

## *Battle-Pieces* and Vernacular Poetics

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Positing that the poetic commemoration of the Civil War offered Melville an opportunity to reconstitute the readership he had lost with *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*, this essay argues that with *Battle-Pieces*, Melville envisioned himself in the role of national bard. For Melville, the project of reconstituting a fragmented nation meant engaging not with the interior subjectivity of emergent modernist lyric but rather with the possibilities for public address offered by vernacular forms such as ballad, hymn, and epitaph. Melville's engagement was often critical, disclosing and disrupting the ways in which vernacular forms have been vehicles for discourses that legitimate violence. While *Battle-Pieces* includes some nostalgic poems in undeviating hymn or ballad stanza, as well as pentameter poems deriving from an elite tradition, the volume's baseline form is that of the hymn, ballad, or epitaph in the process of becoming something else. Where vernacular poetics traditionally voices patriotism as the nation's cooptation of interiority, Melville thus explored a patriotism of supplementation, in which interiority remains unspecified and citizens are constituted by means of critical engagements with established forms.

**T**he growing interest in Melville's poetry over the past two decades has drawn on a larger recognition of the importance of poetry in mid-nineteenth-century America (Spengemann, Parker, Marrs, Coviello, Barrett 251-80). Where we used to see Melville's turn to poetry as a turn away from an unappreciative audience, we can now see it as a

turn toward a different, culturally prominent literary mode. Undeterred by his failure to find a publisher for the volume of poetry he completed in 1860, Melville seems to have found in the Civil War an occasion to reconstitute the public he had lost with *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*. The commercial failure of *Battle-Pieces* only sharpens the resulting question: how did Melville understand poetry to hail a constituency?

Melville's dedication of the volume "TO THE MEMORY OF THE THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND WHO IN THE WAR FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF THE UNION FELL DEVOTEDLY UNDER THE FLAG OF THEIR FATHERS" suggests that he counted on the power of elegiac commemoration to constitute an audience through the production of common memory (*Published Poems* 2).<sup>1</sup> But what form would this commemoration take? Melville addresses the problem of form in the Preface: "I seem, in most of these verses, to have but placed a harp in a window, and noted the contrasted airs which wayward winds have played upon the strings" (*Published Poems* 3). The figure of the Aeolian harp signals Melville's critique of representation; it is a way of explaining why, as Whitman put it, "the real war will never get in the books" (115).<sup>2</sup> It also signals his address to his audience in terms of poetics and, given the topic of the volume, suggests an engagement with the question of the forms of national identification and citizenship. If the "strings" of the Aeolian harp evoke a lyre, the poetics that Melville developed in *Battle-Pieces* was not lyric in the sense that modernist criticism has prepared us to understand—"feeling confessing itself to itself" in the "utter unconsciousness of a listener," in John Stuart Mill's well known formulation (348), but rather lyric in the sense of bardic song in which a poet deliberately addresses and thereby constitutes a national audience.<sup>3</sup>

For Melville, the project of reconstituting a fragmented public meant engaging not with the elite omniscience of epic nor with the unmediated subjectivity of emergent modernist lyric

but rather with the collective vernacular forms of hymn, ballad, song, and epitaph.<sup>4</sup> These forms, somatically satisfying in their quatrains of four-stress or alternating four- and three-stress lines rhyming *abcb* or sometimes *abab*, were widely dispersed and produced communities of experience in churches, work sites, and leisured gatherings, or, in the case of epitaphs, through reminders of our common fate.<sup>5</sup> Melville often engages critically with these forms, disrupting the ways in which vernacular poetics have been vehicles for discourses that legitimate violence, such as glory, patriotism, or religion. Thus while *Battle-Pieces* includes some nostalgic poems in undeviating hymn or ballad stanza, as well as pentameter poems deriving from elite traditions, its baseline form is that of the hymn, ballad, or epitaph in the process of becoming something else. Often, Melville inscribes traces of this process in the openings of poems, some portion of a hymn or ballad quatrain remaining as a reminder of the poem's formal and ideological ground.

