

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

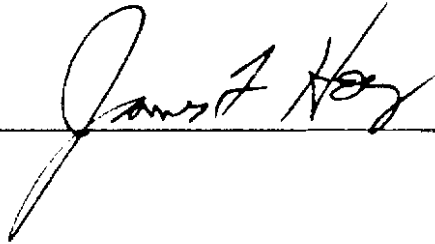
Janice M. Huston FOR THE Master of Arts

IN English presented on July 13, 1981

Title: A COMPARISON OF THE CIVIL WAR POETRY OF MELVILLE

AND WHITMAN

Abstract approved:



Perhaps more than any other philosophy, the Transcendental influence of the mid-nineteenth century allowed Herman Melville and Walt Whitman to experiment with their writing. The unlimited opportunities of America spilled over into the works of these artists as each attempted a variety of genres, eventually creating masterpieces of innovation in Moby Dick and Leaves of Grass. But each had reached a period of hesitation by 1860, perhaps stilled by the imminent outbreak of war, or perhaps quieted by the poor reader reception of their works.

Yet with the Civil War, both found new voice. And they

spoke out in poetry resonant with ever new experimentation. Their introductory poems to Drum Taps and Battle Pieces and Aspects of War reveal their new direction and new conviction to be the mouth-pieces of that war. Whitman's opening poems vigorously assert the necessity of the war to preserve the union. Strong rhythmic cadences punctuate these poems with the symbolic drum taps that give their name to the collection. Whitman uses the free verse style that he had developed, cataloguing the various scenes of preparation for the war. Conversely, Melville's opening poems stress the solemn implications of a civil war. Poetry was an entirely new venture for him since all of his previously published works had been in prose, and these first poems exhibit the harsh discordant style that was to characterize his poetry. Yet for a very real purpose, the atrocities of war are portrayed in choppy, difficult rhythms and images. These opening poems demonstrate the vast gulfs in philosophy that separate these two men. Whitman's optimistic Transcendental approach assures him that the war can cleanse the country of its controversies, renewing it for its destiny as the New Eden. Melville, on the other hand, realizes the complex issues causing the war, and, given his basic distrust in God and His creation, Melville can only dread the breakdown of the country. Yet in spite of their differences, both face the war with patriotic devotion.

As the collections progressed, the poets experimented frequently with style, achieving works very unlike others they had written. Some of Whitman's best war poetry is conventionally metered and rhymed. Yet his free verse works also demonstrate a

fine honing of his poetic skills. He was especially proud of the Drum Taps poems because he felt them to be the most honest, pared-to-the-bone pieces he had ever written. Melville, too, allowed himself a wide range for experimentation. One critic claims that not once is a rhythm and rhyme scheme duplicated throughout Battle Pieces. Although Melville opted for retaining these poetic conventions, he still took obvious liberties, straining rhythms to stress unlikely words, and rhyming as only his upper New York dialect allowed. Some poems become increasingly sinister with the repetition of simple refrains that seem to grow in implication with each stanza, again stressing the complexities Melville saw in the war.

In themes, too, these two men differed widely. Whitman clung to the Transcendental dream that universal brotherly love would end all strife and create in America the New Eden. This theme echoes through poem after poem in Drum Taps. Melville's poetry, however, reflects a great range of themes from the obvious one of opposition and reconciliation, to a preoccupation with death, to a conviction that law is necessary to preserve order, to a final despair that evil would overcome all.

To illustrate these themes Whitman and Melville chose symbols and images of war closely related to their outlooks. Whitman's drum taps and lines of soldiers marching together illustrate the unity in spirit that he hoped would prevail. Melville selected diverse symbols and images which once again reveals his inability to accept any single philosophy.

Against the Transcendental backdrop of the American dream, then, these two artists faced the problem of a civil war in their land. Even though their perspectives, themes, style, and form differ, through their poetry Melville and Whitman captured the complete texture of the war.

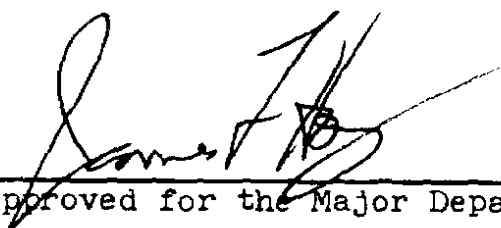
A COMPARISON OF THE CIVIL WAR POETRY OF
HERMAN MELVILLE AND WALT WHITMAN

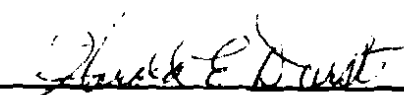
A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
Emporia State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Janice M. Huston
July 1981

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Approved for the Major Department


