

GARY GRIEVE-CARLSON

---

## “The House-top”: Melville’s Poem of Force

In early July 1863, northern armies won two pivotal battles that shifted the direction of the Civil War decisively in the Union’s favor: on July 4, Confederate troops surrendered Vicksburg, Mississippi, to Ulysses Grant, and control of the entire Mississippi River passed to the North, and on July 3, Union forces at Gettysburg stopped Robert Lee’s invasion of Pennsylvania. But victory is a funny thing. Lee managed to get his army across the Potomac River and back to Virginia, where it would fight for two more years. And on the morning of the same day that Lee crossed the Potomac—July 13—a series of bloody anti-draft riots broke out in Manhattan. In the course of these riots, which unfolded over five days, draft offices were burned down, arson and looting were rampant, the homes of well-known Republicans and abolitionists were attacked, African Americans were lynched and some of the corpses sexually mutilated, the Colored Orphan Asylum on Fifth Avenue was burned down, policemen were beaten beyond recognition, factories were closed, telegraph lines destroyed, railroad and streetcar tracks pulled up, bridges and ferry berths shut down, and over one hundred people were killed. Property losses were estimated at \$5 million. To support the overwhelmed police, federal troops from the harbor forts, the Brooklyn Naval Yard, and West Point entered the city on the second day of rioting, and five regiments were ordered back to the city from Pennsylvania, where they had been sent in support of Mead at Gettysburg. Early on the fifth day, the Seventh Regiment arrived and fought off the rioters in one final battle at Gramercy Park.<sup>1</sup>

Why did this happen? Before the victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg, it was not at all clear that the Union would win the war, and support for Lincoln was far from unanimous. In the 1862 elections, the Democrats (Lincoln's rivals) had gained thirty-five Congressional seats. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued in September 1862, had provoked heated debates in the North, and in New York particularly, many Democrats argued that freed blacks would come north and work for lower wages than whites, taking their jobs. To many working-class immigrants, fighting a war to free black men so that they could take jobs away from white men didn't seem sensible. In June 1863, freed blacks under police protection had been used as scab labor to break a New York longshoremen's strike (most of the strikers were Irish), and racism was linked with anti-war sentiment and class consciousness when the new draft law exempted anyone who could hire a substitute or pay a \$300 "commutation fee."

New York Democrats criticized the rioters' violence but understood their anger, while Republicans saw the riot as an act of treason and emphasized its racist aspects—this link between racism and sympathy for the Confederacy would be further emphasized on the day after the riots ended, when Robert Gould Shaw and the black soldiers of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry were massacred in the assault on Fort Wagner, in South Carolina. Where was Herman Melville politically at this time? His biographers don't agree. Stanton Garner argues that Melville was a conservative Democrat who preferred General McClellan to President Lincoln. Most of Melville's information on the War, says Garner, came from other conservative Democrats such as his brother Allan, and Melville must have sympathized with the rioters' grievances (32, 255). Robert Milder labels Melville a "moderate Democrat" who was not as conservative as most of his family or friends (44), while Daniel Aaron concedes that Melville "distrusted doctrinaire abolitionism," but claims that he "abominated slavery" and was "staunchly Unionist" (76, 77). Hershel Parker tells us that Melville's family "expressed all degrees of opinion on the war" (541).

Melville was in Massachusetts at the time of the riots, and he did not write "The House-top" until after the war's end, when the cause of the Union had been secured and the nation was busy forgetting the ways in which race, social class, and political ideology continued to divide it. This is a poem that does not forget those divisions, although not everybody sees it that way.