In recognizing the vernacular poetic context of *Battle-Pieces*, we return Melville to the contexts of his military experience aboard the frigate *United States* and to his work on merchant and whaling ships, all ventures that took place against a background of song.<sup>6</sup> In *White-Jacket*, the captain of the main top Jack Chase sings traditional ballads such as "Sir Patrick Spens" while the sailor-poet Lemsford pens new ones (*White-Jacket* 310-1, 41).<sup>7</sup> In *Moby-Dick*, the *Pequod's* crew receive copies of Isaac Watts's *Hymns*; they do heavy work, such as heaving on the windlass, to a hymn or a "wild chorus"; off duty, they sing naval ballads and whaling songs (*Moby-Dick* 103, 104, 303, 171, 173). Melville also had a career-long interest in the naval and martial songs of Charles Dibdin, which were printed in broadside during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, circulated orally, and collected and published posthumously in 1841. After brief references in chapter 29 of *Typee* and chapter 30 of *Redburn*, Melville returns to

Dibdin at length in *White-Jacket*. Here the military context invites a critique centered on Dibdin's "Poor Jack." *White-Jacket* quotes a portion:

‘As for me, in all weathers, all times, tides, and ends,  
 Naught’s a trouble from duty that springs;  
 For my heart is my Poll’s, my rhino’s [i.e., money’s] my friends,  
 And as for my life, ’tis the king’s.

To rancour unknown, to no passion a slave,  
 Nor unmanly, nor mean, nor a railer,’ etc. (*White-Jacket* 382-83)

The fourth line, “as for my life, ’tis the king’s,” would recur as a deadly bit of foreshadowing in chapter 3 of *Billy Budd*. Such patriotic ventriloquism is the norm in Dibdin’s songs, many of which take the first-person voice of a common sailor or soldier. As products of the late eighteenth-century ballad revival, they capitalize on the core value of authenticity by means of which the literati helped the middle class invent “the folk.”<sup>8</sup> Thus a standard collection of English songs published in 1851 claimed of Dibdin’s songs that “the pictures are true, . . . the feelings are real, and such as no stranger could have invented”; readers would recognize their truth even if they had never been to sea and had “received only the old traditionary or stage notions of [sailors’] character” (Mackay 157).<sup>9</sup> *White-Jacket* affirms this closed circuit of authentication because it depends upon a familiar distinction between elite and vernacular forms: “I do not unite with high critical authority in considering Dibdin’s ditties ‘slang songs,’ for most of them breathe the very poetry of the ocean.” (*White-Jacket* 383) Even so, he recognizes that they are contrived to produce a particular image of the authentic sailor: “But it is remarkable that those songs—which would lead one to think that man-of-war’s men are the most care-free,

contented, virtuous, and patriotic of mankind—were composed at a time when the English Navy was principally manned by felons and paupers . . . . Dibdin was a man of genius; but no wonder, Dibdin was a government pensioner at £200 per annum” (*White-Jacket* 383). Which is to say that the government rewarded Dibdin’s success in hailing “the people” (as a ship’s crew were called) such that they would recognize themselves, yet in a way that served the ends of authority.

The vernacular poetic context of Melville’s work thus opens the question of the constitution of “the people” and their relation to authority, a microcosm of the Civil War’s central problem. Developing a poetics of supplement to the vernacular tradition, Melville hoped that enough would remain of familiar forms to transact the people’s self-recognition, while enabling deeper, critical reflection and national reconstitution on an enlightened foundation, much as *White-Jacket*, one of the people of the *Neversink* (Melville’s fictional name for the frigate *United States*), was an appreciative but critical reader of Dibdin. Using the device of ventriloquism sparingly in *Battle-Pieces*, Melville usually takes the depersonalized stance of hymn, ballad, or epitaph. In the few poems that do take a first-person voice, “the people” speak in ballad stanza or song from differing positions: representative southerners in “Stonewall Jackson (Ascribed to a Virginian)” and “The Frenzy in the Wake,” representative northerners in “Stonewall Jackson. Mortally Wounded at Chancellorsville.” Melville acknowledges the ballad form’s national heritage in songs such as “The Temeraire” by supplying subtitles that identify British speakers. By contrast, U. S. elites North and South speak in pentameter. In “The House-top,” a blank verse soliloquy characterizes a New Yorker who approves the violent suppression of the 1863 draft riots fomented by the city’s immigrant “rats” (*Published Poems* 64). In “Lee in the Capitol,” a late addition to the collection, Robert E. Lee, testifying before Congress in 1866, speaks in heroic couplets; this form locates him within the elite antebellum southern culture in

which Dryden's translation of Virgil and Pope's translation of Homer were the literary standard. This marking off of elite from vernacular forms suggests Melville's awareness that the postwar reconstitution of the nation was not limited to the question of North and South, but rather raised more broadly the question of political authority. In thus shaping the vernacular voice, Melville avoids the easy cooptation of patriotic verse while attempting to constitute "the people" in a critical, self-aware relation to political and poetic forms.<sup>10</sup>

The question of political authority emerges in the volume's opening poem, "The Portent," thematically in the mere naming of John Brown but more complexly in its formal address to the contemporary reader's expectation of a poem in ballad stanza.<sup>11</sup> Melville broaches the question of the bardic poet's role in the constitution of national authority here by way of deep allusion.