Approved for the Graduate Council

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PREFACE

Walt Whitman and Herman Melville had written their most acclaimed works by the time of the Civil War, yet each saw his Civil War poetry as pivotal in his career. In a period of wrenching conflict these two poets were most successful in giving voice to the divisions tearing at the country. Perhaps it was their innovative poetic techniques, different from the conventionally metered and rhymed works of their time, that articulated the confusion more accurately than other Civil War poets. Perhaps their clear-eyed depictions of the atrocities, psychological as well as physical, were realized as far more accurate than any patriotic homilies written by poets only wishing to portray their side as right. Their sharply etched images and profound symbols were unrelenting in illustrating the confusion both men felt at seeing their country, the land of promise for the future, being torn apart. These men had grown up in a time strongly influenced by Transcendentalist thought teaching the democratic promise for all men. Whitman, ever the optimist, embraced these teachings and expanded on them to develop his understanding of an all-encompassing love and peace that would be possible in this new Eden. Melville, the skeptic, doubted that such love could ever be universal given the

existence of evil in this world, an evil which must have been created by God. But nevertheless, he loved his country as Whitman did. This patriotic response may have been the only common experience Melville and Whitman ever shared, so their collections, Battle Pieces and Drum Taps, made for a fascinating comparison.

I would like to thank Dr. Gary Bleeker, my thesis director, for his original suggestion of comparing these two authors, and then for his encouragement in making this a thesis project. His steady guidance and direction greatly simplified the task. Dr. John Somer, as second reader, was extremely helpful in giving a new clear-eyed view of sections needing sharpening. My parents, Rhoda and Bill McConachie, are responsible for instilling in me the desire for learning and knowledge. To my girls, Tammy and Tania, goes my special appreciation as they put up with my mess while the paper was in process. I am especially thankful for my husband, Gene, who encouraged me to return to school. Without his support, this paper would not have been completed.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Although their poetic treatment of the Civil War was very different, startling similarities have long been recognized in the lives of Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. Both men were born in the same year, 1819. Each created his most renowned work in the 1850's with Moby Dick appearing in 1851 and Leaves of Grass first being published in 1855. Both faced intense criticism for the innovative techniques they employed and for the highly unusual philosophical content of their works. Both men were natives of New York State, living there most of their lives, yet they never met and apparently had very little influence on each other. Both were widely read though largely self-taught. Most importantly, they both were deeply touched by the transcendental movement; Whitman had his sunny Emerson contact, and Melville, the obverse, the anti-transcendental Hawthorne of blackness.

The Civil War was pivotal in the careers of Whitman and Melville. Aged forty-two at the outbreak of hostilities, they were older than most soldiers and so did not serve in the armed forces. Both sensed the magnitude of the implications of the war on their country, on their own lives, and

on their very perception of the worth of man. This overwhelming realization that their entire outlook had been forever changed by the war impelled them to produce the outstanding poetry of the Civil War. Walt Whitman created his Drum Taps which was first published separately and then included in Leaves of Grass. The fall of Richmond inspired Herman Melville to write Battle Pieces and Aspects of War.

Transcendentalism Versus Puritanism

The philosophical context of the period deserves close scrutiny. America was viewed as the New Eden of the New Adam, the land of opportunity where a uniquely American dream was born. Matthew Ignoffo, in a book entitled What the War Did to Whitman, says that two groups claimed the American dream, fashioning it to suit their goals. The Transcendentalists, explains Ignoffo, yearned for an America where there would be a "mystical oneness of the self-reliant soul with the Over-Soul in harmony with the brotherhood of man and in intuitional union with Nature."¹ The Transcendentalists envisioned a natural way of life doing away with the institutionalism of Europe and regenerating the masses in this new utopia. The Puritans, on the other hand, dreamed of a society free of old world pomp and decay which would provide a better life for the chosen few. A literary tension developed between these two views of the dream. Where the Puritans were preaching restraint from the evils

of man's depravity--pride, vanity, hatred, all identified with the old world--the Transcendentalists were convinced of the innate virtue of man, preaching of love, forgiveness, and the bond of brotherhood possible in the new world. The Puritan attitude became associated with a materialism which equated worldly possessions with divine blessings. However, the Transcendentalists claimed the "true" American dream which recognized no value other than human dignity. This choice between the two versions of the American dream confronted Whitman and Melville in the mid-nineteenth century. Whitman embraced transcendental teachings, expanding them to develop his understanding of an all-encompassing love which could make America the New Eden. Melville is more difficult to pin down. He could not accept the view of America as the New Eden, but neither could he abide by the restraints of Puritanism. He forced himself to identify every shade of gray between the two poles of thought prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century.

Ignoffo explains how Whitman embraced Transcendentalism:

Optimists such as Emerson and Thoreau believed that in America man could fulfill his godly Edenic destiny, the True Dream. Pessimists such as Hawthorne and Melville believed that in America man would merely become all the more lost and ungodly as he became selfish and imperiously greedy in the False Dream, the reinstatement of the Old World corruption. This tension of belief concerning man in America was something which Whitman tried to resolve.²

Five basic beliefs can be derived from Whitman's conception of the utopian dream, according to Ignoffo:

1. America is the promised land free of perversions of the old world.
2. Man must recognize evil but avoid cynicism in order to experience idealism.
3. Man must commune with nature and gain harmony with the Over-Soul for fulfillment and eventual union with the Creator at death.
4. Love must be the basis of all life, and the soul and body must resolve their discord just as all mankind must mend relationships for true brotherhood.
5. Materialism will destroy the true Dream, setting up a false dream of greed and vain worldly wisdom. Materialism must be avoided.³

These five concepts governed Whitman's life and his poetry. Gay Wilson Allen says of Whitman, ". . . in planning to assume the role of poet of his nation, he became a complete idealist, with the consequence that the America of his poems is a dream world though he fervently hoped to turn the dream into reality."⁴ Certainly, the dream was shattered by the Civil War when hatred tore families apart, and three hundred thousand lives were lost. But Whitman was not disillusioned. Instead, he used the war as a learning experience and emerged in 1865 confident in the basic goodness he saw in the young men fighting in the war.

