HERMAN MELVILLE AS REVEALED IN HIS CIVIL WAR POEMS,
BATTLE-PIECES AND ASPECTS OF THE WAR

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
1964
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ABSTRACT

_Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War_ reveals three interesting and uncharacteristic aspects of Herman Melville. First, it is in _Battle-Pieces_ that Melville makes his initial appearance as a poet. And by means of his skillful use of devices like irony, prosaic imagery, suggestive near-rhyme, and a remarkably effective flatness of tone, Melville communicates in a style all his own the war's effect upon a sympathetic observer. _Battle-Pieces_ is not without conspicuous flaws. But at its best, it displays a poetic technique which is both deft and dramatic and must be considered a unique contribution to our literature.

A second aspect of Melville which emerges from _Battle-Pieces_ is a renewed sense of participation in the affairs of his fellow-men. Many poems in the book attest to Melville's capacity to assume the role of "citizen" even in a society whose values he had been reluctant to accept in his better-known prose writings. Finally, a mood of optimism regarding the outcome of the war and the perfectibility of man runs unmistakably through _Battle-Pieces_. The unusual roles of poet, citizen, and optimist assumed by Melville in these Civil War poems cannot but contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the author of _Moby-Dick_.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The rediscovery of Herman Melville which took place during the second and third decades of this century assuredly deserves to be ranked among the more remarkable phenomena of our literature. But it is hardly less amazing to the present writer that the intense interest that has since been generated by Melville's work should not have succeeded yet in altering an almost entirely one-sided stereotype of the author of Moby-Dick which has been given wide currency by certain commentators on his life and writings. Some persuasive arguments have been adduced to uphold the view that Melville was a thoroughgoing pessimist with a single-minded capacity for little else but contempt for heaven and distrust towards men.

Vernon L. Parrington, whose chapter on Melville in his Main Currents in American Thought is pertinently titled "Herman Melville: Pessimist," asserts that Melville "recoiled savagely from the smug conventions of society; but when he spoke out his views...and found himself fiercely assailed for unorthodoxy, he bade the world go to the devil and would have nothing more to do with its praise or blame."¹

Similar views are to be found in William Ellery Sedgwick's *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass., 1944). And recently Lawrance Thompson's *Melville's Quarrel With God* advances the rather extreme thesis that Melville was "angry with God for being the harsh and logical punisher that the Calvinists said he was. Still influenced by the Calvinistic dogma that God did indeed try to exact from mankind a rigid letter-of-the-law obedience, and that Adam's fall was indeed the first indication of the unjust ruthlessness of God's punishment, Melville came to view God as the source from whom all evils flow, in short, the 'Original Sinner,' divinely depraved."\(^2\)

There can be little doubt that Melville's best-known works of fiction have laid a secure foundation for the popular conceptions of Melville the Outcast and Melville the Pessimist which many of his readers have come to accept as "essential" Melville. But that is only part of the story. The all-important intuitions achieved by Melville in his most characteristic work are so impressive that they have been emphasized to the neglect of another--less powerful but no less valuable--aspect of Melville's protean genius. This lesser-known side of Melville is revealed in the uncelebrated volume of Civil War poems called *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, published by Melville in 1866. In this neglected book, Melville commemorates the Civil War period in war poems which perhaps only Walt Whitman surpassed in his own day. But so little-known is this book that Lewis Mumford, author

of one of the earliest critical and biographical studies of Melville, incorrectly refers to it twice in his book as Battle-Pieces and Other Aspects of the War. The word "Other" appears to be Mumford's own interpolation and has not even been deleted from the revised edition of his 1929 study issued in 1962—a detail which in itself attests to the lack of familiarity with this particular item in the Melville canon.

Melville's Civil War poems, aside from their very considerable intrinsic merits as works of art, display attitudes and beliefs which are dramatically unlike the ones voiced in Moby-Dick and The Confidence-Man. In Battle-Pieces Melville not only exhibits interesting skills as a poet, but he also emerges clearly in the unfamiliar roles of citizen and optimist. These important divergences from the better-known pessimistic or anti-social stance of Melville are certainly worth examining for the more comprehensive understanding they afford of one of our most important novelists. Yet of the few critics who have taken the trouble to look into Battle-Pieces, not one has brought conclusively and systematically to light the qualities of optimism and interested citizenship that distinguish Melville's first serious venture into poetry. Indeed critical opinion has been largely superficial or unfavorable towards Battle-Pieces from the outset. Of the nine reviews it received in the wake of its publication, five were decidedly hostile—the assessments running from "absolutely bad" all the way to "epileptic"—while the rest of the country maintained a non-committal silence towards a book

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which at very least could claim to be of topical interest, if nothing else, in that autumn of 1866. Robert Penn Warren's essay, "Melville the Poet," though by far the best of the fairly recent studies, is devoted to the whole of Melville's poetry and largely to considerations of technique and poetic style. The few paragraphs Warren devotes to Battle-Pieces serve merely to indicate that Melville was a far more effective practitioner of the art of poetry than was allowed by a reviewer of the book in the 6 September 1866 issue of The Nation (probably Charles Eliot Norton) whose comments included the judgment: "Nature did not make him a poet." More recent critical studies of Melville's poetry will be mentioned in the next chapter.

The aim of this paper will be to reveal, by means of a careful scrutiny of Battle-Pieces, the way in which its author showed himself to be poet, citizen, and optimist during the crucial years of the Civil War. In Chapter Two, which will have to do with Melville as poet, the method employed will be that of subjecting to critical analysis or commentary a number of passages from the Battle-Pieces which most tellingly reveal Melville's poetic technique. In Chapters Three and Four, which will deal with Melville as citizen and optimist, respectively, a selection of passages which most fully illustrate these two aspects of Melville will be studied and commented upon in detail. Battle-Pieces consists of seventy-two poems, several of which are over ten pages in


length. It is obvious that exhaustive treatments or explications of all seventy-two poems would make for a paper of prohibitive length, not to mention that such a task would be beyond the scope of the present paper. It will be seen, however, that the selections chosen for examination constitute enough of the silver nitrate solution needed to bring out faithfully the three unusual pictures of Melville contained in *Battle-Pieces*.
CHAPTER II

"PLAIN MECHANIC POWER": MELVILLE AS POET

"...since grimed war here laid aside
His Orient pomp, 'twould ill befit
Overmuch to ply
The rhyme's barbaric cymbal."

There exists a good deal of evidence that before Melville "took to poetry" (in the words of his exasperated wife) he had made a sustained effort to study a number of models who might serve to direct his development as a poet. We know that during the period before he set to work on Battle-Pieces, he purchased and assiduously read volumes of poems by Alfred Tennyson, James Thomson, Thomas Moore, James Clarence Mangan, Robert Fergusson, Henry Kirke White, Matthew Arnold, and a number of others. It has been pointed out by F. O. Matthiessen in his American Renaissance (New York, 1941) that there are a number of echoes of Milton's "Lycidas" in Melville's "A Requiem for Soldiers Lost in Ocean Transports." The passages Matthiessen had in mind are undoubtedly the following, the first by Milton and the second by Melville:

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1Herman Melville, Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War (Gainesville, Florida, 1960), p. 61
2Ibid., p. 61.
3Leyda, "Chapter VII," passim.

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Ah me! whilst thee the shores and sounding seas
Wash far away, where'er thy bones are hurl'd,
Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides,
Where thou perhaps, under the whelming tide,
Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world;
Or whether thou, to our moist vows denied,
Sleep'st by the fable of Bellarus old.  

And:

Save them that by the fabled shore,
Down the pale stream are washed away,
Far to the reef of bones are borne;
And never revisits them the light.

These two passages reveal not only evidence of specific verbal repetitions on Melville's part, but also provide an example in Battle-Pieces of a poem whose tone owes a great deal to one of Melville's models. And the epigraph at the head of the present chapter, taken from Melville's "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight," would seem to be indebted to the poem to Milton's Paradise Lost wherein Milton characterizes rhyme as "no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem or good Verse... but the Invention of a barbarous Age..."  

One of the earliest reviewers of Melville's Civil War poems alleged that Melville had "written too rapidly to avoid great crudities" and that his rhymes were "fearful."  

This opinion has remained curiously unchanged since the publication of Battle-Pieces. But in an article alluded to earlier, Robert Penn Warren has the following to say of

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6Melville, Battle-Pieces, p. 176.


8Leyda, p. 682.
Melville's craftsmanship: "It must be admitted that Melville did not learn his craft. But the point is that the craft he did not learn was not the same craft which some of his more highly advertised contemporaries did learn with such glibness of tongue and complacency of spirit." The fact is that Melville had little respect for the kind of verse his contemporaries were writing, a fact which is confirmed by a passage he checked and underscored in a book he was reading in April, 1862: "Harmonious modulations, and unvarying exactness of measure, totally precluding sublimity and fire, have reduced our fashionable poetry to mere sing-song." Melville, to all appearances, did not wish to learn a craft which was in effect a dulcet numbers game that lilted along too regularly for the grim themes of war and violent death he was determined to record.

A number of recent critical articles may be cited at this point for the light they throw on Melville's performance as a poet. The most instructive of these studies is Laurence Barrett's "The Differences in Melville's Poetry." In this article, Barrett maintains that three important features characterize Melville's Civil War poems. These are as follows: first, the use of "a highly personal symbolism developed from metaphor" (p. 610); second, the "device of using metaphors and images to mean something other than what the reader expects them to mean" (p. 613); third, a conscious adherence to strict stanzaic forms in reaction against what Barrett calls Melville's earlier

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9 Warren, p. 208.