*Hanging from the beam,*

*Slowly swaying (such the law),*

*Gaunt the shadow on your green,*

*Shenandoah!*

*The cut is on the crown*

*(Lo, John Brown),*

*And the stabs shall heal no more.*

*Hidden in the cap*

*Is the anguish none can draw;*

*So your future veils its face,*

*Shenandoah!*

*But the streaming beard is shown*

*(Weird John Brown)*

*The meteor of the war.* (*Published Poems 5*, italics in original)

Although lineation disguises the form, oral recitation reveals the metric baseline as a seven-stress ballad couplet (which conventionally would be lined out as 4343 rhyming *abcb*, though Melville adds rhymes or near rhymes in the first stanza only). The expectation of ballad form stretches the refrain word “Shenandoah” to four syllables while the rhyme scheme associates it with “law,” “draw,” “more,” and “war.” Thus bringing key sites of contested meaning, the law and the war, into emphatic alignment, the form unites culturally prestigious regions of the Union and the Confederacy, for native speakers in New England, Tidewater and Piedmont Virginia, and low-country South Carolina would all have pronounced “more” and “war” without a postvocalic /r/, thus naturally rhyming these words with “law” and “draw.”<sup>12</sup> To stretch “Shenandoah” into a four-syllable word is to pull the name of the river away from local speakers who, to this day, pronounce it with three syllables (Shanan-doe). In the folksong that emerged from those local speakers, the name has three syllables: “Oh Shenandoah, I long to see you.”<sup>13</sup> If a singer were to attempt an additional syllable contrary to the meter, it is elided into the next vowel, “I.” “Oh Shenandoah” voices the melancholia of continental expansion, orienting national division along an east-west axis, as figured in the pull of two rivers, the Shenandoah and the “wide Missouri.” Melville maps this axis onto the war’s north-south axis. In the context of Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, the allusion to the Missouri River and westward expansion evokes the Missouri Compromise and John Brown’s abolitionist activities in northeastern Kansas during the mid-1850s.

Such regional differentiations might be bridged by a bardic poet who hopes to speak for all through vernacular forms. Here, the poet voices a nationally-oriented commentary concerning questions of law and the historical meaning of violence as well as locally grounded reportage with its attention to the saber cuts and bayonet stabs that disfigured John Brown's head and body. As critics have observed, the image of John Brown's "streaming beard" alludes to an actual meteor that flashed between the time of Brown's trial and his execution, as well as to Thomas Gray's poem "The Bard" (Spengemann 587).<sup>14</sup> Gray depicts a thirteenth-century Welsh bard who addresses the English conqueror Edward I. After foretelling Edward's doom and subsequent civil wars that end only when Elizabeth accedes to the throne, the bard avoids execution by committing suicide, plunging into the Conway River gorge. This allusion suggests that as Wars of the Roses laid waste to the Conway valley, so the Shenandoah Valley was devastated by fighting throughout 1862, 1863, and 1864. Pursuing the analogy at various points in *Battle-Pieces*, notably in "Battle of Stone River," Melville entertains the idea that, as in the English civil wars, ideological legitimacy in the war forecast by the meteoric Brown's death may be a product of mere force. However, where Gray's bard invokes other "ancestral bards" to "join" in "dreadful harmony" and shape the future—"Weave the warp and weave the woof, / The winding-sheet of Edward's race" (Gray 79), Melville refuses Gray's fantasy of shaping fate, even while claiming from the mute Brown the role of prophet: "So your future veils its face, / Shenandoah!" From the retrospect of 1866, Brown's execution predicts and even in some sense causes (as do Gray's "ancestral bards") the violence of civil war. The future that remained veiled to the would-be bard Melville was the question of national reconstitution.

Two explicit statements of poetic theory early in the volume, in "Dupont's Round Fight" and "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight," clarify Melville's formal engagement with the



common meter tradition in “The Portent” while pressing its political questions. Although these poems offer apparently conflicting accounts of the relation of poetic form to content, both argue that form ought to have a mimetic function. A historicized reading in the context of vernacular poetics suggests, however, that Melville was more concerned with form’s rhetorical power to constitute and affect an audience. “Dupont’s Round Fight” proposes that enduring poetic forms find contents that match their representational capacities, thereby sorting events to identify correspondences between world and words while ruling some content out of bounds. The poem itself unvaryingly follows one of the most enduring forms, a hymn in common meter:

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. (*Published Poems* 20)

As if to comment on Emerson's dictum that "The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form," rhyme is said to "evolv[e]" so as to realize its fated end, which is as predictable and symmetrical as an astronomical "orbit" or the pendulum motion of John Brown's suspended body "Slowly swaying" from the gallows (Emerson 10). From a map of the Battle of Port Royal in the *Rebellion Record*, Melville saw the neatly elliptical path that the ships of Union's South Atlantic Blockading Squadron were supposed to have sailed in the mouth of Port Royal sound, first upstream to fire on Fort Beauregard and then downstream to fire on Fort Walker (*Published Poems* 628-29; "Plan"). This elliptical form mirrors the astronomical orbit that the opening stanza had posited as a natural-law analogue for the aesthetic "rules" exemplified by the poem. This is the "unity" that is supposed to "overawe" the rebels and reconstitute the nation on the basis of "LAW," as a congregation constitutes itself through the singing of a hymn.