Melville, on the other hand, responded differently to the by-words of the 1850's, "reform" and "progress." Melville saw these views as proceeding from the transcendental movement which had stressed the goodness, even the

divinity, of man. Yet always below the surface Melville saw chaos and corruption. He was deeply skeptical of any doctrine which preached one thing yet carelessly concealed an evil so close by. The unlimited power of the western movement which was supposed to give the nation equality and brotherhood was rent by dissension. The clouds of war were apparent to all, so the headlong proclamations of America as the New Eden seemed to Melville as heresy. He polemicized against Emerson and the new optimism, eventually isolating himself from intellectual camaraderie and from readership. This tended only to increase his conviction that he was right, stimulating him to create more and more complex images.

Melville's pervading cynicism was a result of his resentment at the narrowness of his Puritan upbringing. His obsession was that God, in expecting rigid obedience of man and in allowing Adam's fall to receive ruthless punishment, was the source of evil. God, to Melville, was divinely depraved. As Lawrence H. Martin explains:

Melville says clearly that natural evil does exist in the world What is its source? The paradox of Moby Dick is still unresolved; the Christian God is supposed to be benevolent, and is supposed to have created nature, but nature contains creatures of innate evil. The logical answer, for Melville, is that God is the ultimate source of Evil.²

Hawthorne wrote that as a result of this thinking, Melville had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated, but still he does not rest in that anticipation, and I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief."⁶

What Melville wanted, Martin reasons, "was a philosophically sound reconciliation of faith, reason, and experience."⁷

But Christianity could not offer this to Melville, nor could Transcendentalism. He knew that America was not free from the same temptations found in the old world, and he could not rid himself of cynicism while he searched for a definite belief.

Therefore, the Civil War caught Melville and Whitman and, indeed, the rest of the country, at an important philosophical juncture. The two prevailing trains of thought, Transcendentalism and Puritanism, were put to an ultimate test, a civil war. Melville and Whitman responded with poetry reflecting the inner turmoil they experienced at seeing their country so tried. And they emerged strengthened in their convictions. Whitman remained the devout Transcendentalist, convinced that, through the bond of brotherhood, his country could still offer utopian opportunities unparalleled in the world. Melville, though stimulated by the war toward new directions in thought, remained essentially the tormented doubter, always skeptical of any teaching. Nevertheless, the war presented an important test for each man, propelling him in new artistic directions.

Writers' Reactions to the War

One of the most important things that happened to Whitman with the advent of the war was that his perception of his individual life became merged in the national. A self-centered emphasis in his poetry evolved in response to the war, reaching a patriotic and religious plane where he could be "brother to all" rather than the "kosmos," encompassing all. Emory Holloway in Free and Lonesome Heart notes,

Here is no longer the childlike reveling in sense perception, delight in the outward wonders of the world, nor yet the feeling of immortality that comes so easily to one who has not yet discovered the fixed limits reality sets upon the attainment of youthful aspirations.⁸

Instead the Civil War poetry becomes more compressed, more exacting in the message it wishes to convey, perhaps more mature. The Drum Taps poems are the favorites for many because they deal with the subject of war in a very immediate, personal way.

The turmoil preceding the Civil War clouded Whitman's vision of the American Dream, causing him to stop and re-evaluate his entire position about America. Whitman admitted, "Without those three or four years (of the war) and experience they gave, Leaves of Grass would not now be existing."⁹ Since he believed that modern man could throw off outworn conventions and corrupt institutions to attain Eden in the New World, he was challenged to explore some ancient evils that surfaced with the conflict:

1. Slavery was a violation of social harmony and of the divine dignity of body and soul.
2. A Civil War was a violation of brotherhood.
3. Materialistic greed and political corruption which were building up toward the Gilded Age were also a violation of human dignity and the spiritual brotherhood of the Common Man.¹⁰

All of these evils were a perversion of democracy, alienating man from every other man, from nature, and from God. In fact, escaping these evils had been the reason for coming to America in the first place. The Civil War became the ultimate test for America, and at the same time it forced Whitman to try, as Ignoffo says, "to reconcile mass conflict and malice with his vision of the American Dream."¹¹ He began to see the necessity for the bards of democracy to repeat continually the theme of brotherhood for all men. Although Whitman did not glorify war, this particular war was essential because it involved an ideal, the cause of democracy.

