Shadows in the Shenandoah:

Melville, Slavery, and the Elegiac Landscape

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Melville's poem "The Portent" presents readers with a haunted vision of the divided American landscape before and during the Civil War. Through the speaker's apostrophe to the Shenandoah—a metonym for the shadowy presence of fugitive slaves, dissident bodies, and dead soldiers in the Valley—the poem dislocates the reader into the ethical position of literary witness, suggesting the power of poetry to make visible shadows otherwise unseen. The tenuous moment between looking and seeing, hearing and awaiting reply, threatens the reader's ability to read the poem coherently, and this essay argues that Melville's play with the conventions of apostrophe and prosopopoeia ultimately poses a deeper relation between the act of reading and the encounter with a face not one's own.

The Portent
(1859)

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.

“ ‘S henandoah!”—the urgent refrain of “The Portent”—inaugurates *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) with a strange series of images. Bodies and faces blur with the antebellum Virginia landscape, and shifting sight lines refract familiar terrain into uncanny shadows. Critics have often read the poem for its treatment of pre-war politics, primarily through the overt references to the execution of John Brown and the oblique allusions to tragic Shakespearean heroes.[1] In this essay, I examine the specific geographical space invoked by the speaker’s apostrophe to the Shenandoah River Valley. The speaker of the poem faces the Shenandoah, looks to it, and addresses it. I argue that the poem’s emphasis on facing and watching directs readers to think more deeply about the role of American geography in political and ethical issues of the day, most notably black chattel slavery, and the ways in which literature can offer vision into shadows otherwise unseen.

Looking and watching are master tropes for Melville, appearing throughout his fiction from Tommo’s observations of the Typee to Amasa Delano’s inspection of the *San Dominick* and its inverted actors. Melville, always on the lookout for the weak reader, the “superficial skimmer of pages,” often entangles his readers in the very thematics of watching that his stories rehearse. In what we might call Melville’s poetics of reading, the surface seems to offer the clear answer until the “eagle-eyed reader” catches a glimpse of something else, some unsettled detail or repetition that collapses an easy interpretation and forces a new start. The “*Shenandoah!*” refrain in “The Portent” functions in this way. The two apostrophes to the Valley—articulated in paired lines 3 & 4 and 10 & 11—unsettle the poem at its most allegorical moments. These disruptions position “The Portent” within the tradition of the “threshold poem,” Saundra Morris’s term for a difficult opening verse

that initiates a way of reading the poems that follow.[2] The poem's difficulty lies in its eerie ability to change face, to turn the reader toward the landscape through the poetic tropes of apostrophe and prosopopoeia. The following essay unfolds the ethical implications of these tropes for the politics of American slavery, suggesting how poetry can cultivate a narrative ethics rooted in the act of difficult reading. Bringing together the rhetoric of antebellum slavery, literary scholarship on the apostrophe, and the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, I argue that "The Portent" shadows Melville's lifelong concerns with the problems and potentials of literary form, particularly its ability to articulate the grounds of ethical and political crises through the idiom of American geography.

On first reading, the primary image of "The Portent" appears to be John Brown's body, "*slowly swaying*" from the gallows and portending the War's brutal cost. Hennig Cohen, for example, identifies how the "predominantly visual," even "kinetic," imagery of the poem centers on the human body and structures the metrical patterns of the two stanzas (203). I aim not to discount this reading but to amplify it. So far critics have not fully considered the refrain, the word "*Shenandoah!*" that repeats, hangs, and disrupts neat political and prophetic interpretations. It is a supplement, a floating polysemic cultural marker that disturbs the tidy allegory of Brown as harbinger-of-the-War. The two exclamatory apostrophes appear at the very center of each stanza, guiding the reader's vision away from the scaffold and the surface plot of Brown's execution. In these parallel moments, the reader is forced to face the landscape and hear the speaker's vigorous but ambiguous address to the Shenandoah.

The word "*Shenandoah!*" has a number of dimensions. Most immediately, it is a call to northern Virginia's lush river valley and the (Anglicized) Native American histories buried in its name.[3] Juana Djelal reminds us that the Shenandoah River meets the Potomac River at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, the location of Brown's 1859 raid on the United States Arsenal and the future

borderland between Union and Confederate territories. For Djelal, "the confluence becomes both a geographic and a historical juncture. . . . [It] summons a witness" (223). Reading the poem as a summons to witness is a productive start, simultaneously engaging its geographic context and its rhetoric of watching. But precisely what we should witness remains uncertain because the "Shenandoah" refrain multiplies the poem's cultural and historical frames.

First, Melville plays on the well-known American ballad "Oh! Shenandoah," popularized as a sea shanty among sailors, to create an ironic patina of nationalist nostalgia in the context of Brown's execution. Second, "Shenandoah" is not only a disputed geopolitical space but also a sign of conflicted cultural memory in the shadow of antebellum national ideals. This conflict was amplified by the naming of two warships—the *USS Shenandoah* (1862) and the *CSS Shenandoah* (1864)—each fighting on an opposing side in the War. And third, to antebellum readers the "Shenandoah" refrain evoked images of runaway slaves fleeing to freedom along the hiding spots of the Shenandoah River's shores. Although fugitive slave escape routes were rarely fixed and thus often difficult to track precisely, there is historical evidence that Harper's Ferry, Virginia was an important hub for the final stretch into the Northern states.[4] On one level a retrospective elegy to the Valley's blood-soaked battlefields, on another, the "The Portent" calls to the Shenandoah to signal the subversive cartographies of fugitive slaves whose escape routes challenged the dominant mapping practices so central to antebellum political discourse. The Shenandoah was thus a literal and figurative reminder of mid-century America's contested political geographies. When Union General Phillip Sheridan and his Army of the Shenandoah burned the Valley in 1864, the metaphor became material. Now a charred theatre of guerilla warfare, the Valley's landscape bore visible scars of a conflict in which geography and slavery were knotted together under dueling nationalist claims.[5]

The poem's complexity deepens when we recognize how the speaker's apostrophe maps the American landscape, with its variety of political and cultural shadows, onto the story of John Brown.