10 Leyda, p. 649

"rejection of literary form" (pp. 613-615). Barrett's conclusion is that what Melville was "trying to do was too bold, too new, and courted failure. Indeed what he was doing with form was so new that it is new to us still, just as his highly personal symbolism and his unique metaphysical ambiguities are still new. Because they are, we are not yet clearly aware of how often they actually do succeed, and we sometimes chalk them up as unjustified violences that have to be conceded" (p. 620).

The examples Barrett gives of Melville's experiments with form are numerous and eye-opening.

Another interesting article is William B. Stein's "Melville's Poetry: Its Symbols of Individuation." This study is devoted entirely to "the poetry of Melville's old age" (chiefly to the volume John Marr and Other Sailors), but it is valuable for its understanding of the formal and psychological complexities of Melville's poetry in general.

A third article, Gene B. Montague's "Melville's Battle-Pieces," takes a generally unfavorable view of Melville's poetry. Approaching Battle-Pieces from an excessively "formal" viewpoint, Montague argues that the poems in this volume are largely unsuccessful because Melville neglects the "actual principle which determines the coherence of any poem, a unity of thought and image" which, according to Montague, "seems frequently to have eluded" Melville (p. 107). However, this ten-page

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article also takes up the problem of Melville's attitude to war at considerable length and hardly does justice to Melville's achievement as poet.

My principal indebtedness in the present chapter on Melville as poet is to the extraordinarily acute remarks on Melville's Civil War poetry in Newton Arvin's *Herman Melville*. Although Arvin devotes less than ten pages in his book to *Battle-Pieces*, his brilliantly suggestive insights have provided invaluable guidelines for a more detailed study and indeed have served as points of departure for my own examination of Melville's poetic practice.

There are three chief features to Melville's Civil War poetry which will become apparent to the careful reader and these will be dealt with in this chapter in the order in which they follow. First, the traditional nature of many of the stanza patterns and the imitativeness with regards to inversions and archaic words which mar a number of the poems. These were weaknesses that characterized much of the poetry of the age, however, and it is my opinion that the unreceptiveness of the mid-Nineteenth Century to serious experimental poetry in America had much to do with Melville's failure to strike out on his own in these matters the way Walt Whitman did. Second, the effective use of prosaic phrasings and imagery to convey the day-to-day incidents of the war. Melville's use of near-rhyme and irony are especially remarkable in this connection. Finally, the striking way in

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which Melville makes use of palpable things and common objects which form a part of the soldier’s everyday equipment in order to bring home to his readers the quotidian realities of war. This is probably the most effective device used by Melville in the *Battle-Pieces* and he often uses it with a sureness of touch that brings to mind T. S. Eliot’s concept of the "objective correlative."

Among the vestiges of imitativeness that appear here and there in *Battle-Pieces*, the poetic inversions which were the rule when Melville wrote are the most tiresome of all for the modern reader. Phrases like "his onset grim" (p. 56), "yon forest dim" (p. 67), "the hillside villas far" (p. 78), "searching parties lone" (p. 85), and, even worse, "who can aloof remain" (p. 157) as part of a question, occasion some impatience in the reader. It is unfortunate that Melville should have allowed himself to be bogged down in this sort of stale poetic convention. No less tiresome than the inversions are the archaic words often used for "poetic" effect—words like "targed" instead of "swords," and "marge" instead of "edge." But it must be remembered that Whitman himself was not above lapsing into this sort of thing every now and then. Once the reader has accepted these conventions as the necessities they were to poets in Melville’s time, then he can concentrate on the more significant contributions Melville made to poetry. It must be remembered that the degree of originality of Melville’s poetic art was won virtually in the midst of the most discouraging personal solitude and, more important, of a real slump in American poetry which lasted until the turn of the century. It was a particularly unfavorable time for a serious American to be writing
poetry, as Edmund Wilson has reminded us recently. The age was infinitely more receptive to its facile Bayard Taylors and Edmund Clarence Stedmans than to some disgruntled innovator. And it seems to be true that when this happens, a writer loses something irreplaceable—an aware and critically responsive audience—but that nevertheless his work will desperately derive a kind of painful and difficult beauty from his very disabilities. This was almost as true of Melville as it was of Whitman. Certainly it was entirely true of the work of the only other two American poets of that long dull period after the Civil War who possessed genuine ability, Sidney Lanier and Emily Dickinson. Melville, like Lanier and Dickinson and Whitman, did not have the benefit of a literary gulf-stream such as the one that had borne Emerson on its current and his poems have the aspect of having come to life in something very much like a dead calm. But this does not keep them from having a very particular personal ring and an innate strength all their own.

The second distinguishing feature of Melville's war poetry stems from the poet's knack for effects which are commensurate with the situations they describe. And despite the fact that Melville's stanza forms are almost always recognizably traditional, there is a wide range of variety of effect within these largely regular stanzaic patterns—from the jarringly anti-poetic to the sinisterly ironic. Melville's eccentric use of near-rhyme to achieve humorous effects or

incongruity must also be mentioned in view of the frequency with which near-rhymes appear in *Battle-Pieces*. And it is unlikely that an artist as adept as Melville is at capturing moods in prose should have so faithfully given us by accident the tone of a Civil War incident which he captures in the following poem, "Stonewall Jackson. Mortally Wounded at Chancellorsville. (May, 1863)"

The Man who fiercely charged in fight,
   Whose sword and prayer were long—
   Stonewall!
Even him who stoutly stood for Wrong,
   How can we praise? Yet coming days
Shall not forget him with this song.

Dead is the Man whose Cause is 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.

Relentlessly he routed us;
   But we relent, for he is low—
   Stonewall!
Justly his fame we outlaw; so
We drop a tear on the bold Virginian's bier,
Because no wreath we owe. (pp. 79-80)

The intrusion of the ejaculatory "Stonewall!" in the third line of each stanza of this poem is hardly effective in terms of the other lines in which the word is set. It violently breaks up each stanza in two. Yet this exclamation does serve, despite the formal awkwardness it produces, to keep the figure of the enemy general constantly before the reader's eyes. And not only does the word occur in each of the poem's three stanzas, but it appears with a suddenness and forcefulness reminiscent of the hero it eulogizes—creating "awkwardness" and confusion where it occurs. There is a peculiarly Melvillian duality to the person of Jackson as depicted here: the closing line reminds the reader that
"no wreath we owe" because Jackson was, after all, the enemy, but Melville experiences a need to relent and recognize the "bold Virginian's" dedication to the "Wrong" as well as his "Fame." Throughout the poem, however, one feels Melville's admiration for Jackson's heroism constantly kept in check by an unconcealed contempt for his error and the menace he constituted while alive. The choppy rhythms employed in this candid tribute to Stonewall Jackson carry all the "edge" of this bumptious Southern soldier's energetic personality. The closing lines of the second stanza, for instance, convey swiftly (almost in a single breath) the utter sincerity and formidableness of the man:

True to the thing he deemed was due,
True as John Brown or steel. (p. 79)

The "steel" bespeaks durability and strength, perhaps, but keeps the avenging sword of the wrathful Stonewall squarely before the eyes of Northerners inclined to mourn his demise without hesitation. The function of this "steel" is underscored effectively by the sudden deadly thrust of the closing foot of this trimeter. Notice how jarring is the sudden departure from regular iambics ("the thing he deemed was true") by means of the calculated use of a trochee immediately followed by an iamb in the following line: "as John Brown or steel." The dynamics of the threat which Jackson has posed to the Northern armies all along is perfectly rendered by the suddenness with which one stumbles headlong into the words "as John Brown" from the singly-accented "True" preceding them. Then the closing iambic foot hits home with the quick economy of movement of an expert swordsman's
Another poem which reveals Melville's skill as a poet is "The College Colonel." This masterful example of Melville's rhythmic skill is quoted in its entirety in an appendix at the close of this thesis, together with a number of other poems that have a bearing on Melville as poet, citizen and optimist. The opening stanza of "The College Colonel" succinctly dramatizes for the reader the presence of a young officer who has just emerged from the worst horrors of the war and has "seen" its meaning for the first time:

He rides at their head;
A crutch by his saddle just slants in view,
One slung arm is in splints, you see,
Yet he guides his strong steed—how coldly too. (p. 120)

The uncertain metrics of the second and third verses serve to underscore the discomfort and pain patiently endured by the young officer. And the drooping quality of the second foot in the second line quoted below is especially effective after the reference to the "crutch" which opens the couplet:

A crutch by his saddle just slants in view,
One slung arm is in splints, you see.

One cannot help noticing how well the strongly accented syllables and dramatic back vowels of "One slung arm" serve to center the reader's attention upon the wounded colonel's arm, while the barely perceptible accentual rise and weak front vowels of "is in splints" seem to reinforce the good soldier's belief that the splints are nothing to worry about. The casual "you see" at the end of the line clinches that implication. The figures of the gloomy regiment described in this poem
have been chastened in battle and the casual close of the third line emphasizes that they regard their pitiful plight with stoical indifference. The sufferings of this tattered remnant are not fully aired until the closing stanza of the poem and Melville makes their youthful leader the focus of the anguish they all shared. Ironically, the physical hardships these men endured are somewhat eclipsed by the ambivalent appearance of the word "truth" in the closing line:

But all through the Seven Days' Fight
And deep in the Wilderness grim,
And in the field-hospital tent,
And Petersburg crater, and dim
Lean brooding in Libby, there came—
Ah heaven!—what truth to him. (p. 120)

The official "truth" and the official celebration to which these broken soldiers are returning are equally meaningless after the malodorous imprisonment they have known in the infamous Libby jail—after they have experienced the "terror and pity" which Melville maintains in the supplement to *Battle-Pieces* will purge the whole country (p. 272)—and the use of the word "truth" to articulate what they must have known there has a harshly ironic sound to it.