Drum Taps lacks the spirited rush of the earlier exuberant Leaves of Grass. This poetry is much more disciplined, sometimes even conventional. Critics have asked if the war stifled Whitman's creative flow. Was he exhausted by his long days in the hospitals? Or did the war supply such new material for Whitman that it caused him to experiment with a variety of poetic forms he had previously avoided? The obvious pride he felt in Drum Taps may be the result of his private knowledge that these poems were totally his and not the products of inspiration found in ancient

readings, as T. R. Rajasekharaiah suspects.¹² The Drum Taps poems remained the only pieces in Leaves of Grass which were almost completely unrevised indicating that Whitman seemed to want to preserve the primitive character of these poems.

With Whitman's new realization that he was involved in something larger than himself came a reinforced faith in democracy. As Samuel Coale expressed it,

The problem of the individual and the en-masse had resolved itself into a horizontal line, a steady march both into battle and into the future The many are outside of him; he is involved with them; he is a part of their marching and dying and constant moving.¹³

Individuality was preserved yet unity was also projected.

The war gave Whitman a new direction. Where he had bade farewell to his readers at the end of the 1860 Leaves, now he had new direction, new leaves to unfurl.

Whether Whitman's renewed optimism was realistic is questionable. Lewis Mumford describes the situation facing the country:

But the very act of prosecuting the war confirmed the chaos and hastened the disruption, so that what was saved was not freedom and equality, the freedom of voluntary association and local initiative, the equality of access to an unlimited amount of utilizable land: what was left was just the opposite of those things--servility and inequality. Land and natural resources, scattered, broadcast during the Civil War under the Homestead Act and under various acts to promote the railroad building were turned into exacting monopolies; and the government itself became the principal agent for establishing and extending privileges. In less than half a generation Walt Whitman was forced to modify many of his fondest hopes for America: for with these new agents of exploitation dominant, there was no longer any way of distinguishing the American proletariat from that of Europe, except in their independent manners--a relic of an equality that had once been real.¹⁴

Ignoffo, too, sees the False Dream as having been the winner of the Civil War: "America entered the inferno and has been going through purgation ever since."¹⁵ But Walt Whitman, the bard of the True Dream, always saw the possibility of a second chance.

Herman Melville, likewise, was shaken to his very core by the Civil War, but he seems to resolve some existential questions by writing about it. Opposed to war, Melville was also opposed to slavery, regarding it as the worst of human evils. He saw the Civil War as a tool for righteousness, and in his Battle Pieces he allowed justification of the means with the end he hoped for. Yet Melville was never without his skepticism. If only the war would end the slavery, then it would serve its purpose. But ever aware of the larger scope of humanity, Melville, in his heart, doubted that forgiveness and brotherhood would follow. Thus the Battle Pieces became schizophrenic. The two themes, the championing of the Union cause and the strongly developed anti-war sentiment, work at cross purposes. In most of his writings, good and evil are so tightly intermeshed that they become inseparable. In Battle Pieces they are clearly perceived, but they required ever more complex imagery to avoid ambivalence.¹⁶ At times in Battle Pieces Melville seems intensely patriotic, and then just as quickly his mood shifts to sad reflection on the conflict. This creates a distance in his poetry that markedly contrasts with Whitman's close involvement. Melville, like Whitman, wished for a time

of federation, commonality, but he saw maintenance of the Union by force creating a stronger central government dominated by special interest groups always erecting obstacles to regional independence and ultimate world peace. And, his philosophy incorporated a fatal evil. He wanted to believe that the Civil War would cure the country's ills, but he knew in his heart that it could also hasten the demise of the idealistic promise of a New Eden in America.¹⁷

The Civil War came at a special time in Melville's life. He had seen great success with his early tales, but had known no satisfaction in them. His truly great artistic and philosophical works were judged failures in his time. He was burdened with debts and family problems and had become indifferent to life, convinced that existence itself was a form of slavery. Then the Civil War arrived giving an "event outside of himself, an action grand enough to furnish correlatives for his own feelings and emotional patterns."¹⁹ Having nearly lost stimulation, he found the Civil War to be a reason for writing. Completed in only a matter of months following the fall of Richmond, Battle Pieces shows extensive research and complex intellectual involvement. The Civil War gave purpose to Melville's life even though war itself is a denial of life. His humane, basically religious mind explored selflessness, bravery in the face of death, and the willingness to give life for an ideal. He even began to see a cosmic purpose at work. Not only was a political bond being struggled for, but the universe itself

should hold together. He saw great adventure and aimed his defiance at the evil futility of war.

Battle Pieces was Melville's first volume of poetry although he apparently was comfortable with the idea of himself as a poet as early as 1849. Critics have been largely critical of his efforts, condemning it as "tortured" poetry. Yet more recently they wonder if his techniques seem awkward merely because the reader cannot understand the complexities Melville was trying to portray. Perhaps a steadily developing genius was at work. William Bysshe Stein analyzes Melville's poetry in these words:

The more he wrote poetry, the more he became convinced that the measured euphony of verse belied experiential reality, and as a consequence he finally settled upon ugly discordance and incongruity--in meter, rime, image, symbol and language--as the indices of truth in the finite world.¹⁹

War is brought about by discord. What is more appropriate in expressing this chaos than discordant poetry? Throughout Battle Pieces the reader finds wrenching rhythm and jolting symbolism. Melville apparently achieved satisfaction in this means of expressing the effects of war, but he could never rationalize away the facts of the war.

