution. The key point about Robespierrean virtue is that it was fundamentally aligned with the rights of man along the axis of nature, signifying the natural goodness of the people, rather than the product of laws and institutions, as in the classical republican concept of civic virtue, and referring to the love of the people for the patrie, or “none other than love of the homeland and its law”: The aim of the Revolution, Robespierre argues, is “the reign of that eternal justice whose laws are engraved, not in marble and stone, but in the hearts of all men”—engraved not under the sign of techne, but rather under the sign of phusis.  

That is why, in historiographical terms, the National Convention’s “coerced recovery of the natural goodness of the people,” to cite Keith Baker’s aptly paradoxical definition of the Terror, undoes political or legal identity itself through the ongoing suspension of legal protection (e.g., the decree of 10 October 1793; the Law of Suspects; the Law of Prairial). The violence that emerges in the wake of this suspension is what Robespierre famously called “prompt, severe, inflexible justice,” “an emanation of virtue” that springs forth in the hour of the “homeland’s most pressing needs.” In the ideology of the Terror, the legislated withdrawal of legal protection to counteract the supposed corruption of egalitarian and democratic republican virtue is designed not only to secure, but above all to bring forth fundamental nature and to morally regenerate the sovereign people. The reign of virtue is thus preceded by or coterminous with the state of exception: “The provisional government of France is revolutionary until the peace,” in the decree of 10 October 1793 which announced the suspension of the (never ratified) Constitution of 1793. The exception, to put this point the other way around, is an ethical imperative. Hence, for example, not only the further extension, but also the explicit


24 Baker, “Political languages,” 657. In On Revolution, Arendt describes this process as the tearing away of each individual’s persona, the “legal personality which is given and guaranteed by the body politic.” The Reign of Terror, she states, equalized all (“liberated the natural in all men”) in the sense that it “left all inhabitants equally without the protecting mask of a legal personality” (98).


moralization, of the definition of political crime in the Law of Prairial, of which article 6 includes in its list of those “deemed enemies of the people” anyone who has sought to “deprave morals and to corrupt the public conscience, [or] to impair the energy and the purity of revolutionary and republican principles, or to impede the progress thereof,” and of which article 8 allows that the “proof necessary to convict enemies of the people comprises every kind of evidence, whether material or moral.”

The Reign of Terror was, let us say, the reign of “virtues pristine and unadulterate” as “exceptionally transmitted” within the political space of the “city” (BB, 53).

In Billy Budd, Sailor, Melville gives formal expression to radical revolutionary ideology’s conflation of morality and politics. In what amounts to a miniature, serio-comic dramatization of the security imperative inherent in the ideology of the rights of man, Graveling’s tale describes how “Billy came” to the Rights-of-Man, whose forecastle is a “rat-pit of quarrels”; and how “it was like a Catholic priest striking peace in an Irish shindy. Not that he preached to them or said or did anything in particular; but a virtue went out of him, sugaring the sour ones” (BB, 46-47). Though the shift from a kind of bellum omnium contra omnes in the “rat-pit of quarrels” to a state of unity suggests a parody of Hobbesian social contract theory, there is no sense here of voluntary consent, or of the authorization of sovereign power by the multitude. Billy instead binds the people, in such a fashion as to render moot the question of each individual will, into the state of an involuntary general will—a people united in virtue. As a figure for the wellspring or ultimate source of harmony and coordination aboard the Rights-of-Man, Billy’s virtue is a trope for the underived, imprescriptible natural rights of man themselves, as they are understood to emerge prior to language, agreement, fiat, oath, or

---

action. ("Not that he preached to them or said or did anything in particular; but a virtue went out of him, sugaring the sour ones.") When the lone dissenter, Red Whiskers, "insultingly gave [Billy] a dig under the ribs," Billy’s justice is swift and uncompromising: "Quick as lightning Billy let fly his arm" (47). Where virtue is powerless, it may be backed by the monopolization and channeling of radical popular violence in the name of a unitary political will and in defence of the patrie.28 Put in Robespierre’s terms, Billy’s violence here is “prompt, severe, inflexible justice,” an “emanation of virtue,” a consequence of the principle of virtue “applied to the homeland’s most pressing needs”--and a means to the inculcation and extension of such virtue and the political harmony it represents: “And will you believe it, Lieutenant,” Graveling concludes, “the Red Whiskers now really loves Billy. . . . But they all love him . . . and it’s the happy family here” (47).

