

MELVILLE'S
 HISTORICAL IMAGINATION IN
 "THE HOUSE-TOP"

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One of the most original, puzzling, and enduring poems in *Battle-Pieces*, "The House-top" is a concise yet allusive portrayal of what are believed to be the New York City Draft Riots of July 1863. In composing "The House-top," Herman Melville called upon not only contemporary journalistic coverage of the Draft Riots but also a variety of literary works such as the Bible, Jean Froissart's *Chronicles*, several Shakespeare plays, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Robert Southey's *The Curse of Kehama*, and William Wordsworth's *The Excursion*. Melville's felicity in echoing so many different authors, often in a single image or phrase, rescues the poem from being too clearly indebted to any one author. Examining his allusions demonstrates that the reading of the poem as a straightforward, pessimistic indictment of the rioters is no more apt or satisfying than the one that sees it as a piece of dramatic irony by an ambivalent author.

In one sense, Melville's originality has encouraged the ongoing debate about the meaning of his poem. Yet its apparent lack of concrete historical detail has also contributed to the problem of its interpretation. While it is dated "July, 1863" and presumably set in New York City, it does not identify the city (major draft riots occurred in other cities in July 1863). Strange entities ("tawny tigers," "red Arson") and mythical characters (Sirius, Draco, Nature's Roman) enter into and form the subject of this night piece. Also, the speaker of the poem lambasts the rioters and seems to salute the artillery of the state, even though it is unclear whether Melville himself sympathized with the rioters' complaints and was uneasy about the draconian measures taken against them.

What some see as an ambivalent or noncommittal attitude reflects a doubleness that is neither ironic nor straightforward but is, rather, grounded in allusion and metaphor. This double aesthetic deals in ambiguities and demonstrates a nuanced view of the conflict without being partisan, gesturing to social realities while taking upon itself the mysteries of reality. Melville's imagination reveals a tension between the particular events that inspired the poem and the abstract ideas they suggested. This reading of the poem is inspired by Samuel Otter's idea of "verbal doubleness" in several of Melville's writings that sets him apart from the "*deus ex machina* of irony often used to redeem him from the taint of his culture or from the too-easy ambivalence used to describe an author said to see 'both sides.'"¹ A figure of dual mindedness, the narrator of "The House-top" cannot endure as a pure outsider, despite his desire to be anchored to the life of the mind.

This undertaking seeks to add to the apprehension and appreciation of Melville's allusive practice as it relates to his historical imagination in "The House-top." It is the nature of the poem's style to balance the intricate details of the Draft Riots against the literary imagery and rhetorical devices borrowed from the author's readings. Although understanding the poem requires a consideration of Melville's political and economic context, it is important to recognize his attempt to distance himself from that context by engaging in his literary tradition. These two components reflect the dueling impulses of what he himself described to Nathaniel Hawthorne as a belief in "unconditional democracy" as well as "a dislike to all mankind—in the mass."² In echoing various sources, recognizing their legitimacy, and elevating the subject to a work of art, "The House-top" exposes the tragic problems underlying civil unrest: the innate depravity of humanity and the lack of thought in the citizenry. The angst of the poem comes from the realization that freedom and security cannot coexist—that virtue is impractical in a depraved world. Melville makes the poem an iteration of civil unrest in a series of battles that will continue to be fought, even in the years and decades after the Civil War.³ The narrator's exhausted presentation—with its tension between intellectual sympathy and a sense of horror—is jarring, his internal strife expressing itself as musical discord. He is troubled by what he has seen and by what his poem is saying.

To date, critics of "The House-top" have focused less on judg-

ing Melville's allusions and more on judging his political beliefs, the poem's straightforwardness versus its irony, or its pessimism as opposed to its ambiguity. A convincing example of the so-called literal reading is William Shurr's brief analysis, in *The Mystery of Iniquity*, of Melville's "earnest" pessimism in "The House-top."⁴ Similarly, Larry Reynolds has bluntly stated that "The House-top" exemplifies "conservative views of man and society that could not be much darker."⁵ Contrasted with these readings, Stanton Garner's *The Civil War World of Herman Melville* argues that the poem "is a dramatic monologue in which Herman does not speak in his own voice but through a dramatic character whose opinions differ markedly from his own." The "polish" of the poem's speaker makes Garner suspect irony and an ambiguity of attitudes.⁶

Suspecting irony is not an assertive reading, and a poem that contains ambiguities does not necessarily entail its author's ambiguity of attitudes. Yet since Garner's monumental study, no substantial examination of Melville's allusions has confirmed or countered his reading of "The House-top" or other similar readings, such as the one proposed by David DeVries and Hugh Egan regarding the narrator's shifting points of view and "heteroglossic spirit" of "competing discourses."⁷ Even though Melville's political context, his allusions, and a close reading of the poem do not suggest irony or competing philosophies, the literalist readings have downplayed the forcefulness of his imagination—namely, the surprising yet illuminating combinations of words and ideas. His tactfulness as a poet allows at once a wide variety of allusions as well as a humane attentiveness to a difficult situation.