Prior to and early on in the war both Whitman and Melville expressed optimism that the war might resolve some of the difficulties plaguing the nation. Whitman wrote rousing poems calling men to arms. He invoked patriotic fervor with the drum taps that gave their name to the collection. "Beat! Drums! Beat!" is most notable for its

rhythmic cadences of marching feet. And other early poems including "First O Songs for a Prelude," "Eighteen Sixty One," and "From Paumanok Starting I Fly Like a Bird" thrill with the challenge of making things right with this war.

Melville, too, fervently hoped that this war could somehow make a difference. Maybe it could disprove his own cynical doubts about the country. "March Into Virginia" gives a zestful account of young men trooping off to war. However, writing the bulk of Battle Pieces in retrospect, Melville always had the advantage of knowing how the war was to end. No poem was free of underlying irony. These exuberant young men would age far beyond their years in the course of the war. Melville was incapable of sustaining optimism throughout a single poem because in honesty he knew that the country was not battling over a simple ideal. Every poem, thus, became freighted with the weight of underlying meanings.

Whitman quickly became aware that his initial enthusiasm had presupposed an early end to the war. A hiatus developed in the flow of his war poems as he turned to other things. He is said to have spent many months in 1861-62 patronizing beer taverns in New York and riding with cabbies on their routes, later to eulogize their commonality in his poetry. Perhaps at this time he, too, was experiencing misgivings as the war dragged on. Suddenly in December, 1862, the Whitman family received word that George Whitman had

been injured. Walt immediately left for the front. Searching hospital after hospital for George, he became profoundly aware of the realities of the suffering of this war. Upon finding George recovered in camp, Walt decided that he had a calling in the hospitals, aiding the injured. A dedication is reflected in the poetry of this period. Working long hours and seeing the excruciating cruelty of war first hand forged a wrenching change in Whitman's poetry. The images become very lifelike. Rather than working for artistic effect, he seemed to be compelled to tumble the jumble of emotions onto paper, crowding the exhaustion and the pathos into a chain of poems that must have resembled the chain of days he spent ministering to the injured.

In contrast, the impetus for the larger portion of the Battle Pieces poems stemmed from information found in newspaper accounts, especially The Rebellion Record, a compilation of press reports and releases from the war.²⁰ In fact, Melville visited the front only once during the war. The result of this visit was the lengthy poem entitled "The Scout Toward Aldie" and inspiration for others. So Melville maintained a distance in his poetry which allowed him to develop a serious structural plan.

John P. McWilliams, Jr. has claimed a Miltonic framework evidenced by Melville's comparison of events of the Civil War to the war in heaven and the fall of man. Some of Melville's pieces about war leaders, McWilliams says, cast them as epic figures reminiscent of Milton. The nation

seemed divided into the righteous and the wicked. But just as quickly, in the next poem, Melville would drop this clear cut depiction of moral conflict to look sympathetically at the human individual caught in the chaos of war.²¹ Probably Melville was very conscious of his divided attitudes exhibited in the uneven structure of this collection. Inevitably, Battle Pieces results in a varied texture.

As in all of Melville's great works, symbolism provided him with a means for tracing his own layers of thought, but it did not give him any relief from the suffering he saw throughout the country. He was driven to intellectualize the conflict, to discover the ironies, but never to feel a release in grief. As Hibler observes, "We must admit that the sense of suffering and death present in Melville's war poetry comes through more as a fact which has been manipulated for a given thematic effect (usually philosophical) rather than as a reality which has been intensely experienced."²² But this is understandable since he maintained a distance from the battle front.

The concluding poems of the collections give evidence of both poets' hoping for reconciliation of north and south. Whitman remained staunch in his belief that brotherly love would solve the nation's ills in spite of the recent slaughter. He viewed the war as a cleansing, healing time. Although he couldn't glorify war as a unified experience, he was able to see that national reconciliation is made possible by individual acts of love.²³ Various critics have said that

Whitman found reaffirmation in death. Each individual death helped to atone for the national suffering.²⁴ But he had to work through this concept. Samuel Coale says:

The terror of death often haunted his mind, and when the first flush of mystical acceptance and affirmation seemed to die, he was left with a fear of becoming nothing. We can tell that he feared death by his assertions that his closeness to death during the war helped to relieve him of his original fears.²⁵

Toward the end of the war he understood that the unity of the dead reinforced his concept of democracy, for death is the great equalizer. He lost his fear of death when he saw so many die gratefully. His belief in the immortality of the soul sustained him, and he turned to affirmations for the future. He turned to his new understanding of himself as one of the many, marching to a new unity in the preserved union.²⁶

Melville, too, fervently hoped for reconciliation, but even his final poems exhibit his perennial distrust of any absolute position. His chief worry was that the Union would not acknowledge any guilt, only branding the South and failing to see her own worse sin in that branding. In "Lee in the Capitol" Melville seems almost to have made up his mind that American democracy would fail. But then he adds six remarkably unconvincing lines in which he cheers, "Faith in America never dies / Heaven shall the end ordained fulfill / We march with Providence cheery still." These strangely appended lines neither suit the tone of the rest of the poem nor do they suit the skeptical Melville that the

reader has trained himself to expect. However, they do reflect the sincere wish that the transcendental poets were right.

