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William V. Spanos. *The Exceptionalist State and the State of Exception: Herman Melville's* Billy Budd, Sailor. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. 210pp.

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William V. Spanos's latest book on Herman Melville's fiction draws important connections between three global historical moments, each roughly one hundred years apart. The first is the global historical context of Melville's posthumous novella, the imperialist rivalry and naval warfare between Britain and post-revolutionary France as well as the mutinies within the British Royal Navy at the close of the eighteenth century. The second is what Spanos calls the "historical occasion" during which Melville wrote *Billy Budd*, a moment when America embraced its role as an imperial power abroad in the late nineteenth century. Lastly, the third historical moment might be called Spanos's own "historical occasion," i.e. the post-9/11 United States and the so-called "War on Terror" that legitimates the current state of exception, or the suspension of constitutional laws and rights in the name of preserving those same laws and rights. Spanos makes a compelling case that Melville's last work uses the historical moment of Napoleonic Wars that frames the "inside narrative" of Billy Budd's execution as an example of the state of exception at work on board the HMS *Bellipotenet* to warn against U.S. global aspirations of imperial expansion overseas in the late nineteenth century and also serving as a "proleptic" text pointing to the current state of exception and exceptional security mobilized by the George W. Bush administration and critically analyzed by theorists such as Giorgio Agamben. Overall, the book provides a rigorous example of how to account for the correspondences among different historical contexts—the one that frames the moment within a

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literary work, the one in which the writer produces a text, and the one in which the scholar critically reads the previous two—as a method of literary and cultural criticism.

Central to this argument situating *Billy Budd* in this multi-layered historical context is a critical reading exposing the ideological assumptions of ostensibly disinterested scholarship on the novella of Americanists and Melvillians throughout much of the twentieth century. This previous scholarship, Spanos laments, has not only misunderstood, but rather has either "willfully disregarded" or "labored to render marginal" the global historical context of the fictional narrative as well as moment in which Melville wrote the story. (2) This "criticism of acceptance" school claims that *Billy Budd* represents a significant break from Melville's earlier, more overtly political work from the 1850s by expressing a "mature" aesthetic sensibility rejecting political conflict and embracing universal, liberal humanism. Implicit in this critique is also the unwillingness of these earlier scholars to consider their own historical context of the Cold War era that shaped New Critical and Myth-Symbol scholars in the United States.

In contrast, Spanos aligns his reading of the novella with the "criticism of resistance" school, arguing that there is continuity between the radical Melville of the 1850s and the late Melville of *Billy Budd*. To do so, he emphasizes the references to "the Great Mutiny" as a backdrop to the narrative that unfolds on the *Bellipotent* and also identifies references to nineteenth-century America in the narrative to argue that the narrator of the story is an American in the late nineteenth century looking back a century earlier to warn of the arbitrary power exercised in the name of security. The "criticism of acceptance" school either ignores or rejects these textual details pointing up these different global historical contexts and the connections between them.

The global historical context of the Great Mutiny of 1797 anticipates and cautions against later American enactments of the state of exception and empire-building, both at the end of the nineteenth century and, for Spanos, the beginning of the twenty-first century. Spanos claims the closing of the continental frontier in the late nineteenth century inaugurates a moment of "relentless global imperial momentum" for the United States "had its immediate origins in the mid-1880s" and provides the principle motivation for Melville to write *Billy Budd*. (16) Yet some of the examples Spanos provides to account for this late nineteenth-century American context precede this "immediate origin" of the 1880s, disrupting the global-historical trajectory

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of continental to overseas expansion he relies on and reproduces. Contrary to his claim, United States overseas empire-building in the Pacific, on the west coast of Africa, and throughout the Caribbean has a much longer history that extends back before the Civil War. Nevertheless, Spanos offers an incisive case that with *Billy Budd*, in line with his earlier fiction from the 1850s, the elderly Melville left a powerful critique of American exceptionalism, an ideology that relies on spatial divisions of Old World and New World as well as temporal divisions of past, present, and future.