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God and the Critics of Melville

ACCORDING TO PROFESSOR LAWRENCE THOMPSON, HERMAN MELVILLE devoted a lifetime’s creative output to stating and restating the proposition that God is evil. In *Melville’s Quarrel with God*, Mr. Thompson sees this proposition as the essence of both *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd*, Melville’s two most famous novels. First, as to *Moby Dick*, Mr. Thompson says (*Quarrel*, p. 185): “Ahab’s story dramatizes the conviction Melville shared with the young Shelley of *Queen Mab*: God is evil.” And second, with respect to *Billy Budd*, Melville’s last work, Thompson says (*Quarrel*, p. 322): “Melville came to the end of his life still harping on the notion that the world was put together wrong and that God was to blame.” Put succinctly, Thompson argues that Captain Ahab is a man brutally exterminated while trying to redress the injustice God has inflicted upon him, while Captain Vere, in *Billy Budd*, represents an unjust Christian God sadistically executing a perfectly innocent “son.” Supplementing such critical exegesis and often used as headnotes to Thompson’s chapters are random citations from Melville’s peripheral writings, such as Melville’s use of Christ’s words in *Clarel*—“My God, My God, forsakest Me?”—and letters from Melville to Hawthorne: “The reason the mass of men fear God, and at bottom dislike Him, is because they rather distrust His heart, and fancy Him all brain like a watch.”

The argument against God is not particularly new or startling, despite the posture of dark conspiracy which Thompson discovers under Melville’s innocent surface. Often, in fact, it has been deeply devout men who have made the argument against God most persuasively. Witness Aeschylus, for instance, who traces Orestes’ guilt for matricide straight back to the king of the gods in the *Eumenides*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Furies:</th>
<th>Did you kill your mother?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orestes:</td>
<td>I cannot deny it. Yes, I did.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furies:</td>
<td>On whose persuasion, whose advice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orestes:</td>
<td>Apollo’s. He is witness that his oracle commanded me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apollo:</td>
<td>I never yet, from my oracular seat, pronounced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>For man, woman, or city any word which Zeus,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Olympian Father, had not formally prescribed.</td>
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Following this revelation, Aeschylus hurriedly clangs the lid on the investigation. So in the end Athena simply suppresses the angry Furies by threats of force. After all, she can enlist on her side the H-bomb monopoly of the ancient world, Zeus's thunderbolt: "You call on Justice: I rely on Zeus. What need/To reason further? I alone among the gods/Know the sealed chamber's keys where Zeus's thunderbolt/Is stored."
The Book of Job likewise raises the issue of God's injustice to man and solves that issue largely by parading so awesome a vision of God's power and wisdom and creativity before Job that finally he can only shrink into insignificance and say, "Behold, I am vile" (Job XL: 4)—though by normal human standards he is not vile.

So the argument against God is neither new nor particularly heretical. My objection to Mr. Thompson's book, then, does not rest on grounds of piety. It rests simply on the fact that Thompson's thesis is not true. All the evidence—both the central, such as Melville's treatment of his two sea captains, and the peripheral, such as the material in Melville's poems—stands against it. I should like to document that evidence at once. Let us begin with Captain Ahab.

Captain Ahab is a negative Transcendentalist. That is, he accepts Emerson's precept in *Nature* that "behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present," but unlike the high priest of American Transcendentalism, Ahab would insist that that Spirit is evil. And so, setting out with Emerson's "confidence in the unsearched might of man," (*The American Scholar*) Ahab wants to destroy that ultimate source of all suffering, the evil God.

But Captain Ahab's quarrel with God is not Herman Melville's. On the contrary, Melville sharply criticizes the attitudes Ahab embodies. Abundant proof of this statement may be found both in *Moby Dick* and outside the novel. How does Captain Ahab stand, for example, in the light of Melville's moral judgment in "The New Rosicrucians"?