Effects on Careers

Both Walt Whitman and Herman Melville dreamed of becoming the poetic mouthpiece of the Civil War. Whitman's Drum Taps has achieved lasting renown while Melville's Battle Pieces has largely been lost in obscurity until only recently. Most evidence indicates that both men were deeply touched by the war and saw it as a turning point in their careers. With Drum Taps Whitman's poetry took on an intensity and purity of feeling that engages readers not previously appreciative of his poetry. But in his Battle Pieces, Melville was still struggling with his own private search for moral certitudes. The result is highly analytical poetry requiring close study. Where Whitman celebrates the will to absorb the images of the war, Melville must deal with the conflicts of the heart.

Following the war and the publication of Battle Pieces, Melville, after fifteen years of misunderstanding and neglect by his readership, turned to daily labor at the Custom's House. He continued to produce ever more difficult literary works, yet now they were the private products of his soul. Whitman experienced physical deterioration and a stroke following the war, but he, too, continued to write

new works while constantly rewriting, rearranging, and refining his overall concept. Melville and Whitman died within months of each other at the age of seventy-two.

I propose to examine Drum Taps and Battle Pieces paying particular attention to the influence the transcendental movement had on the innovative poetic techniques, the treatment of themes, the use of symbols, and the employment of vivid imagery. Although Whitman and Melville responded quite differently to the transcendental notions which pervaded their era, the war brought them together as it provided a climax for the debate raging between factions claiming the truth about the American Dream. Since neither interpretation could ever be proven wholly correct, each man learned that he must continue to explore in his own mind and then attempt to give voice to his convictions. As a result of the Civil War, each man found a newly moderated direction for his future as a poet. An examination of their early poems reveals the care that they took in establishing a framework for their new collections.

Chapter 2

OPENING POEMS

The years preceding the outbreak of war were very painful ones for both Whitman and Melville. During the 1850's Whitman saw the possibility of the American Dream being destroyed by industrial materialism. This greedy profiteering in combination with the increasingly heated dissension between the northern and southern states seemed capable of overcoming the progress Whitman saw in the human spirit.²⁷ He viewed the breath of promise offered by the Transcendentalists as heightening experience for the collective human spirit. In his 1855 "Preface to Leaves of Grass," Whitman had called the United States a poem, giving all Americans the command to

read these lines in the open air every season of your life, re-examine all that you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.²⁸

But by 1860 he saw his country innocently stumbling into a mire of misunderstanding. Reason began to twist, and virtue became perverted and tangled to the point that Whitman's own drums almost overwhelmed his voice. The first poems show

Whitman "kindled, sometimes a little artificially, by the thought of the struggle rather than by the facts of it."²⁹

Melville had passed the decade perversely compounding the desperation he felt at the public's failure to apprehend the meaning of his complex novels. When only his romantic adventure tales pleased the public, Melville was bent on offering, after Moby Dick, other works, Pierre, Israel Potter, and The Confidence Man, and a collection of shorter tales. Each dealt in one way or another with man's alienation. He felt that he must expose the falseness of the romantic concept of a common human spirit bonded by brotherhood. The purity of progress was spoiling all around him, clearly evidenced by the strife between various parts of the country. Why could not others see this? Why would no one heed and read his warnings? His poetry must be seen against this backdrop of rejection.

War does satisfy certain needs in men; it offers releases. The unity in a common cause, the thrill of action, the test of endurance, and the affirmation of self, sometimes in death, all stimulate new energies. It was so for Melville. Robert Penn Warren argues:

For one thing, his personal failure, with the stultifying effects of self-pity and self-absorption, could be sublimated in the national tragedy For a second, but related thing, the deep divisions of Melville's inner life, from the struggle between his natural skepticisms and his yearning for religious certitude . . . now found, we may hazard, in the fact of a civil war an appropriate image which might, in some degree, absorb and purge their pains.³⁰

Thus the two writers, Whitman and Melville, each recognized in the Civil War a chance to make a real statement of his philosophy, and each was remarkably successful.

Whitman's Introductory Poems

The introductory poem to the 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass (hereafter referred to in the text as LOG) must establish the background for Drum Taps. This poem was originally entitled "Premonition" and was probably begun in 1856. By 1860 it had earned the title "Proto-Leaf," and in 1867 it acquired its present title, "Starting From Paumanok." Whitman had apparently witnessed two mocking-birds mating. The she-bird then disappeared leaving the he-bird singing in vague, lonely longing for something beyond death. Whitman saw this vision of separation as symbolic of the splitting halves of the union, causing him to question. Could war end America? Is the New Eden possible? What is love? What is death? Does death end love? He strove to explain the significance of this questioning in "Starting From Paumanok." Matthew Ignoffo explains that in "Paumanok" Whitman realized that Nature was communicating with him about the loving Over-Soul.³¹ The essence of God is in every man uniting all men in brotherhood, thus a New Eden is still possible. Whitman felt compelled to proclaim this in his effort to counteract the divisions threatening the Union. He experienced agony with this poem because he was no longer "the

uninitiated optimist."³² Now he had to deliver the message that all men must recognize the Deity within themselves and within every other man. Only the democratic love for each other would bring into existence the New Eden. "Starting From Paumanok" gives evidence of his shifts in reflection as he delighted in his understanding of the saving factor of amateness and as he despaired upon realizing that not all men would understand. In this he knew that war was imminent.