Writing "The House-top" required a historical imagination, for during the Draft Riots Melville was not in New York but in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where locals were lighting off celebratory fireworks to welcome the victorious Berkshire regiment home from Gettysburg. Eventually he gathered the basic story of the riots from newspapers, periodicals, and family and friends. On Saturday, July 11, 1863, a group of Irish laborers and volunteer firemen gathered at the draft board at the Ninth District headquarters on Third Avenue and Forty-Sixth Street to protest the Enrollment Act of March 3, 1863, which granted a deferral from serving in the Union Army for a \$300 commutation fee. By the end of that day, officials drew the names of several mem-

bers of the “Black Joke” Engine Company Number 33 who believed that they should have been exempt from conscription. On Monday morning, they returned to the Ninth District headquarters, stormed the office, and set the building on fire. They then attacked policemen and several high-ranking police officials.

With the draft office blazing, a group of men from the Invalid Corps—many still recovering from battle injuries—met the mob on Forty-Third Street and withered under a barrage of stones. The mob dispersed throughout the east side of the city while many Black Jokes, who supported burning only the draft office, attempted to put out fires in adjacent buildings. “The failure of the authorities to respond faster, the ridiculously easy victories over the police and the Invalids encouraged many who might have remained mere spectators to join the mob,” Adrian Cook has concluded.⁸ Many of those spectators used the opportunity to air grievances concerning not only the draft (from which black men were exempt because they were not considered to be citizens) but also labor conditions, Republican policies, and abolitionists.⁹

The Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863 had intensified the economic concerns and racism among Irish and German laborers in New York City to such an extent that “nowhere in the North were Negroes and abolitionists more hated than in New York City.”¹⁰ The leader of the riots was reported to be John Urkhardt Andrews, a lawyer from Virginia who had encouraged resistance to the draft at the Cooper Institute before the riots. Incidentally, Andrews addressed the rioters from a rooftop, saying, “if necessary, I will become your leader,” according to a July 14 report in the *New York Daily News*. After the first day of rioting, many of the Black Jokes who had initiated the riot disengaged and returned home to protect their neighbors from the rioting they had unleashed.¹¹ By midweek, the violence was reduced to a small group of Irish laborers who attracted other young and bigoted industrial workers.¹² In five days, the rioters had looted stores, destroyed telegraph lines, ransacked the office of the *New York Times*, lynched African Americans on the street, and burned down the Colored Orphan Asylum on Fifth Avenue. Federal troops arrived after the second day of rioting, and the Seventh Regiment engaged in a final skirmish at Gramercy Park on July 16, dispersing the mob. New York City was soon restored to order under the leadership of General John A. Dix, a close friend of the Melville and Gansevoort families.

The riots resulted in an estimated \$5 million in damages and about a hundred deaths, mostly of rioters.

Contemporary accounts of the riots in newspapers and periodicals show how Melville's poem reimagines the intricacy of the Draft Riots. *Harper's Weekly*, which he consulted while writing *Battle-Pieces*, featured its first editorial in the aftermath of the riots on July 25, stating that mobs "can only be radically cured by grape and canister." Many New Yorkers had questioned Governor Horatio Seymour's and Mayor George Opdyke's leadership due to widespread corruption, and many members of the upper classes were not interested in city politics.¹³ Many Irish laborers viewed the law as an abstract enemy, believing they could effect change only through violence.

The exasperation of the *Harper's* editors—and in turn the speaker in "The House-top"—reflects the municipal government's inability to protect its citizens and to negotiate with the Irish, who as staunch Jeffersonian-Jacksonian Democrats had become rancorous toward the war effort due to the arrests of prominent Catholics and many other wartime Republican policies.¹⁴ Melville may have noticed that on August 1, *Harper's* featured a column questioning whether the Draft Riots were a popular uprising: "In this country what class of citizens is to be especially described as 'the people'?" *Harper's* argued that the rioters had forfeited their freedom, a position that helps contextualize the language of citizenship in "The House-top." Even though the narrator reflects the status quo view of well-to-do New Yorkers (like Melville himself), the poem's doubleness abstracts the Draft Riots by balancing sources historical and artistic. The result is a poem disturbed and disturbing.