Billy is clearly no Robespierre. In several respects, Billy’s violence seems closest to the spontaneous and popular exercise of force in the so-called anarchic phase of the Terror; closest, that is, to what Baker describes as the “physical embodiment, corporeal vitality, and active political energy” that characterized an uprising in which sovereignty “was seen to inhere in the people as a political body.”29 At the same time, his singular and exemplary embodiment of virtue, far from indicating a transindividual force, suggests instead the intense concentration of power, easily associated with the Jacobin rule of 1793-94. It may be objected that Billy lacks the ideological conviction, conscious intentionality, and political skill of the members of both the popular uprising and of the later architects of the systematic violence of the Terror, not to say the paranoia,

28 I am borrowing terms here from Baker, “Political languages,” 652.
29 Baker, “Political languages,” 650.
ruthlessness, and theoretical sophistication associated with the centralized Jacobin
dictatorship in particular. Nor does Graveling’s story index the Terror’s accelerating
levels of incarceration and execution; its languages of suspicion, unmasking, and
unveiling; its final orgy of bloodletting. I would nevertheless maintain that Billy’s
monopolization and implicit moralization of the exercise of revolutionary violence
(violence for the sake of the rights of man); his embodiment not just of nature but of a
natural virtue that springs forth under necessity as sovereign violence; in short his
performance of legally exceptional and messianic political violence as an immediate
expression of natural virtue, unitary will, and regeneration and purification--that all of
these figural details register the multiple links between the discourses of political
violence, legal exception, and the virtue of the peuple in the revolutionary year II.

Billy Budd as Revolutionary

Aboard the Bellipotent, the master-at-arms Claggart complicates any notion of
human nature as fundamentally good, perhaps only corrupted by “Cain’s city and citified
man.” If Billy represents the Paineite “divine origin of the rights of man at the creation”
and “regeneration of man,” Claggart represents pure phusis in the sense of an evil or
depravity “not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living”
(not produced under the sign of techne), “but born with him and innate, in short ‘a
depravity according to nature’” (BB, 75-6). Yet while Billy in his “simple nature,” as we
have seen, “remained unsophisticated by those moral obliquities [associated with]
respectability,” Claggart’s “mania of an evil nature” (76) in fact “folds itself in the mantle
of respectability” (75), paradoxically suggesting natural corruption at the core of artifice
and convention. Claggart negatively doubles Billy’s embodiment of sovereign exception, his own “exceptional . . . nature” appearing to be “peculiarly subject to the law of reason” while seeming “not the less in heart . . . to riot in complete exemption from that law” (76). Likewise, just as Billy is the “loyal” subject of the King, so Claggart is a genuine subject of obedience, “charged” (64, 93) or invested with authority by the monarchical sovereign power he serves. When Billy, as “exceptional” bearer of “virtues pristine and unadulterate” and “jewel” of the Rights-of-Man, is objectified and persecuted by this combined opposite and sinister double who stands for the corruption of the artifice and worldliness of “citified man,” he once again performs an act of “exceptional” moral and political violence outside the strictly or properly constituted order in defence of virtue and the natural rights of man, when “quick as the flame from a discharged canon at night, his right arm shot out, and Claggart dropped to the deck” (99).

Of course, when Billy strikes Claggart, he does so as a loyal subject of the King who never possesses any conscious intention to alter or abolish the present state of things or to found a new order. (“I have eaten the King’s bread and I am true to the King” [106], as he states in all sincerity.) Moreover, from one perspective this deed becomes an act of political resistance only when those in power determine that “the people” (112), meaning the common sailors, will interpret it as such. (The crew, states Vere, will regard it as “plain homicide committed in a flagrant act of mutiny. What penalty should follow, they know. But it does not follow. Why? they will ruminate. You know what sailors are. Will they not revert to the outbreak at the Nore? Ay” [112]. Judgment performatively renders the blow “revolutionary”—or “mutinous,” in Melville’s trope.) Finally, it happens that this act of revolutionary violence stems most immediately from Billy’s very obedience to the
command of his captain—a figure of monarchical sovereign power, a “King’s officer” and “commissioned fighter” (110)—that he “speak and defend himself” (99).

It is possible to interpret this latter contradiction by saying that when Vere demands an agonal exchange between Claggart and Billy (“Now, Master-at-arms, tell this man to his face what you told of him to me”; and, “Speak, man!” he cries to Billy, “Speak! Defend yourself” [98, emphasis added]) he has unwittingly motivated—and paradoxically coerced—Billy’s sovereign “decision” on the exception. What ensues is, in part, the story of what happens when the “jewel” of the Rights-of-Man and figure of “virtues pristine . . . exceptionally transmitted” stands under the “injunction to speak and defend himself” (99). More particularly, it is the story of what happens when this figure defends himself by speaking a particular language of pure force figured in the caesura of his “vocal defect” (53) and “convulsed tongue-tie” (98): “Could I have used my tongue I would not have struck him,” Billy states during his testimony; “But . . . I had to say something, and I could only say it with a blow” (106, emphasis added).