The most obvious source of critical disagreement on this poem concerns the narrator: who is he? And why does the poem's title emphasize his position on "the house-top"? Andrew Delbanco assumes that the narrator is Melville himself—"in

'The House-top' he imagined himself (he was in Pittsfield) on a roof during the New York City draft riots"—and stresses Melville's remoteness from the riot: "Having seen none of this with his own eyes, he depended on newspaper accounts, which he filtered through his memory of Aeneas standing on a roof in Troy as the Greeks advance upon the city. . ." (272). Stanton Garner, on the other hand, argues that the poem is an exercise in dramatic irony: its narrator is nothing like Aeneas, but rather a Radical Republican, "one of the privileged few free of conscription," who stands on his house-top, "a height too exalted to permit an understanding" of the riots, which from his point of view can reflect only "debased character, insubordination, [and] a perverse refusal to live within the restraints imposed by 'civil charms / And priestly spells'" (256-57). Garner's reading captures the speaker's characterization of the rioters as "rats" and his refusal to consider their grievances, as well as his apparent celebration of the military force used to put down the riots. However, Garner has trouble with the poem's final lines: why would a Radical Republican celebrate the "cynic tyrannies" of "honest kings"? In fact he misreads the final lines, claiming that the "riots" themselves imply a "grimy slur on the Republic's faith" in a human nature that is intrinsically "good"; however, the poem's syntax clearly states that the suppression of the riots, and not the riots themselves, implies the slur. Helen Vendler reads these lines more persuasively: the speaker is not a radical Republican, but rather someone who is dismayed by both the rioters and the military authorities, and his position on the house-top, far from impeding his understanding of the riots, allows him to see all sides of the question (591). Timothy Sweet emphasizes the narrator's shifting points of view, telling us that the narrator is "not a monological speaker" (187), and David DeVries and Hugh Egan go even further: instead of thinking of the speaker as a coherent character, we ought to read the poem as a "heteroglossic" composition of "competing philosophical discourses" (20, 31).

This speaker's conflicted response to the riots is echoed in the poem's curious structure. At first the rioters are described with animal imagery—"ship-rats / And rats of the wharves," or "tigers" who are "apt for ravage"—and the sound of the riot itself is compared to "a mixed surf / Of muffled sound." But the lexicon of the natural world blends with the lexicon of law: the riot is metonymically depicted in terms of one particular crime—arson—and the noise of the rioters in terms of one spiritual sin: atheism. Human nature is imagined as fundamentally brutal and violent at its deepest, primal levels, as something that must be controlled by law ("civil charms") or religion ("priestly spells"). When law and religion lose their power to induce "Fear" and "awe," then the "sway of self" takes over, and the result

is riotous violence. Given this depiction of the rioters, it is hardly surprising that the speaker cries “Hail” when he hears the rumble of the wall-shaking artillery brought against the rioters, or that he labels Draco “wise.” (Draco’s reputation is a result of his ascribing death as the penalty for an extremely broad range of crimes, hence the eponymous adjective “draconian”). Nor is it surprising that the narrator acknowledges that Draco’s “code” of extremely harsh law corroborates “Calvin’s creed,” which imagines human beings not only as full of original sin, but as utterly undeserving (without the intervention of God’s grace) of anything but eternal damnation. The federal soldiers who enter Manhattan to put down the riots do not come to “parley,” or to negotiate—they come to shoot and kill. If “kings” are “honest,” the speaker suggests, they acknowledge the Calvinist, Hobbesian truth of human nature, and know that its brutal impulses can be governed only by “tyrannies.” These tyrannies may be “cynic” in the sense of “cynical,” that is, they may pay lip service to Jeffersonian pieties, while reacting with draconian violence whenever their rule is challenged—or they may be “cynic” in the ethical sense of the ancient Greek philosophy that led to stoicism, which understood virtue strictly in terms of one’s capacity to control one’s nature. Melville was enough of an ironist, and may have been enough of a classicist, to know that *cynic* derives from the Greek *kynikos*, or “dog-like,” so that in one more layer of meaning, “dog-like” tyrannies of honest kings are loosed upon the “rats” of the wharves: each side is essentially brutal, and neither is fundamentally virtuous.