"The House-top" is mindful of historical and literary influences. An encapsulation of this comes from Melville's reading of Matthew Arnold's sonnet "To a Friend," which like "The House-top" is set in the context of class conflict and revolutionary upheaval. Rather than aligning himself with the progressive zeal of his friend and fellow poet Arthur Hugh Clough, Arnold asks in the first line, "Who prop, thou ask'st, in these bad days, my mind?," and calls upon classical antiquity to find an ennobling balance between withdrawal and commitment with a broad philosophical perspective. Melville's annotation at the end of this sonnet identifies Arnold's allusions—"Homer, Epictetus, Sophocles"—and demonstrates his ability to notice three kinds

of allusion at play in this short poem: epic poetry, stoic philosophy, and tragedy.¹⁵ In “The House-top,” a troubled mind follows Arnold’s example by seeking out similar sources to ground his tragic sense of the Draft Riots with philosophical skepticism about human goodness, political freedom, and progress.

Many scholars have attended to the poem’s biblical resonances, yet its setting could have been inspired by *Harper’s Weekly*, as is revealed by several accounts about the happenings on the housetops and rooftops during the New York riots. One witness was quoted in the August 1 issue as saying that “dropping shots were coming from the windows and roofs of houses,” which were “filled by assassins, and from all the windows and housetops shots, stones, and brickbats were thrown with great rapidity . . . The insurgents had gained the windows and housetops of nearly all the buildings in that vicinity.” Melville’s narrator uses a housetop to witness both sides of the battle—the rioters and the authorities. In addition to the rioters bombarding troops from the top of buildings, black residents were seen jumping from windows of burning buildings. Other residents skipped between houses using clotheslines or hopped between rooftops to find safety.

Still, the journalistic emphasis on housetops connects to biblical imagery: the King James Version also contains many instances of house-tops, such as Psalm 102:7, which Melville underlined and side-lined in his Bible: “I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top.”¹⁶ He may also have known that the housetop could be a site for preaching difficult truths, as in Luke 12:3: “and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.” Melville used the housetop as a fraught site for brooding or rioting or truth telling itself, so it is clear that he carefully chose the setting of the poem. “The House-top” accounts for the activities on the housetops reported in *Harper’s* while pointing to the biblical motif of meditating on the housetop during troubled times.

The punchy opening phrase of the poem—“No sleep”—has a protracted trajectory of influence that is particularly difficult to pinpoint.¹⁷ Compelling parallels to the Bible and several Shakespeare plays undermine the idea that Melville was indebted to only one author. Hennig Cohen’s notes to *Battle-Pieces* point to lines in five Shakespeare plays, including not only *Macbeth’s* “sleep no more” but also “To die: to sleep; / No more” in *Hamlet*.¹⁸ Cohen does not cite

other compelling instances, such as Queen Margaret's curse on the Duke of Gloucester early in *Richard III*: "No sleep close up that deadly eye of thine, / Unless it be whilst some tormenting dream / Affrights thee with a hell of ugly devils!" In Melville, Shakespeare's curse of "no sleep" amid political turmoil and acts of sedition coexists with the biblical imagery of the housetops.

Robert Duggan has argued that "No sleep" comes from book 10 of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and that Melville sought to "rewrite" book 10. In this episode, Wordsworth likens the violence of the French Revolution to the curse in *Macbeth*, "sleep no more," further elevating the treachery of the Jacobin Reign of Terror.¹⁹ In Duggan's view, Melville nods to Wordsworth in the opening of "The House-top" and then proceeds to deconstruct the Romantic idealism presented in *The Prelude* by showing how the rabble turns human nature into a destructive force. Yet by singling out *The Prelude* as an influence, Duggan oversimplifies the poem's force and overlooks its ambitious allusiveness.

Following the tension of sleeplessness and political unrest, the phrase "dense oppression" speaks to the state of poverty that fueled the riots as well as the narrator's anguish. The conditions of the Irish were in some respects worse than those of free African Americans, so the rioters had some justification to oppose a war that benefited those who they thought were taking their jobs. Stanton Garner points out that at this time 1,600 families possessed 60 percent of New York City's income, whereas 58 percent of the population "were packed into slums" in fifteen wards of lower Manhattan "that rivaled the rookeries of London in squalor and filth."²⁰ Those who could not afford to live in tenements downtown squatted in the woods and crags of mid-Manhattan (now Central Park) or lodged in rat-infested cellars near the docks on the East River. In "The House-top," then, the "dense oppression" that "binds the brain" is as much the experience of the poem's speaker as it is of the rioters. The seemingly vitriolic phrase "ship-rats . . . And rats of the wharves" was a common figure of speech that reflected the dockhands' living conditions.

Yet the "dense oppression" is also densely written; it elaborates on the pervading "sultriness," a natural force that "binds the brain" of both the narrator and the town itself. This recalls a passage in book 8 of *Paradise Lost* (a book that Melville heavily marked), where Adam's "soft oppression seiz'd / My droused sense" after he lay in "balmy

sweat” from the heat of the sun.²¹ That Melville’s sense of oppression “binds the brain” suggests his familiar prisoner motif; it acknowledges and yet counters Milton’s sunny “soft oppression” and “droused sense” with the directness of “No sleep” and a night piece with “matted shades”—a terrifying intuition of something wrong behind the shadows. This bespeaks Melville’s allusive tact: the language interweaves various oppressions—of the poet’s mind, the people’s political situation, and nature itself—with the burden of poetic tradition in the backdrop.