If speech is one of the “natural rights of man, always retained,” as Paine says, “speaking” is also, Maurice Blanchot insists, a “curious right,” because language, in Blanchot’s Hegelian argument, is “deferred assassination”: “[W]hen I speak, death

---

30 My allusion here to Carl Schmitt’s famous dictum, “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception,” according to which sovereignty is constituted in the subjective decision on political security, is meant to bring out the strong rhetorical element of “defense” behind Billy’s act of sovereign violence. In _Political Theology_, Schmitt claims that the sovereign decides “what constitutes the public interest or interest of the state, public safety and order,” while the “exception, which is not codified in the existing legal order, can at best be characterized as a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state, or the like.” The decision on the exception, then, amounts to “determining definitively what constitutes public order and security, [and] determining when they are disturbed” (5, 6, 9). Billy’s act, in this reading, is the outcome of his “decision” on the threat to the political authority located in natural virtue.

31 Paine, _Rights of Man_, 106.
speaks in me.” 32 “Of course,” Blanchot concedes, “my language does not kill anyone.” And yet, he goes on,

when I say, ‘This woman,’ real death has been announced and is already present in my language; my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence, and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction. 33

Read from this perspective, Billy’s blow, the only way he can say what he had to, is a literalization of the “real death present in language.” Through it, we might say, Claggart is “removed from his existence and his presence, and suddenly plunged into a nothingness.” “Speak, man! . . . Speak!” cries Vere: and when Billy does, it is in a language that we may wish to consider as revolutionary in an important sense.

Billy’s language of revolution reveals the revolutionary as utterly subjected at the moment of ultimate freedom. The double, absolute imperative—“I had to say something, and I could only say it with a blow”—is the sign of the unconditional imperative to perform radical moral and political violence in the name of simple nature, natural virtue, and the natural rights of man. The narrative and semantic echo of the act of violence aboard the Rights (“Quick as lightning Billy let fly his arm”) in the climactic confrontation between Billy and Claggart (“The next instant, quick as the flame from a discharged cannon at night, his right arm shot out”) suggests that Billy’s strike indeed not

only signifies the unpremeditated revolt of exceptional virtue against the evil nature
cloaked by convention and artifice, but also constitutes at some level a defence once
again of the imprescriptible rights of man, as well as the judgment (in the sense of divine
verdict) of the radical revolutionary security project rendered upon the
counterrevolutionary security project that would contain and control it, and the fleeting
suspension or momentary crisis of sovereign power through the annihilation--by what
takes the form of a sheer and irresistible force of nature--of the figure of the Bellipotent’s
order and security.

Neither a refusal nor an endorsement of the political project of liberation implied
by Billy’s violence, Melville’s representation of a freedom utterly compelled suggests
uncertainty lurking at the heart of modern revolutionary transformation. Elevated into a
subject empowered to judge in its own cause, the revolutionary actor thereby becomes
like a conduit of forces of coercion that the revolutionary world seems to have created
anew.

**Pragmatism and Obedience**

Vere deliberately orchestrates Billy’s execution in order to discipline harshly the
crew of the Bellipotent and to forestall the possible radical aftereffects of the crisis of
sovereign power that Billy has unwittingly produced. Billy Budd allegorizes the
terroristic suppression of radicalism, as a figure from one of the early contextualizing
chapters that Melville worked on at the B stage of inscription would suggest. In a
digression in chapter 5 on the aftermath of the Nore, the narrator states that “it was
thought that an officer like Nelson was the one, not indeed to terrorize the crew [of the
Theseus] into base subjection, but to win them, by force of his mere presence and heroic personality, back to an allegiance if not as enthusiastic as his own yet as true” (BB, 59). Whatever other function it may perform in the text, Nelson’s charisma, as critics have recognized, serves as a standard against which Vere’s intervention before the tribunal (in a scene added at a much later stage in the growth of the manuscript) must appear in a negative light. Unable or unwilling, so Melville’s figural logic implies, to sustain the crew’s allegiance “by force of his mere presence and heroic personality,” Vere has recourse to an alternative security strategy--the “terror” that yields “base subjection.” In short, the sympathetic and intelligent Vere, whatever his merits and his “mindful[ness] of the welfare of his men” (60), brings terror into effect as a political force through his power of judgment. The rhetorical basis of that power, Vere’s complex and effective but nevertheless internally divided argument before the court, is the main subject of the remainder of this chapter.

Vere is himself an “exceptional character” (BB, 62) in full sympathy, as he admits, with the sentiments born of “inviolate Nature primeval” (110). He nevertheless secures Billy’s conviction and sentence of execution not only by pronouncing allegiance

---

34 Melville’s hesitation over the word “terrorize” in his manuscript supports the possibility that he thought carefully about the significant historical and political contexts that the word inevitably conjures. At inscription stage Bb (early in the growth of the manuscript) he initially writes “terrorise.” Then, at the same time he is inscribing this particular leaf (leaf 175 in the B foliation), he cancels the word with a line and inserts “flog.” At a later substage of inscription (Bc) he cancels “flog” in pencil and restores “terrorise” (see the genetic text in BB, 308.) We might conjecture that after writing “terrorise,” Melville pauses over the associations he has just introduced and determines to unveil from behind these layers of highly charged historical, philosophical, and political connotations the core sense he thinks he has in mind (“flog,” a return to the idiom of White-Jacket [1850]: beat, lash, physically coerce); then he determines to unveil from behind this more limited and almost monosemic evocation of visible and practical means those same charged connotations of collective fear, of the emergency measure, of strategic state violence, and of arbitrary and absolute power; and he decides to let stand the trope of terror as a state disciplinary tactic as it gets exploited, not of course for safeguarding and furthering radical egalitarianism (the Jacobin rule, the Great Mutiny) but rather for controlling, containing, and repressing it (the “White Terror” of year III, here translated into a monarchical-counterrevolutionary context).