Yet there is a metaphysical disjunction in the last stanza, as the final line invokes a juridical sense of "LAW" for the confirmation of the "type" made visible in the order of battle. The question of "victory" is inapplicable to the sense of natural law proposed in the first stanza (gravity, momentum, and so on), as illustrated by the orbits of "stars divine." The question of poetic form is similarly poised between natural and constructed standards: if sonic phenomena such as rhyme and meter are, on the one hand, natural features of all oral language, they are on the other hand conventionally organized patterns that feel familiar (that is to say, natural) as poetry and song. An analogously liminal position is occupied by the "LAW." As Deak Nabers has argued, this is one of many instances in which Melville demonstrates his awareness of the dual valence of law, natural and positive, that was at stake in the war and remained at stake in Reconstruction (39-42).

Against this already troubled poetic theory, the first stanza of “A Utilitarian View of the Monitor’s Fight” renders a contrasting claim that traditional forms ought to be malleable in taking on new content:

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. (1.1-6; *Published Poems* 44)

As critics have observed, lines four and five disrupt the anticipated rhythm and rhyme of 4343 common-meter hymn or ballad stanza, as thematically the poem claims that the new mechanized warfare exemplified by the clash of the ironclads disrupts certain discourses that legitimate warfare: heroism, glory, and so on (Coviello 203-06). These discourses are staples of patriotic hymns and ballads, whose formal and representational capacities, Melville suggests, have been exceeded by a new kind of event. The contrast is the more emphatic since this poem immediately follows “The Temeraire,” a nostalgic paean to sailing ships also set in a 3333 *abcb* song stanza framed by three stanzas in the 4343 *abcb* form that is the base for “A Utilitarian View.” According to its subtitle, “The Temeraire” was “Supposed to have been suggested to an Englishman of the old order by the fight of the Monitor and Merrimac” (*Published Poems* 41). Even so, in “A Utilitarian View,” the repetition of the first stanza’s novel pattern through four subsequent stanzas establishes a new formal regularity. The expected rhyme does return in each stanza rather than remaining unresolved. The battle is celebrated, albeit in a new fashion: “Hail to victory without the gaud / Of glory” 1.7-8;44). Analogously, if “warriors / Are now but

operatives” and “War’s made / Less grand than Peace, / And a singe runs through lace and feather,” still the traditional discourses are not obliterated but rather blemished and battle-scarred, bearing traces of violence into peacetime commemorations (l.28-30; 45). The hymn or ballad form and its patriotic or heroic associations persist as the ground against which these new judgments and accommodations make sense.

This point is the more evident if we attend closely to the historical content of “Dupont’s Round Fight,” which is similar in one key respect to the battle of the ironclads. The ships of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron were steam-powered, wooden-hulled but propeller- or wheel-driven and tended by collier brigs.<sup>15</sup> Melville’s readers would have known that sailing ships would not have been capable of the neatly elliptical maneuver executed by Captain Dupont’s squadron in the mouth of Port Royal sound. Here, no less than in the *Monitor*’s fight, the maneuvers were conducted by means of “crank, / Pivot, and screw, / And calculations of caloric” (l.16-18; *Published Poems* 44). However, although the sailors who manned Dupont’s ships were “operatives” in the new mechanized mode of naval warfare, like those of the *Monitor*, they are only revealed to be such as the hymn or ballad becomes another form.

**M**elville’s engagement with vernacular poetics takes three general forms in *Battle-Pieces*: repetition, internal modification, or larger transformation. In the first case, Melville sometimes constitutes his audience by simply retaining the familiar forms of hymn, ballad, or refrain-driven song. Even here, as we have seen in “Dupont’s Round Fight,” material details may complicate straightforward affirmation for closely attentive readers, especially when the poem is read in the context of other poems such as “A Utilitarian

View.” Melville counts on the form’s affirmative rhetoric to produce affective bonding, as in the case of “The Temeraire,” in which Englishmen, Unionists, and Confederates alike can recognize in each other a shared nostalgia for the time before steamships. Yet Melville also dramatizes nationally divisive consequences at the limit of mutual recognition, as for example in a pair of songs commemorating Sherman’s March. “The March to the Sea (December 1864)” begins as a Union soldier’s marching song—“It was glorious and glad marching, / A marching glad and free” (l.11-12; *Published Poems* 94)—but turns in the last stanza to anticipate the southern civilian response:

For they left behind a wailing  
 A terror and a ban,  
 And blazing cinders sailing,  
 And houseless households wan,  
 .....

