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Lone Oak

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Melville's Battle-Pieces published in 1866 was hardly noticed. As Leon Howard points out, he may have been discouraged but he could hardly have been surprised at being ignored. According to Prof. Howard by 1868 only 486 copies had been sold, and during the next seven years only eleven additional copies were sold. The New York newspapers were fairly kind in their reviews, but such journals as Atlantic Monthly were contemptuous. Melville, who had made himself financially responsible for the project, lost about $400 on the publication.

Warner Berthoff suggests that the poems show little technical facility (a point already referred to in the essay by Robert Penn Warren). But even so Berthoff admits that in places the book shows some qualities of the greatest poetry, "particularly in its strong emotional control and intellectual energy . . . and in the nervous expressive power with which now and again it lifts itself to its most intense concern."

In the preface to the volume Melville wrote: "Let us pray that the terrible historic tragedy of our time may not have been enacted without instructing our whole beloved country through pity and terror." Most of the poems had been written after the fall of Richmond and at a time politically when there was a division between those who sought reconciliation and a quick return to "normalcy" and those who were punitive and vindictive in their intentions.

While Melville was a Northerner and believed in the rightness of the Union's cause, he did not view the Southerner as the enemy so much as a misguided brother. In the prose afterword to the volume of poems he urged the victorious North to show mercy and compassion to the vanquished South instead of a spirit of hate and revenge. It is significant, Gay Allen suggests, that Melville was not one of those who saw a Divine Purpose being carried out in the war. Rather he saw God keeping "the middle way" instead of taking either side.

The war and Melville's deep feelings concerning it roused him out of the pessimism, cynicism, and lethargy to which he had descended in the years following the publication of Moby-Dick and culminating in the publication of The Confidence Man. He was touched by the heroism of individual men and was saddened by the loss of the finest youth in

the nation on both sides. And perhaps more significantly there began to appear in his writing at this point a note of reconciliation with life--a reconciliation which was finally to be expressed so beautifully in Billy Budd (called by some his Nunc dimittis). He came to see nature as a symbol of healing and renewal over against the scars brought on by man's strife.

Newton Arvin suggests that some lines of Melville's poetry seem close to the poems of the 17th century metaphysical poets, but that his diction also draws on the tradition of the Elizabethan dramatists and Browning. He notes that the special quality of his verse depends often on rare, archaic words or words he invents himself with conscious oddity (e.g., "undeceive"). Arvin suggests further that Melville is the first poet in English to realize the meaning of modern technological warfare and to render it grimly and unromantically in his work. He calls him the Matthew Brady of Civil War verse. And yet at the same time, along with the horror of the war, Melville recognized the good mixed with the evil. He retained his facination with the ambiguities of human existence which engaged his mind in one way or another, as Richard Chase reminds us, from Typee to Billy Budd. In the supplement to Battle-Pieces he wrote of the "tempest bursting from the waste of Time/On the world's fairest hope linked with man's foulest crime." And similarly he wrote there that "with certain evils men must be more or less patient" because "to an unknown degree, men act as they must, out of the compulsion of necessity or the pressures of individual natures."

In the remainder of this study of Melville and the Civil War several themes which recur within the book of poems will be explored briefly as representative examples of his response to that national event which ironically restored hope to him and finally enabled him to make peace with the universe before he died.

A. Youth and Death. Melville was conscious of the youth of the fighting men on both sides in the Civil War. He saw it as largely a war fought by boys, boys filled with romantic notions of war, with enthusiasm and innocence, soon to be "undeceived" by the harsh realities of the real nature of war.

In "The March into Virginia" (subtitled "Ending in the First Manassas"), he wrote:

> Youth must its ignorant impulse lend--
> Age finds place in the rear.
> All wars are boyish, and are fought by boys.
>
> .....
>
> In Bacchic glee they file toward Fate,
> Moloch's uninitiate;
> Expectancy, and glad surmise
> Of battle's unknown mysteries.
> All they feel is this: 'tis glory,
> A rapture sharp, though transitory,
> Yet lasting in belaureled story.
> So they gayly go to fight,
> Chatting left and laughing right.
> But some who this blithe mood present,
> As on in lightsome files they fare,
> Shall die experienced ere three days are spent--
> Perished, enlightened by the vollied glare;
> .....

Similarly in "Sheridan at Cedar Creek," while recognizing the heroism of the leaders he thinks of the thousands of young enlisted men and concludes solemnly:

> There is glory for the brave
> Who lead and nothing save,
> But no knowledge in the grave
> Where the nameless followers sleep.