Melville’s phrase “tawny tigers” acknowledges the real conditions of the rioters as well as the rumors of the sneaks sponsoring the rioters. The word “apt” suggests some sympathy with the animalistic reaction of rioting in that it is “appropriate” because the “ravage” results from the “sultriness” and “oppression.” The rioters’ oppression may be due to wealthy sneaks or merely to their own wretched living conditions. Melville’s likening the “dense oppression” to “tawny tigers . . . Vexing their blood and making apt for ravage” could be an echo of either Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* (“Out Tawny-Coates, out Scarlet Hypocrite”) or Matthew Arnold’s “tawny-throated” nightingale in *Philomela*. Melville probably knew that “tawny” could evoke a beastly nature or a sublime voice of nature as well as heraldry, privilege, or priestly garment. William Blake’s “The Tyger” lurks in the background, too, with its “burning” metaphor in the backdrop of political rebellion. Melville’s use of “matted shades” illustrates not only the troubling darkness but also the pent-up violence in Blake’s “Tyger” with a simile that recalls the “tiger heart that pants beneath” the ocean in *Moby-Dick*.²² Violence pervades the summer air even before it is expressed; it is a part of nature.

The conditions of civic chaos early in the poem illustrate another combination of historical resonance and literary imagery such as is seen in Robert Southey’s epic poem *The Curse of Kehama*, which bears some resemblance to the opening lines of “The House-top.”²³ Southey’s poem begins with a funeral procession: “Midnight, and yet no eye / Through all the Imperial City clos’d in sleep!” It begins as a night piece, with interruptions, for “clos’d in sleep” ends in a full stop (the hushed exclamation of the sleepless), just like Melville’s “No sleep.” Southey’s scene on the streets appears at once celebratory and uncontrollable, on the verge of mindless destruction. The

motley scene of the parade has “ten thousand torches [which] flame and flare / Upon the midnight air,” and “the fiery sky” gives way to “one long thunder-peal” from thousands of voices that “Pour their wild wailing” in a deafening way, whereas Melville’s “mixed surf / Of muffled sound” exudes less pomp and more fear.²⁴

Melville’s “red Arson” complements the rioters “Vexing their blood” to ravage the city, a dual image that compares to Kehama’s son Arvalan, who mirrors the redness of the fire on the streets with the “crimson canopy / Which o’er his cheek the reddening shade hath shed.”²⁵ Later in *The Curse of Kehama*, the peasant Ladurlad is cursed with insomnia because he killed Arvalan in order to protect a peasant girl. In book 5, Arvalan (now a demon) appears to the peasant girl with a “Tyger’s hungry howl.”²⁶ Southey’s death march, the power-hungry priest Kehama, the peasants’ rebellion, and the heightened emotions all relate to Melville’s characters in “The House-top.” “The House-top” harkens back to the mythology, wildness, and symbolism in Southey’s strange poem of foreignness and violence, yet it addresses a real moment of contemporary history about the problems of integrating foreigners into society.

The exotic landscape and simile construction in lines 5 and 6 (“the roofof desert spreads / Vacant as Libya”) allude to the conclusion to book 12 of *Paradise Lost*, in which the archangel Michael takes the “brandish’d sword of God” and with “vapour as the Libyan air adust, / Began to parch that temperate clime.”²⁷ Milton’s “adust” is synonymous with “scorched,” which, coupled with Michael’s parching Eden, feeds into Melville’s ninth line, “Yonder, where parching Sirius set in drought.” Though all the world was before Adam and Eve, their sins led to the destruction of Eden; so, too, does Melville’s narrator suggest that the moral corruption in New York could lead to blight like the one ending *Paradise Lost*. That Melville calls attention to an Abrahamic scene with the Greek Sirius (the “swart-star” in *Lycidas*, which he read carefully) shows his indebtedness to Milton’s style as well as his playfulness with mythology.²⁸

Melville’s conceit that “man rebounds whole aeons back in nature” affirms Milton’s sense of innate depravity while questioning the viability of the social order during wartime. The “roofof desert” imagery is also a pastoral invocation, harking back to Melville’s simile in “The Conflict of Convictions,” where “The People spread like a weedy

grass”—which follows God’s decree that all humans are born to suffer, and that “strong Necessity / Surges, and heaps Time’s strand with wrecks.”²⁹ The housetop is a site where each group deserves equal measures of admiration and pity, for a “strong Necessity” has made their suffering so.