They will long remember Sherman

Marching to the sea. (l.85-88, 95-96; *Published Poems* 96)

This response is taken up in the first-person plural voice of “The Frenzy in the Wake: Sherman’s advance through the Carolinas (February 1865),” which ends with an especially vehement iteration of the Lost Cause ideology: “Have we gamed and lost? But even despair / Shall never our hate rescind” (l.31-32; 98).

Whereas in poems about the war’s destruction Melville develops a critical perspective on the ballad’s transmission of the legitimating discourses of patriotism, in poems bearing on the incorporation of emancipated slaves into the national body politic he counts on the vernacular poetic tradition’s power to summon assent, as for example in “‘Formerly a Slave’.” This poem is

a response in modified hymn form to a painting by Elihu Vedder of an aged New York street vendor, which Melville had seen on exhibition at the National Academy of Design in 1865. Had Melville chosen to ventriloquize the vendor's voice, literary convention would have dictated a dialect poem. Instead, he proposes reading the street vendor's character through her physiognomy, projecting a meliorist view of race relations into that reading through a small modification of stanza form.

The sufferance of her race is shown,  
     And retrospect of life,  
 Which now too late deliverance dawns upon;  
     Yet is she not at strife.

Her children's children they shall know  
     The good withheld from her;  
 And so her reverie takes prophetic cheer—  
     In spirit she sees the stir

Far down the depth of thousand years,  
     And marks the revel shine;  
 Her dusky face is lit with sober light,

Sibylline, yet benign. (*Published Poems* 115)

The unrhymed third lines of each quatrain, bearing five stresses rather than the expected four, repeat a sense of hope, not through the radiance of the luminist paintings which Melville had seen at the exhibition, but rather through the “sober light” of character study.<sup>16</sup> As the ballad

stanza accommodates the five-stress third line with only a slight strain, so might the American body politic strain just slightly to incorporate the emancipated slaves' descendants.

The slight strain of the base meter in “Formerly a Slave” thus contrasts with the more emphatic strain evident in “A Utilitarian View.” Melville’s approach in the latter case is comparable to that in “The Apparition (A Retrospect),” a first-person plural-voice account of an incident from the 1864 siege of Petersburg, Virginia, in which Union troops dug a tunnel to undermine the Confederate line and exploded dynamite, blowing a hole in the defenses.<sup>17</sup> As in many other poems, violence disrupts the pastoral scene:

Convulsions came; and, where the field

Long slept in pastoral green,

A goblin-mountain was upheaved

(Sure the sense was all deceived),

Marl-glen and slag-ravine.

The unreserved of Ill was there,

The clinkers in her last retreat;

But, ere the eye could take it in,

Or mind could comprehension win,

It sunk!—and at our feet.

So, then, Solidity’s a crust—

The core of fire below;

All may go well for many a year,

But who can think without a fear

Of horrors that happen so? (*Published Poems* 116)

The third line of each stanza, which would remain unrhymed in traditional ballad form, here is rhymed by a fourth, before the fifth line recovers the form. In each case the doubling line—which explodes and then collapses the ballad scheme as dynamite “upheaved” and then collapsed the ground—focuses on the mechanism of perception. By the third stanza, the doubling line anticipates future perceptions as the event persists in a post-traumatic trace.<sup>18</sup> The poem’s plural subjectivity could represent the nearby Confederate soldiers as well as the Union soldiers who were at first too stunned to charge the gap and later became trapped in the hole at the mercy of the surrounding Confederates. The final three lines shift the response from the eternal metaphysics of the stanza’s first two lines to a specific post-bellum national allegory, in which the plural voice could speak for all Americans. The return of a similar image in the Supplement ponders further sectional crisis: “Wherefore in a clear sky do we still turn our eyes toward the South, as the Neapolitan, months after the eruption, turns his toward Vesuvius?” (*Published Poems* 185).

