"Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War": Melville's vision of race, reconciliation, and America's tragic knowledge

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BATTLE-PIECES AND ASPECTS OF THE WAR: MELVILLE'S VISION OF RACE,
RECONCILIATION, AND AMERICA'S TRAGIC KNOWLEDGE

by

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ABSTRACT

*Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War: Melville’s Vision of Race, Reconciliation, and America’s Tragic Knowledge*

by

AmiJo Comeford

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Civil War and Reconstruction America has both fascinated and stumped scholars for decades. Nineteenth-century Americans daily confronted a myriad of contradictions about race and reunion that needed, yet eluded, reconciliation. Questions of race and reunion were by no means polarized into only two perspectives for many Americans; rather, a tremendous middle ground existed, a middle ground in which people like Herman Melville tried to make sense of a confusing political and social climate that struggled to find a place for union, equality, and liberty for all Americans, white and black. One of the best examples of this difficulty in trying to define the topsy-turvy political and social chaos that encompassed the years of war and the months that followed the cease-fire was Herman Melville’s book *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, published in 1866. *Battle-Pieces* presents a forward-thinking perspective that in many ways looks ahead to Reconstruction America and to the development of what historians have begun to see as the “romance of reunion” that dominated postbellum politics and social remembrance well into the twentieth century. By utilizing the many different
voices that resounded so firmly after the Civil War ended, Melville created a powerful poetic rendering of the contradictions that stood both inside and outside the “romance of reunion.”

Melville did not hesitate to recognize heroism on both sides, differentiate between the people and the causes they supported, and most importantly define the most important link that could bind America together—common humanity. In so doing, Melville stood in the shadow of another great American, Abraham Lincoln. Though Melville devoted only one poem to Lincoln specifically, Lincoln’s philosophy of magnanimity and charity is evident throughout *Battle-Pieces*. Only by drawing upon a common history, a firm belief in democracy, and above all basic human kindness, could the nation truly experience the “new birth of freedom” that Lincoln envisioned in the *Gettysburg Address*, a vision shared by Herman Melville. *Battle-Pieces* is not just Melville’s private reverie about the issues of his day. The book is Melville’s instruction for greatness to a nation ripped apart by civil war, racial tension, and political partisanship.
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CHAPTER 1

A HARP IN RECONSTRUCTION'S WINDOW

"I seem, in most of these verses, to have but placed a harp in a window, and noted the contrasted airs which wayward winds have played upon the strings." —Herman Melville in his introduction to *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*

In recent years, interest in America's Civil War has increased dramatically, with new documentaries, Hollywood productions, and even a Tony Award nominated Broadway musical drawing wide audiences.¹ Shelby Foote, who appears on Ken Burns' popular Civil War Series as an expert commentator, sold thirty thousand copies of his Civil War trilogy before the series and just six months after the series aired, more than 100,000.² The opening moments of one of these recent additions to Civil War assessment, the film *Gods and Generals*, is an effective combination of aesthetics, pathos, and visual truth. As Mary Fahl's deep, rich voice quietly comes into focus with the notes of an original track written for the film, "I'm Going Home," the screen is filled with slowly changing images of battle flags unfurling in a gentle breeze.³ What is remarkable, aside from the general visual and emotional appeal of this scene, is an important point made by the battle flags.

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¹ Ken Burns' *Civil War Series*; John Jakes' novel *North and South* was made into a mini-series with an all-star cast including Patrick Swayze among others; *Cold Mountain; Gettysburg; Gods and Generals*; Frank Wildhorn's musical *The Civil War*, an adaptation of which will be beginning a five year run at the Musical Theater in Gettysburg beginning June, 2006.
² Lawrence Buell, "American Civil War Poetry and the Meaning of Literary Commodification: Whitman, Melville, and Others," in *Reciprocal Influences*, eds. Steven Fink and Susan S. Williams (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 123.
³ The song was written by Mary Fahl, Glenn Patscha, and Byron Isaacs for the film *Gods and Generals*, directed by Ronald F. Maxwell and released in 2002 by Ted Turner Film Properties, LLC.
Each has its own symbol representing a different unit, regiment, state, and ultimately group of people, many of whom prior to the Civil War had never been beyond their homes and the piece of land they considered America. The lyrics sung in the background capture this sense of home, the intense longing that the men for whom these battle flags fly must have felt, a longing to get back to their familiar piece of America: “And when I pass by/don’t lead me astray/Don’t try to stop me/Don’t stand in my way/I’m bound for the hills/where the cool waters flow/on this road that will take me home.” Yet when the lyrics are combined with the visual image of the battle flags and the larger presence of what the Civil War has come to mean to generations of Americans, the lyrics also capture something deeper—an intended, or maybe even unintended, result of the four bloody years. “Home” now had a different meaning. No longer did it mean these United States; the battered veterans were indeed going home, but they were going home not to a piece of these United States, but the United States.⁴

Politically and physically ravaged, the country had been born again, or as Abraham Lincoln put it at Gettysburg, America’s “new birth of freedom” had begun. The change came at a heavy cost to those who had braved the battle’s front. But the national upheaval did not end at Appomattox. Lincoln’s vision for America’s rebirth was still in violent process in the period directly following April, 1865 when Ulysses S. Grant accepted Robert E. Lee’s surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia.

The tremendous social and political upheaval of a nation’s rebirth might be expected to have catalytic energy for the national literary consciousness, and to some extent it did in America. Probably the most famous contributor to Civil War literature is Walt

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Whitman. Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* and poems devoted to President Lincoln, “O Captain, My Captain” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed,” are certainly striking portraits of individual death and of his own experiences as a hospital nurse. Though Whitman’s work is indeed remarkable for its lyrical and stunning representations, his response was still limited. According to Daniel Aaron, Whitman was “not the man to sort out its [the war’s] complications—military, diplomatic, political, and social....”\(^5\)

Regardless of Whitman’s failure to truly probe the war’s “complications,” his work is undeniably a strong personal reaction to the conflict. Whitman was certainly not the only one interested in writing about the Civil War. Others found the Civil War useful as a literary medium as well, yet some of the most striking literary responses came much later from a generation that did not even know the war’s true horror, never lived through it, knew it only from the stories of those who had lived it. Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage* is a good example. Why didn’t a Stephen Crane emerge from the war’s own participants or those who had lived through it either at home or on the battlefield? This is a good question and one that likely will not ever be answered without qualification, though David Daniels’ *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* is a valuable resource in this regard. But perhaps part of the reason is the same reason why Herman Melville has, as of yet, been denied solid status as a gifted and remarkable commentator on the war and its direct aftermath. His poetry remains, after all, understudied, “a minnow in an ocean of whales.”\(^6\) Melville’s contemporaries were not ready to write about the war in all its horror and they were not particularly accepting of


those who did, those like Melville, who despite his "roughness and clumsiness, depicted
the face of war."\textsuperscript{7}

*Battle-pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) was Melville’s first published poetic
venture. According to his own introduction to the volume, "with few exceptions, the
Pieces in this volume originated in an impulse imparted by the fall of Richmond."
Whether Melville really did write most or even all of the poems, "with a few exceptions,"
after Richmond fell or not is difficult to ascertain, as there is little or no evidence to
suggest otherwise. Stanton Garner has noted that "if he [Melville] kept a notebook or a
journal...between late 1859 and the middle of 1866...it is not extant." As such, it is
difficult to determine whether or not Melville did actually start writing any of his poems
before he claims to have written them, after the fall of Richmond. However, Garner also
notes that by 1864, Melville had probably at least begun to think about writing war poetry
because that year he contributed a war poem to a book with submissions by noted
authors, which was to be sold to raise funds for the Sanitary and Christian Commissions.
The poem that Melville submitted was "Inscription for the Slain at Fredericksburgh."
Melville chose not to include this poem in *Battle-Pieces*\textsuperscript{8}.

*Battle-Pieces* itself consists of 72 poems and a prose Supplement that closes the
volume. The poems are split into three sections. The first section proceeds
chronologically through the war and presents perspectives on various battles and
"aspects" of those battles, including famous people, on occasion. This first section
contains the majority of the poems. The second section is given a title by Melville and is

\textsuperscript{7} Aaron, 153. Aaron also places Whitman in this category along with Melville.

\textsuperscript{8} Stanton Garner, *The Civil War World of Herman Melville*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993),
291.
an apt description for the poems in this section: "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial." The poems in the second section are very short and are often dedicated to particular people or groups of people, often to those who have died or exhibited tremendous bravery. The final poetry section consists of three long poems, each with their own title page. The first two, "The Scout Toward Aldie" and "Lee at the Capitol," detail specific historical events, or at least are based on two historical events. The third, "A Meditation," is exactly that. Melville presents his philosophical vision for America, his hope for the future, and his belief on whether or not the war's results have been worth the cost. The final "piece" of the book is the prose Supplement. The Supplement is an overtly political text that came to fruition because of Melville's concern for the "infinite desirableness of Re-establishment."^ His acknowledgement that "we have sung of the soldier and sailors," and his follow-up question reveals much about what to expect from the Supplement: "But who shall hymn the politicians?"

Battle-Pieces is valuable not only because it signals a shift in Melville's literary career from novelist to poet, but the collection also provides a critical vantage point for examining Reconstruction America. While the text does have tremendous value in terms of its rendering of the American Civil War, Melville's most critical contribution is his ability to view the war through a perspective that is filtered through the war's aftermath. In this respect, critics have been much less vocal. When read and studied retrospectively, each poem takes on dual significance, both as commentary on the war and commentary on the post-war. America's post-war political and social struggles inform Battle-Pieces in a myriad of important and inescapable ways.

^ Herman Melville, Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War, ed. Lee Rust Brown (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1995), 259. All references to Battle-Pieces in this study refer to this edition, unless otherwise noted.
After the surrender, Americans found themselves in a political and social whirlwind, whose raging and intermingled elements consisted of deep-seeded anger, retribution, and hatred, balanced by nostalgia, charity, and magnanimity. Melville, like other Americans, must have felt the battering whirlwind occupying his every thought and action, always trying to distinguish between the elements, at times identifying with each. Whether *Battle-Pieces* is viewed as Melville’s own voice as it spun in this whirlwind or whether the collection is a collective clearinghouse for many voices that he daily encountered, the volume is an imaginative and philosophical work that ranges from moments of anger and vengeance to Christian charity and reconciliation.

As Americans found themselves trying to recover physically, emotionally, and financially from four ruinous and destructive years, the political and social rancor escalated. One of the most contentious and rancorous issues that Northerners and Southerners had to face was reunification, since not all Americans were either willing or interested in uniting again as countrymen, much less as friends. Into the bitter atmosphere came a soothing form of poetry such as Francis Miles Finch’s “The Blue and the Grey” and Wills S. Hays’ “The Drummer Boy of Shiloh,” sought out by people who hoped to counter and smooth over the biting political and social problems of the day, preferring instead to memorialize people and events. Melville was not one of these soothing poets. Unlike Melville’s verse, much of the Civil War poetry published during and after the war was “patriotic and self-righteous.” In contrast, Melville’s poems sought to define and explore something beyond unquestioned patriotism. Melville sought truth and did not hesitate to plunge into the dark abyss of human folly, error, and vengeance to find it. If

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his poetry is full of "great crudities," as one of his contemporary critics suggested, the crudities only serve to enhance his conflicted portrayal of post-bellum America, an America ripped in pieces by Reconstruction. In short, Melville was unafraid to minutely examine the conflict, both from a personal and historical perspective, finding great literary power in each.

Embracing conflict was not new to Melville, and the Civil War provided him much material with which to sound the deep dimensions of conflict in disturbing yet instructive ways. *Battle-Pieces* is brilliant for its wide range of feeling, thought, and social and political commentary. The book explores Melville’s philosophies on the social issues of his time as well as the darker regions of human suffering and hatred, illuminated at times by moments of humanity that seem to defy the greater evils at large in individuals and society. Melville’s work is not just about Melville, however. He was an American like many others who daily encountered stunning reminders that refuted forgetfulness or easy reunion. Because such strong oppositional ideas and loyalties, which are found throughout *Battle-pieces*, were so consistently present in the literary mind of a single man, the collection is a useful tool for examining the wide-spread tension so predominant in the public at large following the cease-fire.

Not all critics have agreed that *Battle-Pieces* is an effort worthy of widespread attention. Edmund Wilson, in *Patriotic Gore*, described *Battle-pieces* as "versified journalism; a chronicle of the patriotic feelings of an anxious, middle-aged non-combatant as, day by day, he reads the bulletins from the front." While Wilson’s words

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11 See note 86.  
probably were meant as a criticism, they actually define why Melville’s book is so important. Hundreds of thousands of non-combatants anxiously awaited news of their friends and loved ones, relentlessly reading news from the front, hoping and dreading the news they might glean. Alice Fahs, in her book on popular war literature, commented on the importance of newspapers for America’s citizens during the Civil War. Far from being a relaxing pass time, for both Southerners and Northerners newspapers became an “urgent necessity of life, with readers eagerly gathering at bulletin boards outside newspaper offices in order to read the news as soon as it was printed.” Fahs notes Mary Chesnut’s observation from South Carolina in 1862 that “we haunt the bulletin board.” The same held true in the North as

crowds assemble daily before the bulletins of the newspaper offices, and the excitement of important news flutters along Broadway or Nassau Street like the widening ripples in water. You feel something in men’s motions; you see something in the general manner of the throng in the street before you read it recorded upon the board or in the paper. There is but one thought and one question. The people are soldiers. The country is a camp. It is war.14

Melville, if he was simply a non-combatant reading news bulletins from the front, is precisely what makes his voice so pertinent to a study of mid-nineteenth-century America. His oppositional and conflicted position as a poet stands as a microcosm for the conflicted position of a country that had little reason to expect a peaceful conclusion to a

war that had cost so much. *Battle-Pieces* is a public work that seeks to say something to and about the entire nation, not just about Melville.15

As individuals, filmmakers, and musicians try to define what the war means today and how it should be presented to yet another generation of Americans, most often the material is focused on the war itself, particular battles, individual heroic moments, heart-rending stories of compassion, personal eyewitness accounts, and stirring images. The war, however, was much more than striking images of great horror. It had political and social components that would continue to be debated long after the cease-fire. Just as the cannons stopped firing, the musket balls stopped shrieking and whizzing, and the skeletal inmates of Andersonville made their way home, another war was beginning to take shape, one that would last much longer than the military endeavor. The battle for reunification of one nation had just begun, and those like Melville who passionately desired reunion would have to face two very difficult situations before reunion could effectively happen: sectional hatred and sectional politics.

Mary Chesnut, a proud South Carolinian and wife of Senator James Chesnut of South Carolina, recorded in her journal in March, 1861 her view why North and South had separated. Her words provide an early indication of the animosity that would become even more pronounced as the war dragged on: “We separated North from South because of incompatibility of temper. We are divorced because we have hated each other so.”16 The feelings Chesnut recorded in her journal were not unique. Aaron affirms that

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15 Hook, 186.

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Southern pamphlets and periodicals between 1850 and 1860 reveal a stark change in the attitude of the South toward their Northern neighbors and their “attitudes and pretensions.” It changed from “mere dislike” to “positive hatred.” 17 The Editor’s Table segment in the Southern Literary Messenger in December, 1860 is a good example:

The lamentable fact must be admitted, that the people of the two sections instinctively hate each other, and had slavery never existed, this hatred would have exhibited itself just as fiercely and unmistakably upon other grounds—the tariff, public lands, what not—as it is now exhibited and the sundering of the Republic would have followed just as certainly.18

The hatred did not subside for Chesnut or for others after the war was over. On May 16, 1865, Chesnut records in her journal that “the remnant of heart left alive within us [is] filled with brotherly hate.”19 A Confederate officer commented to Federal officer Joshua Chamberlain after the surrender at Appomattox that “you may forgive us, but we won’t be forgiven. There is a rancor in our hearts which you little dream of. We hate you, sir.”20 Moreover, Mary Custis Lee, Robert E. Lee’s wife, after the War started never again considered herself an American. For her, the South was her only country, and after only one year of what would become almost twelve years of Reconstruction legislation and occupation, her hatred of the North had not subsided. On March 10, 1867 in writing about the Republican leaders of Congress, she referred to them as “malignant enemies…cowards and base men,” and that “the country that allows such scum to rule them must be fast going to destruction & we shall care little if we are not involved in the

18 Southern Literary Messenger, December, 1860, 470.
19 Chesnut.
crash—God only knows what our future may be.\footnote{21} One of the more famous poetic renderings of Confederate hatred to emerge from Reconstruction was Major Innes Randolph’s “Good Ol’ Rebel Soldier.” Though Shelby Foote has explained that this poem was written as a parody to “evoke a humorous response,” no doubt the sentiment that it utilized was not unknown to many ex-Confederates.\footnote{22} Indeed if the poem was written as a parody, as Foote explained, it required a foundation in reality in order to serve as a parody at all, and given documented Southern hatred of the Northern victors, much of what Randolph drew upon for his poem likely had substantial following in his Southern countrymen:

Oh, I'm a good old Rebel soldier, now that's just what I am;
For this "Fair Land of Freedom" I do not give a damn!
I'm glad I fit against it, I only wish we'd won,
And I don't want no pardon for anything I done.

I hates the Constitution, this "Great Republic," too!
I hates the Freedman's Bureau and uniforms of blue!
I hates the nasty eagle with all its brags and fuss,
And the lying, thieving Yankees, I hates 'em wuss and wuss!

I hates the Yankee nation and everything they do,
I hates the Declaration of Independence, too!

\footnote{22} \textit{Songs of the Civil War}, prod. Jim Brown, Ken Burns and Don DeVito, Sony Music Entertainment Inc., compact disk. See the liner notes.
I hates the "Glorious Union" -- 'tis dripping with our blood,
And I hates their striped banner, and I fit it all I could.
I followed old Marse Robert for four years, near about,
Got wounded in three places, and starved at Point Lookout.
I cotched the "roomatism" a'campin' in the snow,
But I killed a chance o' Yankees, and I'd like to kill some mo'!

Three hundred thousand Yankees is stiff in Southern dust!
We got three hundred thousand before they conquered us.
They died of Southern fever and Southern steel and shot,
But I wish we'd got three million instead of what we got.

I can't take up my musket and fight 'em now no more,
But I ain't a'gonna love 'em, now that's for sartain sure!
I do not want no pardon for what I was and am,
And I won't be reconstructed, and I do not care a damn!23

Even the ghastly horror inflicted upon South Carolina and her citizenry in Sherman’s famous march were not grounds for sympathy. As the war-weary Union army marched through South Carolina they took vengeance on the people and the state they blamed for the war and all the suffering it had brought; they burned, looted, and razed everything in their path. According to one officer, "it was sad to see this wanton destruction of property...The country was necessarily left to take care of itself, and became a 'howling

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23 This poem is readily available in a number of places online. One of them is www.civilwarpoetry.org.
waste." Little wonder that Southerners felt hatred akin to that of their vengeful victors. Melville sensed the hatred and depicted it in a short poem he wrote from a Southerner’s perspective of Sherman’s march through the Carolinas. In his poem, the Southern onlooker asks whether or not time will “allot” to them revenge on their Northern oppressors and grant to them the same “joy” to which Israel “thrilled when Sisera’s brow Showed gaunt and showed the clot.” Even more telling and horrifying for the reasonable tone in which they are presented are Sherman’s cold remarks on the state of South Carolina’s suffering: “The whole army is burning with an insatiable desire to wreak vengeance upon South Carolina. I almost tremble at her fate, but feel that she deserves all that seems in store for her.” Little wonder that Melville’s speaker declared that “even despair shall never our hate rescind.” If General Sherman, who only three years before, after the Battle of Shiloh could write that “the scenes on this battlefield would have cured anybody of war,” and yet have developed a war-hardened vengeance against South Carolina to the extent that he could only “almost tremble at her fate” (italics added) that she deserved, how was an entire nation to find the will to reunite under one banner with those who like Sherman and the confederate officer who expressed his disgust of Northerners to Joshua Chamberlain harbored a hatred solidified by four years of death and destruction?  

24 Garner, 376.
25 “The Frenzy in the Wake. Sherman’s advance through the Carolinas.” Sisera was a captain in one of the Canaan armies that opposed the Israelites in the Old Testament. He was lured into an Israelite woman’s tent with promises of hospitality and food. After he fell asleep, the woman, Jael, drove a nail through his temple, killing him in his sleep. See Judges 4:15-21.
26 Garner, 376.
Equally important to the military conflict was the political battle that began even before the war had ended. Lincoln had already begun to consider the possibilities for reunion shortly before the surrender. In his last public address on April 11, 1865, Lincoln again reiterated his position that the goal of any reconstruction should be to “again get them [the seceded states] into the proper practical relation” to the other states, not to impugn or punish, but to reunify.\(^\text{28}\) Furthermore, Lincoln’s famous Second Inaugural Address leaves no doubt as to what his ultimate course of action would have been, had he lived:

\[
\text{With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.}\(^\text{29}\)
\]

Lincoln, however, was not the only one who had to be involved in reuniting the nation. He still had to deal with the country’s citizenry whose violent dislike had matured into hatred, those like Mary Chesnut and General Sherman, and the vengeance-driven looting armies that further provoked vast hatred amongst Southerners. Edmund Ruffin, a staunch Virginia secessionist who was honored for his strong advocacy of Southern rights by being allowed to light the fuse that fired the first shot on Fort Sumter, refused to even continue to live in peace with the North. When the war ended, Ruffin draped himself in a Rebel flag and committed suicide by shooting himself in the head, preferring death to


\(^{29}\) Ibid. 107-108.
living in a reunified nation with “members of the ‘Yankee Race’” where slavery would be legal.30

Stanton Garner astutely refers to the immediate aftermath as “a peace as unsettled and as unsettling after the routines of war as, in 1861, war had been after the routines of peace.” Further, Garner contends that the peace “canceled the political controversies that the war had spawned.”31 Garner’s judgment is too optimistic and does not recognize the political bitterness that had fueled the war and continued afterwards. Political rancor raged just as fiercely after the war as before, since the war could not immediately change the political and social attitudes that had begun the war in the first place.

Of course one of the most contentious political issues that had social implications as well was slavery. Historian James Huston, in his book Calculating the Value of the Union, points out the tremendous economic stake that Southerners had in maintaining slavery, and historian James Oakes has also assigned unmistakable emphasis to the slaves as property value.32 Property value was the root of the constitutional question that drove the wedge deeper and deeper between North and South, ultimately splitting it apart. Further, both Huston and Oakes agree that slave holdings were necessary to a Southerner’s social and political advancement because of slaves’ immense property value. Ultimately, then, war did not cancel the political problems. It merely staved off the political entanglements for a time, assuring that those political arguments would take

31 Garner, 399.
place, once again, in a unified nation, one half of which simply lost the ability to fight anymore.

Surrendering did not constitute political and social concession at all. In fact, the unrepentant and unchanged Southern attitude was large enough of a concern for the Northern politicians that when Congress formed the Joint Committee on Reconstruction by resolution in the House and Senate in December, 1865 a whole host of witnesses were brought before the Committee to testify to the physical and mental state of the South and its people, including their former leaders. Reconstruction Committee members knew the South was not politically willing to agree with the North anymore than they had before they seceded, either on civil rights or states’ rights. They had no faith that the military conquest, and it was a conquest, given the actions of Sherman and his armies, had settled the political questions that had fueled the war to begin with. Particularly interesting and enlightening is the testimony of Robert E. Lee in his appearance before the Committee on February 17, 1866. So important was this testimony that it was reprinted in its entirety in the New York Times just over a month later on March 28, 1866. Even more importantly, Lee’s appearance was so significant to Melville that he devotes an entire poem to the event: “Lee in the Capitol.” The poem is a vital piece of the volume, being one of only three poems found in the closing section which have their own separate title pages. Melville would also use “Lee in the Capitol” as a preview for what he argued for in the following Supplement, charity to all and magnanimous reunion. As such, Lee’s

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33 The Committee consisted of six Senators (William P. Fessenden, Maine; James W. Grimes, Iowa; Ira Harris, New York; Jacob M. Howard, Michigan; Reverdy Johnson, Maryland; George H. Williams, Oregon) and nine House Representatives (Thaddeus Stevens, Pennsylvania; Ellihu B. Washburne, Illinois, Justin S. Morrill, Vermont, Henry Grider, Kentucky; John A. Bingham, Ohio; Roscoe Conkling, New York; George S. Boutwell, Massachusetts; Henry T. Blow, Missouri; Andrew J. Rogers, New Jersey), Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction (New York: Negro Universities Press, Greenwood Publishing Corp, 1969). Originally printed in 1866.

appearance warrants some attention and explanation, particularly as it demonstrated the
degree to which political problems were still very much alive after the war had ended.

Besides slavery, the other major component that had a direct relation to the war’s
beginning was the constitutional question of secession, since secession was the means
employed by the South to justify its separation. The Committee asked Lee very directly
about secession in their rounds of questioning. The question, posed by Senator Jacob M.
Howard (MI), was whether or not Lee felt that a jury convened in Virginia by native
Virginians would convict Jefferson Davis of treason under the Constitution, having led a
seceded state coalition in warring upon the United States. Lee’s response is a telling
defense of secession’s legality as well as a defense of Virginia’s withdrawal from the
Union and his own participation in that withdrawal.

In responding to Senator Howard, Lee replied that to the best of his knowledge “they
look upon the action of the State, in withdrawing itself from the government of the
United States, as carrying the individuals of the State along with it.” In Lee’s mind, since
individuals were merely “carried” along by being citizens of the State, “the State was
responsible for the act, not the individual,” thereby absolving individual citizens,
including himself, from having committee treason. Senator Howard continued to press
Lee on the secession question: “And that the ordinance of secession, so-called, or those
acts of the State which recognized a condition of war between the State and the general
government, stood as their justification for their bearing arms against the government of
the United States?” Lee’s response is remarkable in that he does not offer an outright
defense for secession’s legitimacy: “Yes, sir. I think they considered the act of the State

36 Fellman, par. 4.
as legitimate; that they were merely using the reserved right which they had a right to do." Lee's answer was not enough to satisfy his examiner, as it failed to define his own position. Howard would not let Lee's generalization stand. He asked Lee point-blank what his personal views "on that question" were. This time, Lee offered no equivocation or generalization: "That was my view; that the act of Virginia, in withdrawing herself from the United States, carried me along as a citizen of Virginia, and that her laws and her acts were binding on me." As Michael Fellman has noted, Lee's responses, as a representative of the South, reflected strongly held beliefs about the importance of the foundation for secession, a State's right against the overreaching of a centralized government that destroyed principles of republicanism. Further, in a letter written to the governor of Virginia in August 1865, Lee wrote that

the questions which for years were in dispute between the State and General Government, and which unhappily were not decided by the dictates of reason, but referred to the decision of war, having been decided against us, it is the part of wisdom to acquiesce in the result, and of candor to recognize the fact. Significantly, Lee does not concede, as he would never do, that the question had been constitutionally decided, rather that the South must concede only to the result, not the intellectual question itself, an important distinction because for many Southerners, including Lee, the South still maintained the political and moral high ground of preserving the Constitution and traditional republicanism. The North's differing position as to who had the constitution on their side is evident in the Reconstruction Committee formation resolution as well as in the questions to Lee and others. In the exchange cited

37 Joint Committee, 133.
38 Fellman par. 24.
above between Howard and Lee, the "ordinance of secession" has no validity in and of itself. It is non-existent as an ordinance, legal right, or anything else. The ordinance is "so-called," not a real ordinance for which there is even a proper name. Throughout the extended questioning of various people, the Committee members always referred to the Confederacy as the "so-called Confederate States of America," (italics added) a phrase that Lincoln would also use, invalidating any claim to an official name or status at all, a direct contradiction of the basic Southern position on the Constitutional right of the state and the individual to maintain independence from the federal government. For Southerners, they, not the North, were the Constitution's guardians.

As early as 1866, Lee voiced this notion of guardianship, and later in 1869 in a letter to a Confederate general, he further articulated this guardianship as a defense for the South's antebellum belligerence: "I was for the Constitution & Union established by our forefathers. No one is more in favour of that Union & that Constitution, & as far as I know it is that for which the South has all along contended, & if restored...there will be no truer supporters of that Union." The intellectual political questions were not solved at the war's end, as Lee's statement is indicative, as both sides still ultimately believed that their side was right in its reasons for war. The political questions were not "cancelled," as Garner suggests, merely put into a new arena for debate—the Reconstruction arena.

39 Joint Committee, iii.
40 Fellman, par. 33
41 The secession question was ultimately decided by the Supreme Court in 1869 in Texas vs. White. Salmon P. Chase wrote the majority opinion. Though the Supreme Court ultimately "settled" the legal question, surely the Constitutionality of secession could still as an ideological problem plague many Southerners, since if they didn't accept the federal government's power over the state, then any decision rendered by part of that government could be deemed invalid by the state.
Into this milieu of political and intellectual debate came the maiden public poetic work of a man whose experiences were not those of a mythologized general or a divisive president, rather the experiences of a general American citizen whose literary renown had begun to falter by 1860—Herman Melville, whose poetry has found little critical respect since its publication. In fact, "essays and studies on Melville's poetry stand out like lonely desert islands." A. Robert Lee has even predicted a still bleak future for Melville the poet. He guesses that Melville's poetry will probably not ever have "any very wide readership." Indeed, "Melville's poetry remains largely in parentheses, a kind of awkwardly also-present literary second family." Unfortunately, modern audiences have indeed as Lee suggested maintained the same reaction to his poetry that Melville's contemporaries did.

By the time Harper's published *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, Melville had virtually disappeared from literary life. In fact, on August 12, 1866, the *New York Herald* noted in a response to *Battle-Pieces* that "for ten years the public has wondered what has become of Melville." Unfortunately, only in the recent past has this important piece of literature begun to resurge, following several years after the general Melville revival of the 1920s. According to historian James McPherson, Melville's Civil War poetry was essentially "rediscovered" in the 1960s. Until that time, the only people really familiar with *Battle-Pieces* were a handful of Melville scholars, Civil War historians, and a few other interested readers. Even by 1978, when *New Perspectives on Melville* was

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42 Hook, 177.
published, Melville’s poetry had still not become noteworthy enough for any inclusion in
the book, and for contemporary, modern critics of Melville’s work, his stature as a great
American writer has rested firmly on his prose work, with poetry seemingly an
“afterthought,” an “irrelevance, a distraction.”

A quick perusal of Melville’s Civil War poetry, even the small amount that has found
its way into a few American and Civil War literature anthologies, suggests that this lack
of attention to Melville as a poet, and particularly an important Civil War poet has greatly
undermined nineteenth-century American, Melville, and general Civil War studies. Such
virtual ignorance of the poetry of one of the most important nineteenth-century writers,
which “reflect[s] a general literary and critical consensus,” begs an obvious question, one
that Andrew Hook has also asked: “Is this assessment a fair and acceptable one?”

Certainly the relative lack of critical attention devoted to Battle-Pieces is not due to a
myriad of nineteenth-century American poetry with which Melville has to vie for
attention from critics and scholars. As Hook has noted, the “overall poetic achievement”
of American writing was “remarkably slim,” with Dickinson and Whitman rising to the
top of the list of American Renaissance poets.

Of course, the absolute “why” of any generation’s interest and disinterest can never
fully be answered, yet two distinct possibilities have emerged to explain why Battle-
Pieces has long remained at the bottom of Melville’s literary trunk and viewed as a
product of a time in his life when Melville had chosen to give up, being “disappointed
and creatively exhausted.”

One of Melville’s contemporary critics, Charles Eliot

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46 Hook, 176.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 178.
49 Hook, 178.
Norton, wrote the following review of *Battle-Pieces* in *The Nation* on September 6, 1877:

“It is impossible, in view of what Mr. Melville has done and of his intention in his present book, not to read his ‘Battle-Pieces’ with a certain melancholy. Nature did not make him a poet.”

Gratefully, now many would certainly take issue with Mr. Norton’s judgment, despite Lee’s bleak prediction, at least in the text under question. Perhaps forty-five years has begun to fulfill Walter Bezanson’s 1960 judgment: “We have not lived long enough with the idea that [Melville] was a poet at all to decide justly how good a poet he was.”

Melville’s poetry is understudied and under appreciated because it probed the war’s complex philosophical webs, not only the military portion, but also the ongoing political and social battle to reunify the county and create the United States from the remains of these United States. From this dual perspective *Battle-Pieces* must be considered, having been inspired and published during a unique and conflicted moment—Reconstruction. Before dealing with the contemporary reviews of the volume and the reasons why it remained buried until its reprinting in the 1960s, a few words about the collection might be useful.

By utilizing the moments and “aspects” of the war that he read about in historical and newspaper accounts, most notably newspaper accounts collected in *The Rebellion Record*, according to Stanton Garner, Melville allows the living and dead to tell their stories, sometimes tragic and cathartic, sometimes vengeful and unforgiving, but always with a depth that explores the recesses of humanity’s positive and negative desires.

Though these desires are evident in the collection, Melville chose not to specifically

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51 Hook, 178-179.  
52 Garner, 388. *The Rebellion Record* was a chronological multi-volume history of the war through newspaper and other reports. See Hook, 189.
arouse the passions of either North or South in a partisan way. Instead, he took the
difficult road blazed by Abraham Lincoln, infusing his poetry with Lincoln’s
magnanimous, tolerant, and charitable vision for a re-born America. What Melville tried
to do was radically different than his contemporaries, the “coterie of gentility” like
Bryant, Whittier, Longfellow, and Lowell, and the soothing poetry they espoused.\textsuperscript{53}

Historian James McPherson wrote that one reason Melville’s poetry has not been as well accepted by those who consume Civil War poetry by such poets as Whitman or Whittier can be attributed to what he called Melville’s “lack of triumphalism.”\textsuperscript{54} Melville was not interested in gloating over Union victory or sentimentalizing the Southern way of life or the failed Southern Cause. What he was interested in doing was articulating through verse the problems the new nation confronted as its people worked through their hatred, animosity, and political differences, both as individuals and as citizens. So while the
Reconstruction Committee tried to oversee practical reconstruction policies and
determine the political and emotional climate in the South by interviewing Southerners like Robert E. Lee, Melville strove to untangle and expose the deeper-seated problems that would prevent the Reconstruction Committee’s practical work.

\textit{Battle-Pieces} revealed rather than effaced the grey political and social chaos that engulfed the Union, the Confederacy, and the re-unified United States. The book is not a patriotic jingoistic work that validated the war and its thousands of sufferers, though at times specific poems do have echoes of such things. Instead, the collection filters the war itself through the beginnings of Reconstruction with its pitfalls and entanglements.

Unlike the pervasive sentimental tone that dominated much Civil War poetry and popular

\textsuperscript{53} Hook, 181.

\textsuperscript{54} McPherson, 14.
fiction, Melville boldly confronted the problems of a divided nation that strove to reunite, even as its citizenry exhibited both compassion and vengeance.

The very title of Melville’s book, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, is a clear indication that Melville had no intention of delivering a complete and accurate re-telling of the war, but rather small snapshots of those events that may or may not have shaped the outcome and the difficulties in the immediate aftermath. The verses he creates do not always mimic the realism of the battlefield photographers, though some poems do present some very stark battlefield images, and they do not allow sentimental words to feign optimism for complete healing. Richard Marius in his introduction to *The Columbia Book of Civil War Poetry* notes that poetry had an avid reading public in the nineteenth century. He also notes that “poetry was expected to be didactic and uplifting, and if it made its audience weep, so much the better. Nineteenth-century readers and auditors loved to wash their cheeks in noble tears.”

Timothy Sweet posits that Melville’s lack of “firsthand experience of the war permits a critical perspective—one that Whitman never quite manages. . .” Indeed William Dean Howells in his review of the book in the *Atlantic Monthly* gave Melville credit only for being withdrawn and cold in his towering viewpoint of the Civil War battles and “aspects” that he chose to treat in verse:

Mr. Melville’s skill is so great that we fear he has not often felt the things of which he writes, since with all his skill he fails to move us. . . Is it possible—you ask yourself, after running over all these celebrative, inscriptive, and memorial verses—that there has really been a great war, with battles fought by men and

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bewailed by women? Or is it only that Mr. Melville’s inner consciousness has been perturbed, and filled with the phantasms of enlistments, marches, fights in the air parenthetic bulletin-boards, and tortured humanity shedding, not words and blood, but word alone?57

Howells may have been right that Melville’s perspective is withdrawn, that he chose not show grotesque bloodletting. It is also true that unlike Whitman who would strive to give meaning to the “slaughterhouse” of the battlefields and who would try to make meaningful and pure individual soldiers’ deaths in poems like “Strange Vigil Kept I On the Field One Night” and “The Wound-Dresser,” Melville differed sharply, as Howells commented in his review of Battle-Pieces.58 Howells’ point is indeed true, but that truth need not be negative. On the contrary, what Howell’s noticed about Melville as a poet is exactly what makes Melville so necessary to Civil War studies, whether historic or literary. Hennig Cohen has written that Battle-Pieces is the result of “cool calculation which the passage of time makes possible,” a nicely updated paraphrase of Howells.59 Whitman may have been better at evoking emotional response to the war itself, but he sheds little light on the actual political problems that provoked the bloody split and later derailed peaceful reunion. Whitman’s response is an intimate one, to be sure, stimulated by his personal experiences as a battlefield nurse, but it is also a subjective response that painted a picture instead of examining what created the picture in the first place. Melville’s cold “objective examination” and “political analysis” makes his poetry what

59 Garner, 388.
Whitman's can never be, "a vision of America searching in battle for its soul." However, although he is far from being a poet of optimistic healing and triumph of Federalist ideals or a poet concerned only with the graphic and gruesome details that could do nothing but move an audience to tears, though on occasion his poetry does do just that, his poetry is worthy of the critical attention that it is slowly gaining.

The poetry that comprises *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* is not unified in construction or structure; does not rely on predictable rhyme; does not contain glossy and positively charged words; and does not sentimentalize death or victory. Instead Melville recognizes good and bad in both North and South, at times ennobling and criticizing each. His poetry is a "comprehensive encompassing of the points of view of both sides of the struggle, North and South" that ultimately only seems to find resolution in the triumph of humanity. A few brief examples, each of which will be addressed in greater detail in the upcoming chapters, will suffice to illustrate Melville's overall purpose for the volume and attitude toward his fellow Americans in 1866.

One of the best examples of the Southern soldiers being positively depicted in *Battle-Pieces* is referred to by Hennig Cohen, who wrote the introduction for the first major printing of *Battle-Pieces*. Cohen quotes a *New York Times* article from February 17, 1862 after the battle for Fort Donelson: "In some cases, a few of our [Union] wounded were cared for by the rebels, although they were without fire, and could give them but little valuable assistance." Melville utilized this newspaper report, which he apparently found in *The Rebellion Record* when he wrote his versified version of the battle,

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60 Ibid., 445.  
62 Cohen, 18.  
63 Ibid.
“Donelson.” In the midst of individual suffering for the greater cause of Southern States Rights and for Federal Unionism, Melville offers kind words to the enemy of the Union, a Union for which both of Melville’s grandfathers had fought in the Revolutionary War.

Some of the wounded in the wood
Were cared for by the foe last night,
Though he could do them little good,
Himself being all in shivering plight. (Lines 254-257)

Melville’s words offer no sense of triumph on either side, politically, but they do offer a small “piece” or “aspect” of war that is often overlooked in the calculation of enemy dead—the simple humanity that ennobles even “the foe,” in this case the Confederates. One need not look terribly far for other actual examples of what Melville detailed in his poem of enemies caring for their fallen foes, including Richard Rowland Kirkland of Co. G 2nd South Carolina Volunteers, C.S.A., more famously known as the Angel of Marye’s Heights, whose memorial statue is a prominent feature at the Fredericksburg National Battlefield, and on which is engraved the following tribute: “At the risk of his life this American soldier of sublime compassion brought water to his wounded foes at Fredericksburg. The fighting men on both sides of the line called him the Angel of Maryes Heights.” Melville further exemplified his non-partisan attitude in his collection’s opening poem, “The Portent,” a poem that will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

In Melville’s original publication, the poem was unlisted and completely italicized, indicating that the poem may well have been intended as an epigraph for the entire collection. The poem sets up the conflicting viewpoints that will inform the remaining

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64 Ibid., 15.
poems and give relatively equal treatment in terms of heroism and depth to North and South. "The Portent" contains no direct references to either the North or the South, only John Brown's "slowly swaying" body, a man who tried to harness the sleeping hatred of almost four million slaves. The poem is remarkable for its play of ambiguities that prevent any solid, biased opinion on the man who some viewed as a martyr and some viewed as a cold-blooded devil. Melville begins his book exactly as he will continue and finish it, by critically commenting on several "aspects" of the war without exulting in Union victory. In so doing, Melville found himself in another powerful man's philosophic company—Abraham Lincoln.

Interestingly enough, neither Melville's book nor Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address were well received by Americans. Lincoln was criticized by some reporters for doing the unthinkable, changing the war aims from strict Union to something more abstract, a new view of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, particularly as it related to the slave question. Lincoln drew even further attention to the scope of the conflict and the troubled future, yet still couching these problems in the purely theoretical and abstract. In the Address, he again attempted to inspire the "dissatisfied" Americans to do what his First Inaugural Address had failed to do—allow "the better angels of their nature" to guide them through the sectional crisis.

Like Melville, Lincoln chose a vastly different approach to the war than many American citizens. One reporter for the Chicago Times stated: "It was to uphold this constitution, and the Union created by it, that our officers and soldiers gave their lives at Gettysburg. How dare, he, then, standing on their graves, misstate the cause for which they died, and libel the statesmen who founded the government? They were men
possessing too much self-respect to declare that negroes were their equals, or were entitled to equal privileges.® Garry Wills contends that Lincoln intentionally re-made the Constitution and changed the war aims specifically to win the war ideologically as well as militarily. Given the harsh political climate in which Lincoln both campaigned and won the 1860 and 1864 presidential elections, he must have known that many would disagree with him and that his particular perspective might further divide the country before it would unite it; but in the end, he knew that the country must accept the new ideology he had articulated in order to maintain the peace which he intended to keep after a Union victory.

In much the same way, Melville knew his poetry would not serve as the basis for reconciliation but that it very well might simply “substitute words for wounds” and “perpetuate a representational crisis,” though he certainly hoped it would not.® But Melville was willing to alienate himself from the popular reading public, indeed to “subordinate commercial popularity to his love of country and his love of wisdom.”® Because Melville was willing to do what his contemporaries were unwilling to do, namely to “ask hard questions” instead of “idealiz[ing] the war-torn nation,” he faced Reconstruction with his face forward, looking directly into the divisions and strife that characterized this difficult time in American history.®

The most brilliant example of Melville’s reaching out to grasp the hands of Northerners and Southerners, bring them together, and help them overcome their sectional strife and hatred is in the poem, “Shiloh: A Requiem.” In the poem’s closing

66 Quoted in Wills, 39.
67 Sweet, 180.
68 Dowling, 330
69 Sweet, 191.
lines partisanship falls away in the face of the greater cause: the people’s ability, in the face of Reconstruction and fresh emotional and physical wounds, to mimic the soldiers and gain the humanity that Lincoln called for in his Second Inaugural Address, “with malice toward none, and charity toward all....” To achieve ultimate Union, Melville knew, as Lincoln knew in the Gettysburg Address, that the difficulties of Reconstruction had to be faced, whether the people welcomed them or not, and like the soldiers in his poem “Shiloh: A Requiem,” the people, though “foemen at morn,” would have to become “friends at eve;” even if it took something as harsh as a “bullet to undeceive” them. As such, Melville does not sentimentalize the war, the people, or the land. In fact he parodies sentimentality and pastoral landscape in the “March into Virginia.” As the onlookers gather to watch the battle, Melville’s description for the scene is a “berrying party.” Melville’s use of this phrase is particularly telling since the Battle of Manassas was unique for its spectators that came to see their brave boys fight gloriously on a beautiful and sunny afternoon when the “air [was] blue,” the perfect setting for a “berrying party.” Melville counters the pleasant and pastoral image with the double-edged meaning of the word. In the course of a few hours, many would join that “berrying party” turned “burying party” in an attempt to honorably and with dignity place their fallen boys, who had become “enlightened by the vollied glare” into the blood-soaked ground.

Though some poets other than Melville wrote about the fallen dead, they did not explore the difficulties posed by reunion, choosing instead to focus on sentimental and peaceful reunion. One notable example is Francis Miles Finch’s popular poem, “The Blue and the Gray.” This very popular poem immortalized four women who on April 29, 1866 decorated the graves of Confederate and Union soldiers buried in Friendship Cemetery in
Columbus, Mississippi, an act that is said to have given rise to Decoration Day, which eventually became known as Memorial Day. “The Blue and the Gray” creates a picture of unity for Union and Confederate dead, but it does not recognize as Melville’s poetry does the complex emotions and attitudes that were tearing a nation apart and that made any eventual unification a hard-won process. Indeed, the rent nation would continue to be divided long after Reconstruction had ended.

*The Patriotic Roster of Livingston County, Illinois* published in 1899 contains a listing of all surviving veterans residing in Livingston County. Each section contains a heading that indicates the war in which the following list of people served: the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, the Spanish-American War, and finally simply those listed under Union soldiers. The message is very clear in the *Patriotic Roster*. Those patriotic veterans living in Livingston County, Illinois in 1899 were Union veterans and were distinguished not as veterans of the War for the Union or the War Between the States but simply as Union patriots. Melville understood this singular division and classification.

The years known as Reconstruction and Melville’s interest in what would happen to a nation that, although no longer engaged in military war, was certainly engaged in a political and social war of a different type is what distinguishes his poetry from many of his contemporaries. Melville’s unique approach to fulfilling Lincoln’s request for charitable reunification required him to “plumb the existential depths of the human tragedy and suffering wrought by the war” in order to achieve the kind of knowledge that could only be achieved through struggle, but that would ultimately produce a better and

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stronger America. According to Hennig Cohen, "the central theme of Battle-Pieces is one of opposition and reconciliation," and from this perspective and in the shadow of Lincoln and his ideals, a careful reader must come to Melville's book. Otherwise, the collection can present obstacles that make reading the collection difficult. Melville's opening lines for his preface form the basis for the contradictions that even he expects will arise from his text. He indicates that he "placed a harp in the window, and noted the contrasted airs which wayward winds have played upon the strings" (v). Melville knew his poetry would present the diverse possibilities for interpretation as well as reception.

His prediction turned out to be correct, given the reception of Battle-Pieces both then and now. The book was published in August of 1866, just sixteen months after the fall of Richmond and consequent surrender at Appomattox although Stanton Garner writes that Melville's intent to "write Civil War poems, and perhaps a book of them, dated from much earlier, at least as early as the period following the Battle of Fredericksburg, and by the time the Confederate capital fell he had probably composed versions of some of them." Brown has indicated that the same modernist notions that led scholars of the 1920s to seriously study and resurrect Moby Dick from literary obscurity have prevented the serious study of Battle-Pieces. He further believes that although the poems have garnered a few "worthy advocates," for the most part, study of these poems constitutes a "critical dead zone." Mustafa Jalal observed that another problem for many past critics was the "complex, multi-voiced aspect of Melville's poetry," and Cox and Dowling refer to past critics who tried unsuccessfully to understand Melville's poetry because they were

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71 McPherson, 14; Warren, 269.
72 Cohen, 11.
73 Warren, 269; Garner, 388.
75 Ibid.
prone to focus on Melville's unconventional poetry and problematic politics. This is truly unfortunate, since the poems yield up not only much about Melville's view of the war, but they also relate a view of the war, and more importantly the aftermath, that was different than most Civil War poetry published at the same time.

Although most of the poems were composed after the Civil War had ended and some, if not all of them, utilized information gained from newspaper accounts during the war years, the poems were also informed by Melville's personal connections and experience. Brown describes Melville as a man whose family was very much involved in the war in many different ways, including two cousins who actually fought. Melville's "vantage" point was, as Brown put it, "in reality closer to that of a central intelligence office than to that of some remote watch tower," due to the large network of family and friends who were involved in the war. Melville's poetry was not, however, just influenced by the experience of his family; Melville was an active man during the Civil War years in finding out for himself the ins and outs of the conflict. He visited the half-empty Senate chamber in 1861 when the remaining Senators debated and wrestled with a national response to secession and the actions taken by the Southern states. Even more dramatic, perhaps, than this event was when Melville himself visited the front on the eve of the Battle of the Wilderness:

In the spring of 1864, after Melville had finally moved back to New York and as he was conceiving the project of his war poems, he made an unforgettable trip to

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77 Brown, par. 21. Stanton Garner notes that at least twenty of the poems have been identified as having been directly influenced by accounts found in The Rebellion Record. See page 388.
78 Ibid., par. 22; Warren, 271.
79 Brown, par. 22.
80 Ibid., par. 23.

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the front with his brother, Allan. In addition to the usual tours of battlefields, they visited their cousin Henry Gansevoort's army camp in the Shenandoah, and Herman rode out with a cavalry detachment on a three-day sortie in which prisoners, and casualties, were taken. On that same trip he saw the Northern and Southern armies facing one another across the Rapidan just prior to the Battle of the Wilderness.  

Melville gained a perspective of this war that was different than many other poets. According to Brown no other poet, except Walt Whitman, had a more direct, personal experience with the war, and his poetry seeks to put the “real war in the books,” not just in terms of the physical but also the philosophical. The poetry is neither nostalgic nor glorious; its format neither exact nor particularly lyrical. The poetry is, instead, just as its subject matter, conflicted. Melville himself, in a “Utilitarian View of the Monitor’s Flight” recognized that this theme demanded an “unconventional and unromantic style”:

Plain be the phrase, yet apt the verse,
More ponderous than nimble;
For since grimed War here laid aside
His painted pomp, 'twould ill befit
Overmuch to ply
The rhyme's barbaric cymbal.

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81 Ibid., par. 24.
82 Ibid., par. 23.
83 Hook, 180.
Melville’s conflicting verse was deliberate; through both his words and his style, he chose to expose the war for what it was, a messy and chaotic affair. Though he honored soldiers and their sacrifice, he sentimentalized neither the people nor the battlefields. For Melville the reality was that a soldier at his post was not a gallant warrior with a bright and un tarnished sword. Melville’s soldier was no less brave than heroes and soldiers of old, but he “stands coldly by his gun—As cold as it,” ready to face the “ordered fury” that would soon test the soldier’s “gladiatorial form.” In refusing to sentimentalize either the war or the warriors, Melville’s verse aims for truth—truth about the war; truth about Americans; truth about post-bellum America.

The immediate reception of this book says much about the external context of the publication date, 1866, and about the effect that this book would have on future readers. Upon publication, Battle-Pieces was received with varying reviews; two reviews for example, the American Literary Gazette and Publisher’s Circular declared, “He has written too rapidly to avoid great crudities. His poetry runs into the epileptic. His rhymes are fearful.” Yet these same “crudities” allow for a very different sensory and abstract perspective of Civil War and Reconstruction America than Melville’s contemporaries were offering. Melville’s greatness is in his willingness to destroy any illusion that Americans may harbor about the war. Simone Weil said that “to love truth means to tolerate the void, and consequently to accept death. Truth is on the side of death.”

Melville certainly tolerated the void, even embraced it. The myriad of voices, beginning with the two voices that argue in one of the opening poems in the collection, “Conflict of

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85 Hook, 181.
86 “The Battle for the Bay.”
87 Higgins and Parker, 513.
88 Quoted in Warren., 272.
Convictions," illustrate just how strongly Melville felt the void and knew that to ever achieve a lasting peace, the void between all the different political and social opinions in the North and the South would have to be faced and eventually bridged. Further, neither North nor South could escape responsibility, either as victors or vanquished. They both had an obligation to mend their differences because "her [South] fate is linked with ours [North]...together we comprise the Nation." Melville chose to present a non-illusionary vision of the nation as it had existed for four years and as it currently existed – a nation of politically warring factions, exemplified by the bitter vengeance of the opposing narrators of "Gettysburg (The Check)" and "The Frenzy in the Wake." The former refers to his Southern foes as the heathen god Dagon, and the latter declares to his Northern conquerors that "even despair/Shall never our hate rescind." Neither group seems to have had the prescience to take President Lincoln’s advice to "bind up the nation’s wounds" and "achieve a lasting peace."

When Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War was published in 1866, not only was it not well accepted by most critics, but it was not well-received by the reading public either. Only 468 copies had been sold after two years; after ten years, only 525 copies were sold, a quarter of the 1,200 printed copies having been distributed as review copies. Of those copies sold, 486 were sold during the first eighteen months after publication. A brief comparison will suffice to solidify the reaction of people to Melville’s book. The same year that Battle-Pieces was published, John Greenleaf Whittier published Snow-Bound, a "nostalgic masterpiece about the hearth-life in times

89 The Supplement, 260.
90 See Hook, 191 and Lawrence Buell, “American Civil War Poetry and the Meaning of Literary Commodification: Whitman, Melville, and Others,” in Reciprocal Influences, eds., Steven Fink and Susan S. Williams (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 127.
It was the most popular poem in 1866 and directly opposed the material in Melville’s book, a book of realism that dealt harshly with war’s devastating effects and the complex political and social issues that vexed the nation. *Snow-Bound* sold 32,000 copies in its first year of publication. Whittier was handsomely paid for this poem, according to Brown. His first royalty check was for $10,000, an amount that more than doubled what Melville earned during his entire writing career.

Quite possibly, the contradictions and problems within Melville’s text can be best understood through one very relevant aspect of Melville’s poetry that has not yet been touched on in this essay—the relation of Melville’s poetry to the small details of the Civil War, its causes, its destruction, and its ultimate meaning both for the individual and for the nation. Lee Rust Brown in his introduction to the Da Capo Press edition of *Battle-Pieces* notes that “*Battle-Pieces* is more literally woven into the texture of specific historical events than any of Melville’s other books.” If nothing else, Melville does present a critical view of Civil War politics and basic components of Civil War experiences that allow the battles and the aspects about which he speaks to transcend individual moments to find a place in the larger context and in the population at large.

While Howells criticized Melville’s coldness and outside voice, Howells does a disservice to the book by minimizing the very moving effects of many of the poems. The very complex nature of the book as an entire work is what renders it more than just a book of Civil War poetry. The book is a political commentary on Melville’s social reality that addresses the problems of race and reunion from a variety of angles that force

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92 Brown, par. 22.
93 Buell, 127.
94 Brown, par. 22.
95 Ibid., xii-xiii.
readers to step outside of their own personal opinions about the war, its purpose, its beginnings, and its consequences and accept that there were many oppositional yet strongly held beliefs that would not be overcome easily. How was the hatred of the narrator in “Gettysburg (The Check)” to be reconciled with the hatred of the Southerner in “The Frenzy in the Wake”? While Melville does not offer an immediate, easy solution in *Battle-Pieces* he does begin the first step in the process—recognizing the depth and variation of America’s response to the war and the aftermath. By at least attempting to face the dark truth about America’s unstable peace, Melville was able to envision the possibility of a future where “foemen at morn” would become “friends at eve,” eventually.96

Perhaps Melville’s ability to relate his poetry to so much of what so many thousand of Americans had experienced was another reason why the book was not well received. The immediacy that Melville brought to many of his poems may have been too much for the grieving parents of maimed and dead children. Additionally, the book probes the troubling question that many must have been asking in the chaotic months following the surrender: What was it all about? What has been gained? And most importantly, was it worth the price? *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* seeks to answer each question, but in so doing may have opened two deep and bleeding wounds that had not yet had sufficient time to congeal: race and reunion.

96 “Shiloh: A Requiem.”
Questions of race have long been a consequential component to American history, and they continue to be a platform for many current political discussions. Beginning with the earliest explorers who enslaved Native Americans, to the colonists who settled Jamestown and brought African slaves with them, to Martin Luther King who labored diligently for African-American Civil Rights, racial issues have been important to American society and politics.