When the muffled sound in the distance gives way to the “Atheist roar of riot,” the rioters’ violation of a tender social contract illustrates a verbal doubling of the two worst racially charged incidents of the Draft Riots. The “red Arson” not only connects to the vexed blood in line 4, it also accounts for the burning of the Colored Orphan Asylum as well as the lynching of African Americans. A report in *Harper’s* relayed that rioters attacked a “negro cartman” and proceeded to hang him, then, “procuring long sticks, they tied rags and straw to the ends of them, and with these torches they danced around their victim, setting fire to his clothes, and burning him almost to a cinder.”³⁰ It is hard to imagine Melville’s desire to create a piece of dramatic irony after reading that account. Rather, he would probably have seen it as an unadulterated expression of an innate atavism. “Red Arson” is also bloody arson; it is bad blood boiling over and the taking of blood from black victims.

The historical context behind “red Arson” casts doubt on Stanton Garner’s argument that, *pace* the narrator, Melville disapproved of the government’s treatment of the rioters: “He deplored the satanic impulses that had been aroused in the mob, but was not the entire nation afflicted by the same evil?”³¹ The nation was affected by an immoral blight, the irresolvable contradiction that an egalitarian democracy was built on slavery—a fact that Melville captures in “Misgivings” as “the world’s fairest hope linked with man’s foulest crime”—but Garner disregards Melville’s belief that the state ought to mitigate the kinds of evils he read about in *Harper’s*.³² The “Atheist roar” also recalls a subtle example of Melville’s disillusionment with sudden political progress, channeling Edmund Burke’s polemic against the “atheistical fanaticism” of revolutionaries.³³

The “red Arson,” then, leads to two senses of “sway” in the lines:

... All civil charms
And priestly spells which late held hearts in awe—
Fear-bound, subjected to a better sway
Than sway of self; these like a dream dissolve.

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Whereas reports in *Harper's Weekly* initially indicated that the rioters' burning of the Colored Orphan Asylum "inaugurated their sway," then on August 8 lamented the "times in our history when bigoted prejudice has had sway," Melville used "sway" as a noun and a verb, respectively. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as a noun "sway" has a range of connotations, from physical ("force or pressure") to sociological ("inclination or bias") to political ("power of rule or command"). The word itself sways throughout *Battle-Pieces*, such as the "crowds like seas that sway" in "The Fall of Richmond" and "Our rival Roses warred for Sway— / For Sway, but named the name of Right" in "The Battle of Stone River, Tennessee." One sense of "sway" may also acknowledge the lynchings on the streets of New York. "The Portent" has John Brown "*Hanging from the beam, / Slowly swaying (such the law)*."³⁴ The parenthetical "*such the law*" pits the sway of power against the futility implied in the phrase. In "The House-top," the "sway of self" that leads men to commit violence is a verbal reminder of the literal swaying of a lynched man. Yet the "better sway" is a complicated—and not entirely positive, as it is under "priestly spells"—political and social pressure that has dissolved with disastrous consequences.

Melville's statement that "man rebounds whole aeons back in nature" connects Miltonic depravity and fatalism to Jean Froissart's account of the 1358 Jacquerie uprising during the Hundred Years' War (from Sir John Bourchier's translation of the *Chronicles*). Cody Marrs has written that Melville's note shows that "solidity's uncertainty flows from historical patterns of disintegration and collapse."³⁵ Attacking and killing African Americans in New York are indistinguishable from the peasant revolution in France; these acts illustrate Melville's motif of civilization's tendency to uncivilize itself. A similar use of allusion as abstraction appears in "The Whiteness of the Whale," where Ishmael muses on "the art of human malice," and recalls another passage in Froissart.³⁶

With Melville's myriad echoes surveyed thus far, it is difficult to agree with Robert Duggan's claim that Melville alluded primarily to *The Prelude* in "The House-top." No surviving evidence indicates that he had read *The Prelude* at all before publishing *Battle-Pieces*.³⁷ His first encounter with it was probably in 1869, when he scored passages quoted in Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism*. Melville did

read Wordsworth's *Complete Poetical Works* (which did not include *The Prelude*) before and after the Civil War. In 1977, Thomas Hefferman announced the discovery of Melville's copy of *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* with ample marginalia.³⁸ Hershel Parker has written that Melville first read *The Complete Poetical Works* in the early 1850s, when he probably focused on *The Excursion* while composing *Pierre*.³⁹ During his voyage around Cape Horn in 1860, he wrote the ship's coordinates in the flyleaf of his copy of Wordsworth: "Pacific Ocean, Sep 14th 1860 / 5° 60" N.L."⁴⁰