The brief, mournful stanzas of "A Dirge for McPherson" (see Appendix) succeed in their clipped and tactless lines in making even grimmer the inevitability of death in any war. The opening stanza reads, in its terseness, like stage directions:

Arms reversed and banners creased—
Muffled drums;
Snowy horses sable-creased—
McPherson comes. (p. 124)

The show, however, is a funeral and the patchy nature of the lines quickly intones the sardonic reminder of death's finality, the remorseless
moaning of the bell--whose only comment on all this must be its metallic bong--follow startlingly, almost echoing near our ears, in the wake of the priest's solemn ministrations:

Bear him through the chapel-door--
Let the priest in stole
Pace before the warrior
Who led. Bell--toll! (p. 124)

Perhaps the content of the fourth stanza explains why these quick, seemingly unfeeling lines seem to be cooperating with death in making short shrift of this hero so recently decked out in all his general's pomp:

Lay him down within the nave,
The Lesson read--
Man is noble, man is brave,
But man's--a weed. (p. 124)

The closing line has the anguished terseness of a Pascal's tribute about it and is a kind of summing up of the human lot in time of war. It is as though the brilliance of Melville's aphoristic craft, in this passage, had definitively linked the fate of even the most glittering generals to the common fate.

It was suggested earlier that Melville was aware that poetry whose metrical regularity was too great could degenerate into mere "sing-song." This understanding on Melville's part is of fundamental importance to the appreciation of his poetic achievement. Robert Penn Warren, in his Kenyon Review article, disparages Melville as an uncertain craftsman and an incompetent bungler when it comes to controlled handling of meter, rhyme, and music. This attitude calls for drastic revision in the light of Melville's apparent intent. A more tolerant and more inclusive critical approach could go a long way towards creating a climate of receptiveness for the liberties Melville allowed
himself in verse. I. A. Richards, with his usual good sense in these matters, provides us with an intelligent starting point: "The whole conception of metre as 'uniformity in variety,' a kind of mental drill in which words, those erratic and varied things, do their best to behave as though they were all the same, with certain concessions, licenses and equivalences allowed, should nowadays be obsolete.... Most treatises on the subject, with their talk of feet and stresses, unfortunately, tend to encourage it...." Melville, as the excerpts from poems quoted above tend to show, had the requisite boldness and initiative to disregard the undue importance ascribed to the game of metrics by the cheerier versifiers of his day because his aims clearly differed from their own. The task of doing justice to the ugly misfortunes and disappointments of the Civil War was a somewhat different one from the more genteel undertakings of most of his contemporaries. It is useful to approach the poems of Battle-Pieces with this fact in mind.

It was perhaps inevitable that Melville's attempts at creating a bold, personal style in keeping with the bafflements and cripplings of war should have got him into trouble. It was intimated earlier that Melville's accomplishment as a poet in Battle-Pieces was, to be sure, an uneven one. His real successes, significantly, were scored in the rough-hewn or realistic portrayals when it is obviously his intention to devise a diction, a tone, adequate to the disturbing events of the war. "The Frenzy in the Wake" and "The Fall of Richmond," included in the Appendix, are good illustrations of this. It is when Melville

succumbs to the temptation of imitating the pretty ballading prevalent in his day that he makes tasteless blunders. What could be more absurd, for instance, than the banal ballad refrains that occur (with preposterous variations) after the stanzas of "The Cumberland"? Two examples follow:

Sounding name as ere was sung,
Flowing, rolling on the tongue—
Cumberland! Cumberland!

And certainly worse than this:

Noble name as ere was sung,
Slowly roll it on the tongue—
Cumberland! Cumberland!

This attempt to make the name of a Civil War frigate a kind of sweet-tasting lemon drop merely to fulfill the alien requirements of the ballad form must have required a certain amount of candor on Melville's part. But the ballad refrain of a far greater poem, "The March to the Sea," is hardly less jejune:

It was glorious glad marching
That marching to the sea. (p. 128)

Though the pathos of Melville's indignation is conveyed here (he is describing Sherman's maniacal march to the sea), the sense of repining which the banal refrain prevents the poem from achieving towards the end leaves the reader puzzled and unsatisfied. And the repetition of this too-jaunty refrain nine times in a fairly short poem, though meant to be ironic, is more of a liability than a successful device—especially since Melville's indignation at Sherman has been made sufficiently evident within the poem itself.

But it is with the daring of his rhymes and the quick thrusts
of irony that Melville achieves some of his most memorable effects as a poet and it would be appropriate to round off this section of the present chapter by citing a good example of Melville's use of each device. In the following stanza, the poet is describing some unthinking, zestfully patriotic young soldiers going off to war:

The banners play, the bugles call,
The air is blue and prodigal.
No berrying party, pleasure-wooed,
No picnic party in the May,
Ever went less loth than they
Into that leafy neighborhood. (p. 23)

The near-rhymes employed here lend an added pungency and excitement to the occasion: there is no time, it seems, to fuss over proper rhymes when a war has broken out! The playful paraphones (call--prodigal, pleasure-wooed--neighborhood) palpably accentuate the distracting exhilaration of the moment.

There are abundant examples of irony in Battle-Pieces, but the following bitter-sweet quatrain--reminiscent of World War II humor of the Mauldin variety--shows how Melville could use a touch of humor to illuminate the dilemma of the soldier at the front:

Little else took place that day,
Except the field artillery in line
Would now and then--for love, they say--
Exchange a valentine. (p. 42)

Aside from the purposeful irregularities in Melville's poems studied above, however, and far more important from the point of view of visual and dramatic effectiveness, is the uncanny realism of his use of images of things directly involved in the war (Arvin, p. 263). The clangor and homeliness of the war scene and objects that go to make it up--what Melville himself called the "plain mechanic power"
of the Civil War—are ubiquitous in *Battle-Pieces*. The book is honeycombed with striking images that arise directly from the field of battle. The very title of *Battle-Pieces*, in fact, seems to confirm the essentially visual intent of Melville’s poetic technique. Jay Leyda, in *The Melville Log*, mentions that Melville was not only a visitor at exhibitions at the National Academy, but that two of the paintings he saw there actually suggested poems for his Civil War collection to him. It seems likely that Melville used the term "battle-piece" in the artist’s sense of paintings or murals depicting scenes of battle. A confirmation of this supposition is inherent in the sub-title of the book, *Aspects of the War*, with its emphasis on the visual element.

The most consistent distinguishing feature of the poems in *Battle-Pieces* is their reliance on strong visual representations of the stuff and equipment of war and the relation of men to these things. Indeed Melville’s manipulation of concrete symbols to objectify his own reactions to the setting and events of the war often prove to be more impressive than Whitman’s own treatment of the same theme. For all the grandeur of the lonely vigils and personal tenderness in Whitman’s Civil War poems, *Drum-Taps* is often too nebulous to be quite convincing. It will be admitted that if vagueness and futility are to be avoided in making poems, detached emotions must be made to terminate in an appropriate object. In the sensitive use he made of this idea, Melville showed himself to be far more closely related to

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17 Leyda, p. 674.
fine contemporary poets like Robert Frost and the early Ezra Pound, for example, than Whitman managed to in *Drum-Taps*. In all of the good poems of *Battle-Pieces* (and even in some of the less successful ones) Melville seems conscious of the capacity of palpable objects to embody emotion. Substances, for Melville, provide limits to and a rest for the fears and angers he experiences as the war progresses.

For the purposes of art, of course, raw feeling is mere lack of organization. Only when emotions are truly experienced and embodied effectively in corresponding objects or images do they succeed in finding just utterance. It can hardly be denied, therefore, that Melville's images of things—objectifying as they do the feelings he seeks to communicate within the context of individual poems—constitute a major poetic achievement somewhat ahead of the times. The author of *Battle-Pieces* did not have to be instructed by a later age about the value of "objective corollaries."

The scope of Melville's symbol-making abilities can best be demonstrated within the limits of a thesis like the present one by isolating thematic phrases from the poems in which they were intended by Melville to function. Unfortunately, these phrases and symbols must be read within the framework of the poems in order for their concentrated impact to be felt as Melville intended them to be felt. Perhaps the best way to remedy that is to quote completely the most impressive of these hard-symbol poems before going on to examine individual images. No poem in *Battle-Pieces* renders more skillfully the tough-mindedness of Melville's response to the Civil War than "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight." Its very title is as
prosaic as the title of an academic dissertation and, as a poem, it promises nothing at the outset. But the title is misleading and the poem gives everything there is to give, as Melville sees it. By means of characteristically severe rhythms and the imagery of the workaday setting of the humdrum wartime episode he is describing, Melville removes all the heroics which readers had come to expect in war poetry. He plants his reaction to the event squarely in things. All the terror of the war is given a sharp intensification by being shown to be merely the affair of "trades and artisans"—in short, a dull business, where plying one's trade expertly is all that matters. The stanzas of this poem have a persistent lack of color that accords perfectly with the materials being described. Melville's "toneless lines," as Newton Arvin has called them, succeed in objectifying Melville's vision of the impersonal clackety-clack of a war greatly dependent on machines. The regular form of these five stanzas, it will be noted, makes for a reading which oddly suggests the precision and predictability of a well-oiled machine. The effect is unmistakable and could not be an accident any more than a smoothly-functioning machine is an accident. The opening lines leave no doubt about the manner in which Melville intends to present his subject:

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

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.