From the country’s earliest beginnings, African-American slavery blighted America’s social and political landscape, and during the antebellum period, the debate over the slave question continued to escalate until it climaxed in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation and finally being settled when the thirteenth amendment was ratified on December 6, 1865. Throughout the antebellum period, few would argue that Americans, whether North, South, pro-, or anti-slavery, were nothing if not invested in their respective positions, whether based on moral, economic, or political grounds. As 1861 and the Civil War approached, pro-slavery rhetoric became more and more inflexible. One journalist for the Hagerstown, Maryland newspaper, Herald of Freedom and Torch Light, wrote as part of a response to the John Brown raid that “the Democracy North is rotten to the heart on the question of slavery, leaving not a corporal’s guard to protect our
institutions against the fierce, frenzied, deadly, 'irrepressible' warfare waged against them by that Lucifer of Abolitionism, Wm. H. SEWARD. By 1859, then, the rhetoric had become virtually polarized without a middle compromising position. After Fort Sumter fell in April 1861, any attempt to inhibit Southerners’ pro-slavery arguments disappeared. The rhetoric became more than just rhetoric. It became “Confederate gospel.” As the Southern slavery arguments became more and more defensive in the South, so too did the abolitionists gear up to meet this challenging and convoluted rhetoric with rhetoric of their own. Then came the great adjudicator of the slave question: guns replaced words and before it was over, some 685,000 casualties would be the price for emancipation, a price that Melville questioned at Battle-Pieces’ end: “Can Africa pay back this blood/Spilt on Potomac’s shore?” Still, though slavery had ended and the sun rose on a new American in 1866, issues of race and equality did not disappear. They were, in fact, as alive and powerful as ever, merely having their rhetorical and legal masks replaced by others, sometimes literally as the Ku Klux Klan and other similar organizations were born.

In some ways, the period known as Reconstruction, roughly the years 1865-1877, merely exacerbated the racial problems that a large portion of the population had been able to ignore before the War because no longer was racial inequality supported by the Constitution. Now, the government, both federal and state, as well as individuals, had to make very practical decisions about racial issues, including suffrage and civil equality. No longer could slave and racial rhetoric be couched in lofty and ideal republican and Constitutional phrases. However, though slavery’s legal life was effectively dead, the war

3 “A Meditation.”
did not stand as the final message for national moral repugnancy to slavery. Former
Virginia Senator, both in the United States and Confederate Senates, R.M.T. Hunter’s
dispassionate assessment of the thirteenth-fifteenth amendments is a bleak reminder of
the gap between the legal and moral sides of slavery and racial equality.4 In an article that
appeared in Southern Historical Society Papers in 1876 Hunter wrote his view of the
amendments and their having been ratified by the South: “That these constitutional
amendments represent the well considered opinion of any respectable party in the South,
there is none infatuate as to believe. They were accepted as the terms of the conqueror,
and so let them be considered by all who desire to know the true history of their origin.”5
Certainly the road to civil rights would prove an uphill battle when Southerners like
Hunter still believed in 1876 that constitutional rights had been forced upon them as a
condition of having lost the war. Nor was Hunter’s position a new formulation. Daniel
Aaron noted about Emancipation which occurred in 1863, nearly two years before the
war even ended that it “did not signal a national change of heart; it was a tolerated
tactical war measure to discourage the enemy at home and win approval abroad.”6

The danger, of course, is that after emancipation became a fact, slavery was
abolished, and citizenship was granted to former slaves, the vestiges of the old

4 The thirteenth amendment abolished slavery and was ratified on December 6, 1865; the fourteenth
amendment granted citizenship and due process and was ratified on July 9, 1868; the fifteenth amendment
granted suffrage and was ratified on February 3, 1870.
(Richmond, January 1876): 12.
6 Aaron, 332. Strangely enough, a journalist for a western Maryland newspaper predicted before the war
even began the consequences to slavery in the border states if the Union was broken, consequences that the
Emancipation Proclamation effected: “We do not believe that a majority of the Northern people have
willfully and deliberately determined to crush out Slavery, or that they are not prepared at this very
moment, could they be heard through their ballot-boxes, to do us ample justice...Release those Northern
people from their constitutional obligations to us, and what is to prevent them from striking down Slavery
wherever it can be reached?” See the Hagerstown Herald of Freedom and Torch Light for March 13, 1861
under the article “Will Secession Preserve Slavery?”
paternalistic attitude toward African-Americans did not die when slavery did. Long after the war ended and slavery was becoming a memory, some Americans still did not consider slavery a reprehensible and morally bankrupt system. Virginian L.W. Hopkins recounted his memories of slavery in his memoir From Bull Run to Appomattox, A Boy's View published in 1908. His paternalistic words are startling to a modern audience, yet they illustrate the difficulty that reformers and African-Americans faced in trying to curb the nostalgia and racial prejudice that prominently surfaced in the post-war years:

There was a peculiar relationship existing between the slave owner's family and the slaves that the North never did and never will understand. On the part of the white children it was love, pure and simple, for the slave, while on the part of the adult it was more than friendship, and, I might add, the feeling was reciprocated by the slaves. The children addressed the adult blacks as Uncle and Aunt, and treated them with as much respect as they did their blood relatives. It was Uncle Reuben and Aunt Dinah. The adult whites also addressed the older colored people in the same way. With but few exceptions, the two races lived together in perfect harmony. If a slave-owner was cruel to his slaves, it was because he was a cruel man, and all who came in contact with him, both man and beast, suffered at his hands. Even his children did not escape. These men are found everywhere. The old black mammy, with her head tied up in a white cloth, was loved, respected and honored by every inmate of the home, regardless of color... In many homes the slaves were present at family prayers. The kitchen and the cabin furnished the white children places of resort that were full of pleasure... How anyone could
have desired to break up this happy relationship was beyond the conception of the child, and more or less incomprehensible to the adult.\(^7\)

So felt one Southerner who had grown up with slavery and now as an adult found nothing lacking.

The words of one Southern editorial that tried to define "civilization" in 1866 are perhaps the most poignant reminder that America's re-birth into an age of racial equality would be difficult at best: "But if to produce the greatest number of great and good men, and good and gentle women, in proportion to her white population, of any Christian nation on earth, is civilization, then, if our reading of history is not at fault, the South stands first amongst the nations of the earth. (The white population! We love the word white—it is a sweet, beautiful word, made doubly dear by the efforts of the negrophilists to blacken it.).\(^8\)" The discrepancy between the legal question and the moral question understandably complicated any smooth transition for the newly freed Americans because in trying to negotiate this chasm many Americans chose to try and lessen the racial tension by downplaying the question of racial equality in favor of peaceful reunion with their neighbors. In fact, in the twenty-five years after the war ended, North and South strove to "dissolve" their "old hatreds" into "nostalgic recollection." Both Northern and Southern "orators vied with one another in praising the courage and nobility of their former enemies; newspapers in both sections gave columns to ceremonies of reconciliation.\(^9\)" So while African-Americans struggled to establish their legitimacy in a country that had only recently recognized their freedom as a real and practical war aim,

\(^8\) Aaron, 242.
\(^9\) Ibid., 207.
their white countrymen tried desperately to "repair the ravages of civil strife" and unify themselves, even if racial equality had to be subordinated to reunion to effect that unity. According to David Blight reunion did take precedence over race in the years following 1865.\textsuperscript{10}

Questions of race and reunion were certainly not polarized into only two perspectives. Like with most political and social issues, a tremendous middle ground existed where people like Herman Melville tried to make sense of a confusing national stage where people struggled to find a place for union, equality, and liberty for all Americans, white and black. Herman Melville's Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War is one of the best examples of the difficulty that Americans had in trying to define the topsy-turvy political and social chaos that encompassed the years of war and the months that followed the cease-fire. Scholars have noted the difficulties that Melville's book presents, both politically and poetically, as it refuses to shy away from the grey chaos that was to be found in the Union, the Confederacy, and the re-unified United States. While it might be a difficult collection to read, not to mention analyze, this very difficulty sets Battle-Pieces apart as a forward-thinking vision that looks ahead to Reconstruction America and to the development of what historians have begun to see as the "romance of reunion" that dominated postbellum politics and social remembrance well into the twentieth century.

Racial issues were not unfamiliar to Melville, and his last publication before 1861 was \textit{Benito Cereno}, an unabashedly anti-slavery book that according to Richard H. Cox and Paul M. Dowling was intended to "persuade antebellum America to oppose slavery,

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and even more important claimed humanity for black slaves, even though they lacked a voice to speak for them. ¹¹ *Benito Cereno* tells the story of a slave ship named the San Dominick under the command of Captain Benito Cereno. Early on, the ship is boarded by the captain of another ship, Captain Amasa Delano, who sees the San Dominick’s haggard condition and awkward sailing from his own ship and offers help. While on the ship, Delano becomes aware that something is not quite right aboard the San Dominick, and he attributes his unrest to Cereno’s apparent mental instability. What is discovered at the end, however, is that the San Dominick has actually been taken over by the slaves, who were the cargo, led by their charismatic leader Babo. From the moment that Delano sets foot aboard the San Dominick, Cereno is forced to play the role of captain, though he is actually controlled by Babo. Eventually, the slaves are overthrown in a battle between them and Delano’s crew and Babo is executed after the two ships land. As the book closes with the deeply ambiguous line, “Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader,” readers are aware that while Cereno explains his melancholy in the narrative’s final spoken lines, Babo “uttered no sound.” Amasa Delano emphatically reminds Cereno that he has been saved, given another opportunity to live and enjoy the “mild trades,” a sailor’s most “warm” and “steadfast friends,” but he has little success in lifting Cereno’s melancholia. ¹² With no ability to understand Cereno’s enigmatic behavior, he finally pointedly asks, “What has cast such a shadow upon you?” To which Cereno makes his famous reply, “The negro.” While Cereno’s reply may have created even more questions about the text’s final lines, the point is that he did speak, willingly.

perhaps, because he knew he would be listened to, not completely understood maybe, but listened to and acknowledged. He had a right to at least that much from his white friend. Cereno’s black counterpart, however, does not speak in the end, and for a character like Babo who had managed to take over the San Dominick, exert authority over his comrades, and come so close to succeeding in his plan to liberate himself and his comrades, all of which must have taken a tremendous amount of persuasion and charisma, this silence is haunting, particularly because it was self-imposed. Yet, his ominous silence is explained by Melville, if only briefly: “Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will speak no words.” Babo chooses his own silence, defying his captors and the law.  

Why? Maybe because the legal and social situation was hopelessly useless and beyond his ability to effectively change. Why trouble himself with words when they could have no practical effect, no “deeds” to accompany them?  

When Babo leaves the sea, he is forced back into the system that kept him quiet before he took over the San Dominick, a system with a socially ingrained prejudice that embraced racial slavery. Significantly, Babo has nobody to speak for him, nor would he perhaps have allowed anyone to speak for him, and he dies in silence at the end of *Benito Cereno*. Babo’s understanding of rhetoric’s futility when detached from any action was a very real quandary for African-American slaves. Though they may have had some supporters, without real action to give force and consequence to the rhetoric, their plight remained unchanged for over two centuries, and even when action did come, it was

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countered by slavery’s supporters. The strengthening of the Fugitive Slave Law as part of the Compromise of 1850 is a good example.\textsuperscript{14}

Cox and Dowling, however, have seen Babo’s voice as coming from outside the text. According to them, Melville became Babo’s voice and spokesman.\textsuperscript{15} Babo’s story is Melville’s voice, defense, and condemnation of a system that cast a shadow over an entire nation that was ruled, whether its people liked it or not, by that shadow. In a sense, an entire nation was following slavery to its inevitable downfall and Joyce Sparer Adler argues that the entire narrative is an early commentary on the violence that would erupt if America persisted with slavery.\textsuperscript{16} *Benito Cereno*, then, would seem to place Melville squarely within the Northern intellectual movement that characterized slavery as a rude mark upon an otherwise worthy experiment in democracy.\textsuperscript{17} However, like the multi-

\textsuperscript{14} A tragic and fascinating real example of the virtual futility of slaves to defend their actions, particularly when it had to do with actions against a white person is recounted in *Celia, A Slave*. In 1855, after being driven to despair by her white master, Robert Newsom, who purchased her when she was fourteen for the purpose of being his mistress, Celia killed him when he tried once again to force himself on her after she revolted from his domineering oppression. She was put on trial in Missouri, where she lived, for Newsom’s murder and given a very strong defense particularly for a woman of color in the 1850s in the South, by a team of three lawyers. In the end, she was convicted and executed, but her story is a remarkable one about the futility of black slaves trying to defend themselves in a society that had espoused racial slavery and was fully committed to its maintenance. See Melton E. McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave* (New York: Avon Books, 1991).

\textsuperscript{15} Cox and Dowling., 30.


\textsuperscript{17} Robert K. Wallace has conducted some very insightful research into the connections between Melville and Frederick Douglass, some of which involves *Benito Cereno*. In a lecture he delivered at a symposium in May, 2005 entitled “Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: A Sesquicentennial Celebration,” Wallace stated that “Douglass and Melville did know each other’s work, in ways that are quite significant and revealing.” Two very strong pieces of evidence that he provides for this assertion are directly related to *Benito Cereno*. In tracking Melville and Douglass’ physical whereabouts for a number of years, Wallace concludes that Melville and Douglass were in close geographic proximity on various occasions. On April 23, 1842 Douglass gave a speech in New York at Shiloh Presbyterian Church, located "halfway between Melville's Fourth avenue house and his Library at Leonard Street." During the course of the speech, Douglass referred to the slaveholders as ‘sleeping on slumbering volcanoes, did they but know it.' If Melville did not know of this speech, it is an unbelievable coincidence that Melville uses the same phrase in *Benito Cereno*. According to Wallace “Melville uses the same phrase in the context of the slave revolt on the San Dominick [...]. Captain Delano, not yet knowing what has happened, asks himself ‘would not the San Dominick, like a slumbering volcano, let loose energies now hid?’” Another even more striking example that would seem to confirm Melville’s awareness of Douglass is the most famous scene from *Benito Cereno*—the shaving scene with Babo functioning as the barber to Captain Cereno, with the razor
layered thematic schemas in his other works, on the question of race Melville cannot be so simply categorized.

As noted above, the first writing Melville published after the war was *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, a work not devoted solely to questions of race, but one that addressed slavery and former slaves as one “piece” of the book. Those few poems and bits of prose dedicated to slavery are less dramatic in their treatment of blacks than was *Benito Cereno*, but that is, perhaps, not surprising since historians like David Blight, Peter Kolchin, and Nina Silber have all noted the conflicted nature of Americans in the years following 1865, and even before. Reconstruction with all of its nuances, including unionism and black suffrage and equality, was neither an easy nor a cut-and-dry issue for many nineteenth-century Americans, including Melville. Helen Vendler describes Melville’s vision regarding postbellum America, a vision that struggled to reconcile preservation of the fragile Union with black equality and sympathy for the freedmen, with the following: “Melville’s gaze is not upward, like Dickinson’s nor directed in a democratic horizontal, like Whitman’s; it is pitched downward, to the drowned under the sea, or the fiery hell at the core of the earth.” Into that fiery hell of postbellum America, with all its challenges of race and reconciliation, Melville plunged in *Battle-pieces and Aspects of the War*.

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very close to his throat, at one point cutting him when Benito flinches. In this scene, Babo expertly shaves his “master,” an expertise on which Delano comments. When Douglass spoke at the Broadway Tabernacle on May 7, 1850 a very vocal group of rioters attended and tried to “disrupt” the proceedings. When Douglass took the stage, he was greeted by “catcalling” and “hideous noises.” One particularly outspoken rioter was Isaiah Ryders who at one point yelled to Douglass that the slaves wanted to “cut your master’s throats.” Douglass’ response is remarkable in its connection to the shaving scene that is brilliantly rendered by Melville. Douglass replied, “they have had the razor in their hands for years and the worst they had done was to cut hair.” Wallace’s connections between Melville and Douglass are insightful and further suggest that Melville was very much aware of and involved in the racial issues of his time. See *Melville Society Extracts* (October, 2005). 3-9.

Robert Milder has contended in “The Rhetoric of Melville’s Battle-Pieces” that “Unionism and blackness control the volume from the outset as an overtone and undertone.”¹⁹ Milder’s statement is insightful because it recognizes an important connection between race and union that characterizes racial themes in the collection and helps to explain the book’s at times contradictory racial component, which has garnered harsh and severe criticism from at least two of Battle-Pieces’ critics.²⁰ Did Melville retreat from his position in Benito Cereno? Did he subordinate race to reunion as so many others were doing? These certainly are finite questions, but they may not have easy, finite answers. What is clear is that Melville did see a connection between race and reunion and while only two poems are dedicated specifically to black Americans, race is an essential “piece” in the collection.

As one might expect from a book of war poetry, particularly one published so soon after the conflict’s end, a dedication immediately follows the title page: “The Battle-Pieces in this volume are dedicated to the memory of the THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND who in the war for the maintenance of the Union fell devotedly under the flag of their fathers.”²¹ The dedication is striking because it immediately validates one primary Northern aim before the war and a primary concern for many Americans after the War—union. Historian Peter Kolchin affirms that the “initial” war aims for both sides were clear and “only indirectly linked to the peculiar institution.”²² Though Kolchin’s

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²⁰ See Adler’s “Melville and the Civil War” and Karcher’s “The Modern and the Radical: Melville and Child on the Civil War and Reconstruction.”
²¹ Herman Melville, Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995).

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statement may not be strictly true, at least not on the Southern side. According to Karen
E. Fritz's analysis of Confederate rhetoric, by 1859 Southerners felt a need to fiercely
defend slavery and they "faced the divisive issues of 1859 and 1860 with a strong
proslavery attitude and a strong desire to defend the institution." In December, 1860,
the New Orleans Bee was very specific in describing the importance of slavery in
maintaining the union: "As long as slavery is looked upon by the North with abhorrence,
as long as the South is regarded as a mere slave-breeding and slave-driving community;
as long as false and pernicious theories are cherished respecting inherent equality...there
can be no satisfactory political union between the two sections." Whether or not the
South viewed slavery as a major component in the war effort, Lincoln and other
Northerners invoked preservation of the union as the primary cause before and during the
war, though by 1863, those war aims had been revised to include abolition. In 1863,
Lincoln assured the abolitionist vision with the Gettysburg Address, a point noted by
Gary Wills in his influential book *Lincoln At Gettysburg.* James McPherson's study
*For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War,* an impressive collection of
previously unpublished soldier diaries and correspondence, also shows that even
individual soldiers had, by war’s end, recognized the need for slavery to be part of the
practical and rhetorical battle being waged. Politicians and soldiers alike recognized
slavery’s importance as a war aim, yet if Melville, whose book *Benito Cereno* is so
adamantly anti-slavery, and who believed slavery to be a “curse,” dedicated his book to

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24 Ibid.
25 See Lincoln’s Cooper Institute Speech of 1860 for his early statement on toleration of slavery where it already existed.
those who died preserving the Union, not those who died to abolish slavery, perhaps the complexities governing the relationship between union and slavery were more complicated than most politicians and even soldiers wanted to admit.\textsuperscript{28} The reaction to Lincoln’s \textit{Gettysburg Address} certainly points to just such a complication.

Though the Address was only 272 words in length and mentioned neither the name of the town from which the battlefield received its name, nor any of the places that had become famous either for the heroism enacted or the great slaughter (e.g. the Wheatfield, the Peach Orchard, Little Round Top, and Cemetery Ridge), what Lincoln accomplished, or certainly tried to accomplish, did not go unnoticed by some American journalists, many of whom were adamantly offended by Lincoln’s contention that the Declaration of Independence was written for both black and white Americans.\textsuperscript{29} By the end of 1863, with the Emancipation Proclamation in full effect and the \textit{Gettysburg Address} re-shaping the definition of American liberty, abolitionists had finally achieved success—abolishing slavery now accompanied preserving the Union as an official war aim. In fact, even though the North had not immediately embraced the abolitionist stance on emancipation, the Emancipation Proclamation “captured the imagination of the Northern public and elevated the Union’s commitment to emancipation far beyond the level of mere expediency by adding moral weight to the Union cause.”\textsuperscript{30} Union commitment to emancipation could not, however, change Southern opposition to it even at the war’s end. One Southern woman wrote in her journal on April 1, 1865 that whites in her community in South Carolina had “requested the negroes be called up, and told them they were not

\textsuperscript{28} The Supplement to \textit{Battle-Pieces}.

\textsuperscript{29} See Wills pages 38-39 for specific newspaper accounts of the Address and the reaction to what Wills refers to as the “intellectual pocket picking” that occurred at Gettysburg that November 1863.

free, but slaves, and would be until they died...Poor deluded creatures! Their friends the Yankees have done them more harm than good." Establishing emancipation would be a difficult task in the South as well as in the North, even if it did please abolitionists. As such, although Lincoln had “captured the North’s attention,” not all Federals agreed that slavery ought to be the primary cause invoked for the war being waged, and neither were they interested in making it the central outcome of the war.

Northern disagreement over the place of blacks in America and the issue of slavery as a motive for the war may account for the complexities in Melville’s various writings on race and union. Certainly after the War ended, former slaves were unwilling to forget their place in the war’s beginning or end, and continued to fight for the lessons they felt should not be forgotten, a point noted without reservation by Kolchin who affirms that slaves “correctly perceived” that the war “revolve[d] around slavery.” Kolchin’s perspective is, in this respect, somewhat limited as he adamantly accepts that after the Emancipation Proclamation what was once a “conservative war to restore the Union” was “transformed” into a revolutionary war to reconstruct it,” with slavery being the primary focus. Historians David Blight and Nina Silber accept this general premise but have gone much further by noting the willingness of many Americans to lay to rest the question of slavery as a cause and re-focus instead on union and re-union, which helps to explain the difficulties that Americans, including Melville, faced in trying to define the war and their own experiences that were shaped by it, particularly after it was over.

Melville’s opening dedication is devoted to those who fell to preserve the Union, a point that he reiterated in “On the Men of Maine” found in the inscriptive section: the

31 Kolchin, 209.
32 Ibid., 204.
33 Ibid., 207.
Maine youth “died for her [the Country]—/the Volunteers/for her went up their dying prayer.” The dedication, however, contains no specific mention of the abolitionist cause, and Paul M. Dowling has asserted that Melville greatly “downplays” slavery as a cause of the war in his book. Why would Melville, as a firm believer in the moral degradation of slavery, having described it in the Supplement to *Battle-Pieces* as an “atheistical iniquity,” “downplay” it now that the issue was firmly before him? First, Melville was not an abolitionist, as various critics have pointed out, though he was a “loyal Unionist.” He certainly disapproved of slavery, but that was a long way from being an abolitionist in the nineteenth century. Abolitionists were reformers, and Melville once said of reformers in general, “These men are all cracked right across the brow.” As a point of interest concerning Melville’s connection to the abolitionist cause, his father-in-law Judge Lemuel Shaw was the Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, and he chose to uphold the oft-hated Fugitive Slave Law. Whether in deference to his father-in-law or his own general attitude about reformers, Melville did not become involved in the radical abolitionist movement.

The second reason for the downplaying of slavery in his book, if indeed this is what he did, is, according to David Blight, quite a simple one. For many Americans, reconciliation and racial equality could not both have place in the country at the same time. They were mutually exclusive. Blight sees the problem as being not unlike the

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36 Hitt, 58.
37 Ibid.
38 Karcher, 190.
39 Blight, 3, 57, 139.
sectional tension that existed before the war. Two sections of one country were utterly irreconcilable: polar opposites with no room in the middle for compromise. Indeed, in Blight’s words, “the new nation awaiting rebirth...had the thought of black equality on one side, the knowledge of sectional reunion on the other side, and no muse yet in the middle holding their hands.” As Blight aptly points out, “the country was sick of war” and ready to move beyond sectional conflict to a reunion foreshadowed by the reaction recorded by a soldier at Appomattox after the surrender:

It was hard to tell which side cheered the loudest, Rebs or Yanks. We were soon all mixed up, shaking hands, giving the johnnies grub & coffee & getting tobacco. It seemed more like meeting of dear old friends after long absence than of men ready to kill or be killed a few hours previously.

Silber explains how Americans were able to turn their heads so quickly to reunion with their enemies. She posits that the emotional bond between Northerners and Southerners was stronger than sectional politics and that this attachment overshadowed any need to remember or reflect on the lessons that the Civil War might have taught. While Silber’s contention may have been true on some level, reunion was not so simple as she and Blight claim, even for white Americans. Melville’s *Battle-Pieces* is a good example. Clearly, his opening dedication recognizes the importance of unionism and reunion under the “flag” of the founding fathers, yet the first actual poem in Melville’s book, “The Portent,” is not dedicated to union at all. It takes on the other major weight in the scales

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40 Ibid., 30.
41 Ibid., 43.
43 Ibid., 10.
44 One of the best examples of this tension, noted by Blight, is the difference in President Johnson and Congress’ goals for Reconstruction. See Blight pages 45 and 47.
that Silber and Blight have recognized, that is, race and its predecessor, slavery. If Melville began his book downplaying slavery, as Dowling has suggested, then the first poem in the book recognizes Melville’s point that race is a controlling feature in the collection from beginning to end.

The opening poem is not listed in the Table of Contents, “for no clear reason” as Mustafa Jalal sees it. Adding to its enigmatic nature, well-befitting a poem devoted to John Brown, an enigmatic figure himself, is its having been printed completely in italics. However, far from being omitted from the Table of Contents “for no clear reason,” this oddity has prompted Cox to believe that the poem was meant as an epigraph, of sorts, for the entire book, and Megan Williams writes that “John Brown’s body literally hangs over the course of history and the trajectory of his [Melville’s] collection.” That the poem may be an epigraph for Battle-Pieces as a whole is an important point because being an epigraph it carries the same, if not more suggestive weight, than the dedication in relation to the volume as a whole, thereby balancing Melville’s dedication to union. In short, Melville gives equal attention from the outset of the book to the two largest concerns of the war and its direct aftermath: race and union.

_Hanging from the beam,_

_Slowly swaying (such the law),_

_Gaunt the shadow on your green,_

_Shenandoah!

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46 Megan Williams, “‘Sounding the Wilderness’: Representations of the heroic in Herman Melville’s _Battle-Pieces and Aspect of the War_,” _Texas Studies in Literature and Language_ 45, no. 2 (Summer 2003): Par. 26.


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The cut is on the crown
(Lo, John Brown),
And the stabs shall heal no more.

Hidden in the cap
I the anguish none can draw;
So your future veils its face,
Shenandoah!

But the streaming beard is shown
(Weird John Brown),
The meteor of the war.

As the maiden poem in the collection, readers could not ask for better than "The Portent," although at least two contemporaries of Melville's wrote in critiquing Battle-Pieces that "only a writing medium could mistake such stuff as this for poetry" and that the first stanza is "not very promising to say the least." Gratefully these critics from the Nation and Albion have not been the final say on the poem. Carolyn L. Karcher disagrees with the Nation and Albion critics, referring to the poem as the "most haunting and evocative piece" in the entire book, a comment borne out by the sense of mystery and anxiety Melville creates from the first line: "Hanging from the beam." Because the hanging object is unknown, the reader is intensely aware that what came as a "portent" to the Union was not immediately apparent to those watching the "hanging" from a distance. This unknown quality is also vital, as it connects to the poem's title. What is portentous is

49 Karcher, 195.
fate-driven, prodigious, and ultimately supernatural, thereby unknowable—inevitable, but still unknowable and unpredictable. Additionally, the image of a hanging object implies instability, no solid grounding, thereby increasing the potential for a shift in direction, if external forces provide the stimulus. Whatever is hanging in Melville’s poem is unidentified and unstable.

The mystery begun with the unknown hanging object merely increases the urgency that develops by the second line that is spoken as a parenthetical afterthought, “(such the law).” The second line’s parenthetical structure is notable because it suggests uncertainty, a subdued doubt that whatever has been caused by the law, presumably the “hanging” of the object, is not absolutely devoid of objection. Though the hanging has been sanctioned by the court, perhaps the viability of the law itself ought to be doubted. Deak Nabers has suggested that *Battle-Pieces* as a whole encourages us to “feel a gravitational pull between ‘Right’ and the ‘Law’, but it also forces us to notice a gap between them.”

Surely the parenthetical statement of Brown’s judgment does indeed indicate a “gap” between what is morally right and what is legally right.

Moreover, as if to emphasize the instability of whatever is hanging or what is represented by that hanging, Melville remarks that the object is “Slowly swaying.” Like a pendulum counting down the seconds until the clock will strike, so does the swaying object act as a counter, a “metronome” to mark time until the portentous event will occur, the event of which the portent, perhaps the hanging object itself, has signaled. Still, what is hanging remains unspoken and unnamed. The consequence of the hanging object, however, is described, perhaps because the consequence far outweighs the portent itself.

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51 Williams, Par. 25.
and the consequence is not slight. As the pendulum swings, slowly, building tension with each moment, the entire Shenandoah Valley is overcast by a shadow: "Gaunt the shadow on your green/Shenandoah!" What is that shadow? To find out, another of Melville's works must be re-visited, this time with "The Portent" in mind.

Given that Battle-Pieces is the first writing Melville published after the war and Benito Cereno was the last writing published before the war, the two works can be related without too much of a step, particularly when the correlation is an obvious one, as is the case with "The Portent." The similarity of one particular image used in both texts is remarkable and likely not mere chance. When Amasa Delano requests an explanation from Benito Cereno about Cereno's melancholy, their exchange is a haunting foreshadow to the epigraph for what would be Melville's first major poetic adventure: "What has cast such a shadow upon you?" (Italics added) To which Cereno makes his famous reply, "The negro." For one who has read Benito Cereno, then, the object and the subject of the hanging starts to demystify. What casts a shadow over the Shenandoah is the same as what casts the shadow over Benito Cereno, "the negro," or more generally, slavery. With this in mind, the first two lines can be read with a new perspective, particularly the parenthetical afterthought, "(such the law)." If the hanging object has something to do with slavery, the speaker in the poem is doubtful that the law's execution as been above reproach in the matter, perhaps even mistaken. The law is merely executed as it is written; the speaker seems to recognize that only because of the law is the hanging

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52 Rosanna Warren has presented an additional idea for the shadow. She argues that the image has biblical overtones, no an unlikely theory. "The subliminal suggestion of 'valley' in relation to 'Shenandoah,' combined with 'shadow' and the ominous implications of the poem thus far, may call to mind 'the valley of the shadow of death' from Psalm 23." See pages 277-278.

53 Adler has also identified the shadow as slavery. See page 111.
justified, not because the action leading to the hanging is worthy of the consequence. Already, Melville muddies the slavery issue, and only four lines have yet been read.

Now, the only remaining mystery is what exactly the harbinger that foretold the war for union is. At the end of the first stanza in line six the answer is finally provided. Significantly the line appears as a parenthetical afterthought: "(Lo, John Brown.)" John Brown’s divisiveness in mid-nineteenth-century America was probably eclipsed, if at all, only by Lincoln, and Brown’s sole reputation rests on his relationship to the anti-slavery cause. If he was such a crucial player in the abolitionist movement, a man referred to by one Maryland newspaper as a “bloody marauder,” why is he revealed in parenthesis? Surely his position as a portent makes him worthy of an outright statement and not a parenthetical note. The answer is multi-faceted.

First, the structure connects line six to the previous parenthetical line, "(such the law)" and makes the connection between the two much stronger than it otherwise would have been. Brown has been the subject of that doubtful sentence revealed in the second line. Rosanna Warren points out that the connection between the two lines has already begun before the figure is even revealed, thereby making the final revelation about the hanging figure’s identity that much stronger. About the first connection, Warren writes, “Alliteration seems to bind the physical motion of what we do not yet know is a corpse to the legal enforcement: ‘Slowly swaying (such the law.)’” Even before the hanging figure becomes John Brown’s corpse a solid connection between the law and the result of that law, a result that the speaker seems to doubt, has been formed. About John Brown and the law to which he succumbed, Karcher has made an interesting observation that is

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54 "The Harper’s Ferry Insurrection," Hagerstown Herald of Freedom and Torch Light, 26 October 1859.  
55 Warren, 277.
applicable here. She notes that both Brown and Babo were victims of law but not necessarily justice.®® Certainly the parenthetical nature of line two supports that supposition, as discussed above, and the parallel structure of lines two and six ascertains that the connection between misgivings about the law and John Brown will be clear.

Second, because Melville describes the shadow that Brown’s hanging body casts before even identifying the man, the former is given heavier emphasis. Slavery as an issue was larger than John Brown, or any one person in particular. As Benito Cereno answered, not just Babo casts a shadow over him but “the negro,” the entire race and the accompanying baggage—racial slavery. Because the shadow, the issue, was more crucial and carried the greater consequences, (after all, John Brown could be hung, but the slave question could not be) it stretches over the Shenandoah, while John Brown himself is understated. Having noted this, however, does not change the importance of John Brown as a portent of the war, but he is just that, a portent, a harbinger, a sign of the coming strife. He foreshadows it, but does not cause it, though one Southerner might disagree, believing that John Brown’s “atrocious” raid on Harper’s Ferry “kindled a flame in the hearts of the Southern people that led to the Civil War.”®7 Yet even here the beginnings for the fire were already there. John Brown merely applied the heat.

The status that Melville gives to Brown as a foreshadower but not an instigator is reiterated in the second to last line, which is, again, in parenthesis, tying it back to lines two and six: “(Weird John Brown).” Attention is immediately drawn to the word “weird,” since that is the distinguishing word between this line and line two. The most natural allusion here is to Shakespeare’s Macbeth with its three famous “weird sisters,” an

®® Karcher, 196.
®7 Hopkins. 13.
allusion that Warren acknowledges; Melville’s use of “weird” did not mean only “strange” but rather closer to the Shakespearean use as in the weird sisters. 58 With Shakespeare in mind, at least one reading of “The Portent” becomes very clear.

Stephen Greenblatt in his introductory essay on *Macbeth* for the Norton anthology edition of Shakespeare gives some attention to the witches and reminds readers about the etymology of “weird” as Shakespeare used it to describe the three witches who foretell Macbeth’s rise in King Duncan’s ranks: “The word ‘weird’ in one of its etymologies, derives from the Old English word for ‘fate.’” 59 Warren, using the O.E. D. etymological definition, believes that Melville used the word as he “knew from the Weird Sisters of Macbeth, ‘having the power to control the fate or destiny of men’ and ‘claiming the supernatural power of dealing with fate or destiny.’” 60 Whether or not Shakespeare knew the word’s etymology when he used the word cannot be known definitively, but it is “probable that he did.” 61 That Shakespeare used the word intentionally, however, does not automatically suggest that the witches themselves influenced fate or that they were the fates personified. In fact, the witches do not create the action in the play at all; they cannot “compel” Macbeth to do evil, as Frank Kermode has observed. 62

Additionally, in his important and foundational study of Shakespeare’s plays, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, A.C. Bradley points out that “there is no sign whatever in the play that Shakespeare meant the actions of Macbeth to be forced on him by an external power, whether that of the Witches, or of their ‘masters,’ or of Hecate.” 63 As such, when

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58 Warren, 280.
60 Warren, 280.
63 Bradley, 285.
Melville uses the term “weird” to describe John Brown, he is using it in the Shakespearean sense, but contrary to Warren’s position, this does not mean necessarily that John Brown, the portent, is himself the instrument of fate which causes the tragedy that is recounted in the pages that follow “The Portent.” So though John Brown’s body may become a “physical sign” that the war was “inevitable,” a position to which Megan Williams holds, he is not the primary cause, any more that the Weird sisters cause Macbeth’s fall, though they foreshadow the possibility. The title is suggestive of quite the opposite and is probably much closer to Melville’s allusion to Shakespeare’s Weird Sisters than simply giving John Brown carte blanch fate-controlling power.

A portent is something that bespeaks an event, but it does not cause the event. In Shakespeare specifically, in *Macbeth* and elsewhere, notably in *Julius Caesar*, portents are extraordinarily crucial to the plays, but not to the actual events happening. They merely give a sign that something is, has, or will happen. Portents are not compelling forces. Such is the case in Melville’s poem. This may also be why both times that John Brown’s name is mentioned in the poem, it is contained within parenthetical phrasing. John Brown is merely the omen, not the cause. His death and the tension that his lifeless swinging body signifies on the issue of slavery causes the ultimate tragedy to follow. John Brown is dead, yes, but what has killed him? What is the cause of the swinging body and the shadow that it casts? “(Such the law)” —a law that hangs one of the slaves’ strongest advocates on the one hand and legalizes slavery on the other. John Brown is indeed a portent, but not the root, which may explain why his name is understated twice

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64 Williams, par. 25. Williams also posits that the omission of “The Portent” from the Table of Contents indicates on Melville’s part an uncertainty as to exactly when the war reached the point of inevitability, since the remainder of the poems listed in the Table of Contents are chronological in order and seem to be very exact in their occurrence and the themes that they address by their placement. See par. 27 in Williams.
in the poem and not even introduced by name until after the consequences of the law have been explained.

Yet, the significance of John Brown to the mounting tension in the years leading up to the Civil War cannot be absolutely ignored, even if he was a portent and not the absolute cause. Though Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry in 1859 was merely one in a long string of incidents that heightened sectional anxiety and polarized the nation, he was, no doubt, an important figure, and upon this point there is another explanation for why Brown’s name is understated in the poem.

Up until 1863, most Americans were neither willing nor interested in making slavery the focal point of the war, preferring to view union as the primary cause, a position to which Melville metaphorically tips his hat in the dedicatory statement. If slavery was to be acknowledged at all as a harbinger, it was not to be boldly proclaimed, rather spoken quietly, acknowledged but not declared, and John Brown’s name most definitely bespoke slavery. Between the dedication and the epigraph, Melville succinctly pointed to a major contentious issue for white America—even defining the causes of war would prove problematic, to say nothing of trying to determine what the war’s end should try to change or re-establish. Should slavery be boldly stated as a war aim or parenthetically whispered? In at least one possible reading of “The Portent” the question is clearly answered. Slavery ought to be subordinated to union, parenthetically addressed.

Once Melville definitively recognizes at the end of the first stanza that the hanging figure is John Brown, hanged on December 2, 1859 for his attempt to start a slave revolt.

65 Karcher’s essay maintains that the cause of the war was slavery, but it was not the central concern of the war. pp. 201, and certainly James Huston’s study Calculating the Value of the Union argues very effectively that slavery did cause the war, mostly because of its economic component to Southerners. R.T.M Hunter’s essay published in 1876 argues that slavery was not the cause, rather encroachment of the majority onto the minority’s constitutional rights was the primary cause. See Hunter’s “Origin of the Late War.”
in what is now West Virginia by capturing the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry on October 16, 1859, and hunted for butchering five proslavery men in Kansas in 1856, the poem further develops as a commentary on slavery itself. According to the poem, and as discussed above, John Brown’s death shadow looms large over the Virginia landscape. In fact his “gaunt shadow” haunts the beautiful Shenandoah Valley, and indeed John Brown’s shadow did haunt Virginia, but not only Virginia. John Brown was for abolitionists a martyr to the great moral cause, and his interviews and statements after being captured only increased his standing as a moral figure, turning “a military debacle into a moral victory.” Indeed some Federal soldiers “would march into battle singing, ‘John Brown’s body lies amoulding in the grave...’” Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau both praised Brown and lamented his death as a momentous occasion in America’s moral history. Emerson believed that Brown’s hanging would “make the gallows as glorious as the Cross.” Thoreau wrote just prior to Brown’s hanging that “some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its link. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light.” Not to be left out, Nathaniel Hawthorne responded in an essay entitled “War Matters, by a Peaceable Man”: “Nobody was more justly hanged. He won his martyrdom fairly, and took it firmly.”

For the South, John Brown and the “scoundrels,” “cut-throats,” “bloody marauders,” and “few phrenzied [sic], malignant out-laws” who engaged in the “diabolical,”

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67 Karcher, 193. Melville, however, did not see John Brown as a martyr at all, only the sign of what was to come. See Jack Lindeman. “Herman Melville’s Civil War.” Modern Age. Vol. 9 (1965): 388.
68 Warren, 275.
69 Ibid., 276.
71 Warren, 276.
“hideous,” “devilish” and “monstrously wicked” attack at Harper’s Ferry vindicated all of their worst fears about Northern abolitionists. After Brown’s actions in Kansas in 1856, one terrified South Carolinian living in Kansas wrote to his sister that

I never lie down without taking the precaution to fasten my door and fix in such a way that if it is forced open, it can be opened only wide enough for one person to come in at a time. I have my rifle, revolver, and old home-stocked pistol where I can lay my hand on them in an instant, besides a hatchet and an axe. I take this precaution to guard against the midnight attacks of the Abolitionists, who never make an attack in open daylight, and no Proslavery man knows when he is safe in this Ter[ritory].

Moreover, Southerners equated John Brown to the newly formed Republican Party. In their minds, John Brown with his ties to the abolitionists was also linked to the Republican Party since from the Southern perspective abolitionists functioned as “mere agents of the Republican party.” The idea that the abolitionists, and by extension the Republicans, sought to destroy the South and were an unmitigated evil influence on the country is borne out by the words of one Southern defender of slavery who meshed the abolitionist platform with the ideas of “Socialists, of Free love and Free Lands, Free Churches, Free Women and Free Negroes—of No-Marriage, No-Religion, No-Private Property, No-Law and No-Government.” For many Americans of all inclinations on the eve of the Civil War, one man became the material shape for the great abstraction that loomed over the country—slavery, that “gaunt shadow.” Because of Brown’s notoriety

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72 “The Harper’s Ferry Insurrection.”
73 Boyer, et.al, 445.
74 Ibid., 451.
75 Ibid.
and involvement in the slave issue, Melville did not need to proclaim his voice in direct statements. His name whether in parentheses or not was enough to rouse memories in Americans throughout the country of either martyrdom or execution.

In the lines connected with the revelation of John Brown and his gloomy shadow, Melville begins a physical description that serves not only as a way of characterizing the marks of violence on Brown’s hanging body, but also to more clearly focus the poem’s vision: “The cut is on the crown.” Warren contends that “the cut” that gashed Brown’s “crown,” suggests the “violence of slavery itself,” in short representing the cuts on the many black crowns whose lives John Brown hoped to save. In addition, the cuts also remind Melville’s audience of the ghastly lengths to which Brown had gone for his radical cause—mutilating and butchering five non-slaveholding supporters of the proslavery Lecompton government in Kansas. Further complicating the image of the cut on Brown’s crown is the relation that it bears to the image of Christ. The cut on the crown may symbolically suggest Christ’s crown of thorns, a reading that certainly holds with Brown’s popular martyred status, further evidenced by Emerson’s linking of Brown with Jesus Christ, Brown’s hanging having made “the gallows as glorious as the Cross.”

Regardless of whether the line is directed as an allusion to the savior of all humanity in the Christian tradition, or if the cut represents the violence of the slave system directed toward slaves, and/or the violence to end slavery, slavery is still the main issue at hand. Yet another reading further deepens the ambiguity and mystery that surrounds John Brown and whether the poem casts him as a martyr or a murderer. William C.

76 Rosanna Warren, 279.
77 Ibid.
78 Karcher, 196.
79 Warren, 276.
Spengemann in “Melville the Poet” that appeared in *American Literary History* points out that the line dealing with the cut on the crown may very well be an allusion to Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, in which the King verifies that “it is no English treason to cut French crowns.” In this sense, then, John Brown’s crown is justly cut; the execution is warranted by his crime.

The final line of the first stanza only strengthens the previous line’s connection to slavery and the peculiar problem it posed for Americans as individuals and the nation as a whole: “And the stabs shall heal no more.” Certainly the line, as with the rest of the poem, has its very literal foundation. The wounds sustained by Brown in his capture at Harper’s Ferry would indeed heal no more now that he was dead, yet as to be expected with Melville, this line, like the others in “The Portent” and the remaining poems in *Battle-Pieces*, is laced with multi-layered significance. The first layer is a literary one, rich in ambiguous possibility. Spengemann concludes that this line with its unhealed wounds is an allusion to Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* or *Macbeth* “where attacks upon constituted authority are treason and nothing but.” In this case, then, like the previous allusion to *Henry V*, Brown’s hanging is a justified punishment. Yet even here the justification for the execution is not absolute, given the difficult nature of *Julius Caesar* particularly and the questions that revolve around Brutus. He is after all the tragic figure whose nobility is famously praised by Mark Antony in the play’s closing moments:

This was the noblest Roman of them all.

All the conspirators save only he

Did that they did in envy of great Caesar.

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81 Ibid.
He only in a general honest thought
And common good to all made one of them.
His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that nature might stand up
And say to all the world 'this was a man'.

If the allusion to Julius Caesar is accepted, then, Melville has acknowledged Brown's status as both a figure deserving punishment for defying a basic constitutionally protected right, slavery, and a figure inflicting a blow against a corrupt system that would only lead to democracy's demise. In this sense then, Brown functions as both Brutus the protector and Brutus the destroyer.

The second possible reading for the cut on the crown is an historical one. Up until 1860, the country had been living from compromise to compromise. Indeed Jay Winik in his bestselling book April 1865, The Month That Saved America writes that beginning in 1820, the country “lurched from one tense confrontation to another” and that “throughout this period, Congress would become, in many ways, little more than a Union-saving body, that and nothing more.” Each time a “stab” or “cut” was thrust on North or South on the slave issue, from the avid defenders or detractors, it had healed each time, a precarious healing to be sure, but a healing nonetheless. By 1859 and John Brown’s execution the time for compromise had vanished; those stabs and cuts offered in slavery’s name would no longer heal, or as Winik puts it, Congress’ efforts as a Union-saving body “would not be enough.” Lines eight through eleven, the first four lines in the second stanza, also offer a commentary on the future of those open wounds: “Hidden in the

82 5.5.67-74.
cap/Is the anguish none can draw;/So your future veils its face,/Shenandoah!" Because the stab wounds are beyond healing, the inevitable will happen; anguish will follow the shadowing of the Shenandoah. Even more importantly, that anguish is, like the hanging corpse at the beginning, unknown. Though Melville provides enough physical description in the poem to create sympathy for Brown, according to Karcher, his imagery includes much that is withheld. Brown’s body covers the physical landscape with his shadow, preventing clarity about how to even address that shadow, slavery, and its relationship to the people and the nation.

Likewise, Brown’s own face is hidden at the moment of his death. He does not see into the faces of his supporters or enemies and neither can they see him. This inability to see one another is indicative of two tragic components of the war. First, the ability of the two sides to the slave question, for and against, had by the end of 1859 become so rhetorically separated, that they could no longer even see each other. Hence, the time for compromise had ended. As Abraham Lincoln had prophesied in his famous “House Divided” speech,

A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other.

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84 Richard Harter Fogle points out that John Brown is indeed hidden in the poem and that his covered face is the “vast tragedy of the future, more fearful because veiled.” See “Melville and the Civil War,” Tulane Studies in English 9 (1959): 68.
85 Karcher, 196.
Secondly, as will be further discussed in an upcoming chapter, the people, both Brown’s supporters and his detractors, those who are symbolically represented by the Shenandoah Valley to which the poem is addressed, an area that bore the brunt of Civil War fighting, could not see the portent’s full implications. The horror experienced by the events of which the portent foretells was hidden from the participants, as Melville poignantly observed in “The March Into Virginia,” as the new recruits are only able to “surmise” about “battle’s unknown mysteries.” Soon, however, the “anguish” that was “hidden in the cap,” would be revealed, and a tragic drama would play out—America the tragic figure whose flaw, slavery, leads to the “inevitable fate” of war, resulting in growth and enlightenment. ⁸⁷ The innocence of a country that had managed to “veil its face” would soon be gone, and a new, more tragic and dark knowledge, a knowledge of evil itself, would take its place. The old innocence would never be recovered, even if the country survived the crisis, “the anguish” warned of in “The Portent,” a warning made even more poignant by John Brown’s own words in a note he gave to one of his jailors as he walked to the scaffold on December 2, 1859: “I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with Blood.” ⁸⁸

Melville offers in the closing lines his final introduction to Battle-Pieces, tying the last line to the title: “(Weird John Brown),/The meteor of the war.” Certainly, the meteor could be read as another way of utilizing the notion of a portent, or an external, unearthly force that signals a momentous event, but it has other possible significance as

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⁸⁷ Adler, 96.
well. The image of the meteor is particularly interesting because of its many possibilities, and is exemplary of Melville’s trademark ambiguity. One reading of Melville’s use here of a meteor reinforces the instability and general element of misgiving, doubt, and the unknown in the poem. According to Maurice S. Lee’s research, in the nineteenth century, meteors were very unpredictable, unlike comets, which were scientifically predictable. Lee concludes, therefore, that Brown cannot be an absolute “celestial body” which, in Lee’s view, “point[s] toward Northern victory.” That Brown’s significance is unpredictable is further verified by the images of veiling and shadowing that occur throughout the poem. Brown’s final significance as a portent is indeed unpredictable, both in the context of the poem with its focus on a pre-war America. When Melville wrote and published the poem in 1866 the war’s final chapter was still being written, and perhaps even is still being written today, as Americans searched to find meaning in the “anguish” and determine how the newly christened United States would deal with a new political and social scene rising out of the ashes of Bull Run, Shiloh, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg and other various battlefields, a scene that included four million newly freed slaves.

The second reading of the closing line adds yet another layer to the poem’s overall interpretive possibilities. Warren draws attention to the meteor image as an allusion to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, a likely connection as Melville was well-acquainted with Milton’s work and *Paradise Lost* in particular. Warren connects Melville’s meteor image to an image connected with Satan and his banner: “The imperial ensign, which,

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full high advanced/Shone like a meteor streaming to the wind."91 Certainly the connection seems plausible, particularly since Melville also connects John Brown’s beard to the line when he describes it as a “streaming beard.” The allusion further complicates Melville’s reaction to John Brown, but as many critics have observed, and rightly so, *Battle-Pieces* has a “multi-voiced quality” whose voices work both with and against each other, never allowing the book as a whole to confine itself to only one “partisan ideology.”92 As such, the identification of John Brown’s beard with Satan’s banner works as a wonderful opposing force to the allusion to Christ with the “cut on the crown.”93 Melville sensed the paradoxical nature of John Brown and his actions, himself refusing to reveal whether he views John Brown as “a satanic or heavenly emissary.”94 Regardless of Melville’s own personal attitude toward Brown, what does seem clear is that however praiseworthy Brown’s original aims had been, in “becoming absolute” they had become “murderous.”95 The tension Melville creates through the mulit-layered and oppositional allusions mirrors the very real debate among Melville’s contemporaries about John Brown’s status as a martyr or a mad murderer.

Between the dedication and the opening epigraph, then, Melville outlines a troubling challenge that faced the newly born United States, race on one hand, union or re-union on the other, a challenge that would be further discussed by Melville in the prose Supplement that closes his poetry collection, and which will be more fully discussed in

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91 Warren, 280. The lines are found in Book I, lines 536-37.
93 Spengemann adds yet another possible reading of this line. He sees the meteor image as an allusion to Thomas Gray’s poem “The Bard,” since Melville was familiar with Gray’s work. Gray’s line reads, “With haggard eyes the poet stood,/ (Loose his beard, and hoary hair/Stream’d, like a meteor, to the troubled air).” See page 587.
94 Aaron, 79
an upcoming chapter. David Blight has pointed out that as white Northerners and white Southerners attempted to make sense of the war and make the thousands of deaths and casualties mean something glorious and tangible, they subordinated race to notions of glory, valor, and reunion. Complete reconciliation could not become reality if black equality and black suffrage were brought to the forefront and openly discussed, as racist sentiment was still and would continue to be so pronounced in the defeated South (clearly racism was also a problem in the North, but it did not reach the heights that it did in the South. e.g. Klu Klux Klan). Blight, to a large extent, is correct in his assertions, but in the months following the war, the months in which Melville composed most of his poems, reunion and race were not necessarily incompatible or mutually exclusive. Union was dependent upon race, a difficult concept at best, and one which Melville addressed in the differences between the dedication and the epigraphic poem and then further in the prose Supplement that closes the volume.

In the Supplement Melville acknowledges his sympathy with the freedmen but will not absolutely give up “the infinite desirableness of Re-establishment” for their cause. Instead he recognizes the equal importance of the “clouds of heroes who battled for the Union” and comments on the years of the war as a test of “our devotion to the Union”[italics added for emphasis]. Joyce Sparer Adler, as a severe critic of what she sees as Melville’s blindness, in the Supplement specifically, to the four million freedmen, contends that the Supplement is filled with intolerance, as Melville is “willing to sacrifice

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96 Blight.
97 For a very thorough discussion of KKK violence in the South, see Blight’s chapter “Reconstruction and Reconciliation.”
98 The Supplement, 260, 271.
the needs of the former slaves to the former slave-interest." Adler is not alone in her assertion that race and slavery were downplayed by Melville. Dowling has commented that the Supplement advocates "temporarily subordinating the black freedmen." However, Melville's position on the racial questions in the Supplement cannot be characterized so simply. Like the dedication and the epigraph, the prose Supplement approaches the messy in-between ground that refused to subordinate either race or reunion, unlike the later years on which Blight and Silber have focused their attention. In defending the moral rightness of the war as a fight against human bondage, Melville acknowledges that the South fought for the purpose of "erecting in our advanced century...an Anglo-American empire based upon the systematic degradation of man" [emphasis added]. Furthermore, Melville is very clear that he "abhorred" slavery and found himself "exulting...in its downfall." However, like Vendler suggested, Melville is quite willing to "pitch" his gaze "downward, to the drowned under the sea, or the fiery hell at the core of the earth." He sees the war's difficulties from not just a Northern view but from a Southern one as well, devoting poems to Southern heroes like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson and describing Sherman's March from a Southern perspective in "Frenzy in the Wake." From his dual perspective, Melville achieves a position that Blight claimed could not have been achieved, that of a "muse yet in the middle holding their [advocates of reunion and advocates of black equality] hands."

While exulting in slavery's downfall, Melville yet stresses that while Northerners, particularly the Radical Republicans led by Thaddeus Stevens, are trying to "confirm the

99 Adler, 112-113.
100 Dowling, "Melville's Quarrel With Poetry," 327.
101 The Supplement, 261.
102 Ibid., 268.
103 Blight, 30.
benefit of liberty to the blacks,” they should be equally conscious of not alienating the
South: “Let us forbear from measures of dubious constitutional rightfulness toward our
white countrymen—measures of a nature to provoke, among other of the last evils,
exterminating hatred of race toward race.”104 Robert J. Scholnick points out that Melville
even directly “attacked the refusal of Radical Republicans, who controlled Congress, ‘to
admit loyal representatives from the South.’”105 What is interesting about this statement
is that it directly contradicts the general statement of at least one historian that
Southerners were “viewed as traitors.”106 Melville, as a white Northerner, did not view
Southerners as traitors, at least not in the Supplement.

Melville even adopts a position not unlike that which would be taken years later, ca.
1895, by the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) who declared that “slavery was the
South’s misfortune, the whole country’s fault.”107 The UCV sounds hauntingly like
Melville in the Supplement: the people of the South “though they sought to perpetuate the
curse of slavery, and even extend it, were not the authors of it, but (less fortunate, not less
righteous than we) were the fated inheritors.”108 Historically, Melville was not alone in
such sentiments, and he predates the Lost Cause rhetoric, to which both David Blight and
Nina Silber call attention, that effectively absolved the South of any responsibility for the
slave institution, preferring instead to “romanticize” the happy slave on the plantation,
which Northerners were more than happy to accept.109 Interestingly, Melville’s temperate
attitude is pointed to by Silber, who uses Melville as an example of a Northerner who

104 The Supplement, 268.
105 Robert Scholnick, “Politics and Poetics: The Reception of Melville’s Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the
War,” American Literature 49, no. 3 (1977): 423.
106 Kolchin, 215.
107 Blight, 281.
108 The Supplement, 266.
criticized other Northerners for their victorious attitudes and their “manipulation” of their “own and former enemies’ feelings for the sake of a quick and economically satisfying reunion.” Melville, while supporting reunion, had no tolerance for his countrymen who would reunify by oppressing and manipulating their Southern neighbors.

The months following April, 1865 were chaotic, challenging, and mired in political, economic, and social upheaval. As Americans began to define the war in terms of what had caused it and what it meant, the situation became murkier and murkier. The country was not in a state of pristine re-birth; rather it was racked by social and political divisions that were every bit as troublesome as they were in 1861, but now, the freedom of more than four million people had to be accounted for and reconciled with the notions of unionism that had spurred so many to fight and die over a four year span. Herman Melville’s poetry collection, composed largely in the months that followed the fall of Richmond and published in August, 1866, barely sixteen months after Lee’s surrender to Grant, is a prime example of one who recognized the murkiness that loomed over the country and threatened to dissolve the tenuous re-union established in the months directly following the war’s end. Melville believed in the cause of Union, dedicating his book to those who died to preserve it, but likewise knew that slavery could not go unacknowledged as a catalyst to that struggle, a fact attested to by the opening poem of the book, which declared John Brown the meteor of the fratricidal struggle. Closing the book, the prose Supplement also acknowledges the delicate and web-like links between reunion and racial equality, recognizing slavery as a curse, yet equally acknowledging that “the future of the whole country…urges a paramount claim upon our anxiety” in

110 Silber, 47.
comparison to the "future of the freed slaves." On some level, for Melville, reunion was a necessity for racial equality.

