Necessity at Sea and the Narrative Imperative

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Herman Melville's *Bill Budd* tells the story of two killings at sea. The first is an accident: Billy does not intend the death of his shipmate. The second is an execution: the ship's drumhead court sentences Billy to be hanged from the yard arm. But within minutes of the first killing, Captain Vere has already declared 'the angel must hang'. Why is it necessary for angelic Billy to die? What is this 'must'? On one reading, it is the unavoidable, merciless letter of the law. On another reading, it is the demand of security, and the dispensability of freedom. On yet another reading, it is the primal exigency of sacrifice. And on a further reading, Billy 'must' hang because he cannot speak. For Billy stutters to badly that he cannot defend himself; he cannot account himself. The story is told by a fellow seafarer.

The imperative to give narrative shape to an event or a self can be empowering (even a birthright) and oppressive (even deathly). It can feel like a requisition, or it can feel essential. This paper traces various formulations of the necessity of story, from Homer through to Benjamin, Arendt and Agamben. And in doing so, it asks why the vital storyteller so often appears as a seafarer, and considers the sea as a paradigmatic scene of necessity.