The poem has two central turns. The first is from Brown's swaying body in lines 1-2—"*Hanging from the beam, / Slowly swaying (such the law)*"—to the Shenandoah's shadow in lines 3-4: "*Gaunt the shadow on your green, / Shenandoah!*" The second moves from Brown's cap in lines 8-9—"*Hidden in the cap / Is the anguish none can draw*" to the veiled face of the Shenandoah's future in lines 10-11: "*So your future veils its face, / Shenandoah!*" The poem's oscillating visual and aural elements, moving from Brown's body to the Shenandoah and back, suggest that Brown's narrative is entwined with American geography and a national territorial identity. By grafting the landscape onto Brown's hung body, Melville reminds readers how the politics of slavery were rooted in territory, in the possession of land. Brown believed that the total abolition of slavery required violently resisting the spread of slavery into new territories, as his 1856 firefights in "Bleeding Kansas" attest. In the first stanza of "The Portent," the shadowy image of Brown's body blended into the Shenandoah links the dissident body (and, by extension, the bodies of the slaves he sought to free) with the historical landscape of Virginia and the fractured national body it represents. The dissolution of Brown into the Valley turns our attention to the chiasmic relation between political and material bodies—State and dissident, master and slave, Shenandoah and valley—that shadows the entire poem.

Take, for example, the object of the preposition in line 1: "*Hanging from the beam*." "Beam" is a synecdoche for the gallows, but the word originally derives from the Old English *béam* (and later the German *baum*) meaning "tree" (*OED*). Melville doubles the image of Brown's body hanging from the beam with leaves and vines hanging from Shenandoah Valley trees, "*slowly swaying*" in the wind under the laws of gravity.[6] John Brown's hanging body superimposed onto the Valley, emphasized by the pendulum participles "hanging" and "swaying," presents the reader with a difficult image to envision, a blurry and grotesque vision of human body entangled with tree. The presence of one image distorts the next, yet each is not visible without the other. The linked images

established in lines 1 and 2 form a jumbled backdrop for the first address to the Valley in lines 3 and 4: the observation (and perhaps condemnation) "*Gaunt the shadow on your green / Shenandoah!*"

Critics have posed a number of ways to read these two lines, most commonly citing Psalm 23: 1-4 ("Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death"), an allusion that may refer to the nation's sense of hypocrisy and guilt for Brown's execution and the maintenance of slavery it implies. Rosanna Warren concludes that "the valley of the shadow of death" implicit in the first stanza allows the address to the valley a more expansive meaning in the second stanza, "so as to include the whole land in its illusion of prewar innocence" (109).[7] But each of these readings misses the full force of "shadow" in line 3, which amplifies the linguistic density of "Shenandoah" in line 4. The word "shadow" had tremendous resonance in antebellum American discourse, drawing on a moral register from the Bible to address a variety of social and cultural conflicts. The poem's trochaic emphasis on "shadow," alliteratively paired with "Shenandoah!" in the following line, guides the reader to meditate on this vague image in the context of the War's material and discursive landscapes. In its full historical and geographic milieu, the "shadow" on the Shenandoah's "green" may very well be the gaunt slave, the spectral body haunting the Valley (and poem), camouflaged in its trees (and beams).

"Shadow" was a common word in antebellum abolitionist rhetoric used to frame slavery in both Biblical and spatial terms.[8] For example, Wendell Phillips's 1845 letter to Frederick Douglass, included in the preface to his *Narrative of the Life* (1845), urges the female reader to envision a map of America, gaze north to south, "and then imagination may task her powers to add dark lines to the picture, as she travels southward to that (for the colored man) Valley of the Shadow of Death, where the Mississippi sweeps along" (10). Sojourner Truth writes that under slavery "truth and error strangely commingled" in the mind, producing in the souls of owners and slaves alike "sometimes hideous shadows" (58). And perhaps most famously, Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette,

observed on his 1835 trip to America that slavery had become "a dark spot upon the face of the nation" (Bascom, *Voices* 98). These writers use shadow imagery to suggest how tightly abolitionist politics was yoked to a spatialized rhetoric of ethical responsibility and, often, tropes of visibility and confrontation under the rubric of the national map.

Given Melville's fascination with visibility and invisibility (as narrative techniques, Gothic tropes, and philosophical problems), it is unsurprising that "shadow" appears throughout his fiction and poetry.[9] Melville was clearly aware how the word "shadow" resonated in antebellum American culture, an awareness that organizes his most famous treatment of American slavery, "Benito Cereno" (1855). The word appears on the first page of the story to describe the ominous birds skimming "low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come" (*Piazza Tales* 46). Later, when the dissident slave Atufal first appears, the narrator uses "shadow" to describe the masked anger in Benito Cereno's face: "At first glimpse of his approach, Don Benito had started, a resentful shadow swept over his face; and, as with the sudden memory of bootless rage, his white lips glued together" (61-62).[10] This dynamic is reversed in the climax of the story when Delano finally realizes the truth and "Atufal, the pretended rebel" becomes "but [a] punctual shadow" (96) of his earlier performative self.[11] Soon after, the narrator describes the *San Dominick*'s prow, no longer hidden from sight, swinging into Delano's vision to reveal the "skeleton gleaming in the horizontal moonlight . . . casting a gigantic ribbed shadow upon the water . . . beckoning the whites to avenge it" (102).