For the sake of reconciliation and placation amongst white Americans, Melville, while acknowledging slavery as a curse, is momentarily willing to subordinate black equality and strong black voices to "the future of the whole country" that "urges a paramount claim upon our anxiety" in comparison to the "future of the freed slaves." Only then, perhaps, could race and reunion both become reality. Just as his contemporaries struggled with how to reconcile race and reunion, Melville was also doing the same, and *Battle-Pieces* is the public account of his private struggle.

Between the opening dedication, "The Portent" and the Supplement, *Battle-Pieces* contains two pivotal poems that deal explicitly with black slaves and freed slaves: "The Swamp Angel" and "Formerly A Slave." Each presents a strong case for the difficulty that Melville and other white Americans had in trying to reunify themselves within a country that now recognized blacks as citizens, theoretically anyway. First, "The Swamp Angel," since it appears before "Formerly A Slave" in the collection, a poem that one contemporary critic described as an effort by Melville to write in a "sentimental style," an assertion that seems dramatically unjustified given the harsh political and social truths expounded upon in the poem.

There is a coal-black Angel

With a thick Afric lip,

And he dwells (like the hunted and harried)

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111 Blight, 267.
112 Ibid., 267.
113 Adler agrees that *Battle-Pieces* emphasizes "the war within Melville." See page 104.
114 Higgins and Parker, 512. The review is from *National Quarterly Review.*
In a swamp where the green frogs dip.

But his face is against a City

Which is over a bay of the sea,

And he breathes with a breath that is blastment,

And dooms by a far decree.

By night there is fear in the City,

Through the darkness a star soareth on;

There's a scream that screams up to the zenith,

Then the poise of a meteor lone --

Lighting far the pale fright of the faces,

And downward the coming is seen;

Then the rush, and the burst, and the havoc,

And wails and shrieks between.

It comes like the thief in the gloaming;

It comes, and none may foretell

The place of the coming -- the glaring;

They live in a sleepless spell

That wizens, and withers, and whitens;

It ages the young, and the bloom

Of the maiden is ashes of roses --

The Swamp Angel broods in his gloom.
Swift is his messengers' going,
   But slowly he saps their halls,
As if by delay deluding.
   They move from their crumbling walls
Farther and farther away;
   But the Angel sends after and after,
By night with the flame of his ray --
   By night with the voice of his screaming --
Sends after them, stone by stone,
   And farther walls fall, farther portals,
And weed follows weed through the Town.

Is this the proud City? the scorned
Which never would yield the ground?
Which mocked at the coal-black Angel?
The cup of despair goes round.

Vainly she calls upon Michael
(The white man's seraph was he),
   For Michael has fled from his tower
To the Angel over the sea.
Who weeps for the woeful City
Let him weep for our guilty kind;
Who joys at her wild despairing —
Christ, the For giver, convert his mind.

First, as with most poems, the title is significant. The Swamp Angel, according to Melville’s own note to the poem, literally referred to an artillery battery used to shell the city of Charleston in August 1863. But scholars have noted that Melville intended a double meaning for this poem. Certainly the literal besieging of Charleston is indicated in the poem, yet, lines one-four are clear about what the metaphorical meaning should be—the plight and vengeance of slaves: “There is a coal-black Angel/With a thick Afric lip,/And he dwells (like the hunted and harried)/In a swamp where the green frogs dip.” The cannon represents a “fugitive slave,” a human Swamp Angel.115 According to Warren, the cannon is “associated explicitly with the justified vengeance of former slaves.” 116 One critic has even gone so far as to associate the cannon with God’s judgment, the blasting cannon serving as God’s vengeance for the sin of slavery.117 With the cannon firmly rooted as a metaphorical embodiment of slavery, whether the slave itself or God’s instrument of retribution for slavery, the poem’s title takes on new and more magnificent significance.

The slave is an “angel,” a transcendent being, something beyond human understanding, indeed beyond human significance. If the poem’s title began and ended with “angel,” the poem would have a very different effect, but it does not

115 Karcher, 208.
116 Warren, 291.
117 Adler, 107.
begin and end with a slave’s divinity, rather any elevation achieved by the slave
through association with the angelic is muted by the strong adjective that
precedes it, as well as the angel’s description in the opening stanza. Contrary to
the critics who wrote a review of *Battle-Pieces* in *National Quarterly Review* and
judged the first stanza to be unintelligible, admitting that “we do not entirely
understand” it, the opening stanza is significant in what it reveals about the angel,
which will be significant throughout the entire poem.118 This angel is not
heavenly, does not dwell on a mountaintop or in the sky, nor even in open fields
of grass. Rather Melville’s angel is a swamp dweller, “hunted and harried.” In
other words, an entity mired in a place of disease, mud, entangled vegetation,
flies, and “green frogs.” Whatever power this angel might embody initially is
drowned and trapped by its association with the swamp on the outskirts of
Charleston—the heart of Confederate secession, pride, and pro-slavery rhetoric.
Ironically, Charleston was one of the first cities to join against the British and the
first Southern city to do so, known as a stalwart of “freedom.”119 Here in the heart
of Confederate sentiment Melville lets the angel, even from its position in a dank
swamp, make its voice heard. The possibilities in this poem are at least twofold.
On the one hand, Melville allows a strong black voice to be heard in Charleston,
an angelic, superhuman voice. Such is in keeping with Melville’s “abhorrence” of
slavery that he concedes in the Supplement. Yet, another reading of the “Swamp
Angel” supports a more pessimistic tone, more in keeping with *Battle-Pieces’*
dedication and the Supplement. That is, the ultimate of the collection is to enforce

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118 Higgins and Parker, 512.
119 Adler, 108.
union, not racial equality. Hence, the one poem that gives the slaves a strong voice is muddled by the “Swamp” in which it originates.

The first reading, allowing a strong black voice, is certainly supported by Melville’s having used the overriding metaphor of a cannon. Line five is indicative of the great physical and emotional power that is granted the swamp angel: “But his face is against a City/Which is over a bay of the sea.” Though the slave’s voice must originate within the swamp, beyond the reaches of Charleston’s politicians and slaveholders, the swamp angel does not make war with a back toward the enemy. Rather he faces the city defiantly, always looking toward the goal—to be heard and have his face seen by those who he would “blast.” The first word in line five, “But,” is a very important dictional turn in the poem because it serves as the link between the strong voice of the Angel and the potential muting effect of the Swamp, almost as if to say, “the slave may be hunted and harried and forced into the swamp, but he still has the pride and courage to face the enemy head-on and unreservedly.” One is reminded of Frederick Douglass’ declaration that he would no longer be beaten by Mr. Covey, that he would be killed before submitting to another beating: “I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.”\textsuperscript{120} White domination could not kill the “sense of manhood” that even though beaten into dormancy, would not be crushed.\textsuperscript{121} Like Douglass, who though mired in slavery still faced his oppressor boldly, so also

\textsuperscript{120} Frederick Douglass, \textit{Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass}, (Boston/New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 79.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
does the Angel, still mired in the swamp, face the heart of Confederate slavery
face forward, boldly and without hesitation or reservation.

In line seven, Melville further empowers the Swamp Angel by characterizing
him as few Southerners or even many Northerners would have done. He
humanizes him. The cannon does not merely “blast” its way into Charleston. This
firing action anthropomorphic: “And he breathes with a breath that is blastment.”
The cannon and slave is no longer material property, rather a living entity that
breathes its vengeance. Although Karcher condemns Melville for using a material
object to represent the slave, in place of an actual human black subject, in one
very significant way, Melville’s use of a cannon instead of a human subject is
much better. The harsh reality is that human black voices did not have the
power to end slavery. Only the voices of cannon and muskets had finally
annihilated government sanctioned slavery, and when blacks were finally allowed
to carry and use those speaking weapons, they were able to truly “breathe” their
indignation to their detractors. By using the cannon, Melville gave the swamp
angel what he had never had before, the power to fight back. Frederick Douglass,
and others, welcomed and demanded that blacks be allowed to fight for their own
freedom and cause. In his speech, “Men of Color, To Arms!” of March 21, 1863,
Frederick Douglass urges black men to take up exactly the power that Melville
gave the swamp angel. Melville seems to have recognized what Douglass
recognized: “Words are now useful only as they stimulate to blows.” Speaking
was not enough, and the cause of black liberty, according to Douglass, “would

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122 Karcher, 210-211.
123 Nearly 200,000 black men, most of whom were former slaves, served in the Union army and navy, some
36,000 dying in their service. See Ira Berlin et.al.
lose half its luster” if only “won by white men.” By 1863, the thousands of swamp angels had been given the power to fight back, a power they did not take lightly. A group of black officers in New Orleans, whose regiments had allied themselves to the Union, were deemed unacceptable and not fit for their positions although the regiments themselves were accepted into the Federal army. In a letter dated April 7, 1863 to General Nathaniel P. Banks, the commanding officer, they wrote:

We hope also if we are permitted to go into the service again we will be allowed to share the dangers of the battle field and not be kept for men who will not fight. If the world doubts our fighting give us a chance and we will show then what we can do…

Further, again the specific battle chosen by Melville to use as a foundation for a poem about black freedom fighters is vital. First, after the fall of Charleston, the press reported that the Union occupying army was headed up by the 21st Regiment of U.S. Colored Troops made up of black Carolinians. Additionally, Melville pays tribute to the now-famous basis for the modern film Glory, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry who led the charge of Battery Wagner, with disastrous casualties, which was located on Morris Island, a short seaward distance from Fort Sumter. In “The Modern and the Radical: Melville and Child on the Civil War and Reconstruction” Karcher offers a slight condemnation of Melville and

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124 See “Men of Color, To Arms!”. TeachingAmericanHistory.org
125 Berlin, 93.
126 Karcher, 209.

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finds that his omission of any poem dedicated to an African-American hero is “striking” since Melville had a number of black characters in his antebellum fiction. However, Stanton Gamer disagrees; Melville did pay tribute to the soldiers who fought at Charleston, the 54th Massachusetts, who certainly were heroes to their people, not only because of their bravery, but because they proved their worth as soldiers to a nation of skeptics, and in “The Swamp Angel” Melville honors their courage. Literally then, both in the poem and historically, the Swamp Angel did make its voice heard and its presence known in Charleston.

Second, Charleston was a bedrock of inflammatory Southern fire-eater rhetoric, South Carolina being the first to draw up papers to secede from the Union. By facing Charleston directly, Melville appears to have made a very strong statement about the reason the cannon is blasting, not for union but for freedom. The Swamp Angel, in Melville’s poem, strikes at what he believes is the war’s ultimate cause and reason for being fought in the first place—the downfall of Charleston and by extension institutionalized slavery. In a letter found in the streets of New Orleans dated September, 1863 and signed only by “A Colored Man,” the reasons for blacks fighting in the war and the ways in which they differed from their white counterparts were sharply outlined:

Our Southern friends tell that the are fighting for negros and will have them our union friends Says the are not fighting to free the negroes we are fighting for the union and free navigation of the Mississippi river

128 Karcher, 206.
129 Gamer, 260.
130 South Carolina had also threatened secession much earlier in 1832 when John C. Calhoun brought the issue of nullification of federal law to the forefront of national and state politics.
very well let the white fight for what the want and we negroes fight for what we want there are three things to fight for and two races of people divided into three Classes one wants negro Slaves the other the union the other Liberty So liberty must take the day nothing Shorter we are the Blackest and the bravest race the president Says there is a wide Difference Between the black Race and the white race But we Say that white corn and yellow will mix by the taussels but the black and white Race must mix by the roots as the are so well mixed and has no tausels—freedom and liberty is the word with the Collered people. 

By representing black power with a cannon and not a human face Melville does not detract from the swamp angel’s empowerment. On the contrary, that vitality is strengthened by giving the angel the real power that it needed to win. In the subtle combination of objectified power and humanizing voice, which Melville strengthens by using the personal pronoun, “he” instead of “it,” the Swamp Angel becomes greater than either quality would have alone. The humanity that Melville bestows on the Swamp Angel, both in this poem and in the Supplement, is probably one of his most powerful moments of pro-black sentiment. 

110 Berlin.

131 Even William Lloyd Garrison was unwilling to grant to Frederick Douglass complete humanity for his own sake, notwithstanding the abolitionist cause, a situation not uncommon for northern antislavery activists who “sought to embrace the former slaves in a national bond while vindicating their own righteous path in the antebellum struggle.”132 Humanity for slave writers and their place in the larger American drama, outside of the antislavery cause, was not always the focus of abolition, even for William Lloyd Garrison.

In his preface to the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Garrison justifies Douglass’ narrative and defends his intellectual abilities in part with the following words describing his first vision of Douglass: “There stood one […] Capable of high attainments as an intellectual and moral being—needing nothing but a comparatively small amount of cultivation to make him an ornament to society and a blessing to his race.”132 William Lloyd Garrison was certainly a powerful, if not the most powerful voice, for the abolitionist cause in early antebellum America.
the power to make that humanity their enduring legacy, the Swamp Angel’s very real human vengeance to follow in the succeeding stanzas is made probable and possible.

The second stanza finds the Swamp Angel in the position of distributing vengeance, breathing his demands onto the slaveholders in Charleston as the poem switches locations from the swamp, the slaves’ perspective, to Charleston, the slaveholders’ perspective: “By night there is fear in the City.” Certainly, Melville strikes a notable dissonant chord in this line. Remembering that by Melville’s own admission in his Introduction most of the poems in *Battle-Pieces* “originated in an impulse imparted by the fall of Richmond,” in other words during the beginnings of Reconstruction, he is writing in a time of great fear, not only of Northern vengeance toward the South, but of black vengeance as well, former slaves turning on their former masters. Obviously this fear, particularly of freedmen’s vengeance, was largely uncalled for and not warranted by actual

but even he was not untouched by the prejudice and assumptions of white Americans. The passage cited above is a good example of how even the abolitionist movement may have failed to truly see their final goal as complete equality and integration of the races, a situation that necessitates absolute dissolution from the damaging association of blacks with material objects, rhetorically and ideologically—they must be human, and they be accepted on their own terms, not on terms established by white society. In both regards, Garrison fails. Melville does not fail so absolutely.

For Garrison to make such a statement as the above words about Frederick Douglass, he first has to believe that Douglass’ “cultivation” that makes him acceptable to his white audience means that white cultivation is ultimately the goal of abolition and ought to be the goal of every freed slave. Second, even though Garrison loudly praises Douglass as a man of strong character and spirit, he also sees him in a very objective manner, as an “ornament” of society at large, not as an equal leader of that society, but as something quantifiable and almost inhuman, a purely material example of what a freed slave could become given the right circumstances.

In Garrison’s words, Douglass has merely been exchanged as one form of property for another. He has become a material symbol for the abolitionists of what abolition can accomplish for the black race. Freed slaves would be materialized for their ornamentation possibilities, not for their cultural and intellectual contributions, in short, not for their humanity. Is it any wonder that Garrison and Douglass split the anti-slavery movement, disagreeing on how and what should be the goals of abolition? Melville, for all of his hesitation to grant full black power in his poetry, does try to do what even Garrison did not fully do for Douglass in his preface, humanize the slave in order to give the Swamp Angel his breath to speak vengeance to the citizens of Charleston.

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events, yet it was for Southerners a tangible emotion. The fear of freed slaves’ “blastment” was a strong foundation for pro-slavery rhetoric (and later Jim Crow rhetoric) possibly best summed up by Thomas Jefferson in a letter written to John Holmes April 22, 1820. In this letter he refers to the slave issue, specifically the extension of slavery, settled momentarily by the Missouri Compromise of 1820, as a “fire bell in the night” which “awakened” and “filled [him] with terror.” He went on to give his famous analogy about slavery: “as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.”*133

As Charleston, and perhaps by extension the entire South, sat in fear of the “coal-black” Swamp Angel, the angel himself continued to breathe his voice into the city, not a harsh and gritty voice, but a voice that “soared” “through the darkness” like a “star,” an image that ties very well to the angelic image that begins in the title. As the star reaches its “zenith,” it does not immediately fall earthward. Rather it is “poised” as a “meteor lone,” suspended in angelic position above the earth, radiating and “Lighting far the pale fright of the faces,” providing a wonderful and direct contrast to the “coal-black Angel” of line one. Here it is beneficial to remember the earlier use of “meteor” in describing John Brown in “The Portent.” To have used the same phrase to describe the Swamp Angel’s vengeance and the portent that foretold that vengeance is an ingenious tactic to bring attention back to a very important point. Just as in “The Portent” where the meteor was unpredictable and unstable, so also here is the Swamp

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133 The original manuscript is located in the Library of Congress in the Manuscript Division, but a copy and transcription can be viewed on the Library of Congress website at the following address: www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/jeffwest.html
Angel’s vengeance. Melville wrote this poem after Charleston had fallen, after the Swamp Angel had blasted free of slavery, yet the ultimate result of that vengeance was anything but decisive when the poem was written and published. Slavery as an institution had ended, yes, and no longer had Constitutional support, but racial equality had not yet been achieved, which was one major goal for free blacks and newly freed blacks. The meteor’s success for the future was still unknown, but its immediate success is more certain because in line fourteen, the “star” falls “downward,” and brings with it all of the vengeance and power that Melville can give to his Swamp Angel. The air is filled with “rushing,” “bursting,” and “havoc.” The Swamp Angel has been heard in Charleston and must be answered.

The voice is indeed answered, but only by way of reaction. Charleston “wails” and “shrieks” in between the Angel’s “blastment.” Again, Melville is writing in the midst of Reconstruction arguments. If the slave metaphor is followed throughout the poem, the closing line in the stanza is perfectly fitted to the first line and the fear that dominates Charleston and Southern society: “By night there is fear in the City. . . . And wails and shrieks between.” Between the arguments for black suffrage, civil rights, and equality, shrieking and wailing was heard from defeated Southerners who quickly reacted to federal amendments calling for equal rights and suffrage with their own state laws, and Jim Crow was born. The extent of Southerners’ fear, however unjustified, was put into words by none other than President Andrew Johnson in response to a delegation who had met with him to discuss black suffrage. In his response he referred to the “enmity
and hate” between blacks and whites in the South and wondered if when the “one should be turned loose upon the other, and be thrown together at the ballot-box” a “war of races” would “commence,” particularly “when you force” black suffrage “upon a people without their consent.” Did Southerners “wail” and “shriek” when the Swamp Angel came into their midst? They certainly did, and continued to do so well after the war was over.

The third stanza stands in opposition to the second with its loud blasting and “soaring stars” that fall downward on the city, radiating the fear of “pale” Southerners. The stanza begins with a powerful image that underscores the angelic metaphor: “It comes like the thief in the gloaming;/It comes, and none may foretell/The place of the coming—the glaring.” Like so much of Melville’s writing, the imagery is biblical, coming from Revelations 3:3: “I will come on thee as a thief and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.” In the biblical reading, the Messiah, when he comes again for the second and last time, just preceding judgment day, will come to the wicked as a thief in the night, not to the righteous, and the wicked are those who will not hear his message and have not lived according to His commandments. What Melville has implied with the thief image is exactly what might be expected at this moment of the poem when the scene has shifted to Charleston and the Southerners’ perspective. What they perceive is not the angelic and star-like radiance of the Swamp Angel’s voice. What they perceive is a thief in the night because they have not listened to the Angel’s voice:

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134 Quoted in Karcher, 229.
Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die; for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.  

The biblical allusion does not condemn the Angel for coming as a thief, but the wicked (e.g. Southerners) whose works have not been found to be perfect before God and therefore the Angel comes as a thief to them. The Swamp Angel is the righteous avenger who comes to proclaim judgment, as the Messiah will do, tipping the scales in favor of black vengeance. Yet, in typical Melville fashion, such a one-sided discussion of the quoted lines is far too simplistic.

Because the poem shifts from a booming voice to the silence of thievery, the lines also imply instability or uncertainty about the Angel’s voice, a confusion that causes Southerners to “live in a sleepless spell.” Southerners found no need to try and understand black voices, what they meant, what they wanted, or what they deserved, beyond causing irritation and “sleepless spells.” The power of pro-slavery rhetoric jumbled, garbled, and outright submerged and silenced black voices to the point that understanding became nearly impossible. Melville may, unwittingly, have contributed

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135 King James Bible, Revelation 3:2-3.  
136 One cannot help but think of Frederick Douglass’ famous lines from a rally in 1842 that make this correlation even more explicit—that Southerners incorrectly see blacks who proclaim their freedom and escape from slavery as thieves. “I appear this evening as a thief and a robber. I stole this head, these limbs, this body from my master, and ran off with them.” Clearly, Douglass is not a thief, but from Southerners’ perspectives, who has refused to listen and hear the truth about black equality and humanity, Douglass did appear as a thief.  
137 Shirley Anne Williams in her novel Dessa Rose points to this exact problem in her opening chapter “The Darky.” Nehemiah, a white writer, attempts to extract information from the captive Dessa by asking her direct questions and trying to make her tell the story of her escape from the slave coffle the way he wants to hear it., and when she does answer in what he believes are
to this communicative confusion in “The Swamp Angel” by first giving great power to
the Angel’s voice and then following with a subdued voice that is more silent, as a thief,
evertheless seen nor heard. Though again, the stanza does begin with a correlation to the
Messiah, who, after being rejected by his countrymen will be ruler over all, an ambiguity
perfectly in line with Melville’s vacillating voice, a reflection of the many voices raging
after April, 1865.

The fourth stanza finds the Angel’s voice “sapping” the city’s strength,
“slowly” forcing Southerners to “move” “farther and farther away” from their
“crumbling walls.” As Southerners try to escape the demands of black equality
and the “thief” that has come to take what is rightfully his, they are pursued by
the Angel who “sends after and after./By night with the flame of his ray—/By
night with the voice of his screaming—” (lines 29-32). The city’s citizens cannot
escape the power that flooded the South after Appomattox, demanding equality,
suffrage, and claim on the new history that Lincoln created at Gettysburg. The
slave is no longer in the swamp, rather he has moved directly into white society
and chased the Southerners from what is left of their social order, their
“crumbling walls.”

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indirect ways, he becomes annoyed because she has not answered him appropriately. In effect she
does give him the answers he seeks but not in the ways that he wants or expects. He refuses to
understand her on her terms. No ultimate understanding between the two can be reached because
Nehemiah refuses to believe that he and Dessa may speak the same language of humanity.
Dessa’s voice, like the Swamp Angel’s, is confused and garbled, in Southerners’ minds, by the
pro-slavery rhetoric that either killed or twisted black voices.

One very literal example of a slave whose voice penetrated those walls from the darkness of a “swamp”
and yet rose above it is Harriet Jacobs. Both literally and metaphorically, Melville’s use of the word
“swamp” implies a darkness that is not chosen. The swamp angels were placed in their positions by white
assumptions of natural black weakness, a point made plain by the many proslavery defenses that relied
upon arguments of blacks’ physical and intellectual inferiority for their maintenance of the slaveocracy.
(Three of the most famous of these are Thomas Jefferson’s discussion of physical differences between the
white and black races in his Notes on the State of Virginia, Samuel Cartwright’s Report on the Diseases of
and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race, and Josiah C. Nott’s Instincts of Races).

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As Melville’s Angel becomes more and more forceful and begins to gain ground against the oppressive city of Charleston, victory is finally declared in stanza five. The “proud City” has fallen, and the Angel, the conqueror, mocks the city that once “mocked at the coal-black Angel” (line 38). Power has shifted hands. Southerners no longer control their own land, and certainly have no control over the action of invading victors because they are no longer part of that government from which they seceded, notwithstanding Lincoln’s assertion that the union had never been broken. Melville draws a very staunch line between black and white in lines forty through forty-two. The coal-black Angel has vanquished the city, and the inhabitants have no choice now but to call on their own Angel for help, Michael, “(The white man’s seraph was he),” who Stanton Garner has identified as the “divine guardian of supposedly just causes.” They will receive no help, however, for their “white man’s seraph” has “fled from his tower.” To where does Michael flee? Adler believes that Michael flees to the side

Harriet Jacobs is a good example of a slave who was literally forced into darkness, into a small cell in her grandmother’s house for seven years, by her white master: “The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air.” For seven years, Harriet lived in this dungeon while her master, Dr. Flint, tried to coerce her children into revealing something about her whereabouts. Jacobs, however, manages to survive her forced imprisonment and rises above both her physical and psychological imprisonment to gain white friends in the North who encourage her to tell her story, to vocally penetrate and help to “crumble” the slaveocracy’s walls.

Physically, Jacobs rises out of the swamp, out of her dungeon, by escaping North. Equally important is the psychological swamp that she escapes in order to see the “pale faces” in the light of her own individualization, finally realizing that she does not belong to anyone but herself: “It seemed not only hard, but unjust, to pay for myself. I could not possibly regard myself as a piece of property.” Harriet Jacobs learns much during her forced imprisonment, exile, and separation from family, but perhaps her greatest lesson learned is that freedom was not a privilege to be earned or purchased, but a natural right that had been smothered by cruel and unnatural means. Truly, Harriet Jacobs is a real example of Melville’s Swamp Angel—a woman forced into a physical and psychological “swamp” who “screamed to a zenith,” then “rushed” down into the midst of her oppressors to deliver a scathing condemnation of slavery in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Garner, 262.
that would end slavery, the North. Regardless of where Michael goes, the last vestige of hope for Southerners is gone and the Swamp Angel has conquered the city and the heavens. Black reigns at this moment in Melville’s poem. Yet, the final two lines must be addressed, and they are a little troubling given how they seem to turn sympathy away from the Swamp Angel toward white Charlestonians. In so doing, they withdraw black power into the pages of Melville’s book and into the events of Reconstruction, reconciliation, and reunion: “Who joys at her wild despairing—/Christ, the Forgiver, convert his mind.” First, the “her” refers to the city of Charleston, as it does in line forty and throughout the poem; the “him” must refer to the Swamp Angel, as it has throughout the poem, although it also refers generally to any who would mock Charleston’s fall. The Angel’s victorious voice has gained the reigns of power over the “pale” inhabitants of Charleston, whose last recourse, heaven, has also been subdued.

In this moment, the Angel can claim victory, equality, and even supremacy, but Melville does not allow him that boon without restriction and qualification. His vengeance, the vengeance that has risen like a “star” and “lighted” the faces of the “proud” Southerners is a vengeance that in the end is neither righteous nor laudable, only forgivable, and any joy in toppling the heart of the South must be forgiven by Christ himself; such is the condemnation of any exulting in the Swamp Angel’s “blastment.” In the end, all vengeance and black power is quietly overshadowed by something greater: forgiveness and reconciliation. In this way, Melville has continued the difficulty begun at

140 Adler, 107.
141 Karcher, 210.
the beginning of Battle-Pieces with the dedication and "The Portent" and at the end with the Supplement. All stand under condemnation for slavery, "all share" in its "guilt." Woe be to anyone who triumphs in the "anguish" the portent foretold, including those who would benefit from its fall—the Swamp Angel. Reunion trumps race in the closing lines, though race is the driving force that ultimately leads to the possibility of forgiveness in the end. Contrary to the writer who critiqued Battle-Pieces for the San Francisco Evening Bulletin who believed that the poem was "worthy of a much greater poet than Herman Melville," Melville is indeed worthy of the poem in that the complex reaction to racial problems that he dared to confront required the skillful treatment that he was quite capable of giving them, most especially in "The Swamp Angel." 

The second poem that Melville dedicated specifically to racial concerns is "Formerly A Slave." This poem is more straightforward than "The Swamp Angel," yet it bears some examination because it verifies that throughout Battle-Pieces, not just in the Supplement, Melville was dealing with Reconstruction issues, not just giving his account and feelings toward the war itself. The poem also illustrates that while Robin Grey may have been correct in that Melville dedicated "comparatively little attention to slavery" in Battle-Pieces, choosing instead to focus on "the origin of war in evil and the destruction of the Union," the effort that he did devote to racial issues and slavery defies the criticism aimed at him and Battle-Pieces for exhibiting "blindness" to African-Americans.

The sufferance of her race is shown,
And retrospect of life.

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142 Garner, 262.
143 Higgins and Parker, 521.
144 Grey, 48.
Which now too late deliverance dawns upon;

Yet is she not at strife.

Her children's children they shall know

The good withheld from her;

And so her reverie takes prophetic cheer—

In spirit she sees the stir

Far down the depth of thousand years,

And marks the revel shine;

Her dusky face is lit with sober light,

Sibylline, yet benign.

Like the "Swamp Angel" the poem is not about an actual "former slave," but a painting that Melville saw at the Spring Exhibition at the National Academy in 1865, according to the poems' subtitle, "An idealized Portrait, by E. Vedder." That Melville chose to use another "representation" instead of an actual human subject, just as he did in "The Swamp Angel" is, according, to Karcher, problematic in what it does to the issue of slavery and race relations in the collection as a whole, yet she concedes that the poem is the only poem in the book to be wholly sympathetic to African-Americans.¹⁴⁵ Karcher is correct, at least, in that the poem is indeed a sympathetic portrait, but sympathy for the African-American cause of liberty, equality, and suffrage was not enough in the difficult months and years directly after the war's end. Action and vision were necessary components to effecting social change, yet as noted earlier, many Americans believed

¹⁴⁵ Karcher, 210-211.
that the future of the country's peaceful reunion depended upon quelling the race
question beneath the demands of reunion. Others, led by the Congressional Republicans,
saw racial equity and suffrage as an integral part of that reunion. Between these two
camps Melville stands.

Adler has written that Melville's imagination did not go beyond slavery's end, that he
did not look toward the aftermath. While it may be true that he did not stand with the
Republicans, who were radicals for their time, hence the name given to their reformation
attempts—Radical Reconstruction—it would be unfair to intimate that he did not see
beyond slavery's demise. Melville confidently wrote about the reality that was ahead
and did so with an optimism not grounded on wishful ignorance, but rather on the
knowledge that the "apparition" of hatred very well could overwhelm the country
again. He speaks as one whose mind, unlike those of many of his countrymen, did
"comprehension win" before the goblin-mountain "sunk" back beneath "Solidity's
crust." His walking the line between two post-war problems, race and reunion, is an
indication that he truly feared that staying on one side or the other might very well lead to
the danger he warned of at the end of "The Apparition": "All may go well for many a
year,/But who can think without a fear/Of horrors that happen so?" Melville believed in
democracy, believed that it was the best form of government. However, if the
"anguish" and "stain" experienced by even a democracy could happen, which "happen

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so,” nothing could prevent the horrors from reappearing, except forgiveness and reconciliation of the type the Forgiver brings at the end of the “Swamp Angel” to anyone who exults in war’s destruction. With this attitude in mind, Melville chose to take the one path that God himself had chosen in “Conflict of Convictions,” the middle way: “YEA AND NAY—/EACH HATH HIS SAY;/BUT GOD HE KEEPS THE MIDDLE WAY.” The middle way is the key to “Formerly A Slave,” a key, that if used, prevents a premature condemnation of Melville’s lukewarm response to Radical Reconstruction.

As noted earlier, the poem is a response to a painting that Melville saw in an exhibition in 1865, and he gives a remarkably intimate description of the portrait. The first line breathes a deep understanding that goes beyond the problems of Reconstruction. “The sufferance of her race is shown.” What Melville does in this first line is to indicate a problem that goes beyond the issues of his contemporary social and political world; his view is much more general and takes more into account than just slavery. The portrait was actually of a woman in New York, a peanut-seller, not one who lived in the South, so her inclusion in the text as the subject of the only poem that specifically addresses slavery without any metaphors attached is unusual. She is a black woman whose physical appearance bespeaks the suffering “of her race.” In his description, Melville stretches beyond the problem of Southern slavery and reaches out to the rest of the black community, those who have also “suffered” whether it be slavery, inequality, second-class status, or any other form of discrimination. This woman is the receptacle of all the problems brought on by racial slavery, not just the institution itself,

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151 Karcher argues that the poem imitates and explains the gradualism of Reconstruction, paying particular attention to the poem’s tendency to present African-Americans as “passive recipients” instead of activists. See page 211.

152 Garner, 440.

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as she suffers for the entire race, not just those who have been enslaved, but also for those free blacks who have suffered the effects of a society that sanctioned racial slavery.

Equally important to the woman as a representative of her race, is the focus that Melville chooses for "Formerly A Slave." As noted above, according to Milder undoubtedly race is indeed a vital "aspect" of Battle-Pieces. The collection begins with "The Portent," an unabashed reference to slavery's importance to the war, and the book ends, minus the Supplement with "A Meditation," in which Melville ponders whether slavery's end has been worth the cost: "Can Africa pay back this blood/Spilt on Potomac's shore?" That spilt blood has been described in a variety of ways in the pages between "The Portent" and "A Meditation." In essence, Melville is asking for a judgment on the "anguish" that he has detailed, an anguish foretold by the portent, a man hung for conspiring to end slavery. Melville has, in painstaking detail, outlined the cost of slavery's end, and he finally asks whether the price can ever be re-paid by those whose cause has cost so many lives. In "Formerly A Slave," Melville adds another layer to his discussion by providing a very sympathetic portrait of one who is to help repay the price. However, this portrait is very different than the one he painted in the "Swamp Angel."

Instead of focusing on vengeance, he immediately directs attention to the woman's suffering. Here is not the cost of the war, but the cost of the institution, the reason for the price paid. Here is a very human example of the debilitating and degenerative result of slavery. This is the only poem that directly describes a black person who has experienced and lived as a slave. Melville is walking the middle-way. His sympathetic portrait belies and questions any outright condemnation of him, based only on the Supplement, as one who without reservation turned a blind eye to the freedmen's plight. Melville was not
blind to the suffering slave, a crucial point to be underscored when examining "Formerly A Slave" as part of the racial dialogue in *Battle-Pieces*.

From the very first line, Melville attributes to the woman a patient and strong demeanor. She has survived slavery and all its "suffering," yet she has a humanity that the Swamp Angel lacks. She is introspective and prophetic. In her face Melville sees "retrospect of life," a "reverie" that leads her to believe in a brighter future for her "children's children" if not for herself. Here is a portrait of a selfless woman whose thoughts are directed outward to her posterity and the hope that she has been denied. Melville further creates sympathy for this former slave when he reminds his fellow countrymen of all that she has lost. If America had lost much of its life and a whole generation of youth in the war, this woman has also lost, and through no fault of her own: "deliverance" has come "too late" for her. The vitality that she might have had, if liberty had before been her destiny, is already gone, and she is not alone, as she stands as a representative of all her race, all their "sufferance" reflected in her "dusky" face. Even in light of such great loss and hardship, Melville endows her with greatness, triumph, and transcendence, while never losing sight of her plight and her claim on a nation's sympathy because her triumph has come at such great personal loss.

First and foremost, she quietly accepts her fate; she is "not at strife." Melville seems deliberately to have created a foil for the Swamp Angel who does not accept his fate, but rather fights back with tremendous power and vengeance. However, her acceptance should not be misconstrued as weakness. Though "good" has been "withheld from her," the woman rises above her situation to achieve an enlightenment and divinity that the Swamp Angel does not, and she does not achieve it through force, but rather through
"reverie." She is quiet in her thoughts, and this stillness Melville rewards. Unlike the Swamp Angel who is chastised at the end of his victory, the woman in "Formerly A Slave" becomes a prophet: "And so her reverie takes prophetic cheer—/In spirit she sees the stir/Far down the depth of thousand years." She is the only character in Battle-Pieces who as an individual is able to see into the future, a thousand years away and be assured that “her children’s children they shall know/The good withheld from her.” Because she looks into the “depth of thousand years” her face shines with the vision she receives: “Her dusky face is lit with sober light.” The emphasis that Melville places on her connection to the divine as a prophet is enforced by the closing line, consisting of only three words: “Sibylline, yet benign.” Here again, she is contrasted with the Swamp Angel who is anything but “benign,” harmless. Also, that this final line closes with a rhyme draws added attention to both “Sibylline” and “benign” as if these two words summed up the woman’s character and the general tone for the entire poem.

However, as in “The Swamp Angel,” Melville’s depiction of the woman in “Formerly A Slave,” is not without its troubling moments, particularly for anyone wishing to find an absolute pro-black, abolitionist voice in Melville. That the woman is content with her situation, that she is not willing to fight like the Swamp Angel, makes a tremendous assumption that if deliverance comes late, if race is subordinated to reunion, as Melville advocated in the Supplement, that situation is to be quietly accepted, without “strife.” A presumptuous and even racist position, at best. The woman, who appears to represent all former slaves, since in her face is seen “the sufferance of her race,” seems content to know that she is bound to continue to suffer. She sees no point in trying to change the
social structure, during her own lifetime at least. If read from this perspective, Dowling may be right that the poem “suggests Melville’s ambivalence toward the freedmen.” On the other hand, that the woman is presented as a prophet, connected to “the depth of thousand years” suggests her endlessness and the inevitability of what she sees, that eventually her posterity will acquire the “good” that she has been deprived. As such, she remains a sympathetic figure who is worthy of notice because she is willing to endure the “sufferance of her race” for the rest of her life, even if she is formerly a slave. Melville may not have been a radical abolitionist, but his sympathy for newly freed blacks is clear in the portrayal he gives of the woman in “Formerly A Slave.” He notes her suffering, and he implicitly recognizes the suffering that she will yet endure, as she will not be the recipient of the final victory that cost so much “spilt blood” on the “Potomac’s shore.”

“Formerly A Slave” provides a crucial foil for “The Swamp Angel.” While the latter focused on vengeance and violence, the former is quiet and invites retrospection on slavery; on those who suffered under its yoke; and on what was to be done after the Swamp Angel had crushed Charleston. “Formerly A Slave” is the aftermath of the Swamp Angel’s bombardment and provides a unique window into Melville’s perspective about how that aftermath ought to be handled. After the Swamp Angel effectively defeats Charleston and drives its citizens “farther and farther away” from the “crumbling walls” of their city, another figure flees the Swamp Angel’s destruction—Michael the Archangel, Michael, who Melville describes as “the warrior one” in “The Conflict of

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153 Her attitude invokes a reminder of Booker T. Washington’s famous analogy in his Atlanta Exposition Address: “Cast down your buckets where you are...” The difference in the attitude between the portrayal of blacks in “The Swamp Angel” and in “Formerly A Slave” would later be the crux of the debate between Washington and W.E.B. DuBois.
155 “A Meditation.”
Convictions,” and who Mustafa Jalal affirms is a warrior and fighter, the opposite of Raphael.\footnote{Jalal, par. 13.}

After Michael the warrior is gone and with him the will of Charleston to keep fighting, the battle can come to an end and someone else will come and address both the victors and the vanquished—Christ, the Forgiver, the great reconciler replaces Michael. Significantly, Michael flees just six lines before the poem ends, almost immediately followed by Melville’s reference to “Christ, the Forgiver.”\footnote{Melville’s interest in \textit{Paradise Lost} is important here. In Milton’s poem, the same pattern emerges. In Book Six of \textit{Paradise Lost}, where the War in Heaven is described, Michael gives way to Christ in the battle, although Christ is very much a warrior as well.} Reconcile follows in the path of the fleeing warrior. So too, does “Formerly A Slave” follow after “The Swamp Angel” with hope for a better future, even if at the expense of an immediate end to suffering. What is most crucial about the pattern of great battles followed by reconciliation and hope for peace and forgiveness, as in “The Swamp Angel” followed by “Formerly A Slave”, “Shiloh: A Requiem” and even “Gettysburg” with its final gaze into the future when “every bone/ Shall rest in honor there,” is that it provides a foundation for the general attitude of clemency and pardon to be found in the Supplement and in the collection as a whole, not just on matters of race, but on matters of reunion as well. In this regard, Melville is very much in the shadow of another proponent of clemency—Abraham Lincoln.

Melville, perhaps more than any other writer directly after the war, had his finger on the pulse of a nation in the throes of great social and political turmoil. He was willing to risk his writing career by turning to poetry and be what David Blight asserted could not be done: to stand in the shadowy middle ground between sectional reunion and black
equality, and like a “muse” hold their hands together and truly unify, both practically and
ideologically, a country that could not see beyond its confused and disfigured present.
CHAPTER 3

SHILOH AND GETTYSBURG: MELVILLE’S GUARDED OPTIMISM

Just as Melville tried to work through the racial issues confronting Reconstruction America, often with a dual perspective, he also exhibited a tremendous ability to be bipartisan when approaching war, reunion, and politics. Throughout the collection, he refuses to assign blame to one side or the other or to refer to the South as traitors. His stunning presentations of humanity and charity from soldiers on both sides is remarkable and contributes to Battle-Pieces’ status as a necessary text for post-war study. “Shiloh: A Requiem” and “Gettysburg: The Check” are two of the most prominent examples of Melville’s diverse and open reaction to a new and complex political and social reality. They are useful as starting points from which to address other poems that lead to a multi-voiced conversation in Battle-Pieces. This multi-voiced element of the collection is particularly important because it lends perspective to the ways in which North and South viewed their enemies and their own contributions to a cause that had become an endeavor sometimes confused, sometimes overly idealized, but always worthy of great sacrifice.

Little need be said as to the significance of the Battle of Gettysburg in July, 1863 as it provided the setting for Lincoln’s famous Address and also halted Lee’s advance into Northern territory for the second time, the first having occurred at Antietam a year earlier. Shiloh, on the other hand, could use, perhaps, a short explanation. Surely,
Melville did not haphazardly choose this battle as the foundation and inspiration for what would become his most perhaps recognizable and famous poem from his Civil War collection. Shiloh was a turning point in the war, an early indicator of the bloody destruction that awaited an as yet, untested republic. Although the First Battle of Bull Run/Manassas yielded some 2,952 Union casualties and 1,752 Confederate casualties, and had become, in Melville’s words in his poem “The March Into Virginia,” a “burying party” instead of a “berrying party,” the casualty numbers were merely a harbinger of those that would come in later months and years.¹ The first true moment to reveal just what the war would entail and require of its citizens over the next three years, both in physical payment and political rancor, occurred on April 6-7, 1862 near a small church in Tennessee called Shiloh, a church that would give its name, ironically a Hebrew word meaning “place of peace,” to the battle. This area in the midst of which stood a small church would mark the deaths and wounding of over 15,000 people, according to one source, and for the first time, two very large and dedicated armies would finally be put into action against each other.²

During the winter of 1861 leading up to the First Battle of Bull Run, Northern and Southern supporters engaged in an unceasing rhetorical battle that seldom had any military or even economic weight to back it. Moreover, perhaps the most dangerous aspect of this rhetorical battle was the gross underestimation each side harbored toward the other; this propensity to downplay the opposition’s real and deeply emotional attachment to the rhetoric it so vehemently both stated and espoused would only heighten the shock and horror with which a nation would turn its eyes toward a previously

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²Ibid.
insignificant plot of Tennessee land. If the South underestimated Lincoln’s practical and ideological attachment to the Union, so too did the North fail to perceive how much the South disliked them, as noted in Chapter One.

Prior to April 1861, neither side, regardless of its inflammatory rhetoric, really appreciated the gravity of the situation, an appreciation that, had either side had it, may have stopped the conflict’s quick escalation from rhetoric to action. The South refused to believe that the war would be a drawn-out affair and did not even take the opportunity to stockpile modern weapons when they had the money and the cotton to support that stockpile. Additionally, their gallant posturing, often repeated by Shelby Foote, was that every Southern gentleman could lick at least ten Yankees. Those same Southern gentlemen would find out, of course, that the “gentleness” of position or character mattered little in the face of musket and cannon fire; in fact, both sides would discover this frightening indifference in catastrophic ways by mid-1862.

The South was not alone in its confidence that it could handle easily a military conflict with its detested Yankee neighbors. Early in 1861 and really until the Battle of Shiloh in 1862, the North thought the South would collapse from its own weakness, and others believed, or maybe hoped, that Southerners would see the difficult reality of assuming the position of a foreign nation, not the least of which would be the increased complexity of retrieving run-away slaves, a situation that was already anything but an easy task. Additionally, Northerners severely underestimated the emotional ties binding Southerners to their peculiar institution, which for Northerners was, in many cases, an abstract concept rather than a practical reality, since their way of life, economic foundation, and personal wealth was neither dependent upon nor intricately weaved and
inseparable from slavery. While the battle's casualties certainly speak for themselves in terms of calamitous human toll, the fact is, the battle involved much more than numerical loss. It also signaled a change in public perception about a war that would not end elegantly or easily. In the words of Larry J. Daniel in his exhaustive military study of the battle, _Shiloh: The Battle That Changed the Civil War_, "Beyond a devastating body count, something else had died on the fields of Tennessee that April 1862—the innocence of a people. Shiloh would soon be eclipsed by more horrific battles, but at Shiloh, the Nation had taken its first gasp." As Daniel pointed out in his lengthy and detailed study, public opinion when it came to high casualty lists was not the only thing to change during this battle.

Up until Shiloh in the spring of 1862, the Northern and Southern armies had not yet come to realize the sheer physical strength of the other side, not to mention the deep-seeded resolve that drove each one. Particularly in the North, public opinion, including that of General Ulysses S. Grant, was that the war could not continue, as the South did not have the strength or resources to continue to fight. After the victory at Fort Donelson, only about a month prior to Shiloh, General Grant wrote to his wife Julia that "with one more success I do not see how the rebellion is to be sustained." After Shiloh was over, soldiers and commanders alike shared a potentially debilitating vision of modern warfare

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3 See John C. Calhoun's "Speech on the Reception of Abolition Petitions" from February 6, 1837; James Henry Hammond's famous "Mudsill Speech," 1858; Alexander Stephens' "The Cornerstone Speech," 1861. A good resource for these speeches and others that delineate the Southern position on slavery, socially, politically, and economically, is _Defending Slavery: Proslavery Arguments of the Old South_, edited by Paul Finkelman, published in 2003 by Bedford/St. Martin's. Additionally, Walter Johnson's _Soul by Soul_ is an excellent study about the slave market and presents very convincing evidence that an individual's social status and standing in Southern communities depended directly upon their acquiring and keeping slaves.


5 Ibid., 111.

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and its aftermath, in short, the price of victory. One soldier from Indiana wrote the following to his mother after the fighting at Shiloh had ceased: "I dread tomorrow. Burying those unfortunate Rebel dead. They are swollen and smell awful bad and terrible many of them. I do not see how I can stand it." Even more importantly, perhaps, were the accounts of reporters who had witnessed the battle and the sickening remnants that remained on the field awaiting burial from soldiers like the one from Indiana, or attention from field doctors. A journalist from New Orleans recorded his account: "Arms, legs, hands, and feet, just amputated lay scattered about." Most striking of all is the momentary attitude taken by none other than General William T. Sherman. In a letter he wrote home on April 7, in the immediate aftermath, Sherman, the same man who took desolation and waste to the South on his famous March to the Sea, sounded very unlike a general when he revealed how Shiloh’s scenes had affected him: "The scenes on this field would have cured anybody of war."

The nation for the first time knew modern war firsthand, and more notably each side knew the fortitude of its respective enemy and the lengths to which it would go and the immensity of which it would sacrifice in order to win. In the end, no significant ground had changed hands and neither army was completely defeated. Only the retreating Confederates signaled that the North had won a victory of any kind. Dennis Loyd observed that the battle of Shiloh mirrored that of Napoleon at Waterloo with roughly the same results, about 24% casualties in both battles. There was, however, one major difference between the two, according to Shelby Foote in *The Civil War: A Narrative*:

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6 Ibid., 300.
7 Ibid., 295.
9 Daniel, 294.
Fort Sumter to Perryville: “Waterloo had settled something, while this one apparently
had settled nothing. When it was over the two armies were back where they started, with
other Waterloos ahead.”¹⁰

The controversy over the Union “victory” began almost immediately with Northern
and Southern commanders both claiming to have carried the day. General P.T.
Beauregard, commander of the Confederates after the death of General Albert Sydney
Johnston on April 6, announced “a complete victory” that same day and claimed that only
“untoward events [had] saved the enemy from annihilation.” On the other side, Generals
Grant, Halleck, and Buell were also claiming a complete victory and General Halleck
even telegraphed the War Department that they had sustained a “glorious victory.”¹¹ On
April 13, 1862 N.H. McLean, Assistant Adjutant-General issued General Order No. 16
from the headquarters of the Department of the Mississippi in Tennessee, which
commended the bravery of the Union army at Shiloh: “The major-general commanding
the department thanks Major-General Grand and Major-General Buell and the officers
and men of their respective commands for the bravery and endurance with [which] they
sustained the general attacks of the enemy on the 6ᵗʰ, and for the heroic manner in which
on the 7ᵗʰ instant they defeated and routed the entire rebel army. The soldiers of the great
West have added new laurels to those which they had already won on numerous fields.”¹²
And the cost of these added laurels, bravery, and endurance? A casualty number that
nearly doubled that of the battles of Manassas, Wilson’s Creek, Fort Donelson, and Pea
Ridge combined. Even more telling is that the casualties for those two days of fighting

“Correspondence, etc. Operation in Kentucky, Tennessee, etc., March 4-June 10, 1862. Shiloh, Corinth.”
were more than those of the combined casualties of all the American wars up to that point.\textsuperscript{13} Approximately 111,000 men participated in the battle and of those men 24,000 became casualties.\textsuperscript{14} Little wonder that Sherman had revealed certain misgivings about this battle’s cost. Did other Americans beyond Sherman and a soldier from Indiana, including Melville, see a new landscape opened before them after Shiloh? They would have had to be inflicted with blindness not to have seen it. Prior to 1862, many people held out hope that an elegant, even romantic end to the war might be possible. Lincoln still yearned for a political and diplomatic solution, and the commanding officers were not as of yet tried and proven in their ability to handle large forces of men. Soon after Shiloh, however, two generals who were able to handle large-scale battles would emerge, in the aftermath of Shiloh’s blunders: Lee and Grant, and with these two men at the helm, a nation no longer expected or received low casualty numbers and elegant solutions. Shiloh had changed the war’s landscape and the “scale of fighting.”\textsuperscript{15}

Melville drew much of his material from newspaper and journalistic accounts of the front and of the major engagements, even creating a poem, “Fort Donelson,” that reads much like and includes large segments of journalistic accounts. So, it is not striking that Melville chose such a significant battle for a poem that would be the literary center point of \textit{Battle-Pieces} and bring so many of the book’s themes into focus in a few brilliantly crafted lines, which according to Dennis Loyd constituted “one of the finest literary responses to that horrible occasion.”\textsuperscript{16} It is not hard to imagine Melville himself, like many other Americans, as a man like those in “Fort Donelson” who anxiously wait for

\textsuperscript{13} Daniel, 305.
\textsuperscript{14} Sword, 430.
\textsuperscript{15} Williams, par. 44.
\textsuperscript{16} Loyd, 11.
news from the front, in any kind of weather. Even more striking about “Shiloh: A Requiem” is that for a poem whose content rests largely upon remembering the ghastly human sacrifice of a war that resulted in casualty numbers that surpassed any to that point in American war history, Melville retained a surprisingly reconciling and forgiving voice. Even the Round Table critic who felt that the faults in Battle-Pieces were “many and marked,” grudgingly had to admit that “except for its defective rhymes,” “Shiloh: A Requiem” was “excellent.”

Shiloh: A Requiem

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,

The swallows fly low

Over the fields in cloudy days,

The forest-field of Shiloh--

Over the field where April rain

Solaced the parched one stretched in pain

Through the pause of night

That followed the Sunday fight

Around the church of Shiloh--

The church, so lone, the log-built one,

That echoed to many a parting groan

And natural prayer

Of dying foeman mingled there--

Foeman at morn, but friends at eve--

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Fame or country least their care:
(What like a bullet can undeceive!)
But now they lie low,
While over them the swallows skim,
And all is hushed at Shiloh.

Life and regeneration seems natural to “Shiloh” as Melville begins his poem, yet the reality of the battle struck a quite different chord. Death had replaced life, and desolation beyond regenerative possibility had become fact. After the cannons and guns had ceased their terrifying work, where a small church surrounded by vegetation and natural life had once been, a stark and terrible scene had been born. One observer described his impression of the newly born offspring of mechanized war:

Scarcely a tree or brush had escaped the musket balls, bushes were cut off, while trees had been hit on every side...from the ground to the limbs. Cannon balls had ploughed through tree tops, and in many cases left them without a branch. Trees had been shivered into splinters, while the ground was covered with brush and downed timber. In many places could be seen where the huge shells from the gunboats had ploughed great pits in the ground.18

Another onlooker remarked that the “desolation is complete.”19 A battered landscape fittingly held the battered humanity which Melville brought into very clear focus in his poem.

What is remarkable about “Shiloh,” however, is that it opens without any sign of destruction and chaos. The natural scene seems to have been preserved in its pristine

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18 Sword, 440.
19 Ibid.

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condition, unaware that a large-scale battle has taken place. The “backdrop” is distinctly “redemptive,” infused with the natural connections between spring and Resurrection and the new life that is possible when redemption is achieved. The poem opens with an unmistakably soothing image; birds fly over the field. What could be a bitter reminder that they circle the dead, ends up being an unobtrusive and contemplative moment, as Melville’s birds are not scavengers waiting to feed on the dead; they are swallows who “skim” through the air “as if they hovered and comforted.” That Melville intended the opening lines to awaken a sense of peaceful and slow contemplation, far removed from cannon and musket fire, seems evident by the language and construction of the opening line: “Skimming lightly, wheeling still.” Before Melville even reveals what is “skimming,” he delicately distances the noise and heaviness of battle from a war-weary American public through using the word “skimming,” with its calming and drawn-out consonant sounds.

Not leaving “skimming” alone to work an effectual dictional peace, Melville reinforces the restful word “skimming” by describing it directly: “skimming lightly.” Nowhere to be found are the quick dips and dives and flapping of wings that would have been appropriate for the pell-mell nature of a battlefield. Instead, Melville chooses to have his birds “wheel” and “skim” “lightly,” a tone that seems to say, “if you choose to enter this place, be still as we are.” Additionally, the way the line is constructed adds to the poem’s stillness of tone. At only three points in the nineteen lined poem, does Melville break up a line with internal punctuation. Lines one, ten, and fourteen are broken into two sections by a comma. Each of these lines has an added significance that

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21 Loyd., 11.
requires a pause in thought, a slowing of the reading and thinking process as the line is read: "Skimming lightly, wheeling still;" "The church so lone, the log-built one;" "Foemen at morn, but friends at eve." Because each of these lines is so significant to the poem’s overall meaning and themes, Melville makes certain that the lines will be read slowly by adding a break in the middle of each. This is doubly important in the opening line because the slowness is so fully in step with the diction. As the swallows themselves move slowly within the poem, so too does the line move slowly, forcing the readers into the birds’ “still” flight pattern and setting up the general pace of the requiem.

As the swallows hover over the field, awareness grows that the swallows are alone over a “hushed” field in which they seem to be, at least in the beginning, the only living figures. The loneliness serves to heighten the intensity of the silent scene. Later in the poem Melville will offer a few words that shatter the silence of the opening lines, but for those first few glimpses of “Shiloh,” Melville urges peaceful and natural contemplation, exemplified by the birds who seem also to be connected quietly to the dead, as they “wheel still” and “fly low/Over the field,” at first glance, the only witnesses to the scene below, and they serve as connectors between the scene at hand and the possibilities for the future, as they “wing in circles of eternity, uniting symbols of spring—the swallows—and resurrection—the church.”

All seems perfectly normal and natural in the poem’s opening lines. Three times in the first five lines Melville points out that the swallows are in their natural habitat. They fly above the “field” and the “forest-field.” Nothing is fractured or displaced in the scene for the first five lines while Melville sets the scene for his great philosophic moment.

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“Shiloh’s” opening scene is as a man standing in time’s river with one foot in front and one in back. On the one hand, Melville reminds Americans of the untouched beauty of the pre-war landscape, swallows unruffled by gunfire, a “lightly” depicted scene. On the other hand Melville swings forward “to the scene long after the battle, after neutral nature has healed the land.” Then, in one line, he moves both feet to the center of the river, to the present, to the moment of the battle. The pain, agony, and suffering incurred by the fighting intrudes on the “hushed” scene, setting up the moment when Melville will connect not only the past and the future, but will include the present in the healing process and make a very bold statement about how and if that process will ever be complete. Yet, even though the battle’s reality comes into sharp focus in this “delicate and moving lyric,” Melville does not allow it to completely wrest prominence from the more vernal quietude. Melville reiterates the notion of quiet death in a poem that appears much later in the collection, “On the Slain Collegians.” In this poem, the dying imagine that death would be a “mere/Sliding into some vernal sphere.” In “Shiloh” this imagining is realized in the vernal atmosphere and of “swallows skimming” and April rain.