The poem’s apparent criticism of the rioters—“rats” who engage in “Arson”—and its “Hail” to “Wise Draco,” who “redeems” the city and earns its “thanks,” have led a number of readers to conclude, as Iver Bernstein does, that Melville “celebrated the military suppression of the draft riots as a simple victory for the forces of order” (71). Michael Rogin agrees, claiming that the rebellion against state power that Melville endorses in *White-jacket* is reversed in “The House-top,” where he endorses the state’s repressive power (266). Similarly, George Fredrickson writes that the Civil War had led Melville to believe that “the passions of the masses must be held in check by the strong hand of authority” (186).<sup>2</sup> But such readings ignore the poem’s final three and a half lines, in which the speaker points out that to endorse the violence of Draco and Calvin is to reject Jefferson’s republican faith in man’s inherent virtue and natural rights. Once again Helen Vendler gets it right: for “Melville’s tragic sense of history,” the violence of the War represents “a definitive break with the ethical promise of the United States,” and his poem clearly “ascribe[s] evil to both sides” (579, 583, 584).

Those final lines bring the poem to its thematic climax. Timothy Sweet notes that the image of the whip in the final word—"scourged"—functions as a synecdoche "for all repressive force" (188). It reminds us that slavery is the fundamental cause of the War, but it also raises the troubling question of whether violence can serve the cause of democracy. The town's devout thanks for its redemption at the hands of Draco's black artillery is ironic, for it clearly implies a "grimy slur" on the Republic's faith "that Man is naturally good" and "never to be scourged." The poem's final line alludes to Acts 22:25, in which the apostle Paul saves himself from a beating with this question: "And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said unto the centurion that stood by, Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman [i.e., a citizen], and uncondemned?" Timothy Sweet reminds us that in *White-Jacket*, after a long passage excoriating the practice of flogging in the U.S. Navy, Melville alludes to that same verse in Acts: "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman? asks the intrepid Apostle, well knowing, as a Roman citizen, that it was not. And now, eighteen hundred years after, is it lawful for you, my countrymen, to scourge a man that is an American?" The novel's narrator goes on to argue that the purported depravity of the typical sailor (like the purported depravity of the New York rioters in 1863) cannot justify the oppressive violence of flogging: "Depravity in the oppressed is no apology for the oppressor; but rather an additional stigma to him, as being, in a large degree, the effect, and not the cause and justification of oppression." For the narrator, flogging as practiced by the U.S. Navy violates both "the genius of the American Constitution" and "the Law of Nature" (496-99).<sup>3</sup>

In #51 of the Federalist Papers, Madison writes, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." Melville's speaker knows that men are not angels: they can act like rats, or dogs, or tigers, and if we trace their nature "whole æons back," we find a capacity for brutality that is never finally under control.<sup>4</sup> So the speaker knows that law, backed by force, is necessary. On the other hand, the speaker also knows that man is "naturally good," that alongside his capacity for violence lies a capacity for love, forgiveness, and reciprocity that reflects his creation in God's image. So men are not angels, but neither are they "rats" that should be "scourged" whenever they step out of line. Law is necessary, but law is not necessarily justice, and in fact the law can become an instrument of injustice. Melville's father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, was Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, and he suppressed his conscience, which told him that slavery was profoundly unjust, in order to enforce the law of the land, the Fugitive Slave Law. The 1863 draft law, which forced men to fight in a war that many believed was unjust, and which

exempted the wealthy from such service, may be taken as another example of law that does not square with justice.