Drum Taps itself opens with Whitman's "First O Songs for a Prelude." Its panoramic view sweeps the city of Manhattan, taking in all of the preparations for war. A variety of autobiographical touches may be noted in this poem. The poet mentions, "Forty years had I in my city seen soldiers parading" (LOG, p. 280), and indeed he was forty-one, soon to be forty-two. He had apparently first received the news of the attack on Fort Sumter while standing in a crowd "at dead of night."³⁹ The poem recounts the effect of the news on the city as day broke.

A shock electric, the night sustain'd it,
 Till with ominous hum our hive at daybreak pour'd out
 its myriads.
 From the houses then and the workshop, and through all
 the doorways
 Leapt they tumultuous and lo! Manhattan arming.
(LOG, p. 280)

The tearful parting of mother and son recounts Whitman's own mother and brother saying goodbye. Other details catalogued in the poem were garnered from newspaper accounts, according to Agnes Cannon. She cites pieces about a lawyer leaving his office to enlist, a church which had difficulty getting

its flag "flung out" from the steeple, and an organization for women volunteering to nurse--all ideas utilized by Whitman in his weaving of the fabric of the poem depicting the feverish activity of the city in the opening days of war.³⁴ With a journalist's eye, Whitman records the various preparations, cataloguing details as was his habit. The mechanic, lawyer, driver, salesman are recruited, armed, and sent off enthusiastically while the city itself takes on a new ambiance. "How your soft opera-music changed, and the drum and fife were heard in their stead" (LOG, p. 280).

"First O Songs for a Prelude" introduces the drum taps lightly tapping the call to arms. A noticeable cadence moves the poem along, although, as with the rest of Whitman, the rhythm is not restricted to any set pattern. Instead, in the opening stanza he "piles dependent clauses on top of one another, each paralleled by the adverb 'How,' followed by a substantive and a verb."³⁵ The largest segment in the middle of the poem is characterized by participial action. One-line vignettes are painted with the participant named and then his action described using the present participle verb form:

The driver deserting his wagon in the street, jumping
down, throwing the reins abruptly down on the
horses' backs,
The salesman leaving the store, the boss, book-keeper,
porter, all leaving. (LOG, p. 280)

This technique results in a brisk tempo carrying the reader along from one image to the next. Occasional alliteration, too, as in "driver deserting" is found throughout. The

great pride Whitman felt for the city is complimented by the enthusiasm with which it anticipated the war. The entire poem exudes expectation.

The second poem, "Eighteen Sixty-One," in contrast, seems more controlled, more cautious, more aware, and much more masculine. Gay Wilson Allen suggests that Whitman may have been considering enlistment at this time for he characterizes the year as he might have described himself.³⁶

Whitman personifies the year as a "strong man . . . with well-gristled body . . . masculine voice . . . large step . . . sinewy limbs . . . a robust year . . . of determined voice" (LOG, p. 282-3). His warrior year moves beyond Manhattan, striding across "the prairies out of Illinois and Indiana," "from the great lakes or in Pennsylvania," "southward along the Tennessee or Cumberland rivers, or at Chattanooga on the mountain top" (LOG, pp. 282-3). Perhaps most tellingly, he sees 1861 as the "Year that suddenly sang by the mouths of the round-lipp'd cannon" (LOG, p. 283). This strategy of depicting the year as one would a vigorous man is effective in continuing to produce a powerfully hopeful view of the purpose of the war. Whitman may have been becoming much more aware of the immensity of the undertaking by this time, though, for in the end he intones that 1861 is a "hurrying, crashing, sad, distracted year" (LOG, p. 283).

The third poem, "Beat! Drums! Beat!" finally throbs with the rhythm of war drums. This poem, published September 28, 1861, shortly after the Bull Run defeat, stridently illustrates the intensity of Whitman's beliefs in the call to arms for the preservation of the Union.

Beat! beat! drums!--blow! bugles! blow!
 Through the windows--through doors--burst like a ruthless force,
 Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
 Into the school where the scholar is studying;
 Leave not the bridegroom quiet--no happiness must he have now with his bride,
 Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain,
 So fierce you whirr and pound you drums--so shrill you bugles blow. (LOG, p. 283)

Rendered in anapestic and spondaic rhythms, this poem is carefully structured. The three stanzas of seven lines each begin with the same energy-charged command. The concluding line of each stanza reiterates this initial command in slightly altered language, the second stanza concluding "Then rattle quicker, heavier drums--you bugles wilder blow" (LOG, p. 283), and the third, "So strong you thump O terrible drums--so loud you bugles blow" (LOG, p. 284). These three envelopes are filled with images of change demanded of the times; no person would be unaffected by the war.