18Arvin, p. 264.
Yet this was battle, and intense—
   Beyond the strife of fleets heroic;
Deadlier, closer, calm 'mid storm;
No passion; all went by the crank,
   Pivot and screw,
And calculations of caloric.

Needless to dwell, the story's known.
The ringing of those plates on plates
Still ringeth round the world—
The clangor of that blacksmith's fray.
   The anvil-din
Resounds this message from the Fates:

War shall yet be, and to the end;
But war-paint shows the streaks of weather;
War shall yet be, but warriors
Are now but operatives; War's made
   Less grand than Peace,
And a singe runs through lace and feather. (pp. 61-62)

A good deal of the power of this poem derives from its prosaic vocabulary, from terms which suggest science and industry rather than the gallantries that had always been looked for in war poetry (See Arvin, p. 264). Melville's equating the noise of war (in the fourth stanza) with the sounds emanating from a blacksmith's shop is ironic and in keeping with the central idea of the poem: that war has lost its former glory. The "crank,/ Pivot and screw" are the weapons of the new warriors--the "operatives" of the last stanza--and mathematics plays an important part in the "calculations of caloric" of the third stanza. The poem is not dependent upon nonce-words or rarities, as the commonplace seldom is, but does exhibit a genuine poet's control of language. Words are used here in a manner that suddenly confers upon them a new and powerful impact. But the dehumanization the poem decries in the first four stanzas is given its ultimate indignant statement in the closing line when a "singe" runs not only through the
usual combatants, but "through lace and feather" as well. Most impor­tant of all, the poet's feelings about the soullessness of modern war­fare are expressed strictly in terms of the war's own mechanical practices. It is not necessary for Melville to editorialize. The vivid picture of the war which he gives us in a sequence of unadorned images contains its own built-in condemnation.

Battle-Pieces contains many other poems in which an emotion is vividly objectified in this manner. The poems in the Appendix number several of these. In almost every instance, the images employed rep­resent the equivalent of an attitude or feeling which Melville experi­ences towards the situation in which the images figure. They speak for themselves and Melville hardly ever accompanies them with additional comments. There is no vagueness in any of these images—merely the tangible contours of things one can touch or see, things which can in­flict pain, things which preclude the need for explanations. The long narrative poem "Donelson," for example, contains "Breast-works and rifle-pits in woods" (p. 34); it tells of positions being defended and the manner in which the spaces between "Flamed with sharpshooters" (p. 35); it shows how a "ramrod bites the lips it meets" (p. 36) on a cold night; and "Nearby, the trees show bullet-dents./ Rations were eaten cold and raw" (p. 39) and there are "shell and round-shot, grape and cannister" (p. 50) and "ice-glazed corpses, each a stone" (p. 43).

"In the Turret," one of the finest poems written about modern naval warfare, shows us the sailors "Sealed in in a diving-bell" and sheltered in what may become their "welded tomb" (p. 55). Other poems contain such images as "The flaring fire-rafts" and the "jam of gun-boats"
(p. 65), the "shriek of shells--/ Aerial screamings, taunts and yells" (p. 84), the outline of a worried General Grant before a decisive battle,

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  sky-drawn Grant
  Whose cigar must now be near the stump--
  While in solitude his back
  Heaps slowly to a hump; (p. 91)
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and later, after a hopeless battle, abandoned by the roadside, can be discerned "the rusted canteen,/ and the drum which the drummer-boy let go" (p. 97). Some of these images are extended and etch out the chagrins of war even more starkly in their bareness:

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  ...skull after skull
  Where pine-cones lay--the rusted gun,
  Green shoes full of bones, the mouldering coat
  And cuddled-up skeleton. (p. 101)
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Finally, the narrative poem called "The Scout Toward Aldie," one of Melville's finest and most suspenseful stories, contains excellent images in which the trappings of war figure prominently. The poem is based on an actual experience Melville had when he was granted permission by General Sumner to accompany the Army of the Potomac on a scout near enemy territory in pursuit of the Confederate guerilla leader, John S. Mosby. Those who are lucky enough to survive the bloodiest skirmish are presented thus: "Bandage, and crutch, and cane, and sling" (p. 190). But shortly after, a little comic relief is given in the form of a worried officer's comment on a careless soldier's failure to be sufficiently "economy-conscious" (the term current in the present-day U. S. Army):

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  There now, that fellow's bag's untied,
  Sowing the road with the precious grain. (p. 193)
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The economics of life and death, however, is Melville's chief concern
in this poem. What is probably the baldest and most charged image in "The Scout Toward Aldie" describes death's unheeding prodigality when "out jets the flame! / Men fall from their saddles like plums from trees!" (p. 219).

Summing up these remarks on Melville the Poet, it is evident that Melville achieved a personal kind of success in the practice of his art in Battle-Pieces. Despite the fact that he was writing poetry at a singularly unpropitious time and did not succeed in some of his poems in freeing himself altogether from a number of infelicitous mannerisms in vogue during the better part of the last century, we cannot afford to overlook the unique contribution Melville made to American poetry. The principal examples quoted from Battle-Pieces in this chapter and the comments bearing upon them should show that what some have called inept in Melville's practice appears to have been a conscious effort to develop a poetic style characterized by vibrancy, realism, and crude power to reflect the dislocations of wartime.
CHAPTER III

"THROUGH PEOPLED GLOOM"\(^1\): MELVILLE AS CITIZEN

"...felt in that rapt pause...
Horror and anguish for the civil strife."\(^2\)

When Harper and Brothers brought out *Battle-Pieces* in 1866, the nine-year silence since the publication of Melville's *The Confidence-Man* was broken. Melville's last full-length novel had not been his happiest work. In this bitter novel—in which a Mississippi river-boat and its varied passengers serve as a microcosm of human society—Melville's faith in human institutions seems to have reached its nadir. The ominous "No Trust" sign in the barber shop of the boat, it will be remembered, underscored the book's grim central theme: that self-interest and not an altruistic concern for the fate of one's fellow citizens lies at the heart of men's dealings with one another. It is impossible to mistake the vehemence of Melville's indictment: "'You fools! you flock of fools, under this captain of fools, in this ship of fools!'"\(^3\)

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\(^1\) Melville, *Battle-Pieces*, p. 103.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 241.

It cannot be said that the years immediately following *The Confidence-Man* were marked by a diminution of the spirit of skepticism and alienation that color this book for Melville himself. As late as July 3, 1861, when Melville acquired a set of the poetical works of James Thomson in connection with his studies of verse models, he was attracted to the following passage in Thomson which he heavily underscored: "Blessed is he who expecteth nothing, for he shall never be disappointed." — a sentiment which might also have appealed in its disabused sagacity to the misanthropic Schopenhauer himself.

It is an imperfect image of Melville, however, that unduly emphasizes this side of the man—this largely justified aloofness from society's tawdry concerns which cannot fail to impress Melville's readers even in the pages of earlier works like *Omoo* and *White-Jacket*. Melville's *Battle-Pieces* provides us with a very different side. These Civil War poems betray a genuine capacity on the poet's part for self-involvement in the affairs of men. It may be that this alignment with the social concerns of that critical period in our history was heightened by a realization that the very bases of American civilization were being threatened. It may be that it was a short-lived alignment. But it was nonetheless very real and is embodied in some of the finest poems in the collection. In fact, this identification with the endangered human community in which he lived which pervades the whole of *Battle-Pieces* amounts to a decisive acceptance by Melville of the role of "citizen" and will be the subject of the present chapter. The term "citizen" as used here, however, will not be the narrowly

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4 Leyda, p. 641.
legalistic one signifying a native or naturalized person entitled to the rights and privileges guaranteed by his government. Rather it will be used more inclusively to refer to one who is conscious of the larger undertakings and troubles of the human community to which he bears allegiance and who actively sympathizes with or participates in the affairs of this community. Thus the term "citizen" here will stand in direct contrast to the alienated Melville of The Confidence-Man and the Melville who exhausted himself grappling with the titanic philosophical problems of Moby-Dick.

It should not be necessary to cite more than a few instances from published writings of this period to indicate the extent to which Melville was interested in this conflict which was menacing the American Union. Melville himself must have been delighted to see how much more in sympathy with his countrymen he had suddenly become as a result of the outbreak of hostilities. The following excerpt from a letter of May 25, 1862, to his brother Thomas shows that was clearly the case: "The war goes bravely on. McClellan is now within fifteen miles of the rebel capital, Richmond. New Orleans is taken &c &c &c... But when the end--the wind-up--the grand pacification is coming, who knows. We beat the rascals in almost every field, & take all their ports &c, but they dont [sic] cry: 'Enough!'-- It looks like a long lane, with the turning quite out of sight."5 Newton Arvin writes: "Amid the pastoral quietness of Arrowhead and the Berkshires there was hardly a detonation of the great battles--Antietam, Shiloh, Lookout

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5 Ibid., p. 652.
Mountain, the Wilderness—that did not reach his ear... a fact which is clearly borne out by the newspaperman's verve with which Melville wrote poems immediately after many of the great battles. Not only did Melville get the repercussions from various military campaigns from newspapers, however, but he also took the trouble to visit several military installations. A letter of February 17, 1863, to his cousin Kate reads, in part: "The other day, be it known unto you, Incomparable Kate, I went with Allen and his wife to Fort Hamilton, where we saw Lieutenant Henry Gansevoort of the U. S. Artillery. He politely led us to the ramparts, pointing out all objects of interest."  