*For all the preacher's din*
*There is no mortal sin—*
*No, none to us but Malice!*

Ishmael, we know, is saved precisely because he repudiates his initial malice. At first, he had fully yielded his feelings to Ahab's frenzied hatred of Moby Dick: "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs... oaths of violence and revenge," (Chapter 41, "Moby Dick") But in "A Squeeze of the Hand," (Chapter 94) Ishmael, now fully given over to "an abounding, affectionate, friendly loving feeling," expressly repudiates the oath of vengeance and the malice behind it: "I forgot all about our
horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and heart of it; ... while bathing in that bath, I felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever.”

Ahab, by contrast, does not come off so well when judged by the standard of malice. Not only in the larger events, such as his pursuit of the whale itself or his repudiation of Pip and the Rachel’s captain, but even in the smallest details Ahab is the man whose malice has made him inhuman. “Heartlessness” is the most negative term in Melville’s vocabulary: what most horrified Ishmael in contemplating “The Whiteness of the Whale” was the “heartless voids and immensities of the universe” when nature is viewed atheistically, as a mechanism behind which is nothing, not even a Spirit who is evil. To judge by the standard of “heartlessness,” then, it is most revealing that when Ahab orders “a complete man, after a desirable pattern” in talking to his carpenter, he orders “a quarter of an acre of fine brains” but “no heart at all.” (Chapter 108, “Ahab and the Carpenter”; emphasis mine) Captain Ahab would seem subject to Melville’s severe disapproval here, unless we submit to Mr. Thompson’s argument that Ahab’s heartlessness is God’s fault, seeing that God made Captain Ahab.

But let us consider Thompson’s argument more closely for a moment. On the one hand, Thompson sees Melville as identifying with Ahab, the Promethean rebel against God: “Like his own Captain Ahab, he remained a defiant rebel, even in the face of death”. (Quarrel, p. 425) Melville would seem to be at one with the Romantic poets in this respect: “Like Blake, he was inclined ... to glory in man’s Prometheanism. He implied as much in a pertinent latter to Hawthorne: ‘I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head!’ ” (Quarrel, p. 35)

But here we encounter contradictions. If Melville favored the heart—“To the dogs with the head!”—how can he identify with Ahab, the man who wants mankind reconstructed so as to have a quarter acre of brains and “no heart at all”? Furthermore, if Melville “was inclined ... to glory in man’s Prometheanism,” why does he satirize Prometheanism by having Ahab call his carpenter “Prometheus”—the carpenter who shares Ahab’s own heartlessness, that most negative of character traits? “For nothing was this man more remarkable, than for a certain impersonal stolidity ... this half-horrible stolidity in him, involving, too, as it appeared, an all-ramifying heartlessness.” (Chapter 107, “The Carpenter”) This carpenter has the same stolidity and heartlessness, we may

2 Melville himself would seem to be guilty of malice according to Lawrance Thompson’s Melville’s Quarrel with God (Princeton, New Jersey, 1952, p. 414): “Melville ... took comfort and delight in ... deceiving those readers whom he hated.” Could this hater of readers be the same Herman Melville who said the only sin is malice?
assume, that makes Ahab order a new man with no heart at all, and that earlier made Ahab compare himself to a locomotive, likewise with no heart at all: "Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents' beds, I rush! Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!" (Chapter 37, "Sunset") Certainly, no merely human warmth or responsibility proves an obstacle to Ahab's "iron way"—not Starbuck's pleas nor Pip's nor even the memory of his own wife and child.

It would seem, then, that Melville criticizes his Ahab rather than identifies with him. But Mr. Thompson has the perfect strategy for handling this contradiction: have it both ways. Thus, in the Promethean conflict between God and man, Ahab represents both man—when Ahab is being heroic and high-minded—and God, when Ahab is being tyrannical and heartless. So Ahab both defies God—"Ahab heroically and bravely and tragically defies God" (Quarrel, p. 233)—and is God: "Melville . . . stressed his desire to let the Pequod serve as a microcosm or emblem of the world. . . . Then Ahab, as captain of this microcosm briefly becomes (emblematically and ironically) a representation of absolute power, or of God." (Quarrel, p. 181) It is a very neat way to win an argument, and also a very old way. I believe it is called the "good on our side" technique: all that is good in Ahab is accredited to man, who is good; all that is bad is ascribed to God, who is evil. Clearly enough, it is not easy for God to hold his own against this sort of prosecution.