In the most complex kind of engagement with vernacular forms, Melville transforms them into something else over the course of the poem, developing more profuse and complexly interwoven rhymes, while leaving a trace of the original form. Moments that delegitimize war, such as the interjection “what like a bullet can undeceive!” from “Shiloh,” thus claim the ballad’s broad cultural authority rather than the subjective authority of the lyric voice that would develop in later antiwar poems such as Wilfred Owen’s 1920 “*Dulce et Decorum Est*.”<sup>19</sup> In the opening of “Shiloh,” the expectation of ballad stanza is associated with the promise of pastoral



recuperation; both are ultimately upset. Melville marks the intrusion of violence by a shift from common-meter hymn or ballad to couplets:

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 (l.1-6; *Published Poems* 46)

Couplets in turn give way to an embedded ballad quatrain as the violence becomes the object of political interpretation:

The church so lone, the log-built one  
That echoed 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!) (l.10-16; *Published Poems* 46)

Shifting from terms of universal agreement in the first line of the embedded quatrain (the soldiers were “foemen”) to delegitimation in the third by means of the temporal caesura in the second (“morn” / “eve”), Melville turns the soldiers’ knowledge into another claim, also apparently universal, clinched by rhyme. Not only have the soldiers agreed to put aside the discourses of “fame” and “country” that positioned them as “foemen”; they have also come to recognize that these discourses are deceptions that make war possible. Locating this recognition

with respect to the opening pastoral frame, the poem's final three lines pick up the rhyme of the opening ballad quatrain:

But now they lie low,  
 While over them the swallows skim,  
 And all is hushed at Shiloh. (l.18-20; 46)

The unrhymed line's internal rhyme ("them" / "skim") marks the natural environment's indifference to human suffering. Melville thus identifies claims of legitimation and delegitimation alike as products of politics and therefore tenuous, requiring human agreement and capable of modification.

Disrupting the audience's formal expectations without obliterating them, such poems invite complex or critical interpretations of events without grounding such interpretation in individual subjectivity. Thus for example "On the Slain Collegians," which sets up the expectation of traditional ballad meter by opening with two 4343 quatrains rhymed *abcb*, begins a new stanza midway through the poem as follows:

Woe for the homes of the North,  
 And woe for the seats of the South:  
 All who felt life's spring in prime,  
 And were swept by the wind of their place and time— (l.25-28; *Published Poems*  
 118-19)

The fourth line here, remarkable for its substitution of triple feet, ought to rhyme with "South." The unexpected couplet "prime" / "time" asks us retrospectively to reconcile "North" and "South" as a couplet, emphasizing an equal distribution of fault and pathos while proposing an uneasy post-bellum unification, off-rhymes at best.

This structure of common meter giving way to a more complex form is especially prominent in the “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial” section of the volume. For example, “An uninscribed Monument on one of the Battle-fields of the Wilderness,” which comments, like “Shiloh,” on the popular theme of pastoral recuperation, begins with a rhyme scheme that Melville had used in “The Apparition” to evoke traditional ballad form:

Silence and solitude may hint

(Whose home is in yon piny wood)

What I, though tableted, could never tell—

The din which here befell,

And striving of the multitude. (l.1-5; *Published Poems* 130)

As the fourth line rhymes with the third, which would have remained unrhymed in the ballad form set up by the first two lines, the poem shifts genres. Following are two more quatrains rhymed *abba*, the pattern set by lines two through five (“wood” / “tell” / “-fell” / “-tude”), and a closing couplet that commands the living witness’s memorial response. Here are the final quatrain and couplet:

Thou who beholdest, if thy thought,

Not narrowed down to personal cheer,

Take in the import of the quiet here—

The after-quiet—the calm full-fraught;

Thou too wilt silent stand—

Silent as I, and lonesome as the land. (l.10-15; *Published Poems* 130)

In the latter part of this fifteen-line poem, several lines take the pentameter form of line three, thus reinforcing the sense that we are hearing a ballad turn into a new form akin to a sonnet, yet

the topic remains outside the sonnet form's conventional purview. The personified monument's bid for the observer's identification forces a confrontation with mortality (Barrett 277). "Personal cheer" would be a natural response, even if tinged with survivor's guilt. Yet the stone redirects any such "narrow," "personal" attempt to evade the violence, urging attention to the cannon balls lying on the ground, "spheres of death / Set round me in their rust," asking for an impossible recognition that transcends human emotion: become "lonesome as the land."

The concluding poem of the "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial" section, by contrast, directly presents first-person subjectivity. Ventriloquizing the voice of a common soldier in the manner of Charles Dibdin, "The Returned Volunteer to his Rifle" sets up the expectation of four-stress quatrains rhymed *abcb*. However, the pentameter third line soon stretches the meter, straining to incorporate something as yet undefined:

Over this hearth—my father's seat—

Repose, to patriot-memory dear,

Thou tried companion, whom at last I greet

By steepy banks of Hudson here.