It is indeed one of his major themes that as these young men go gallantly into battle with notions of bravery, valor, and chivalry, the experience itself shatters such romanticism with its brutal realities. In "The College Colonel" he tells the story of William Francis Bartlett, who returned home to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in August, 1863, to a town celebration. Bartlett had left Harvard as a young student to enlist as a private, was later commissioned as a captain in the 20th Massachsetts Regiment, lost a leg, was twice more wounded, and after this celebration returned to war, rose to the rank of Brigadier General and was finally captured at Petersburg, Virginia. As the archetype of the boy soldiers Melville wrote of his experience:

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

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

In the deeply poignant poem, "On the Slain Collegians," he speaks of the unity in death of the youths of both sides, valiant, loyal, and honorable.

Warred one for Right, and one for Wrong?
So be it; but they both were young--
Each grape to his cluster clung,
All their elegies are sung.

.....

Each bloomed and died an unabated Boy;
Nor dreamed what death was--thought it mere
Sliding into some vernal sphere.
They knew the joy, but leaped the grief,
Like plants that flower ere comes the leaf--
Which storms lay low in kindly doom,
And kill them in their flush of bloom.

B. War's Ambiguities. For Melville there was no clear-cut right and wrong in war. Like the fabric of life itself it was filled with contradictions and ambiguities. In the "Battle of Stone River, Tennessee" inspired by that 1863 conflict near Murfreesboro, Tennessee, he compared the Civil War and its roots with England's War of the Roses between the Houses of York and Lancaster, ending each stanza with a refrain concerning the difficulty of ever reconciling the two sides in this complex war.

In North and South still beats the vein
Of Yorkist and Lancastrian.
.....

Do North and South the sin retain
Of Yorkist and Lancastrian?
.....

North and South shall join the train
Of Yorkist and Lancastrian.
.....

Shall North and South their rage deplore,
And reunited thrive amain
Like Yorkist and Lancastrian?

In "Commemorative of a Naval Victory" Melville quietly points out that even in victory the hero knows the mixed nature and ambiguity of war, the mixed motives and conduct on both sides. The good man has his dark side and vice-versa.

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

C. Themes of Hope: Leaders and Nature. There are, despite the impression perhaps given thus far, themes of hope and a moving toward some kind of confidence in a number of the poems. They have to do with the catalytic nature of manly leadership and the symbolism of nature as renewing and bespeaking order in the midst of human chaos.

In one poem in particular, "On the Photograph of a Corps Commander," Melville deals in a very positive way with the nature of leadership, teaching that the manly leader can be both inspiration and catalyst to his fellow men. As Hennig Cohen puts it, Melville believed that a manly leader could draw his fellow men into a brotherhood of honor in a way in which even God could not. His hero in the poem, Gen. Winfield S. Hancock, achieved distinction at the Battle of Spotsylvania in 1864 as commander of the II Corps.

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

In two of the best-known poems, "Malvern Hill" and "Shiloh" Melville juxtaposes man in the chaos of war with the order and renewing powers of nature and presents this as a portent of hope. He visited the battlefield of Malvern Hill in Virginia in April, 1864, and saw the grove of ancient elm trees swaying after the carnage of the battle which ended Gen. George B. McClellan's unsuccessful campaign against Richmond.

Reverse we proved was not defeat;
But ah, the sod what thousands meet!--
   Does Malvern Wood
Bethink itself, and muse and brood?

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

In "Shiloh," subtitled "A Requiem," inspired by the bloody though indecisive battle near Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee, in April, 1862, he saw the swallows flying overhead as expressive of the order and continuity of nature and a symbol of survival transcending man's destructiveness.

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

D. <u>The End of an Epoch: Modern Warfare Begins</u>. One poem in particular, "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight," shows how very clearly Melville saw the Civil War as marking the end of an age and the beginning of modern warfare. The day of the epic Naval hero has gone forever with the clash of the ironclad Monitor (Union) and Merrimac (Confederate) in March, 1862. He writes that this move into modern warfare has purged war of its false rhetoric and romanticism. It has now become technological. While Melville seems to regret the change, he recognizes the harsh modern reality for what it is.

Hail to victory without the gaud
   of glory; zeal that needs no fans
Of banners; plain mechanic power
Plied cogently in War now placed--
            Where War belongs--
Among the trades and artisans.

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

.....

War yet shall be, but warriors
Are now but operatives; War's made
   Less grand than Peace,
And a singe runs through lace and feather.

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In conclusion we refer again at Robert Penn Warren's essay on Melville the poet. Melville, he points out, is concerned with the fundamental ironical dualities of existence: will against necessity, action against idea, youth against age, the changelessness of man's heart against the concept of moral progress, the bad doer against the good deed, the bad result against the good act, ignorance against fate. Melville was, as Hawthorne once put it, really unable to believe or to be comfortable in his unbelief, but too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. The Civil War gave him opportunity to look at these dualities pitched to highest intensity. But even more, they gave him occasion to feel and to move toward hope and resolution. Perhaps in our times when we long for simple answers he may still lead us to think carefully and to feel deeply, and to live honestly without illusion but with a hope even greater than he was able to achieve.