The first sound or image of war that is heard and seen in the poem is the “parched” and wounded soldiers “stretched in pain” who call for water. This image will be discussed in greater detail a bit later, but one should notice how the image is introduced into the poem. As the first intrusive, real image that takes the poem, and as Stanton Garner argues *Battle-Pieces* as a whole, into a realm where “real men suffer and die on

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23 Ibid., 141.
24 Ibid.
real battlefields,” the image does not enter unaccompanied.\textsuperscript{25} Rather the image is preceded with another very momentous representation, one that reinforces resurrection and regenerative symbolism—April rain. Melville is careful to be historically exact in this poem in that he mentions the month in which the battle takes place. He is not so exact in other battle poems. As just two examples, in “Gettysburg” the battle takes place in the “prime of months,” but Melville never specifically mentions July inside the poem, though it is part of the subtitle, or that the battle takes place just before the most important holiday in American history, Independence Day, and in “Donelson” the date is also given as the poem’s subtitle but not found in the poem itself. Here then is something significant. Melville makes very good use of the actual date of Shiloh to solidify certain associations with April, the actual month in which the battle took place, including rebirth.

Just prior to the dismal image of the parched soldier, then, Melville introduces a natural image of cleansing and source of new life, rain: “Over the field where April rain/Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain.” If he had chosen, Melville certainly could have reversed the line, making the “parched” soldiers the first image, thereby upstaging the gentler image of April rain falling. Once attention is riveted to the suffering of the dying, it would have been more difficult to re-direct that attention back to the less dramatic and less understated natural setting, until, that is, the dying themselves have directed their attention away from war’s reality and back to more basic principles of life, death, and spiritual rebirth through forgiveness, “Foemen at morn, but friends at eve,” thereby connecting them to the natural setting that begins the poem, which they do.

Once the dying soldiers have refocused their energy, the force of their enlightenment pulls those looking into the scene with them as they become part of the natural setting.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 142.
bringing the poem to its closing moments, once again focused on living nature. This time, however, the dying have become connected to that natural setting. Just as in the opening lines the swallows “fly low,” so now do the soldiers “lie low” as nature’s healing constancy continues to “skim” above them. Utilizing this spring setting, Melville’s work in “Shiloh: A Requiem” is noteworthy in the balance he strikes between a realistic depiction of the battle of Shiloh, represented by the “parched soldiers” imagery, particularly as it relates to its very specific historical moment and the artistry that suggests optimism and a sense of change leading to individual redemption and reconciliation, as represented by the opening and closing vernal images, a difficult task given the historical reality in which that reconciliation must ultimately be achieved.26

Stanton Garner in his comprehensive study of Melville’s Civil War years takes note of Melville’s historical specificity and counts it as a mark in his favor. Specifically, Garner compares Melville’s specificity to Whitman, whose poetry does not lend itself to a specific time. Indeed, according to Garner, to one unacquainted with Whitman, his life, or his work, his war poetry could very well be founded in a variety of wars, including the Crimean War or the Franco-Prussian War.27 Such is not the case with Melville. No one reading Battle-Pieces could ever mistake Melville’s poetry for an account of the Crimean or Franco-Prussian War; no one could question that this collection is an account of America’s Civil War and America’s political chaos, with all of its distinctive nuances. It would seem, then, that Melville’s attention and use of historical reality is an essential compass when reading his poetry and can be an invaluable interpretive tool, and so it is in “Shiloh: A Requiem.”

26 For a more in-depth look at how redemption is achieved through the scandalizing of violence, see Michael Warren’s “What Like a Bullet Can Undeceive?” Popular Culture 15, no. 1 (2003): 41-54.
27 Garner, 445.
Probably some of the most striking lines in the poem are “Foemen at morn, but friends at eve—/Fame or country least their care:/(What like a bullet can undeceive!).” First, a focus on the second line, “fame or country least their care.” Country has various potential meanings, but in this case it likely refers to the Union or the Confederacy, depending on one’s loyalties. The question of country, and the preservation of that country, was of tantamount importance. Both sides maintained that the major cause of the war was the preservation of the Union or preservation of constitutional rights of that country, although other causes did become important during the course of the war. One Southern newspaper, the Memphis Daily Avalanche, around the time of the Battle of Shiloh called every “able-bodied man to the ‘scenes of a great and decisive battle’ in the struggle for ‘Southern Independence.’” Likewise, the New Orleans Daily Picayune referred to the “struggle for independence,” and another New Orleans paper ran a whole “series of articles entitled “Chronicle of the Second American Revolution.” For many Americans slavery was not the primary reason for fighting and would have been a deterrent to the fighting spirit had it in fact been the primary cause. A soldier in the 7th Kentucky was quite clear that he and others had “volunteered to fight to restore the Old Constitution and not to free the Negroes and we are not a-going to do it.” An enlisted schoolteacher in the 20th Connecticut recorded that he was fighting to preserve “those institutions which were achieved for us by our glorious revolution...in order that they

30 James M. McPherson, For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 122
may be perpetuated to those who may come after.”31 One place in *Battle-Pieces* where Melville recognized these soldiers’ fighting motives was in “Presentation to the Authorities.” In this poem, a group of Northern privates makes a presentation of flags they had captured in various battles “ending in the surrender of Lee.” In the poem, the privates declare, “We here, the captors, lay before/The altar which of right claims all—/Our Country.” The notion that soldiers sacrificed themselves on the altar of their country was not unique to Melville. Many soldiers in their correspondence and personal writings described themselves as sacrifices on an altar to preserve nationhood. In fact, the phrase was quite a “typical” one in soldier correspondence.32 A sergeant in the 8th Georgia wrote to his family in 1863 that “if my heart ever sincerely desiered [sic] any thing on earth…it certainly is, to be useful to my Country…I will sacrifice my life upon the altar of my country.” His sacrifice was completed at Gettysburg.33 Nathan W. Daniels, a young Northern abolitionist, also honored the dead with the same image of sacrifice: “Most gloriously have they offered up their precious lives upon the altar of their country and most glorious shall be their reward.”34 Indeed, slavery as a war issue did not materialize as a major cause until after 1863 when Lincoln gave the *Gettysburg Address*.35 Prior to this, Lincoln and his supporters believed that “country” was the goal of the war and that the sustaining of that country was worth the souls of thousands of young men, even a full generation of young men. In his famous letter to Horace Greeley, Lincoln wrote:

31 Ibid., 110.
32 Ibid., 95.
33 Ibid.
35 Garry Wills maintains that with these 272 words Lincoln changed the force of the war aims in the direction of slavery and not just the preservation of the Union. See Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (New York: Touchstone, 1992).
If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause.  

Not only was country or preservation of the Union important to the Federals, but the Confederates also strongly believed in their right to country, the great cause of the Confederacy, and that country was not, for a Confederate, so intimately tied to slavery as the North may have felt that it was. One young Georgia volunteer wrote to his parents the following letter:

Can you imagine a more suicidal, outrageous, and exasperating policy than that inaugurated by the fanatical administration at Washington? Heaven forbid that they ever attempt to set foot upon this land of sunshine, of high-souled honor and of liberty. It puzzles the imagination to conceive the stupidity, the fanaticism and the unmitigated rascality which impel them to the course which they are now pursuing.  

That the war was not about slavery for many Southerners is validated by an article published eleven years after the war had ended. In an article entitled “Origin of the Late War” that appeared in the *Southern Historical Society Papers* in January, 1876, the Honorable R. M.T. Hunter of Virginia, a senator in both the United States and later in the

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37 Ibid.
Confederate States, confided that “when we consider how deeply the institutions of southern society and the operations of southern industry were founded in slavery, we must admit this was cause enough to have produced such result [as the Civil War]. But great and wide as was that cause in its far-reaching effects,” it was not the primary cause. Hunter adamantly argues that the cause was an ever encroaching majority that ceased to recognize the minority’s constitutional rights. In short, it was a matter of country, not slavery.\footnote{R.M.T. Hunter, “Origin of the Late War,” \textit{Southern Historical Society Papers}, Vol. 2 (Richmond: Boradfoot Publishing Company, 1990). Originally printed in \textit{Southern Historical Society Papers}, 1:1 (Richmond, January 1876): 1-13.} An article from the \textit{Richmond Dispatch}, reprinted in \textit{The Fredericksburg News} in May 1861 may have helped provide the foundation for Hunter’s argument: “Nothing has been more conspicuously revealed by the war than the universal ignorance of the North of the principles of the Federal Constitution.” Further, the government had “degenerated into a naked despotism, conducted by the most depraved and reckless men.”\footnote{“Their apostacy [sic] to Republican Principles,” \textit{The Fredericksburg News}, 7 May 1861, reprinted originally from the \textit{Richmond Dispatch}.} The question of country is central to the contextual analysis of Melville’s poem. In one line he captures the Hydra of sectional tension and pride, a misplaced pride in sectional superiority now wasted on America’s countryside.

Also important in this poem’s relation to its historical moment is the question of “fame,” since this concept forms the other part of such a crucial line in the poem: “Fame or country least their care.” General Sherman once said, “There’s many a boy here today who looks on war as all glory, but, boys, it is all hell.”\footnote{Price, 11.} Sherman’s words encapsulate a heartbreaking lesson that hundreds of thousands learned between 1861-1865. Without even a slice of comprehension of the destructiveness of full-scale mechanized total war,
thousands jubilantly enlisted on both sides in hopes of bringing home fame and honor. When the war first started, enlistment numbers reached into the thousands. The Union Army alone had 2.3 million enlisted men by the end of the war. By the time it was over, both sides had large desertion rates, and some scholars believe that the South ran out of people to fight while the North had a larger population and could draft more numbers. William C. Davis suggests that recruits on both sides were “romantics,” eager for action and adventure, “goaded by patriotism to flights of operatic passion.” One Southern recruit wrote that “so impatient did I become for starting, that I felt like ten thousand pins were pricking me in every part of my body.” Northerners and Southerners both were convinced that the conflict would be decided with one valiant and relatively bloodless battle. Thousands of men enlisted for service, all hoping for a share of the glorious accolades sure to follow their involvement in this ultimate sectional crisis.

One graphic example of the fame and glory-seeking attitude, accompanied by a blissful ignorance in war’s more destructive capabilities, can be found in the very first battle after Fort Sumter, the Battle of Manassas or Bull Run. The Battle of Manassas occurred in a relatively small area. Indeed, one can walk the major lines of this battlefield within a couple of hours. However, the smallness of space did not lessen the fatal capacity of musket and cannon fire. Ironically, where now lush green fields and a reverent silence, broken only by occasional visitors, have been born, in 1861 was a killing field, a devastating harbinger of four long years that would spawn several other killing fields, whose grisly scenes would test a nation’s dedication to a government

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41 Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage* also deals with this notion rather extensively and effectively in the opening sections as Henry Fleming tries to imagine himself as a glorious warrior with tales of Greek proportion to tell his mother and fellow townspeople.
42 Price, 9.
43 Davis, 14.
“conceived in liberty,” as Lincoln would phrase it in the Gettysburg Address. On that beautiful and sunny day in July of 1861, a day described by Melville as fit for a “berrying party,” crowds gathered on the rolling emerald hills to view their brave patriots trounce the rebellious Confederates. Both sides believed the war would be of small duration and that this one battle would end the fuss. A writer for the Richmond Dispatch even declared in an April 18, 1861 article that if they confronted “these grave issues like men ‘still as the breeze, but dreadful as the storm,’” the “struggle [would] be ‘brief, brave and glorious.’”\footnote{From Correspondence of The Fredericksburg News from the Spotswood Hotel in Richmond on April 18, 1861. Re-printed here from the Baltimore Sun on April 19, 1861.} This writer and many others would be proven grossly inaccurate. Spectators to this opening battle at Manassas/Bull Run included socialites, men and women of rank, and government officials. By 5:00 p.m., the federals were retreating frantically in the face of a driving Confederate attack. Untrained and unseasoned volunteers began throwing away their weapons and running chaotically back to Washington. A Confederate shell hit a civilian wagon on the bridge over the creek and caused panic among the retreating soldiers and civilians. Many civilians became Confederate prisoners, including a New York Congressman.\footnote{Katcher, Philip, Battle History of the Civil War: 1861-1865 (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2000), 23.} The Battle of Manassas had proved disastrous for the Union; President Lincoln must have been horrified by the military dispatch he received from Bull Run: “The day is lost. Save Washington and the remnants of this army...The routed troops will not reform.”\footnote{David Herbert Donald, “Lincoln Takes Charge,” With My Face to the Enemy: Perspectives on the Civil War, ed. Robert Cowley (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2001).}

And what had begun as an effort to display the glory of their young men had ended in death and tears, an assurance that this war would not be quick or bloodless. Melville
recorded his own version of the battle in one of the first poems in *Battle-Pieces*. His account is both insightful and haunting. Melville writes that the soldiers march full of "rapture" with "expectancy, and glad surmise/Of battle's unknown mysteries." However, this "rapture," to the accompaniment of spectators who with no more thought than going to a "pleasure" filled "berrying party," would soon end in a very personal and intimate way in the "vollied glare" of a very real and dangerously armed enemy. Private John O. Casier of the 33rd Volunteer Virginia Infantry Regiment exemplified the reality of Melville's words. Melville could have been speaking directly about Private Casier given Casier's record of his experience following the First Battle of Bull Run:

I then took a stroll over the battlefield, to see who of my comrades were dead or wounded, and saw my friend, William I. Blue, lying on his face, dead. I turned him over to see where he was shot. He must have been shot through the heart, the place where he wanted to be short, if shot at all. He must have been killed instantly, for he was in the act of loading his gun. One hand was grasped around his gun, in the other he held a cartridge, with one end of it in his mouth, in the act of tearing it off. I sat down by him and took a hearty cry, and then, thinks I, "It does not look well for a soldier to cry," but I could not help it.47

Surely at this moment, the truth of Melville's words describe most aptly the experience of Private Casier whose least "cares" at that moment were for "fame or country." Thousands more than Private Casier would soon watch friends die on the battlefield, many not so lucky to have died "instantly." Furthermore, in addition to friends, soldiers became very aware of their own mortality and learned to know true and abiding fear, wherein "fame

47 Katcher, 23.
and country" had no part. One Northern private recorded his personal acquaintance with fear and his honest reaction to his own mortality:

We heard all through the war, that the army was so eager to be led against the enemy. It must have been so, for truthful correspondents said so, and editors confirmed it: But when you came to hunt for this particular itch it was always the next regiment that had it. The truth is, when bullets are whacking against tree trunks and solid shot are cracking skulls like egg shells, the consuming passion in the heart of the average man is to get out of the way.\textsuperscript{48}

Melville described this survival instinct as the "gladiatorial form," soldiers and sailors fighting for their lives, not for fame and honor.\textsuperscript{49} Instead of waving flags made by loved ones at home and boasting about their various regiments, by the end of the war, soldiers "carried slips of paper into battle" in order to be identified and honorably buried after the next engagement, should they not be able to "get out of the way" of the flying bullets and artillery shrapnel.\textsuperscript{50}

Melville approaches these two issues, fame and country, very quickly in his poem and then moves to the most poignant point of the line. Now the Federals and the Confederates lay "mingled" together, "fame or country least their care." It takes a "bullet" to "undeceive" their precarious notions of fame and country. In their last moments, war has not been glorious. Preservation of country matters little to those who breathe their last breath among the scattered dead and whose hope of burial can only be a shallow and unmarked mass grave, if that. The line that follows this one is equally stirring and has roots in battlefields beyond Shiloh. When the battle began, the Blue and Gray were

\textsuperscript{49} "The Battle for the Bay."
\textsuperscript{50} Garner, 333.
enemies, “foeman at morn,” but now they are “friends at eve.” Death, the great leveler has spoken. Now as they “lie low” they become simply human sacrifices to a great struggle that will continue after they are gone.

Finally, Melville creates one last historically accurate impression in the lines “Over the field where April rain/Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain.” The windows of heaven did open after the first day of fighting to flood the ground with something more than human life. Water and thirst was a common theme and problem after the fighting had ceased. On more than one occasion, soldiers recorded the haunting cries for water from the dying who were often left to suffer alone after a battle until burial and medical teams could arrive. Sometimes, the burial parties never did arrive. At the battle of Cold Harbor, one soldier recalls hearing the cries for water from the wounded on the field. He was prevented from much needed rest by the “sickening sound ‘W-a-t-e-r’ ever sounding and echoing in his ears.” At the battle of Fredericksburg, in one of the most heart-wrenching and compassionate stories in Civil War lore, Confederate Richard Kirkland earned the name Angel of Maryes Heights because he risked his life to take water to the dying Federals on the battlefield. The battle of Shiloh was no different.

Truly there were “parched” soldiers who awaited medical help on the scattered crimson fields. Wilbur F. Crummer who heard the groans and shrieks of the wounded after the first day of fighting records the following: “Some cried for water, others for someone to come and help them. I can hear those poor fellows crying for water. God heard them, for the heavens opened and the rain came.” Melville captures this moment

52 David Nevin, *The Road to Shiloh: Early Battles in the West* (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1983), 144. This story is also recorded in *Shiloh-Bloody April 1863*, originally taken from Crummer’s memoir, *With
beautifully: "April rain solaced the parched one stretched in pain." The horrible thirst that
accompanies gunshot trauma was a common theme that struck many soldiers as
horrifying and truly "sickening." Melville's comment about the rain is important beyond
its historically accurate tie. In Melville's poem, the rain, as noted above, serves as a
gentle opening to a more grisly image, the wounded dying on the other field. The image
suggests rebirth and cleansing, which is exactly how at least one soldier also viewed the
rainstorm that followed the first day of fighting: "the heavens opened" in answer to the
"parting groan[s]/And natural prayer" of the wounded. The reality, however, was viewed
differently by other soldiers, a reality that Melville does not include in his poem, a reality
that would have marred the solace and peace on which Melville depends for a successful
requiem. One survivor of that first day's battle at Shiloh commented that it seemed to him
that the torrential rain storm, complete with thunder and lightening was the "Lord rubbing
it in." Another soldier, a Confederate, remembered the cries of the wounded calling out in
the pouring rain and recalled that it was "a night of horrors," one that would "haunt [him]
to the grave."53 Further, a soldier in General Buell's command recalled, "I think I give the
experience of every member of [my regiment]...when I say that the night of the 6th of
April, 1862 was the worst night of our entire three years service."54 Henry Kyd Douglas
in his memoir I Rode With Stonewall wrote that for him the effect of rain after any battle
increased the nightmarish experience, and after the fighting at Slaughter's Mountain in
August, 1862, he "was, for some reason, impressed more deeply with the horrors of a

Grant at Fort Donelson, Shiloh and Vicksburg published in 1915, see pages 69,70. Crummer recalls that
the most distinct memory he has of the battle is the cries of the wounded for water through that terrible
night.
53 Sword, 374-375.
54 Ibid., 376.
battlefield, on a day of rain, after a bloody fight, than ever before or after, not excepting Malvern Hill.\textsuperscript{55}

Yet from Melville’s requiem, that wet and bloody April “night of horrors” is stripped of its horror. The rain is not torrential; it is a refreshing and resurrecting “April rain,” capable of “solacing” the wounded sufferers. Shiloh’s aftermath, like that of so many other battles, provided an opportunity for reproducing the grotesque and truly “sickening sight[s]” of reality, but Melville chose to emphasize the transcendence of violent death when it is accompanied by metaphysical knowledge, the knowledge that in the end, regardless of “country” humanity remains connected. That “bond of affection,” those “mystic chords of memory” are stronger than pursuit of “fame or country.”\textsuperscript{56}

The internal and external connections occurring in “Shiloh: A Requiem” are evidence of Melville’s artistry; in only a few lines, he directly relates the Battle of Shiloh with the experiences and reasons for later Civil War battles, and he sums up the sectional issues that had divided a nation from Declaration of Independence to Declaration of Independence. But this is not the only success Melville achieves with “Shiloh: A Requiem.” The poem is also a delicate balance of movement and stagnation that suggests the difficulty of ever truly re-attaching the past peace with future peace when the ugliness of battle remains in between, just as the poem’s circular structure suggests. The poem has a subtle moving quality about it, movement that occurs from the early morning to night, in spite of what many soldiers must have thought, that the sun would never set to put an end to the slaughter. In Melville’s poem, though, the sun does go down. The night ended

\textsuperscript{55} Henry Kyd Douglas, \textit{I Rode With Stonewall: Being chiefly the war experiences of the youngest member of Jackson’s staff from the John Brown Raid to the hanging of Mrs. Surratt} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 127.
\textsuperscript{56} See Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address.
the nightmare for many, but began the nightmare for many more. Melville’s poem truly becomes a requiem for these tormented men, those who are still hovering between life and death, having experienced the enlightenment of the “vollied glare,” an elegy that suspends all movement for just a moment, a moment in which these enlightened few can enjoy forgiveness and return to the “natural” bonds of “friendship” of which they had deprived themselves, or been “deceived” out of, until this moment. As the poem stands still at various points, it also may serve as a suspended vision for those who would come after, for those who would try to understand the slaughter, those who at the moment of its publication were trying to make certain, often in various partisan ways, that these men “did not die in vain.”

Even in the difficult historical moment which begins and ends the poem, the rejuvenating pastoral setting and the speaker’s cautious optimism are revealed in the artistic movement that permeates the entire poem. The poem and its characters are in flux; they never stagnate even in their death poses. The very first line breathes of movement; the swallows “skim” and fly over the battlefield. Internally the poem reveals that the passage of night has come and gone, “through the pause of night that followed the Sunday fight.” At least one day has gone by—one day through which the dying and wounded have come to a stark realization, a realization that occurred to at least one Union infantryman who recorded that “war is horrible, and you can have no idea of it until you have been in battle.” In addition to the movement of time of day, the poem is explicit in its movement from beginning of battle to the haunting aftermath, “foemen at morn, but friends at eve.” Brilliantly stated, Melville has made clear a very physical and

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57 Stanton Garner noted that in Shiloh, the dying in the end return to the more natural state of friendship with their enemies as they “shared the brotherhood of pain and death.”

58 Sword, 441.
philosophical point. As these men lay dead and dying, something momentous has been achieved. Another day has passed, but it has not passed without personal significance. An entire philosophy has been reversed. Epiphany has occurred on an individual level, if not on a national level.

Commonality of human suffering and human connectivity, a commonality of suffering which, according to Richard O. Shaw is commenced by the sense of “futility” of war, has been discovered by enemies who at the beginning of the battle had nothing but antipathy for each other. This quality of connectivity achieved at the moment of death is evident in *Battle-Pieces*. The very knowledge of connection that prevented any more compromise in 1860 has been born again, ironically in a moment of death, yet surrounded by natural rebirth—spring in the shadow of a small chapel, a point noted by Robert Milder in his important article, “The Rhetoric of Melville’s Battle-Pieces.” Even more telling is that Melville makes clear what that dangerous knowledge has cost—human, individual life. Only in blood has that knowledge become sure, “What like a bullet can undeceive!” A lieutenant from Illinois commented after Shiloh on the failure of Americans to have gained that knowledge through less bloody means: “What a pity it is that men do not use reason instead of rifles, and common sense instead of cannon.”

“What like a bullet can undeceive!” The sentence is deceptively simple upon first perusal. However, in searching deeper, the dark abyss into which Melville gazed, even in this seemingly optimistic, if melancholy moment, can be found. Reconciling and redemptive knowledge has been gained, yes, the type of knowledge that could make

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61 Sword, 441.
Americans countrymen again, but the only ones to have gained that knowledge are precisely those who are now powerless to use it to more peacefully and effectively reconstruct the Union. Only the dead and dying know, and Melville seems to imply that only those who are wounded in battle will know—thereby preventing the destruction from ever ending.

Melville gave a preview of the deadly cost of this truth, this knowledge and the dark understanding of human failure that accompanied it in the earliest battle poem in the collection, “March Into Virginia.” In this poem, as noted above, the tone is lively, the innocence of a country has overshadowed the confusion, “misgivings,” and “conflicts of conviction” that fought for dominance in the preceding poems. Innocence has become an “ignorant impulse” of the youth who will fight the war since “all wars are boyish, and are fought by boys.” The boyish ignorance of the opening stanzas chooses to “spurn precedent” and the “warnings of the wise,” the very problems presented by the speakers in “Misgivings” and “Conflict of Convictions” who recognized that the battles ahead would not be the delight of the “berrying parties” who, “pleasure-wooed,” would find entertainment in watching their young boys fire muskets and cannons at each other, amidst the “banners play[ing]” and “bugles [call]ing.” On the contrary, as predicted in “The Conflict of Convictions,” “WISDOM IS VAIN, AND PROPHESY” to a country ill-prepared for the difficult days ahead. And surely, they were not prepared, as “The March Into Virginia” makes clear. Yet, by the end of the poem, the nation will be on a road toward the enlightenment that the dying have gained at Shiloh.

The final stanza of “March Into Virginia” is the key to one dominant theme in Melville’s collection: knowledge is gained only through great suffering and only by those
no longer able to share that knowledge with the living who need most to know that the chords of humanity are stronger than political and economic ties. As the boys march forward at First Manassas, they are accompanied by “expectancy, and glad surmise of battle’s unknown mysteries.” These “champions and enthusiasts of the state” have no studied knowledge of what to expect; they only know that “glory” is to be anticipated with great zeal, and that in the end they will have a “belaureled story” to tell, so on they march, side by side, “chatting” and “laughing” with their comrades. So ends the middle stanza of the poem.

Then, Melville counters these celebratory images with his forecast of the war and more importantly his forecast for the pages that will follow and what it means for a country in the throes of Reconstruction. Some of these who are happily marching off to their glorious fate “shall die experienced ere three days are spent—.” That, however, is only a part of what will be gained. They will “perish” yes, but they will be “enlightened” at the moment of their deaths. One young soldier dying of wounds he had received at Shiloh “pleadingly questioned his companion, Johnny Green, ‘Johnny, if a boy dies for his country the glory is his forever isn’t it?’” Melville himself was not adverse to recognizing the worth of a soldier’s death for a noble cause and granting the dead an immortality in that cause. The final stanza of “The Battle for the Mississippi” clearly illustrates Melville’s sympathy for the soldiers who like the young boy who pleaded with Johnny Green to validate his death must have

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wondered if the cause had been worthy of their lives. At the end of “The Battle for the Mississippi,” the men who have lived to see victory are caught in a moment of prayer as they “mourn their slain.” As they do so, the speaker notes that the cause for which they were slain goes beyond death: “But Death’s dark anchor secret deeps detain./Yet Glory slants her shaft of rays/ Far through the undisturbed abyss;/ There must be other, nobler worlds for them/ Who nobly yield their lives in this.” Though Melville in “Shiloh” points to the nobler cause of humanity and the recognition of that cause through the dying soldiers, he will not make light of their sacrifice, instead allowing them to carry it into a “nobler world” that is fit for their own nobility.

Still in “Shiloh,” in the moment just before death, and not in the moments that follow that death, Melville emphasizes individual enlightenment about the very personal connection that each individual has to all humanity. And the instrument of that enlightenment? Not political speeches, not Lincoln’s abstract ideal of union, not even democracy, although Melville will deal with these issues in turn throughout his collection. The instruments of enlightenment are the instruments of death: the cannons, the minie balls, and the grapeshot.

But some who this blithe mood present,

As on in lightsome files they fare,

Shall die experienced ere three days are spent—

Perish, enlightened by the vollied glare;\(^63\)

If enlightenment comes only from destruction and only to those who are destroyed by their gain, is the knowledge worth the cost? On this point, Melville is not so clear. As Lee Rust Brown has written, “Melville found power in conflicts, his own and those of

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\(^{63}\) “March Into Virginia.”
history.”\textsuperscript{64} “March Into Virginia” is a good example of that penchant for conflict on which Melville thrived. Just prior to the haunting prediction of the final stanza, in the midst of the fanfare surrounding the soldiers’ carefree march to Manassas, Melville provides, for the close reader, one possible answer to the question of whether or not the “enlightenment” of the closing stanza is worth the price paid for it. On one hand, the soldiers march into the “leafy neighborhood,” filled with “Bacchic glee,” as carefree as the god of wine himself. However, in the very next line, Melville presents a ghastly image for any who might not yet have sensed the doom to which these boys have been so enthusiastically marching.

The boys are “Moloch’s uninitiate.” Moloch himself will instruct these boys and the nation in his own doctrine: sacrifice of the nation’s children to his appetite.\textsuperscript{65} Melville, or his speaker in the poem, condemns not only the war as a failure to heed the “warnings of the wise,” but he condemns a nation for sacrificing its children to the pagan god, Moloch.

James A Garfield, shortly after Shiloh had ended, found himself in a tent wherein about thirty wounded Confederates, lying amongst the dead, were being attended to by a surgeon and a few aides. Shortly afterward in a letter home, he expressed his horror at the grisly sight: “The horrible sights that I have witnessed on this field I can never describe. No blaze of glory, that flashes around the magnificent triumphs of war, can ever atone for the unwritten and unutterable horrors of the scene of carnage.”\textsuperscript{66} The sin of annihilation and Moloch-like sacrifice seemed utterly unforgivable to Garfield, un-atoneable for either

\textsuperscript{64} Lee Rust Brown, Introduction, \textit{Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War} (Da Capo Press, 1995), v.
\textsuperscript{65} Moloch was the god of the Phoenicians and the Ammonites to whom parents would sacrifice their children or make them pass through fire, as Moloch was a fire god. In the King James Bible, see 2 Kings 16:3; Leviticus 18:21. Information about Moloch or Molech is readily available from a myriad of sources including online at wikipedia.org and dictionary.com.
\textsuperscript{66} McDonough, 212-13.
side. In “The March Into Virginia,” unlike “Gettysburg,” Melville does not only identify one side with a particularly appalling heathen god, but the entire nation is at fault and condemned in the most heinous of term—a god whose reputation rests solely on his need for child sacrifice. Perhaps any knowledge gained has been gained only at the price of becoming the very antithesis of what the end of the war was supposed to promote—reunification and brotherhood. Important to remember is that Melville’s collection was, according to his own admission in the preface, composed primarily after the fall of Richmond, while the country was in the throes of Reconstruction. As such, any optimistic view that positive enlightenment was a product of the war had to be tempered by the difficulties of reconciling the hatred of so many, which is exactly what Melville perfected later in the collection with “Shiloh: A Requiem,” a quietly guarded optimism tempered by the difficult realities of rationalizing a war that had cost so much in human sacrifice and seemed to have gained little by way of true reunion, having only achieved a geographical reunification, and a tenuous one at that. One of the major lines of tension in the book is caused by this difficulty between Melville’s support for the war for “Right” and his abhorrence at the cost, including the annihilated youth.

In “Shiloh,” the knowledge achieved by the dying is unequivocally opposite from the spirit of Moloch found in “March Into Virginia,” though in each case, enlightenment is gained through violent means, the “vollied glare,” and “a bullet.” The dying on Shiloh’s fields have learned a lesson that bespeaks future peace, if only the living could learn it.

67 Paul M. Dowling addresses this situation in his article “Robert E. Lee & Melville’s Politics in Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War.” He relies heavily on Winik’s book April 1865, The Month That Saved America. In this book, Winik posits that were it not for the strength of Robert E. Lee’s character, the Civil War would not have ended in 1865, rather it would have been carried on through guerilla warfare. See pages 153-154
Again, the importance of the dates Melville composed most of the poems and published the book cannot be overstated. Melville likely wrote this poem after the war was over, after the battles have ended, and while the country was in the midst of great political and social turmoil. Richard Harter Fogle notes that Melville was very much interested in the great problems and strife that America faced in the Reconstruction period. His poetry is a tremendous vision of the thorny mess into which America plunged after the cease-fire. Unfortunately, what Melville was experiencing while writing the poems in *Battle-Pieces* was the reality that the living did not achieve the understanding of those stunning lines, “Foemen at morn but friends at eve.” For those who survived the battle and frantically worked to bury the recently enlightened dead, the mutual bond of common humanity was not clear. Confederates and Federals were separated into different graves and when the Federals buried their own dead, “they were buried with more care,” according to one soldier. Further, the Union burial sites were more likely to be on the high ground. Even in the mass trench graves, Federals and Confederates were buried in separate trenches. Clearly the living who buried the dead still saw the distinction between “foeman” and “friend,” and it was delineated by the color of a uniform, blue or grey.

Melville underscores the cautious optimism begun with the spring imagery and continued with the dying soldiers through the very structure of the poem. Visually, the lines that draw the most immediate attention are lines four, eight, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen as a consequence of the strong punctuation marks that end each line. The battle’s name stands prominent in lines four and eight as both lines close with “Shiloh.” But even more interesting are lines twelve through fifteen. As just noted, in

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70 Sword, 431.
these lines the strongest philosophical position is presented, hope for reconcile is given. However, that same hope is quickly and unassumingly retracted in line fifteen, ("What like a bullet can undeceive!"). Melville’s *Battle-pieces* is full of conflicts, oddities, and paradoxes that make it difficult to pin down one philosophical or political position beyond that of the war as an intense “conflict of convictions,” a point even Melville acknowledges in the prologue to the book, “I seem, in most of these verses, to have but placed a harp in a window, and noted the contrasted airs which wayward winds have played upon the strings.” Line fifteen seems to encapsulate or at least emphasize that ambiguity and those “contrasted airs.” The line achieves greater emphasis and strength with the exclamation mark, almost making the line shout its import in the silence of the “pause of night.” Yet, that very strength is undercut by the parenthetical markings that suggest the line is only an afterthought. So, the ideological shift that occurs in this line from the previous three is not so cut and dry as it may at first appear. The speaker may believe that individual change from foemen to friend is possible and perhaps it is hope that makes the line jump off the page with such strong punctuation, although the speaker’s equally strong reservation about the war’s continuance and its players’ inability to learn what the dead and dying have learned is equally powerful in the line and the parenthetical markings draw the line back into the page. Michael Warner has also given attention to this parenthetical line: the “undeception” of the wounded has occurred only at the “threshold of mortality.” Their “undeception” will not end the war. The line’s optimism is countered with this realistic and poignant withdrawal back into the death scene and the waste that the requiem eulogizes.

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71 Michael Warren, 51.
Additionally, the circular nature of the poem’s structure disallows any ideological change from escaping the confines of the poem. Note that the poem does not end with the speaker’s optimism, however qualified it might be, of lines twelve through fifteen. Melville neither asks nor gives time for any true pondering of those lines as the poem ends because three important lines follow the optimistic element, that positive change is possible: “But now they lie low, While over them the swallows skim, And all is hushed at Shiloh.” The opening of line sixteen signals a return to something, almost an invitation to be drawn back to the scene at hand—the requiem. The soldiers may have gained enlightenment, BUT, now they lie low—it has profited them little to have learned what they learned. They do not soar in triumphant knowledge, only the swallows have the panoramic view, not the soldiers themselves, when all is said and done. Hsu Hsuan, in an article published in *Nineteenth Century Studies*, has paid particular attention to the importance of Melville’s use of swallows here. Hsuan posits that Melville’s use of “swallows” suggests a swallowing or consuming, even an engulfing and notes that in 1866 “swallow” also could mean to “make away with or destroy completely; to cause to disappear utterly.”\(^{72}\) As the swallows return at the end of the poem, the knowledge gained is indeed vanished, swallowed, and removed from the poem’s final moments.

Furthermore, the next line completes “Shiloh’s” circular structure and completely encapsulates any ideological or philosophical question within the poem’s lines, “While over them the swallows skim.” The lines call to mind the poem’s beginning, “Skimming lightly wheeling still, the swallows fly low.” While optimism and reconciliation may have been presented inside the poem, nothing practical has changed. The swallows are

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still skimming over the dead. Melville's having repeated these lines cannot be counted as accidental since book-ending the poem with identical images and diction is important to the structure and the theme with which Melville appears to be so fascinated in "Shiloh" and elsewhere in Battle-Pieces. Closing the poem the same way that it began is to keep the poem in one place, to keep the ideas safely tucked away in a requiem, because outside the poem in Melville's America, this was the truth. Reconciliation really had not found its way outside the poem. Finally, the closing line underscores the burial of reconciling knowledge: "And all is hushed at Shiloh." No final words of advice or knowledge gained are heard or continue to be heard outside of the poem. Everything is silenced. The knowledge gained at such a high cost will go no further than the dying lips of friends mingled in death. Dying words of understanding are hushed, hushed by the circular nature of Melville's structure and the inflammatory rhetoric of his contemporaries.

Also, if the opening line is again consulted, there is to be found more deep insight into the constant struggle between Melville's hope for America and the difficulty in arriving at the point when that hope would be borne out in his contemporary America: "Skimming lightly, wheeling still,/The swallows fly low." The present tense is used in these first lines, suggesting an immediacy to the poem and its philosophic components; the lessons infused into the poem's lines, those lessons learned by the dying are needed NOW at the moment that the poem was published, not only at the moment of the battle's end. The present tense usage here may be connected to one general theme throughout Battle-Pieces, most obviously in "Shiloh": optimistic hope is extended momentarily but is quickly withdrawn because it cannot last until the living have learned what the dead
have already learned. The lessons are pertinent to this historical moment, the moment of
the poem's publication, 1866, not just April, 1862.

The withdrawal of hope for reconciliation at the poem's end is reinforced when
Melville counters the early moving images with images of stagnation and immobility to
capture this moment, the moment of death, the moment of tragedy that will never, never
move on, not for these soldiers who are suspended in spiritual and physical agony until
death takes them away. Again, the opening line is vital. Although the swallows fly low,
they are "wheeling still." In addition, even though the night has come and gone, it is not
a movement of progression toward dawn but rather a "pause." In the words of Hsuan,
"the pause of night simultaneously freezes the temporal experience of pain and cloaks it
in darkness," a darkness that counters any possibility for hope. The passage of time and
change of philosophy is evident in this poem, but the movement is really in limbo,
because as Melville knew in 1866, movement and knowledge gained was suspended in
the greater chronology of life, death, politics, and history, his contemporary history, one
marred by the battles of Reconstruction. Perhaps this is why he had to concede that even
after the war was over, the living were still to be condemned as victims of their own
"changeless hearts." The difficulties of Reconstruction aptly demonstrated that
Melville's frequent pessimism in moments of seeming optimism were to him justified
reminders that the "apparition" of evil had once again been "upheaved" and found root in
"man's changeless hearts." The goblin may return to his lair but will reappear when

73 Michael Warren has noted the two different possibilities of the word "still." "They wheel still yet;" and
"motionless, almost out of time." See page 48.
73 "The Conflict of Convictions"
74 "The Conflict of Convictions"
"man's imperfection will renew his opportunity to seize the reigns of events." Only
"awareness" will prevent the uprising.  

Still, regardless of the melancholy pessimism implied in the closing lines, the words are also infused with a fledgling hope that people can change from foemen to friends, and can do so very quickly. The following touching story demonstrates how real Melville's hopes for brotherly kindness and forgiveness were. The first day of fighting at Shiloh had been fierce and costly. One victim of this first day's fighting was a private in General Hurlbut's 14th Illinois who "suffering from a horrible stomach wound, came to his commander, crying, 'Oh, Colonel, what shall I do?'" Another one of Hurlbut's men, just seventeen years old, walked from the battlefield with seven bullet holes in him, later dying from his wounds, and an eyewitness of this unfortunate soldier, a friend, said upon looking at him that "He looked like he had been dipped in a barrel of blood." As night approached after this first vicious day of fighting, and the wounded and dead were left alone on the field, three wounded soldiers, two young Confederates and one Federal, "crawled into a tent for shelter. They talked throughout the night, comforting one another. At dawn only one - a Confederate - was alive." Melville, like the three wounded soldiers, also harbors compassion for the commonality of human suffering. That soldiers could be free from "fame or country" at the moment of death and shed their positions as foeman is further illustrated by the reminiscence of a Confederate soldier whose stark observation just before leaving the battlefield on April 7 is a poignant reality of what Melville captured in a single poetic line:

I shall never forget the face of a young lieutenant from Louisiana with [a] smooth

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75 Garner, 394. The goblin-mountain image that is upheaved from the earth is found in "The Apparition."
76 This story is found in both Nevin and McDonough, 126.
77 Nevin, 119,147. This story is also recounted in Sword, 376.
face and the bluest-blue eyes... He lay with his revolver in his right hand, a most peaceful smile on his face, and a great big Yankee laying across him cold in death, with his musket still firmly grasped in his hand. The Yankee’s gun was empty, and the lieutenant’s pistol had two empty chambers. The lieutenant had a death wound made by a musket ball, and the other man had two pistol ball holes clear through him; neither face had any expression of pain or anger... I don’t know but what we should have put them both to sleep in the same grave, but we did not.

Even given the understanding of common brotherhood achieved by the dying on the battlefield, was that the only knowledge that they gained? Given the optimism that is withdrawn into the poem at the end and the inability of the living, including those who buried the dead afterward, as noted above, to share that knowledge and end the fighting, perhaps the dying learned something else. They learned first-hand about the “goblin-mountain” that lay just beneath the surface of “Solidity’s crust.”

The instruments of their enlightenment would have been useless without humanity’s influence; here, into the darkness of the human soul Melville plunges throughout his collection. If the dying in “Shiloh” had learned about the greatness of human bonds, they had also learned the horror of humanity’s capacity for hatred and evil. “The Coming Storm,” a poem toward the end of Battle-Pieces, defines this poignant and horrible paradox—the simultaneous reaching toward the highest pinnacle of human connectivity and the lowest depth of antipathy for one another. Melville notes in the poem’s final stanza that “no surprise can come to him/Who reaches Shakespeare’s core.”

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78 Sword, 441-442.
79 “The Apparition”
Shakespeare's greatest achievement has been consistently regarded as his ability to see into the human soul and provide unforgettable characterizations of the extremes in human character, from the heroic Henry V to the loathsome Iago and everything in between. Shakespeare's core would seem to be the heart of humanity and human experience. Is this what the dying have learned, beginning with "The March Into Virginia" and most fully culminating in "Shiloh"? Is it they who have reached Shakespeare's core? The closing lines of "The Coming Storm" lend affirmation to both questions: "That which we seek and shun is there—/Man's final lore." The key to these two lines is the tension between two opposites: seeking and shunning.

The truth of human capacity in its most soaring and abysmal moments is worthy of seeking, but is equally horrifying enough to be shunned. The paradoxical "core" of the human soul is what the dying at the end of "Shiloh" have learned and for this reason, that dark knowledge is contained within the poem. The dark truth of "The Coming Storm" is shunned by Melville in "Shiloh," not allowed to leave the poem, with hope that the great "goblin-mountain" in "The Apparition" will be re-interred within "Solidity's crust," never to re-emerge. Yet, it has emerged by the time the poem is written and published. The rancor of post-bellum America was little improvement over the air of the antebellum period. In fact, for Melville, enlightenment had not been comprehended by Americans who survived the war. The "upheaved" goblin-mountain had sunk "ere the eye could take it in,/Or mind could comprehension win." Surviving Americans were still in the morning of their great battle, still "foemen at morn." The goblin-mountain sunk before they could truly become "friends at eve" because they had not gained the metaphysical epiphany that had claimed the last thoughts of those who died on the fields at Shiloh and

80 "The Apparition"

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elsewhere. Yet, even here Melville is not absolute in portraying hatred and brotherly kindness. Melville's "strong refusal to coalesce around one point of view reflects the depth of his engagement with the war," and this is no more evident than in the ways in which the Southern soldiers themselves are represented, and the ways they are distinguished from the cause for which they fought. In the distinction between the two, Melville's search for the truth that is to be both embraced and shunned is clear.

Throughout *Battle-Pieces* Melville creates a very distinct connection between soldiers and how they view one another. Though they regard each other as foes, they are still able to recognize the brave sacrifice of their enemies, even if it was in a wrong cause. Part of this connection between soldiers is drawn out in the words Melville used in "Shiloh" to describe the physical placement of the dying in their final mortal moments: "dying foemen mingled there." A very distinct gap existed between how Melville perceived and wrote about the soldiers' attitudes toward each other, represented by the "mingling" together of those who had indeed given "the last full measure of devotion" to their respective causes, and the ways in which their fellow citizens, non-combatants, viewed the opposition. This gap is apparent in more than one poem, though in "Donelson" it becomes even more pronounced as the two perspectives are closely juxtaposed. The poem is masterful in that it reads like a journalistic account of the battle. The narrative is the story of a crowd waiting expectantly for news bulletins from the front. One member of the crowd reads the bulletin to the cheering of his fellow union patriots. The bulletin is a detailed account of each attack, each repulse and various moments of individual bravery, taken directly from the field. On the second day of waiting and fighting, the crowd is treated to a first-person account of union bravery as Grant's army faces the

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81 Brown, Introduction, x.
Southern enemy and matches their bravery and skill: “Their far sharpshooters try our stuff;/And ours return them puff for puff.” The speaker has no misgivings about his Federals’ comrades, certainly to be expected given the speaker’s Northern point of view, but what is even more remarkable is the speaker’s willingness to concede that same confident awareness to his Southern foes. The speaker proceeds to explain that fighting the rebels was “diamond-cutting-diamond work.” Both sides are equally tough, worthy, and impenetrable. Each side is allowed the distinguishing trait of a diamond. The speaker, though only a battlefield journalist, however, does not mirror the attitude of the non-combatant citizens who read the bulletin, having not experienced the front for themselves.

While the unionists await news from the front, a Copperhead passes by, “sneer[s],” and throws his jeering remarks into the crowd: “these ‘craven Southerners’ hold out; Ay, Ay, they’ll give you many a bout.” The Copperhead speaks truth, yet in an ironic way. He calls the Southerners “craven,” which is what the crowd certainly thinks, yet the news reports that they are reading clearly indicate otherwise. The Southerners are not craven at all, not according to the unionist on the field who is sending back the report, anyway. Indignantly, one crowd member responds to the Copperhead’s ironic comment about the Southerners, in an attempt to prove that the Southerners truly are cowards, again, a very different perspective than what is being attributed by the speaker in the bulletin, who if not a soldier himself certainly speaks as one who has experienced the battle firsthand, having compiled the report from various sources. A man in the crowd responds to the Copperhead rather indignantly, “We’ll beat in the end, sir.” To which the Copperhead responds, “And do you think it? That way tend, sir?” The patriotic Federal
soundly rejoins, “Yes I do.” As the Copperhead leaves with a parting observation that the “country’s ruined,” he is showered by falling ice and snow. The prompt response from the crowd is that the misfortune “well-suited him.” Unlike the speaker in the bulletin, who recognizes that Southerners are anything but cowards, the crowd refuses to hear its own thoughts sarcastically voiced by the Copperhead and utterly believes in its ability to soundly achieve victory at Donelson, a position hardly taken by the observer who has seen the “diamond-cutting-diamond work” of his “heedless boys” fighting an evenly matched enemy. Later, the speaker, who has compiled his notes from various sources, records that the Confederate charge was repelled “only by courage good as their [the Confederates] own,” basing the Federals’ heroic response on their attackers’ standard.

Furthermore, Melville rather blatantly presents the Southern soldier as heroic by including two poems about the South’s great soldier hero, General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. Jackson, who earned his famous nickname while leading his men at the first Battle of Bull Run/Manassas, was fatally wounded by friendly fire at the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863. The depth to which Southerners revered Jackson is exemplified by General Lee’s written dedication to Jackson, his courage, and his service. Shortly after learning of Jackson’s death, Lee issued General Order No. 61: “With deep regret the commanding general announces the death of Lieutenant-General T. J. Jackson. Let his name be a watch-word to his corps who have followed him to victory on so many fields. Let his officers and soldiers emulate his invincible determination to do everything in the defense of our loved Country.” That Melville dedicates two poems to this

82 Brigadier General Barnard E. Bee, C.S.A. spotted Jackson during the battle and was later reported to have shouted, “There stands Jackson like a stone wall! Rally behind the Virginians!” See Davis, 158.
Southern hero is significant, as he did not do the same for any Northern heroes individually, except in “Lyon” and “The Victor of Antietam.” The latter is dedicated to one of the most famous generals of the war, General George B. McClellan, but is regarded by many critics as a “poetically flawed” and overly “quaint” poem. The subtle and powerful tribute to Jackson compared to “The Victor of Antietam” is notable and obvious.

Melville had no wish to denigrate the Southern soldier, although the cause for which they fought was treasonous and destructive. Moreover, Melville did not dedicate only one poem to the Southern general, but two poems, one following immediately after the other. The first is a tribute to Jackson from a Northern perspective, and it has all the markings of union partisanship, as many of the other poems do, some of which have been discussed here. Melville was not satisfied, however, with only giving Jackson tribute from the North, tempered by political concerns. Rather he devoted another entire poem to Jackson, this time from a Southern point of view. The poems’ subtitle reads, “(Ascribed to a Virginian).” Not only did Melville give the Southern voice a chance to laud his great hero, but the voice is also a Virginian, one of Stonewall’s own. What is particularly noteworthy in these two poems is that the Northern voice of the first poem begins with praise and ends with a sympathetic and mournful tone, “We drop a tear on the bold Virginian’s bier.” Jackson is worthy of this sorrow because he was a good soldier, a brave man who “stoutly stood” for his cause. Of course, not all of the speakers’ countrymen would perhaps agree with this tribute to a Southerner who time and again out-maneuvered Union armies and whose men killed so many thousands of Federals. It

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84 Garner, 202. See Garner’s discussion of the poem for further discussion as to the reasons for Melville’s inclusion of this poem in his collection, since by the time of its writing and certainly its publication, McClellan no longer commanded the respect that he once had.
may even be Melville’s own voice that preemptively hears and anticipates counterarguments and antagonism for so positive a treatment of the Southern hero: “How can we praise?” The closing lines of the second stanza provide the answer to this very specific question, but they also provide an answer to why Melville so often allows and even provides tribute to Southern bravery as frequently as he does for the Federals. While Jackson’s cause was “Wrong,” “coming days /Shall not forget him” because he was “True to the thing he deemed was due.” Melville consistently refuses to sanction the Southern cause and he is not afraid to name it as he perceived it, a “goblin-mountain,” a “foul crime” that forced the “Founders’ dream” to flee, yet he praises Southern bravery and in “Stonewall Jackson” provides a soldier-to-soldier honor that is then reinforced by the following poem from the Confederate Virginian.

Further, the closing line of the second stanza is stunning in that Melville associates this Southern general who gave his life for a “vain” cause that was not worth his death with a man whom Southerners vilified—John Brown: “True to the thing he deemed was due,/True as John Brown or steel.” Why did Melville choose to compare Jackson’s loyalty to his cause with that of John Brown’s loyalty to his cause? Perhaps it was to reinforce Melville’s equanimity in recognizing bravery and courage without regard to the cause for which it is exhibited. In this way, Melville remains true to the union cause while recognizing the greatness of what he perceived to be all Americans, whether North or South. After all, part of the unionist philosophy was that America was still a single country, making the Southerners countrymen, not foreign combatants. To give honor to an American is to give tribute to one’s own people. Being true to their beliefs was what connected Jackson and Brown, two men who had little else to connect them, perhaps each
one standing as a symbol for the South and the North respectively, an indication that the
torn country’s citizens were still bound in one very important way, their loyalty to what
they believed to be the war’s foundation—democracy and their rights as Americans.
Beneath the political and social concerns of the war and the Southern perpetrators was
something greater, something worthy of eulogizing by both the North and South. That
core virtue is presented in both “Stonewall Jackson” poems, one from the North and one
from the South. The Southern perspective, not surprisingly, is much longer and more
specifically details Jackson’s personal virtues and military victories, but the fundamental
focus of the poem is the same as its predecessor. Jackson becomes, for Melville, the
physical representation of the entire South, and their courage. Jackson’s “great soul”
ever wavered in its devotion to the cause for which he died, albeit a “vain” cause from
the Northern point of view. He “followed his star” to the very end, and for this, Melville
pays him tribute, as a soldier.

Throughout *Battle-Pieces*, Melville is quick to make sure that a soldier’s bravery is
never questioned, whether North or South, and often that reminiscence comes from a
soldier’s perspective, not from the non-combatants within the poems. If Melville did
“offer” *Battle-Pieces* as a “prophetic corrective to the disastrous reactions [to
Reconstruction] he saw taking shape all around him” as Lee Rust Brown has written, then
his willingness to afford bravery to each side seems a strong indicator that Melville
himself continued to seek for “Shakespeare’s core” wherever it was, and, in his own way,
tried to help the war’s survivors do the same, to seek that which the dead had learned.85
The core of humanity is not partisan and it does not wear only blue or grey. Humanity’s

85 Brown, Introduction, ix.
core is “mingled” much deeper in the consciousness of human experience, just as the
dead in the end lay “mingled” together at Shiloh.

“Gettysburg,” unlike Shiloh, is a much stronger exploration of the dark side of
humanity’s core, and a blatant partisan censure of those who had “upheaved” the “goblin-
mountain” and given over the reigns of power. While “Shiloh” and the “Stonewall
Jackson” poems seek to unify through equal assessment of military courage,
“Gettysburg” is a vengeful condemnation of the South and a harsh description of a battle
that is only in the wings in “Shiloh: A Requiem.” Although Stanton Garner does not see
the voice in “Gettysburg” as Melville’s, but rather as one of many monologue voices that
are heard throughout Battle-Pieces, unsurprising is that a man who embraced conflict in
his writing would draw upon the greatest American conflict to that point and do so with
an intensity that belies William Dean Howells’ criticism of Melville as a poet “who fails
to move” his audience with his cold and withdrawn vision. Harold Frederic, a
contemporary of Howells, actually believed that a certain distance from dramatic events
was advantageous: “It seems as if the actual sight of a battle has some dynamic quality in
it which overwhelms and crushes the literary faculty of the observer. At best he gives us a
conventional account of what happened, but on analysis you find that this is not what he
really saw but what all his reading has taught him that he must have seen.” What
Howells had been unable to see, and what Frederic sensed about writing in general, was
that Melville’s ability to probe deeply from his “detached” position allowed him to do

86 Maybe it was this very exploration that prompted the critic writing for the San Francisco Alta to write
that “Gettysburg: The Check” was “one of the best pieces in the book” while yet classifying the book as a
whole “a decided failure.” Higgins and Parker, 521.
87 Garner, 247. Garner takes note of the varied voices that people Battle-Pieces from beginning to end. See
also William Dean Howells’ review in Higgins and Parker, 514.

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what few others were willing to do, to “ponder” the war’s “darker meaning.” Various current critics have sensed what Frederic did. In John Paul Russo’s view, Melville’s “detachment represents greater awareness, deeper involvement, empathy, and fairness.” Russo is not alone in his assertion. Daniel Aaron agrees with Russo, stating in The *Unwritten War* that “what [Melville] loses in immediacy, he gains in penetration.” Timothy Sweet, like Russo and Aaron, has also recognized the truth that Howells missed. Melville was willing to “ask hard questions” instead of “idealiz[ing] the war-torn nation,” looking on Reconstruction with his face forward, directly into the divisions and strife that characterized this difficult time in American history. Moreover Robert Milder believes that “the cumulative effect of the battle poems is outwardly to confirm the Northern reader in his commitments while laying the groundwork for a tragic sense of experience that later poems will consolidate and direct toward a new political faith.”

Surely, “Gettysburg” is one of the places where Melville’s conflicted vision, whether his own voice or another monologue, does seek to ask hard questions, while still confirming Northern unionism, himself a strong supporter of unionism. However, “Gettysburg” is not the only poem in which Melville’s narrative speaker confirms the “Northern sentiments” to which Milder referred. By placing “Gettysburg” as the central unionist poem in the text and viewing the surrounding poems as supplementary evidence of the difficulty of the book, particularly with its staunch moments of reconciliation, a

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89 Ibid., 39.
91 Aaron, 79.
94 Robert Milder, *The Reader of in Melville’s Battle-Pieces,* 14. Milder strongly affirms that Melville did strongly support the Union cause, while applauding heroism regardless of the uniform.

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more complete picture of Reconstruction’s difficulties will be apparent, as will the brilliance of “Shiloh: A Requiem,” which eloquently combines partisanship and reconcile in its brief nineteen lines.

The partisan unionism of “Gettysburg” begins very quickly; after setting up the battle’s timing “in prime of the months,” Melville wastes few words to create the poem’s overall partisan tone and to reveal his speaker’s position as a strict and vengeful defender of the union cause, though this union defender is no ordinary one. This speaker is one whose position is biblical. For him, heaven is no longer “ominously silent” as it was in “Conflict of Convictions.” Just as elsewhere in Battle-Pieces, God awakens and chooses the cause to which He will lend his power—Northern unionism. Significantly, this strongest defense of the Northern cause as the righteous cause is based around the one battle that saved the union from the last real threat of Southern invasion.