Since Lieutenant Gansevoort had recently seen service at the second battle of Bull Run and at Antietam, it can hardly be imagined that he failed to recount some of his experiences to his eagerly interested relation. Elizabeth Melville's personal memoir of Melville gives another instance of such a visit in her entry for April 10, 1864. Correct punctuation has been inserted by myself for the sake of readability: "Herman went to Virginia with Allen in April, 1864. Visited various battlefields & called on Gen. Grant. Henry Gansevoort then in service at Camp in Vienna, Virginia—" Finally, an excerpt from a letter sent by Melville to George McLaughlin on December 15, 1863, gives added evidence of Melville's keen sympathy for the harassed

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6Arvin, p. 259.


8Ibid., p. 217.

9Leyda, p. 667.
Northern combatants: "The Sanity Fairs to be held in several of the larger cities, will do an immense service to our soldiers. God prosper them, and those who work for them, and the great Cause which they are intended to subserve."\(^{10}\)

It is nothing short of remarkable that Melville should have so whole-heartedly identified himself during the cataclysm of the Civil War with the troubled aims of a society whose materialism he had so roundly denounced a few years earlier. The feelings of compassion and concern which imbue the whole of *Battle-Pieces* had gone a long way to restoring to Melville a sense of participation in the designs of men. As recently as June, 1851, Melville had felt the need to write to Hawthorne of his *Weltschmerz* in these words: "...the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. My dear Sir, a presentiment is on me, --I shall at last be worn out and perish, like an old nutmeg-grater, grated to pieces by the constant attrition of the wood, that is, the nutmeg. What I feel most moved to write is banned--it will not pay."\(^{11}\) And in November of 1851, again to Hawthorne, but this time in a mood of utter discouragement: "Ah! it's a long stage, and no inn in sight, and night coming, and the body cold."\(^{12}\) Only a major outward jolt could have shaken Melville from a mood as desolate as this. And the Civil War, it turned out, was to be that jolt.

The poem "On the Photograph of a Corps Commander* provides us

\(^{10}\) *Letters of H. Melville*, p. 219.


with an excellent starting-point in the present examination of examples of fellow-feeling in *Battle-Pieces*. From the very outset, Melville's admiration for one of the active participants in the war is made manifest. The poet also establishes in the second stanza the relaxed feeling of enjoyment derived from the familiar pleasures of looking at pictures. Melville's pride of citizenship at being related to the corps commander who serves the country they are both committed to is evident:

Ay, man is manly. Here you see  
The warrior-carriage of the head,  
And brave dilation of the frame;  
And lighting all, the soul that led  
In Spottsylvania's charge to victory,  
Which justifies his fame.

A cheering picture. It is good  
To look upon a chief like this,  
In whom the spirit moulds the form.  
Here favoring Nature, oft remiss,  
With eagle mien expressive has endued  
A man to kindle strains that warm.

Trace back his lineage, and his sires,  
Yeoman or noble, you shall find  
Enrolled with men of Agincourt,  
Heroes who shared great Harry's mind.  
Down to us come the knightly Norman fires,  
And front the Templars bore.

Nothing can lift the heart of man  
Like manhood in a fellow-man.  
The thought of heaven's great King afar  
But humbles us--too weak to scan;  
But manly greatness men can span,  
And feel the bonds that draw. (pp. 105-106)

Here Melville has clearly turned his back upon the struggle with the perplexing dilemmas with which he had wrestled in earlier works--considerations of "heaven's great King afar" and the attempts to "scan" Him which had humbled him. He is content, for the moment, to limit
himself to an appreciation of the qualities he sees exhibited in the photograph of a corps commander. The role of citizen of the human commonwealth seems to come as a distinct relief to Melville after his enervating experiences as citizen of the cosmos. But most important is his explicit affirmation of kinship with the human struggle. Melville openly recognizes the "bonds that draw" him to his "fellow-man" in this and other poems throughout Battle-Pieces. The typical excerpts of this cited below will give an idea of the extent to which Melville had aligned himself with those who were caught up in the battles raging around him. The whole story is not told, however, by saying that Melville favored victory by the North at any price. This would be too narrowly partisan an interpretation of the attitudes voiced by Melville about a war he refers to as "this strife of brothers" (p. 93). It was clear to Melville—as will be pointed out later in this chapter—that human motives and convictions were involved in the Civil War and that the last word would have to be the echo of a deep-rooted sense of brotherhood and justice.

Melville was hardly more than forty when he wrote the following, but the depression which had followed in the wake of Moby-Dick was already a long way behind him:

O, the rising of the people
   Came with springing of the grass,
They rebounded from dejection
   After Easter came to pass.
And the young were all elation
   Hearing Sumter's cannon roar,
And they thought how tame the Nation
   In the age that went before. (p. 20)

The note of gladsome resurrection that animates this poem may not be
entirely devoid of the element of autobiography. Melville's mind had been rather inert and lacking in purposiveness during the years after *The Confidence-Man*, but the outbreak of the Civil War had the tonic effect of bringing about a sudden redintegration of his creative faculties. He may have been shocked, as others had been, at the realization of what the war might entail. But he was no longer apathetic. It is abundantly clear from *Battle-Pieces* that during this period the sense of participation in the affairs of men "quickened Melville and made him feel a purpose." He watched the fortunate young soldiers "go forth in their blue uniforms, with flushed faces and eager tread, a little enviously." In the early poem, "The March into Virginia (July, 1861)," his bystander's surmise vibrates with a longing to share this moment of cheerful comradeliness:

> All they feel is this: 'tis glory,  
> A rapture sharp, though transitory,  
> Yet lasting in belaureled story.  
> So they gayly go to fight,  
> Chatting left and laughing right. (p. 23)

This exuberant response to the appeal of arms is not without its attendant recognition of the imminent dangers the soldiers will have to face. The poem "Lyon" is a hardly less restrained account of the derring-do of a Northern hero that brims over with "glory-glory." It ends with this stanza in honor of the fallen which shows clearly how Melville sizes up their performance and, at the same time, describes the kind of reward which the grateful citizen in Melville believes

13 *Arvin*, p. 258.
14 *Mumford*, p. 298.
Lyon has earned:

This seer foresaw his soldier-doom
Yet willed the fight.
He never turned; his only flight
Was up to Zion,
Where prophets now and armies great brave Lyon. (p. 27)

Another stirring account of the public acclaim received by Northern armies occurs in the poem called "Donelson," where Melville describes the enthusiastic reaction of the citizenry after the announcement of an important Northern victory:

O, to the punches brewed that night
Went little water. Windows bright
Beamed rosy on the sleet without
And from the deep street came the frequent shout. (p. 51)

Otto Rank has made much of the fact that "civilized man, even if he fights the outside world, is no longer opposed to a natural enemy but, at bottom, to himself...."16 Perhaps Melville managed during the writing of Battle-Pieces to find, to a certain extent, an externalization of his own gnawing inner problems by turning his attentions, for the moment, to the external activity of the Civil War. But it does not seem enough to say that he used the war as a convenient crutch to support his own vexing uncertainties. Throughout the poems, there runs a never-waning conviction that the issues the North is fighting for are genuinely right and worthy of the efforts and allegiance that he and so many others putting forth. Melville's acquaintance with Milton was referred to in the previous chapter. There is a strong similarity, it may be noted, between Melville's view of the American Civil War as a conflict between Right and Wrong and Milton's

rendering of the triumph of the heavenly hosts over Satan's followers in *Paradise Lost* as a victory of Good over Evil. Passages like the following from *Battle-Pieces* may serve to illustrate this:

> God has glorified the Mountain 
> Where the banner burneth bright, 
> And the armies in the valley 
> They are fortified in right.  
> (p. 89)

Again, referring to the Northern effort in "A Canticle," Melville invokes the assistance of God and forecasts the ultimate triumph of those whom the Lord cherishes:

> Thou Lord of hosts victorious, 
> Fulfill the end designed.  
> (p. 140)

He becomes even more explicit in his loyalty to what he calls the "Cause" of the Union in the following couplet from "Donelson":

> The rebel is wrong, but human yet; 
> He's got a heart, and thrusts a bayonet  
> (p. 44).