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 kept it green.

Long rest! with belt, and bayonet, and canteen. (*Published Poems* 138)

Marked by indentations, the opening quatrain is songlike and sentimental as it venerates patriarchy and patriotism. The sixth line stretches to pentameter again, aestheticizing the Hudson River valley landscape familiar to Melville from his boyhood and gesturing toward blank verse

landscape meditation in the vein of William Cullen Bryant's "The Prairie" or James Russell Lowell's "The Cathedral." The poem's base line remains poised uneasily between four and five stresses, between vernacular and elite associations.

The next line, however, pulls back to the four-stress base as the scene shifts to a radically different landscape in a flashback recollection of the Gettysburg battlefield. A deliberate effort to return to the present moment cuts short this post-traumatic recollection. Sentimental icons in the final couplet ("haven . . . God kept it green") begin to recover the tenor of the opening, but cannot cover the trace of trauma in the form of the poem: a single, unrhymed line that recollects, in a detached way, the prospect of death: "Little at Gettysburg we thought." This is not a case of "feeling confessing itself to itself," as in the conventional understanding of modern lyric, but rather of form proscribing deep "feeling" (Mill 348). The experience of war, absent from the deictic unrhymed line, remains exterior to the discourses that legitimate war. Thus the stoic recollection of the prospect of death is not recuperated by patriotic song, but is formally set apart. Are we to take the unrhymed line's gesture toward free verse (the only such gesture in the volume) as an experiential analog to the moment of freedom that comes from accepting the inevitability of death? If so, as the song-like closing couplet suggests, such moments are both fleeting and incompatible with the commonality of belief or allegiance that constitutes vernacular poetics' relation to its audience. Yet as we have seen, Melville insists on incorporating such moments of recognition or delegitimation into vernacular forms, producing new forms that hail an audience on familiar terms and then critique those very terms.

The late unrhymed line in “The Returned Volunteer” thus emphasizes by way of exception an important pattern in *Battle-Pieces*. Whether in poems of a single stanza such as “Shiloh” or within stanzas of longer poems such as the *abccb* of “The Apparition” or the *abcdbcc* of “The Scout toward Aldie,” the pattern is one of increasing density and complexity of rhyme in a movement away from vernacular forms; the unrhymed line remains as a trace of the vernacular *abcb* base. The resulting echoes and resonances register at the level of form the ideological complexities that Melville addresses at the level of theme. Sometimes the critical alteration of vernacular form is quite subtle, so as to carry the intended reader easily into assent, as in “Formerly a Slave”; at other times the alteration is more confrontational, as in “An uninscribed Monument.” Throughout the volume, whole poems or stanzas in vernacular forms recur to provide gauges against which the innovative poetics of increasing density can be measured.

The unrhymed line of “A Returned Volunteer” suggests another means of complicating the vernacular base, by means of free verse, which Melville did not explore further. The Victorian-era association of free verse with individual voice made this pattern inappropriate for *Battle-Pieces* as a whole—not merely for commemorative poems whose task by definition is to establish a common memory, but also for the battle poems, which do not attempt to present the soldier’s subjectivity.<sup>20</sup> Although the model of Whitman was available to him and he was well aware of Emerson’s occasional use of unrhymed lines for punctuation, emphasis, or mimetic effect, Melville used unrhymed lines primarily in the openings of poems or stanzas as a means to ground his poetics in familiar forms.<sup>21</sup> By this means, he hoped both to hail the audience who had grown up with these forms and to reconstitute this audience through association as critical citizens. The mechanism for this association was not the subjective self-management that

modernist lyric both laments and reproduces, but was rather the sense of community produced by and experienced through hymns, ballads, and songs.

Melville regarded vernacular poetics as a vehicle for the rhetorical production of the common “feelings” that, as Christopher Castiglia argues, could move subjects to invest in national identities (20). In his critical departure from these forms, however, Melville did not accomplish the constitution of a public. The volume was a commercial failure. Reviewers praised some of the more songlike poems, such as “The Temeraire,” “Sheridan at Cedar Creek,” or “The March to the Sea”—which as we have seen could invoke uncritical collectives—but for the most part they found the forms “uncouth” (Higgins and Parker 522). One reviewer more sympathetic than most seems to have glimpsed the nature of the project when he observed that Melville’s “thoughts . . . refuse to obey the rigid regimental order of the stanza, but outly its lines, deployed as irregular though brilliant skirmishers” (Higgins and Parker 523). If Melville failed to fulfill the bardic role he evoked in “The Portent,” this was because he could not finally speak in a single, national voice as Whitman claimed to do. Where Whitman presented himself as a microcosm of the United States, his one voice standing for each and all, Melville, like Emily Dickinson, “noted” multiple voices, “variable, and at times widely at variance,” as the only apt register of the war’s memory (*Published Poems* 3).<sup>22</sup>