At Gettysburg, not only was Lincoln given an opportunity to re-create the war in his terms, those of abstract and idealized democracy, but it was here that Robert E. Lee was halted and given a beating that he would not soon forget (upon whose heels he submitted his resignation to Jefferson Davis, but was denied), one from which it would be difficult to recover, both in terms of army morale and physical ability to sustain a war that boasted such a high percentage of casualties in battle. At Gettysburg, about one-third of all men engaged fell as causalities. After the disastrous Southern charge up Cemetery Ridge, more commonly known as Pickett’s Charge, on the final day of the battle, General Lee instructed General George Pickett to rally his division for a possible Northern counter-

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95 A good example of God clearly taking one side over the other is “Armies of the Wilderness.”
96 The North lost about 23,000 and the South lost about 28,000. See Ken Burns’ episode on Gettysburg in his series The Civil War.
attack. General Pickett famously responded, “General Lee, I have no division now.”

Little wonder, if General James Longstreet’s eyewitness account is accurate:

As they started up the ridge over one hundred cannon from the breastworks of the Federals hurled a rain of canister, grape and shell down upon them; still they pressed on until half way up the slope, when the crest of the hill was lit with a solid sheet of flame as the masses of infantry rose and fired. When the smoke cleared away Pickett’s division was gone. Nearly two-thirds of his men lay dead on the field, and the survivors were sullenly retreating down the hill. Mortal man could not have stood that fire. In half an hour the contested field was cleared and the battle of Gettysburg was over.

It would be difficult to find a more appropriate battle for Melville to have selected than Gettysburg for a poem that so clearly defends the union cause against an invading Southern army.

As early as line three, the union cause is made “holy,” a reminder that this battle and this war is not purely about political union, rather it transcended any earthly arguments and achieved biblical significance, the preservation of God’s chosen people, a point made clear by lines three through seven: “When before the ark of our holy cause/Fell Dagon down—/Dagon foredoomed, who, armed and targed,/Never his impious heart enlarged/Beyond that hour; God walled his power.” Gone is the cautious optimism and quiet reconciliatory tone of “Shiloh.” In “Gettysburg” the narrative is delivered by a fiery

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97 See Shelby Foote’s comment on the Gettysburg installment of Ken Burn’s Civil War Series.
and vengeful speaker who takes sides—one who condemns to damnation the Southern foe. Interestingly, here as elsewhere in the book, Melville does not specifically state North and South, Lincoln and Davis, Grant and Lee. Yet, to which side the speaker belongs is never in question because the battle’s outcome was known by the time the poem was published. The North won, so all allusions to the winning side ascertain Melville’s speaker as a staunch Northerner, a partisan speaker who does not see his foemen as friends, even in the battle’s aftermath. In fact, the Southern cause is completely vilified by the speaker from the poem’s earliest lines.

Not only are Confederates on the wrong side of the struggle, but they are the enemies of God and God’s people. The Federals are God’s instruments on earth, “the ark of [His] holy cause.” In the Old Testament, the Ark of the Covenant was the physical symbol of God’s power on earth and led the Israelite armies into battle, bringing them tremendous victories over sometimes impossible odds, according to the Old Testament accounts. Like the Israelites of old, the union army is the physical instrument to bring about God’s holy cause, which has become the union’s holy cause. And if the union is represented by Israelite images, what about the opposition? “When before the ark of our holy cause Fell Dagon down.” According to Melville’s language and metaphor, the South fell to the more holy power of the union at Gettysburg, an attitude that adheres to Milder’s supposition that Melville did, at times, confirm Northern commitments to unionism throughout the book.

99 For instances of the Ark and its use by Israelites in battle, see Joshua 3:3-13 and Joshua 6.
100 Stanton Garner notes in The Civil War World of Herman Melville that Melville was a conservative unionist and believed in the maintenance of Union above all else, an idea validated by Melville’s prose Supplement to Battle-Pieces.
Just as the union is associated with the Israelite Ark, the South becomes, for the
speaker, the Philistine god, Dagon, whose image, according to 1 Samuel 5:1-7, fell down
before the ark in his own temple, when the ark was placed before the image. In fact,
Dagon’s falling happened twice, and the second time, according to Samuel, “the head of
Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold; only the stump of
Dagon was left to him.” Like the pagan god vanquished by the god of Israel, so too was
the South brought before the holier North: “When before the ark of our holy cause Fell
Dagon down.” The speaker’s partisan position could not be clearer. From the poem’s
very beginning, Melville lets the speaker assume a strong political position, which is
never relaxed, and then merges that political position with religious conviction. The
speaker in “Gettysburg: The Check” is not the only voice in Battle-Pieces that coalesces
political and religious conviction.

“Conflict of Convictions,” which is the second poem in Battle-Pieces (excepting the
epigraphical “The Portent”), handles Southern rebellion in similar fashion. The Southern
cause, the disunionists, are adversarial to God and His will. Like “Gettysburg,” which
leaves no room for doubt, as the opposition is identified with Satan’s side, the pagan god
Dagon, “Convictions” begins this identification in the very first stanza. Those who would
“dash” the “aims” of democracy are “Mammon’s slaves,” about whom “Christ’s martyrs
pale.” The fight for Union is not just between North and South. Rather the dichotomy is
set up very clearly from the opening poems in Battle-Pieces as something greater, an epic
event that parallels the first great earthly confrontation between good and evil in
Christianity, the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. The split of North and South is,
according to Melville, “man’s latter fall,” a reference that immediately points to an
aggressive adversary that instigated the fall, as did the South when it fired the first shot at Fort Sumter. Confederates, brave though they may be, were “foully snared/By Belial’s wily plea” and attacked the defenders of Right, causing not only Northerners to seethe with rage, but even Christ’s dead “martyrs” are awakened by the rumble, turning “pale” at the fall. Those who would perpetuate “man’s foulest crime,” whether disunion, as Stanton Garner believes, or slavery, as Joyce Sparer Adler and Carolyn L. Karcher believe, are slaves to the great lord of evil, Mammon. After becoming ensnared by Belial and Mammon, the Confederates have lost any bravery they may have once had and instead “loutish[ly] loll in lazy disdain.”

Melville continues the religious metaphor in “Gettysburg” in the lines that follow Dagon’s fall, dooming Dagon/South to loss from the moment the conflict began. “Dagon foredoomed...Beyond that hour.” Not only would the union army defeat the Rebels, but God himself “walled” Dagon’s power, made the end a foregone conclusion. In the momentous struggle between North and South, God has not been idle. He, like the speaker, has taken a position, a union position, a complete opposite twist on Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, “Both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other...The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully.” What is clear instead is that one side’s prayers have been answered at Gettysburg and that those on the other side have not prayed to the same God, rather they have sided with God’s adversary, a point that Melville

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102 “Armies of the Wilderness”
strengthened in "The Armies of the Wilderness." In this poem, the "Georgians, Carolinians, Virginians, Alabamians, Mississippians, Kentuckians and Tennesseans" that face off against Federals are "tribes" who "swarm up to war," just as did the heathens "in ages long ago" gathered to fight Christ's church, to war "ere the palm of promise leaved/And the lily of Christ did blow."

The speaker's strong language against the Confederacy and the Confederate "charge" at Gettysburg does not begin and end in the opening stanza. Some of the strongest language is found in the second stanza. Gone are the quiet requiem sounds of Shiloh. In their place, this stanza "shrieks, screams, taunts and yells." The speaker's rash and harsh emotion is brilliantly transferred to the sounds and objects of battle—whizzing shells and artillery fire, or in the words of Bertrand Mathieu from his study that appeared in Essays in Arts and Sciences, strong emotion has been "vividly objectified." 103

In the midst of all this noise, the speaker sums up the reason for the enemy's charge: hate, fire, ire, and scorn. Gone is the honorable fight for "fame or country" of "Shiloh." Instead are words of the most negative implications. The South fights not for honorable purpose, rather out of hate and scorn for their once countrymen, whose purpose is not only to be victorious, but to be victorious in a very physically brutal way: "He sought to blast us in his scorn. And wither us in his ire" (italics added). To wither is to destroy and in this case to employ hate as a means of destroying what Melville viewed as the "Founders' dream," the "world's fairest hope"—democracy and the preservation of the United States as that hope for the world. 104 To destroy that hope was to destroy democracy for the world, which is why Melville could never justify the Southern cause,

104 "Misgivings" and "The Conflict of Convictions"
even in his most magnanimous moments in *Battle-Pieces*, whether through his voice or the dramatic voices of various speakers.

Lest the seriousness of Melville’s commitment and belief in American democracy as the “world’s fairest hope” and the condemning of those who would destroy that hope be taken too lightly, it must be observed that Melville was not alone in his assessment of American democracy as the “world’s fairest hope.” That America’s survival would have cataclysmic effect around the world was a belief for which many Americans were willing to risk horrible death. A forty-year old English born corporal with the 39th Ohio, after re-enlisting for a second three year term in 1864, expressed his view of the importance of the union cause in a letter to his wife: “If I do get hurt I want you to remember that it will be not only for my Country and my Children but for Liberty all over the World that I risked my life, for if Liberty should be crushed here, what hope would there be for the cause of Human progress anywhere else?” ¹⁰⁵ Four months later, he did get hurt. He was killed near Atlanta.

Another soldier from Ohio, a thirty-three-year-old private in the 2nd Ohio Calvary wrote that regardless of how long the war lasted, it must be continued “for the great principles of liberty and self government at stake, for should we fail, the onward march of Liberty in the Old World will be retarded at least a century and Monarchs, Kings and Aristocrats will be more powerful against their subjects than ever.” Another private in the 122nd Illinois wrote that “if we succeed in establishing our Government, then you may look for European struggles for liberty.” ¹⁰⁶ That America’s survival was necessary for liberty’s survival around the world was also expressed by an Irish-American private in

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 112-13.
the 28th Massachusetts Irish Brigade. After receiving a rebuke from his wife and his Irish father-in-law for fighting for the "Black Republican administration," in 1863 the soldier gave a very strong rebuttal:

This is my country as much as the man who was born on the soil. I have as much interest in the maintenance of . . . the integrity of the government in the act of sustaining itself against internal enemies . . . if it fail all tyrants will succeed the old cry will be sent forth from the aristocrats of Europe that such is the common lot of all republics. . . . Irishmen and their decedents have . . . a stake in [this] nation . . . America is Ireland's refuge Ireland's last hope destroy this republic and her hopes are blasted.

Like his fellow soldier the Ohio corporal, he did not live to see that republic reunified. A year after defending his service to his wife and father-in-law, he was killed in action. 107 Like Melville these soldiers believed that the union they fought for was not just theirs, but an ideal that would spawn and preserve liberty throughout the world. In addition to slavery, the destruction of the "world's fairest hope" was, as Stanton Garner has indicated, "man's foulest crime." 108

Elsewhere in his collection, Melville noted the destructive force unleashed by what he considered the South's hatred and treacherous behavior. Melville does not often depict the war's physical desolation and its violent effect upon the land and people. More often, he is concerned with the political ramifications and the philosophical issues at stake. However, in a notable exception, "Armies of the Wilderness," one of the rare moments in Battle-Pieces when the war's horrors break through, is a stunning and poignant reminder

107 Ibid., 113.
that the war had very real and physically destructive consequences. Frank Wilkeson, a private in the Army of the Potomac who participated in the Wilderness Campaign, described the loud and ravaging scene in his memoir: “Powder smoke hung high above the trees in thin clouds. The noise in the woods was terrific. The musketry was a steady roll, and high above it sounded the inspiring charging cheers and yells of the now thoroughly excited combatants.” Melville’s poetic rendering of the same scene juxtaposes the pristine beauty of nature with the desultory realities of the war that invaded the natural setting, the realities that Frank Wilkeson recalled: “By the bubbling spring lies the rusted canteen,/And the drum which the drummer-boy dying let go.” Further, the land has been “scar[red]” and “stumps of forests” appear as a “massacre.” The entire scene is a “site for the city of Cain.” Civilization itself has been destroyed by the war. According to Stanton Garner, “the symbols of ordered lives and peaceful civilization have been misappropriated, overturned, debased, ravaged, and burned.”

Tillie Pierce, a native of Gettysburg who was fifteen when the Battle of Gettysburg occurred described the change that war had made on her small town of 2,500 citizens. Her description eerily matches exactly what Melville described as the ravaging reality of the war’s aftermath: “The whole landscape had been changed, and I felt as though we were in a strange and blighted land.” With the stark reminder of what the war cost, Melville leaves no question as to who is at fault.

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109 Shaw, 44-49.
111 Garner, 328.
Sandwiched between the scenes of desolation, the “moor-like wastes” and the scarred land, is a condemnation and an explanation: “since the venom such blastment deals,/The South should have paused, and thrice,/Ere with heat of her hate she hatched/The egg with the cockatrice.” Mythically, the cockatrice is a serpent hatched from a cock’s egg that has the power to kill simply by glancing at its victim. Surely in the lines that follow the cockatrice image Melville depicts in detail the victims of the South’s offspring, the killing cockatrice, hatched through their own hate. Perhaps this understanding provides one reason for Melville’s interest in equally depicting reconcile and the need for charity in the Supplement and perhaps even more poignantly in “Shiloh: A Requiem.” He recognized the destruction caused by hate. Indeed, his concern that the cockatrice will rise again is the guiding theme of a poem that appears later in the collection, “The Apparition.”

In “The Apparition,” the speaker uses a different image for the hatred and treachery. This time, the image is a “goblin-mountain” that lies just below the surface of the earth, one that “long slept,” but was eventually “upheaved.” Certainly, few would argue that the difficulties of nationhood, union, and slavery did in fact reside just below the tenuous political structure in the years following 1776. Indeed, the “goblin-mountain” of slavery and its direct tie to nationhood was present from the moment America declared its independence from Britain. In his autobiography, Thomas Jefferson records that from his original draft of the Declaration of Independence the segment “reprobating the enslaving the inhabitants of Africa, was struck out in complaisance to South Carolina and Georgia.”

In the Declaration itself, Jefferson referred to the slave trade as “piratical

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"warfare" and an "execrable commerce," condemning King George for supporting the "captivating and carrying" into slavery a "distant people who never offended him."\(^ {114} \) Moreover, even prior to drafting the Declaration, while in Virginia Jefferson "drafted a law for gradual emancipation" but then never "introduced it."\(^ {115} \) Clearly, the process for hatching the cockatrice began long before the compromises of 1850 or even 1820 tried to quell it and sink the "goblin-mountain." Unlike the guarded optimism of "The Apparition," however, the speaker in "Gettysburg" has absolute hope that the South’s hate has been effectively banished and defeated, not just sunk beneath "Solidity’s crust."\(^ {116} \) Just as Dagon fell before the Israelite God, so too will the South’s hate be repelled by the "sterner pride" of the union line defending that "place of graves" on Cemetery Ridge.

To counter the hate and ire, the union has something greater, the rightness of cause that is not yet ready to "wither" before Southern scorn: "And Right is a stronghold yet." Note the emphasis given to Right in this line. It is absolute. Such utter commitment to the rightness of cause is not found only in "Gettysburg." As soldiers fought for the Right in the Peach Orchard, the Wheatfield, on Cemetery Ridge and Little Round Top, so too did the Union sailors in "Dupont’s Round Flight." Here as on land, "the Fleet [...] warred for right" and ultimately "prevailed," preserving that for which the Iron Dome came to stand in much of Melville’s collection, "victory of LAW" the "fairest hope" that stands counter to "man’s foulest crime," a point that did not go unmissed by Mustafa Jalal, who in "Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War: the novelist as poet" reads the iron dome as a

\(^ {114} \) Ibid., 242.
\(^ {115} \) Jay Winik, April 1865, The Month That Saved America (New York: Perennial, 2001), 9.
\(^ {116} \) "The Apparition"
symbol of freedom and the dream of American democracy. Additionally, in the
“Inscription for Graves at Pea Ridge, Arkansas” the dead defend their “amiss” deaths
with the assurance that they “warred for Man and Right,” a war begun by “the traitor’s
choice” (Italics added). Finally, in “Presentation to the Authorities,” the Northern victors
could return to “waiting homes with vindicated laws.”

Of particular significance is the identification of Right with God in “Gettysburg.” The
bifurcation of North vs. South, God vs. Satan from beginning to end is maintained and
leaves no doubt as to the speaker’s vengeance. What adds strength to Melville’s parallel
is his use of a similar parallel in other key moments in his collection. In the poem that
details one of the most important events that led to surrender, Melville again identifies
the South with Mammon and Belial, although this time he uses Lucifer’s name
specifically, thereby going beyond Old Testament imagery into modern Christianity and
adding a great deal of strength to the comparison. The first stanza of “The Fall of
Richmond” describes the “city in flames” as it “goes Babylon’s way,” setting up the
second stanza that champions the “hearts unquelled” that defeated Southern treachery,
“the helmed dilated Lucifer.” Only divinity or those who have the divine on their side can
defeat Lucifer himself. The North had such divine aid: “Behind each man, a holy angel
stood.” The solid stand of unionism as a righteous cause is clear in “Gettysburg” and
throughout Battle-Pieces as a whole.

117 Mustafa Jalal, “Battle-Pieces and Aspect of the War: Novelist As Poet, A Study in the Dramatic Poetry
of Herman Melville,” American Studies International 39, no. 2 (June 2001): Par. 20.
118 This idea of Melville’s that the North could claim vindication of laws is reminiscent of Lincoln and his
insistence that the South had no legal right to secede. Secession was not valid. As such, the South could not
claim as the North could that its laws had been vindicated at the war’s end.
119 “Battle for the Bay”
One might be tempted to account for the differences between “Shiloh” and “Gettysburg” in that one depicts a battle’s aftermath, and one depicts the battle itself, in all its activity and torrential leaden hail. However, that explanation would be far too simple because the closing stanzas of “Gettysburg” also depict the battle’s aftermath. However, the serenity of “Shiloh,” maintained through its structure as a single stanza as well as by the emphasis on quiet sounds such as Ls, Ss, and breathy Ps, is nowhere to be found in the closing stanzas of “Gettysburg.” First, as just noted, “Gettysburg” is written in stanzas, suggesting a fracturing or at the very least, a separating of ideas that prevents the visual as well as metaphorical unity of a single stanza poem. Also, the aftermath of Gettysburg is not a hushed scene with swallows skimming overhead, where the cries for water are silenced with a solacing April rain. Gettysburg’s aftermath is a beach strewn with the “Men, arms, and steeds” of a “wild” battle that has “dashed” the army onto the battlefield with the hurricane force of a “September gale.” Certainly such a description is no more historically inaccurate than the detail in “Shiloh.” Only the types of details on which to focus are different. Melville’s strewn beach was aptly described in detail by Private Robert H. Carter of the 22nd Massachusetts who fought with General Daniel H. Sickles on the second day at Gettysburg:

The hoarse and indistinguishable orders of commanding officers, the screaming and bursting of shells, canister, and shrapnel as they tore through the struggling masses of humanity. The death screams of wounded animals, the groans of their human companions, wounded and dying and trampling underfoot by hurrying batteries, rider less horses and the moving lines of battle. A perfect hell on earth, never perhaps to be equaled, certainly not to be surpassed, nor ever to be forgotten.
in a man's lifetime. It has never been effaced from my memory day or night for fifty years.  

Further, another soldier who fought at the famous battle for Little Round Top remembered his experience: "The enemy was pouring a terrible fire upon us. His superior forces giving him a great advantage. The air seemed to be alive with lead. The lines at times were so near each other that the hostile gun barrels almost touched." These soldier's accounts: Out of 262 men in one Minnesota regiment, only 47 survived unhurt, 82% of them falling in less than five minutes; Company F of the 6th North Carolina lost 100% of its men. Surely the dead and dying who endured this leaden hell were just as worthy of a requiem as those who fell at Shiloh, but they receive no such treatment. These dead do not even have the simple identity as foemen or friends. They are "unknown" and "lifeless." Even the atmosphere of the field is distinguished from Shiloh as "searching-parties" move on the battlefield disturbing the death scene, compared to the hush and quiet at Shiloh. Though the battle is over and Dagon has been vanquished, the speaker shows little sympathy for the fallen dead—no requiem here, only blunt and partisan explanation for why they fell.

The final stanza ends the poem not in a tone of reconciliation or even a hope of reconciliation. Rather it soars with triumph for the victors who charge after charge "held that place of graves" (Cemetery Hill) that now can boast that "glory waves" over the place held by those who "even in their swoon" managed to repel the "three waves of flashed advance." After the blasting and taunting and shrieking of shells, the speaker

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121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
notes that in this place a warrior-monument will be re-erected and “Shall soar
transfigured in loftier light,” making violence acceptable instead of repudiating it, an idea
not specific to “Gettysburg.” “Armies of the Wilderness” also makes plain that some
problems will only be solved in “blastment” and war fury because of man’s inability to
solve them any other way: “Were men but strong and wise,/Honest as Grant, and
calm,/War would be left to the red and black ants,/And the happy world disarm.” This
longing for wisdom in peace is most evident in “Shiloh,” but finds its antithesis in
“Gettysburg” as again the speaker assumes a biblical significance to the victory, as the
monument to that victory is “transfigured” or changed into something transcendent,
something loftier and greater than its earthly significance.

Here, unlike Shiloh, victory has been achieved and announced as such. No
reconciling tone, yet even here, like “Shiloh: A Requiem,” Melville is unwilling to leave
the poem on a vengeful note. He is, after all, searching for the totality lodged in
“Shakespeare’s core.” Throughout “Gettysburg” he has found the element of the core that
is to be shunned—vengeance, hate, ire, and overarching pride, exemplified in the
following statement of one Confederate officer to Pennsylvanians just prior to the Battle
of Gettysburg, “My friends, how do you like this way of our coming back into the

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123 This is the direct opposite to what Warren believes is a crucial theme in “Shiloh.”
124 It is interesting that Melville cites Grant in this poem, one of the few poems that so closely deals with
the destruction of the war and the desolation of both land and people. Melville seems to recognize in
“Armies of the Wilderness” that fighting is a necessary evil, a point that is significant to General Grant who
was known for his penchant to fight no matter the human cost. McDonough recounts one veteran’s
remembrance of Grant at the time of Shiloh and thereafter: “From that time until now I have charged Grant
with the responsibility of having uselessly slaughtered at least half of the men that were killed and wounded
in that battle; so universal was the disapprobation felt by the army that he was passed as a dog and hissed
by his men.” See page 223. Nathan W. Daniels also wrote about Grant in his diary entry for June 22, 1864:
“It seems to be admitted by all of his officers that he is reckless of the lives of his men, as was Napoleon,
results are his aim, not fear of blood letting, and he cared not what sacrifice is made doth it but accomplish
his object.” Yet, Lincoln, like Melville, in this poem at least, did not censure him for his behavior or his
actions. After enduring criticism of Grant’s high casualties after the disaster at Shiloh and being advised to
fire him, Lincoln gave his very famous support of Grant, “I can’t spare this man. He fights.”

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Union?" Each trait, however, is defeated by the opposing force of the "core" that is worthy of being sought—divine judgment and the Right, led by God himself.

Still, no reconciliation is achieved in life; the dead only have gained peace from their exposure to the extremes of human capacity. Throughout the entire poem, only those already dead are allowed silence: "Soldier and priest with hymn and prayer/Have laid the stone, and every bone/Shall rest in honor there." Ultimately, the truth in human character, the bravery enacted by North and South alike, causality aside, is still allowed to close this poem, with a hope that all warriors regardless of cause will "rest in honor," a wonderful retrospective nod toward the contemporary reality—Gettysburg was indeed dedicated as an honorable resting place by the time Melville wrote the poem. While bitterness still governed America in 1866, the dead have been given rest. Also significant is that both "soldier and priest" have "laid the stone" for the dedication at Gettysburg. While the bulk of the poem reflects the partisanship that created a gash in postbellum America, like "Shiloh," though to a lesser extent, since it devotes only the closing lines to anything besides violent partisanship, "Gettysburg" still holds out a guarded hope that at the very least, the soldiers might be honored as they were inclined to honor each other in life, themselves helping to lay the memorializing stones at Gettysburg. However, that time had not yet come, at least not by August, 1866 when *Battle-Pieces* was published.

Melville is clear in the final line that this honored rest is for the future, not the present: "every bone/Shall rest in honor there." [italics added]. Indeed when the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association was established in September 1863 and legally chartered in April, 1864, the original charter "made no provision for

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memorializing, commemorating, or preserving that part of the battlefield associated with the Confederate foe.\footnote{Kathleen Georg Harrison, ""A Fitting and Expressive Memorial": The Development of Gettysburg National Military Park," in Gettysburg Compiler, 125\textsuperscript{th} Commemorative Edition, ed., Jerold Wikoff, 1, no.1 (Gettysburg: Times & News Publishing Co.,1988), 35.} In Melville’s poetic rendering, while the memorializing stone had been “laid,” clearly an event that had already taken place, the dead did not yet rest in honor, but the speaker’s hope is that someday they will, a prophetic moment that looks ahead to the Gettysburg of today, the Gettysburg that President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited when he spoke at the dedication of the Eternal Light monument at Gettysburg on July 3, 1938: “All of them we honor, not asking under which Flag they fought then—thankful that they stand together under one Flag now...”\footnote{Anna Jane Moyer. “Tenting Tonight, Boys! The Last Reunion of the Blue and Gray,” in Gettysburg Compiler, 125\textsuperscript{th} Commemorative Edition, ed., Jerold Wikoff, 1, no.1 (Gettysburg: Times & News Publishing Co.,1988), 46.} Roosevelt’s words were realized very dramatically that same day because “although in camp the words ‘Johnny Reb’ and ‘Damn Yankee’ were spoken, the veterans [whose average age was 94] extended hands of friendship across the stone walls where they had fought. Sectional differences and prejudices which had divided them were overcome.”\footnote{Ibid., 44. The reconciliation had begun much earlier at the fiftieth anniversary reunion of the battle. At the fiftieth reunion, veterans of North and South, many of whom had been involved in Pickett’s Charge, “reached over the wall and embraced all up and down the line. Men who had fought one another with bayonets and butts of muskets clasped hands and buried their faces on each other’s shoulders.” See Moyer page 52.} This is the Gettysburg that Melville hopes will occur at the end of his poem, when all the dead will rest in honor, finally truly acknowledging that memorial stone that had been “laid” in 1863. As in “Shiloh,” however, Melville’s optimism is not absolute, as it could not have been given the tumultuous political and social condition of America in 1865-66, yet it is there nonetheless, a subtle hope that America would indeed be “purifie[d] from stain” and “with graver air and lifted flag” would “chase” the “shadow” of evil “along the far-drawn...
height” and emerge a stronger nation, a “youth matured for age’s seat-.”¹²⁹ Only by achieving a tragic vision of itself, of humanity’s extreme possibilities, and recognizing the worth of all its citizens could America gain its maturity. To truly establish itself in “age’s seat” America would need to accept the vision that Melville offered, a vision that stood side-by-side with that of another great American—Abraham Lincoln.

¹²⁹ “America”
CHAPTER 4

"THE MARTYR": LINCOLN AS FORGIVER, FATHER, AND RECONCILER

The bipartisan politics and the path toward knowledge encompassed in Melville's *Battle-Pieces* are linked inextricably to one of the most powerful leaders and politicians in American history, Abraham Lincoln, a figure whose famous magnanimous Second Inaugural Address is considered by many to be his greatest speech, even surpassing the *Gettysburg Address*. Melville's poetry must be studied in the shadow of the sixteenth American President since Lincoln's figure looms over much of Melville's poetry, according to at least two modern critics, Richard H. Cox and Paul M. Dowling, who have directly linked Melville with Lincoln in their essays.

In their respective writings, Lincoln's *during* the Civil War, and Melville's *after* the Civil War, each strove to, if not placate the South, at least not alienate or drive it into a position of further hatred and rebellion. Lincoln, in one of his most famous speeches, the *Gettysburg Address*, made no mention of the partisan sides of the great American tragedy. The *Address* does not even mention the North and/or the South. Instead, it includes both sides in the great "experiment" in democracy.¹ Taken even further, one might conclude that this great War Between the States was necessary to validate "that nation of the people, by the people, and for the people." In so stating, Lincoln gave

relevance to all Civil War dead, not just the Union dead, just as Melville had done in Battle-Pieces by recognizing Southern bravery and heroism, even dedicating poems to Southern heroes and Southern perspectives on the war. Gary Wills, in his Pulitzer Prize winning book Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America, gives Lincoln credit for not only addressing the needs of the Federals in dedicating the battlefield, in a town of only 2,500 residents, where “eight thousand human bodies were scattered over, or (barely) under, the ground” but also “transform[ing] the ugly reality into something rich and strange – and he did it with 272 words.”\(^2\) Abraham Lincoln was at his rhetorical best with a speech that lasted only a matter of minutes. But what he did was to recognize the significance and truly epic proportions of the Civil War. He made transcendent the issues at stake in the war, much more than just keeping the Union together, an idea that only a short time before had held his complete attention. Lincoln “lifts the battle to a level of abstraction [...]”, a feat that Melville also accomplished in his poetry.\(^3\) Melville picked up the cause of transcendent reconciliation where Lincoln was forced to put it down. According to Robert Milder in “The Reader of/in Melville’s Battle-Pieces” Melville becomes a Reconciler who stands as an “Instructor” in place of the assassinated Lincoln.\(^4\)

Melville’s only poem devoted to President Lincoln does not even mention Lincoln’s name, but he is clearly the leader of the “Right” cause, the cause of union in this poem. “The Martyr: Indicative of the passion of the people on the 15\(^{th}\) of April, 1865,” unlike Whitman’s famous eulogies to Lincoln, “O Captain, My Captain” and “When Last the Lilacs in the Dooryard Bloomed,” is overtly political in tone and language, hardly

\(^2\) Ibid., 20.
\(^3\) Ibid., 37
surprising since Melville’s poetry is political poetry, a point emphasized by Paul M. Dowling’s “Robert E. Lee & Melville’s Politics in Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War.” Melville’s final injunction is neither a eulogy of Lincoln, nor an expression of either personal or national grief; rather it is a stern warning to the South, a startling preview of the Reconstruction period.

As noted in a previous chapter, Melville was fully behind the proposition of reunion and unification between North and South after the war was over, being a firm unionist before, during and after, but he was also not willing to gloss over the problems that reunification was causing and would continue to cause. In surveying the chaos that characterized the war’s aftermath, Melville recognized the shadow of Abraham Lincoln and the magnanimous policies that governed him during the war and presumably would have guided his reconstruction plans as well, had he not been assassinated. Though Lincoln’s shadow is always present in Battle-Pieces, having presided over the epic event from which Battle-Pieces draws its material, Melville wrote only one poem about Lincoln himself, or rather about America’s response to his assassination. The poem is entitled “The Martyr,” and is according to one of Melville’s critics in the Boston Commercial Bulletin, “effective in its simplicity and pathos.”

GOOD Friday was the day
Of the prodigy and crime,
When they killed him in his pity,
When they killed him in his prime

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Of clemency and calm—

When with yearning he was filled

To redeem the evil-willed,

And, though conqueror, be kind;

But they killed him in his kindness,

In their madness and their blindness,

And they killed him from behind.

There is sobbing of the strong,

And a pall upon the land;

But the People in their weeping

Bare the iron hand:

Beware the People weeping

When they bare the iron hand.

He lieth in his blood—

The father in his face;

They have killed him, the Forgiver—

The Avenger takes his place,

The Avenger wisely stern,

Who in righteousness shall do

What the heavens call him to,

And the parricides remand;
For they killed him in his kindness,
In their madness and their blindness,
And his blood is on their hand.

There is sobbing of the strong,
And a pall upon the land;
But the People in their weeping
Bare the iron hand:
Beware the People weeping
When they bare the iron hand.

The first notable point about the poem that ought to be addressed is the title. The title is significant for at least two reasons. First, the poem is not named after Lincoln, even though Melville was certainly not adverse to mentioning specific people in the titles of his poems e.g. "Stonewall Jackson," "Lee at the Capitol," plus a few others. The omission of Lincoln’s name must, therefore, be crucial to the poem’s overall meaning, and it is. First, the name suggests a certain transcendence naturally associated with martyrdom, a timeless quality of a selfless act that has meaning beyond the moment. That very transcendence and timelessness becomes important to Melville as he draws upon Lincoln’s philosophies of charity and magnanimity as a solution to the problems that continued after Lincoln had died. As such, though Lincoln’s presence physically is gone from Melville’s text, as it was published in 1866 after Lincoln had died, Lincoln quite literally transcended that death to cast his philosophical shadow over Melville’s work.
The second reason for Lincoln’s name being omitted is suggested by Dowling, who believes that the omission of Lincoln’s name is a show of “Northern restraint” on Melville’s part. Dowling’s observation is right on target because in keeping Lincoln’s name from appearing in the poem’s title, Melville immediately re-directs attention away from the man and toward the cause for which he stood and the war that had been fought to establish his vision for America’s future. Lincoln himself was a highly divisive figure and more than anyone else, except perhaps John Brown, infuriated Southerners, whether justified or not. Southerner William Gilmore Simms after the 1860 election described Lincoln as “a creature wholly unknown before, save, as it appears, a rail-splitter, in which few well-trained Southern negroes cannot excell him.” Further, Lincoln’s detractors, both Confederate and Copperhead, at various times described him as “gorilla,” “ape,” “baboon,” “clodhopper,” and “peasant.” His Inaugural Address did little to discourage the negative commentary. As just one example, after his conciliatory Inaugural Address a correspondent for the Charleston Mercury referred to Lincoln as “the Ourang-Outang at the White House” whose Address was the very “tocsin of battle” and “the signal of our freedom.” After the surrender of Fort Sumter, Southern hatred for Lincoln continued in earnest. Southerners even touted Lincoln’s election as the final reason for secession.

Correspondence from one journalist from Richmond on April 18, 1861 and printed in the Baltimore Sun, reprinted in The Fredericksburg News a day later, reveals the vituperation directed at Lincoln from his Southern detractors:

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9 Ibid., 349.
The unparalleled and atrocious duplicity and devilish malignity of this Usurper at Washington demands prompt, earnest and calm wisdom now... We rebel against the usurpations of a wretch who attempts to be a Military Dictator, -not against the Union, the Constitution and the Laws. We have no necessary quarrel with the people of the North. If they choose to sustain usurpation and tyranny the fault and its consequences are theirs.¹¹

The correspondent went on to encourage Southerners to take whatever federal property they could since “fifteen thirty-fourths of all the army, navy, forts, &c, belong to the South.” He encouraged immediate action, remaining not a “moment” more “in the degraded service of Lincoln.”¹² Southerners from all branches of the military did leave their posts to join the Confederacy.

Even after the war had begun and Lincoln continued to try to appease Southerners and those in the Border States in 1862 by offering compensated emancipation, congressman from the Border States treated his efforts with “contempt” and made no “substantial response” to his “efforts to save their States and people.”¹³ Southern hatred of Lincoln largely originated and continued to fester, no doubt, from his position on

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¹¹ From Correspondence in The Fredericksburg News from the Spotswood Hotel in Richmond on 18 April 1861. Re-printed here from the Baltimore Sun on 19 April 1861.
¹² Ibid. One such man who immediately heeded the call to leave the Federal navy was Daniel B. Conrad. While a surgeon on board the Frigate Congress with the Mediterranean Squadron, Conrad first learned about the war. In his diary he wrote that he heard about the war “for the first time” on April 15 and “refused” the “Oath on board.” At this point he was immediately ordered to stay put. He tried to leave the following day but was arrested at the depot and taken to jail for treason. After remaining in custody for six weeks, he escaped and made his way to Virginia where he joined General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson at Harper’s Ferry as a surgeon in the Stonewall Brigade. Diaries of Daniel D. Conrad, 1855-1864, Archival Manuscript Material, Library of Congress, 0536D NHF-Alph.
slavery. In a speech given to the House of Representatives on July 27, 1848 Lincoln very clearly delineated how he felt about the slave issue: "I am a northern man, or, rather, a western free State man, with a constituency I believe to be, and with personal feelings I know to be, against the extension of Slavery." Further, in his last speech given in Springfield, Illinois during his Senate campaign, he reiterated his earlier position of ten years:

The legal right of the Southern people to reclaim their fugitives I have constantly admitted. The legal right of Congress to interfere with their institution in the states, I have constantly denied. In revisiting the spread of slavery to new territory, and with that, what appears to me to be a tendency to subvert the first principle of free government itself my whole effort has consisted.

Lincoln continued to distance himself from the abolitionist element in the North, and even directly addressed this Southern charge against Republicans in his famous Address at the Cooper Institute on February 27, 1860: "You charge that we stir up insurrections

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14 One of the most brilliant and eloquent descriptions of his position on slavery equated slavery with a snake: "If I saw a venomous snake crawling in the road any man would say I might seize the nearest stick and kill it; but if I found that snake in bed with my children, that would be another question. I might hurt the children more than the snake, and it might bite them...But, if there was a bed newly made up, to which the children were to be taken, and it was proposed to take a batch of young snakes and put them there with them, I take it no man would say there was any question how I ought to decide...The new Territories are the newly made bed to which our children are to go, and it lies with the nation to say whether they shall have snakes mixed up with them or not." See James M. McPherson, "How Lincoln Won the War," *With My Face To the Enemy: Perspectives on the Civil War*, ed., Robert Cowley (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2001), 95.


16 Ibid., 33. Lincoln gave another famous description of his stance on slavery that illustrates both his political position and his rhetorical ability to express that position. "If I saw a venomous snake crawling in the road any man would say I might seize the nearest stick and kill it; but if I found that snake in bed with my children, that would be another question. I might hurt the children more than the snake, and it might bite them...But, if there was a bed newly made up, to which the children were to be taken, and it was proposed to take a batch of young snakes and put them there with them, I take it no man would say there was any question how I ought to decide...The new Territories are the newly made bed to which our children are to go, and it lies with the nation to say whether they shall have snakes mixed up with them or not." See McPherson, "How Lincoln Won the War," 95.

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among your slaves. We deny it; and what is your proof? Harper's Ferry! John Brown!!
John Brown was no Republican; and you have failed to implicate a single Republican in
his Harper's Ferry enterprise."¹⁷ So, while Lincoln repeatedly emphasized that though he
believed slavery was wrong, he was content "to let it alone where it [was]," Southerners
still harbored a deep antipathy and mistrust of Lincoln, and could find little good in his
election to President in 1860.¹⁸ To Democrats, the dominant political party of the South,
who knew virtually nothing about Lincoln as a man vilified him as a representative of
"Black Republicanism" a ""sooty and scoundrelly' abolitionist who wanted to free the
slaves and mongrelize the white race."¹⁹ Lincoln's efforts to distance himself from
radical anti-slavery groups, however, did little to assuage the mind of at least one
Southerner who reviled Lincoln specifically because of his "hatred of slavery."²⁰ The
Editor's Table section in the Southern Literary Messenger for March 1861 explains,
perhaps, exactly why Southerners so distrusted Lincoln as an abolitionist. By their
definition, Lincoln was undoubtedly an abolitionist, as ardently as he claimed that he was
not:

An Abolitionist is any man who does not love slavery for its own sake, as a divine
institution; who does not worship it as the corner stone of civil liberty; who does
not adore it as the only possible social condition on which a permanent
Republican government can be erected; and who does not, in his inmost soul,
desire to see it extended and perpetuated over the whole earth, as a means of

¹⁷ Lincoln, 45.
¹⁸ Ibid., 51.
human reformation second in dignity, importance, and sacredness, alone to the Christian religion. By this definition, Lincoln was most certainly an abolitionist, a man to be hated and reviled by his Southern countrymen.

As the Southern definition clearly illustrates, Southerners saw no distinctions between the various people who made up the anti-slavery movement, a perception that led them to a deep hatred of Lincoln that few Northerners would have understood. To Southerners, slavery was a polarized division with no room in the middle for compromise. Northerners on the other hand, recognized at least two different groups within the anti-slavery positions: immediate abolition and gradual abolition. Immediate abolitionists were led and represented by people like William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass. They believed slavery ought to be abolished in one giant sweep. Gradual abolitionists were a bit more compromising in their attitudes and recognized the possibility of abolition with compensation and the need to keep slavery from spreading outside the South where it already existed, without directly interfering with the political rights of Southerners to keep slaves where slavery was already established. Those who called themselves free-soilers, many of whom formed and made up the Republican Party were of the latter opinion. Lincoln was one of this group. He disliked slavery on moral grounds but did not advocate immediate abolition.

Unlike Southerners, the differences within the anti-slavery movement were very important to Northerners and they were distinctions that Northerners clearly recognized, as evidenced by the very different view that one particular Northerner had of Lincoln compared to his Southern counterpart from the Southern Literary Messenger. To Nathan

21 Southern Literary Messenger, March, 1861.
W. Daniels Lincoln was not radical enough and was certainly NOT an abolitionist.

Having met Lincoln on the street in Washington, Daniels described his encounter:

I politely saluted the deputy that he fills but not the man, as I have but little respect for Mr Lincoln as an Individual – I consider him anything but a Reformer or a Radical. He is a drifter and only acts when forced & by public opinion. His Emancipation Proclamation only came when the people arose in their majesty and demanded its birth [...] The Radicals are for more earnest work and they are thoroughly convinced that Mr Lincoln is not the man to speedily and successfully close this war. He has served the purpose for which he was [elected?] and must now pass into obscurity & remain [where he originally was a negative character?].

According to Daniels who did consider himself an abolitionist and reformer, Lincoln most definitely did not qualify as a solid member of the group. Lincoln was indeed a divisive figure for both Northerners and Southerners.

Melville chose not to focus attention on these very material divisions that Lincoln caused by emphasizing his name in the title; rather, with the title Melville created not just a title but an entire philosophy about Lincoln’s vision for America, a vision that would not be entrenched with the baggage of Lincoln’s name, but rather the cause for which he stood as the head. In omitting Lincoln’s name, the man disappears beneath the

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23 In another entry dated January 1, 1864 Daniels records his abolitionist and radical sentiments. “I pray for the advancement of these people and the recognition of all their rights as human beings. They are entitled to something else besides their mere personal freedom, political social and moral rights are theirs and the day will soon arrive when we shall all be willing to concede such Justice.”
transcendence of an idea, preserving "world's fairest hope," a cause that produced a martyr, not just a man whose name carried with it deep hatred and divisiveness.

The second possible significance for Melville's title is contained in the obvious connotations and literal denotation that "martyr" carries. Martyrs are typically killed for their religious conviction, often offering their lives in place of a denial of what they know to be true. In using "martyr," a word that implies transcendence, to describe Lincoln, Melville places an interesting scenario before both Northerners and Southerners and implicitly and ingeniously makes two very powerful statements about each group, without having to mention either of them, thereby avoiding any direct antagonizing of Southerners, which he warned others against in the Supplement. Before going any further, however, one point must be established. Was Melville's choice of word to describe Lincoln deserved? The definition of "martyr" given in Webster's Dictionary includes the following: "a person who dies rather than renounce his religion; one who makes a great sacrifice for the sake of principle; a great or constant sufferer." Certainly one of Lincoln's contemporaries, A.C. McClure, believed Lincoln contained just such qualities. McClure, as a friend and confidante of the President urged against the Emancipation Proclamation on political grounds, citing the very real possibility that Republican congressional seats would be lost. McClure notes that Lincoln "appreciated, as I did not, that the magnitude of his act cast all mere considerations of expediency into nothingness." McClure also notes that his dire predictions about political losses did in fact come to fruition, but far from condemning Lincoln's decision McClure firmly declares that Lincoln "dared to do the right for the sake of the right."24 Certainly to McClure's thinking, Melville's title is an appropriate one. Historian Stephen Oates'

24 McClure, 113.
research has confirmed McClure’s assessment of Lincoln’s character. In his biography of Lincoln, Oates writes that Lincoln was regarded as honest even by those who opposed his policies. People had no doubt that he was committed to his principles and was, in fact, often “unbending” in his attitude toward those principles.\(^{25}\)

Moreover, keeping in mind that Melville’s audience would likely have associated “martyr” with the great Christian saints and martyrs like Peter, Stephen, and Paul, among many others, the allusion to Lincoln’s belief in his vision of America as synonymous with religious faith, which is what “martyr” certainly implies, is a remarkable connection. The connection, though remarkable, is particularly surprising given Melville’s constancy to the union and his belief that ultimately “God he keeps the middle way.”\(^ {26}\) The middle way discourages partisanship, while advocating temperance. “Wisdom is vain, and prophecy” because in the end His cosmic and universal will prevails and is not subject to man’s limited power and understanding: “None was by/When he spread the sky.”\(^ {27}\) What is this rightness of cause wherein God will be triumphant? Union.

Regardless of the many ambiguities and many voices that speak in \textit{Battle-Pieces}, about this one point, union, Melville is always consistent throughout the entire collection. He is optimistic about union and democracy.\(^ {28}\) That God ordained the Right, as pronounced also in “Gettysburg,” and eventually “walled Dagon’s power” indicates that those who are killed for refusing to give up on this Right are indeed martyrs. Yet, if this is the case, why are the soldiers, though sympathetically treated in \textit{Battle-Pieces}, not

\(^{25}\) Oates, 58.
\(^{26}\) “Conflict of Convictions.”
\(^{27}\) Most likely this is an allusion to a dialogue between God and Job in Job 38:4. “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?”
given martyrdom by Melville? Perhaps because Lincoln represented all of them, his vision for America being all-inclusive. By placing Lincoln as a martyr, the man who directed the armies that were instruments to "walling" that heathen god, Melville makes his strongest statement in the entire collection. Lincoln and his vision stand as an earthly witness and testament of God himself, one of God's faithful representatives on earth. Northerners who followed Lincoln and revered him are implicitly praised in "The Martyr" because in supporting Lincoln, they supported His servant. On the flip side, Melville gives a damming judgment to the South. They killed one of God's earthly witnesses, and as such their punishment will be swift, meted out by the "iron hand" of Northern grief. Because the North sided with the martyr, Lincoln, they are, in short, qualified as adjudicators and given the power to exact justice. With just one word, "martyr," to describe the Northern leader, Melville elevates the conflict to a war between good and evil, between God and Belial, a polarization not unique to "The Martyr."

Additionally, Lincoln's constancy to his beliefs is one of the most heroic attributes of his character and besides taking an opportunity to make the Civil War a divine conflict with supernatural consequences, after all it was "man's latter fall," Lincoln's constancy may have been another reason that Melville grants him martyrdom. From his earliest foray into public life, Lincoln was very insistent that obedience to the law was required of all citizens if a stable government was to be maintained, and this included absolute union of the states into one country, unbreakable, a union unbroken, as he unwaveringly declared in the First Inaugural Address:

I hold, that in contemplation of universal laws, and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the
fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no
government proper ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination.
Continue to execute all the express provisions of our national Constitution, and
the Union will endure forever—it being impossible to destroy it, except by some
action not provided for in the instrument itself [...] I therefore consider that in
view of the Constitution and the laws, the Union is unbroken.29

As to Melville’s thoughts on politics and on Lincoln specifically, he came from a strong
Democrat family and probably tended himself more toward Democrats and moderate
Republicans, according to Hennig Cohen.30 William Chapman Sharpe agrees that
Melville was an anti-slavery Democrat.31 However, Stanton Garner has pointed out that
though Melville may have supported McClellan as Lincoln’s political rival, specifically
for the 1864 election, Melville supported Lincoln in being “steadfast in his determination
to reunite the states.”32 Melville asserted his loyalty to the concept that Lincoln described
as the perpetuity of union in a poem entitled “Inscription for Graves at Pea Ridge,
Arkansas.” In this poem, the speaker unequivocally defends those who died in pursuit of
“the Cause” which was “hallowed by hearts and by the laws.” The cause of union was
sacred because its very foundation was rooted in the law. Union was the law and could
not be broken except by a fundamental alteration to the legal buttress that supported the
government’s form and basic life-sustaining elements.

As strong as it was, though, Lincoln’s dedication to union was not merely a political
stance. It was a sustaining feature of his character, “the only thing like passion or

29 Lincoln, 55, 56.
32 Garner, 360.
infatuation" in him, according to Northerners, including Walt Whitman. Lincoln’s
dedication stretched into a commitment that amounted to religious devotion. Alexander
Stephens, a political contemporary of Lincoln’s who served as the vice-president for the
Confederacy, described Lincoln’s unflinching commitment to perpetual union in
decidedly religious terms: “The Union with him, in sentiment, rose to the sublimity of a
religious mysticism.” Little wonder that Melville described Lincoln as a martyr who
died for a transcendent cause for which he had an almost religious attachment.

Lincoln’s solid attachment to Union was complemented by his willingness to stand
firm in his belief that extending slavery into the territories was a blatant denial of the
Founding Fathers’ intent, and that the federal government, contrary to the beliefs of his
opponents, did have the necessary Constitutional authority to restrict slavery in federal
territories. After he was elected President, in the midst of the heated rhetoric that would
soon erupt in war, Lincoln continued to stand firm in his denial to give one inch of
ground to Southern secessionists, regardless of the cost. If his religious faith was to
preserve the union, democracy, and eliminate slavery’s extension, he was indeed faithful
to it. In this regard he was very much unlike many in Congress, who worked toward a
compromise even up to the day they received the dispatch that South Carolina had

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33 Quoted in Wills, 125.
34 Ibid. Garry Wills also discusses Lincoln’s assertion that the Union remained unbroken later in the chapter
on “Revolution in Thought.” See page 133.
35 See “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions,” Lincoln’s Address Before the Young Men’s Lyceum
of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838. In this address Lincoln firmly adheres to the belief that contempt
for the law will result in disastrous consequences for the nation: “Let every American, every lover of
liberty, every well wish to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least
particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others.” See page 5. In his
“Cooper Institute Address,” Lincoln, in a very logical and detailed fashion, makes the argument that those
who are striving to extend slavery into the territories are renouncing the wishes and precedent of the

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approved a secession resolution. Indeed on December 20, 1860, after having received word of South Carolina’s resolution, Congressmen and Senators still held out hope for a compromise. Yet, Lincoln was unmoved. He wrote to one Southerner that “on the territorial issue [he was] inflexible.”

From the beginning of his presidency to the end, Lincoln was faithful to what he felt was his legal and moral duty as an American citizen and as its chief executive, and he refused to concede any ground to what he felt were ridiculous and illogical threats and demands. His resolve did not change after he reached Washington and came into

36 The newly formed Republican party, unlike their other political colleagues were not sold on compromise, taking a position much closer to the head of their newly elected majority party—Abraham Lincoln. As evidence of their stalwart opposition to compromise, a reporter in Washington dispatched the following to the New York Times on December 20, 1860, the day Congress received word that South Carolina had on that very day voted affirmative on a secession resolution: “A discussion occurred regarding the position of the Republican Party regarding compromises with the South, and it was agreed that no compromises admitting the Constitution to extend Slavery to Territories, or looking to its protection there would be acceptable to the Republicans under any circumstances. The Expression of opinion was very decided and firm.” See The Most Fearful Ordeal, Original Coverage of the Civil War by Writers and Reporters of The New York Times, Introduction and Notes by James M. McPherson (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004): 49.
37 Senator Pugh from Ohio, according to an Associated Press reporter, declared that he would “stand by the side of his friend from Kentucky (Mr. Crittenden).” See The Most Fearful Ordeal, 53. The Senate had formed a Committee of Thirteen to try and work out a likely compromise to avert the crisis, and out of this committee came the Crittenden Compromise, proposed by John J. Crittenden of Kentucky. The Crittenden Compromise seemed the most likely of the proposals, but it did not succeed and was opposed by both Northerners and Southerners. The compromise was built upon four major areas: 1) The many personal-liberty laws passed by individual states to counteract the Fugitive Slave Law were to be repealed. 2) More strict and stringent enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law was to be enacted. 3) A constitutional amendment would prohibit any federal interference with the slave institution. 4) Another constitutional amendment would restore and extend the line established in the Missouri Compromise into the territories, allowing everything south of the line open to slavery. See Paul S. Boyer et al. eds., The Enduring Vision, 3rd ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996), 456. The House of Representatives had formed a similar committee, consisting of thirty-three men, one representative from each state, to find a compromise to alleviate the crisis. Out of this committee, came a compromise similar to the Crittenden Compromise. Its tenets were four-fold. 1) New Mexico would come in on the popular sovereignty doctrine—the people of New Mexico would decide whether to allow slavery or not. 2) There would be more strict enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. 3) Personal-liberty laws in the North would be repealed. 4) The creation and ratification of a constitutional amendment that would prevent any more interference with the slave institution. Like the Crittenden compromise, the House version was also not accepted. Republicans in general were opposed to these compromises because they violated the major premise upon which their party had been based—no extension of slavery. See Boyer, 456.
38 Boyer, 456.
39 In the “Cooper Institute Address” Lincoln used a very strong analogy to depict the attitude of Southerners toward the North’s position that if a Republican were elected President, they would break the Union apart. “But you will not abide the election of a Republican president! In that supposed event, you
contact with the various compromisers and their proposals, once telling a visitor to the
Whitehouse what would turn out to be an eerie prophetic statement: “I will suffer death
before I will consent...to any concession or compromise which looks like buying the
privilege to take possession of this government to which we have a constitutional right.”
In Melville’s mind, Lincoln’s stubborn refusal to abdicate his belief in union and
democracy must have qualified him for a martyr’s death.

Like with so many of Melville’s poems, some of which have been addressed in this
study, “The Martyr” has other interpretive possibilities and one of them helps to establish
a strong philosophical link between Melville and Lincoln. Where Lincoln died before
having an opportunity to implement his vision, Melville took up Lincoln’s cause, not by
name, of course, but in overall philosophic agreement, and the “Martyr” provides an
opening example by connecting Lincoln to the Rightness of the union cause, for which he
was a martyr, and also to the other great aim of the war, slavery’s destruction.

At first, Lincoln presented the war to the country as a matter of union, not slavery.
Many Northerners would have agreed. After the President’s address to Congress in July,
1861, many newspaper editors were very happy that Lincoln had not mentioned anything
about slavery in his speech. Instead Lincoln founded his case on the need to reunify the
country, a case that he made over and over again, referring to the conflict as rebellion

say, you will destroy the Union; and then, you say, the great crime of having destroyed it will be upon us!
That is cool. A highwayman holds a pistol to my ear, and mutters through his teeth, ‘Stand and deliver or I
shall kill you, and then you will be a murderer!’ To be sure, what the robber demanded of me—my
money—was my own; and I had a clear right to keep it; but it was no more my own than my vote is my
own; and the threat of death to me, to extort my money, and the threat of destruction to the Union, to extort
my vote, can scarcely be distinguished in principle.” See Great Speeches, 49. Additionally, Throughout the
course of his journey from Springfield to Washington after being elected President, Lincoln made a number
of stops along the way, taking the opportunity to explain his dedication to union. 39 On one of these
occasions in New York City, he reiterated his devotion to protecting the union, a stubbornness that would
see him through the next four bloody years: “Nothing...can ever bring me willingly to consent to the
destruction of this Union.” See Donald, “Lincoln takes Charge,” 7.
40 “Lincoln Take Charge,” 6.
"more than 400 times in his messages and letters." \(^{41}\) That rebellion was based on secession and disunion, a disunion for which Lincoln had no tolerance, a point he made clear to a Maryland delegation who early in the conflict demanded that no more troops be brought through their state and that the President make peace with the Confederacy "on any terms." Lincoln's response is a telling reminder of just how seriously Lincoln took his position as president of the entire United States. Under no circumstances would he allow the Union to be broken: "You would have me break my oath and surrender the Government without a blow. There is no Washington in that—no Jackson in that—no manhood nor honor in that." \(^{42}\)

By the war's end, however, Lincoln's vision for America included not only union but emancipation as well, though he was by no means a "sentimental abolitionist," according to one of his contemporaries. \(^{43}\) In fact, as indicated earlier, Lincoln made every effort to assure Southerners that he had no intention of interfering with slavery where it was already a confirmed constitutional right. McClure observed that "there was no time from the inauguration of Lincoln until the 1\(^{st}\) of January, 1863, that the South could not have returned to the Union with slavery intact in every State." \(^{44}\) By January, 1863, his decision had been made. \(^{45}\) After the Emancipation Proclamation and the Gettysburg

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 21, 23.
\(^{43}\) McClure, 98.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 100. In March, 1862, Lincoln put before Congress a proposal for compensated emancipation, and the preliminary draft of the Emancipation issued on September 22, 1862, did not call for immediate abolition. Lincoln gave the South three months "formal notice" to cease their rebellion before, as a military necessity, he would issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Just nine days prior to issuing this preliminary notice, in response to a Chicago delegation of clergymen who urged emancipation, Lincoln gave the following reply: "I have not decide against the proclamation of liberty to the slaves, but hold the matter under advisement, and I can assure you the matter is on my mind by day and by night more than any other. Whatever shall appear to be God's will I will do." See McClure, 103.
\(^{45}\) In 1864 in a speech delivered in Baltimore Lincoln further clarified his commitment to emancipation, even if it meant denying what up to that point had been a constitutional right. He used the following story to illustrate the importance of striking a blow to slavery, even at the expense of Southern "liberty": "The
Address in November that same year, Lincoln was effectively tied to the cause of destroying slavery, not just containing it where it had been so long entrenched. To win the war, he had to take decisive and destructive action against slavery.\footnote{ibid., 95.} The ultimate union of the nation depended upon it, a point he made the focus of the following figurative image:

> Often a limb must be amputated to save a life. The surgeon is solemnly bound to try to save both life and limb; but when the crisis comes, and the limb must be sacrificed as the only chance of saving the life, no honest man will hesitate...In our case, the moment came when I felt that slavery must die that the nation might live.\footnote{Ibid., 98.}

Lincoln’s decision to strike a blow at slavery was certainly not a dramatic change in political or personal sentiment. According to Stephen B. Oates, Lincoln once commented that slavery “had the power of making [him] miserable.”\footnote{Ibid., 60.} Moreover, as a representative in the Illinois legislature, Lincoln was one of only six legislators to vote against a series of pro-slavery and anti-abolition measures put before the legislature in 1937.\footnote{Ibid., 87.} Later that
same year, Lincoln along with fellow Whig Dan Stone wrote an “official protest against slavery” and had it recorded in the House Journal for March 3, 1837, denouncing slavery as “a bad and unjust policy.” With these early signs of his personal and political dislike of the peculiar institution, Lincoln’s ultimate strike against slavery should come as no surprise, and furthermore he was not alone in his position on slavery. According to historian Peter Kolchin, as the war went on, more and more Northerners adopted the view that slavery had to be abolished as well as preserving the union.

