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**Down from the Crow's Nest:
Herman Melville's *Battle-Pieces*
and *Aspects of the War***

uring the years 1861-1865 a generation of Americans faced the mechanized, uncensored brutality of war. Whether experienced in person or seen in a Matthew Brady photograph, the scarred land, bloated bodies, and dismembered limbs shredded many romantic illusions about war and altered the way some Americans perceived the battlefield. At the close of this bloodletting, American culture was itself fragmented and in need of reconstruction. Not only reconstruction as it pertained to the South, but the reconstruction of a post-war comprehension of reality. This cultural reconstruction enveloped a generation of writers who embraced the daunting task of representing war—what Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. aptly described as an “incommunicable experience.” It also occurred at a time when writers were still consciously grappling with the meaning of being “American” writers. The critical response to much of the literature produced after the war was lukewarm (at best)—the war spawned no *Iliad*, no *Aeneid*, no *Song of Roland*. William Dean Howells, in fact, claimed that American writers had responded “lamely” to the “charge” of war.¹ Yet, this early estimate tends to dismiss the literary significance of key works, like Herman Melville’s *Battle-Pieces* and *Aspects of the War*.

To offer a fair appraisal of Melville’s work, it must be placed in an appropriate literary context. For starters, these writers were in many ways artistically and culturally unprepared. Today when we think of war writers, we may think of names like Hemingway, Vonnegut, or O’Brien. (The list is quite extensive, especially if we expand our vision of war literature to include works written by men and women outside the main conflict.) Yet writers during the Civil War lacked renowned American models. They could look to Philip Freneau and Phyllis Wheatley’s early Revolutionary poetry, but the conventionality of this verse does not seem as if it would resonate with an experimental artist like Melville. There also are examples of captivity narratives, like Mary Rowlandson’s work treating

her experiences during King Philip's war. But on the whole, Melville and the other writers of the time lacked major American models of war literature. This reality, in part, highlights the apparent difficulty of depicting a conflict of this magnitude. Writers like Melville felt the classic American tension—a conscious desire to create “American” literature and a reverence for earlier Homeric or Miltonic models. Despite the artistic challenges inherent in representing this war, Melville could not and would not ignore it. “What has America?” Whitman asks in *Democratic Vistas*, “With exhaustless mines of the richest ore of epic, lyric, tale, tune, picture, etc., in the Four Years' War; with indeed, I sometimes think, the richest masses of material ever afforded a nation...”² Like his contemporary Whitman, Melville understood the need to mine these rich literary materials.

Along with his understanding of the conflict's literary potential, Melville believed a book of poems about the war would resuscitate his tarnished literary reputation. Again like Whitman, Melville sought a nationalistic role—he looked to change Northern attitudes towards the defeated South. Within such a context, Melville's Civil War poems should not be dismissed. Rather, they should be viewed as an invigorating attempt to fashion a distinctive conception of the war as it pertains to the American individual. His verse exhibits an intriguing amalgamation of romance and realism. It is necessary, therefore, to view his work as experimental. By viewing his verse in this way, it becomes possible to move beyond what was not written about the war and to see the artistic merits of what, in fact, was written.

In the landmark book *The Unwritten War*, the esteemed critic Daniel Aaron characterizes Melville as “aloof” during the Civil War, stating he “surveyed the conflict from his own lofty crow's nest.”³ Such a characterization seems to have its antecedent in Howells's early review of Melville's poems:

Is it possible—you ask yourself, after running over all these celebrative, inscriptive, and memorial verses—that there really has been a great war, with battles fought by men and 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 words alone?⁴

Howells's critique, it seems, set the standard for viewing Melville during the war—a man apart from the greatest conflict of his time. Recent critics have attempted to counter this view. Stanton Garner, for one, has offered an in-depth examination

of Melville's involvement. Paul Dowling has offered a convincing argument for what he terms Melville's "emotional distance."⁵ This paper would like to continue to re-shift our view of Melville as a war poet. The "blood" that Howells called for actually exists in *Battle-Pieces*—the quantities, however, may not be as some desire. This then leads to a central, fundamental question in literary war studies—how much "blood" must war writers represent in their writing to fulfill our expectations? As readers, it is easy for us to demand that war writers find the "right" distance to write about the many passions and incomprehensibility of war. But it is a complex, almost impossible task. Melville understood this impossibility, as evident in his poem "The Armies of the Wilderness":

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—
 [...]

*Long they withhold the roll
 Of the shroudless dead. It is right;
 Not yet can we bear the flare
 Of the funeral light.*⁶ (217-220; 225-228)

Here Melville highlights the Civil War writer's paradox. The essence of the war experience defies the nature of narrative and cannot be *truly* represented, yet the experience cannot be ignored and remain unwritten.

Melville's own depiction of the realities of the era—the "blood"—comes in two key manifestations. First, it appears in his depiction of brutal images produced throughout the war. In such poems, Melville straddles that ambiguous line of romance and realism. The other manifestation of "blood" appears in the political passion expressed in the Supplement to his book of poems. Here it is possible to perceive a compassionate recorder of the conflict—a man attempting to balance his support for the North with his desire for reconciliation with the South. From such a perspective, it is possible to see a poet who descends from that lofty crow's nest in an effort to effect positive social reconstruction—even at the cost of his literary reputation.