In those final lines, the poem's narrator begins to recognize that the foundation of law is not justice, but simply force. All states assert a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, but the assertion of that monopoly is not grounded in justice; it is grounded simply in the state's power, its force.<sup>5</sup> In his Civil War poems, Walt Whitman imagines violence as a dreadful "spirit" that does its necessary work and then departs, and in a beautiful image Whitman describes "the sisters Death and Night [who] incessantly wash again, and ever again, this soil'd world."<sup>6</sup> But Whitman's vision is not finally tragic, for he believes that after the war, after the sisters have done their washing, we arrive at a place of genuine "reconciliation." Lincoln engages in the same kind of thinking: in the Second Inaugural, he imagines the Civil War as a kind of divine retribution, "the woe due to those by whom the offence [of slavery] came." And he continues, with the same scourging imagery that Melville uses at the end of his poem: "if God wills that [the war] continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.'" This is rhetoric in which violence is not only justifiable; it is divinely sanctioned and a necessary component of justice and reconciliation. Lincoln's argument is fundamentally no different from John Brown's famous last statement: "the crimes of this guilty, land: will never be purged away; but with Blood." In Brown's eyes, that argument justified his terrorism at Pottawatomie Creek, when he and his men pulled five pro-slavery men from their beds in the middle of the night and hacked them to death with broadswords. In Lincoln's eyes, that argument justified, indeed sanctified, the more than 600,000 casualties of the Civil War.

Melville's speaker initially welcomes the state-sanctioned violence of wise Draco, but he seems finally to realize that force, or violence, does not have the power to redeem or to reconcile—violence always corrupts those who try to use it in the service of justice. Our condition, as Melville sees it, is tragic: both the rioters and the soldiers, both the Union and the Confederacy, in trying to do the right thing ("as God gives us to see the right," as Lincoln puts it), do wrong. In her essay "*The Iliad*, or the Poem of Force," Simone Weil argues that the *Iliad* is not a glorification of war or warriors; instead, its theme is force, or violence, and she reads the poem as an illustration of the ways in which force violates and dehumanizes not only its victims but also those who employ it toward their ends. "The true hero, the true

subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force . . . the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to. . . . To define force—it is that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*” (163).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, “force” can “turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive,” and “Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates” (165, 171). The crushed are easy to identify; the intoxicated include both the rioters as well as the soldiers and police who put down the riot—whoever holds the upper hand at a particular moment—and also those, like the poem’s narrator at certain points, who support the use of violence in accomplishing their desired ends.

“The House-top” is Melville’s “poem of force,” his recognition that war is never redemptive. The New Testament reference in the poem’s final line leads me to suspect in its title an allusion to the Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. This comes to pass in AD 70, when the Romans finally re-take Jerusalem and destroy the second temple in response to the Jewish revolt that began in AD 66 and would not end until the mass suicide at Masada in AD 73. In the course of this rebellion, the first and greatest of the Jewish revolts against Rome, presumed rebels were killed by the Romans, presumed collaborators were killed by Jewish rebels, and everyone was pressured to take one side or the other, to commit to the violence. Jesus prophesies that “nation will rise against nation . . . And brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death” (Mark 13: 8, 12).<sup>8</sup> He advises his disciples that when this war breaks out, “let him who is on the housetop not go down” (Mark 13: 15). Don’t take sides. Don’t fight back. Don’t be fooled into believing that violence can ever be redemptive. Simone Weil writes that men who believe they can use violence in support of justice are always “swept away, blinded, by the very force [they] imagined [they] could handle . . . deformed by the weight of the force [they submit] to.” I am not arguing that Melville was a pacifist, or that he opposed the Civil War, or that he believed that federal troops should not have been called in to suppress the draft riots. Weil was no pacifist either, and did what she could to support the Allies in World War II. Given the tragic aspect of the human condition, to stay on the housetop may be impossible in certain situations, even for someone who takes Christ as seriously as Melville does. Nevertheless, Melville’s speaker in “The House-top” seems to recognize, at the poem’s end, that to go down from the housetop is inevitably to entangle oneself

in violence that only makes the promise of democracy and human rights even more remote than it already is.