However, Melville does not merely insist upon the rightness of the Northern cause (to which his sense of citizenship bears witness), but, as is shown in this passage, he also insists upon the humanity of the enemy. Perhaps the ambivalence of Melville's feelings toward the South (what some of his contemporaries must surely have considered misplaced compassion) could account, in part, for the poor reception accorded to *Battle-Pieces* when it was published. Melville counseled his countrymen to a magnanimity few are prepared to show the enemy in the wake of a war, especially in the leniencies urged towards the South in the prose "Supplement" to the book. Melville could not help thinking of the war as a strife of brothers and the indignation he puts in the voice of a Southerner who has just witnessed the
violence of Sherman's officially sanctioned brutalities is surely indicative of his own feelings. It is certain that Melville's conviction that the Union had to be preserved stopped somewhat short of such extreme measures. Notice the withering hatred in the Southerner's reaction to General Sherman:

With burning woods our skies are brass,
The pillars of dust are seen;
The live-long day their cavalry pass—
   No crossing the road between.
   We were sore deceived—an awful host!
   They move like a roaring wind.
Have we gained and lost? But even despair
   Shall never our hate rescind. (p. 134)

The poems in the last part of Battle-Pieces, most of which were written when a Northern victory was either in sight or a fait accompli, contain a number of hopeful lines in which Melville expresses the wish to see the old wounds healed between North and South. In "A Meditation," we are reminded that

   When Vicksburg fell, and the moody files
   marched out,
   Silent the victors stood, scorning to raise
   a shout. (p. 243)

This seems a good omen to Melville, an indication that the clamant events of the internecine quarrel the country has just lived through will soon be forgotten and the healing process be given a chance to do its work. In the "Supplement" to Battle-Pieces, Melville issues a reminder which the excesses of the Reconstruction Era would tragically nullify: "...the glory of war falls short of its pathos—a pathos which now at last ought to disarm all animosity" (p. 265). And as if he had sensed that the spirit of forgiveness needed to be forcefully advocated after the exacerbating hatreds of recent events, he
promised the North a lasting shame if it failed to be as considerate and brotherly as he believed such victors should be:

"The South's the sinner?" Well, so let it be; But shall the North sin worse, and stand the Pharisee? (p. 243)

The above examples should suffice to show how Melville's sense of citizenship stood in the matter of "taking sides" in the war. But the most personal examples of Melville's identification with his fellow-countrymen occur in a number of poems which celebrate the unsung participants of the war. "The Released Prisoner (June, 1865)," a poem which painfully portrays the insecurity and bewilderment of a Southern soldier shortly after a long time of confinement, adds an ironic afterthought to the process of building up and glamorizing the soldiery which has taken place at a time when soldiers happened to be desperately needed. The soldier is shown wandering despondently up and down the sidewalks of New York and ends:

Home, home--his heart is full of it; But home he shall never see, Even should he stand upon the spot: 'Tis gone!--where his brothers be.

The cypress-moss from tree to tree Hangs in his Southern land; As weird, from thought to thought of his Run memories hand in hand.

And so he lingers--lingers on In the City of the Foe-- His cousins and his countrymen Who see him listless go. (pp. 131-132)

The poem "Sheridan at Cedar Creek," which sings the praises of the much-honored General Philip H. Sheridan, closes with lines that serve as a reminder that the lesser-known heroes whom we easily forget also served, in their modest way:
There is glory for the brave
Who lead, and nobly save,
But no knowledge in the grave
Where the nameless followers sleep. (p. 117)

In "The Battle for the Mississippi," apparently written two years
earlier, Melville had been able to write more encouraging words for
the same men:

There must be other, nobler worlds for them
Who nobly yield their lives in this. (p. 66)

No poem in the collection, however, more poignantly expresses
Melville's concern for the embattled defenders of his country than
"Shiloh." So movingly does this elegy summarize Melville's abiding
fellow-feeling for his countrymen slain in the war that the poem de­
serves to be ranked, in this writer's opinion, with Whitman's "Vigil
Strange I Kept on the Field One Night." Not only is this poem metri­
cally and rhythmically a feat, but its skillful use of imagery by far
surpasses any of the attempts Melville made to express emotion else­
where in the book. Especially effective is the haunting presence of
the swallows. Whitman undeniably achieved an unforgettable effect
by using the hermit thrush "withdrawn to himself" to symbolize the
lonely Lincoln during the war years in his elegy to our first assas­
inated President, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," but
Melville's use of skimming swallows--a migratory bird serving as a
symbol for the migrant souls of the dead--betrays no less self-assured
an instinct in the handling of symbol. Perhaps it would be fitting
to bring to a close this chapter on Melville's involvement as a
citizen by quoting in its entirety this tribute to those who had
paid the price of total involvement:

...
Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
The swallows fly low
Over the field in clouded days,
The forest-field of Shiloh--
Over the field where April rain
Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain
Through the pause of night
That followed the Sunday flight
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 foemen mingled there--
Foemen at morn, but friends at eve--
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. (p. 63)

The documents and samplings from Melville's Civil War poetry quoted above lend unquestionable support to the claim that Melville evinced a real and sustained capacity during the war years for citizenship in the broader sense. The compassion, the sense of involvement, and the lively concern for a just settlement of the conflict which appear in Battle-Pieces—all these were aspects of a role which Melville assumed with zeal. And that Ishmael should have been able, even for a short while, to cease thinking of himself as the son of Hagar the Egyptian, destined to wander in "the wilderness of Beersheba," is no small matter.
CHAPTER IV

"THE FINAL EMPIRE AND THE HAPPIER WORLD"¹:

MELVILLE AS OPTIMIST

"Life is, of all we know, 
God's best."²

The image of Melville presented in the preceding chapters may seem unusual in the light of the opinions of Farrington and Thompson cited in Chapter One. But there is another interesting side to the heart and mind of the Herman Melville of the early 1860's. Far from being disheartened entirely by the spectacle of the Civil War, Melville experiences during this period a rebirth of hope. This new hopefulness which is reflected in Battle-Pieces seems to have been born out of Melville's conviction that Nature's designs were trustworthy and that life was good. The generous hand of a benevolent God is suddenly sensed in a world once bleak with the desolation and loneliness once experienced by the young Redburn. But most significant of all, Melville comes to find it possible to be optimistic about the future of America and the perfectibility of this society made and maintained by imperfect men. That the

¹Melville, Battle-Pieces, p. 17.
²Ibid., p. 127.
deplorable excesses of the Reconstruction Era which follow in the
wake of Lee’s surrender should have forced Melville to abjure all
too quickly his high hopes for the betterment of America need not
concern us here. My intention in this chapter will be to show that
Melville did in effect find it possible, if only momentarily, to give
utterance to an optimistic belief in the impending regeneration of
the human spirit and a better world. This will be demonstrated by
means of a selection of passages from *Battle-Pieces* that bear upon
this efflorescence of hope in Melville, together with a running com­
mentary on their importance. Additional poems in an optimistic vein
are given in the Appendix.

The feeling of trust in Providence and Its designs for an
ameliorated human society which Melville expresses in many of his
Civil War poems was a feeling which endured throughout the period
in which he was engaged in writing *Battle-Pieces*. There are impres­
sively conclusive voicings of his optimism given from the earliest
poems to the last. In "The Conflict of Convictions," a poem of the
opening years of the war, for example, he expresses his optimism
thus:

The Ancient of Days forever is young,
Forever the scheme of Nature thrives;
I know a wind in purpose strong—
It spins against the way it drives
What if the gulfs their slimed foundations bare?
So deep must the stones be hurled
Whereon the throes of ages rear
The final empire and the happier world (p. 17)

The younger Melville's sense of the contradictoriness and moral
chiaroscuro of Nature is thus stated in strikingly affirmative terms
by the time he has reached his forties. The manner in which the antinomies of life are described as working counter to each other before they can succeed in bringing about order (in the line "It spins against the way it drives") might have been the inspiration for Robert Frost's "West-Running Brook"—a modern poem which revolves on the same optimistic axis. But even more effectively in the following stanza, Melville gives us his vision of a world in which the most discouraging reverses pave the way for ultimate reconciliation:

Age after age shall be
As age after age has been,
(From man's changeless heart their way they win) (p. 17)

He summarizes this point with the serene conviction of one who has waited patiently before arriving at his certainty. The conclusion of the poem rises to a sort of religious exaltation as it asserts the fundamentally creative interaction of opposite forces:

YEA AND NAY—
each hath his say;
but God he keeps the middle way (p. 18)

There is an unshakeable assurance about the proverb-like frame Melville has given to these capitalized words which, nearly five years later, at the close of the war, he was able to round off in a prayer of gratitude and confidence:

Thou Lord of hosts victorious,
Fulfill the end designed (p. 140)

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In this later poem, "A Canticle," signalling the victory of the North ("Right") over the South ("Wrong"), Melville artfully employs sea imagery to represent the ebb and flow of human affairs. But since he is writing a retrospective summary of the devastating war which has recently been battering both North and South, the sea he gives us is a tumultuous sea—the hazardous sea which his whalers had known. Yet far from disclosing the terrible inscrutability of the whalers' savage deity, this poem shows us a God Who has a hand in the tides of men's affairs and announces the ultimate triumph of the Good in His own fulfillment of "the end designed." What had been a mantic impulse in the earlier poems of Battle-Pieces has by now become a patent truth to Melville. It is as if after so many misgivings about God's sense of responsibility towards His own creation Melville could at last give full credence to the idea that men might henceforth expect sure justice and the inevitable triumph of the Good. This attitude, in fact, is given an air of tranquil certainty in the penultimate poem in Battle-Pieces, "Lee in the Capitol" (pp. 229-237), written in April 1866. This long narrative poem shows Robert E. Lee, the spokesman of the defeated Southern armies, invited to testify before a Congressional committee on behalf of the South. It contains one of the most moving monologues penned by an American poet. Melville admits in a note to the poem (p. 255) that for the sake of vividness of effect he has taken the liberty Shakespeare arrogates himself in his historical plays. He has put words in the mouth of General Lee which Lee had not actually spoken.
Melville's poetic license is greater than Shakespear's, however, because Lee was very much alive when the poem was published. The sentiments Lee expresses reflect Melville's optimistic attitude of this period. So sympathetic was Melville to Lee's dilemma and hopefulness that if Lee had been less reticent in public and a poet to boot, this is doubtless the way his testimony would have sounded. The poem comes to a close, after Lee's exit, with Melville's forecast:

Catching the light in the future's skies,
Instinct disowns each darkening prophecy;
Faith in America never dies;
Heaven shall the end ordained fulfill,
We march with Providence cheery still. (p. 237)

It is important to emphasize how explicit Melville's views become here: "Faith in America never dies" and God Himself, the very God Whom Melville could surely still remember as not having been particularly cooperative in the past, shall fulfill "the end ordained."
The encouraging glimpse which Melville got of Nature in a friendly mood during this remarkable period persists in finding expression in poems despite adversities. Nature is basically for rather than against man in a poem like the delicately wrought "Malvern Hill."