Parker has suggested that by the early 1860s "Wordsworth was the poet most prominent in Melville's mind as his modern predecessor, the one he envied for his tenure as poet laureate and other honors and was contemptuous of for Wordsworth's own contempt for ordinary people." Some well-documented annotations in William Hazlitt's *Lectures on the English Poets* illustrate Melville's ambivalence toward Wordsworth, such as the one calling him "that contemptible man (tho' good poet, in his department)."⁴¹ Much of Melville's attitude was due to the fact that late in life, the poet laureate of England saw "nothing but darkness, disorder, and misery in the immediate prospect" of liberty and democracy.⁴²

Yet Melville's deference to and gratitude for the artistry of Wordsworth's *The Excursion* show in "The House-top." That eight of its last eleven lines allude to marked passages in *The Excursion* suggests that Wordsworth helped Melville finish the poem and make it his own rather than a political poem or an aloof exercise in Romantic mimesis. In the preface to *The Excursion*, Melville double-scored the passage that Wordsworth inserted from the conclusion to the first book of *The Recluse*:

... Not Chaos, not
The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
Nor aught of blinder vacancy—scooped out
By help of dreams, can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon us often when we look
Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man,
My haunt, and the main region of my Song.⁴³

In the preface, Melville also scored Wordsworth's condemnation of the city, as when he claims that the poet who travels to "see ill sights / Of

madding passions mutually inflamed” must eventually be “Brooding above the fierce confederate storm / Of sorrow, barricadoed evermore / Within the walls of Cities.”⁴⁴ Melville adopts Wordsworth’s familiar theme of the poet witnessing the mob from above as well as the prisoner motif with the “confederate storm” within the city walls. Melville’s sleepless narrator takes Wordsworth’s “haunt” to be a haunted trap.

Book 3 of *The Excursion* likely affected Melville’s conclusion to “The House-top.” Wordsworth’s narrator, the Poet, presents a dialogue in which the Solitary debates the Wanderer on the truth of religion and the nature of humankind. Melville scored the passage where the disenchanted Solitary tells the Wanderer: “Hail Contemplation! from the stately towers, / Reared by the industrious hand of human art / To lift thee high above the misty air / And turbulence of murmuring cities vast.”⁴⁵ Melville’s man on the housetop stands above the “turbulence” of the rabble. Like Wordsworth’s Solitary, he contemplates how the human “industrious hand” in the spirit of “progress” has led the individual away from nature and peace. Melville’s “rumble” works against Wordsworth’s ironic “Contemplation”: “Hail to the low dull rumble, dull and dead, / And ponderous drag that shakes the wall.”

Both *The Excursion* and “The House-top” meditate on the nature of power and the loss of faith resulting from uninhibited liberty. The Solitary’s disenchantment follows from the Jacobin Reign of Terror: speaking of the Old World, he asks, “Where now that boasted liberty? No welcome / From unknown Objects I received.” Then he notices a “Volume—as a compass for the soul— / Revered among the Nations,” whose guidance disappoints him:

... but the infallible support
Of faith was wanting. Tell me, why refused
To One by storms annoyed and adverse winds;
Perplexed with currents; of his weakness sick;
Of vain endeavours tired; and by his own,
And by his Nature’s, ignorance, dismayed!⁴⁶

Melville underlined the words “his own” and “his Nature’s,” the spirit of which appears in the last two lines of “The House-top” with their emphasis on a corrupted self as against Nature. Wordsworth’s skepticism of a boasted liberty, coupled with his lack of faith, gives Melville “The grimy slur on the Republic’s faith implied.” Yet examining

Wordsworth's poem also reveals Melville's powerful silence: while Wordsworth's narrator exclaims "dismayed!," Melville's narrator is quite dismayed without having to use the word. Melville laments his fellow citizens' loss of civility and lack of awareness, suggesting the impracticability of virtue in a fragmented world.

Later in book 3 of *The Excursion*, the Solitary finally journeys to the New World, where he finds as little comfort as he did in the old one. Seeing "Big Passions strutting on a petty stage," he narrates:

Yet, in the very centre of the crowd,
To keep the secret of a poignant scorn,
How'er to airy Demons suitable,
Of all unsocial courses, is least fit
For the gross spirit of Mankind, — the one
That soonest fails to please, and quickest turns
Into vexation. — Let us, then, I said,
Leave this unknit Republic to the scourge
Of her own passions.⁴⁷

Wordsworth's Solitary then makes haste for the West, where dignified "Man abides, / Primeval Nature's Child." Melville underlined "To keep the secret of a poignant scorn" (which points to the unacknowledged slur on humanity's natural goodness) and "unknit Republic to the scourge / Of her own passions" and placed an "X" in the right margin followed by "186 | & | 186." The annotation, which was partially trimmed away during the book's rebinding, is probably a dating of the start of the Civil War and the year of the Draft Riots or of the end of the Civil War.