35 See Samet, Willing Obedience, 193. Weisberg, in The Failure of the Word, interprets Billy as a Nelson figure and Vere as the envious, silently enraged plotter against him (see 160-70).
“to the King” over “allegiance to Nature” (110), but also by subordinating “the exceptional in the matter” (111, emphasis added) to the strict application of codified law. Vere acknowledges the pull of “natural justice,” but rejects any notion that the “duty” of the “King’s officers” should lie “in a sphere correspondingly natural.” As he states, “[I]n receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents” (110). Against the Enlightenment doctrines of natural right and natural virtue that Billy symbolizes, Vere will propose an alternative locus of power.

To repeat, Billy is a figure not only of the Enlightenment ideology of natural right, but of the ideology of natural virtue that manifests as sovereign, exceptional violence in a situation of political emergency. These and related meanings are concentrated in the images of “Nature,” “natural justice,” and “inviolate Nature primeval” to which Vere opposes “martial law” and the “King” at the outset of his address. To claim this allegiance “to the King” is to choose “military duty” and to banish the influence of “moral scruple.” Scruple is, of course, a name for uncertainty and hesitation (“troubled hesitancy,” as Vere calls it)--that is, for the doubt that thwarts the decisive action of “duty”: “[M]indful,” Vere claims, “of paramount obligations,” he “strive[s] against scruples that may tend to enervate decision” (110). Vere establishes, then, or at any rate upholds, a very particular jurisdiction of praxis, beyond the borders of which lies theoria--enticing in itself, but out of bounds: “Speculatively regarded, [the case] well might be referred to a jury of casuists. But for us here, acting not as casuists or moralists, it is a case practical, and under martial law practically to be dealt with” (110).

Vere is at his most Burkean here in his pragmatic rejection of speculative reasoning and his identification of a fundamental incompatibility between “Nature
primeval” and the political order. In the opposition between Nature and the King, Vere alludes to the idea in Burke’s Reflections that civil society is grounded in a law of “convention” rather than of “nature” and that it functions not to safeguard but to repress the traces of “unconvenanted man”--namely, the “inclinations,” “will,” and “passions” that might have reigned in the state of nature:

Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should be frequently thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection. This can only be done by a power out of themselves; and not, in the exercise of its function, subject to that will and to those passions which it is its office to bridle and subdue. (R, 150-51, emphasis in original)

Since, according to the “fundamental rules” of civil society, “no man should be judge in his own cause” (150, emphasis in original), only such a “power out of themselves” is sufficient to control the will and desires of the individuals in a state. Government is thus generated solely out of the “experimental science” and “practical science” of “constructing a commonwealth” (152, emphasis added)--that is, out of practical art and practical knowledge (techne), the “delicate and complicated skill” necessary to the “constitution of a state, and the due distribution of its powers” (151). The drafters of the Declaration of Rights have “wrought under-ground a mine that will blow up at one grand explosion all example of antiquity, all precedents, charters, and acts of parliament” (148). They pose a drastic threat to the only “real rights of men” (149, emphasis in original), civil rights, which one gains by abandoning natural rights: “They have the ‘rights of
men.’ . . . Against these their rights of men let no government look for security in the length of its continuance” (148-49). Security on this account is what you achieve in the suppression of talk about natural rights (or “natural justice,” in Vere’s terms). The natural right is not to be secured; the natural right is that which in-secures, that against which the political order must be defended.

Vere’s argument is drawn from Burke, then, in its emphasis on pragmatism, convention, and positive law as the bases of political life (in turn a rejection of the political use of speculative moral theory) and in its tactical separation of Nature and King, phusis and techne. But the political art (the “practical science” of “constructing a commonwealth”) that Burke advocates is in turn what we could call a revelation of Nature in the cosmic sense. For if society “is indeed a contract,” as Burke writes in one of the most famous passages of the Reflections, then each political state in turn is but a “clause in the great primaeval contract of eternal society” (R, 195). Far from rejecting the dictates of natural jurisprudence, Burke, as scholars have noted, is indebted to a Stoic and Thomistic model of natural law and divine order.36 Nature in this sense is made legible in social structures and civil institutions. (“Art is man’s nature,” as Burke famously puts it).37 The members of the legitimate state in fact “receive,” “hold” and “transmit” their government and its “privileges” precisely by “working after the pattern of nature” (120). Nature in this sense (as opposed to the concept in state-of-nature theory) is therefore the efficient cause of law, the maker and arranger of the civil order, the sovereign power

behind the convention that is, as we have seen, otherwise the law of civil society. Civil institutions and the various extant forms of government are fundamentally static, immovable “according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the whole inviolable oath which holds all physical and moral natures, each in their appointed place. This law is not subject to the will of those, who by an obligation above them, and infinitely superior, are bound to submit their will to that law” (195). Political revolution and the exception, as Burke argues, may be part of such an order, but only as proceeding from the “law . . . above.”