By war’s end, and even before, Lincoln had become the Great Emancipator, a title synonymous with liberty for four million Americans. “Lincoln and Liberty Too,” a poem and song attributed to Jesse Hutchinson, Jr. (whose family were popular performers during the war years) is one popular rendering of this view of Lincoln as a fighter against slavery:

Hurrah for the choice of the nation,

Our chieftain so brave and so true,

We'll go for the great reformation,

For Lincoln and Liberty, too!

We'll go for the son of Kentucky,

The hero of Hoosierdom through,

The pride of the "Suckers" so lucky,

For Lincoln and Liberty, too!

to be abolished in Washington, D.C. The resolutions were ratified in the house by a vote of 77 to 6. Lincoln was one of the opposing votes. This was his first recorded public position on the slave issue. See Oates, 37.

Ibid., 39. Lest Lincoln be branded as an early abolitionist, in this same official declaration, he also included a sound condemnation of abolitionists for exacerbating the problem.


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They'll find what by felling and mauling,
Our railmaker statesman can do;
For the people are everywhere calling
For Lincoln and Liberty, too.
Then up with the banner so glorious,
The star-spangled red, white, and blue,
We'll fight till our banner's victorious,
For Lincoln and Liberty, too.

Our David's good sling is unerring,
The Slavocrat's giant he slew,
Then shout for the freedom preferring,
For Lincoln and Liberty, too.
We'll go for the son of Kentucky,
The hero of Hoosierdom through,
The pride of the "Suckers" so lucky,
For Lincoln and Liberty, too.52

Though "The Martyr" does not mention slavery by name, Melville recognized Lincoln's connection to slavery through an understated connection to "The Portent," another poem in the collection about slavery.

Throughout Battle-Pieces Melville titles his poems, especially those in the opening section, very specifically so as to draw attention to either particular battles, people, or

52 The poem is available from various sources including the following website: http://www.civilwarpoetry.org/union/songs/lincoln-liberty.html.
occasionally items of great interest to those battles or places. Of especial importance here are those poems that he dedicates to people. In each poem that is dedicated to a particular person, the individual is mentioned in the title, with the exception of “The Victor of Antietam.” Yet, even in this poem, the individual is clearly delineated, as there is only one person to whom this poem could refer; General McClellan was the only “victor” at the Battle of Antietam, as he was the commanding union officer. Only “The Martyr” and “The Portent” are different from the remaining poems that single out a very specific person in that only after reading the poem is it clear to whom the poem is dedicated. Such is the first link between “The Martyr” and “The Portent.”

Next, the titles give no indication of their respective subjects’ personal qualities or attributes. Nothing about the titles indicates what type of men they are. The titles refer only to the status they would achieve after their deaths, not even during their lives, and these mantels, of portent and martyr, would be endowed by others, not themselves. In addition, both descriptive titles make clear that some external, fate-driven, or divine influence is at work, and these two poems are the only titles in the book which contain such overt implications. Lastly, and perhaps most obviously, the crisp syllabic structure is parallel, with each title containing two words, the first of which is the same and the second containing two syllables in a stressed/unstressed pattern.

Perhaps the strongest connection between the two poems is in the relationship to Lincoln’s title of “a martyr” and the one man included in Battle-Pieces who was, historically, in fact, given a very prominent status as a martyr—John Brown. While “The Portent” does not contain the word “martyr” to describe Brown, contemporary audiences would likely have made that association as many Northerners were quick to assign him
that distinction when he died. That Melville attributes to Lincoln the very status that
Brown did in fact have, at least for the many who believed in his anti-slavery crusade, is
noteworthy. This connection is furthered by the poem’s second line, which describes the
“crime” as “the prodigy,” a portentous sign, event, or an omen. In this way, the act of
“martyrdom” functions in the same way that John Brown’s “martyrdom” functioned. It
will result in “anguish” for those who have committed the sin. In just the poem’s title,
“The Martyr” Melville effectively establishes Lincoln’s connections to both race and
union, a martyr for both causes, unlike Brown whose martyrdom was only for the
abolitionist cause. In so doing, Melville sets up his next parallel for Lincoln, a parallel
that fits his own philosophical and political positions in Battle-Pieces—magnanimity and
forgiveness.

“The Martyr” is a carefully constructed poem from beginning to end and designed
with a very specific purpose in mind: to further Lincoln’s magnanimous vision for
America’s future through a description of his own death. The poem’s first line begins
with a striking set of words: “Good Friday.” Historically, the poem is accurate in that
Lincoln was shot on Good Friday, yet just as in “Shiloh: A Requiem,” whose date is
historically accurate to when the actual battle took place, in the spring, Melville uses the
historical fact to his poetic advantage. The poem could have begun in a myriad of ways,
with who shot Lincoln and for what cause, or with an angry condemnation like that
delivered in “Gettysburg.” Melville chooses not to pursue either of these very possible
lines of thought. Indeed, he chooses not even to begin with the grieving nation, even
though the poem’s subtitle reads, “Indicative of the passion of the people on the 15th of
April, 1865.” Melville certainly addresses this “passion” before the poem has ended,
twice, in fact, but he does not begin the poem with the people's "passion." Why? Maybe because the volatile Northern emotions had to be justified in order to keep the stern warning of the second and fourth stanzas from being too harsh and potentially unfounded. Just who the martyr is and his status of a martyr must be fully explained, beyond the title's implicit connections.

In order to illustrate just who the man is who has been martyred, Melville exploits the historical accuracy to his advantage. In the first two words, the poem attains a significance that even Whitman's great dedicatory poems, "O Captain, My Captain," and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed," do not have. Lincoln's death is likened to that of Jesus Christ's. Good Friday's religious significance rests solely on the fact that Jesus Christ died on that day, killed by the very people that He came to save. Can the same be true of Lincoln? Was he killed by the very people whom he tried to "save"? Melville's contemporaries thought so. After Lincoln was assassinated, writers did not fail to make the connection with Christ and the crucifixion. One Bostonian wrote

With a kind of awe the imagination lays hold on such facts as these: The North, which had already poured out such rivers of blood in expiation of its guilty acquiescence in wrong, cannot be released till it has made one crowning offering more–its first-born child and chosen leader. The man whose election was the occasion of the war, becomes its victim. The President who had dealt so tenderly with Northern traitors, had forgiven them, had treated with them, had almost cherished them, is stung to death at last by the serpent he would insist on taking to
his bosom. Destiny would not let the war close till it had clearly demonstrated that
the worst foe was at home.  

Evidently Melville agreed, as he makes the connection between Lincoln and Christ very
obvious. A quick look at historical evidence provides a possible reason for Melville
having validated the connection between Lincoln and Christ, which at least one writer
also made—as redeemers of their own assassins. First, Lincoln’s own words.

In the last public speech he gave on April 11, 1865, Lincoln started to outline his own
plan for reconstructing the South, a plan based on his consistent position that the South
was not a conquered foreign nation, as it did not have the legal right to secede in the first
place; rather it was a rebellious child that needed to be ingratiated back into the national
family:

We all agree that the seceded States, so called, are out of their proper practical
relation with the Union; and that the sole object of the government, civil and
military, in regard to those States is to again get them into that proper practical
relation. I believe it is not only possible, but in fact, easier to do this, without
deciding, or even considering whether these states have ever been out of the
Union, than with it. Finding themselves safely at home, it would be utterly
immaterial whether they had ever been abroad. Let us all join in doing the acts
necessary to restoring the proper practical relations between these states and the
Union.  

No mention of punishment, revenge, or vengeance invades Lincoln’s charitable
description. Lincoln’s vision to treat the South as a lost and rebellious child, not to be

53 Quoted in Aaron, 352.
54 Lincoln, 111.
condemned, but to be aided, began with the attack on Fort Sumter and remained the same until his death. Lincoln’s refusal to outright censure the South, either publicly or privately, is borne out by a diary entry of one of Lincoln’s old friends, Orville H. Browning. Browning noted in his diary that when he visited the President three months after Sumter, Lincoln “did not denounce the Confederates” for what had happened. Lincoln was indeed killed by one member of the very group he hoped to welcome back, after they had “[found] themselves safely at home.”

In the second line, Melville continues the parallel between Jesus and Lincoln. Like Jesus’ death, Lincoln’s assassination was not merely an act of vengeance by a misguided people, but a “crime,” an act both morally and legally outside acceptable social boundaries. In this sense, Lincoln’s death is brought from its transcendent realm back to an earthly one. For anyone who may not have believed in Lincoln’s divine calling, thereby entitling him to a martyr’s death, Melville provides another avenue, a second path that leads to the same conclusion: shock and defensible condemnation. Besides an act of martyrdom, John Wilkes Booth has at the very least committed murder, a “crime,” that is punishable in accordance to both law and justice. The act of assassination, though it may have led some to consider Lincoln a martyr, is still a “crime.”

Melville does not quickly abdicate the parallel between Lincoln and Christ. Rather he carries it through the entire opening stanza. Lincoln was “killed” in “his pity,” and like Jesus, Lincoln was killed “in his prime.” Christianity emphasizes the role that Jesus had in caring for his people, in pitying his people, even in their sins, and offering solace, performing dozens of miracles to relieve individual suffering; his great sacrifice at Gethsemane and Golgotha was punctuated with the very attribute that Melville uses to

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describe Lincoln’s behavior toward the conquered South, “clemency and calm:” “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

Melville does not leave these parallels to chance; he uses specific language that is reminiscent of the poem’s opening phrase, “Good Friday.” In lines six-seven, Melville again presents reminiscent language of Jesus Christ’s mission and sacrifice. Lincoln’s “clemency” and “kindness” was directed toward a specific purpose, a divine purpose that Melville is clear to delineate: “When with yearning he was filled/To redeem the evil-willed.” Like Jesus on the cross who came to redeem an “evil-willed” and fallen people, all humanity (according to Christians), and who pleads for forgiveness for his crucifiers in his final moments, Lincoln’s great mission was to save the very people who stooped so low as to have “killed him from behind.” By equating Lincoln’s assassination with Christ’s crucifixion, Melville sets up the necessary foundation for the second stanza. Melville’s parallel here is not without historical context and foundation. Ronald C. White affirms that on Easter Sunday, the day after Lincoln died, in churches throughout the nation, Lincoln was indeed “hailed” as “a savior who in his death shed his blood as an atonement for the sins of the nation.” The terrible calamity and the warning Melville provides in the second stanza and the poem’s closing lines could only be warranted by such a heinous crime as killing a savior whose “kindness” could transcend the role of “conqueror” and offer clemency to those whose “madness” and “blindness” would ultimately bring about his own death.

The warning stanza begins with a simple description of a nation in mourning: “There is sobbing of the strong,/And a pall upon the land.” Historically, as in turns out, Melville

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did not overstate the case. His is an apt description, as testified to by contemporary newspaper accounts of the President’s death. A correspondent for the New York Times, in writing an account of the Trial of the Assassins on May 29, 1865, referred to the “fiendish acts” and “diabolical crimes” of the conspirators, who not only planned the assassination of Lincoln and his cabinet, but also conspired to bring into “this city several packages of clothing, infected with yellow fever and smallpox, to be sold here indiscriminately.” Further yet, another New-York Times dispatch describes the citizens, “without any preconcert whatever” “draping their premises with festoons of mourning.” As in Melville’s poem, wherein “there is a sobbing of the strong,” the newspaper correspondent also noted that the “wide-spread” grief knew not the bounds of strength and weakness since according to his account, “strong men weep in the streets,” an amazing parallel of language that Melville utilized in his poem. In yet another dispatch of Friday, April 14th at 12:30 a.m., the correspondent noted the feverish atmosphere of the city, and the “profoundest sorrow” that accompanied the “many tears” shed for President Lincoln. Truly, Melville was precise in describing his poem as “indicative of the passion of the people on the 15th of April, 1865.”

Richard Lathers, a friend of Melville’s, was a Southern Democrat who had moved to New York City before the war and established the Great Western Marine Insurance Company. During the War, he supported the North, but remained friendly to the South, a situation that led others to suspect him of Southern sympathy. After Lincoln’s assassination, Lathers witnessed several violent attacks on others who were also thought

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Ibid., 332.
Ibid.
Ibid., 324.
Garner, 9.
to be Southern sympathizers or secessionists. He gave word to Southerners who might try to seek him out on the day that Lincoln’s body passed through New York City on the route to burial in Springfield to “lock themselves in their rooms for the day.” The popular outpouring of sympathy and that Melville devotes precious space in his collection to a poem detailing the “passions of the people” upon Lincoln’s death is all the more notable because Lincoln had not been a popular president and had many enemies, political and otherwise. Nathan W. Daniels noted in his diary on July 12, 1864 that “the old fellow [Lincoln] evinces no fear, although he is in great danger from enemies abroad and more particularly from the dastard secesh, who lurking as citizens in the rear, will not hesitate even at assassination to accomplish their plans.” Daniels’ assessment turned out to be exactly right. After a “dastard secesh” did kill Lincoln, he became more popular than ever, and “it was a rare person who did not mourn him.”

Following the descriptive lines of a nation in mourning is Melville’s dire warning about the North’s reaction to Lincoln’s death, which is, according to Stanton Garner, Melville’s primary interest in this poem, rather than any attempt to actually create the poem as a mourning tribute. Garner notes that the poem is a “warning against” the “transient emotions” of Northerners who wished to inflict vengeance in the direct aftermath. Garner is absolutely correct in his assessment of the poem as a warning, yet, the poem, like others in Battle-Pieces, is multi-layered. By creating such a sympathetic portrait of the president as “the compassionate president,” a perspective that Garner

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63 Quoted in Garner, 384.
64 In his last public address on April 11, 1865, Lincoln made mention of his detractors: “As a general rule, I abstain from reading the reports of attacks upon myself, wishing not to be provoked by that to which I can not properly offer an answer.” See Great Speeches, 110.
65 Diary of Nathan W. Daniels.
66 Garner, 383.
67 Ibid., 385.
ascertains is Melville’s own inclination and not just that of the narrator who speaks in the poem, he justifies the “transient emotions” at the same moment that he condemns them.\(^{68}\) That the speaker offers a stern warning to the South, that Lincoln’s grievers would succinctly enforce their victor status with an “iron hand,” reveals the speaker’s inclination to condemn the actions by tolling a warning knell.

The second interpretive possibility, however, that the people’s actions are justified, is a bit less obvious and rests solely upon the literary allusion that Melville creates, rather than any one specific word or group of words. The first stanza very directly likens Lincoln to Jesus Christ, a difficult allusion to miss. Christ’s killers were not exempt from the wrath of his supporters either. One disciple’s defense of Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane is a good example. When the chief priests came to arrest Jesus and “laid hands on Jesus, and took him…one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest’s, and smote off his ear.”\(^{69}\) Furthermore, according to New Testament accounts, the earth itself was subject to supernatural expressions of wrath after Christ had died on the cross.\(^ {70}\) Assassination, or even worse, killing the Son of God, is indeed a punishable offense, and by linking Lincoln to Christ, Melville, if ever so faintly, offers justification for the people’s anger.

The second and fourth stanzas are clear that the “people in their weeping” would not be inclined to offer the clemency that Lincoln himself had sought to offer, most notably in his First and Second Inaugural Addresses. Now the people would be in charge (and by extension their Congressional representatives, as the most direct representatives of the...
peoples’ will, who did indeed take over Reconstruction after Lincoln’s death.), and they would “Bare the iron hand.” The iron dome, representing Congress and the iron law they would espouse, would hand down its judgment. Contemporary newspaper accounts of Lincoln’s death exhibit rather clearly the early indications of the “iron hand” that the “people in their weeping” would bare.

Already in the evening, in the early hours of April 15th, Washington “present[ed] a scene of wild excitement, accompanied by violent expression of indignation,” and by the following day, according to a newspaper dispatch, that violent indignation had erupted into action. As an “intense feeling of sorrow” filled “all parts of the city,” anyone found demonstrating “the least disrespect to the memory of the universally lamented dead, [was] sure to find rough treatment.” The correspondent who filed the dispatch described in detail two such incidents of the people beginning to bare the iron hand in their weeping:

One of the long-haired wandering preachers, named TOMLINSON, and hailing from Buffalo, while speaking at a soldier’s camp, this afternoon, indulged in the remark that if the new President pursued Mr. LINCOLN’S policy he would meet Mr. LINCOLN’S fate in two weeks. He was immediately set upon by the soldiers, and only escaped severe bodily harm because he was at once arrested. In another case, a crowd of curious persons in front of the Provost-Marshal’s office, on Ninety-fourth-street, where were a number of rebel soldiers and parties brought in under arrest, became incensed at the remark of one of them about Mr. LILINCOLN, and set upon him in such a manner that his life was only saved by

71 McPherson, The Most Fearful Ordeal, 324.
72 Ibid., 349.
hustling him out of the back door and off to the Old Capitol, while JOHN B. HOLE and Gen. F.E. SPINNER made speeches to the crowd, and urged coolness and obedience to law.73

If John Brown was the Portent that brought the war, Lincoln’s death was the portent that brought the heavy hand of judgment upon the South.

After the first warning words in the second stanza, Melville cleverly follows up with an even more clear description of this martyr whose death will inspire such vengeance. Melville’s choice to break up the stanzas about Lincoln with the warning stanzas assures that any condemnation for the North’s “iron hand” is subdued beneath the greatness of the crime. Stanza three is a skillful interweaving of ideas internalized in “The Martyr,” as well as a grafting together of ideas found elsewhere in Battle-Pieces, providing sturdy evidence that Cox was correct when he wrote that “Melville seems to construe his own book as a poetic substitute for the great speeches of the magnanimous president whose voice had been silenced by a bullet fired by hate-inspired John Wilkes Booth.”74

The first line of stanza three is a grisly and disturbing image that lends added emotional strain to the entire stanza: “He lieth in his blood—.” The image certainly does not seem out of place or in any way antithetical to the overall theme of Battle-Pieces. In a book of war poetry, such an image is natural and expected. If taken out of “The Martyr” and placed elsewhere, in “Donelson” or “Armies of the Wilderness” or even in “Shiloh: A Requiem,” the image would be common and no doubt, though worthy of attention and sympathy, passed over as just one more description of a battle’s tragic consequences.

73 Ibid.

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When read in its full context, however, the line jumps out as a brutal and vicious result of hate-driven "madness" and "blindness." Here is not a soldier killed in action, but the legally elected leader of a nation built on principles naturally abhorrent to the assassination of the people's elected representatives, which was a "crime." This action was uninspired by bravery or true devotion to liberty's cause, having instead been committed in cowardly fashion, "from behind." Lincoln's killer did not face him on honorable terms, as soldiers faced each other on the battlefields, with a healthy respect for each other, many officers having served together in the Federal army before the war started. The image Melville creates of Lincoln prostrate, helpless in his own blood is a deep reminder that his killer was indeed "evil-willed," the martyr covered in blood shed not in pursuit of honorable means, but in uninspired "madness." The irony of the line, of course, is that Lincoln's blood becomes some of the last to be shed in the pursuit of his own goal—that no more of America's blood, physical and metaphorical, including that of slaves, would be spilled. Also, it is appropriate, perhaps, that Lincoln's blood should be mixed with nobody else's, unlike the war's many casualties, whose bodies were often piled together for mass burial. Lincoln alone directed the war and died alone, ultimately giving his life as the final sacrifice, a "martyr," according to Melville, for the cause to which he had remained so constant.

The ghastly portrait that this first line paints follows immediately after the warning at the end of the second stanza: "Beware the People weeping/When they bare the iron hand." The following up of these dire lines with the grisly image of the fallen President, one who in the first stanza was likened to Jesus Christ, serves to weaken the intensity of the warning, almost providing justification for the North's anger. The emotion that might
have triggered a reaction to the closing lines of the second stanza, “Beware the people weeping/When they bare the iron hand,” is instead re-directed toward the image in the following line: “He lieth in his blood—.” And this emotion is not denunciation at the people’s use of an “iron hand” in retribution for their murdered president; instead, the emotional response is pity, grief, horror, and anger at the murderers, not their judges. Just as the opening stanza to “The Martyr” very specifically identifies the fallen Lincoln with the Christ, thereby downplaying the second and fourth stanzas, so too does the first line in the third stanza continue to downplay the harshness in stanzas two and four.

The third stanza continues to magnify the parallel from the first paragraph, while adding something more—contemporary associations already identified with Abraham Lincoln. The stanza’s second line is significant for at least two reasons: “The father in his face.” First, the use of “father” here adds another layer to the Christian allusion. Lincoln was indeed a fascinating figure because his reputation was so diverse and scattered. On the one hand he was the “the Ourang-Outang at the White House,” the man who inspired hate and ill-will throughout the South.75 He was also the man whose suspension of habeas corpus caused some to shudder at his expansion of presidential powers and his consolidation of Constitutional power into the executive. Yet, he was also the man to whom many looked as a sympathetic listener, one who cared about the needs and plights of average Americans. Lincoln’s status as a father is a natural one, as he was the male head and leader of the country. However, Melville’s reference likely goes beyond that general statement of father of the nation to something deeper and connects the poem to a very tangible historical reality.


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Lincoln was often referred to by his contemporaries as Father Abraham, from Harriet Beecher Stowe to other less famous Americans, soldiers and non-combatants alike. Stowe, in a letter written to Annie Adams Fields in November, 1862 told of her trip to Washington to meet with various public officials, including Abraham Lincoln:

I am going to Washington to see the heads of departments myself, and to satisfy myself that I may refer to the Emancipation Proclamation as a reality and a substance, not a fizzle out at the little end of the horn, as I should be sorry to call the attention of my sisters in Europe to any such impotent conclusion. . . . I mean to have a talk with 'Father Abraham' himself, among others.76

Another Northern supporter, this time a soldier named Osbom Hamiline Oldroyd, noted in his diary that in contrast to the “rebel authorities” who “have made numerous drafts for young and old, to refill their ranks” and who have “by conscription and terrorism . . . forced into the field every available man,” the North did not have to resort to such measures. Instead, “the old song, ‘We are Coming, Father Abraham, Three Hundred Thousand More,’ is being sung there yet, with good will, and volunteers are still pouring in to fill up what may be lacking in our ranks. We can thus throw renewed forces against failing ones.”77 As one more example, in a letter written to Benjamin Franklin Butler in September, 1864, Erastus Wright utilized Lincoln’s familial title to express his support of Lincoln’s position on the slave question: “I had a talk recently with my old neighbor Father Abraham. I stand by him yet, although many of his best friends have their feelings alienated and wounded by his sympathy with slavery, as though there was any goodness

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in so Godless a wretch as a slaveholder.” Melville’s attribution of father to Lincoln was not an unusual technique, given the historical context in which Melville was working, but it is enormously significant.

The title Father Abraham, so used by many of Lincoln’s contemporaries, a title upon which Melville relies, accomplishes two very important agendas. The first is stated very well by David Herbert Donald. Donald has written of Lincoln’s great importance as he related to common Americans and his sympathy for their needs and situations: “Stories of Lincoln’s accessibility to even the humblest petitioner, his patience, and his humanity spread throughout the North.” Americans, perhaps more than at any other time, now felt that the President truly did represent them. No doubt, as James M. McPherson has pointed out in “How Lincoln Won the War With Metaphor,” Lincoln’s ability to relate to average Americans, thereby enlarging his capacity to act as a father figure for many, was greatly aided by his aptitude for telling stories, many of them taking for their context rural landscapes, people, and animals. In one of his earliest political forays, a seat in the Illinois state legislature for the 1832 session, Lincoln could be found amongst the common voters. He “spun yarns in country stores, pitched horseshoes with voters, and declaimed his sentiments from boxes and tree stumps.” Although some Americans found Lincoln’s propensity for telling stories to illustrate more important and serious matters troubling, given his political position, Lincoln was undeterred. Chauncey Depew, a reputed lawyer and leader of the Republican Party in New York, related how Lincoln had once responded to the criticism of those who disapproved of his style of addressing

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78 Erastus Wright, Letter from Erastus Wright to Benjamin Franklin Butler, September 4, 1864, in Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, During the Period of the Civil War, vol. 5 (Springfield: Plimpton Press, 1917), 748.
80 Oates, 24.
serious matters: According to Depew, Lincoln once said to him: "I have found in the
course of a long experience that common people, common people take them as they run,
are more easily influenced and informed through the medium of a broad illustration than
in any other way, and as to what the hypercritical few may think, I don’t care." 81

Despite his many detractors, Lincoln certainly was able to endear himself to many
Americans, whether through his speaking style or something else, many of whom
"referred to him as Father Abraham, and they showered him with homely gifts: a firkin of
butter, a crate of Bartlett pears, New England salmon." 82 In a very poignant illustration of
the Lincoln who deserved such loyalty, Donald recounts that much of the President’s
time when he first arrived in Washington was spent meeting with visitors and “office
seekers.” From early in the morning until late at night the White House was open to
visitors. Sometimes there were so many that “it was impossible to climb the stairs.” At
one point President Lincoln “sadly” explained his willingness to visit with each person to
Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson: These people “don’t want much and don’t get but
little, and I must see them.” 83 Did Melville overstate the case when describing Lincoln as
having “the father in his face”? Probably not, historically at least.

The second significant element of the Father Abraham title, to which Melville
undoubtedly alluded in “The Martyr,” is the allusion to which that title itself refers.
Abraham, as one of the great figures in the Old Testament, has a tremendous genealogical
significance. From his line, over which he presides both metaphorically and physically,
come many of the other prominent figures in Judaism and Christianity. In Melville’s
poem, with its parallels to Jesus Christ, the genealogical line most relevant is the one

83 Ibid., 11.
which culminates in Jesus’ birth. According to Old and New Testament accounts, Abraham’s posterity, as it figures into the coming of Jesus Christ, is a direct line from Abraham to Judah to King David to Jesus, with several generations in between.\(^4\) By drawing upon a real title given to Lincoln, one that had its own symbolic meaning, Melville further identifies the martyred president with Jesus Christ by bringing to mind the original Father Abraham’s messianic lineage.

The third line in the stanza, which follows the “father” image, provides a wonderful link both intrinsic to the poem and extrinsic as it connects this poem and the overall themes to those of others in *Battle-Pieces*: “They have killed him, the Forgiver.” First, Melville deliberately distorts one historical fact. Lincoln was not killed by a group, as was Caesar, though several people were involved in the plot. He was killed by the bullet from one man’s gun—John Wilkes Booth. A mistake on Melville’s part? Clearly, that explanation is unlikely, since Booth and his conspiracy was a well-publicized event and Lincoln was assassinated in front of witnesses, leaving no doubt that he was killed by a single person. Why then does Melville, or his created narrator, use “them” both in the first and the third stanzas? Garner notes that in so doing, Melville extends the “crime” not just to the assassin but the entire South as well.\(^5\) Certainly Booth, as a disillusioned and partisan Southern supporter who hated Lincoln, could very well stand as the South’s unreconstructed symbol, so Melville’s extension of blame for Lincoln’s demise is not unusual. It is, however, significant for the greater truth for which Melville strives in the poem, which is encompassed in the last two words of the third line—“the Forgiver.”

\(^5\) Garner, 386.
As in the first stanza, Melville strongly likens Lincoln to Jesus Christ. Jesus, of course, is for Christians the embodiment of forgiveness, his death having been the culminating act that makes forgiveness possible, unconditional forgiveness that is offered even to those who killed him, evidenced by his words, noted above, on the cross: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” So too did Lincoln offer forgiveness to those who had wronged a nation and caused the deaths of so many thousands, without absolving the South of their responsibility for having created the violent hostility. In the First Inaugural Address, Lincoln is very clear that he would not be responsible for having brought on the hostilities.

In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to “preserve, protect and defend” it. His original draft was even more pronounced in its language, but was later edited at the advice of Secretary Seward. In this first draft, Lincoln made the consequences even more clear, war or peace, and did so by asking a very direct question that required a response: “In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow country men, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war...With you, and not with me, is the solemn question of ‘Shall it be peace, or a sword?’” Still, though Lincoln would not allow the South to slip away from its responsibility in not averting the conflict, he nonetheless offered forgiveness. In one

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87 Lincoln, 61.
of the most famous passages in all of Lincoln’s writings, the Second Inaugural Address,
Lincoln outlined exactly what his vision of Reconstruction would be:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God
gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up
the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his
widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and
lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.89

The image of Lincoln as the Forgiver in Melville’s poem is strengthened by the extension
of his assassination to the entire South, to “them” instead of just John Wilkes Booth. That
“they,” all of those to whom Lincoln had turned his charitable vision, would “kill him"
adds justification to the second and fourth stanzas.

Melville’s use of “the Forgiver” here is also important because it links this poem, and
Lincoln’s shadow, to another poem that contains the same polarized tension. The closing
lines of “The Swamp Angel” serve a similar purpose as the third line in the third stanza
serves in “The Martyr”: “They have killed him, the Forgiver—” The connection between
the poems is clear, Melville having used the same phrasing for the same idea. “Who
weeps for the woeful City/Let him weep for our guilty kind;/Who joys at her wild
despairing—/Christ, the Forgiver, convert his mind.” At this point in “The Swamp
Angel,” the voice of retribution has already “crumbled” the “walls” of Charleston and the
Southern institutions for which Southerners fought and died. Michael, the “warrior one”
has fled. The guns have been silenced by the coming of the Forgiver. No longer is war
the appropriate means for achieving a “lasting peace.” War has done its job, perhaps, but
it still cannot overpower the greater force exerted by Christ, the Forgiver. In fact, war is a

89 Lincoln, 107-108.
necessary evil, at best, a point that Melville emphasizes in both "Armies of the Wilderness" and "Conflict of Convictions." In the former, Melville observes that war destroys the very foundations of civilization. In their warpath, armies have disgraced the church by "snug[ing] their huts with the chapel-pews." The courthouses "stable their steeds." Law and order is overturned since the soldiers "kindle their fires with indentures and bonds" and "old Lord Fairfax's parchment deeds." Even knowledge and learning is not exempt from war's destruction, "And Virginian gentlemen's libraries old—/Books which only the scholar heeds—/Are flung to his kennel." Nature, heretofore tames by humanity is allowed to recede to a more primitive state, "And gardens are left to weeds."

So also in "The Swamp Angel," where Charleston's walls are "crumbled," its halls having been "sapped," a more primitive state thrives as "weed follows weed through the Town." The primitive weeds have replaced the more civilized walls, halls, and portals. War does not accentuate humanity's goodness. In its wake, "turned adrift... Man runs wild on the plain/Like the jennets let loose/On the Pampas—zebras again."\(^{90}\) War is indeed a necessary evil that cannot be lauded in and of itself. God abhors war, as it is the realm of Moloch and Belial, but it must sometimes be utilized to obtain a greater purpose. In short, sometimes the very tool that is used to obtain a purpose is the tool that in other circumstances would be shunned because of its antagonistic qualities. Such is the difficult paradox that Melville recognizes in "The Conflict of Convictions:" "I know a wind in purpose strong—/It spins against the way it drives." War is an "ordered fury," ambiguous at best and full of contradictory complexities.\(^{91}\) Consequently, the destroyer and those who would exult in the destruction require a forgiveness that only Christ himself can

\(^{90}\) "Armies of the Wilderness."
\(^{91}\) See "Battle for the Bay."
give. In “The Martyr” Melville appropriates the philosophy of “The Swamp Angel” and gives it real import. Lincoln exemplified Melville’s own call for magnanimity in “The Swamp Angel,” and in applying the same title to Lincoln that he applied to Christ, the Forgiver, Melville solidifies the connection between the two poems.

Because Melville’s own mind tended toward reconciliation, both “The Swamp Angel” and “The Martyr” are structured so as to illustrate that only in forgiveness is true peace to be found. The title of the Forgiver is endowed to Christ in “The Swamp Angel” and Lincoln in “The Martyr” only after Melville depicts the situation and circumstances that would most require the Forgiver’s presence. Again, the philosophy of “The Swamp Angel” finds its personification in Lincoln, whose shadow loomed over Reconstruction, as it was his vision that Melville sought to achieve throughout Battle-Pieces and made especially plain in the Supplement. Moreover, with “The Martyr” Melville has an opportunity to even further elevate Lincoln’s status as the exemplar to follow in addressing the mounting problems that occurred after his death. Forgiveness follows the destruction of Charleston in “The Swamp Angel,” and literally it is the exulting over the destruction that the Forgiver denounces. The situation is slightly different in “The Martyr” but no less poignant. The Forgiver follows after the ghastly image of the Forgiver’s own death: “He lieth in his blood.” The sin in need of forgiveness is the assassination. A nation must be willing to forgive the South its “crime,” and the example of ultimate forgiveness is the very man whose death requires that forgiveness. The country was reminded in “The Martyr” of the higher ideals that would be required of them, ideals that Lincoln espoused and explained in so much of his public language.
Melville did not, however, stop his moral lesson with the assassination. Not only would forgiveness be required for that one sin, but the South would not be alone in its need for atonement. The poem ends with the same injunction leveled in stanza two: “Beware the People weeping/When they bare the iron hand.” Though the Christ-like images began the poem, they will not end it. What ends the poem is the very opposite of the Christian “pity” and “clemency” that Lincoln has heretofore exhibited on his path to becoming a martyr. Why? Why not end the poem like “The Swamp Angel”? Why not promote a conciliatory tone at the end as the last projection toward a final reconciliation presided over by Lincoln’s magnanimous presence? Melville was unwilling to give carte-blanche optimism in *Battle-Pieces* as a whole or in individual poems, instead “evoking a wistful, uneasy, subdued tone” because his own contemporary situation still resonated with the “changeless hearts” that had caused the original hostility. Even after the passions of April 15th had calmed down, as Melville clarified in his note on the poem, the “iron hand” of the North had not. Many in the North were unwilling to forgive their Southern neighbors for the atrocities which resulted from the war. William Dean Howells criticized Melville’s collection, using the North’s “iron hand” for part of his harsh criticism: “If the Rebels were as pleasingly impalpable as those the poet portrays, we could forgive them without a pang, and admit them to Congress without a test-oath of any kind.” As it stood, however, with Howells anyway, the “pang” was too sharp to even consider forgiveness. Because “The Martyr” ends with the “iron hand” of the North ready to exert its judgment, Lincoln and his reconciling policy stay within the poem, a haunting

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pessimism that Melville's entire collection exudes. But the example of Lincoln is still there, even if overshadowed.

Though the final stanza projects its gloom into the future, it has lost some of its force because Melville has already countered its words, having placed the original warning, of which the last stanza is merely a repeat, in between two stanzas that are overpowering in their suggestions for charity and clemency. By following the first warning about the "iron hand," the rule of law to shortly fall upon the South, with the image of the Forgiver, Melville suggests that something deeper, more universal is required to counter that law. Laws by themselves will not create the means to reunify. Such a position is not new to "The Martyr." "The Portent" also suggests the inadequacy of law to administer true justice with its doubtful pronouncement that John Brown's hanging was "(such the law)." Also, the Swamp Angel even with his blasting voice is not enough to bring unity to Charleston. What is needed in the end is forgiveness, divine action, not legal action. Only divine forgiveness can upright the "crumbling walls" of Charleston. Constitutional amendments and provisional governments will not "bind up the nation's wounds."

Lincoln fulfills the role of countering the North's iron hand in the second stanza, as he reappears as the Forgiver in stanza three. By ending the poem with the same warning about the "iron hand," Melville has left the situation open, as it indeed was in 1866, as Lincoln was dead, almost as if to question whether or not the nation's citizens would follow Lincoln's example when they had finished the poem with their own historical stanza. Lincoln had "redeemed the evil-willed," could "the People" do the same now that he was gone?

94 Ibid., 329.
The tension created by the forces of good and evil in "The Martyr" is achieved not only by painting Lincoln as a Christ-figure; the poem also relies on certain structural tools and dictional turns for its successful rendering of emotional play between opposing forces. Melville describes three different figures in the poem, all with differing characteristics: Lincoln, his killers, and the People. Notably, Lincoln, except in the title, is not introduced immediately. Line three is the first mention of Lincoln and his killers, but the killers are presented first: "When they killed him in his pity, When they killed him in his prime." Attention is first focused on the killers. Only after they are named is the object of that murderous behavior described. Lincoln not being described first, in his "pity" and in his "prime," is strange if the poem is in fact about him, at least to some degree, and designed to evoke sympathy for him, which it certainly seems to do, given the obvious parallel to Jesus Christ. Why does Melville choose to structure his lines in this way instead of flipping them around? By first focusing on the killers, Melville does not detract from the previous line that described the act as a "crime." To have followed with Lincoln's attributes would have been to counteract the wave of indignation created by the nature of the act. Instead Melville builds on that indignation through deliberately positioning Lincoln's killers before him in the poetic line.

After the killers have been introduced, Lincoln himself is brought to the fore, but significantly, in contrast to the killers, who are given no real identifying attributes, being defined only by this one action that contains no qualification, no justification, Lincoln is aptly described with strong characteristics that naturally carry with them sympathetic connotations. Unlike "kill" which needs qualifiers to be praiseworthy, "pity," "clemency" and "calm" need no qualification. Melville elevates Lincoln to a position of transcendent
height from which he can peer down on the very base acts of his murderers, they having been given no magnificent or divine purpose for having committed their "blind" and "mad" deed. It is, after all, only a "crime."

The fourth line contains an interesting inter-textual allusion that sheds further light on Melville’s own philosophy about the war and its participants. As already discussed, Lincoln was committed to union, a position that Melville often describes as the “Right.” For the close reader, Melville adds one more buttress to this argument in the fourth line of the first stanza: “When they killed him in his prime.” Though the final word “prime” may have been chosen in order to rhyme with “crime” in line two and also to alliterate with “pity” from line three, it also serves a more important function. Melville certainly could have chosen another word, and he was assuredly not concerned about maintaining any particular rhythmic structure, which is what concerned some of his contemporary reviewers, one of whom declared, “He has written too rapidly to avoid great crudities. His poetry runs into the epileptic. His rhymes are fearful.” Melville must have had something else in mind when he chose to use “prime” to describe Lincoln, a word that does not fit very well with the others. Each of the other words used to depict Lincoln are indicative of character traits. Only “prime” is out of place in giving a relatively tangible description. Why use such a word that appears so out of sync with the others?

On a purely literal level, the word increases sympathy for the fallen president by implicitly suggesting the possibilities of his character and leadership which are now dead. One meaning of prime, and the one most often associated with people, is “the most active, thriving, or successful stage or period (as of one’s life).” As such, Lincoln, having been cut down “in his prime,” had he lived could have accomplished so much more and

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95 Higgins and Parker, 513.
presided very effectively, as the Forgiver, over a difficult and chaotic period of America's life. The killers then, killed not only one man, but they also annihilated tremendous possibilities for a more peaceful and "forgiving" Reconstruction. The second possible reason for Melville to have used "prime" to describe Lincoln is that in using that word specifically, Melville links the poem to two other poems in *Battle-Pieces*, thereby endowing the word with yet more interpretive layers.

In addition to suggesting the most active and fruitful stage of life, "prime" can also mean "the earliest stage of something," which is how Melville first uses the word quite literally in "Conflict of Convictions." In this poem, the word appears in a parenthetic segment: "(The poor old Past,/The Future's slave,/She drudged through pain and crime/To bring about the blissful Prime,/Then—perished. There's a grave!)." Here Melville makes reference to an earlier time that was "blissful," a time that was worth tremendous "pain" and "drudgery." Yet that beginning, which was deliberately sought, only brings about the death of the "poor old Past." Melville's use of "Prime" in this poem suggests in fact the earliest of humanity's existence, Eden, before man's fall into a life of "pain and crime," and certainly long before "man's latter fall," the Civil War, a situation that will never again achieve that Prime because the effort will only result in death before the end is achieved. In short, although the Past, Melville's and America's Past with its hope for democracy, its republican government, the "Founder's Dream," may attempt to regain that "blissful Prime," a time before the "goblin-mountain" simmered beneath "Solidity's crust," the attempt will fail. And indeed, even that past is still "Future's slave," itself irrecoverable because it must always be tied to Future events, in this case, the war and all its destruction. In "The Martyr," then, Lincoln is associated with that
more “blissful Prime,” a time before evil entered men’s hearts and they “martyred” saints and presidents. This description of Lincoln, “in his prime,” when associated with the earlier usage in “Conflict of Convictions” further advocates Lincoln’s having deserved a martyr’s eulogy.

“Gettysburg” is the second poem to which Melville’s use of “prime” may refer. The word is prominent in this poem, as it occurs in the first line: “O PRIDE of the days in prime of the months.” Here Melville may be referencing the time of year in which the battle actually occurred, July, but the more significant point is the context of the poem in which it appears. The speaker in “Gettysburg” proceeds to give a vengeful account of the battle, always coming back to the primary point, which is that the North is God’s chosen side and the South is God’s enemy, by name the Philistine god Dagon. The South crumbled before the “sterner Pride” of the union line, just as Dagon fell before the Ark of the Covenant of ancient Israel. In this battle, Melville creates the classic Christian duality, with God on the side of Right or the North in this poem, and evil opposing Him. This battle that took place in the “prime of months” was not just any battle, but a battle where the line between Right and Wrong was clearly drawn. By associating Lincoln with this battle, through linguistic connection, Melville implicitly places Lincoln on God’s side, the God of “Gettysburg” who “walled Dagon’s power.” So too had Lincoln “in his prime” just as God did in “the prime of months” stood at the head of an army that “walled” the South’s power.

Structurally and dictionally, lines eight through eleven are significant in the clear differences they create between Lincoln and his enemies: “And, though conqueror, be kind:/But they killed him in his kindness,/In their madness and their blindness/And they
killed him from behind.” The most prominent sounds in these lines are the “k” consonance and the ending, “ness.” Again, as with his use of “prime,” Melville methodically chose to use words that have obvious linguistic connections. By using words that have the same opening consonant sound, one word that describes the assassins and one that describes Lincoln’s behavior toward those assassins, Melville distinctly creates two very different characters. The first is a group that “kills” a man who has striven to “redeem” the “evil-willed,” even though he had every reason to refuse this office, as he was the “conqueror.” On the other hand, Lincoln, unlike his killers is “kind.”

Attention, however, is not allowed to rest on Lincoln’s “kindness” because the opening consonant sound inevitably manipulates the focus and draws attention back to “killers.” Though Melville reiterates the malice of the assassins by repeating “killed” four different times in the first stanza, Lincoln ultimately triumphs as his alliterative attributes are greater, and more varied, though the consonance is identical. As such, Lincoln’s attributes are more memorable and certainly more interesting: clemency, calm, though conqueror, kind, kindness.

In addition to the consonance to describe Lincoln and the assassins, Melville also draws attention to three other words in the first stanza by repeating the “ness” suffix. The first “ness” word describes Lincoln, “kindness,” an attribute repeated from the previous line. What is more interesting, though, are the words that Melville chooses to emphasize because they rhyme with “kindness.” Added attention is a natural consequence of rhymed words, particularly when they are an unusual feature of a poem and not part of a pattern. Such is the case with “kindness,” “madness,” and “blindness.” That “kindness” was an apt description for Melville to have used for Lincoln needs no more explanation that what
has already been given above, but the final two words are fascinating because of what they suggest about Lincoln’s assassination.

“Madness” refers here, apparently, not to anger but to a mental deficiency. Plus, it also has a notable historical component as it relates to Lincoln’s death and more importantly to his assassin, John Wilkes Booth. Booth was a well-known actor and generally well-liked man. According to Michael W. Kauffinan, John Wilkes Booth “was a captivating person.” He was associated with and ran “in the highest social circles, with a roster of friends that included some of the most notable people of the era.” Significantly, “he was remembered fondly even by Unionists.” He loved nature, wrote poetry, “frolicked on the floor with his nieces and nephews,” and “practiced sign language in order to converse with a deaf poetess.” How was such a man capable of assassinating the president and plotting the deaths of other Cabinet members? One person who was present the night Lincoln was shot and who saw Booth fleeing the theater, after stopping on the stage for a dramatic pronouncement, reportedly “Sic simper tyrannis!” provided one very suggestive answer. Just as Booth rose to his feet after jumping out of the presidential box brandishing a knife, ticket agent Joseph Sessford recognized the man as Booth and exclaimed, “By God, then, is John Booth crazy?”

Sessford’s question must have summed up the thoughts of many people who knew Booth as a kind and gentle man, one not inclined toward the sort of crime that he had just committed. One plausible explanation could be, then, that he was not in his right mind, that in “madness” he had committed the crime. Whether or not Melville subscribed to Sessford’s immediate reaction is not as important as what the term “madness” suggests.

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97 Ibid., 8.
about the crime, a suggestion that Sessford’s instant response implicitly recognizes:

Lincoln’s assassination was a product of a mental defect, one which could neither be reasoned through nor fully explained. Lincoln, a man whose “clemency” and “calm” were firmly enshrined in his public addresses and his personal correspondence, explainable and always reasonable, was murdered by his very opposite, a man whose public and private behaviors, or so people remembered, so defied his defining moment, a moment governed not by reason but by mental defect.

The second word that Melville uses to describe Lincoln’s assassins is “blindness,” which differs from “madness” in one very important way. While madness is determined by mental instability, blindness is a clear physical weakness, though it also clearly has overtones of metaphorical blindness and inability to see truth or reality, as in the case of Oedipus. Equally significant to the obvious metaphorical reading, however, is the double denunciation that Melville offers the killers and their motives. The crime cannot be justified reasonably or materially. Rather the crime resulted from both mental and physical weakness. In short, Melville covers the totality of Lincoln’s killer and finds all areas wanting. Nothing justified the crime, neither reason nor material weakness.

Lincoln’s role as Forgiver, Father, and Reconciler, which Melville establishes in “The Martyr,” is maintained throughout Battle-Pieces, as he continues the mission that Lincoln did not have a chance to finish—to “bind up the nation’s wounds” and see the day when Lincoln’s vision for America would dawn, when the “better angels of our nature” would indeed prevail. David D. Vries and Hugh Egan have pointed out that the prose Supplement expresses the same ideal Lincoln advocated of “the need to move through the bitter recriminations of the war to reconciliation as a way of redeeming the awful blood
sacrifice of battle.⁹⁸ Their supposition might equally apply to Battle-Pieces as a whole, with the Supplement standing as a final plea for peace, daring to defy Northern opinion with its call for generosity toward the South instead of retribution.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ "The Entangled Rhyme: Melville & the Maze of War." see page 7.
CHAPTER 5

TO BIND UP THE NATION'S WOUNDS: MELVILLE IN LINCOLN'S SHADOW

Certainly "The Martyr" is the most obvious acknowledgement that Melville gives to Lincoln and his importance as both a practical and ideological leader whose influence would extend far beyond April 15, 1865. Lincoln's importance, however, does not begin and end with "The Martyr." Throughout Battle-Pieces and especially in the Supplement, which Andrew Hook has described as an "impressive" document, Melville retains Lincoln's philosophical and reconciliatory tones in important ways and stands directly in Lincoln's magnanimous shadow, at times becoming Lincoln's posthumous advocate.1 Indeed, A. Robert Lee claims that not only is the Supplement "one of the great Civil War addresses," it is "easily fit company for the oratory of Lincoln...."2 Joyce Sparer Adler has even gone so far as to assert that the voice in the Supplement seems more like Lincoln's than Melville's.3 While such an assertion fails to account for the Lincolnesque qualities to be found elsewhere in the collection besides the Supplement, Adler's comment is astute in that it does recognize Lincoln's presence, as did Lee's. Though Battle-Pieces does indeed contain many voices with differing opinions and political positions, as various critics have noted, many of the poems are significant for their

sometimes easy and sometimes reluctant appreciation for Southern courage, heroism, and above all their kinship with the North. A critic from National Quarterly Review noticed Melville’s non-partisan approach to his task, noting that Melville “has gone to his work without prejudice or passion, malice or ill-will.” Through his non-partisan praise, albeit grudging at times, Melville strives to provide a commonality amongst Northerners and Southerners, a connection that he hoped would ease the pain and suffering of Reconstruction and would as Carolyn Karcher has asserted, “guide the nation toward an understanding of the war and a policy of Reconstruction that could produce lasting peace and justice.”

Contrary to the critic who reviewed Battle-Pieces for the Springfield Republican who felt that Melville illustrated “hardly a broad enough grasp of the causes, purposes and results of the great struggle whose most marked events and personages the author has striven to commemorate in verse,” Melville may very well have understood the causes and purposes better than most of his contemporaries. Furthermore, in his grasp of the issues at hand, Melville continued Lincoln’s legacy of a union unbroken, a union based not only on political and legal foundations, but on personal, fraternal ones as well.

One of the first techniques Melville employs in the Supplement to build those fraternal foundations is to allow honor, courage, and renown to the South’s individual soldiers and officers, a technique that did not go unnoticed by a reviewer for the Portland Transcript: An Independent Family Journal of Literature, Science, News Etc. who paid particular attention to Melville’s willingness to praise the South’s heroes as well as the

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6 Higgins and Parker, 509-510.
North's: "The tone of the volume, while sufficiently patriotic, is not partisan, the author having an evident admiration of the courage and gallantry displayed by his rebellious countrymen, and carefully refraining from any expression that would add to the bitter memories of the contest." Though the South was "entrapped" into "support[ing]" a war whose "implied end" was to establish an "empire based upon the systematic degradation of man," the courage exhibited by those who fought should not be questioned. Instead that bravery is deserving of the highest possible praise, even Northern respect. In "spite" of a justifiable reproach in having waged a war for a fallen and degraded cause, "signal military virtues and achievements have conferred upon the Confederate arms historic fame, and upon certain of the commanders a renown extending beyond the sea—a renown which we of the North could not suppress, even if we would." In short, the world recognized the South's military prowess, and Northern defiance in recognizing that prowess would be to defy a judgment that extends beyond America's borders, the world "beyond the sea." Melville's assertion of Southern military success in the Supplement was not unique to the Supplement. Throughout Battle-Pieces, Melville constantly reminds his war-torn and partisan audience that courage is no respecter of uniform. Rather, courage amounts to more than the cause being pursued. Courage is the way in which the cause is pursued, and on this ground South and North were equally matched. Throughout Battle-Pieces, including the closing prose Supplement, Melville is unequivocally willing to applaud heroism wherever and in whomever he finds it. In this respect, as in others, Melville agrees with Lincoln who, according to Kenneth A. Bernard,

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7 Ibid., 522.
8 Ibid., 261.
9 Ibid.
would have "approved the spirit and the substance of Melville's essay [the Supplement].""11

After the attack on Fort Sumter, Northerners were "euphoric..., confident that the Union with its vast natural resources, its enormous superiority in manufactures, its 300 percent advantage in railroad mileage was bound to prevail."12 Lincoln, however, was not convinced that the North would defeat the South so easily. Having heard comparisons made between "Northern enterprise and endurance" and "Southern laziness and fickleness," Lincoln warned that Northerners and Southerners had identical roots and possessed "essentially the same characteristics and powers." Moreover, Lincoln cautioned against Northern arrogance and gave due respect to Southern pluck and courage: "Man for man the soldier from the South will be a match for the soldier from the North and vice versa."13

Like Lincoln, Melville at various points in Battle-Pieces is quick to recognize Southern courage. As Maurice S. Lee has observed, the philosophy underlying Melville's collection is not just another us vs. them attitude that defines the war as "a crusade in which God advocates the Union's cause and in which his righteous natural law must finally prevail."14 Furthermore, Ralph E. Hitt has posited that Melville's poetry is great and unique because, among other things, it does not depend on "sectional propaganda" for its effect.15 Hitt and Lee's comments are certainly justified in how Melville describes both North and South in "Donelson."

13 Ibid.
In “Donelson,” two storylines are juxtaposed against each other. The first is the from a civilian perspective as the townspeople anxiously wait in front of a bulletin board for news from the front. The second story is from the front itself, revealed through the news bulletins. The correspondent is on the front line and writes what he sees. The correspondent’s description of the two armies’ great collision is very much an unpartisan and non-sectional Lincoln-like tribute. “Donelson” is one of the few poems in which Melville really describes the war in any detail, and more importantly illustrates the individual and minute actions that soldiers are called upon to perform under the direst of circumstances. The dispatcher who sends reports back from the front describes the “crackle of skirmishing” that he hears. Into this musket fire, the dispatcher then sees the Union “lads creep[ing] round on hand and foot.” They fight from behind trees, taking “refuge” behind the tall trunks, occasionally finding an enemy who has chosen the same tree for cover. In one of the best descriptions in the poem of the give-and-take nature during a battle, Melville also conveys, through the eyewitness dispatcher, a grudging respect for both sides as they suffer through the grueling battle conditions: “They fight from behind each trunk and stone;/And sometimes, flying for refuge, one/Finds ‘tis an enemy shares the tree./Some scores are maimed by boughs shot off/In the glades by the Fort’s big gun./We mourn the loss of Colonel Morrison,/Killed while cheering his regiment on.” The skirmish has turned deadly for at least one officer, but the battle is far from over as the enemy continues to drive onward: “Their far sharpshooters try our stuff;/And ours return them puff for puff:/’Tis diamond-cutting-diamond work.” Though the speaker will later rejoice that “the earnest North/has elementally issued forth/To storm this Donelson,” for the moment, he is unable to restrain a reluctant respect that the
North and South's soldiers are evenly matched, as diamonds trying to cut diamonds, an impassable situation, as each is hardened almost to perfection. Melville's assessment and Lincoln's earlier one were not out of proportion with the attitudes of soldiers on the field. One Union officer wrote of his Southern opponents, "They are a valuable people, capable of a heroism that is too rare to be lost."¹⁶

Later, after indulging in a few lines of praise for Union bravery on the one hand and scorn for the Confederates who emerge as "ragamuffins" from the fort on the other, he again cannot help but admire the Confederate officers who "mingle" among the others. He observes that these "were men of face/And bearing of patrician race." Lest the dispatcher's words be mistaken as a mocking description of a Southern aristocracy, the speaker goes on to admire not only their physical appearance, their patrician faces, bearing, and gold lace, but also their character. To the speaker these officers mingling amongst the "ragamuffins" are "splendid in courage" as well as dress. The speaker has learned the truth that Lincoln tried to impress upon the arrogant boasters who assumed the South was filled with weak and craven Americans. The South is equal to the North in its tenacity and willingness to sacrifice all on the altar of their country.¹⁷

Melville is quick to take up the role of the bard to tell the stories of "splendid courage" exhibited by both North and South. His self-acclaimed role is described in a poem entitled "In the Turret." The poem is a tribute to sailors who "bore the first iron battle's burden/Sealed as in a diving-bell." By the end of the first stanza, Melville justifies his own writing of the poem and in a more general way describes his personal

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interest in praising courage, whether on land or sea, North or South: "What poet shall
uplift his charm,/Bold sailor, to your height of daring,/And interblend therewith the
calm,/And build a goodly style upon your bearing." *Battle-Pieces* is the answer to this
question. Melville is the charmed poet who will give account to soldiers' and sailors'
"height of daring," always remembering that it is not the cause that creates the heroes, but
the individuals who participate.

Melville's praise of Union soldiers is not surprising, being a unionist himself, but that
he equally praised heroism in Southern soldiers is vital to Melville's underlying
philosophical position in *Battle-Pieces* that tends toward reconciliation and magnanimity.