But now for the other sea captain, Billy Budd's Captain Vere—the one who is supposed to represent an unjust and sadistic Christian God. Seeing that Billy Budd has been made into a movie popular enough to get a write-up in Life magazine—a write-up in which Mr. Thompson's views figure prominently—let us consider how millions of Life readers were advised to interpret the novel:

Princeton's Professor Lawrance Thompson, in Melville's Quarrel with God, maintains that the book is a veiled attack on Calvinist Christianity. Moreover, says Thompson, Billy Budd is tinged with bitter satire. In his innocence and submission to the Captain, Billy is a boob. He is likened to Voltaire's foolish hero, Candide, who in the midst of hideous disaster declares optimistically that he is living in "the best of all possible worlds." And Captain Vere, who may represent Melville's concept of the Christian God, is a cruel, bumbling overlord who strikes without justice.

Life, December 7, 1962, p. 132)

3 Life's summary is concise and accurate. The comparison of Billy to Candide appears in Quarrel, p. 347, and the idea that the book's narrator is stupid ap-
Now it is immediately evident to even a casual reader of the novel that Captain Vere is by no means to be considered all bad. When Claggart presents his false accusations, for example, Captain Vere threatens to hang not the accused but the accuser: “Do you come to me, master at arms, with so foggy a tale? . . . Stay, heed what you speak. Just now, and in a case like this, there is a yard-arm-end for the false-witness.” (Chapter 19) The ensuing confrontation between Billy and Claggart is arranged, moreover, not to indict Billy but to clear him: “If Claggart was a false witness, that closed the affair. And therefore before trying the accusation, he would first practically test the accuser.” And even though we may reject Vere’s reasons for sentencing Billy, we can hardly consider a man cruel and villainous who suffers more than the boy he has condemned to die:

The first to encounter Captain Vere in the act of leaving the compartment was the senior Lieutenant. The face he beheld, for the moment one expressive of the agony of the strong, was to that officer . . . a startling revelation. That the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation was apparently indicated. (Chapter 23)

Other passages could be cited, but need not be, because Mr. Thompson freely admits that many a time Captain Vere seems to be sympathetically considered. But here is where Mr. Thompson plays one of the strangest trump cards in modern criticism: in order to nullify all the evidence in Captain Vere’s favor, Thompson turns on the narrator of the novel and makes him out to be a stupid, unfeeling fellow. What he (the narrator) says about characters and issues we can disregard as moronic foolishness—except, of course, in those rare moments of insight when the narrator says something to indicate that God is evil.

So Mr. Thompson’s entire argument concerning Billy Budd depends upon our accepting the narrator as the target of Melvillian irony—as though this narrator were on a par with Swift’s speaker in A Modest Proposal or with the speaker in Jason’s section of The Sound and the Fury. This bold strategy, it will be seen at once, has the virtue of allowing Mr. Thompson to decide what parts of the narrative to accept as Melville’s own truth and what parts to reject as “irony.” Unfortunately, it also has the weakness of being wholly unreasonable. The narrator displays too many of Melville’s own well-known characteristics to allow for a meaningful difference of identity between them. The serious, simple,
straightforward tone; the intricately wrought texture of Biblical symbolism; the extensive references to Melville's favorite writers—Milton, Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Montaigne, Plato, the Hebrew prophets; the comprehensiveness of perspective, which allows the omniscient narrator even some sympathy for Claggart ("Then would Claggart look like the man of sorrows"), much as Milton nearly sympathized with Satan; the concern with momentous political-moral-theological issues, such as the French Revolution and the "mystery of iniquity"—all these features show a breadth and complexity of intellect and emotion on the narrator's part which would identify him with Melville himself, and which would certainly seem incompatible with Thompson's representation of the narrator as a stupid, insensitive fellow.