This poem records a bloody Southern offensive which resulted in thousands of casualties for the North. The harrowing images of "grimed faces" and "haggard beards of blood" in the wake of this offensive cannot deflect Melville from his optimistic bent of mind. His faith in the forthcoming recovery of America from these ordeals amounts to a confession of belief in the healing powers of Nature:

Reverse we proved was not defeat;
But ah, the sod what thousands meet!—
Does Malvern Wood
Bethink itself, and muse and brood?
We elms of Malvern Hill
Remember every thing;
But sap the twig will fill:
Wag the world how it will,
Leaves must be green in Spring. (p. 68)

Another declaration of faith in the magnanimity of Nature is implicit in the later poem, "The Eagle of the Blue." In a note to this work, Melville explains that many Northern regiments during the war "carried a living eagle as an added ensign!" (p. 250). The eagle served a purpose similar to that of our present-day mascot, to cheer and encourage the troops. Melville does more than employ the eagle as a symbol of fortitude in the poem, however; he subtly ranks the eagle among the powers of Nature in the opening stanzas, in such a way that the impression is given that the generosity of Nature herself accompanies this Northern mascot into battle:

Aloft he guards the starry folds
Who is the brother of the star;
The bird whose joy is in the wind
Exulteth in the war. (p. 122)

The "starry folds" the eagle guards, of course, are those of the Union flag and the inevitability of a Northern victory is proclaimed in the third stanza when we are reminded that, in the past, the eagle's "claw has known the crag" (p. 122).

Confidence in Nature's restorative powers is once again to be found in the poem "Formerly a Slave," written by Melville after he had seen a painting of an emancipated slave in the National Academy in 1865. There is more than a little of Nature's own sense of patient expectancy in the features of the Negro woman the poem depicts. This is a woman who knows fully the meaning of the words "Wag the world how it will,/ Leaves must be green in the Spring." The poem is a short one and is
As benign, it would seem, as the Nature Melville himself seems gradually to be making his peace with in poems like this. Especially fine in this particular poem is the image of the erstwhile abused slave in a social system which now promises to renew itself. It is as if, through her suffering, this former slave had been elevated in dignity to a height where her face becomes bathed in the rays of a light of justice which those still in darkness cannot even see yet—except as reflected in her own "sibylline" face. In addition to being a great song of hope for the future, this poem is a remarkable instance of stanzaic economy and the delicate balancing of ideas. It is not only the freed slave's hopes we are concerned with in this poem, but with the attitudes of society as well. Why else should Melville represent her countenance as "benign"? "Benign" towards whom? Towards those very masters, presumably, who give her now her "too late deliverance," who will make possible for her children's children the opportunities "withheld from her." It is a poem of hope, no doubt, but most important it is a poem of patience. It is meaningful that the freed slave
"sees the stir/ Far down the depth of thousand years." This is the theme of "Age after age shall be" all over again, told in terms of this trusting and optimistic woman.

A broader kind of hope is expressed in "America"—hope for the survival and continuance of the American system of government. In this allegorical poem, America becomes the "lorn Mother" concerned over her unruly children—"Pale at the fury of her brood."

During some of the critical moments of the war, when even survival seems doubtful, the Mother's condition occasions a great deal of alarm:

A watcher looked upon her low, and said—
She sleeps, but sleeps, she is not dead.

These, however, are words by which the troubled watcher hopes to calm his own fears. But the poem ends on a note that leaves no room for doubt:

Power delicate, and hope grown wise,
And youth matured for age's seat—
Law on her brow and empire in her eyes.
So she, with graver air and lifted flag;
While the shadow, chased by light,
Fled along the far-drawn height,
And left her on the crag. (P. 162)

By the time we reach this point in Battle-Pieces, the hope of attaining the triumphant resting point at "the crag" has become a familiar theme.

Melville does not content himself with forecasting a hopeful outcome only for the survivors of the war, either. As in earlier works in prose, he assumes the role of seer, but with a considerable shift of message and emphasis. In the poem "On the House Guards," written in memory of soldiers who perished while defending Lexington,
Missouri, Melville opens with the words:

The men who here in harness died
Fell not in vain (p. 165),

and as if to articulate this feeling more satisfactorily in the later poem "The Battle for the Mississippi," he gives these eagles too their haven, the grateful promise of one who was much more than a by-stander:

There must be other, nobler worlds for them
Who nobly yield their lives in this (p. 66)

As always, though, it is the living who inherit the most immediate fruits of victory, the exhilaration that follows the official cessation of hostilities. In an awkwardly-named poem called "Presentation to the Authorities, by Privates, of Colors Captured in Battles Ending in the Surrender of Lee," the victors are granted their final reward:

Thrice loved and precious to the sense
Of such as reap the recompense
Of life imperilled for just cause--
Imperilled and yet preserved. (p. 182)

The poem ends:

But these flags given, glad we go
To waiting homes with vindicated laws, (p. 182)

And in a gay mock-soliloquy entitled "The Returned Volunteer to His Rifle," a grateful war veteran has a confidential chat with his rifle:

How oft I told thee of this scene--
The Highlands blue--the river's narrowing sheen.
Little at Gettysburg we thought
To find such haven; but God keep it green.
Long rest' with belt, and bayonet, and canteen. (p. 183)

Anyone who has experienced the sense of relief in giving up a military uniform should respond to the qualities of delight and hopefulness contained in these lines. And anyone who, like Melville himself, has
known some of the darkest regions of despair, could not but feel particularly pleased with the wish that God keep this new haven of peace "green." In this access of optimism, Melville sees life as desirable and worthy of being kept green. He too had come at last to appreciate the value of these gifts so seldom fully appreciated until they are threatened with annihilation. This passage from "At the Cannon's Mouth," a poem written after long years of war in October 1864, gives us what is perhaps the definitive statement of Melville's optimism:

Life has more lures than any girl
For youth and strength; puts forth a share
Of beauty, hinting of yet rarer store;
And ever with unfathomable eyes,
Which bafflingly entice.
Still strangely does Adonis draw.
And life once over, who shall tell the rest?
Life is, of all we know, God's best. (p. 126)
CHAPTER V

EPILOGUE

The high hopes for a rededicated America envisioned by Melville in his singular volume of Civil War verse were soon to be shattered by the depredations of the Reconstruction Era. The bitterness engendered by this period's worst travesties upon what Melville himself had had the generous impulse to look to as "the final empire and the happier world"\(^1\) may easily be imagined. Melville the optimist gave way to a resigned and rather sullen witness on the sidelines, while Melville the citizen, toward the close of the very year that saw the publication of *Battle-Pieces*, received an appointment as customs inspector in the port of New York at a salary of four dollars a day. As Willard Thorp puts it, "Melville simply ceased to be a 'public' writer after the appearance of his poems about the Civil War, *Battle-Pieces*, in 1866."\(^2\)

As for Melville the poet, it can hardly be said that the few faltering ventures into verse he attempted during the remainder

\(^1\)Melville, *Battle-Pieces*, p. 17.


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of his life (including the long-winded and dreary narrative of a
voyage to the Holy Land, *Clarel*) ever attained any of the peaks of
excellence reached in his impassioned war poems. The poet had lost
a valuable and rejuvenating theme when the aftermath of the war
dashed his hopes for an equable peace. Van Wyck Brooks, in *The
Times of Melville and Whitman*, has etched the pathos of Melville's
last years in all its terrible incongruity: "For nineteen years,
every day, Melville had to plod back and forth between his house
and the pier on the Hudson River, all but forgotten as a man of
letters."³

During the ten years after its publication, *Battle-Pieces*
sold a little over five hundred copies. Thereafter, it went into
the almost total eclipse that endures to our own day. But Melville
had gone a long way from the invigorating midnight watches on the
ill-fated *Pequod* to the very different watch during the hopeful
years before the close of the Civil War. A long time would pass
before another major work would issue from the pen of Customs In-
spector Melville. Now the major voyages—with the notable excep-
tion of *Billy Budd*—were over. The seasoned traveler of *Omoo*
would have to content himself to the end with dutifully rummaging
through the baggage of returning passengers.
A SELECTION OF POEMS FROM BATTLE-PIECES

A. Melville as Poet

Commemorative of a Naval Victory

Sailors there are of gentlest breed,
    Yet strong, like every goodly thing;
The discipline of arms refines,
    And the wave gives tempering.
The damasked blade its beam can fling;
It lends the last grave grace:
The hawk, the hound, and sworded nobleman
    In Titian's picture for a king,
Are of hunter or warrior race.