Wordsworth's observations linguistically and thematically connect to "The House-top": "Man" and "Nature" inhibiting goodness and liberty, the presence of vexation, and the pairing of demonic and unsocial behavior. The "unknit Republic" anticipates the dissolution in "The House-top" surrounding Wise Draco:

He comes, nor parlies; and the Town, redeemed,
Gives thanks devout; nor, being thankful, heeds
The grimy slur on the Republic's faith implied,
Which holds that Man is naturally good,
And — more — is Nature's Roman, never to be scourged.⁴⁸

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Melville begins and ends his poem in negation: “No sleep” and “never to be scourged,” an imperative yet sleepy conclusion with a passive construction. The end of “The House-top” reverts to its beginning, illustrating a motif of recurrence—a lack of consolation. Reading Wordsworth’s portrayal of the mob mentality—“unsocial courses,” “gross spirit of Mankind” (“gross” being both large and grimy), “vexation,” and extreme “passions”—Melville knew that all these ideas exemplified the conditions underlying riots.

Gesturing to his memories of the madness unleashed after the French Revolution, Wordsworth essentially predicts the American Civil War. This prophecy, coupled with the poem’s relevance to the Draft Riots, intrigued Melville enough that he recorded two dates from the 1860s in the margin. But when Melville alludes, he also departs: the narrator does not flee to find a pure primeval Man, and whereas Wordsworth complains about a Republic, Melville shifts attention to an inscrutable Nature. In this way he parallels Thomas Carlyle’s commentary in *The French Revolution* that mobs are “a genuine outburst of Nature; issuing from, or communicating with, the deepest deep of Nature.”⁴⁹ Even though Carlyle dismisses the rioters with erudite vitriol, and Wordsworth’s character walks away (“Let us . . . Leave”), Melville’s “there—and there” and “never to be” have more immediacy and concern, suggesting no escape.

Melville also follows Wordsworth’s example in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to find “similitude in dissimilitude” in his poem. This idea is no less powerful than is its application in book 5 of *The Excursion*: “Nature had framed them both, and both were marked / By circumstance, with intermixture fine / Of contrast and resemblance.” Melville left several marginal scores on the page with that passage, including these apt lines: “The good and evil are our own; and we / Are that which we would contemplate from far.”⁵⁰ Amplitude, distance, and contemplation complement his humane concern for the evils that are self-created—or half-created?—and yet seemingly predetermined. Wordsworth’s “similitude in dissimilitude” is also a doubling of poetry’s relation to history. Melville scored a passage in the “Essay Supplementary to the Preface” that poetry ought to “treat of things not as they *are*, but as they *appear*; not as they exist in themselves, but as they *seem* to exist to the *senses* and to the *passions*.”⁵¹ That he left at least one marking on each page of Wordsworth’s “Essay” shows

how his historical imagination was indebted to Wordsworth's idea that poetry is historically aware, full of visionary ambition, and jarring at the same time. The word "jarring" gestures to Melville's noting the word "jars" in the place of "shakes" in line 18 of his postpublication copy of *Battle-Pieces*.⁵² The editors of his *Published Poems* retained "shakes" because it was not clear that Melville meant to delete it, but "jars" nevertheless evokes the discord within (and surrounding) the troubled narrator.

The puzzling character of Wise Draco also illustrates Melville's inventiveness. Stanton Garner explains how the Draco sobriquet was as negative then as it is now: "Thus Draco, or Dix, is wise only to one who believes, contrary to the principles on which the nation was founded, in controlling supposedly free men through terror."⁵³ Yet it is faulty to assume that Draco is General Dix: he was not appointed to oversee the military's Department of the East in New York City until after the riots, so he was not the leader of the "midnight roll." Iver Bernstein's more nuanced view suggests that Melville's Draco "displayed two very different tempers to the city" in its middle and upper classes, respectively—the conservatives who sympathized with the rioters and treated them "with a mixture of force and conciliation" (and who ignored the violent treatment of African Americans) and the radicals who called for martial law, thinking the rioters were treasonous, ignorant paupers who deserved harsh punishment.⁵⁴

Melville places Draco in the context of the "cynic tyrannies of honest kings"—not a value judgment but a fatalistic understanding that Draco's will to control the situation, while honestly conceived, reveals an inscrutable darkness within. One could just as easily say that the Black Jokes honestly attempted a limited protest to the draft but unintentionally encouraged a raging mob. "The House-top" outfoxes Wordsworth's treatment of the people by presenting what Rosanna Warren has called Melville's "tragic knowledge" that "tolerates the void and accepts death."⁵⁵ In "The House-top," Melville's fascination with individual greatness and egalitarianism frustrates him because they both seem unattainable. The ending of the poem leaves the impression that the narrator reluctantly accepts Nature and understands only the tragedy of the situation.