Aside from its unreasonableness, I might add, Mr. Thompson's gambit is not particularly flattering to Herman Melville. If, as Mr. Thompson asserts, Melville had to entrust the narration of this story to a stupid, insensitive speaker so as to hide his (Melville's) heretical feelings—that is, his alleged attack on the Christian God—then this was an extraordinarily timid, pussy-footing sort of writer indeed in an age when everybody from Thomas Huxley to Mark Twain was frankly trampling down the old certitudes. When we consider, too, that as long ago as *Mardi* (1849), Melville had openly fought out the issue of atheism within his divided psyche ("And who shall say that when I die, the whole universe won't die out with me?")—it would seem most unlikely that, with most of his family deceased, he should resort to all manner of masks and intrigues to hide his real views, as though he were fearfully loathe to shock his late Victorian public. This was the public whom he did not consider spiritual enough to be susceptible to shock in any case, as he implies when he describes the "mystery of iniquity" in Claggart in terms not of Biblical references but classical, on the grounds that a reading public which insists on "some authority not liable to the charge of being tainted with the Biblical element" might yet accept the authority of Plato. (Chapter 11)

Not all the narrator's observations, in Thompson's view, are ironic. On the few occasions when the narrator says something possibly indicative of a quarrel between Melville and God—then, of course, we are to interpret the text not as irony, but as Melville's own truth. Chief among these metamorphoses from stupid, insensitive narrator to spokesman for Melville's own outlook is the sudden moment of truth in the following passage, where the narrator concludes his portrait of Claggart:

With no power to annul the elemental evil in him, tho readily enough he could hide it; apprehending the good, but powerless to be it; a nature like Claggart's surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are,
what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself and, like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted it? (Chapter 13)

Taken in isolation, this passage would seem to lend strong support to Thompson’s contention that Melville bears a grudge against God. (This is, I should say, the strongest evidence that Thompson puts forward, and it is for that reason that I mention it here.) In a larger context, however, this scorpion simile has nothing exceptionally original or darkly heretical about it. Anyone seriously concerned with the problem of evil is as likely as not to trace the source of evil back to the Creator of the universe: this is why the existence of evil heads the list as the number one theological problem, and has always been regarded as such since at least the time of the Book of Job and Prometheus Bound. The prospect of a basically innocent, well-meaning man brought to ruin, such as Job, Prometheus, or Milton’s Adam, inevitably casts some doubt upon the good will of the Creator, but it does not mean that the writer of Job, Prometheus Bound, or Paradise Lost necessarily hated or permanently distrusted God. Nor does the suggestion that God is unfair to scorpions (the problem of evil always comes down to a sense of God’s injustice) mean that Melville, any more than Aeschylus, Milton, or the writer of Job, bears an Ahabesque malice towards his Maker. In sum, then, the idea that God, as Creator of all that exists, is ultimately responsible for the Claggarts, Ahabs, Satans, and scorpions of the world is a very old and agonizing theological problem. Melville’s restatement of that old idea does not necessarily imply that he is carrying on a quarrel with God. On the contrary, the re-enactment of God’s sacrifice of his Son to save men from their own perversity, as seen in Vere’s anguished sacrificing of Billy to save the crew from the bloody chaos of the French Revolution, argues a more respectful view of the Christian God. If Vere represents God, as in a way he may, then God is not evil, but suffers and sacrifices to save men from their own innate depravity.