In social halls a favored guest
    In years that follow victory won,
How sweet to feel your festal fame
    In woman's glance instinctive thrown:
Repose is yours--your deed is known,
It musks the amber wine;
It lives, and sheds a light from storied days
    Rich as October sunsets brown,
Which make the barren place to shine.

But seldom the laurel wreath is seen
    Unmixed with pensive pansies dark;
There's a light and a shadow on every man
    Who at last attins his lifted mark--
Nursing through night the ethereal spark.
Elate he never can be;
He feels that spirits which glad had hailed his worth,
    Sleep in oblivion.--The shark
Glides white through the phosphorus sea.
The College Colonel

He rides at their head;
   A crutch by his saddle just slants in view,
One slung arm is in splints, you see,
   Yet he guides his strong steed—how coldly too.

He brings his regiment home--
   Not as they filed two years before,
But a remnant half-tattered, and battered, and worn,
Like castaway sailors, who--stunned
   By the surf's loud road,
   Their mates dragged back and seen no more--
Again and again breast the surge,
   And at last crawl, spent, to shore.

A still rigidity and pale--
   An Indian aloofness lones his brow;
He has lived a thousand years
Compressed in battle's pains and prayers,
   Marches and watches slow.

There are welcoming shouts, and flags;
   Old men off hat to the Boy,
Wreaths from gay balconies fall at his feet.
   But to him--there comes alloy.

It is not that a leg is lost,
   It is not that an arm is maimed,
It is not that the fever has racked--
   Self he has long disclaimed.

But all through the Seven Days' Flight,
   And deep in the Wilderness grim,
And in the field-hospital tent,
   And Petersburg crater, and dim
Lean brooding in Libby, there came--
   Ah heaven!--what truth to him.

The Frenzy in the Wake

Sherman's Advance Through the Carolinas

So strong to suffer, shall we be
   Weak to contend, and break
The sinews of the Oppressor's knee
   That grinds upon the neck?
   0, the garments rolled in blood
   Scorch in cities wrapped in flame,
And the African--the imp!
He gibbers, imputing shame.

Shall Time, avenging every woe,
To us that joy allot
Which Israel thrilled when Sisera's brow
Showed gaunt and showed the clot?
Curse on their foreheads, cheeks, and eyes--
The Northern faces--true
To the flag we hate, the flag whose stars
Like planets strike us through.

From frozen Maine they come,
Far Minnesota too;
They come to a sun whose rays disown--
May it wither them as the dew!
The ghosts of our slain appeal:
"Vain shall our victories be?"
But back from its ebb the flood recoils--
Back in a whelming sea.

With burning wood our skies are brass,
The pillars of dust are seen;
The live-long day their cavalry pass--
No crossing the road between.
We were sore deceived--an awful host!
They move like a roaring wind.
Have we gamed and lost? but even despair
Shall never our hate rescind.

The House-Top

A Night Piece

(October, 1863)

No sleep. The sultriness pervades the air
And binds the brain--a dense oppression, such
As tawny tigers feel in matted shades,
Vexing their blood and making apt for ravage.
Beneath the stars the roofy desert spreads
Vacant as Libya. All is hushed near by.
Yet fitfully from far breaks a mixed surf
Of muffled sound, the Atheist road of riot.
Yonder, where parching Sirius set in drought,
Balefully glares red Arson--there--and there.
The Town is taken by its rats--ship-rats
And rats of the wharves. All civil charms
And priestly spells which late held hearts in awe--
Fear-bound, subjected to a better sway
Than sway of self; these like a dream dissolve,
And man rebounds whole aeons back in nature.
Hail to the low dull rumble, dull and dead,
And ponderous drag that shakes the wall.
Wise Draco comes, deep in the midnight roll
Of black artillery; he comes, though late;
In code corroborating Calvin's creed
And cynic tyrannies of honest kings;
He comes, nor parleys; and the Town, redeemed,
Gives thanks devout; nor, being thankful, heeds
The grimy slur on the Republic's faith implied,
Which holds that Man is naturally good,
And--more--is Nature's Roman, never to be scourged.

B. Melville as Citizen

_Dupont's Round Fight_

In time and measure perfect moves
All Art whose aim is sure;
Evolving rhyme and stars divine
Have rules, and they endure.

Nor less the Fleet that warred for Right,
And, warring so, prevailed,
In geometric beauty curved,
And in an orbit sailed.

The rebel at Port Royal felt
The Unity overawe,
And rued the spell. A type was here,
And victory of LAW.

_The Fall of Richmond_

What mean these peals from every tower,
And crowds like seas that sway?
The cannon reply; they speak the heart
Of the People impassioned, and say--
A city in flags for a city in flames,
Richmond goes Babylon's way--
_Sing and pray._
O weary years and woeful wars,
And armies in the grave;
But hearts unquelled at last deter
The helmed dilated Lucifer—
Honor to Grant the brave,
Whose three stars now like Orion's rise
When wreck is one the wave—
Bless his glaive.

Well that the faith we firmly kept,
And never our aim foreswore
For the Terros that trooped from each recess
When fainting we fought in the Wilderness,
And Hell made loud hurrah;
But God is in Heaven, and Grant in the Town,
And Right through might is Law—
God's way adore.

A Canticle:

Significant of the national exaltation of
enthusiasm at the close of the War

O the precipice Titanic
Of the congregated Fall,
And the angle oceanic
Where the deepening thunders call—
And the Gorge so grim,
And the firmamental rim!
Multitudinously thronging
The waters all converge,
Then they sweep adown in sloping
Solidity of surge.

The Nation, in her impulse
Mysterious as the Tide,
In emotion like an ocean
Moves in power, not in pride;
And is deep in her devotion
As humanity is wide.

Thou Lord of hosts victorious,
The confluence Thou hast twined;
By a wondrous way and glorious
A passage Thou dost find—
A passage Thou dost find:
Hosanna to the Lord of hosts,
The hosts of human kind.
Stable in its baselessness
When calm is in the air,
The Iris half in tracelessness
Hovers faintly fair.
Fitfully assailing it
A wind from heaven blows,
Shivering and paling it
To blankness of the snows;
While, incessant in renewal,
The Arch rekindled grows,
Till again the gem and jewel
Whirl in blinding overthrows--
Till, prevailing and transcending,
Lo, the Glory perfect there,
And the contest finds and ending,
For repose is in the air.

But the foamy Deep unsounded,
And the dim and dizzy ledge,
And the booming roar rebounded,
And the gull that skims the edge!
The Giant of the Pool
Heaves his forehead white as wool--
The Arch rekindled grows,
Till again the gem and jewel
Whirl in blinding overthrows--
Till, prevailing and transcending,
Lo, the Glory perfect there,
And the contest finds and ending,
For repose is in the air.

The Generations pouring
From times of endless date,
In their going, in their flowing
Ever form the steadfast State;
And Humanity is growing
Toward the fullness of her fate.

Thou Lord of hosts victorious,
Fulfill the end designed;
By a wondrous way and glorious
A passage Thou dost find--
A passage Thou dost find:
Hosanna to the Lord of Hosts,
The hosts of human kind.
C. Melville as Optimist

**At the Cannon's Mouth**

Palely intent, he urged his keel
Full on the guns, and touched the spring;
Himself involved in the bolt he drove
Timed with the armed hull's shot that stove
His shallop—die or do!
Into the flood his life he threw,
Yet lives--unscathed--a breathing thing
To marvel at.

He has his fame;
But that mad dash at death, how name?

Had Earth no charm to stay the Boy
From the martyr-passion? Could he dare
Disdain the Paradise of opening joy
Which beckons the fresh heart every where?
Life has more lures than any girl
For youth and strength; puts forth a share
Of beauty, hinting of yet rarer store;
And ever with unfathomable eyes,
Which bafflingly entice,
Still strangely does Adonis draw.
And life once over, who shall tell the rest?
Life is, of all we know, God's best.
What imps these eagles then, that they
Fling disrespect on life by that proud way
In which they soar above our lower clay.

Pretense of wonderment and doubt unblest:
In Cushing's eager deed was shown
A spirit which brave poets own--
That scorn of life which earns life's crown;
Earns, but not always wins; but he--
The star ascended in his nativity.

**Malvern Hill**

(July, 1862)

Ye elms that wave on Malvern Hill
In prime of morn and May,
Recall ye how McClellan's men
Here stood at bay?
While deep within yon forest dim
Our rigid comrades lay--
Some with the cartridge in their mouth,
Others with fixed arms lifted South--
Invoking so
The cypress glades? 'Ah wilds of woe!' 

The spires of Richmond, late beheld
Through rifts in musket-haze,
Were closed from view in clouds of dust
On leaf-walled ways,
Where streamed our wagons in caravan;
And the Seven Nights and Days
Of march and fast, retreat and fight,
Pinched our grimed faces to ghastly plight--
Does the elm wood
Recall the haggard beards of blood?

The battle-smoked flag, with stars eclipsed,
We followed (it never fell!)--
In silence husbanded our strength--
Received their yell;
Till on this slope we patient turned
With cannon ordered well;
Reverse we proved was not defeat;
But ah! the sod what thousands meet!--
Does Malvern Wood
Bethink itself, and muse and brood?

We elms of Malvern Hill
Remember every thing;
But sap the twig will fill:
Wag the world how it will,
Leaves must be green in Spring.
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