To begin, it should be pointed out that Melville was an avid consumer of war information. He sought the "truth" about the war and read *The Rebellion Record*, a publication that separated the "poetical and picturesque aspects . . . from the graver and more important documents."⁷ Like many others, Melville also knew participants in the war. Among the many friends and relatives who served were

Toby Greene (the infamous Toby) and his cousin Henry Gansevoort. In 1864, Melville also journeyed to Washington D.C. and visited his cousin's camp. While there he accompanied a scouting party of over 200 cavalymen searching for the famed Mosby's Raiders. At one point they believed a fight was imminent. "Considering the gravity of the advanced guard's report," according to Stanton Garner, "he must have felt that these could be the last few moments of his life, but there was no vintage Mosby attack. . . ."⁸ Melville also met Lincoln and Grant. Considering these extraordinary personal contacts, it is difficult to see Melville as just a distant observer of the fighting.

From his observations and experiences, Melville understood how the battlefield could alter one's perspective of war. This is clearly evident in "The March Into Virginia." Early on in the poem Melville captures the pre-battle excitement—a time when "Age finds place in the rear" and "boyish" soldiers dream of heroism and fame (5; 6): "they gaily go to fight, / Chatting left and laughing right" (29–30). The battlefield, however, offers a sobering lesson—death, disfigurement, and defeat. Melville reflects this major shift through his rhythm, tone, and language. It is immediately evident in the plodding monosyllables of these lines:

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;
 Or shame survive, and, like to adamant,
 The throe of Second Manassas share. (31–36)

By the stanza's close, the severity of the experience finds illustration through Melville's forced pauses and weighty vowel sounds. No one comes through the fight unscathed—the illusory romance of the battlefield is shredded. The invocation of defeat at Second Manassas sharpens the lesson's impact. As Robert Penn Warren asserts, not only the defeat weighs upon the survivors, but the "human fear that romantic illusion can never again conquer."⁹ These lessons are not only for the soldiers but also for those who believed it would be a brief, easy war.

For some, "The March Into Virginia" falls short of authentic war poetry because it lacks particulars of the battle. This is true. Yet it must be recalled that Melville did not write one all-encompassing Civil War poem. Instead, he portrays the fragmented reality of war through a series of poems. Certain poems are devoted to central figures, like Stonewall Jackson, or key battles, like Shiloh, or even the changing nature of warfare, like the ironclads. In the poem "Donelson," he even portrays a battle as experienced by civilians on the home front. We witness, like

these civilians, the newspaper on the bulletin board turn “[c]very shade of streaky blue” as it gets soaked in a storm (42). We hear the crowd cheer and moan and shout down a Copperhead. A portion of the poem also uses a reportorial style to describe the battle.

*Rations were eaten cold and raw.
The men well soaked, came snow; and more—
A midnight sally. Small sleeping done—
But such is war... (146-149)*

Some of the wounded die in the cold—“*Some, seeking to crawl in crippled plight, / So stiffened—perished*” (240-41). The news story also depicts a compassionate side to the enemy—it recounts how some of the wounded “[w]ere cared for by the foe last night, / Though he could do them little needed good...” (253-54). To recount such an incident is classic Melville—it demonstrates his consistent attempt to humanize the enemy. He does the same in “The Released Rebel Prisoner,” which portrays a “jail worn” Southerner who desires to return home, yet “‘Tis gone!” (28; 32). “Donelson” concludes with the announcement of victory and the ominous direction that “*For lists of killed and wounded, see / The morrow’s dispatch...*” (431-432). In the end, tears and rain run sentimentally together as the speaker wishes for an end to war.

Besides humanizing the enemy, Melville also explores the consequences and meaning of Northern victory. In “The March to the Sea,” the poem’s light celebratory tone initially glorifies Sherman—“It was glorious glad marching, / That marching to the sea” (11-12). Despite maintaining this same rhythm, he creates a quite different tone towards the end of the poem. The speaker claims, they “Left a famine where they ceased” (78). He then concludes,

For behind they left a wailing,
A terror and a ban,
And blazing cinders sailing,
And houseless households wan,
Wide zones of counties paling,
And towns where maniacs ran. (85-90)

Such a depiction illustrates Melville’s capacity to capture the “reality” of war from a Southern perspective. Considering the sectional passions of the time, it is quite a testament to Melville’s sectional sensitivities and broader understanding of the

conflict. War is indeed hell, as Sherman stated, and Melville made sure to get this across in this poem.

A poem representing the more gruesome details of the battlefield is the “The Armies of the Wilderness.” The long poem moves back-and-forth between an octave representing a realistic scene and a commentary, lyrical quatrain. In this poem, we see how reverence for death has been lost—it is all around and therefore nothing special. Soldiers use “a head-stone” as “a hearth-stone” (111).