## Notes

1. Two very good accounts of the riots are Adrian Cook's *The Armies of the Streets* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1974) and Iver Bernstein's *The New York City Draft Riots* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990). Laurie Robertson-Lorant's *Melville: A Biography* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1996) also offers a good account.
2. For Fredrickson, "the Melville of 1865 was a disillusioned democrat, who had seen through what he considered the absurd pretensions of American democracy. He had come to agree with men like [Henry W.] Bellows and [Horace] Bushnell that the principal need of society is the maintenance of order, an end best accomplished by the combined forces of law and religion. Melville's distrust of the democratic masses was buttressed by his belief in a form of original sin" (185).
3. The U.S. Congress outlawed flogging in 1861, but some officers continued the practice. See, for example, Evan S. Connell, *Son of the Morning Star: Custer and the Little Bighorn* (New York: Harper & Row/Perennial, 1985): 120.
4. Melville's note to line 16 (ending "whole eons back in nature") reads as follows: "'I dare not write the horrible and inconceivable atrocities committed,' says Froissart, in alluding to the remarkable sedition in France during his time. The like may be hinted of some proceedings of the draft-rioters." Froissart was a fourteenth-century historian (and poet) describing a 1358 peasant rebellion in which the rebels murdered and raped members of land-owning families. That violent rebellion was put down with even greater violence.
5. This argument is persuasively developed in Deak Nabers' "'Victory of Law': Melville and Reconstruction" in *American Literature* 75.1 (March 2003): 1-30. See also Jacques Derrida's essay "Force of Law," trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992): 3-67, and Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999): 277-300.
6. The poems are "Spirit Whose Work Is Done" and "Reconciliation," from the *Drum-Taps* collection in Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Riverside, 1959): 228-31.
7. Weil's essay was originally published in French in the December 1940-January 1941 issue of *Cahiers du Sud*. Mary McCarthy's English translation appeared in Dwight Macdonald's journal *politics* in November 1945.

8. This speech by Jesus, known as "The Little Apocalypse," is his longest in the Gospel of Mark. Whether or not Melville knew Josephus's *The Jewish War*, which is the only surviving history of the rebellion, he certainly knew the Gospel of Mark, which many scholars believe was written during the last year of that war. Another ancient text that Melville may have known, Thucydides's history of the Peloponnesian War, recounts the horrible civil conflicts that began in Corcyra in 427 BC, in which brutal massacres occurred. In language that could as easily be applied to the New York draft riots, Thucydides writes that "human nature, always ready to offend even where laws exist, showed itself proudly in its true colours, as something incapable of controlling passion, insubordinate to the idea of justice, the enemy of anything superior to itself" (III.82).

## Works Cited

- Aaron, Daniel. *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War*. New York: Knopf, 1973. Print.
- Delbanco, Andrew. *Melville: His World and Work*. New York: Knopf, 2005. Print.
- DeVries, David, and Hugh Egan. "'Entangled Rhyme': A Dialogic Reading of Melville's Battle-Pieces." *Leviathan* 9.3 (2007): 17-33. Print.
- Fredrickson, George. *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965. Print.
- Garner, Stanton. *The Civil War World of Herman Melville*. Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1993. Print.
- Melville, Herman. *Redburn, White-Jacket, and Moby-Dick*. New York: The Library of America, 1983. Print.
- Milder, Robert. "Herman Melville: A Brief Biography." *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*. Ed. Giles Gunn. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. 17-58. Print.
- Parker, Hershel. *Herman Melville: A Biography, vol. 2, 1851-1891*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002. Print.
- Rogin, Michael. *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985. Print.
- Sweet, Timothy. *Traces of War: Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of the Union*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990. Print.
- Vendler, Helen. "Melville and the Lyric of History." *The Southern Review* 35.3 (1999): 579-94.
- Weil, Simone. "*The Iliad* or The Poem of Force." *Simone Weil: An Anthology*. Ed. Sian Miles. New York: Grove Press, 1986. 162-95. Print.

---

**GARY GRIEVE-CARLSON** is Professor of English and Director of General Education at Lebanon Valley College. His most recent publications include essays on Charles Olson, Robert Penn Warren, Carolyn Forché, Robert Frost, and Arthur Miller. He lives in Annville, Pennsylvania, with his wife and three children.