"Shadow" has at least three functions in "Benito Cereno" that anticipate its use in "The Portent." First, "shadow" creates a rhetorical register that mirrors the theme of racial performance (e.g., Atufal as "punctual shadow"). Second, it establishes Melville's narrative technique. The true nature of the *San Dominick* remains invisible to Delano and his shadow, the reader, until the end of the story. In other words, Melville premises his entire narrative framework on the trope of visibility.

"Shadow" is for Melville the perfect metaphor for slavery because it only superficially conforms to prevailing abolitionist rhetoric. Instead, in "Benito Cereno" the word "shadow" unsettles a deeper distinction between performance and reality, drawing the reader into the labyrinth of shadows at the heart of the narrative. The reader, a shadow first of Delano and then of Don Benito, has the ability to re-read the story and re-evaluate various performances, especially Babo's. Indeed, as Downes has pointed out, attentive re-readers will notice how, at lunch in Benito Cereno's cabin, Babo positions himself in Delano's shadow. He stands behind the captain to keep a close eye on Benito Cereno, since, as Delano sees it, "by facing him he could the more readily anticipate his slightest want' (90).'[12] So the third function of "shadow" articulates the layered relations between the reader, the narrator of the story, Babo, and Don Benito. Through the shadow of the third-person narrator, Melville makes literal the invisible shadows Babo has cast over the former captain, behind the backs of Delano and the reader. This intricate play of shadows culminates in the moment at the end of the story when a frustrated Delano famously asks Don Benito, "'What has cast such a shadow upon you?'" and Benito Cereno replies, "'The negro'" (116). Babo's "shadow"—the awareness of how performance constitutes racial distinctions and how easily substance can be taken for shadow—haunts Don Benito and the reader alike.

In "The Portent," Melville collapses all three functions of "shadow" into the Shenandoah landscape. The speaker identifies the gaunt "shadow" on the Shenandoah's "green," inviting readers to visualize antebellum representations of escaped slaves and consider the consequences of this visibility. Mid-century American magazines on both sides of the slavery issue were especially interested in maroon communities, creating images of fugitive slaves that blended body with the wilderness in fascinating but problematic ways.[13] Melville's speaker uses the word "green," a metonym for forest, to mark the gaunt shadows hiding in the banks of the Shenandoah Valley. The landscape in turn becomes metonymic for the presence of runaway slaves. In "The Portent," as in

the Shenandoah River Valley, American geography is inscribed, haunted, and made legible by the presence of slavery. The presence of ghostly slaves—alive and dead—in the Valley and in the poem shapes the speaker's lament into an overt act of mourning.[14] Writing against Emily Dickinson's famous declaration that "Unto the dead / There's no geography" (F476), Desiree Henderson reminds us that "death is a remarkably spatial phenomenon; memorials for the dead take form within material environments and structure how individuals map and traverse their worlds" (11). In "The Portent," the speaker attends to the materiality of the Shenandoah Valley to memorialize this extended, ghostly space of enslavement. Henderson argues that Frederick Douglass, like Melville, recognized the extent to which "power relations were carved out as much through material spaces and structures as through ideological concepts like race and citizenship" (85).

Linking "shadow" with both slavery and material landscape, Melville follows his earlier work in *The Piazza Tales* (1855), especially "The Piazza," "The Encantadas" and "The Bell-Tower." These stories investigate the ecological world for its difference, its otherness, against the human world of meaning. The opening paragraph of "The Bell-Tower," for example, details the "dissolution" of a "black mossed stump of some immeasurable pine" and its remainder, a "mossy mound—last-flung shadow of the perished trunk" (*Piazza Tales* 174). The ecological world, Melville seems to say, is constantly emerging from and dissolving into shadows: bodies blurring and morphing into one another as John Brown's body becomes the Shenandoah. Several key words in "The Portent" double as ecological terms; for example, the "stabs" ostensibly given to Brown in line 7 might invoke their tertiary definitions, meaning "stumps," and Brown's "cap" in line 8 could be read as the shorthand for the "calyptra of mosses" (*OED*). Just as the "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" chapter of *Moby-Dick* ties the possession of a whale to the possession of a "Republican slave"—a relation shadowed by the Pip's fugitive presence in the novel—the gaunt shadows in "The Portent" mark how ecology is sublimated into political meaning. Looking at the Shenandoah, the reader is forced

to see beyond its beauty and its strategic, military, or political values. Instead, the poem attends to the fleeting (and fleeing) shadows that disturb such values, cluttering the tidy image of John Brown's body with multiple images of slaves, leaves, and valleys.

If, as Virginia Jackson puts it, the poem is about "the obscurity of consciousness, about our lack of access to the historical experience of John Brown" (184), then the poem is also about how such obscurity may be an effect of what we pay attention to, what metonymic logic we follow. The poem reorients readers to pay attention to multiple registers at once. The gaunt body of the fugitive slave and Brown's hanged body are both mediated by the Shenandoah River Valley. The poem is indeed a summons, a call to witness, yet it crowds and obscures that which demands witnessing, placing the reader in the precise position of the antebellum citizen whose vision, attention, and allegiances are pulled in multiple directions in the years leading to the War.