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... (169-174)

Melville’s image of these forgotten, unburied dead is indeed haunting. We later learn that

*Few burial rites shall be;
No priest with book and band
Shall come to the secret place
Of the corpse in the foeman’s land. (201-204)*

His poem captures both the grotesque and the mundane features of a soldier’s life, complete with Northern soldiers watching a “base-ball bounding” across lines. The title not only references the historical setting of two battles, but a metaphor for the war itself. Joyce Sparer Adler perceives the aforementioned decomposed body as the ultimate contrast to the jubilant youths in “The March Into Virginia.” She states, “The one image compresses the soldier’s life into a single instant: his growth in the womb, birth, childhood, youth, and death are all seen in a rapid photographic shot. The soldier’s identity is lost.”¹⁰ Melville thus takes a realistic detail from one of the war’s many battlefields and creates a symbol for those unknown soldiers who lost their lives in the wilderness of war.

Another poem exploring war’s effect on the individual is “The College Colonel,” which describes the war service of Harvard educated William Francis Bartlett. Bartlett personifies war’s transforming power. He enlisted at the war’s outbreak and was twice wounded, lost a leg, and captured after Petersburg. In the poem, Melville contrasts his leadership with his physical impairments, a “leg is lost” and “an arm is maimed” (22-23). The colonel and his men have changed: They are

“Not as they filed two years before, / But a remnant half-tattered, and battered, and worn” (5-6). Crowds cheer and flags wave, but the colonel remains distant: “An Indian aloofness lones his brow” (14). He is emotionally absent from the celebration of their return. His war days have irrevocably changed him. All his war experiences—the Seven Days Fight, the Wilderness, Petersburg, Libby, and the hospitals—have provided “Ah heaven!—what truth to him” (31). Despite all of the losses, he has gained an intimate knowledge, a truth. Yet this truth, a truth about the nature of war, about what war does to men, ultimately separates those like him from the crowd of enthusiastic, admiring spectators. Melville does not tell us directly what the truth is—after all, it’s the soldiers themselves who possess this unique knowledge.

Melville had a lot at stake with the publication of this book—he hoped it would resuscitate his sagging literary career. That’s why it is so remarkable to read *Battle-Pieces* and its accompanying Supplement. At the expense of his literary reputation, Melville takes a controversial political stance towards the defeated South. *The New York Times* understood this and believed that Melville “has not the fear of the Radicals before his eyes.” The reviewer, in fact, found his use of “treasonous language” an example of his “singular hardihood.”¹¹ Melville’s Supplement may be the boldest example of his activism. Here he feels the need to articulate his political viewpoint, even at the expense of his poetics: “The times are such that patriotism—not free from solicitude—urges a claim overriding all literary scruples.”¹² Consequently, he faults Reconstruction with lacking “common sense” and “Christian charity.” He even candidly admits his own struggle to shape his poems to diminish such an effect:

...in looking over the battle-pieces in the foregoing collection,
I have been tempted to withdraw or modify some of them,
fearful lest in presenting...the passions and epithets of civil war,
I might be contributing to a bitterness which every sensible
American must wish at an end.¹³

Such a statement clearly reflects Melville’s political purpose. These poems are not meant to merely represent the defining years of America, but to shift and shape Northern attitudes towards their defeated brethren.

Far from being the aloof poet of the Civil War, Melville was very much a man of his times. *Battle-Pieces* offers the “reality” and brutality, sentimentality and personality of the war, as Melville understood them. It reflects his active engagement with poetic rhythms and imagery, as well as with the politics and passions of his time. The book shows Melville at the forefront of American war

literature, grappling with the poetic representation of the reality, meaning, and implications of large-scale, mechanized modern warfare. “War shall yet be,” he perceptively asserts in “A Utilitarian View of the Monitor’s Fight,” “but warriors / Are now but operatives; War’s made/ Less grand than Peace. / And a singe runs through lace and feather” (27-30). To minimize Melville’s wartime involvement is, in some way, to devalue the dynamic quality of *Battle-Pieces* and to overlook the artistic experimentations and insights of this truly farseeing poet of war.

Notes

1. Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1973), xv.
2. Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*. Rpt. In *The Portable Walt Whitman*. Ed. Mark Van Doren. (New York: Penquin, 1977). 368.
3. Aaron, 78.
4. Paul M. Dowling, “Melville’s Quarrel with Poetry,” *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), 326-327.
5. *Ibid.*, 327.
6. Herman Melville’s poems are cited from the *Prometheus Books* reprint of his *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* and documented in the text with references to each poem and the specific quoted lines.
7. Aaron, 78.
8. Stanton Garner, *The Civil War World of Herman Melville* (Lawrence, KS: UP of Kansas, 1993), 314.
9. Robert Penn Warren, “Introduction,” *Selected Poems of Herman Melville: A Reader’s Edition*. Ed. Robert Penn Warren. (New York: Random, 1970), 14-15.
10. Joyce Sparer Adler, *War in Melville’s Imagination* (New York: New York UP, 1981), 150.
11. Review of *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, *New York Times* 27 Aug. 1866, 2.
12. Herman Melville “Supplement to *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*.” (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), 239.
13. *Ibid.*, 241.

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