To cite Burke’s argument on necessity,

> It is the first and supreme necessity only, a necessity that is not chosen but chooses . . . which alone can justify a resort to anarchy. This necessity is no exception to the rule; because this necessity itself is a part too of that moral and physical disposition of things to which man must be obedient by consent or force; but if that which is only submission to necessity should be made the object of choice, the law is broken, nature is disobeyed, and the rebellious are outlawed. (195)

Contract is covenant; civil society, an expression of the “law [of] . . . nature” (195); and the language of true sovereign power, the divine fiat or “inviolable oath” that admits “no exception to the rule.”

> It is sometimes said that Vere in effect adjudicates between natural law and positive law, and comes out a positivist. In Law and Letters in American Culture, Robert Ferguson claims that the “modernity of Billy Budd consists in its portrayal of a legal system that explicitly denies all natural and spiritual connections. Amidst much deliberate

---

ambiguity, Melville labors to sustain a basic separation of realms. . . . Unmistakably, it is . . . an overruling distrust of moral philosophy . . . that kill[s] Billy Budd.”39 While this point is not only accurate on the face of it but also essential to an understanding of how Vere’s argument works--Vere indeed labors very hard to “sustain a basic separation of realms”--I would nevertheless argue in contrast that Vere’s valorization of positive law is a (Burkean) natural law argument, that positive law and convention, or nomos, as they emerge in Vere’s rhetoric, can be read as signifying the art or techne that discloses the natural order of things. Where Vere is un-Burkean is in his overt sympathy with state-of-nature theory--although, exactly like Burke, Vere distrusts the political uses of that theory. In any case, the principal point is that Vere’s application of positive law against the dictates of natural justice is in harmony with his (Burkean sense of the) eternal order--an order represented, as we shall see in more detail in a moment, both as the “peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind” (BB, 63) and also, more ominously, as the “War” (112), the father of the law, that protects these.

Natural law is the discourse through which the imperative of the expedient measure becomes absolute. To acknowledge the natural law basis of Vere’s argument is to acknowledge the real source of compulsion in Vere’s decision. As Burke might have put it, Vere determines that Billy’s “resort to anarchy” is an “exception to the rule” without justification, for it has made an “object of choice” out of extraordinary political violence, that which should “only [be] submission to necessity”; meanwhile Vere himself performs what he calls a “military necessity” (BB, 113) which, again in Burke’s words, “is not chosen but chooses.” Even if this “necessity” is irregular--it violates strict procedure, according to which the Bellipotent should defer the decision until it can refer

39 Ferguson, Law and Letters, 289.
the case to the admiral—it is nevertheless “no exception to the rule,” as Vere might argue
following Burke, “because this necessity itself is a part too of that moral and physical
disposition of things to which man must be obedient by consent or force.”

Vere’s argument for submission, we are beginning to see, maps almost precisely
onto the natural jurisprudential argument for obedience in the Reflections. To understand
this point in more detail, we need to see how Vere constructs an image of sovereign
power split ambiguously between the King and War personified. As a subject of
obedience, Vere “fight[s] at command . . . for the King” (BB, 110, 112), and “proceed[s]
under the law of the Mutiny Act.” “In feature,” Vere goes on, “no child can resemble his
father more than that Act resembles in spirit the thing from which it derives--War” (111-
12). War, as if in place of the present Sovereign--the King or, which Vere does not
suggest, the King-in-Parliament--is no mere instrument of sovereignty, but the very father
of the law. The authority of the sovereign to take life or let live resides in war, as a
decision already taken, a categorical injunction: “[T]he Mutiny Act, War’s child, takes
after the father. Budd’s intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose” (112). Vere’s
“War,” I would suggest, is analogous to Burke’s “law above”—especially insofar as it
functions finally to safeguard Vere’s version of “the peace of the world and the true
welfare of mankind” (63). War and the peace of the world, that is to say, occupy in
Vere’s thinking the place of what Burke calls the “law of laws and the sovereign [of]
sovereigns” (R, 196).