In choosing "A Night Piece" as the subtitle to "The House-top," Melville may have been thinking about Wordsworth's "A Night-Piece,"

in which “the Vision closes” and the mind “Is left to muse upon the solemn scene.”⁵⁶ Yet Melville takes what Keats called Wordsworth’s “egotistical sublime” and strips out the ego, as is evident in the dissolving “sway of self.”⁵⁷ Melville’s own night piece is not only similar to Wordsworth’s, but with Wordsworth he also joins a dialogue with lines 81 to 84 of Abraham Cowley’s *Davideis* :

There is a place deep, wondrous deep below,
Which genuine *Night* and *Horror* does o’reflow;
No bound controls th’ unwearied space, but *Hell*
Endless as those dire *pains* that in it dwell.⁵⁸

As imagined from a housetop, Melville restores the gravity of these lines and lifts the horror out of the deep.

“The House-top” moves beyond Melville’s predecessors in terms of structure and sound. It does not rhyme like Southey’s poem, and unlike the fairly strict unrhymed iambic pentameter in *The Excursion*, it employs the English heroic line: some short lines are lengthened to pentameter in order to create thoughtful repetition (“there—and there,” “rats—ship-rats,” “dull rumble, dull and dead”), and the last line, in hexameter, is the longest and most ponderous. The poem departs from Romantic lyricism: that almost every line is interrupted by a dash, semicolon, or full stop gives the poem a jagged rhythm and illustrates the frustration of stopping the riots (it gives one pause). It also features long adverbs (“fitfully,” “Balefully”) and polysyllabic words (“sultriness,” “corroborating,” “artillery”) to increase intensity before the final line, which does not include a word with more than two syllables and departs from the previous lines by using passive voice (which casts doubt on who has agency). Melville’s prosody is more akin to Milton’s than to Wordsworth’s. In his copy of Milton’s *Poetical Works*, Melville noted at the end of *Paradise Regained* that the “intensifying of intense phrases” in the “blank verse” of *Paradise Lost* illuminates the “*subject*.”⁵⁹ By “*subject*” he meant the musings on the “grand thought” that would concern him in “The House-top.” Also, apropos of his fatalism in “The House-top,” Melville’s annotation in book 7 of *Paradise Lost* calls the teleological idea of human advancement toward the divine “A grand thought, tho fanciful,” which he evokes with the rebounding phrase “back in nature.”⁶⁰

The blank verse in “The House-top” also features intriguing sounds:

“He comes, nor parlies” parallels “the Town, redeemed . . . nor, being thankful, heeds” (and features the assonance of “parlies,” “redeemed,” and “heeds”). Melville’s use of “parley” (to truce or discuss terms) can be easily confused with “parlay” (to bet or invest), a near homonym that hints at the ways in which negotiations with aggrieved groups involve risky bets and compromised resources (financially and politically). In choosing not to parley, Wise Draco parlays his power. These structural aspects of doubleness, from the repetition of words to the play of parallelisms and suggestive sounds, reveal a distinct complexity in “The House-top.”

Riots lack the clarity of battles, and “The House-top” leaves many questions unanswered about why they keep happening and how to prevent them. During the Draft Riots, Lincoln chose not to declare martial law and deferred to elite Democrats such as Dix, showing New Yorkers that the city would not be entirely controlled by the Republican purists who viewed the riots as an opportunity to “reconstruct” the city.⁶¹ This reflects the “micropolitics” of the Draft Riots—that is, the cumulative effect of tactics and transgressions by Republican purists, Peace Democrats, War Democrats, and Irish workers in a time when oppositional politics compromised an already delicate social order.⁶² That New York City was neither completely democratic nor socially controlled by law and order provides essential context for explaining why Melville had grounds to believe in the impracticability of virtue in society.⁶³ “The House-top” departs from the wavering “Yea” and “Nay” of its companion piece from earlier in the collection, “The Conflict of Convictions,” and anticipates the doubleness in “The Apparition” that “Solidity’s a crust” covering the burning core below. The rhetorical question concluding that poem also applies to the Draft Riots: “All may go well for many a year, / But who can think without a fear / Of horrors that happen so?”⁶⁴ That “The House-top” is written in the present tense suggests that such explosions of unrest will continue to happen.

The artistic success of “The House-top” illustrates Melville’s desire to fashion a dignified work of art about the Draft Riots that contributes to the tradition of historical poetry on rebellion and ungoverned human nature. Melville acts as a sympathetic witness to a social order (a lower-class immigrant population) to which he could never belong, and his poem attempts to situate that social order within a

comfortable context: art. The poem's dual core of historical and literary inheritances offers philosophical complexity to an event while distancing itself and its author from the event's particularities. "The House-top" is a fabrication about power, governmental and spiritual, showing that the disunity of the antebellum United States reflected a fundamental disunity in human nature, something that would not be resolved by one brief and violent riot or one long and devastating war.