But the main problem with Mr. Thompson’s thesis is not its “impiety” but its irrelevance. In plain fact Billy Budd is concerned not with the character of God but with the nature of man. In the matter of religion Herman Melville’s views would logically correspond with those of Ishmael, the open-minded seeker who could both contemplate atheism, the horror of “the heartless voids and immensities of the universe,” and at the same time respect the orthodox humility of Father Mapple, whose closing prayer in “The Sermon” advocates accepting even the extinction of the self if God wills it: “I leave eternity to Thee: for what is man that he should live out the lifetime of his God?” (Chapter Nine) Rather than quarrel with God, Melville seems more inclined in his fiction to
follow the advice of Alexander Pope: "Then know thyself; presume not God to scan./The proper study of mankind is man."

And certainly, the proper study of *Billy Budd* is man, from the Preface, describing the "crisis in Christendom" engendered by the French Revolution, to the culminating theme statement in Chapter 28: "With mankind . . . forms, measured forms, are everything; and that is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spell-binding the wild denizens of the wood." The true subject of *Billy Budd* is not a quarrel with God but an inquiry into what civilization requires for its survival, and the enemy of mankind is not God but the demonic propensities within man himself. Or, to put the matter differently, on one side of the struggle are the "measured forms" which defend civilization, forms such as church and state, religion and law, which impose moral and legal disciplines so that men will not act too bestially toward one another. Billy, enacting the Christian ritual of self-sacrifice, and Vere, upholding the king's law even against his private conscience, support the measured forms and thereby prevent mutiny and enable the *Indomitable* to vanquish the *Atheiste*—the enemy of all forms, all order—in the final battle. Aligned against the measured forms that uphold civilization are the French Revolution and the Great Mutiny, two uprisings which seem initially justified but which, given the defects of human nature, develop only into continuing holocaust. Once men have flung aside all law and religion—as the French Directory did with its capricious guillotines and its official atheism—the emancipated natural man will find himself not in a primeval Golden Age but in a state of primitive savagery. The spell cast by Orpheus' lyre once broken—the measured forms of civilization once cast aside—the wild denizens of the wood revert to their natural bestiality.

Like Edmund Burke, Herman Melville viewed violent revolution with a sympathy changing rapidly to alarm. Thus in the Preface to *Billy Budd*, Melville (could this really be Thompson's stupid, insensitive narrator?) admits that the French Revolution aimed at "rectification of the Old World's hereditary wrongs," but adds: "Straightway the Revolution itself became a wrongdoer, one more oppressive than the kings." And likewise, the Great Mutiny which the French Revolution fostered "emboldened the man-of-war's men to rise against real abuses, long-standing ones, and afterwards at the Nore to make inordinate and aggressive demands." Again, in Chapter 3, Melville repeats his revulsion against the Revolution in even stronger tones of disapproval:

To the British Empire the Nore Mutiny was what a strike in the fire-brigade would be to London threatened by general arson. . . . the blue-jackets, to be numbered by the thousands, ran up with huzzas the British
colors with the union and cross wiped out; by that cancellation transmuting the flag of founded law and freedom defined into the enemy's red meteor of unbridled and unbounded revolt. Reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances in the fleet had been ignited into irrational combustion as by live cinders blown across the Channel from France in flames.

So there we have it again: measured forms versus chaos, the "union and cross," the "flag of founded law and freedom defined," aligned against the "red meteor of unbridled and unbounded revolt," "irrational combustion," "live cinders... from France in flames." Given this kind of backdrop, it seems clear that it is not a defect in God's character that causes Billy to hang, nor even a defect in Captain Vere's, but rather a defect on the part of the crew. Having already tasted success in earlier mutinies, they might all too readily interpret Billy's slaying of an officer, if unpunished, as a sign of authoritarian breakdown inviting mutiny. Thus, in the crucial Chapter 28, where the ship's crew is ominously described as resembling "mobs ashore," incipient mutiny is put down only by resort to a series of traditional measured forms, beginning with such "mechanisms of discipline" as the Boatswain's whistles, a drum-beat ("the drum-beat dissolved the multitude"), and "the customary salute," and culminating with the measured forms of religion: "all proceeded as at the regular hour. The band on deck played a sacred air. After which the Chaplain went through the customary morning service. That done, the drum beat the retreat, and toned by music and religious rites... the men in their wonted, orderly manner dispersed to the places allotted them."