Borrowing Burke’s definition of the inviolable oath, we could say that the law to
which Vere refers in his argument for obedience--not just the codified law of the Mutiny
Act, but the fount of law, War itself--is “not subject to the will of those, who by an
obligation above them, and infinitely superior, are bound to submit their will to that law” (R, 195). Billy’s deed is a fact for determinate judgment under this overarching order—War, King, Mutiny Act. The rule neatly subsumes the particular. The issue is not open to question. Perhaps the “case is an exceptional one” (BB, 110). Nevertheless, “the exceptional in the matter” (BB, 111), so far as it concerns an object of individual will or choice, has no place under the universal law. Yes, the exceptional case “well might be referred to a jury of casuists.” It might in this sense demand a power of judgment arising from emergency or contingency (i.e., casus, root of both “casuist” and “case”). This power of judgment could foreclose the subsumption of the particular under the general rule by taking emergency, exception, or necessity as the source of law. To do so, though, would be to break the commands of King and War. It would be to unleash revolutionary fervor. (Note again Vere’s argument against clemency: “Will [the sailors] not revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore? Ay” [112].) And it would be to reproduce the crisis of sovereign power brought on by Billy’s exceptional, law-destroying and law-creating assumption of freedom. Whereas, to repeat Burke’s words, it is “a necessity that is not chosen but chooses . . . which alone can justify a resort to anarchy. This necessity is no exception to the rule” (R, 195).

To decide according to the “exceptional in the matter” (BB, 111) would be, in effect, to make “that which [could only ever be] submission to necessity [into] . . . the object of choice” (R, 195). The officers’ “vowed responsibility” is that “however pitilessly [the] law may operate in any instances,” they will “nevertheless adhere to it and administer it” (BB, 111). Kept with total “self-abnegation,” the “vows of allegiance to martial duty” (104) correspond to the Burkean “partnership” (R, 194), “compact,”
“obedien[ce]” (195) and “corporate fealty” (196) that maintain the inviolate “rule” (195). In directing the judgment of the court, Vere claims no more than to expel the exception and to submit himself, according to his “vow,” to a higher, pregiven and external authority that, like Burke’s “great primaeval contract of eternal society,” is equal to the eternal order itself.

Sovereign Self-Legislation

And yet, Vere’s entire interpretive determination of the jurisdiction within which this obedience to a power beyond exception may operate implies his own assumption of exceptional power. Vere seizes on both rule and exception, codified procedure and arbitrary measure. For example, he hovers ambiguously within and without the sphere of the court’s power, “temporarily sinking his rank” to appear as its “sole witness” (BB, 105)—so that the power of the tribunal surrounds him—while at the same time “reserving to himself, as the one on whom ultimate accountability would rest, the right of maintaining a supervision of [the court]” (104)—thus wielding and directing its power. Likewise, although he claims merely to be an agent of the law (“For [the] law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible” [110]), his determination of the application of the rule is nothing less than a sovereign gesture, as Barbara Johnson makes clear:

Before deciding upon innocence and guilt, Vere must define and limit the frame of reference within which his decision is to be possible. . . . It is precisely this determination of the proper frame of reference that dictates the outcome of the decision; once Vere has defined his context, he has also in fact reached his verdict. The very choice of the conditions of judgment
itself constitutes a judgment.40

The very “givenness” or “inscription of a universal law,” as Howard Caygill writes, “itself has to be given.”41 The judgment Vere exercises in limiting the “frame of reference” is analogous to the judgment that “gives” the universal. Vere does not straightforwardly “submit his will to the law,” to adapt Burke’s phrase. At least, his submission to the rule is anything but simple. The complications involved here go to the core of Vere’s Burkeanism and of Burke’s definition of unjustifiable revolution (“necessity” neither “first” nor “supreme”) as that which makes “submission” into an “object of choice.” Marc Redfield, analyzing the Reflections in the idiom of Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, points out that Burke’s crucial claim on necessity (“[N]ecessity is no exception to the rule”) actually “holds only because the rule, as always in the space of sovereign exception, has become indistinguishable from its suspension at the moment of sovereign decision or choice. How can one know whether one is choosing or whether necessity has chosen? Whether one has ‘submitted to necessity’ or whether one has exceeded law, reason, and order in the moment of choice. . . ?”42 In short, Vere, like Burke before him, tries to cover over that an act of (sovereign) decision is bound up with the norm, that human decision haunts any natural or divine principle that supposedly lies at the (arbitrary) founding of the political order,43 and that the unique power of the sovereign to declare where the law does not apply is continuous with the power to declare where it does.

The key to understanding Vere’s complex act of decision and attendant blurring

---

40 Johnson, “Melville’s Fist,” 103, emphasis in original.
42 Redfield, “War on Terror,” 156-57. See also Agamben, Homo Sacer; and Schmitt, Political Theology.
43 On this point, see Brenkman, “Imagination of Power, 67.
of submission and freedom--the key, perhaps, to understanding Melville’s investigation of the inner workings of emergency decision and necessity--lies in Vere’s crucial term “vowed responsibility.” It is according to this vowed responsibility, as we have seen, that Vere submits himself to higher law (both juridical and moral) even against his own deep sense of “compassion” (BB, 110). But what this means is that the obligation that “governs” Vere’s decision is not externally derived. The obligation is not, finally, derived from “martial law” (110) or indeed the “compulsion” of “military necessity” (113), or in general the laws or commands of King and War. Rather, as the “responsibility” to “adhere to” these authorities (111, emphases added), the obligation that actually governs his decision is self-imposed, if not self-generated:

> When war is declared are we the commissioned fighters previously consulted? 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 instances, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it.

