



The Exceptionalist State and the State of Exception ; Herman Melville's Billy Budd, Sailor (Rethinking Theory)

William V. Spanos

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Critics predominantly view Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* as a "testament of acceptance," the work of a man who had become politically conservative in his last years. William V. Spanos disagrees, arguing that the novella was not only a politically radical critique of American exceptionalism but also an eerie preview of the state of exception employed, most recently, by the George W. Bush administration in the post-9/11 War on Terror. While *Billy Budd, Sailor* is ostensibly about the Napoleonic Wars, Spanos contends that it is at heart a cautionary tale addressed to the American public as the country prepared to extend its westward expansion into the Pacific Ocean by way of establishing a global imperial navy. Through a close, symptomatic reading of Melville's text, Spanos rescues from critical oblivion the pervasive, dense, and decisive details that disclose the consequences of normalizing the state of exception -- namely, the transformation of the criminal into the policeman (Claggart) and of the political human being into the disposable reserve that can be killed with impunity (Billy Budd). What this shows, Spanos demonstrates, is that Melville's uncanny attunement to the dark side of the American exceptionalism myth enabled him to foresee its threat to the very core of democracy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This view, Spanos believes, anticipates the state of exception theory that has emerged in the recent work of Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Judith Butler, and Jacques Ranciere, among other critical theorists. *The Exceptionalist State and the State of Exception* illustrates that Melville, in his own time, was aware of the negative consequences of the deeply inscribed exceptionalist American identity and recognized the essential domestic and foreign policy issues that inform the country's national security program today.

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