My discussion of facing and shadows in "The Portent" has given us a richer vocabulary to describe the poem's central poetic conceit: the act of apostrophe to the Shenandoah. In the final two sections, I argue that the speaker's addresses to the land (and ultimately the dead) provide the poem with its ethical valence. The shadowy presences of dissident bodies, disputed political geographies, and fugitive slaves in the poem emerge from the speech circuit between speaker and Valley. I want to interrogate the relation between vision and voice implied by the poem's apostrophe to tease out its implication for an ethical understanding of literary form. With an eye to the philosophy of Levinas, I claim that the interruptive poetics of "The Portent" dislocates the reader into a uniquely ethical position of literary witness. This tenuous position between looking and seeing, hearing and awaiting reply, threatens the reader's ability to read the poem in a coherent way and confuses traditional modes of perception and knowledge. As such, "The Portent" models the experience of difficult reading. Melville plays with the conventions of

apostrophe and prosopopoeia to suggest a deeper relation between the act of reading figural tropes and the ethical encounter with a face not one's own.

"An apostrophe," Harold Bloom tells us, was originally "directed at the dead but swerved into an address to the absent" (64). Writing about the influence of Whitman (and Pater) on Wallace Stevens' "Tea at the Palaz at Hoon" (1921), Bloom traces the swerve from dead to absent through Whitman's *Song of Myself* (1855), particularly section 25 and Whitman's famous declaration, "My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach" (*Complete Poems* 25.5). Whitman's statement offers a helpful index of the dynamic between speech and vision in "The Portent." Melville's interest in shadows and visibility in his earlier fiction takes on a different register in *Battle-Pieces*, as his speaker pivots between visual and aural modes of expression. From Brown's "swaying" body to the "Shenandoah!" address, Melville moves between shadowing and summoning, seeing and waiting for an answer. In other words, the speaker's voice invokes a face for the Shenandoah River Valley, made explicit through the complicated force of lines 10-11: "*So your future veils its face / Shenandoah!*" Because the "future" of the Valley is the primary noun, not the Valley itself, this double metaphor is nearly impossible to visualize. Its logic derives from the figure of prosopopoeia, or the conjuring of a face through speech.

In "Autobiography as Defacement" (1979), his essay on Wordsworth and the epitaphic tradition, Paul de Man argues that apostrophe, and its implied prosopopoeia, is a central mode of human expression laid bare in poetic form. For Wordsworth and de Man, the epitaph becomes "the *speaking* stone counterbalancing the *seeing* sun" through prosopopoeia, "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech" (de Man 926). De Man contends that by extension this voice assumes a mouth, eye, and face (the word prosopopoeia derives from *prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or a face). Thus for de Man prosopopoeia is the trope of autobiography: a name slowly becoming a

face to the reader over the course of the book.[15] Following de Man, J. Hillis Miller has elaborated on the ethical import of prosopopoeia for literary studies over the course of two linked books, *The Ethics of Reading* (1987) and *Versions of Pygmalion* (1990). According to Miller, prosopopoeia is "the ascription to entities that are not really alive first of a name, then of a face, and finally, in a return to language, of a voice" (*Versions* 5). The speaker of "The Portent" invokes a "face" for the Valley's "future," only to have it immediately "veil[ed]": an invocation and refusal of prosopopoeia. This ambivalence is, for Miller, central to the inner logic of prosopopoeias because they "exist prior to the distinction between figurative and literal speech," and many prosopopoeias are also "catachresis, neither literal nor figurative, like 'headland,' 'eye of a storm,' or 'face of a mountain'" (5). Operating in a liminal space between the literal and the figurative, prosopopoeias challenge the boundaries of linguistic expression by compressing reality into paradoxical anthropomorphisms. In her essay "Melville and the Lyric of History" (1999), Helen Vendler argues that Melville's poetic project condenses "reality into an epigram, or—carried to the utmost reach—to a single word" (266), like one inscribed on an epitaph. For Vendler, Melville achieves this effect by imitating refrain poetry: e.g., the repetition of "Cumberland!" in "The Cumberland" or "Shenandoah!" in "The Portent." Thus the circular speech circuits Miller finds in the poet's attempt to voice the dead signal Melville's engagement in *Battle-Pieces* with the wider history of the lyric and its popular nineteenth-century form, the elegy.

The complicated speech patterning in "The Portent" echoes Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751) and the *siste viator* ("stop traveler") convention implied by the address to the landscape and thus the dead. De Man explains that in using the *siste viator* convention, "the text counsels against the use of its own main figure" (928) because this chiastic move (from life/death and voice/silence to death/voice and life/silence) is a threat to the traveler who stops and is struck silent. This threat is perhaps the longest shadow of "The Portent," which, like "the negro"

who haunts Benito Cereno to his death, haunts the reader far beyond the space of poem. The epitaphic tradition shadows all of Melville's writing and provides him an oblique method to address and give face to the faceless, implicating and even threatening the reader in the process. Melville oscillates between epitaphic and elegiac modes to sharpen the reader's attention to her own language and her own impending death. In Mitchell Breitwieser's words, "the linguistic stylization of the elegy mimics death by interrupting prose discourse" (73) and the habitual reading practices of everyday life. Poetry's elegiac power lies in its ability to "break from the currents of the prosaic and to leave a durable mark," thus erasing "quotidian discourses, which are to disappear without significant remainder, like the body of the dead" (73).