(110-11)

With these words, Vere activates what Eve Sedgwick calls a “threshold between acts done on the responsibility of the person and acts done in the name of the state, between the official and the unofficial.” For Vere, Sedgwick continues, martial duty dictates “a rhetorical tour de force by which the line between the official and the unofficial can be
danced across back and forth, back and forth in a breathtakingly sustained choreography of the liminal, giving the authority of stern collective judgment and the common weal to what are, after all, the startlingly specific sensory hungers of a single man.”

Vere’s circumvention of what Sedgwick calls “strict official procedure” (according to which the decision would be postponed until the fleet had rejoined the squadron and the case could be referred to the admiral) allows him to impose his singular will through the channel of the tribunal. And yet from one perspective, Vere actually denies his desires or “hungers” (“For the compassion, how can I otherwise than share it? But, mindful of paramount obligations, I strive against scruples that may tend to enervate decision” [110]) in a conflation of “acts done on the responsibility of the person” (what we could also call individual “choice”) and “acts done in the name of the state” (“submission”). Vere’s notion of vowed responsibility differentiates, only to render indistinct, these different types of act. The officers’ vowed responsibility means that “however pitilessly that law may operate” through them, they must nevertheless “adhere to it and administer it.” The vowed responsibility implies a solemn and binding promise—a promise to “do acts in the name of the state,” to modify Sedgwick’s phrase slightly. (We have analyzed this meaning of responsibility as Burkean obedience or “corporate fealty.”) But the promise by definition can be breached “on the responsibility of the person.” The choice must be made each time to “adhere to” the law in all its unconditional majesty. One must in a sense choose, not just to “administer” the law “operating through” oneself, but to have no choice in the matter. One must choose that “rule” to which necessity is “no exception.”

In thus choosing to be subjected, Vere’s motive is autonomous. His will is “not

---

merely subject to the law but subject to it in such a way that it must be viewed as also
giving the law to itself.” To the degree that this formulation from the *Groundwork of
the Metaphysics of Morals* applies to the conditions that Vere sets and the way he sets them, we may read those conditions, read the structure of Vere’s argument for a particular judicial decision, as analogous to the categorical imperative of Kant’s philosophy of moral action (“act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” [G, 31]), that principle concerning what we ought unconditionally to do. Kant argues that for an action to have genuine moral worth, it must proceed not from desire or as a means to another end, but strictly from duty, which Kant further defines as the necessity of an action from respect for law alone. Objectively speaking, action is determined by the law; subjectively speaking, by pure respect for that law (see 10-14). Vere jettisons inclination as a factor in the court’s decision: “But your scruples: do they move as in a dusk? Challenge them” (BB, 110). Indeed, he implicitly jettisons as a factor any idea of higher or even merely other conditions than vowed responsibility to martial duty to determine the course of action. The officers’ allegiance is to the King and, at some level, to War, perhaps even to a power defined as, or associated with, the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind; but nowhere does Vere indicate that they adhere to that allegiance because it is

---


in turn the will of the King, or the will of a deity, or for personal reward, or out of personal desire, or on any other condition. Vowed responsibility corresponds to the notion of an absolute necessity beyond or before empirical conditions. In Kant’s formulation,

Everyone must grant that a law, if it is to hold morally, that is, as a ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity . . . [and] that . . . the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason. (G, 2-3)

Vowed responsibility is the name for an ethical principle and imperative that, in Vere’s argument, is law in itself, law as absolute necessity, transcending the particulars of the situation, individual desires, feelings, and personal motives. (Vowed responsibility is, in this sense, perhaps even an analogy for the determination of pure reason alone.) And this absolutely necessary law is one that Vere gives to himself. In arguing, to put it in Kant’s terms, that the court ought to decide the case according to a principle “necessary of itself, without reference to another end” (25), a principle that has “no interest as its basis” and which is therefore “unconditional” (25), Vere, I claim, argues at the same time for adhering to “a will,” his own, “that is itself the supreme lawgiver” (40). Deciding upon what takes the form of an unconditional order, choosing to be bound, Vere, we could say, repudiates moral reasoning (casuists or moralists) precisely according to the constraints of an implied ethical theory, and institutes violence as the unconditional demand of an ethical obligation which he himself legislates and determines must prevail.