"Armies of the Wilderness" is undoubtedly a good example of Stanton Garner's
assessment of Melville in that "no other poet looked this closely at the ghastly truth of the
war."18 "Armies of the Wilderness" is indeed filled with "ghastly" depictions of war's
horrible truth. Perhaps it was this poem that prompted a contemporary critic in the
Philadelphia *Inquirer* to concede that although Melville's "versification is at times
uncouth," the "graphic power of the poet will cause the general reader to overlook and
forget these deficiencies."19 Such is the case in "Armies in the Wilderness," since even
the digging of earth-works to protect the army turns to a melancholy and haunting image
as soldiers "turned the reddish soil,/Like diggers of graves they bent." The image has an
ironic layer, of course, given the need for freshly dug graves after the Battle of the
Wilderness was over.

Into these misgiving images, Melville brings a Confederate prisoner who is quick to
declare that he is indeed a prisoner, not a deserter. After some good-humored and mild

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329.
19 Higgins and Parker, 514.
conversation between the Confederate and a Federal, the poet intrudes again in a four line italicized stanza, one of which follows each major stanza. The poet takes this opportunity to describe the Confederate’s character. He is indeed no common deserter. The poet remarks that he is one of “such brave ones, foully snared/By Belial’s wily plea/Were faithful unto the evil end—/Feudal fidelity.” While the poet’s compliment is undercut by the Confederate’s association with Belial, the poet still precedes that association with praise for the natural bravery that has been corrupted by some external force, and not just any force, but a supernaturally deceptive one. Perhaps only a demon so powerful as Belial could have tempted such bravery to pursue “the evil end.”

In a poem that appears later in the collection, “Rebel Color-bearers at Shiloh,” not only the poet recognizes Southern bravery, but Melville’s notes indicate that the poem depicts an event that actually happened at Shiloh wherein Northern soldiers acknowledged the tremendous courage they saw exhibited by the Southern color-bearers. The incident was reported in a newspaper account later recorded in the Rebellion Record, a chronological war record containing newspaper articles, among other documentation, which Melville consulted while composing Battle-Pieces. Melville quotes the following lines from the story:

Under cover of the fire from the bluffs, the rebels rushed down, crossed the ford, and in a moment were seen forming this side the creek in open fields, and within close musket-range. Their color-bearers stepped defiantly to the front as the engagement opened furiously; the rebels pouring in sharp, quick volleys of musketry, and their batteries above continuing to support them with a destructive
fire. Our sharpshooters wanted to pick off the audacious rebel color-bearers, but Colonel Stuart interposed: “No, no, they’re too brave fellows to be killed.” Melville aptly describes the scene, as “the color-bearers facing death/White in the whirling sulphurous wreath,/Stand boldly out before the line.” Immediately Melville pays tribute to these brave men who show their colors proudly in the midst of the leaden hailstorm. Certainly these opening lines would have been enough to endear their courage to friends and enemies alike, but as might be expected of an imaginative poet, Melville goes further than the story in the Rebellion Record. He enfolds the color-bearers in their battle-flags which blowing in the wind have wrapped around them as a “divine flame.” These divine and “living robes are only seen/Round martyrs burning on the green.” This voice seems miles away from the staunch unionist flavor that dominates so many of the other poems. While it is true that Melville is quick to qualify that the martyrs have been “martyrs for the Wrong,” they are nevertheless martyrs, and he never allows the wrongness of the cause to detract from the courage the color-bearers exhibited during the fighting at Shiloh.

Melville goes on in the Supplement to give an even greater compliment to the South by paying tribute to the character of Southerners, not just their military excellence. In their “personal character” many Southern leaders require “forebearance” and demand that the North “refrain from disparaging.” Further, there are some Confederate characters that the North “can respect,” even if they do so “with more or less reluctance.” By encouraging Northern sympathy for Southerners’ “attachment” to their own family, ties, and heroes, as Dowling suggests, Melville “allow[s] merit” to Southern soldiers, which
was unique among Melville’s contemporary poets, according to Hitt. Melville dedicates
at least two poems to one man to whom Southerners had a very strong tie and
attachment—Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson.

As noted earlier, Melville dedicates only a handful of poems to specific people. Of
these, two are devoted to the great Confederate hero, General Jackson. The two poems
follow one after the other, and they are from opposing perspectives. The first is close to
what might be expected in a collection that overwhelmingly favors unionism and the
Northern cause.

The man who fiercest charge in fight,

Whose sword and prayer were long—

Stonewall!

Even him who stoutly stood for Wrong,

How can we prise? Yet coming days

Shall not forget him with this song.

Dead is the Man whose Cause id dead,

Vainly he died and set his seal—

Stonewall!

Earnest in error, as we feel;

True to the thing he deemed was due,

True as John Brown or steel.

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20 See Paul M. Dowling, “Melville’s Quarrel With Poetry,” *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*,
Herman Melville (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2001), 339 and Hitt, 64.
Relentlessly he routed us;

But we relent, for he is low—

Stonewall!

Justly his fame we outlaw; so

We drop a tea on the bold Virginian’s bier,

Because no wreath we owe.

The speaker asks how it is possible to praise a man who so “stoutly stood for Wrong.” He notes that just as Jackson himself is dead, so is the Cause for which he “vainly died.” Though he was “earnest in error,” the fact remains that he was in error. His cause was Wrong, thereby permitting only a “tear on the bold Virginian’s bier,” since “no wreath” is “owe[d].” While the speaker’s reluctance to grant Jackson more than a passing tear is evident, the reluctance overlays a certain respect if not for the man’s cause, for the man himself. After all, he is worthy of at least a tear, and the speaker admits that though he is dead, “coming days/Shall not forget him with this song.” The speaker himself has immortalized Jackson with his words and does not apologize for his boldness in recognizing a symbol of Southern rebellion, courage, and defiance.

Melville could certainly have let this one poem stand for Jackson’s famous courage, but he does not. The Northern point of view is countered by a speaker who unabashedly defends Jackson’s heroic status and finds nothing wanting. The speaker voices exactly the sort of perspective that Southerners truly did attach to Jackson. John Esten Cooke, a Southern poet, referred to Jackson as the “greatest of generals.” Cooke further described Jackson as

a true ‘soldier of the Cross’ no less than the valiant leader of our armies—and in
his person centre the most conspicuous virtues of the patriot and the Christian.
They speak of his eccentricities, his awkwardness, his shy odd ways, and many
singularities. Let these be granted. There is beneath all this in the soul of the man,
a grandeur and nobility, a childlike purity and gracious sweetness, mingled with
the indomitable will, which make him what I call him—a real hero.22

Shortly after Jackson’s funeral, the Southern Illustrated News published an account of
Jackson and the South’s love for the war hero and described him as “one of the most
remarkable men of his time.”23 Jackson, according to the Southern Illustrated News, was
in the company of such men as “Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Frederick, Napoleon” and
“among these heroes Jackson will take his place when the Plutarch of the future shall
chronicle the Lives of this Nineteenth Century.”24 Melville did not exaggerate the
Southern perspective in the second of his Stonewall poems, which he notes is “ascribed
to a Virginian.”

To begin, the second poem is much longer than the first. The Southerner is given
seven stanzas to the Northerner’s three, probably because the Southern speaker needs
more room to follow Jackson’s career and has more to praise than the Northerner does.
The speaker details Jackson’s rising career and names specific places where Jackson’s
strategic genius routed the Federal army, from Manassas, to Fredericksburg, to the
Wilderness, and finally to his own death by accidental friendly fire at Chancellorsville.
Melville allows Americans to see what the South saw in Jackson and provide a reason

22 Ibid., 49-50.
Originally printed in 1864 in Richmond in a booklet entitled The War and Its Heroes.
24 Ibid., 189.
why they might also come to an understanding of if not their cause, since many will in years to come be “puzzled by Stonewall’s star,” their devotion to that cause. Jackson has a “great soul,” a representative of the South’s “great soul,” and his willingness to “follow his star” to his death is why the North must recognize the “historic fame” and “renown” that has been “conferred upon the Confederate arms,” a “renown extending beyond the sea—a renown which we of the North could not suppress, even if we would.”

Though Melville knows that “much of doubt in after days/Shall cling, as now, to the war,” about one thing he has no doubt: that soldiers and “great Captains on both sides” struggled bravely in following their individual stars, just as Stonewall did. Melville is constant in his willingness and ability to separate the political from individual lives, memories, and social ties, setting aside the different causes for which the soldiers fought and merely recognizing their acts of charity without reservation or qualification. As a more reconciling voice emerges throughout the collection, the distinction between the Southern people and the cause they supported becomes more and more clear.

In his ability to recognize charity without regard to cause or side, as in his merit toward Southern courage, Melville reposes in Lincoln’s shadow. In his crucial work, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, David S. Reynolds cites this non-partisan attitude toward bravery and loyalty as vital to the collection’s overall importance to Civil War writing: “*Battle-Pieces* remains (with Whitman’s *Drum Taps*) the most powerful poem about the Civil

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25 See the Supplement page 261.
26 See “Stonewall Jackson II” and “A Meditation.”
war precisely because Melville is able to take a broadly sympathetic overview of martyrdom and victory on both sides...28

The merit that Melville allows Southerners is not reserved for military exploits alone. Southerners are given the greatest of all qualities by Melville—humanity, both in its ability to inflict pain and in its ability to then assuage that consequential suffering. At Donelson, after so many "heedless boys" have been "nipped liked blossoms" and lay freezing in the "snow-drifted" and "dense underbrush," some having managed to "crawl in crippled plight" into the underbrush for cover, then dying in "stiffened" positions, Melville offers a surprising commentary on the battle's aftermath. Unlike Shiloh where the dead and dying are left only to the swallows, here there are caretakers to find the wounded among the stiffened dead. Those humane saviors are not Union nurses or medics, however. They are Confederates: "Some of the wounded in the wood/Were cared for by the foe last night." Though Melville, through the poem's narrator, still refers to them as foes, their actions belie that description and instead give a moment of human connectivity that strongly parallels the closing lines in "Shiloh: A Requiem": "Foemen at morn but friends at eve." Indeed in the eve at Fort Donelson, foemen have not only become friends, but succoring saviors to their suffering countrymen.29 One critic noted that there is "no better example of active sympathy" anywhere in Battle-Pieces than that which occurs between these Southern saviors at Donelson.30

29 As noted in a previous chapter, various instances of care given to enemy combatants were indeed a reality. The most famous example being Richard Kirkland at Fredericksburg whose acts of mercy earned him the title Angel of Marye's Heights.
Melville’s belief in the overpowering force of charity and human kindness in moments of great strife is reinforced by the poem that closes *Battle-Pieces*, “A Meditation.” As the war ends in the book, Melville, through the poem’s narrator, reflects on the events he has recorded, on the causes, the cost, and the future, and whether or not the gains have been worth the price paid. The seventh stanza contains a story much like the one found in “Donelson” and very much like the true story of Confederate Richard Kirkland, the Angel of Marye’s Heights at the Battle of Fredericksburg who risked his life to carry water to the Union wounded left on the battlefield:

And pale on those same slopes, a boy—/
A stormer, bled in noon-day glare;
No aid the Blue-coats then could bring,
He cried to them who nearest were,
And out there came ’mid howling shot and shell
A daring foe who him befriended well.

Suggestively, Melville uses the word foe here as in “Donelson” at roughly the same moment. The paradox that Melville creates in “Donelson” and in “A Meditation” with the word “foe” at odds with the actions of that “foe” is a brilliant set-up for the Lincoln-like philosophy Melville reveals in the lines that follow the word’s use in “Donelson”: “Some of the wounded in the wood/Were cared for by the foe last night.”

Though the preceding lines have contained descriptions of what happens when civilization is swallowed up by war and humanity is replaced by mechanized brutality, Melville starkly reminds the nation that at least one single hope for reconcile,

31 Though Dowling in "Melville’s Quarrel With Poetry" asserts that Lincoln’s speeches disappear from the poems, the succeeding examples indicate that the philosophy of Lincoln’s speeches can indeed be found in the poetry and not just in the Supplement.
forgiveness, and reunion still exists. Whether foe or friends, these soldiers are human, and even though their actions have forced some to leave their comrades “in their fame,/Red on the ridge in icy wreath/And hanging gardens of cold Death,” that humanity is still alive and able to see beyond a cause to what lay beneath the political and social turmoil, the very real human lives that became a costly sacrifice to their respective causes. Melville’s assessment is not altogether devoid of historical reality, as Richard Kirkland exemplifies, and he was not an isolated example. During the Battle of Gettysburg wounded soldiers from both sides took refuge in people’s homes and “compassionate citizens gave them their beds, and when those were filled, their floors.” In this difficult time, “most followed the Golden Rule in aiding Confederates, wanting to believe that their own sons would be well treated should they fall on Southern soil.”

Like the citizens of Gettysburg, in Melville’s poem, although those who themselves were “in shivering plight” and “could do [the wounded] little needed good,” they still did their best to comfort the wounded through a very cold night because they could sympathize on the most basic of levels: “The rebel is wrong, but human yet.” The most curious element, beyond attributing human attributes to the enemy, in this crucial line is the last word.

The speaker, perhaps Melville himself in writing during the difficulties and chaos engulfing the country in the war’s aftermath, after extending a heartfelt hope that magnanimity still exists, having just witnessed a very tangible example of it, is not convinced that this merciful act will transfer to an entire nation. Yes, at this exact moment in time, the “foe” is human, but he may not remain human, and indeed by the time “Gettysburg: The Check” appears in Battle-Pieces the foe is not human, at least not

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for the speaker in that poem. The foe had become a pagan god, devoid of human feeling or connectivity. Clearly the two poems have two very different speakers, as do the various poems in *Battle-Pieces*, forming a “democratic consensus,” which certainly provides a window into the various voices that Melville was hearing in his own social and political circles. As such, the voice in “Donelson” could still argue for the humanity of all Americans while the other in “Gettysburg: The Check” could no longer see the foe as even a human enemy. The enemy had transformed into a non-human form. Still, regardless of the harsh opposition throughout the collection, Melville for a brief moment in “Donelson” extends an olive branch to those who would yet see their enemies as brothers and sisters in the human family. In so doing, Melville continues the tone that Lincoln had begun in his First Inaugural Address.

When Lincoln was inaugurated in 1861, he used his Address to plead with the South for reconciliation, compromise, and union. He did so by appealing first to their sense of reason, having faith that unionists were still the majority in the South and that if given enough time they would ultimately come out ahead because surely no rational body of citizenry could “contemplate disrupting the best government the world had ever seen.” Since the South had threatened secession before but never done it perhaps Lincoln truly believed this was the case again. Second, and more importantly, Lincoln appealed to what he believed was the strongest connection of all—human and familial brotherhood. Lincoln always believed that the best way to deal with Southerners was not to yell, scream, and denounce them as “unregenerate sinners.” Rather he was more interested in

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33 Megan Williams, ““Sounding the Wilderness”: Representations of the heroic in Herman Melville’s *Battle-Pieces and Aspect of the War*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2003): Par. 4.
using “persuasion, kind unassuming persuasion” to change them. He wanted to appeal to their reason and do so gently, believing that the best course was to “make friends with them.” His First Inaugural Address is the ideal example of Lincoln trying to utilize just such a philosophy.

After assuring Southerners that he had “no purpose” or intention to “interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists,” admitting that he had neither “lawful right” nor “inclination to do so,” he appealed to something more sublime and transcendent than legal and political sensibility. The transcendence of Lincoln’s famous closing lines is exactly what Melville appeals to in “Donelson,” by not only providing a moving moment of charity but by proclaiming without hesitation that while Southerners might for the moment be foemen, they are also yet human. With “Donelson” in mind, Lincoln’s closing appeal increases the possibility that Melville, if not standing right next to Lincoln, was certainly in his philosophical shadow:

I am loth to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angles of our nature.

So did Melville hope to appeal to the “mystic chords” that bound all Americans together, even after having passed through a burning hell that claimed so many of their

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37 Ibid., 61.
comrades. “Donelson” is not the only poem to contain traces of Lincoln’s Inaugural philosophy.

In one of his short inscriptive poems “On the Men of Maine Killed in the Victory of Baton Rouge, Louisiana,” Melville echoes Lincoln’s call for national memory.

Afar they fell. It was the zone

Of fig and orange, cane and lime

(A land how all unlike their own,
With the cold pine-grove overgrown),

But still their Country’s clime.

And there in youth they died for her—

The Volunteers,

For her went up their dying prayers:

So vast the Nation, yet so strong the tie.

What doubt shall come, then, to deter

The Republic’s earnest faith and courage high.

Melville notes that the men from Maine “afar they fell,” a long distance from their physical homes, yet still in their own country. Their link to Baton Rouge was certain: “So vast the Nation, yet so strong the tie.” Though these men had probably never been further South than Maryland, if that, they recognized that their tie to the “vast Nation” was more than geographic. It did indeed stretch, as Lincoln believed, from “every living heart and hearth-stone” all across the “broad land.” Furthermore, the men of Maine who fought in Baton Rouge not only believed themselves tied to their fellow Americans by virtue of their status as Americans, but equally important, they refused to concede that the nation
had ever been separated. For them, as with Lincoln, those “mystic chords of union” were sturdy and unbreakable.

The speaker in “On the Men of Maine” observes the differences in the climate and landscape of Maine and Louisiana, but then relates the great truth that the men have come to know through experience, having fought and fallen so far from their familiar homes. The great truth is that they are home because even this “land” so “unlike [their] own,/With the cold pine-grove overgrown,” is “still their Country’s clime.” The South is not a separate nation with its own people. These men from Maine are its people, and the South is their country.

“Armies of the Wilderness” contains another example of the unbreakable ties that bind Americans together, regardless of location. The opening stanza describes the two armies, the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia, facing off on two opposing slopes: “Like snows the camps on Southern hills/Lay all the winter long./Our levies there in patience stood—/They stood in patience strong.” Following the opening stanza with its armies “firmly cling[ing]” to their respective causes, Melville includes a short four line, italicized stanza, a prayer offered up by the poet that God might not let “the just one fall.”

\[
\text{In this strife of brothers}
\]
\[
\text{(God, hear their country call),}
\]
\[
\text{However it be, whatever betide,}
\]
\[
\text{Let not the just one fall.}
\]

That an observer looking at the sight of two massive armies on the eve of battle might offer such a prayer is not remarkable. What is striking, however, is the way the prayer is
phrased. The speaker does not ask that, though he is a unionist, God hear only the call of the North, or as Deak Nabers phrased it, the speaker “fails to specify which side is ‘the just one,’ making it hard to determine for whom this prayer is issued.” Rather he asks that “in this strife of brothers/God, hear their country call.” The speaker does not recognize that the country has been split. Like the Maine men who still envision America as a single nation, so to does the speaker in “Armies of the Wilderness” recognize only one nation, to which both warring brothers belong.

Like the Maine men and the observer in “Armies of the Wilderness,” Lincoln refused to recognize the Confederacy as a separate country. In his mind, he was the President of the entire nation, not just the North. So also did the Constitution still apply to the entire country, including the rebellious South. On occasion when Lincoln heard Northern generals discussing how best to “protect our soil,” with reference to the North, Lincoln set them straight: “The whole country is our soil.” Lincoln knew, as Melville did, that recognizing the South as a separate country was to give validation to the secessionist argument and more importantly would make reconciliation more difficult. The “mystic chords” of brotherhood had to trump all other considerations if the country was to be reunited, a point that Melville makes clear throughout Battle-Pieces. At various points in the collection, Melville remembers this fraternal connection on which he and Lincoln depended for a final hope that the civil hate could be overcome.

38 Deak Nabers, “‘Victory of Law’: Melville and Reconstruction,” American Literature 75, no. 1 (March 2003): 7. Nabers’ argument at this point is that part of the problem Lincoln and others faced during and after the war was that the idea of law was not absolutely clear. Both sides believed that they were inline with the law and that the North in its crusade to enforce the law of union had to transgress Constitutional law that protected slavery. The conflict, at least from the perspective of Lincoln... is actually over what will count as the ‘country’ and ‘the just one’; it isn’t simply between the country and justice on one side and something else on the other.” See page 7.

39 Quoted in Garry Wills, Lincoln At Gettysburg (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 139.
Popularly of course, the American Civil War, as with most other civil wars, is typically rendered as a war of brother against brother, both with the same parental roots who have a stronger tie to one another than a foreign enemy. Historically, this notion is borne out by incidences of actual blood brothers fighting on different sides, sometimes entire families simply being annihilated. As just one example of brother literally fighting brother, Virginia Confederate Colonel James Terril was killed in the fighting at Cold Harbor, Virginia and his brother William, a Union General, was killed while fighting at Perryville, Kentucky. In a somewhat ironic tragedy, the Culp family from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania had two sons fighting. J. Wesley Culp enlisted in the Confederate army on June 20, 1861. His brother, William Culp, served as an officer in the 87th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers. In a strange twist of fate, Wesley Culp was killed in a Confederate charge at Gettysburg up Culp’s Hill, a hill which had belonged to and been named after his own great-grandfather. Melville himself acknowledges the very tragic effect that the war had on family members in the poem that closes his collection, “A Meditation.” The note to the poem explains that the poem was written by a Northerner “after attending the last of two funerals from the same homestead—those of a National and a Confederate officer (brothers), his kinsmen, who had died from the effects of wounds received in the closing battles.” Historically, one of the more popular stories detailing wholesale familial destruction is that of Mrs. Lydia Bixby, a Boston widow who President Lincoln was told had lost five sons in battle. Lincoln’s response to her is a

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moving statement of his at once compassionate and yet unbending commitment to the
cause they had died to save:

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-
General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died
gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of
mine which should attempt to beguile you from a grief of a loss so overwhelming.
But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the
thanks of the republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may
assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished
memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have
laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.*^ That the war ripped families apart is a stark reality, and yet because of this unique
relationship that the two opposing sides had with one another people like Melville and
Lincoln were able to maintain a flickering hope that the family tie would be stronger than
their political differences, eventually ending in reunion.*^ While Melville’s flickering

Though the authenticity of this letter has been disputed, Nickell provides convincing evidence based on
stylistic research of Lincoln’s other writings and the writings of John Hay, who is rumored to have written
the letter, if it was written at all, and finds that there is too much stylistic evidence to abandon the popular
theory that the letter was indeed written by Abraham Lincoln. Mrs. Bixby actually did not lose five sons in
the war; she lost two. How this mistake was made is not absolutely certain, according to Nickell.
Regardless of how many sons Mrs. Bixby lost, whether five as Lincoln was told or two as the evidence
suggests, matters little in the effect the letter has and the eloquent expression of Lincoln’s compassion and
his firm commitment to the cause of Union that required so much of this one mother.
43 Nathan W. Daniels’ journal entry for May 25, 1864 records another example of a family completely
decimated by the war. “Mr and Mrs Bowdish of Michigan, who had two sons, Horace and Congdon in the
7th Mich Reg’t, came to this city a day or two ago in search of Horace who they had learned had been
wounded in the battle of The Wilderness, and had been brought to this city. Failing to find him in hospital,
yesterday morning visited the 6th Street wharf. A few moments afterwards, the steamer Jefferson
steamed up to the dock and standing near the bow of the boat was the looked for son, badly wounded, his
right arm having been shot off above the elbow. As soon as the plank was thrown from the boat to the
wharf, Mrs Bowdish sprang on board the steamer and throwing her arms around her son, burst into a flood
of tears with her head bent upon his shoulder. For a few seconds there was an affecting silence, which the
fond mother broke by saying—Horace, where is your brother Congdon? Horace pointed to a rough wooden

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hope was shared with the nation in *Battle-Pieces*, Lincoln’s would be shared at Gettysburg.

The *Gettysburg Address* is the most famous of Lincoln’s writings and with good reason. The Battle of Gettysburg had been a costly victory for the North and the aftereffects were horrifying for the 2,500 Gettysburg inhabitants whose entire town had become one makeshift hospital and burial ground. A writer for the Gettysburg *Compiler* noted on July 19, 1863 that “our usually quiet and pretending little town of Gettysburg has become historic. During the last two weeks scenes have been enacted here that beggar all description. War has been raging all around us in its most horrid form.”*

Gettysburg’s residents saw scenes that defied the imagination, as their reminiscences illustrate. Alert McCreary, who was a child during the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, recorded that the horrible smell that enveloped the small town “was so bad that every one went about with a bottle of pennyroyal or peppermint oil.”*

Mrs. Fannie J. Buehler wrote about her experience with the sights and sounds of the wounded: “Often have I stopped my ears that I might not hear the groans of those poor unfortunate men, whom I could not relieve.”*

One nun of the Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg, PA recorded the following about their journey to Gettysburg: “The rains had filled the roads with water, and here it was red with blood. Our horses could hardly be forced to proceed with the

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*Quoted in Wikoff, 3.*

*Ibid.; Daniels, 26.*

*Ibid., 27.*

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horrid objects before them, the very carriage wheels rolling through blood.\textsuperscript{47}

Gettysburg’s citizens would never be the same.

Three weeks after the battle, one of the town’s most prominent citizens, a banker named David Wills, provided a report to Governor Curtin, describing the gruesome situation at Gettysburg: “In many instances arms and legs and sometimes heads protrude and my attention has been directed to several places where the hogs were actually rooting out the bodies and devouring them.”\textsuperscript{48} Governor Curtin made Wills his representative in Gettysburg and placed him in charge of clean-up. Wills wanted to dedicate the grounds as a cemetery and called upon the likes of Longfellow, Whittier, and Bryant to contribute some dedicatory words. Each poet, “for his own reason, found their muse unbiddable.”\textsuperscript{49} Lincoln’s muse, however, was well up to the task, though the whole dedication was not without its detractors.

Nathan W. Daniels described the dedicatory scene in his journal entry for November 19, 1863:

This is the Great day of The Inaugurative of the famed Gettysburgh Cemetery.

The President and mainly distinguished personages from other states are to be in attendance. I think the money spent on these ceremonies had much better be given to the many thousand poor and suffering families of those same dead soldiers. The dead can take care of themselves, but God help those they have left behind them.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{48} Wills, 21.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{50} Nathan W. Daniels
Lincoln’s remarks, however, did more than honor those fallen. He did indeed strive to do what Daniels encouraged, though rhetorically instead of financially, to “help” those left behind by rhetorically carving out the ideal America for which the dead had fallen.

The speech is at once a revolutionary and eloquent statement of American idealism, an “escape from distracting particulars, a recovery of the long-term tasks of equality and self-government.” The opening line is crucial to establishing this idealism and the ways in which Lincoln looked upon his Northern and Southern countrymen. “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” The opening line’s significance cannot be overstated in its relevance to the remainder of the Address because it defines exactly to whom he is speaking, not only Northerners, but Southerners as well. Garry Wills observes that this speech is remarkable in that it does not mention North or South, and it mentions none of the names or sites particular to the Battle of Gettysburg: the Peach Orchard, the Wheatfield, Little Round Top, Devil’s Den, Bloody Angle or any of the other names that have been seared into American memory. Lincoln also chooses to omit any mention of sides or units. As Wills points out, “the Southerners are part of the ‘experiment,’ not foes mentioned in anger or rebuke.” In contrast to Everett’s speech that “immersed” the audience in the details of the battle and “pick[ed] its way through the carnage” with his speech, which Daniels declared in his journal to be “really a masterpiece of oration,” Lincoln “hovers far above the carnage.”

Though Lincoln’s Southern detractors harshly criticized what they perceived as his inability to speak eloquently, Lincoln’s rhetorical brilliance is evident in the Address as a whole, and

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51 Wills, 120.
52 See Daniels November 20, 1863. Wills, 33, 37.
particularly in the first line, as he is able in one phrase to promote a philosophy of
brotherhood that could bind the nation’s citizens together again.\textsuperscript{53}

The phrase most relevant to the current discussion is “our fathers.” Wills confirms
that “our fathers” refers to the Founding Fathers, not surprising as Lincoln had referred to
them before in previous speeches given on Constitutional and national issues, including
the slave issue.\textsuperscript{54} In this case, however, the use of fathers is doubly significant because it
reminds Americans that the war they are engaged in is indeed a family struggle between
two factions that used to be affectionate siblings. Lincoln does not use the term Founding
Fathers in this context, instead choosing to use simply “fathers,” coupled with “our.”
These two words when paired together point toward a close familial relationship with an
emphasis on the common roots, background, and “bonds of affection.” Lincoln distinctly
reminds Americans that those soldiers who “struggled” on the fields at Gettysburg
originated from the same fathers, if not physically then ideologically. Perhaps this is why
he chose to include Northerners and Southerners equally in the democratic “experiment.”
The founders and their dream is “ours,” not just Northerners’.

Like Lincoln’s \textit{Address}, Melville also appealed to Americans’ sense of family ties in
\textit{Battle-Pieces} as he strove to remind Americans not just about the tremendous price paid
for what would be the outcome of the war and Reconstruction, but also to emphasize that
because North and South were kinsmen, they could find a way to forgive one another and
help to curb the “bitterness which every sensible American must wish at an end.”\textsuperscript{55} The

\textsuperscript{53} In 1861 one politician from Alabama encouraged Southerners to “compare the speeches of the President
of these Confederate States with those of the President of the United States to feel proud of the contrast
between the statesman and the narrow-minded and ignorant partisan.” Karen E. Fritz, \textit{Voices in the Storm:
Confederate Rhetoric, 1861-1865} (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1999), 11.
\textsuperscript{54} Wills, 77.
\textsuperscript{55} See the Supplement page 263.
poem that most directly addresses Melville’s insistence on American brotherhood and
kinship is “Battle of Stone River, Tennessee.” From the very opening stanza Melville sets
up a parallel that he will continue to develop throughout the entire poem: “In North and
South still beats the vein/Of Yorkist and Lancastrian.” The American Civil War had
simply reincarnated the old fraternal hatred as “the fray of yesterday assumes/The
haziness of years.” The comparison of the Civil War to the War of the Roses is
significant for at least two reasons, both of which reframe the point that Lincoln made in
the Gettysburg Address when he addressed himself to all Americans whose beginnings
could be traced back to identical fathers, “our fathers.”

First, Americans reading Melville’s poem could hardly have missed the obvious
connection that Melville makes to the famous English houses. Americans’ fathers were
themselves British, some of whom were probably literal descendents of the houses of
York and Lancaster, and if not literal descendents, they were certainly metaphorical
descendents. With the parallel to the War of the Roses, Melville suggests that Americans
have a strong similarity to the houses of York and Lancaster, having descended from
them, which also suggests that Americans, since they are subject to the same anger that
pitted the two houses in a civil war so many years ago, can also reap the same resolutions
in the end. The second vital point that Melville makes with the opening comparison is
exactly what Lincoln so clearly designated in the opening line of the Address: Americans,
though they may now be experiencing a violent and painful ideological separation, are
still linked by bonds that far surpass a momentary struggle.

The War of the Roses lasting from roughly 1455-1485 stemmed from a struggle for
the English throne between the House of Lancaster and the House of York. Each side
adopted a flower for its symbol, the Red Rose of Lancaster and the White Rose of York, giving the name War of the Roses to the civil conflict. More essential to Melville’s parallel, however, is that they both descended from a common ancestor. Each was a branch of the House of Plantagenet, all sons and daughters of King Edward III. So also were North and South bound to the same fathers, to the same ideals, to the same founders. Eventually the houses of York and Lancaster were united when the Lancastrian Earl of Richmond ascended to the throne to become Henry VII and then married a daughter of the House of York, which ultimately led to the Tudor line. By using the War of the Roses as the parallel for the American Civil War, Melville suggests the possibility that like York and Lancaster, North and South might be reunited and become even more powerful, like the Tudor line that could boast such rulers as Elizabeth I.

What is not absolutely clear for Melville is whether or not Americans would be able to overcome their differences as Lancaster and York did. Melville closes the poem in the same way that he closes “Shiloh” and “Gettysburg,” with a guarded optimism that reconciliation is still possible, even if only slightly so, because in 1866 America was in too much chaos for anyone to be sure that the struggle would fade into memory as it had for York and Lancaster when their two houses were joined and a new and more powerful family was born:

But where the sword has plunged so deep,
And then been turned within the wound
By deadly Hate; where Climes contend
On vasty ground—

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56 See Wikipedia entry for “War of the Roses.”
No warning Alps or seas between,
   And small the curb of creed or law,
And blood is quick, and quick the brain;
Shall North and South their rage deplore,
   And reunited thrive amain
Like Yorkist and Lancastrian?

The Miltonic influence here is crucial, as Melville utilizes *Paradise Lost* to invoke not only an epic dimension to the struggle, but also to cast a ray of optimistic light into the darkness that he saw stretching before him in 1866, as the nation had not yet found the desire for forgiveness. The opening lines to the stanza are not just similar to Milton’s; they are almost directly quoted. Milton’s text reads: “For never can true reconcilement grow/Where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep.” The lines refer to Satan as he escapes Hell, moves toward earth and Eden, and momentarily muses upon his fall and consequential loss. As he ponders, however, he realizes that his hatred will never be assuaged. He has been pierced too deeply to ever return to God’s presence. His estrangement from God is complete with no hope for repentance or forgiveness. Hate has overcome him completely; “Evil, be thou my good,” he later declares. Satan is no longer simply in hell, rather he has become hell: “Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell.” This context is vital to identifying a key difference in the way that Melville chooses to use Milton here.

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58 *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, Lines 99-100.
59 Ibid., Line 110.
60 Ibid., Line 75.
61 Robin Grey has written a very interesting essay on Melville’s use of *Paradise Lost* throughout *Battle-Pieces*, particularly in relation to Melville’s “doubts about the nature of God’s providence and justice.” Grey’s comparison of lines from *Paradise Lost*, especially those that were marked or annotated by Melville, to those from the poems in *Battle-Pieces* does present both fascinating connections and
Where Milton implies no redemption from utter hatred, Melville offers a strand of doubt: “Shall North and South their rage deplore/And reunited thrive amain?” Melville’s hope is not without foundation. After all, York and Lancaster reconciled. Are North and South so different from York and Lancaster that they cannot also reconcile? Interestingly, Melville closes the entire poem with York and Lancaster, not North and South, which cannot help but indelibly impress upon Melville’s American readers that hate can be reconciled, and Melville provides a tangible example of that very real possibility. Indeed even within the poem, the horror of Stone River has begun to fade. As Garner points out, within the poem’s lines “the pauses in the battle-forest of man’s depravity foretell a future quiet,” as the battle, like the War of the Roses, becomes the “stuff of distant legends,” as Melville writes, “a Druid-dream.”

Even the mixed reviews to Battle-Pieces, particularly the reaction to the conciliatory Supplement, provide a modest hope that North and South could be reconciled, and indicates that Melville’s hope was not altogether out of sync with at least some of America’s citizens. The New York Herald critic noted Melville’s “laudable spirit” in the Supplement and wrote that “so far from spoiling the symmetry of the book, this supplement completes it, and converts it into what is better than a good book—into a good and patriotic action.” The critic continued, “We welcome these ‘words in season,’ not only as the deliberate, impartial testimony of a highly cultivated individual mind, but as a hopeful sign of a change in public opinion and

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divergences between Milton’s and Melville’s conception of God’s justice. Grey notes from the outset of her essay that Melville annotated his copy of Paradise Lost as late as 1860, a fact that certainly validates her contention that Paradise Lost was a tremendous influence on the writing of Battle-Pieces. See “Annotations on Civil War, Melville’s Battle-Pieces and Milton’s War in Heaven,” Melville & Milton, An Edition and Analysis of Melville’s Annotations on Milton, ed., Robin Grey (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 47-66.

sentiment." The New York Herald critic was not alone in his admiration. The reviewer for the Baltimore Sun reiterated the Herald's critic in praising the Supplement, noting that it "increases much the value of the work...a cheering evidence of a healthy change in public sentiment. It is well worthy of perusal." The critics from both the Herald and the Sun themselves were exemplars of their own words through praising Melville's conciliatory Supplement as a "good and patriotic action" that is "worthy of perusal" by the American public.

The "Battle of Stone River" is not the only poem in the collection to contain references to the kinship that binds the opposing armies. The very first stanza of "Armies of the Wilderness" points out that though the South is "amiss" and were "zealots of the Wrong," they are "froward kin!" Melville's word choice here is noteworthy because he easily could have chosen a word with a harsher more condemning connotation. "Froward" is defined by Webster's Dictionary as "stubbornly contrary," "disobedient," and "obstinate." In short, "froward" is a word that might very well be used to describe a wayward sibling, not a hated enemy. As Lincoln once said of the seceded states and the need to receive them back into the union, "finding themselves safely at home, it would be utterly immaterial whether they had ever been abroad." Like a child gone astray, Lincoln was ready to welcome them back. Indeed this struggle is as Melville defined it, a "strife of brothers." The fraternal connection is solidified later in the same poem by the narrator who reminds the picket to "take heed—take heed of thy brother." Here, the fraternal link is made more complex because of the context in which "thy brother" is

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63 Higgins and Parker, 513.
64 Ibid., 517.
65 Lincoln, 111.
66 "Armies of the Wilderness."
used—as part of a warning. In the struggle at hand, one’s brother is the greatest enemy, an unthinkable circumstance at best and an unnatural circumstance at worst.

Melville’s hope that Americans, despite wounds of hate, could find a fundamental similarity that would draw them back into fraternal harmony was not altogether an unfounded one when historical evidence is consulted. If the soldiers themselves who daily shot and killed one another could rekindle their “bonds of affection,” then maybe the nation could be welded together once more. Jay Winik recounts various instances of camaraderie between Northern and Southern soldiers who faced each other in battle lines on the southern front:

Notes and newspapers were routinely passed back and forth; pickets exchanged gossip; and warnings of impending action often preceded hostilities. “Get in your holes, Yanks, we are ordered to fire,” was one common call. Another time, a message wrapped around a stone was tossed into a Federal trench, which cautioned: “Tell the fellow with the spy glass to clear out, or we shall have to shoot him...If officers—rebel of Yank—passed by, the soldiers cautioned the other side, firing weapons at trees or birds or nothing at all.\(^{67}\)

Perhaps reconcile could become a reality if in the moment of battle soldiers could still act upon the “mystic chords of memory” that had once linked them as one nation.

By the time Lincoln gave his famous Second Inaugural Address, the war had almost officially ended, and the nation would soon have to deal with the after effects: physically, politically, socially, and emotionally. Into this fray came Lincoln’s eloquent plea for reconciliation, notwithstanding critics at the *Chicago Times* who described the Address as “slip shod, so loose-jointed, so puerile, not alone in literary construction, but in its ideas,

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\(^{67}\) Winik, 63.
its sentiments, its grasp.”\textsuperscript{68} Frederick Douglass, however, did not agree. To him the speech “sounded more like a sermon than a state paper” and when asked by the President himself what he thought, Douglass replied, “Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort.”\textsuperscript{69} Douglass’ summary is perhaps best exemplified in the closing lines, which have become some of the most famous in American rhetorical history:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

This final paragraph is indeed “sublime” and came at a time when Lincoln’s audience was “accustomed to calls for retribution.”\textsuperscript{70} However, Lincoln was looking toward establishing the America he had envisioned and ideologically created with the \textit{Gettysburg Address}, a nation founded on liberty for all. He knew that “the glory of a restored Union must be built on more than butchery, revenge, and retribution,” which would be difficult given the destruction and total war that punctuated the war’s end.\textsuperscript{71} Now, however, as the war was drawing to a close, he was in a position to preside over the birth of the new nation that he continued to hope would finally become real. For him and for his audience, the Second Inaugural was not an end, as it is so often seen by modern audiences through the “lens of his assassination,” but the beginning of a new era of American unity and

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 184, 199.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 173, 179.
\textsuperscript{71} Winik, 39.
“firmness in the right.” Daniels, a radical reformer and abolitionist, recognized the speech’s significant emphasis on humanity. Daniels recorded the following assessment in his journal on March 5, 1865:

> The Inaugural was short, humane, and satisfactory, not so much communicating a policy, as declaring peace & good will to all...people. - Humanity stamped the document throughout, and foreshadowed the leniency that this great and good man is willing to extend to all who repentant of the past, are willing to work out a new line of action in the future.

Further, notwithstanding the *New York Herald*’s assessment of the speech as a “little speech of ‘glittering generalities’ used only to fill in the program,” one twenty-nine-year-old American named Charles Francis Adams, Jr. who had seen action at Antietam and Gettysburg as a first lieutenant in the 1st Massachusetts Cavalry and a lieutenant colonel in the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry, an African-American regiment, assessed the speech in a letter to his father on March 7th. In the letter he declared the speech with “its grand simplicity and directness” as “for all time the historical keynote of this war.” Adams’ marked assessment recognized the Address’ greatness, perhaps because here was an opportunity for charity to overwhelm malice, an opportunity for Americans to both remember and reconfigure their “bonds of affection,” acting in a manner that befitted the

72 White, 177.
73 Nathan W. Daniels
74 White, 184. White accounts for several different newspaper and personal reactions to the Address, one of which came from the Jersey City Times: “It will stand forever as an announcement, grant in its simplicity, and unflexible in its resolve, of the faith of the American people in the stability of their free government and the justice and invincibility of their cause.” The text goes on to personally assess Abraham Lincoln. “It will make thousand say, who have not hitherto said, ‘God bless Abraham Lincoln.’” See White page 192.
“better angels of their nature,” a proposition that Melville echoed in his final injunction to the nation, the prose Supplement and the poem that precedes it, “Lee at the Capitol.”

To effect lasting repair to fraternal bonds would take the skill and forgiveness of an entire nation working together, a task made all the more difficult because nobody had remained untouched by the ghastly realities of the war, as Nathanial Hawthorne so aptly described: “there is no remoteness of life and thought, no hermetically sealed seclusion, except, possibly, that of the grave, into which the disturbing influences of this war do no penetrate.” At all cost, the nation had to be prevented from disintegrating into “fragmented” and “squabbling republics,” instead rising up as a single, cohesive, and united nation.

No less a spokesman than General Robert E. Lee would be summoned by Melville to present Lincoln’s vision, a vision that Melville espoused throughout _Battle-Pieces_, summed up in the prose Supplement and previewed in “Lee in the Capitol.”

Robert E. Lee was a figure who, by the time the war was over, and even before, had become mythic in his ability to defeat opponents with overwhelmingly better numbers. His men revered him and the South loved him. Even after the disaster at Gettysburg, one Southern publication, the _Southern Illustrated News_, was quick to place complete confidence in Lee’s decisions, reporting in its war new summary that “what necessitated this movement [Lee having re-crossed the Potomac back into Virginia] on the part of Gen. Lee is, of course, a matter of conjecture. Be the case what it may, our people repose the utmost confidence in the skill and judgment of the great commander.” The Richmond daily paper, the _Examiner_, reported that “the country will not venture to deny

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75 Ibid., 190.
76 Quoted in Garner, 389.
77 Winik, 24.
79 Harwell, 216.
General Lee...anything he may ask for." Lee’s heroic status is further evidenced by a chapter on him that appeared in a booklet published in 1864 entitled The War and Its Heroes. In the booklet, Lee is described as “the most thorough of all Virginians.” Moreover, “his judgment is as quick as his military glance, and it rarely deceives...He is about five feet ten inches high, was eminently handsome in his youth, is still one of the finest looking men in the army, rides like a knight of the old crusading days, is indefatigable in business, and bears fatigue like a man of iron.”

Northerners also recognized and certainly put faith in Lee’s tremendous abilities and his faith in his men to overcome tremendous odds. Daniels recorded his attitude about Lee in a journal entry dated May 7, 1864. Daniels remarked that Lee “has consummate Genius and a splendid array of magnificent fighting material and our forces have no child’s play before them.” At Petersburg when Lincoln asked his generals, “Cannot this bloody battle be avoided?” the answer from his generals was a decided negative. They acknowledged that since it was Lee, they expected “one more desperate and bloody battle.” Lee was not a man to be scorned by either North or South, and like Lincoln he is honored by Melville in Battle-Pieces, having one entire poem dedicated to him. Lee’s poem is not contained within the battle section as Jackson’s is. Nor is it in the inscriptive memorial section. Lee’s poem is set apart along with two other poems, each with their own title pages. Melville's placement of “Lee in the Capitol” at the end of Battle-Pieces, just prior to the Supplement, and its setting apart from the other poem in the collection immediately signal its import in relation to the collection as a whole.

80 Winik, 59.
81 Fritz, 118.
82 Ibid., 121.
83 Nathan W. Daniels
84 Winik, 67.
Dowling suggests that Lee is Melville’s poetic spokesman for what would be further introduced in the Supplement, a call for a magnanimity that the North was in a position to offer toward their defeated countrymen. Melville, like Lincoln, urged that “Christian charity” ought to govern the North’s actions, particularly since “rightly will more forbearance be required from the North than the South, for the North is victor.” Earlier in the collection Melville poignantly described the relative conditions of each section at the war’s end. “The Released Rebel Prisoner” is a haunting reminder that though Southerners were able to return to their homes, those homes had been shattered by cannons, muskets, marching armies, and slain soldiers. As the rebel prisoner thinks on the destruction he has witnessed, including fallen comrades like “Ashby dead in pale disdain” and “Stuart with the Rupert-plume, Whose blue eye never shall laugh again,” he is struck by the difference between his return home and the return of his Union foes. From “his [the Rebel’s] wasted fields” Union soldiers return, and what a greeting awaits them: “Ladies feast them on strawberries, And even to kiss them yearn.” The forlorn prisoner notes this difference compared to his “jail-worn” condition. As the released prisoner continues to lament his down-trodden position compared to his Northern jailers, he remarks on the darkest reality of all. For him, his home is gone, because “even should he stand upon the spot: ’Tis gone!—where his brothers be.” Though the physical reminders may be present, “the cypress-moss from tree to tree/Hangs in his Southern land,” home only exists for him now in memory: “The cypress-moss from tree to tree/Hangs in his Southern land; As wierd, from thought to thought of his/Run memories hand in hand.” The frightening truth revealed in the poem’s closing lines is that this

86 Supplement, 260, 271.
soldier’s home has been destroyed by “His cousins and his countrymen” who do nothing more than “see him listless go.” They, his cousins and countrymen, do not even see his suffering; they merely watch him go without a thought to his orphaned position.

Melville’s fear that his Northern countrymen would not rise to the heights of “Christian charity” is evident in another striking poem found just prior to the inscriptive section. The poem’s title, “Magnanimity Baffled,” says much about the problems that Melville as well as Lincoln’s vision would pose to the nation:

“Sharp words we had before the fight;
But—now the fight is done—
Look, here’s my hand,” said the Victor bold,
“Take it—an honest one!
What, holding back? I mean you well;
Though worsted, you strove stoutly, man;
The odds were great; I honor you;
Man honors man.

“Still silent, friend? can grudges be?
Yet am I held a foe?—
Turned to the wall, on his cot he lies—
Never I’ll leave him so!
Brave one! I here implore your hand;
Dumb still? all fellowship fled?
Nay, then, I’ll have this stubborn hand!”
He snatched it—it was dead.

The poem is a poignant reminder that though Americans were countrymen, and the North might try to extend a hand of fellowship, the fact remains that the North was the victor in a very costly war that had ruined the South. Sixty percent of the war was fought in Virginia, and Sherman's famous March to the Sea assured that the deep South would repose in ashes, no longer able to continue a full-scale war. Melville realized that the North could not force the South into a reconciliation, could not "snatch" the "stubborn hand." Charity would be needed in liberal portions, and both Melville and Lincoln used "charity" very specifically as they urged their countrymen toward peaceful and meaningful reunion. Robert C. White has reminded contemporary readers that in Lincoln's time, charity was not simply kindness. Lincoln used the term in its very biblical sense, the way Paul had used it in 1 Corinthians 13:4-6:

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemingly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth.

So too must Melville have meant it when he asked his fellow countrymen to exhibit "Christian charity" toward their Southern countrymen, to be more understanding than the victor described in "Magnanimity Baffled," to exhibit the charity in the mode described by Paul in the New Testament. Also crucial to the poem is the final line. Why did the South not respond in the same way that it had been responding to Northern provocation throughout the preceding poems, with proud and defiant military courage? It could not. It

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87 For the comment on the large percentage of the war being fought in Virginia, see Winik page 45. Sherman's legendary march to the sea likely requires no further explanation.

88 See White 179-181. The scriptural text is taken from the King James version of the Bible.
was dead. The South had lost its ability to fight any longer. Though their pride was undoubtedly still intact, their homes had been destroyed: the land, resources, and a significant number of its people were crushed, hence Lincoln's imperative to care for the widows and orphans of those who had "borne the battle." This was no metaphorical imperative but a practical directive based on a very real need. So also did Melville emphasize the South's need for charity in "Lee at the Capitol" in the voice of General Robert E. Lee.

Like many of the pieces in Melville's collection, the poem is based on an actual, historically documented event. After the war ended, the nation's politicians turned their attention toward Reconstruction. In the first two years after the war ended, debate raged as to how Reconstruction should proceed, as there was no precedent for this endeavor. One of the first actions that Congress took toward reconstructing and rebuilding the nation was to create a Committee on Reconstruction, composed of six senators and nine House representatives. This Committee interviewed various witnesses in an attempt to ascertain the South's condition, materially as well as in political and emotional temperament. One of the most famous witnesses called to give testimony was Robert E.

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89 White relates a historical basis for this imperative in *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*. Mary Elizabeth Wayt Booth, the widow of the white commanding officer at Fort Pillow where reports that black soldiers at the fort had been massacred by Nathan Bedford Forrest's troops after the fort had been overwhelmed, traveled to Washington to speak with the President. While visiting Fort Pillow to identify her husband for reburial, Booth was struck by the grief that she saw exhibited by the black women who were also there to identify their husbands. Three weeks after her experience, she personally visited with President Lincoln and encouraged him to make sure that though slave marriages were not recognized by the law, those black widows be allowed the same compensation, in the form of government pensions for themselves and their children, that she would receive. Lincoln must have been moved by her plea because shortly after her visit, Lincoln wrote to Republican Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner and asked that Booth's request be put into law. Sumner must have agreed with Lincoln because "black orphans and widows were included in a law passed by the House and Senate six weeks later, on July 2, 1864." See pages 173-177.


Lee who appeared before the Committee on February 17, 1866. His entire testimony was later reprinted in its entirety in the *New York Times* just over a month later on March 28, 1866.

At one point during this testimony, Lee was given the opportunity to address any matters not covered by the Committee’s questions that he felt were important. Michigan Senator Jacob M. Howard invited Lee to speak: “If there be any other matter about which you wish to speak on this occasion, do so freely.” Lee responded that he had no wish to speak on any matter except the specific issue that had been addressed to him just previous to Senator Howard’s invitation, that is whether or not Lee had been “wheedled or cheated” into supporting the secessionist doctrine, an accusation that Lee vehemently denied. At this point, Melville’s imagination took over. “Lee at the Capitol” is a poem that answers the question, “What if Lee had chosen to speak?” Melville imagines the major concern that Lee would have raised—a Lincolnesque plea for mercy and magnanimity toward the South, which according to Dowling was Melville’s own plea.

In the poem, Lee is no longer a warrior, who “fierce armies led” and Northerners feared, but a “quiet seminary’s head—/Poor as his privates” who “earns his bread.” Robert E. Lee had indeed become the president of Washington College, as Melville describes. However, this historical accuracy is less important, since Melville was not always terribly careful with historical accuracy, as will soon be discussed, than the impression of Lee that Melville creates. From the very beginning, Melville creates a Lee governed less by military concerns than by daily living concerns like “earn[ing] his bread.” In this position, Lee becomes a much more sympathetic figure, one to whom the

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92 Ibid.
Committee and Melville’s reading audience might more closely listen. Whether the Committee chooses to listen or not is a different matter entirely. Regardless of the Committee’s reaction, in Melville’s poem, Lee is a man of great restraint, not unlike Melville himself in the Supplement.95

After the panel gives Lee leave to speak, Melville intrudes into Lee’s mind and explains exactly why Lee chooses to speak. First, he speaks on behalf of “the brave, /Who else no voice or proxy have.” Lee, even as a civilian, is still concerned for the soldiers he led and the people who esteem him as their primary model of courage and gallantry. This is the Lee who after the costly Battle of Gettysburg officially honored the men in whom he put so much faith: “I cannot speak of these brave men as their merits and exploits deserve. Some of them are appropriately mentioned in the accompanying reports, and the memory of all will be gratefully and affectionately cherished by the people in whose defence they fell.”96 In recognizing the compassionate man who cared deeply about his soldiers, his state, and his country, Melville tips his head toward Southerners who might read his poem: Lee truly cared about his people and had devoted himself without question to the cause he served, a cause that he believed was doomed for failure from the beginning. According to Edmund Wilson’s Patriotic Gore, Lee confided to General Pendleton, just a few days before the surrender at Appomattox that

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\text{I have never believed we could, against the gigantic combination for our subjugation, make good in the long run our independence unless foreign powers} \\
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95 Ibid., 20.
should, directly or indirectly, assist us....But such considerations really made with me no difference. We had, I was satisfied, sacred principles to maintain and rights to defend, for which we were in duty bound to do our best, even if we perished in the endeavor.  

Melville affirms that this honorable Southerner undoubtedly deserves the respect and deference the South had given him. The second reason Melville gives for Lee's willingness to speak is to “save” the “flushed North from her own victory.” Always remembering that Melville is writing during Reconstruction, this line takes on tremendous meaning. Lee implies that the “iron hand” spoken of in “The Martyr” has been raised against the South, perhaps in the form of radical reformation, further denigrating the union for which so many gave their lives. Melville himself knew that reform, if taken in the wrong direction, could just as easily destroy the peace as it could promote it. Benjamin Reiss has written that though Melville may have been a “passionate reformer in his early career” four years of “fratricidal warfare” changed his opinion, and he became “almost as fearful of the results of reformist action as of the causes that impel it.” Melville, through Lee, is aware that Lincoln's imperatives from the Second Inaugural, which offered clemency and restraint instead of punitive reform, have not been followed in the moment he writes Battle-Pieces, 1865-1866.

In fact, an article that appeared in the Hagerstown Herald for Freedom and Torch Light illustrates just how difficult it was to convince Americans that charity should override all other concerns. In the article, the editors adamantly called for justice, not

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senseless vengeance, but accountability for those who had committed treason and broken the laws. The editors did not advocate “punish[ing] indiscriminately all who raised the hand of rebellion against the Government,” but they did feel it was important to “make an example of those who gave existence to the plot, and who were the head and front of it from its very inception down to its close.” In the case of treasonous actions, when they are deemed such and when the penalty for that crime is “fully defined,” why should the guilty parties not be subject to that penalty? Even Robert E. Lee should not be exempt from the law. The editors for the Herald certainly had cause for their cries for justice. Where Lincoln saw the devastation, widows, and orphans as an opportunity for charity, the Herald’s editors saw the same devastation as evidence to convict the guilty parties who had caused it:

When we look around us and see the many sad evidences of the guilt of these men, we cannot see how it is possible for our Government to pass over their crimes in silence and permit them to remain amongst us. The sad and sorrowful faces which we meet in our daily walks; the thousands of orphans that are thrown upon the cold charities of the world, and the maimed, and in many cases, penniless heroes whom we see in every community, demand that justice should be meted out to these offenders against law. It is due to every class of our people, both citizen and soldier, that the leaders of this wicked and unnatural rebellion be dealt with as they dealt with those who offended against law and order, and that the majesty of the law be vindicated. We, however, would show that, as a nation, we know how to be both magnanimous and merciful; but at the same time, just. We would spare those who were the dupes of bad men—the mere instruments in
the hands of ambitions traitors, for the accomplishment of their base designs; yet
we would not make Davis the only example; there are others who are equally
guilty and who should share the fate which awaits him... Those whom he
associated with him in the management of affairs, were of his own types, and their
policy was to wage a war, which for bitterness and inhumanity, has seldom
disgraced the annals of the world, and for this they should suffer.99

The reason Lee speaks in Melville’s poem is to counter and if possible defeat the voices
like those of the Herald’s editors. He has come to be Melville’s voice, to be Lincoln’s
voice.

Amazingly, with one line, saving the “flushed North from her own victory,” Melville
acknowledges a remarkable turn of events. Since the North is incapable of presiding over
its own victory, a Southerner must save the North from itself and in so doing, save the
very union it sought to break apart. The striking irony, of course, is that the North
believed itself the union’s preserver, yet in the end a Southerner best understands the
hazard of punitive revenge and offers cautionary advice to preserve the precarious union.

By making the Southerner the more perceptive character in the poem, Melville reiterates
his own interest, and Lincoln’s interest, in accepting the South as a full partner in the
Nation’s reunification process, not as a mere passive recipient to Northern interests.