Yet, as we've seen, the speaker of "The Portent" resurrects the bodies of the dead by ascribing a name to the river valley, facing it, and awaiting reply from the silent shadows on its "green." Melville's speaker is divided between passivity and action. As such, the poem becomes in part a meditation on "the poet's role as composer of epitaph and performer of elegy" (Griffin 68), a theme that carries throughout *Battle-Pieces*, particularly in "An uninscribed Monument on one of the Battle-fields of the Wilderness" and "An Epitaph." In these poems, Melville's poetic concerns parallel Whitman's, especially in "As Toilsome I Wander'd Virginia's Woods" (1865) and the "*What is the grass?*" section of *Song of Myself*, where the grasses growing over graves become the "uttering tongues" of the dead, "the faint red roofs of mouths" (*Complete Poems* 6.119-20).[16] Whitman and Melville's evocations of faces in the landscape align both poets with a long tradition of Romantic verse techniques: for example, Wordsworth's apostrophe in "Valedictory Sonnet to the River Duddon" (1807). In Wordsworth's poem, the poet's call to the river's eternal "Form" is juxtaposed against the youth who mourn their inexorable journey "toward the silent tomb" (*Collected Poems* 334). The River Duddon and the Shenandoah Valley provide the two speakers a material nexus for their apostrophic laments. But whereas Wordsworth exalts and envies the eternal power of nature's

"Form," thus calcifying the difference between finite man and infinite river, Melville's poem intentionally blurs that difference.

Casualties of war, political dissidents, and runaway slaves alike decompose and dissolve into shadows of the Shenandoah. That is to say, Melville situates "The Portent" and *Battle-Pieces* in the tradition of the romantic lyric to swerve away from it. As Vendler suggests, Melville's "formal innovation" in *Battle-Pieces* is his ability to make a "hybrid of the paean, the narrative, and the elegy" by drawing on "various staples of lyric writing: typology, analogy, personification, myth, allegory, refrain, allusion, proper name, [and] synecdoche" only to silence and veil them once again (261). For example, the ironic prefatory note to *Battle-Pieces* referring to the Coleridge's Aeolian "harp in the widow" (*Published Poems* 3) infers that the war poems to follow flowed freely from the purely aesthetic imagination. We recognize the dark parody in the often disturbing images and cadences of the poems that follow. In this line of thinking, *Battle-Pieces* as a whole "reveals the increasing disjuncture between the verse styles of traditional public mourning and remembrance on one hand, and the interiority of a Romantic poetry of trauma and loss on the other" (Griffin 79).

Merging landscape, runaway, and hanged abolitionist, "The Portent" finds in the "Shenandoah!" apostrophe a welter of faces, suggesting that the Shenandoah "speaks" for the voiceless.[17] Melville's poem directs readers to look, bear witness, but not possess in the way that slave-owners possessed and controlled the spaces of the antebellum South. Melville seems to intuit what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls "the right to look," a "counterhistory" to the historically authoritarian, "violent and expropriative" regime of visuality that has dominated Western culture and politics since plantation slavery (6, 291). "The right to look," Mirzoeff contends, "is not about seeing," which is a form of watching that returns us to the scene of the slave plantation, "monitored by the surveillance of the overseer, operating as the surrogate of the sovereign" (1-2). Rather, the "right to look" is the right to bear witness and the willingness to be witnessed. "The Portent" is a poem of anti-

surveillance, of reverse looking, and its complicated poetics refuse any sort of firm possessive

reading. As Vendler puts it, "Melville's gaze is not upward, like Dickinson's, nor directed in a

democratic horizontal, like Whitman's; it is pitched downward, to the drowned under the sea . . . to

the fiery hell at the core of the earth" and to the dead soldiers and slaves beneath the Valley's

"green" (252).

Attending to Melville's rehabilitation of the lyric, Vendler enables us to see how the

dynamics of counter-visuality in "The Portent" emerge from its poetic architecture. For example,

the constant trochaic force in the poem's fourteen-lines, dotted with iambs in stutter-step

trimeter/tetrameter, counters and disrupts the traditional rhythms of, say, the Wordsworthian

sonnet. Rosanna Warren contends that the opening lines in each stanza—trochaic trimeter

catalectic (three trochees, the last missing its syllable)—are distilled in the three stress lines "*(Lo, John*

Brown)" and "*(Weird John Brown)*" (106). The word "Lo," in line six is suggestive here, from the

Middle English *lo*, probably a shortened form of *lōke* (Old English *lóca*) and the imperative of

"look," as in *loo' thee* ("look you") or *lo we* ("look we") (*OED*). The attention to looking again traces

back to the speech circuit, the speaker addressing the landscape. The deictic dimension of "Lo"

unsettles the reader's position in the poem. Where are we to look? At John Brown? Or is Brown

being directed to look at the Shenandoah . . . or at us readers?

The ambiguity of vision in this parenthetical—crossing lines of sight, gazes within gazes—

juxtaposes the poem's rhetoric with nineteenth-century geographic rhetoric and its emphasis on the

clear-eyed knowledge offered by cartography. For early nineteenth-century statistical geographers

like William Playfair and Joseph Priestly, historical and thematic cartography would "speak to the

eyes" (Playfair xx) with "more exactness, and in much less time, than it could have been by reading"

(Priestly, cited in Headrick 124).[18] Playfair's prosopopoeia is an attempt to register the map as a

transparent instrument of knowledge, but, ironically, his figure reintroduces the very problem he

wants to solve. Knowledge is shadowed in figural language. Melville's poem suggests that apparently clear vision is an illusion and that only by looking into the shadows, the blurry afterimages poetry allows, can we begin to consider how vision is a form of possession. This process of reading is difficult and time-consuming, as Priestly points out. But it is a sustained ethical engagement with the literary and rhetorical figures that shape the cultural and political matrices in which maps and laws appear.