The efficacy of Billy's and Vere's sacrifice—and certainly Vere's sacrifice of his private conscience to save his crew is greater than Ahab's sacrifice of his crew to suit his private conscience—is seen in the Christian imagery at the end of the novel. First, Vere's ship does overcome the Atheiste in an action that gives Vere the chance to die heroically, but not before having a beatific vision of Billy: "Not long before death... he was heard to murmur words inexplicable to his attendant—'Billy Budd, Billy Budd.' That these were not the accents of remorse would seem clear." (It seems odd that this representative of an evil, sadistic God would think of Billy rather than himself before he died.)

Next we have the official record of Billy's death—naming Claggart the hero and Billy the "criminal of the episode"—ironically set off against the folk literature wherein Billy is explicitly compared to Christ. The spar from which Billy was hanged is regarded like "the Cross" by Billy's fellow sailors, one of whom composes a crude ditty containing eucharist symbols: "They'll give me a nibble—bit o' biscuit ere I go./ Sure, a messmate will reach me the last parting cup."
So it would seem that Billy and Captain Vere, whom the narrator describes as “two of great Nature’s nobler order” in Chapter 23, are heroic figures who make the supreme sacrifice in defense of civilization and its measured forms. But before we can state this conclusion we have Mr. Thompson’s irony to dispose of, the idea that Billy is a boob like Candide, that Captain Vere represents a cruel and bumbling Christian God who strikes without justice, and (this is the keystone) that the narrator is a stupid, insensitive fool who doesn’t understand anything. I have already suggested internal evidence why Thompson is mistaken about this, noting particularly the extensive resemblance between the narrator and Melville himself. But even stronger than this is external evidence, such as Thompson himself is fond of using, from Melville’s peripheral writings. I think we shall see that irony, like symbolism, is not a darkly mysterious device by which a writer conceals his theme from his readers, but is rather used for the opposite purpose: to communicate with added clarity and force the central idea which occasioned the work of art in the first place, and which the writer passionately wants his reader to understand.

The external evidence I have in mind is “The House Top,” a poem written by Melville during the Civil War. I realize that this sort of support for an argument is not always valid, but since Thompson quotes all manner of sources at random to show that Melville is carrying on a quarrel with God, I feel entitled to one quotation from Melville’s pre-Billy Budd writings. “The House Top,” subtitled “A Night Piece” and dated “July, 1863,” was occasioned by a mob action similar to those Melville deplores in Billy Budd, as the afternote to the poem tells us: “Note: ‘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.”

The backdrop for this poem, then, is exactly the same as the backdrop for Billy Budd set forth in that novel’s Preface: a revulsion against “the horrible and inconceivable atrocities committed” by people asserting the Rights of Man. In the case of the New York City draft riots, the bloodiest in the city’s history, the Rights of Man are aligned against

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4 Robert Penn Warren describes these draft riots in graphic detail in his recent novel, Wilderness. The Encyclopedia Americana (XX, p. 232) gives the following information: “... the necessity of drafting men for army service resulted in one of the most sanguinary riots New York had ever known. On Saturday, July 11, 1863, a mob of thousands of frenzied laborers and idlers attacked and destroyed one of the enrollment centers. ... Drunk with their first success, they attacked other buildings. For three days and nights, the rioters raged through the town, robbing stores and sacking and burning buildings, including the Colored Orphan Asylum. ... Negroes were the special object of their savagery. Many unfortunate
America's need to suppress the war against the Union. To be drafted, of course, means to surrender one's Constitutional Rights in favor of assuring the survival of one's society. Billy Budd made this sacrifice cheerfully, as we remember, when he said, upon being transferred from the merchant vessel to warship, "And good-bye to you too, old Rights of Man." The New York draft rioters, however, are rather less than cheerful about this sacrifice of their Rights, as Melville's "House-Top" overview of their rioting makes clear:

No sleep. The sultriness pervades the air
And binds the brain. . . .
    All is hushed near by,
Yet fitfully from far breaks a mixed surf
Of muffled sound, the Atheist roar of riot.
Yonder where parching Sirius set in drought,
Balefully glares red Arson—there—and there.
The town is taken by its rats—ship rats
And rats of the wharves. All civil charms
And priestly spiels which late held hearts in awe—
Fear-bound, subjected to a better sway
Than sway of self; these like a dream dissolve,
And man rebounds whole aeons back in nature.

Wise Draco comes, deep in the midnight roll
Of black artillery; he comes, though late;
In code corroborating Calvin's creed . . .
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.

The above lines clearly contain an exact foreshadowing of the ideas at the center of Billy Budd: there is Melville's abhorrence of "the Atheist roar of riot" and the "red Arson" in which the draft resisters have indulged; there is the skepticism towards the presumption of man's innate goodness—this mob "rebounds whole aeons back in nature" to become not "upright barbarians" (like Billy, a unique type) but the most savage and destructive of all animals: "the town is taken by its

Negroes, including women and children, were caught and hanged on the nearest lamp posts . . .

Meanwhile, the vastly outnumbered police and the few military units in the city fought heroically. Not until Thursday did the 7th Regiment, followed by other troops also summoned from the front, enter the city . . . . The veteran guardsmen gave the rioters short shrift. That day saw the end of the worst phase."
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"rats"; there is the idea of civilization as a "charm" which restrains these "rats" from their innate evil through the use of laws ("civil charms") and ethics ("priestly spiels"); there is the comparison of the Northern army coming to suppress this riot to "Wise Draco," an Athenian archon who laid down a severe set of laws; and finally, as in Billy Budd, there is the observation that the need for such a Draco, once "civil charms" and "priestly spiels" have "like a dream dissolved," corroborates "Calvin's creed" concerning the innate depravity of man and refutes "the Republic's faith . . . Which hold that Man is naturally good,/ and—more—is Nature's Roman, never to be scourged."

Now if we wish to join the Ironic school of criticism, I suppose we might say that this is all irony: that the narrator of the above poem is, like the narrator of Billy Budd, a stupid, insensitive fellow saying the exact opposite of Melville's actual beliefs. According to this view, the draft rioters are not really responsible for the "red Arson" lighting up the night sky or for the Negroes, including women and children, dangling from the lamp posts; it is actually God who is responsible for this "Atheist roar of riot" (note: here we have not only Irony but Paradox: God being responsible for "Atheist" riot). Since, as we all know, God created this imperfect universe, He should take the blame for everything that people do.

Taking all the evidence into account, however, I think we must arrive at the conclusion that one must be very careful about whom one calls stupid and insensitive. Because of an abuse of critical methods, it would seem that Melville himself (as the narrator of Billy Budd and "The House Top") has been so disparaged—unless, of course, we choose to regard everything Melville wrote as being the presentation of a stupid, insensitive narrator, a villainous phantom made necessary by Melville's sinister desire not to communicate his most passionate convictions, as other writers wish to do, but to conceal them for his readers. Tremendous possibilities open up if we apply this assumption (and why can't we?) to a host of other writers, from the prophet Isaiah to Allen Ginsberg.

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Mr. Thompson objects to the crucial Orpheus image—"Orpheus with his lyre spell-binding the wild denizens of the wood"—on the grounds that it is unflattering to the common people: "Orpheus understood the art of spell-binding and hypnosis. Vere's analogy is again uncomplimentary toward 'the people' in that he equates them with 'the wild denizens of the wood'." (Quarrel, p. 410) But Vere's "wild denizens" would seem very genteel language indeed compared to Melville's own term for the common people in "The House Top": "The town is taken by its rats—ship-rats/And rats of the wharves."