Additionally, in drawing upon Lee’s characteristics as a reconciler and savior,
Melville reinforces the tenuous nature of the newly reunited nation. Lee sees the danger
that the Reconstruction Committee and the North at large does not see, a danger that
Melville also saw: the goblin-mountain from “The Apparition,” which threatened to
destroy solidity’s crust, was neither created at the war’s advent, nor destroyed at the

war's end, and finally sank before being fully comprehended by the nation at large. The issues that had sparked the war had not been erased from individual minds and hearts, a concern that certainly plagued many Americans, if the actual Reconstruction Committee's questions to Lee are at all representative of Americans in general. The peaceful reunion begun at Appomattox was only a "crust" that could be razed again all too easily. In Melville's poem, Lee senses this problem. He asks the Committee a very revealing question, one for which "The Apparition" provides a possible and searing reminder of what that answer could likely be.

After reminding the Committee that Southerners fought not just for an abstract ideal but were instead "true to the home and to the heart, many "cast[ing] their lot with kith and kin...cleav[ing] to the natural part," Lee poses the following question: "When blood returns to the shrunken vein,/Shall the wound of the Nation bleed again?" Will the goblin-mountain reappear? According to Melville's portrayal of Lee in the poem, Lee certainly hopes to curb the mountain's reappearance and prevent the national wound from re-opening, a hope that Lincoln also held, having implored Americans from the First Inaugural Address to the Second Inaugural Address to seal the wound, to destroy the mountain. Indeed, the most Lincoln-like words, besides the prose Supplement in *Battle-Pieces* are found in "Lee at the Capitol" with its pleas for forgiveness and dire warnings against revenge.

However, as much as Melville hoped that the goblin would stay buried, he harbored strong reservations, gloomily commenting after Lee leaves the Committee that "the Past her shadow through the Future sent" as the Committee members were "moved" by his earnestness but "not swayed" from "their former mien." Melville knows that only if
“triumph repressed by knowledge meet” is the North’s motto will the two feuding sections be able to renew the fraternal connections capable of trumping the sectional differences, thereby permitting a stronger America to emerge, one purified through a painful maturation process, which is exactly what Lee seeks to impress upon the Reconstruction Committee. The Committee’s reaction, which Melville details in the poem, in response to Lee’s pleas for magnanimity and their failure to move away from partisanship, is not unlike the reception of Lincoln’s earnest plea in the Second Inaugural Address and the reception of *Battle-Pieces* by some of Melville’s contemporaries. Lincoln’s plea, like Lee’s, was not enough to “sway” some of his contemporaries from their “former miens” either, including as would be expected, his Southern contemporaries. The *Richmond Examiner* believed that the Address “reads like the tail of some old sermon, and seems to have no particular meaning of any kind, at least, if any meaning lurks in it we fail to perceive it.” Even a Northern newspaper, the New York *World* failed to grasp the import of Lincoln’s earnestness, which like Lee’s surrender at Appomattox and his portrayal by Melville in “Lee in the Capitol,” was intended to promote a speedy reunification. The *World* claimed that in the Address Lincoln was “abandoning all pretense of statesmanship . . .  in this strange inaugural” having “taken ‘refuge in piety.’” Given some of his critics’ responses, Lincoln was correct in having written that the Address would not be “immediately popular.” So also would Melville’s magnanimous and conciliatory attitude not be taken particularly well by his contemporary critics.

100 “America.”
101 White 193.
102 Ibid., 194.
103 Ibid., 197.
Perhaps the Committee's reaction to Lee was Melville's own forecast of what he feared might be the nation's reaction to his own peace offering, *Battle-Pieces*, somehow knowing that, as Dowling puts it, "instructing his beloved country might have to be delayed until later generations."\(^{104}\) The *New York Times* review of *Battle-Pieces*, after citing Melville's call to "be Christians toward our fellow whites" and his reminder that "in all things, and toward all, we are enjoined to do as we would be done by," calls the language "treasonous." The writer asserts that such language shows a "hardihood" on Melville's part, and he regrets that by calling "attention thus publicly" to Melville's "views," he will "draw down upon his [Melville's] devoted head Radical wrath."\(^{105}\)

While the review has an underlying satirical flavor to it, that Melville's language, even in satire, would be termed "treasonous," at least by the more Radical wing of American politics, is revealing. Further the reviewer for the Portland *Transcript: An Independent Family Journal of Literature, Science, News Etc.* saw Melville's plea for generosity as perhaps a failure to counter benevolence with much-deserved and much-needed justice: "All will agree that a generous forbearance should be exercised toward the South, but the nation will not forget that it is bound to be just as well as generous."\(^{106}\) So also was the reviewer for the New York *Independent* hesitant to overshadow justice with generosity, asserting that "a little more or less bitterness in the South must be accepted when it is the condition of future safety and of perpetuity, and we cannot help thinking that the added ballot for the black fully offsets the added biliousness for the white."\(^{107}\)

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\(^{105}\) Higgins and Parker, 509.
\(^{106}\) Ibid., 522.
\(^{107}\) Ibid., 525
Still, even with the negative reactions to both Lincoln’s Second Inaugural and Melville’s *Battle-Pieces*, both Lincoln and Melville, represented by Lee in “Lee in the Capitol,” gave their best effort to save the union from Northern tyranny and scorn. In the end, Lee leaves the Capitol knowing that he has performed his duty as the union’s protector, willingly defying the Reconstruction Committee to save them from their own folly and save the precarious reunion that was beginning to take shape. Lee’s role as the union’s defender solidly connects him, philosophically and politically, to Lincoln.

Melville further intertwines and solidifies Lee’s connection to Lincoln through a historical liberty that he takes with the poem. The poem’s subtitle gives the date as April, 1866. As stated earlier, Lee appeared before the Committee nearly two months earlier. Why would Melville be so careless about the dates? Likely the discrepancy is not carelessness. In other places in the collection, Melville is accurate, and Lee’s appearance before the Committee was not a secret, far from it, as evidenced by the *New York Times* having reprinted Lee’s entire testimony in their paper. If Melville was not simply careless in his reassignment of dates, why did he alter a date that would have been known to have been inaccurate? One very probable reason is that April allowed so many natural connections, all of which are significant to Lee’s appearance before the Committee. Three major events all happened in April with respect to the war: 1) The first shots were fired on Fort Sumter April 12, 1861. 2) Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Grant on April 9, 1865. 3) John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln on April 14, 1865. The final point emphasizes that Melville had every intention of bringing Lincoln’s shadow to bear on Robert E. Lee, a point that Cox has validated in his writing. According to Cox, Melville’s date changing may have been a deliberate attempt on his part to

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directly pay tribute to Lincoln as well as to make Lee’s appearance before Congress occur at the same time of year that the Civil War began. Further, Cox asserts that “Melville seems to construe his own book as a poetic substitute for the great speeches of the magnanimous president whose voice had been silenced by a bullet fired by hate-inspired John Wilkes Booth.”* Certainly “Lee at the Capitol” and the prose Supplement fall into that category.

Melville’s liberty with the date Lee appeared before the Committee clearly ties the poem to Lincoln in that Lincoln, the major proponent of union, was assassinated in April, but Melville also provides another connection that ties Lee closely with Lincoln in his advocacy for union. The allusion is to Lee’s surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia to General Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia on April 9, 1865. Lincoln’s commitment to union needs no more explanation than that given in the preceding chapters, but Lee’s commitment is not so clear, since he led the Confederate army in an attempt to assert independence from the union. What is striking about Melville’s assessment of Lee’s character in “Lee in the Capitol” is that it emphasizes certain attributes pertaining to union rarely remembered in connection with Lee, attributes that are impressive in how similar they are to Abraham Lincoln, and how clearly they were manifested by that one event to which Melville drew attention by changing the date of Lee’s appearance to April—the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse.

By 1865, Lincoln had begun to really hope that the bloodshed would soon be over. However, he also had a very real fear that even if the full-scale war ended, the fragmented union would not be mended effectively. If the Confederates chose to retreat

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into the country and continue the war as guerillas, the union would never be safe.

According to Jay Winik, "as much as any other scenario, this was now his [Lincoln’s] greatest fear."^109 Lincoln had good reason to fear a shift to guerilla warfare. If the South chose to pursue that course, the North would be forced to maintain “outposts in every country and every sizable town; they would be forced to put a blockhouse on every railroad bridge and at every major communications center; they would be reduced to combing every sizable valley and every significant mountain range with frequent patrols.” What’s more, the Confederacy had roughly 175,000 men who could be dispersed into smaller units that could easily conduct “hit-and-run attacks” on the enemy and then “invisibly slip back into the population.”^110 Even more frightening for Lincoln and the North was that the day after Richmond fell, Jefferson Davis announced this very plan of attack.

We have now entered upon a new phase of a struggle the memory of which is to endure for all ages...relieved from the necessity of guarding cities and particular points, important but not vital to our defense, with an army free to move from point to point and strike in detail detachments and garrisons of the enemy, operating on the interior of our own country, where supplies are more accessible, and where the foe will be far removed from his own base and cut off from all succor in case of reverse, nothing is now needed to render our triumph certain but the exhibition of our own unquenchable resolve.^111

Thankfully, Lee was not of Davis’ mind and instead chose to act against Davis’ counsel and surrender his army to Grant, knowing that generations of guerilla warfare would not

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^109 Winik, 39.
^110 Ibid., 152.
^111 Ibid., 150.
only destroy the land, including his beloved Virginia, but would have been such a “vile and poisonous conflict” that it would have prevented any “true and national reconciliation” for many years, and probably “fractured the country for decades into warring military pockets.” Instead, Lee chose to preserve the union by surrendering his forces at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, one of the major events that Melville brings to mind in having changed the date of Lee’s testimony to April. By reminding the nation of Lee’s gallantry and the magnanimous gestures from both Grant and Lee at Appomattox in April, Melville also reminds the nation that this Southerner’s magnanimity was not so far from Lincoln, who was shot just five days after the surrender.

Clearly Lee is the prominent character at Appomattox, as he is the one who surrenders his forces, but Lincoln is also important here because he put into practice his own request for charity and good-will. He directed his generals in the terms he would require for surrender, and they are remarkable for their leniency. As Lee advocated in Melville’s imaginary confrontation between Lee and the Reconstruction Committee, Lincoln was careful not to “push [his] triumph” and did not “urge submissiveness beyond the verge.” In fact, Lee’s caution to the Committee is almost an exact description of Lincoln’s surrender instructions to his generals at Petersburg in what became known as the River Queen Doctrine. First, the generals were “to get the deluded men of the rebel armies disarmed and back to their homes.” Moreover, “let them once surrender and reach their homes, [and] they won’t take up arms again.” Lincoln continued with the most

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112 Ibid., 166.
113 Dowling’s “Robert E. Lee & Melville’s Politics in Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War” effectively addresses the issue of guerilla warfare and Lee’s opposition to it in the context of another poem that Dowling suggests sets up the premise to “Lee in the Capitol,” that is Lee’s magnanimity and restraint, “The Scout Toward Aldie.”
charitable terms of all. "Let them all go, officers and all, I want submission, and no more bloodshed." Lincoln desired that "no one" be "punished," and further Grant, Sherman, and the others were to "treat them liberally all around." All Lincoln wanted was for "those people to return to their allegiance to the Union and submit to the law." Lincoln required no more and no less from his wayward brothers and countrymen. His actions put into practice the words he had spoken to a Louisiana unionist in 1862: "I shall do nothing in malice. What I deal with is too vast for malicious dealing." Not all Americans agreed that Lincoln ought to have instructed Grant to offer such leniency. No less than Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed hesitation toward Grant’s leniency. As the war came to a close, he wrote that the rebels ought to be "pounded instead of negociated [sic] into a peace." In referring to General Grant’s terms of condition specifically, Emerson felt that this leniency might interfere with "the high tragic historic justice which the nation, with severest consideration, should execute." Melville did not agree.

In "Lee in the Capitol" Lee becomes Lincoln pleading for tolerance toward a brother gone astray. Lee encourages the North to show "lenience" and to "avoid the tyranny you reprobate." Lee speaks these words in the very month that Americans would most have pondered President Lincoln, remembering that his last major speech to the nation, delivered just over a month prior to his assassination, was the Second Inaugural with its call for charity and leniency, and Lee’s surrender, effectively ending the war and beginning the slow process of reunion. If Dowling is correct that Lee is Melville’s voice, then Cox is also correct that Lincoln’s words certainly found their way into Battle-Pieces, even adopting the persona of one of the South’s most beloved sons, Robert E. Lee.

114 Lincoln, 68.
115 Oates. See the book’s epigraph.
116 Quoted in Aaron, 36.
In one final aspect Melville mimics Lincoln, and once again, he does so using Lee as a spokesman. In the prose Supplement Melville is very careful not to alienate his Southern readers. He is not “revengeful” toward the South.\(^{117}\) On the contrary he is markedly conciliatory and in urging his fellow countrymen to be the same, his call for justice and clemency is designed to unite the various different perspectives that are so prevalent throughout *Battle-Pieces*.\(^{118}\) One of the major points on which Melville’s conciliatory attitude and his call for unification rests is in his refusal to incriminate and blame one side or group for the war. Just as Melville recognizes and urges his audience to “mark the great Captains on both sides,” so too is he unwilling to assign blame to either of those Captains alone.\(^{119}\) All Americans are at fault. Melville recognizes that though in some respects the war was inevitable, a “perversity of fortune,” he also asserts that perhaps all humanity is at fault and indicted accordingly, observing that had certain circumstances been reversed the North may have become the South:

Let us not cover up or try to extenuate what, humanly speaking, is the truth—namely, that those unfraternal denunciations, continued through years, and which at last inflamed to deeds that ended in bloodshed, were reciprocal; and that, had the preponderating strength and the prospect of its unlimited increase lain on the other side, on ours might have lain those actions which now in our late opponents we stigmatize under the name of Rebellion.\(^{120}\)

Melville introduced this bipartisan responsibility for the war, not surprisingly, through Lee in “Lee in the Capitol.” After warning the North not to “push” its “triumph,” Lee

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\(^{118}\) Russo, 123.

\(^{119}\) “A Meditation.”

\(^{120}\) Supplement, 265.
asserts that “vain intermeddlers and malign/Both of the palm and of the pine” “kindled
the war’s white heat.” As such, Northerners and Southerners alike share responsibility
since “common’s the crime in every civil strife.” Though here Melville, through Lee,
does not mention slavery specifically, not surprising since the instrument in the poem is a
Southern slaveholder, the “crime” may very well be slavery, since this is the crime for
which Melville holds all responsible later in the Supplement.

For Melville, the North cannot claim a moral high ground either in the war’s
beginning or its end. If any blame can be rightfully assigned, it has nothing to do with
sectionalism. Rather if blame is to be found it is in the “arts of the conspirators and the
perversity of fortune” which “entrapped” the “most sensitive love of liberty.”
Moreover, even the “atheistical iniquity” slavery could not be deposited at the South’s
feet alone. Melville declares that the South was “for years politically misled by
designing men, and also by some honestly-erring men,” and was “cajoled into
Revolution.” Even here, Melville takes his own advice of having “moderation” and
“showing candor.” He does not shy away from denouncing slavery as a “curse,”
certainly a show of candor on his part, yet he moderates his denunciation with a loophole
for the South and slavery’s ardent supporters. Unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe’s evil Simon
Legree, Melville’s slaveholders and supporters are “honestly-erring” men who are not
even completely culpable for those honest errors because they were not the “authors” of
slavery, only the “fated inheritors.” As such Northerners could claim no moral superiority
even on the slave issue, being not more “righteous” than Southerners, but only more

121 Ibid., 261.
122 Ibid., 261, 268.
123 Ibid., 266.
124 Ibid. 265.
"fortunate" in having not inherited the "curse."^{125} Melville's deliberate indictment of both North and South in slavery's birth and continuation was not appreciated by all of his reading public, which was to be expected, given the poisonous atmosphere that pervaded the war's aftermath. The critic who wrote the review of *Battle-Pieces* for the New York *Independent* expressed his disinclination to believe that the North had anything to do with the war's beginning and declared that "gentleman of Mr. Melville's class are mischievous men in these troublous times. Only absolute justice is safe. Peaceable, by all means peaceable, in God's name; but *first pure*, in God's name, also."^{126} All Americans were not so willing as Melville to assume equal responsibility for the war's beginning and the "curse" that caused it, or to make generous amends after the war had ended.

Melville's denunciation of slavery as a "curse" in the Supplement is significant because it continues his reluctance to truly condemn Southerners even for a sin that he himself conceded was "abhor[ent]," having rejoiced in its "downfall."^{127} A curse is a punishment imposed from the outside, possibly tied to individual choice and action, but ultimately externally imposed, not directly consequential, which is why Melville could claim that Southerners were the "fated inheritors," not reaping the rewards of their own choices. Melville had previously introduced the fated nature of the war in "Lee in the Capitol" when Lee declares that he believes "that North and South were driven/By Fate to arms." That Melville wanted to assign a more transcendent meaning to the war, its cost, and its outcome than mere human action is evident in his reiteration of the idea in the Supplement, which merely echoes the epic nature of the event that is inherent

^{125} Ibid., 266.
^{126} Higgins and Parker, 525.
^{127} The Supplement, 268.
throughout *Battle-Pieces*, with “heaven’s ominous silence” presiding over “man’s latter fall.”\(^{128}\)

Once again, in refusing to pass judgment on the South in the Supplement, Melville stands on the periphery of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural. Lincoln also chose to emphasize sectional similarities instead of differences, refusing to give the North any moral superiority. Just before the famous closing lines, addressed above, Lincoln makes a poignant observation about one area Americans have in common—their faith in the same God. Lincoln notes that “both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God.” He goes on to recognize that each side “invokes His aid against the other,” the truth of which is illustrated in an event written about by Confederate J.W. Hopkins in his memoir. He writes that after the first Bull Run, the Confederate Congress met and passed this resolution: “We recognize the hand of the most high God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, in the glorious victory with which he has crowned our armies at Manassas, and that the people of these Confederate States are invited by appropriate services on the ensuing Sabbath to offer up their united thanksgiving and prayers for this mighty deliverance.”\(^{129}\) Lincoln’s statement was certainly appropriate.

At this point, Lincoln does appear to indict the South as the greater sinner, with the remark that “it might seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces.” Just like Melville, though willing to be conciliatory, Lincoln stops short of condoning the peculiar institution. Nevertheless, even this observation of Lincoln’s is moderated by the line that follows, “but let us judge not that we be not judged.” Lincoln’s statement sets up the

\(^{128}\) “Conflict of Convictions.”

philosophical assertion that Lincoln will then make. Just as Melville imbedded slavery with the external by declaring it a “curse,” Lincoln will also infuse slavery with an external participant, in this case a divine judge. Unlike Melville, however, for Lincoln slavery itself is not the curse. The war is the curse for the act of slavery:

Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’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.”

Although slavery may have brought God’s judgment upon the nation, the slave owners and slave supporters are not the only ones to suffer. All Americans have been subject to God’s punishment, a stinging indictment of North and South for allowing slavery to continue. In a letter to Albert C. Hodges on April 4, 1864, Lincoln admitted the North’s “complicity in that wrong” and would also “pay fairly” if it was God’s will that “the great wrong” be “removed.” The natural consequence of Melville and Lincoln’s reluctance to assign blame to one side or the other is that the North has no right to impose its “victory” on the defeated South. It does not have the moral authority to do so, and if the North does choose to impose its “iron hand,” Melville warns, again through Lee’s voice, that “intestine rancor” from “eleven sliding daggers” will be the consequence.

To avoid such rancor, Melville urges in the Supplement the same advice offered by Lincoln, a “benevolence and policy,” “dissuaded from penal severities toward the

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130 Lincoln, 107.
131 White, 208.
132 “Lee in the Capitol.”
Like Lincoln, Melville had a vision for America’s future. His first and most immediate goal toward achieving that vision “is a Lincolnesque program of clemency toward the South” which would ultimately lead to “the spiritual growth of the nation as prompted and signified by such clemency.” Only by honoring Southern bravery, recognizing their heroes, and refraining from harsh judgment would Melville’s ultimate vision for America be realized:

Let us pray that the terrible historic tragedy of our time may not have been enacted without instructing our whole beloved country through terror and pity; and may fulfillment verify in the end those expectations which kindle the bards of Progress and Humanity.

Melville’s mission in *Battle-Pieces* is to have guided his fellow Americans down a cathartic and “pain[ful]” path, “purify[ing]” the national “stain,” leading to “a wise and magnanimous America reestablished on the bedrock of tragic vision.” Only that tragic knowledge would ensure the “goblin-mountain” and “Gorgon in her hidden place” would stay hidden, particularly as America embarked on its new march toward Humanity and Progress—Reconstruction and its efforts to balance race with reunion.

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133 Supplement, 267.
135 Ibid., 175.
136 “America.”

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CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: RESPONSES AND CONTEXT

The tragic vision through which Melville sought to guide the country in order to attain the vision outlined in "America" and the Supplement would require a changed voice. The old order of gallantry and sentimental voice was gone. Lincoln and Melville knew the old antebellum ideas and forms had to die for the new to live. The new reality into which Lincoln and Melville gazed would be accompanied by new technology and a willingness to confront truth; the war had necessarily changed the country, socially, politically, and economically. Accompanying these external changes, Melville also hoped that Americans themselves had gained a tragic knowledge about their nation and the darker possibilities that lurked just beneath "solidity’s crust," the darkness in their own hearts—"Shakespeare’s core." This tragic vision, a knowledge of the goodness and wickedness found within humanity, both that which is sought and that which is shunned, is what Melville believed would keep the goblin-mountain buried. *Battle-Pieces* anticipates just such a future when North and South could come together under a similar tragic experience, without hatred, when the Gorgon he wrote of in "America" would no longer threaten America’s existence.¹

¹ Megan Williams, "‘Sounding the Wilderness’: Representations of the heroic in Herman Melville’s *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War,*" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2003), par. 24.
Just as Lincoln anticipated his role in presiding over the new America that he envisioned and outlined in the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address, Melville also believed that he as a poet had a role to play. According to Richard Harter Fogle, Melville was striving for a greater purpose that any of his contemporaries imagined in their Civil War writings. Though Melville saw the challenges that Reconstruction posed, he also believed those challenges could be overcome, and *Battle-Pieces* is his advice to his countrymen as well as a recognition of the obstacles that would bar a peaceful resolution to the political strife that still threatened to destroy the fragile peace. In creating his collection as a public rather than a private literary work, Melville took the risk that his work might be rejected by the public. The opening chapter to this study identifies the rejection that ultimately did occur and details why the collection has yet to receive much critical attention. However, in order to truly complete the current study of *Battle-Pieces*, one more area must be addressed, if only briefly—Melville’s poetry in comparison to some of his contemporary Civil War writers.

Throughout this dissertation, Melville’s poetry has been analyzed through the lens of the political and social trends that characterized and shaped Reconstruction. Such is a useful tool in understanding the poetry itself and sheds some light on the reason why Melville’s work was not readily accepted in the war’s immediate aftermath. Hopefully it also helps to re-direct critical attention to an understudied aspect of *Battle-Pieces* as literary and history scholars alike try to gain a better understanding of the moods, attitudes, and hopes of Americans who had to go on with their lives after living through a hell that had destroyed so many of their lives and razed the very foundations of what they recognized as America and home.

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Because the Civil War left nothing and nobody untouched by some aspect of its heavy hand, it was used extensively as literary material, by Melville and by many others. Melville's approach, however, was in many ways unique to his literary subject. When *Battle-Pieces* was published in 1866, most of the poem having been written, by Melville's own admission in the introduction to the work, after Richmond fell, Americans had long been accustomed to a particular type of writing, in theme as well as structure. As Daniel Aaron wrote in his significant work on post-Civil War literature, "Polite literature before and after the War excluded certain kinds of experience, and it is not surprising that the territory of the common soldier should have been placed ‘off bounds’ by America’s cultural guardians...the few attempts even to approximate the seamy and unheroic side of the War met with small favor until the next century." (xvii). Melville stepped into the off bounds territory and often did depict the unheroic that characterized the new type of mechanized and total war that the Civil War ushered onto America's physical and psychological landscape. While a full comparison of Melville with his polite contemporaries is subject enough for its own dissertation or book, perhaps at least a few words on the subject might be useful as a jumping off point for future research. The most predominate aspect of the polite literature of which Aaron writes that will be discussed here is, perhaps, the most relevant to war literature: dying, death, and bestowing meaning on the sacrifice of those who did suffer and die in their commitment to the cause, whether North or South.

The various literary responses to the war are certainly as important as the political responses because within the various literary genres that took the war for their subject matter, a greater picture can be gained about the divided social landscape that made

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reunion both an ideal dream and a nasty reality, depending on perspective. Within this new framework, the old ideas about death, warfare, and heroism had to be reexamined and needed a language more suited to the harsh brutality and mass killing that defined mechanized warfare. Gregory A. Coco in *Killed in Action* aptly described this new mechanized style: “War is like a great monstrous threshing machine; it does not keep score; it does not pick and choose; it does not show preference. It merely crushes and maims and destroys, with no rhyme or reason, until its bloody, sickening work is done.”

Throughout *Battle-Pieces*, Melville is clear that he is willing to recognize this new reality, both in theme and language, though in both cases it meant disowning some ante-bellum sensibilities about what was appropriate for literature and what was not.

Perhaps the best place to start a discussion of literary responses to the war is with the most famous of Melville’s contemporaries, Walt Whitman. First, the famous lines from Whitman’s *Specimen Days*:

> Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background of countless minor scenes and interiors, (not the official surface courtesousness of the Generals, not the few great battles) of the Secession war; and it is best they should not—the real war will never get in the books... The actual soldier of 1862—65, North and South, with all his ways, his incredible dauntlessness, habits, practices, tastes, language, his fierce friendship, his appetite, rankness, his superb

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5 The Whitman poems used here can be found in a variety of collections both of Whitman and Civil War literature. I have chosen to use Faith Barrett and Cristanne Miller’s *Words for the Hour: A New Anthology of American Civil War Poetry* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).
strength and animality, lawless gait, and a hundred unnamed lights and shades of camp, I say, will never be written—perhaps must not and should not be.  

When reading various pieces on the war, particularly literary pieces, one is tempted to ask whether or not Whitman was right, both whether the war ever would get in the books, and even more importantly whether or not it ever should get in the books, whether or not the "infernal background" and "seething hell" was appropriate for literary consumption, of which Whitman certainly was not convinced. After all, Whitman did have first-hand experience with the war's more unheroic side, its bloody casualties. If anyone had the experience and ability to put that war into the books, it was certainly Whitman. A line or two from his personal correspondence reveals his profound ability to detail his first-hand experiences and his recognition of the "real war." In a letter he wrote to his mother in 1863, he detailed his more pessimistic and very "real" response to what he saw: "One's heart grows sick of war after all, when you see what it really is—every once in a while I feel so horrified & disgusted—it seems to me like a great slaughter-house & the men mutually butchering each other." Later that same year, he wrote again: "I sometimes think over the sights I myself have seen, the arrival of the wounded after a battle, & scenes on the field too, & I can hardly believe my own recollection—what an awful thing war is—Mother, it seems not men but a lot of devils & butchers butchering each other." In a journal entry for May 12, 1863 after describing the "butchers' shamble" and the "groans and screams—the odors of blood" coming from the "slaughterhouse" that was the aftermath of Chancellorsville, he concluded that it was best that "mothers and sisters  

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6 Speciman Days is an easy text to find. For this particular citation an electronic source was used, <www.bartleby.com>.  

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cannot conceive, and never conceiv'd these things." For a literary audience that included women, the real war was not fit for the popular literary market.

When considering *Drum-Taps*, Whitman’s collection of war poetry, a wide variety of poems present themselves for inspection. One of the earlier poems in the collection and one of the most anthologized is “Beat, Beat Drums,” a poem that certainly indicates an interest in Whitman of taking the war to the general public, but the poem is, of course, set at the war’s beginning, before anybody had any inkling of the war’s destructiveness.

Beat! beat! drums!— Blow! bugles! blow!
Through the windows—through doors—burst like a ruthless force,
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation;
Into the school where the scholar is studying;
Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must he have now with his bride;
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, plowing his field or gathering his grain;
So fierce you whirr and pound, you drums—so shrill you bugles blow.

Beat! beat! drums!— Blow! bugles! blow!
Over the traffic of cities—over the rumble of wheels in the streets:
Are beds prepared for sleepers at night in the houses? No sleepers must sleep in those beds;
No bargainers' bargains by day—no brokers or speculators--Would they continue?
Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to sing?
Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case before the judge?

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Then rattle quicker, heavier drums--you bugles wilder blow.

Beat! beat! drums!—Blow! bugles! blow!

Make no parley--stop for no expostulation;
Mind not the timid--mind not the weeper or prayer;
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man;
Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's entreaties;
Make even the trestles to shake the dead, where they lie awaiting the hearses,
So strong you thump, O terrible drums--so loud you bugles blow.

In this poem the drum beats are taken into every life, every community, every occupation. The drums penetrate the farm, the city and even invade the bridal chamber of the newly married couple—and the drums seem to do so heroically and happily, as the jingoistic nature seems to underscore.

The war ought to be taken to the people, yet the real war as it was experienced by Whitman and others was not really taken to the people beyond this opening call to arms because as Whitman discovered, the real war was not suitable material for the antebellum sensibility. The closest he came to detailing the horror he described to his mother and in his journal is in “The Wound-Dresser” where he describes his duties of dressing bloody wounds of amputees and others. Yet even in this poem, the “seething hell” and “infernal background” of the war is tempered by the image of the generous nurse who lovingly cares for each wound, giving each soldier individual attention, and the focus of the bloody passages ends in a positive affirmation of death as a beautiful relief to suffering and of the nurse’s desire to take the place of those soldiers whose names he never knew.
In this way, Whitman holds true to the ante-bellum sensibility about death, described by George M. Frederickson in his foundation text *The Inner Civil War*: “The ante-bellum American sensibility had demanded a meaning in the death of the individual.” One of the best examples of this aspect of sentimental antebellum literature expected by Americans was the deaths of Eva and Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In both instances, Eva and Tom are mourned individually, not just as another child and another slave to be tossed into an unnamed and unmentioned grave. Rather, their deaths are significant both in light of the individual relations with those who care for them and in relation to their deaths having a quality of inspiration, guidance, and ultimate goodness instilled in those left behind, hence the book’s title to honor Tom—*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Whitman takes these same sentimental, ante-bellum expectations for death and infuses them into “The Wound Dresser,” thereby moderating the “real war” of his experience into something more palatable, more “polite” as Aaron suggested. Throughout the poem, the narrator emphasizes the attention given to each soldier individually, not as a group. Though the narrator looks upon the “rows of the hospital tent” and “the long rows of cots up and down” that are filled with the wounded who were “after the battle brought in,” he sees the men as individuals who are wounded, not categorically. With his cloths and rags “soon to be clotted” with blood, he stops at each cot: “To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss.” In case his attentions might be taken as to general, Whitman here interjects a moment of sheer personal communion with one soldier, just a moment, but an intimate one that suggests individual connectivity and meaning, both for the soldier and for the narrator: “One turns to me his appealing eyes—poor boy! I never knew you,/Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if

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8 Frederickson, 83.
that would save you.” Though the soldier is a stranger to the narrator, an important point to remember, he has given the narrator a moment of truth and raw individual emotion, a technique that he also utilized in “Reconciliation.” In this poem, the narrator recognizes his own personal connection to an already dead soldier, an enemy:

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,

Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost,

That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash again,

and ever again, this soil’d world;

For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,

I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw near,

Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

Just as in “The Wound-Dresser,” here the narrator gains a personal and relevant connection to the individual dead soldier. The dead soldier is not a meaningless corpse numbered among thousands of others. He has been the instrument of enlightenment for the narrator—the truth of human connectivity. As such, the soldier’s death has attained a transcendent meaning. The same occurs in “The Wound-Dresser.” The narrator in that poem, who tells the story long after it has happened, validates the soldier’s worth first by his willingness to identify with the soldier and then by repeating the story to other listeners. This soldier, whoever he was, was an individual when he died and his death retained meaning, a sacrifice to a greater cause and as an instrument of enlightenment for the narrator, much as with Tom’s death in the closing moments of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Meaning out of loss was not specific to Whitman or to Northerners in general; Southern poets also sought to make the sacrifices of their soldiers honorable, not just
mere casualties of the threshing machine. One such writer was Virginia physician J.R. Bagby, the author of a popular poem published in 1866 in War Poetry of the South entitled "The Empty Sleeve." The poem is a ballad about a man named Tom who lost his arm during the battle of Malvern Hill: "A good right arm, a nervy hand,/A wrist as strong as a sapling oak,/Buried deep in the Malvern sand—/To laugh at that, is a sorry joke./Never again your iron grip/Shall I feel in my shrinking palm." Tom, while he bears his loss with courage still requires the comfort that the narrator can give to calm his "trembling lip." The narrator passionately reminds Tom that his sacrifice was not in vain, but that his empty sleeve was "a badge of honor." Furthermore, his entire life has now attained a transcendence before unknown: "Tom! The arm that has turned to clay,/Your whole body has made sublime;/For you have placed in the Malvern earth/The proof and pledge of a noble life—/And the rest, henceforward of higher worth,/Will be dearer than all to your wife." That the wound is a badge of an honorable life lived and sacrificed is not the end of the narrator's argument. Tom's loss has had a meaning beyond his own nobility. The cause for which he gave it is also worthy of the sacrifice made: "Bravely your arm in battle strove,/Freely for Freedom's sake, you gave it;/It has perished—but a nation's love/In proud remembrance will save it." Bagby and Tom's friend strove to believe that the sacrifices made by those who struggled were not anonymous and meaningless, just as Whitman did in "The Wound-Dresser."

Throughout "The Wound-Dresser," Whitman continues to dispel the temptation to coalesce all wounded into one group, thereby emphasizing anonymity rather than individuality. Instead, Whitman chooses to identify, to list, to individualize the different wounds that he dresses. While the sensational effect of describing various wounds
certainly is literarily enticing, the divisions also serve to re-emphasize that just as all soldiers did not die from the same wounds, they were each individual people, with differing needs and lives. Note Whitman’s attention to each different soldier’s needs:

On, on I go, (open doors of time! open hospital doors!)
The crush’d head I dress (poor crazed hand tear not the bandage away,
The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through I examine,
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard
(Come sweet death! be persuaded O beautiful death!
In mercy come quickly).

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood,
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv’d neck and side-falling head,
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump,
And has not yet look’d on it.

I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,
But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,
And the yellow-blue countenance see.
I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound,
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive,
While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail.
I am faithful, I do not give out,
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand (yet deep in my breast a fire, a
burning flame).

While his “hand” may be “impassive,” inside the narrator feels no such coldness, knowing that each soldier is an individual life, like his own, with whom he would trade places. Likewise in his poem “A Sight Seen in a Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim,” Whitman sees the dead and dying soldiers, young and old together, and remarks that “this face was the face of the Christ himself.” Ultimately, the sacrifice of the soldiers is given meaning, positive meaning—the war has not been in vain. The cause for which they sacrificed was worth the price paid.

Like Whitman, Louisa May Alcott was also concerned that a soldier’s death should not be lonely, meaningless, or devoid of individual attention. Alcott describes in her Hospital Sketches one particularly difficult incident that impressed itself on her young mind as one of the many “tragic” moments that “met one everywhere.”9 She records her horror at the incidental nature that seemed to accompany one soldier’s death:

It seemed a poor requital for all he had sacrificed and suffered,—that hospital bed, lonely even in a crowd; for there was no familiar face for him to look his last upon; no friendly voice to say, Good bye; no hand to lead him gently down into the Valley of the Shadow; and he vanished, like a drop in that red sea upon whose shores so many women sad lamenting. For a moment, I felt bitterly indignant at this seeming carelessness of the value of life, the sanctity of death.10

9 Louisa May Alcott, Hospital Sketches (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004), 75.
10 Ibid., 77.
Alcott’s response defines the antebellum sensibility about death, and she is only able to console herself with the belief that “when the great muster roll was called, these nameless men might be promoted above many whose tall monuments record the barren honors they have won.” Alcott was not alone in her consoling thought that though death might occur in a meaningless way in this life, a grand reception could be expected in the next life, a necessary reconciliation between antebellum sensibility and the wartime reality that constantly contradicted that sensibility and threatened to render it false and meaningless. Mary H.C. Booth in a poem entitled “I’m Dying, Comrade” also posits that soldiers, in this case particularly Union soldiers, could expect to be rewarded and honored by God in heaven for their sacrifice. The poem begins with a soldier speaking to his comrade:

I think I’m dying, comrade,

The day is growing dark;

And that is not the bob-o-link,

Nor yet the meadow-lark:

It cannot be the distant drum;

It cannot be the fife,

For why should drum, or bob-o-link,

Be calling me from life?

The speaker continues to explain why he believes he is dying and finally in the third stanza, he reveals that he has seen what waits for him beyond his mortal existence. The words are Booth’s powerful reminder that no matter how or where a soldier died, his reward would be immense, far outweighing the “barren honors” of which Alcott wrote:

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11 Ibid.  
12 The poem is included in Barrett and Miller, 163.
I think we must have conquered,
    For all last night it seemed
That I was up in Paradise—
    Among the blest, it seemed.
And there, beside the Throne of God,
    I saw a banner wave,
The good old Stars and Stripes, my boy,
    O'er victory and the grave.

A hundred thousand soldiers
    Stood at the right of God;
And old John Brown, he stood before,
    Like Aaron with his rod:
A slave was there beside him,
    And Jesus Christ was there;
And over God, and Christ, and all,
    The banner waved in air.

And now I'm dying, comrade,
    And there is old John Brown
A standing at the Golden Gate,
    And holding me a crown.
The dying soldier is sure that a crown awaits him in heaven for his service to the Stars and Stripes. This belief gives him comfort in his dying moments. Like Alcott, Booth refuses to accept ignominious or meaningless death, even if what they saw confirmed that very humiliation.

Additionally, Booth will not completely abandon her soldier in his dying moments, as Alcott is forced to do because of her hospital duties and the limited amount of supplies. Her soldier does not die alone. He is accompanied by another soldier, presumably, and not just any stranger, but his comrade. This comrade has stayed with him on the field, has not marched on ahead or left him wounded and suffering. Though Booth reveals virtually nothing about the comrade, he is the soul receptacle for the dying soldiers' last words, his sustaining hope that he has not died in vain, has not died nameless and friendless. He is, after all, to have a crown that has been specially set aside for him. Though the mortal victory for him has ended in death, his eternal reward for the victory is assured, and he has not faced that final moment alone. His comrade has accompanied him to the death's threshold.

Like Booth and Alcott, Whitman also gave voice to the sentimental belief that death should not be faced alone. One of his most famous and anthologized war poems addresses this very need to be mourned at the moment of death. The poem is “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night.” The poem is a remarkably eloquent expression of a father’s grief combined with a soldier’s duty. In the second line, the narrator reveals his relationship to the fallen comrade and sets up the context for the strange vigil. His vigil

13 Alcott relates that the dying soldier has a horrible stomach wound but asks for some water, though he knows he is dying. Alcott quickly runs to find a water pail. Unfortunately, all of the water pails are gone and she has to wait for one to arrive. When it finally does arrive and she immediately goes back to the dying man, he has already died. See pages 76-77 of Hospital Sketches.
began “when you my son and my comrade dropt at my side that day,/One look I but gave which your dear eyes return’d with a look I shall never forget,/One touch of your hand to mine O boy, reach’d up as you lay on the ground.” What is most interesting about the poem at this point is that the father’s grief and need to mourn his son and comrade’s impending death is countered by his duty as a soldier. So, after the one slight touch, “Then onward I sped in the battle, the even-contested battle.” However, the need to keep vigil with the dead is not forgotten by Whitman or the narrator in the poem. After the battle has ended, even in the midst of the many dead and dying that must have spotted the field, the man returns to the one dying soldier, his son and comrade who fell earlier in the day: “Till late in the night reliev’d to the place at last again I made my way,/Found you in death so cold dear comrade, found your body son of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,)/Bared your face in the starlight, curious the scene, cold blew the moderate night-wind,/Long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly around me the battle-field spreading,/Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet there in the fragrant silent night.” The man keeps his vigil all night long, even though his son and comrade has already drifted off into death’s sleep. At the end of the man’s vigil, he buries his fallen comrade gently and with love:

Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed just as the dawn appear’d.

My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop’d well his form,

Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head and carefully under feet,

And there and then and Bathed by the rising sun, my son in his grave, in his rude-dug grave I deposited,

Ending my vigil strange with that, vigil of night and battle-field dim,
Vigil for boy of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,)
Vigil for comrade swiftly slain, vigil I never forget, how as day brighten’d,
I rode from the chill ground and folded my soldier well in his blanket,
And buried him where he fell.

That the individual ought to be mourned with a nightlong vigil and finally wrapped up
with care and buried in a single and individual grave, not thrown into a trench for mass
burial, is an essential antebellum characteristic that evokes tremendous pathos in
Whitman’s poem. Like Booth and Alcott, Whitman refuses to let his soldiers die alone,
unnamed, or unmourned.

Whitman and Booth’s poetic response to the war’s casualties differs sharply from at
least one soldier who saw death so often that it ceased to hold any specificity or meaning
for him at all, except as a frank and stoic fact. Frank Wilkeson in his Recollections of a
Private Soldier in the Army of the Potomac, wrote extensively about the manner in which
men were wounded and died. The account Wilkeson gives is horrifying in its coldness
and for the disinterested methodology that distances him from any sympathy, or even any
connection at all, with the dying men he describes. Wilkeson writes as a scientist who
examines a specimen set before him, only interested in the process by which they cease to
be animated and sentient beings. His response is utterly devoid of personal attachment or
connection. The most poignant part of Wilkeson’s memoir is that Wilkeson describes
others like himself who do not have a “burning flame” inside for their dying and dead
comrades, as Whitman’s narrator does. Note the difference between Whitman’s
description in “The Wound-Dresser” and Wilkeson’s:
The enlisted men were exceedingly accurate judges of the probable result which would ensure from any wound they saw. They had seen hundreds of soldiers wounded, and they had noticed that certain wounds always resulted fatally. They knew when they were fatally wounded, and after the shock of discovery had passed, they generally braced themselves and died in a manly manner. It was seldom that an American or Irish volunteer flunked in the presence of death.\textsuperscript{14}

Wilkeson’s entire chapter “How Men Die in Battle” is completely devoid of sentimentality, either that death ought be mourned individually or that individual deaths had meaning beyond themselves. Wilkeson was certainly not alone in his recollection. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. wrote to his mother in 1862 that “it’s odd how indifferent one gets to the sight of death—perhaps, because one gets aristocratic and don’t value a common life—Then they are apt to be so dirty it seems natural—‘Dust to Dust’—I would do anything that lay in my power but it doesn’t much affect my feelings.”\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps it was this same unsentimental view of death, unmourned and meaningless, that kept some of Melville’s poetry from gaining a great hold on people’s literary interest, accustomed as they were to antebellum literary conventions that demanded heroism, meaning, sorrow, and individuality in death and sacrifice. Though A. Robert Lee has suggested that Melville’s collection should be viewed as a “companion-piece to Whitman’s better-known Drum-Taps,” maybe the very different responses to the war that might make them


\textsuperscript{15} Frederickson, 86.
complementary are exactly why Whitman's have been more than casually read and studied, while Melville's have languished in obscurity and disregard.16

While Melville did on occasion allow moments of individual mourning and ascribed meaning to soldiers' deaths and suffering, the inscriptive section being a good example, he was also willing to point out that this new form of warfare and its attendant consequences was not like the old. "The Armies of the Wilderness" is a good example of how Melville treated death in the midst of mechanized and total war. The poem is notable for various reasons, some of which have already been addressed in previous chapters, but for the current discussion, one of the primary strengths of the poem is in its detailed descriptions of the war, the battle, and the grim reality that faced the soldiers on the field. Rarely does Melville truly physically unmask war and show its true face, as he is more often concerned with specific people and political issues. "The Armies in of the Wilderness" is a brilliant exception:

In glades they meet skull after skull
Where pine-cones lay—the rusted gun,
Green shoes full of bones, the mouldering coat
And cuddled-up skeleton;
And scores of such. Some start as in dreams,
And comrades lost bemoan:
By the edge of those wilds Stonewall had charged—
But the Year and the Man were gone.

Not only does Melville earlier in the poem describe the current scope of the battle, but here he compounds the horror by revealing the desolation from the previous battles that have yet to be mended. How different than Whitman’s poem that honorably gave burial to the fallen individual. Here, soldiers have not been buried at all. Their skulls and skeletons have been forgotten, unburied, unmourned, and have been the bedfellows of pine-cones and decay, their coats having “moulder’d” and their guns “rust’d.” The grisly scene is not composed of only one fellow somehow missed by the burial parties, which might perhaps be forgivable, but such is not the reality here. At this scene it is “skull after skull” that greets the army now, a vicious reminder that death does not always lead to memorial or dignity, as Alcott believed it should. Moreover, not only the soldiers of past battles are in danger of becoming nameless victims of wholesale death. Melville recognizes that the cycle would repeat itself at each battle. As the soldiers “rush in the shrapnel’s stead,” they “go where the shade is, perhaps into Hades, Where the brave of all times have led.” Yet, even here Melville counters the allusion to the Greek and Roman heroes of times past like Achilles and Hector. These soldiers who rush into the glade amongst the fallen and mouldering skeletons whose “green shoes” are “full of bones,” will instead attain the same anonymity of the skeletons. They themselves will become the skeletons’ companions:

That husky huzzah in the hazy groves—
What flying encounters fell;
Pursuer and pursued like ghosts disappear
In gloomed shade—their end who shall tell?
The crippled, a ragged-barked stick for a crutch,
Limp to some elfin dell—
Hobble from the sigh of dead faces—white
As pebbles in a well.

Nobody knows what happens to them; in fact, they cease to have any material existence at all, becoming like ghosts, unintelligible and unseen. Those who die here in the wilderness will not even be given proper burial. Like the skeletons they encountered, their bodies will be forgotten, their guns will rust, and their coats will moulder: "Few burial rites shall be;/No priest with book and band/Shall come to the secret place/Of the corpse in the foe-man's land."

The Wilderness Battle was not the only battle where Melville illustrated the real anonymity of death. "Donelson" also realizes that soldiers could not stop to keep vigil over their dead comrades. The dead and wounded were often left behind as survivors either pursued their enemies or retreated. In "Donelson" as the war raged on and finally fell into night, the dead were left alone:

Some dozen

Hapless wounded men were frozen.

During day being struck down out of sight,
And help-cries drowned in roaring noise,
They were left just where the skirmish shifted—
Left in dense underbrush snow-drifted.
Some, seeking to crawl in crippled plight,
So stiffened—perished.
This one instance was not the only time that soldiers had to leave their comrades during this battle. Earlier in the poem, Melville depicts the grim reality even more graphically:

“But left some comrades in their fame,/Red on the ridge in icy wreath/And hanging gardens of cold Death.” The new war with its screaming shrapnel and whizzing bullets left little possibility for individual recognition, as thousands were killed and wounded in a matter of minutes. Melville, unlike those who still held to a sentimental need for meaning and individual attention at death, recognized the reality the Civil War spawned. One consequence of the new reality was that soldiers often did go unnoticed, unnamed, and unrecognized.

Accompanying the anonymity and loneliness of death were the generals who both created and adjusted to the new reality they faced. The new generals were not the gallants of yesteryear. The general who emerges in Battle-Pieces as the most heroic is General Grant, a man who was hated by many for his willingness to endure tremendous casualties in order to win. Nathan W. Daniels recorded in his diary entry for June 22, 1864 the following assessment of Grant: “It seems to be admitted by all of his officers that he is reckless of the lives of his men, as was Napoleon, results are his aim, not fear of blood letting, and he cared not what sacrifice is made doth it but accomplish his object.” In fact, Stanton Garner has argued that for Melville General Grant was the new man for the new age. According to Garner, “Grant is the new hero of the new America, plain, blunt, efficient, masterful, and filled with compassion for his men.” Indeed in the poem “Chattanooga” in the midst of a difficult and hard fought battle, “sky-drawn Grant”

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stands in "sharp relief," calmly smoking his cigar, "While in solicitude his back/Heaps slowly to a hump." His calmness in battle does not detract from his ability to sympathize with his men. Grant may have been efficient, but heartless he was not, as some like Daniels claimed, at least not according to Melville who sees him slumping while in solicitude, perhaps an image not unlike Melville himself, who efficiently surveys the battle scene but never forgets the men who suffered. The first picture that Melville gives of Grant in the battle is calm serenity, in control of the battle that rages around him:

On yester-morn in grayish mist,
    Armies like ghosts on hills had fought,
And rolled from the cloud their thunders loud
    The Cumberlands far had caught;
    To-day the sunlit steeps are sought.
Grant stood on cliffs whence all was plain,
    And smoked as one who feels no cares;
But mastered nervousness intense
    Alone such calmness wears.

Melville’s Grant is one who is indeed calm in battle, controlled and poised, yet not devoid as some might suggest, of emotion. He simply has learned to “master” the “nervousness intense” that he feels inside. Yet, he is efficient and calm and sends his men into a battle he knows they can win, “Well, go on and do your will,” he tells his men in Melville’s poem. No blustering and no speeches, only blunt efficiency.

In the poem that follows “Chattanooga,” “Armies of the Wilderness,” Grant is further described:
A quiet Man, and plain garb—
Briefly he looks his fill,
Then drops his gray eye on the ground,
Like a loaded mortar he is still:
Meekness and grimness meet in him—
The silent General.

*Were men but strong and wise,*

*Honest as Grant, and calm,*

*War would be left to the red and black ants,*

*And the happy world disarm.*

Grant, not Lee or McClellan, is the new hero for the new age.

Along with the new heroes that would be needed for the new world Melville saw emerging before him, a world in which soldiers had no time to go back and mourn their dead and too many died in a single battle for individual burial and memorial, Melville saw that a new language would also be necessary. Subjective and sentimental language could not portray effectively the horrible awfulness and mangled bodies, spirits, and land that war left in its wake: “None can narrate that strife in the pines,/A seal is on it—Sabaean lore!/Obscure as the wood, the entangled rhyme/But hints at the maze of war.”¹⁹ The old language of poetry is useless for the new horror that none could possibly have imagined even in their worst nightmares. In Melville’s own words, “Orpheus’ charm is vain,” and even when the rhyme is “entangled” only hints of war’s true visage are

¹⁹“The Armies of the Wilderness.”
Deliberately using entangled rhyme to reveal truth is exactly what Melville seeks to do, in order to put Whitman's "real war in the books," a feat that Whitman failed to do because he chose to use Orpheus' charm, not an entangled rhyme. Unfortunately, many of Melville's contemporaries did not agree that entangled rhyme was the best way to write about the war, perhaps contributing to *Battle-Pieces* poor public reception.

Several contemporary reviews of *Battle-Pieces* illustrate the difficulty that Melville faced in stepping outside the bounds of sentimental literature into the new reality of cannons filled with grapeshot and canister, repeating rifles, and trenches, a reality symbolized most clearly by General Grant. The *Albion* reported that Melville's "conceptions are frequently obscure, and his style uncouth and harsh." The *Round Table* reviewer found that Melville's "ease of melody is deficient, as we have already hinted, while some of his rhymes are positively barbarous." The *Providence Journal* noted that "with occasional gleams of poetic inspiration, his verses are generally uncouth in form, rambling in measure, and rough and discordant in their rhyme. We have no fancy for poetry which runs on eccentricities and ziggags. We would rather read one chapter of Typee than all the patriotic and pathetic battle-pieces in this curious volume." The San Francisco *Evening Bulletin* berated the poetry in *Battle-Pieces* as being "cast in unfamiliar metre," with the "versification" becoming "at times harsh and limping."

Further, the editors wrote that they could "pardon barbarism of style in men like Carlyle or Emerson, who are original thinkers; but when Herman Melville affects the obscurly profound and dislocates the parts of speech from sheer contempt of good English, we

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20 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 520.
23 Ibid, 522.
confess it makes our gorge rise." While the editors of the *Evening Bulletin* accused Melville of deliberately "dislocating" his language, they misjudged the reason and did not read Melville carefully enough. Melville himself admits his entangled style in "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Flight." His reason, however, was not out of "sheer contempt of good English," but rather in recognition of the new world that the Civil War had ushered into existence.

The poem's title is the first indicator that the poem might be about something other than a naval engagement and retreat. The word "utilitarian" becomes tantamount to the poem's double meaning because it suggests the practical, not the strategic, the tactical, the military, or the romantic. The war had for Melville become something beyond waving flags, unfurled banners, and opportunities for professional soldiers and sailors to display their abilities and training. It had become a perfect demonstration of the old world passing into obscurity before a new world of mechanics, common soldiers and sailors, and iron boats replacing the older hand-crafted wood boats, yet still retaining a very real sense of the human suffering amidst the destruction. To truly see the significance of "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Flight," its companion poem that appears just prior to "The Monitor's Flight" must be jointly examined, "The Temeraire."

"The Temeraire" contains a subtitle and note by Melville that makes the poem a little more plain in how it should be read. The subtitle reads, (Supposed to have been suggested to an Englishman of the old order by the fight of the Monitor and Merrimac." The note on the poem is as follows: "The Temeraire, that storied ship of the old English fleet, and the subject of the well-known painting by Turner, commends itself to the mind seeking for some one craft to stand for the poetic ideal of those great historic wooden

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24 Ibid., 521.
warships, whose gradual displacement is lamented by none more than by regularly educated navy officers, and of all nations.” In short, the poem is a lament for the passing of the old order into a new more mechanized one that is lacking in artistry and gallantry. The poem’s first two stanzas describe the stark contrast between the new ironclads and the old order of which the *Temeraire* was part:

The gloomy hulls, in armor grim,

Like clouds o’er moors have met,

And prove that oak, and iron, and man

Are tough in fibre yet.

But Splendors wane. The sea-fight yields

No front of old display;

The garniture, emblazonment,

And heraldry all decay.

Though the new ironclads might be gloomy in their grim armor, lacking splendor, emblazonment and heraldry, they are still tough and ready for action. Melville does not ever suggest that the new ironclads are not worthy of the battleground they will inherit, but he does lament the lost gallantry of the old order that “to the years must yield” as “men learn a deadlier lore.” The speaker in the poem and Melville respect the new “rivets” that “clinch the ironclads,” though saddened at the “Titan Temeraire” whose “stern-lights fade away.” However, with the new ironclads and all that they symbolize, is needed a new language to discuss the new weaponry and the new destruction that those weapons will cause. The old language of gallantry and heraldry are just not suitable, as
Melville later declared when he depicted the consequences of the new style of warfare, most closely illustrated by the mechanized navy—the ironclads.

Following "The Temeraire," Melville becomes very explicit about his use of language in "The Monitor’s Flight." He explains his "entangled rhyme" in the very first stanza: "Plain be the phrase, yet apt the verse/More ponderous than nimble." Melville knows that his verse is not particularly nimble, but he did not intend that it should be. His is not the language of the Temeraire. Certainly he could be nimble when he chose to be ("Shiloh" and "The House-top" are two good examples), but for much of *Battle-Pieces*, he chose to be more "ponderous," knowing that his topics and subjects were weightier than nimble lyrics and constructed rhyme were equipped to handle. Though Melville admits that his verse will not be nimble, rather plain, he does not concede that such a change is degraded or any less praiseworthy. Observe the second stanza:

Hail to victory without the gaud

Of glory; zeal that needs no fans
Of banners; plain mechanic power
Plied cogently in War now placed—
Where War belongs—
Among the trades and artisans.

Melville's verse is not bedecked with "glory." Instead it is plain, and resides among the "trades and artisans," not high courts and aristocratic circles. His poetry evokes the common truth about the war, its participants, and the ugly reality that reconciliation would be neither easy nor quick. In so writing, Melville would bring his verse closer to truth, closer to revealing the dark, tragic knowledge that America now had to face: "Yet
this was battle, and intense—/Beyond the strife of fleets heroic; Deadlier, closer, calm 'mid storm.” Such was Melville’s hope for his own poetry, a hope that *Battle-Pieces* would go beyond mere heroism and touch something closer to Americans’ hearts, a true commitment to democracy, “the world’s fairest hope.” Only in facing the true and real struggle ahead, one that had been and might well continue to be deadly, would Americans develop the strength necessary to be “calm 'mid storm” and build the nation that Melville envisioned. Melville’s America was a nation that would weather the nastiness and disillusion of Reconstruction and be ready to take her place as a leader of nations with “Law on her brow and empire in her eyes,” having finally “grown wise” and “matured for age’s seat.”

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25 “The Monitor’s Flight.”
26 “Misgivings.”
27 “America.”
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