"The Portent" resists cartographic appropriation by looking away from the Shenandoah back to John Brown, in parentheses: "*(Lo, John Brown)*" and "*(Weird John Brown)*." These forceful tri-stressed lines appear to emphasize Brown's presence as subject of the poem. And yet John Brown is not, technically, the subject at all. The addressed "*Shenandoah!*" bears the weight of the poem's lamentations, the exclamations and anguish that "*none can draw.*" The parentheses, which Virginia Jackson describes as "pseudo-choral remarks" (185), are asides to the Shenandoah apostrophe. John Brown is only parenthetically in the poem. These dual parentheses cast internal shadows in the poem's landscape: epitaphic memorials marked off by a grammar of enclosure. The poem does not fully render Brown's image, it points to his epitaph. In the next line, it points back to the Shenandoah, which itself resists capture in a single line or vision.

By now we have revised Andrew West's claim that "The Portent" is an epigraph to *Battle-Pieces* (280) by considering the poem an epitaph, an inauguration of the prosopopoeia that *Battle-Pieces* implies for the Civil War itself. If, as Miller contends, we should pay "special attention to prosopopoeia as the fundamental generative linguistic act making a given story possible" (13), then we might consider "The Portent" the face of the collection, a shadow that generates its substance. "If there is no ethics without story and no story without prosopopoeia," Miller argues, then tracking the use of apostrophe is crucial for "the understanding of ethics and especially of the ethics of reading" (13). In other words, "The Portent" demands of the reader certain actions through

reading. This demand to act is properly ethical, and the attention to facing or apostrophe (which, via prosopopoeia presumes a face) resonates with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.

T hough we should be careful of historical anachronisms and the potential for theoretical misreading, the central place of prosopopoeia in "The Portent," along with its highly developed rhetoric of seeing, looking, and facing in the context of American black chattel slavery, invites a Levinasean lens. Another concern is appropriating Levinas' complicated and irreducible ethical system for literary criticism, an act against which Levinas often cautioned. However, in her excellent book *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (1999), Jill Robbins suggests that if we consider literary study either "a more originary questioning of the nature and the conditions of literature and poetic experience . . . or as the study of the operations of tropes and figures within what Paul de Man calls the rhetorical dimension of language" (xx), then Levinas becomes crucial for literary study. Her book explores "the ways in which reading alters—or interrupts—the very economy of the same that the other interrupts. In this way, literary criticism, as a response to this textual interruption, might be said to have an ethical content" (xxiv). Here Robbins echoes Adam Zachary Newton, perhaps the most astute Levinasean literary critic, who argues that Levinas is particularly relevant for American literature. Newton writes that Levinas's "investment in a movement to and from the Other," offers a critical intervention "in the context of a nation and literature where de- or reimagined otherness has often served the interests of foundational fiction making" (629).

The primary energy of "The Portent" emerges in the exchange between the speaker and "Shenandoah!"—"to and from the Other." As we have seen, this Other—the apostrophized Shenandoah River Valley—is metonymic for the many Others fleeing from institutional slavery. Yet the poem's disjunctive poetics resist seeing them directly. These slaves are only visible in the

landscape, which is only visible against John Brown's swaying body. For Levinas "vision is emblematic of the habitual economy and its tendency to grasp and possess. Vision is a violence and a form of adequation" (Robbins 6).[19] Levinas resisted art and aesthetics because for him art substitutes "for the object its image . . [and thus] it is an obscuring or a shadow of reality" ("Reality" 3). But Derrida suggests an alternate way of understanding art as an "interruption" of the object/image binary: "To enter into a rapport with the other, interruption must be possible. The rapport must be a rapport of interruption. Here interruption does not interrupt the rapport with the other, it opens it" (31).

The "Shenandoah" refrain in "The Portent" interrupts the rapport between speaker and reader; it establishes a new speech circuit that forces the reader to rely less on the blurred visual imagery of the bodies-as-landscapes and more on the voices that speak in the poem and the voices given face in the Shenandoah's shores.[20] Deuteronomy 4:12—one of Levinas's favorite Biblical passages—describes the paradigm for this model of communication: "The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no figure [*temunah*]—nothing but a voice."[21] Attention to the interruptive power of voice renews attention to the contingency of language as well as the ability of rhetoric to distract and conceal. But it is only in poetry, Melville appears to say, that we can hold multiple voices, images, and interruptions at once to resist a totalizing, possessive vision. The poem's difficulty enacts the recognition that Melville first described in *Typee* (1846): "how feeble is all language to describe the horrors we inflict" upon all those we try to convert, civilize, and possess (125).