Billy Budd stages the perpetual recapture of the (decisionist) exception within the
(moral) norm. At the same time, the schism in Vere’s rhetoric suggests the possibility of an unraveling. Consider that Burke would never have accepted a “ground of obligation” sought “a priori simply in concepts of pure reason.” For Burke, praxis was the very essence of moral thinking—but a rejection of moral theory. “Political reason,” he writes in the Reflections, “is a computing principle; adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing, morally and not metaphysically or mathematically, true moral denominations” (R, 153, emphasis added). (As Jeffrey Stout puts it, moral thinking for Burke is an “essentially practical affair, properly guided by experience . . . and practical wisdom, not by an ethical theory.”) Political reason, then, calculates “moral denominations” by any means but “metaphysically or mathematically” (153). (To cite Vere’s formulation again, “[F]or us here . . . it is a case practical, and under martial law practically to be dealt with.”)

Whereas for Kant, “even the least admixture” of desires and impulses “infringes upon [the] . . . strength and superiority” of the source of morality (i.e., pure reason), just as “anything at all empirical as a condition in a mathematical demonstration degrades and destroys its dignity and force,” as he writes in the second Critique, Vere: “If our judgments approve the war, that is but coincidence. . . . Our vowed responsibility is in this.” Vere’s argument for the necessity of political violence invokes yet complicates the Burkean argument, rejecting moral reasoning from fixed theoretical principles in favour of the pragmatic application of the rule through a submission to the external higher order, but all according to a self-legislated ethical obligation based on the expulsion of

---

pragmatic, contingent, or, as Kant termed them, “pathologically determinable” factors.\textsuperscript{49} His argument also invokes and complicates Kant, determining an ethicopolitical obligation (“vowed responsibility”) as strict adherence to duty without reference to subjective desire, but doing so for the purposes of expediency within a particular political and historical situation, and arguably on personal motives. Vere’s eloquent and, prima facie, reasoned performance attempts to blend the antithetical, if related, natural law idioms of two major, contemporary late-eighteenth-century thinkers who were, in their quite different ways, antirevolutionary in outlook.\textsuperscript{50}

Such areas of tension in the “moment of decision” suggest an impulse toward critique on Melville’s part. Although there is no clear, definitive textual basis on which to argue that Melville seeks deliberately to open up an alternative politics as such, a sense of this seems to hang over the text in Melville’s combination of tragedy and teasing paradox. Like the series of cascading paradoxes that surround Billy’s violent strike, the contradictions and tensions in Vere’s address destabilize the claim for the absoluteness of the necessity of violence.

\* \* \*

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Unlike Burke, Kant of course sided with the French Revolution, supporting republicanism and reform. But in theoretical terms he repudiated the right of resistance, stating, For a people to be authorized to resist, there would have to be a public law permitting it to resist, that is, the highest legislation would have to contain a provision that it is not the highest and that makes the people, as subject, by one and the same judgment sovereign over him to whom it is subject. This is self-contradictory, and the contradiction is evident as soon as one asks who is to be the judge in this dispute between people and sovereign. . . . For it is then apparent that the people wants to be the judge in its own suit.” (The Metaphysics of Morals, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy series Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 97)
At the end of chapter 21, the chapter of Vere’s address, the narrator compares Billy’s conviction and sentence of execution to the historical affair of the U.S. brig-of-war Somers, the 1842 execution of suspected “mutineers designing the seizure of the brig” (BB, 113). Part of Melville’s point with this reference seems to be that the political or ideological forces he investigates in what is ostensibly a story “restricted . . . to the inner life of one particular ship and the career of an individual sailor” (54) in the French revolutionary wars are perfectly active in Melville’s America and, presumably, elsewhere. But there is something more to the reference than that, even aside from Melville’s well-known personal investment in the story of the Somers. The narrator explains that the “circumstances on board the Somers were different from those on board the Bellipotent,” but that “the urgency felt, well-warranted or otherwise, was much the same” (114, emphasis added). The narrator’s equivocation here is telling. The sophisticated ideological fictions that Melville detected behind the justifications for the terrifying political violence of revolution and repression provoked language as tricky and volatile, and allegorism as intricate, as anything in his corpus, for he was responding to solutions to security crisis that he knew carried the aura of inevitability and with which he was very far from being at ease.


---. “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority.’” Translated by Mary


Drichel, Simone. “‘Signposts to a world that is not even mentioned’: Janet Frame’s Ethical Transcendence.” In Cronin and Drichel, Frameworks, 181-212.


Frame, Janet. An Angel at My Table. In Frame, Complete Autobiography, 143-287.


---. To the Is-Land. In Frame, Complete Autobiography, 3-140.


Haakonssen, Kund. “German Natural Law.” In Goldie and Wokler, Cambridge History, 251-90.


Ross, Lawrence F. J. World War III and the Southern Hemisphere: a discussion of what must be done now, to achieve survival and peace in the Southern Hemisphere, in the event of World War III. N.p.: June 1, 1963.


Selwyn, George Augustus. The True Use of Warnings: A Sermon Preached after the Earthquake at Wellington, in November, 1848. Wellington: St. John’s College Press, 1849.


Wenke, John. “Melville’s Indirection: Billy Budd, the Genetic Text, and ‘the deadly space between.’” In Yannella, New Essays on Billy Budd, 114-44.