In this way, Melville posed the problem of critical citizenship. Recognitions such as the delegitimizing force of “Shiloh,” or the instability of natural law demonstrated in the pairing of “Dupont’s Round Fight” and “A Utilitarian View,” or the existential insights of “An unscribed Monument” or “A Returned Volunteer,” could only be accomplished through a departure from the vernacular forms that traditionally produce the emotional satisfactions of citizenship. As we have seen in the paired poems on Sherman’s March, the production of such satisfactions could

merely reiterate the question of separate national identities posed by secession. Thus where vernacular poetics traditionally voiced patriotism as the nation's cooptation of interiority—Poor Jack is supposed to assent as he sings, “as for my life, 'tis the king's”—Melville explored a patriotism of supplementation, in which interiority remains unspecified and citizens are constituted by means of critical engagements with established forms.

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## *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> On elegy's capacity to constitute allegiances among the living, see Cavitch.

<sup>2</sup> On Melville's critique of representation, see Sweet 165-72.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson argues that William Dean Howells, in a disparaging review familiar to scholars of *Battle-Pieces*, read the volume as attempting, but failing, to develop a modernist lyric voice ("Who Reads" 184-86). On the historical development of this sense of lyric during the nineteenth century, see Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*. For Howells's review, see Higgins and Parker 526-28.

<sup>4</sup> On Civil War literature as failed epic, see Aaron.

<sup>5</sup> Antebellum era epitaphs usually take the hymn or ballad form. For example, in the American Antiquarian Society's Farber Gravestone Collection, of the more than two hundred stones dated 1800-1861 bearing poetic inscriptions, only twenty use five-stress lines. Thanks to Harry Brown of DePauw University and his research assistants Jessica Maginity and Ngoc Anh Nguyen for sharing their transcriptions of the AAS Farber Collection photographs; these transcriptions were tagged for poetic form by the author and James Holsinger.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the songs, ballads, and shanties he learned as a sailor, Melville read much of Francis James Child's eight-volume collection, *English and Scottish Ballads*, beginning in 1859 (Sealts 50).

<sup>7</sup> On folksongs in Melville's fiction, see Hayes 13-24.

<sup>8</sup> On the question of authenticity in the ballad revival, see Stewart, *Crimes* 86-88, 102-31.

<sup>9</sup> Melville owned this book (Sealts 77).

<sup>10</sup> Compare arguments that *Battle-Pieces* represents Melville's capitulation to the coercive power of the state, for example Rogin 257-87.

<sup>11</sup> Coviello characterizes Melville's variations on ballad meter in this poem as "strident" (198).

<sup>12</sup> See Kurath and McDavid map 32. Samples for this study were taken from speakers born in the 1850s and 1860s. Some contemporary reviews in New York City and Philadelphia papers objected to Melville's rhyming "law" with "Shenandoah" (Higgins and Parker 513, 520, 524, 525).

<sup>13</sup> Jackson suggests that Melville deliberately cites the folksong "Oh Shenandoah" (185).

<sup>14</sup> On the actual meteor, see *Published Poems* 625. Melville may have been influenced by Emerson's poem about another Welsh bard-prophet, "Merlin," which he read in late 1859 or thereafter (Parker 109).

<sup>15</sup> For a history of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron and its action in the Battle of Port Royal (which was less perfectly organized than contemporary newspaper accounts and Melville's poem make it out to be), see McPherson 31-42.

<sup>16</sup> Among the artists represented at the exhibition who used luminist techniques were Albert Bierstadt, Frederick Church, and Jasper Francis Cropsey. Character and genre painters in addition to Vedder included Eastman Johnson and William Sidney Mount (Garner 400-01).

<sup>17</sup> For details on the battle and Melville's likely source for the imagery, an illustration in *Harper's Weekly* by Alfred Waud, see *Published Poems* 662.

<sup>18</sup> Marrs argues that this extra line is a formal register of one of the primary themes of *Battle-Pieces*, Melville's sense of cyclical temporality (115).

<sup>19</sup> Warner gives a brilliant account of this line's delegitimizing turn.

<sup>20</sup> On the Victorian association of free verse with individual voice in the sense of freedom from constraining form, see Stewart, “Rhyme” 30-31.

<sup>21</sup> It is not clear whether Melville had read Whitman by 1866 (Parker 97-98).

<sup>22</sup> Miller finds in Dickinson’s Civil War poetry “an amalgam of voices or attitudes taking different emotional and philosophical perspectives” rather than a consistent lyric voice (148).