In the end, "The Portent" urges the reader toward "a kind of waking up from aesthetic experience, with its primacy on vision and the visual experience to which Western civilization ultimately reduces all spiritual life" (Levinas, "Transcendence" 147). This "waking up" is Levinas's definition of ethical relations, as well as a shorthand for the effect of the apostrophic exclamation:

"Shenandoah!" To act ethically is to cast off a veil and confront the face of the Other. Of course, in "The Portent" the most ambiguous two lines—"*your future veils its face, / Shenandoah!*" (lines 10-11)—pivot between superficial and developed readings of precisely *whose* future's face is veiled. The "*your*" of line 10 refers simultaneously to John Brown dying at the gallows, to the Valley "whose face hides in shame and horror at what has been done both to its lush verdure and to the young men slain in its arms," and "to the nation whose future remains unknown amidst the wreckage of the Civil War" (West 279). In all three possibilities, the speaker's prosopopoeia is fully realized. The "face" of the Shenandoah has the potential to speak but does not, perhaps out of shame and horror. Or perhaps the reader, the shadow of the speaker, continues to face and speak to the Shenandoah under the poem's blurred "veil" that obscures possessive vision. It is worth noting that the word "veil" is important to the American Romantics, a link to British Romanticism (Coleridge in particular) appearing in various iterations in the work of Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville.[22] The veil interrupts possessive vision, cultivating a sense of ethical dislocation related to Melville's poetic project in "The Portent."

It is fitting, then, that the final image in the poem is the "streaming beard" (line 12), ostensibly Brown's beard peering out from the execution "cap" and a sign of his ultimate wisdom. William Spengemann tells us that Melville alludes here to Thomas Gray's "The Bard" (1757), a poem "concerning the tribal songsters put to death by Edward I following the conquest of Wales" (587): "With haggard eyes the poet stood, / (Loose his beard, and hoary hair / Stream'd, like a meteor, to the troubled air)" (19). Aligning Brown with a poet, a fellow dissident martyr, Melville again emphasizes the face as a grounding figure of poetic creation. Gray the poet attends to the Bard's "haggard eyes," giving those eyes a face, beard, and voice. Gray simultaneously memorializes the Bard, as Melville does Brown, in epitaphic parentheses that interrupt and startle the reader's habitual economies of reading.[23]

Melville's speaker in "The Portent" shows us a way to read otherwise, to witness the War through the various bodies of the Shenandoah. The poem opens a space in American literature for ethical reflection that resists the territorializing and possessive urges of geographic nationalism that often persist even in the rhetoric of those who oppose it. The poem takes seriously Babo's dictum in "Benito Cereno": "Since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words" (*Piazza Tales* 116). It offers no didactic speech. Rather, the poem directs us, in the blurred superimpositions of bodies and landscapes, to listen and not see. If the shadows in the poem are "nothing but a voice," and if, as Spengemann observes, the poem "strikes a public attitude" (586), then we recognize in Melville's threshold verse an essential relation between voice, silence, and mourning in the antebellum American public sphere.

So John Brown's streaming beard, the visible remainder of a silenced voice and a masked face, may carry even more meanings if we consider the etymology of "beard," from the Old English *béacn* or beacon, meaning "portent, sign" (*OED*).[24] The poem, like the beard, is "a sign, indication, or omen of a momentous or calamitous event, a wonder, a marvel; something exceptional or extraordinary" (*OED*). "The Portent" offers extraordinary insight into the way poetics can turn the reader's face, shaping a narrative ethic that addresses and listens but cannot possess its object. Melville's poem is a powerful example of how geographic idioms shadow nineteenth-century American literature, how the politics of "territory" and "possession" filter through the American literary and ethical imaginations, here transmuted into fleeting shadows in the Shenandoah.

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Notes

[1] For a summary of various political and Shakespearean readings of "The Portent," see Djelal 222.

[2] For an example of Morris's argument about "threshold poems," see Morris 778. Thinking of "The Portent" as a "threshold poem" accounts for the peculiar place the poem occupies in *Battle-*

Pieces as a whole. Given its brevity, its formal intricacy, its italicization, and its omission from the table of contents, "The Portent" creates intentional distance from the poems that follow. It provides a threshold, not only for *Battle-Pieces* but for Melville's entire poetic career, and seems to preface the larger generic questions Melville wants to investigate via poetic forms. The poem condenses into a pseudo-sonnet a quintessential Melvillean theme: the relative ability of certain genres (particularly fiction, poetry, and autobiography) to glimpse the truth, "covertly, and by snatches" (*Piazza Tales* 244). But unlike earlier iterations of this question in, for example, *Mardi* (1848), *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852), or even *Israel Potter* (1856), "The Portent" infers a kind of ethical charge that Melville finds only in poetic form.

[3] The word is of unknown Native American etymological origin, probably in reference to the massacre of the Senedo tribe sometime between 1650 and 1700, but it was adopted to name the Shenandoah River Valley in 1778. See Wayland 60, 78. On the thematic and metrical functions of "Shenandoah," see Cohen 204.

[4] Originally named "Shenandoah Falls" by Robert Harper in 1734 for his ferry business, Harper's Ferry offered runaways routes northwest and east. See Still 48-51 and Switala 110-16.

[5] Melville was attuned to such conflicted cartography, focusing on Thomas Mosby (the "Gray Ghost" of the Confederacy) and his raids into the Shenandoah in *Battle-Pieces*'s longest poem, "The Scout Toward Aldie."

[6] This superimposition carries throughout the poem, even in line five—"cut is on the crown"—which has been read almost solely in political terms. Cohen refers us to John Brown's 22 October 1859 letter to Judge Daniel Tilden asking for legal aid: "I am here [Charlestown, Virginia] a prisoner, with several cuts in my head, and bayonet stabs in my body" (204). But "crown" not only

refs to the human head and the symbol of sovereign power but also "the leafy head of a tree or shrub" (*OED*).

[7] Other critics have read the "gaunt" shadow in line 3 as an allusion to John of Gaunt who sees through Richard II's murderous lies in Shakespeare's *Richard II* (1597). Shakespeare and Melville may be playing with the multiple definitions of "gaunt," meaning both "thin" and "gaping or yawning," as in "Gaunt am I for the grave, gaunt as a grave" (*Richard II* 2.1.82). Following the Shakespearean inter-texts, Spengemann suggests that line 5, "the cut is on the crown," may be linked to the King's assurance in *Henry V* (1600) that "It is no English treason to cut French crowns" (4.1: 244-45; see Spengemann 587).

[8] Abolitionist rhetoric may have appealed to nineteenth-century readers of Milton, who uses "shadow" in *Paradise Lost* (1667) to contrast earthly and heavenly reality—"What if Earth / Be but the shadow of heaven" (5.574-5)—and to contrast Satan's power and rhetoric with God's: "Anger and just rebuke, and judgment given, / That brought into this world a world of woe; / Sin and her shadow death" (9.10-12).

[9] Melville uses "shadow" several times in *Battle-Pieces*, usually to refer to the hypocrisy of slavery. For examples, see the poems "The Conflict of Convictions" (lines 76-78), "America" (47-49), and "Lee in the Capitol" (207).

[10] The narrator describes Benito Cereno's face from Delano's perspective: the slave's approach causes a "resentful shadow" (*Piazza Tales* 61-61) on the white man's face, ironically twisting the slavery-as-moral-shadow trope against itself.

[11] When Delano recognizes that the *San Dominick*'s slaves have revolted, the "past, present, and future seemed one" (*Piazza Tales* 98), a temporal collapse mirrored in lines 10 and 11 of "The Portent": "*So your future veils its face, / Shenandoah!*"

¹² See Downes 480.

¹³ For examples, see Strother's sketch of "Osman," a "Dismal Swamp" maroon in the Sept. 1856 issue of *Harper's Monthly* (452) and Stowe's *Dred* (210). For a nuanced reading of these complex images, see Cowen 92, 111.

¹⁴ Griffin argues that mourning is at the heart of Melville's Civil War poems. Melville's speakers call into existence "a surrounding social matrix for remembrance and mourning, rather than having one already in place . . . [a matrix] formed out of a physical community, a geographical location or set of locations, a fabric of commonly held values and beliefs, and available cultural forms of expression" (9). In "The Portent," we see how the geographical location generates a socio-visual matrix for mourning of all kinds.

¹⁵ In a Melvillean turn of phrase, de Man concludes: "To the extent that, in writing, we are dependent on this language we all are, like the Dalesman in *The Excursion*, deaf and mute … silent like a picture, that is to say eternally deprived of voice and condemned to muteness" (930).

¹⁶ The landscape speaks, faintly, but is not fully incomprehensible to the poet. Whitman's synesthesia in *Song of Myself* mirrors an odd moment in Melville's "The Piazza" when the narrator describes a dark cloud overhead: "while the stillness was so still, deafness might have forgot itself, or else believed that noiseless shadow spoke" (*Piazza Tales* 11). The synesthesia in this moment amplifies the confusion between vision and speech intrinsic to prosopopoeia, foreshadowing a similar confusion in "The Portent" (not to mention the repetition of a gaunt or "noiseless shadow"). See also Whitman's "This Compost" in *Autumn Rivulets* (1881) and Henry Timrod's "The Unknown Dead" (1861).

[17] Referring to the later poem "Shiloh: A Requiem" in *Battle-Pieces*, Rosanna Warren writes: "In establishing his silence ["refusal of facile comfort"], he [Melville] educates our speech. Perhaps in that hush we can hear the dead speak" (121).

[18] On cartographic knowledge, see Shulten 28-40.

[19] Robbins goes on to explain the imperative of Levinasean ethics: giving up one's egoistic, possessive view of the world to encounter the Other as radically different from one's self. She writes: "The self's habitual economy, its tendency toward possession and *pouvoir*, is called into question by the other. But this calling into question, which will not be absorbed into an *awareness* of being called in question, must straightaway become generosity" (7).

[20] The poem's apostrophic laments are gifts (in Levinasean language, "speech-gifts") which establish "a relation in which the terms absolve [or loosen] themselves from the relation" (*Totality* 64).

[21] For further reading on the voice in Western literature and philosophy, see Dolar.

[22] For example, see Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" (193-94). Cohen suggests a link to Schiller's poem "The Veiled Image at Sais," which Melville had read (205).

[23] The relation between "beard" as "an obsolete name for the train or tail of a comet" (*OED*) and the "meteor" that concludes the poem recalls Whitman's linkage of celestial bodies and Brown's execution in "Year of the Meteors" (1859-60) (lines 4, 24). Given our attention to the poem's American slavery inter-text, we also might be reminded of Jefferson's descriptions of African slaves in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). Jefferson writes in Query 14 that the slave's imagination is "wild and extravagant, escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste, and, in the course of its vagaries, leaves a tract of thought as incoherent and eccentric, as is the course of a meteor through the sky" (189). Jefferson's *Notes* is a classic example of literary

geography, an attempt to map not only Virginia's physical landscape but also the bodies that occupy it: farmers, animals, minerals, vegetables, Native Americans and slaves. Out of a geographic model of Virginia, he could infer a political model. For Jefferson, mapping, slavery, and geography are bound in the same Enlightenment plane of reason, visuality, and taxonomic logic that "The Portent" interrupts and resists.

[24] Among colloquial phrasings of the word "beard," we find a spirit of opposition: for example, "spite of or maugre any one's beard," meaning, in defiance of or direct opposition to his purpose, or "to be . . . meet . . . or run in any one's beard," meaning "to one's face, openly; to oppose him openly and resolutely" (*OED*).