Whitman's final introductory poem is entitled "From Paumanok Starting I Fly Like a Bird." Edward E. Sullivan, Jr. has called this the mainspring poem for the collection. He suggests that the first three poems set the stage and describe the scene, but this fourth poem reintroduces the

concept of unity begun in "Starting From Paumanok," political as well as brotherly unity.³⁷ "Starting From Paumanok" had thoroughly explored the questions provoked by the possible secession of southern states. In "From Paumanok Starting I Fly Like a Bird" Whitman accepts his responsibility to proclaim the ideal of unity of these states. He resolves to "be" the bird "to soar and sing the idea of all" to all parts of the nation "(to the tap of the war-drum if need be)" (LOG, p. 284). He is very specific in stating that the first idea, "of the Western world one and inseparable" must precede "the song of each member of these States" (LOG, p. 284). Clearly he has established his position and will continue to proclaim this message.

Melville's Introductory Poems

"The Portent," Melville's opening poem, is remarkably different from Whitman's. Written in 1865 about an event, the hanging of John Brown, which happened in 1859, "The Portent" symbolically foreshadows doom.

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.

(Battle Pieces, p. 35)

William Bysshe Stein believes this poem invests John Brown with Christlike significance.³⁸ Stein suggests that the legal death of John Brown is an ironic dramatization of the stagnation of Christian love. In a country founded on Christian law, the moral authority of the law is casually dismissed with the parenthetical "(such the law)," indicating that the scriptures may no longer influence human conduct. A covenant of love has given way to legal statutes. Melville skillfully turns the "green pastures" of Shenandoah Valley into "the valley of the shadow of death," juxtaposing images of the Twenty Third Psalm in one line. John Brown's crown of glory is the wound inflicted to the head by his captors, and his bayonet stabs parallel Christ's wound in the side. John Brown becomes the victim of a mistaken belief in the brotherhood of man.

The second stanza continues to parody Christ's anguish which caused him to cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Brown's face is hidden in the cap, but the alienation he must have felt is projected on the future of the Shenandoah Valley. And Brown must have felt a crisis in faith as he died, a scapegoat for the times and for his own fanaticism, a herald of the eventual war.

According to William Shurr, the poem may be a study in the meaning of duly constituted civil authority.³⁹ Generally, Melville deemed breach of law as a breach in harmony

and peace. Only the reassertion of law would end the pain and destruction of war. Yet Brown had broken the law, and justice was meted out according to the law. A paradox resulted: was the law capable of dealing with profound moral questions? was there any stretch in the law? was the law infallible? Coming before the war began, the hanging of Brown must have caused Melville to wonder at the implications of his death. The body sways like a pendulum, honoring the law of physics. But the civil law, too, has penalized an insurrectionist. Brown's wound on the head is also a "cut upon the crown in another sense. In the American political structure 'crown' means civil authority. Civil law and order are also 'cut' by his insurrection."⁴⁰ Melville uses them to indicate the wounding of the Union, those festering sores that would not heal and eventually broke out in war.

The second stanza emphasizes Brown's head covered by the executioner's cap but with the beard streaming below. Perhaps the face is hidden as was the future of the Shenandoah Valley, but the significance of Brown's death was not hidden. His beard streamed out like "the meteor of the war." In folk belief meteors and comets were considered portents of disaster (hence the title). Not only did Brown's beard stream like the tail of a meteor, but such celestial phenomena did occur in 1859-60, causing great speculation.⁴¹ Just as Shakespeare and Milton had used meteors as signs, Melville followed literary tradition. He

categorized Brown as "weird" not only because he was odd and eccentric, but also because it associated him with the "weirds," interpreters of signs, seers--in this case, a blinded seer.⁴² Melville may have been recalling the three weird sisters in Macbeth, agents of the Fate (Wyrd) that works for man's destruction. The hanged Brown, then, represents the larger fate that will work itself out in history.⁴³ The law had been broken; the signs of evil could be seen.

Examining the structure of "The Portent," one finds Melville experimenting with his own innovative style. Although there is no particular rhyme scheme or meter in the individual stanzas, the two stanzas are "mirror images" of each other.⁴⁴ Corresponding lines have the same number of stressed syllables, and several lines rhyme. Participles open each stanza, and the parenthetical "(Lo, John Brown)" gains intensity in the second stanza "(Weird John Brown)." Probably, given Melville's regional pronunciation, "law," "draw," "Shenandoah," "war," and "more" are meant to rhyme as are "crown," "shown," and "Brown." Stein suggests a mournful cadence similar to the tolling of a bell in the first four lines of each stanza. "This effect operates to transform the swaying body into a knell of moral failure symbolized by the event at Shenandoah, the name assimilating the total weight of the sound pattern."⁴⁵ In the first stanza the last three lines are made up of monosyllabic words, deliberately clipped, evoking the horror of the scene. The stanzas' two terminal phrases "no more" and "the

war" ring with finality. Although critics have long despaired at Melville's half rhymes and jarring meter, "The Portent" displays a fine poetic talent, "welding together form and thought with dazzling finesse."⁴⁶

Jerry Herndon has researched a connection between "The Portent" and an obscure Whitman poem entitled "Year of Meteors." He is convinced that although their knowledge of each other was very slight, the two poets knew of each other. Whitman critiqued Typee and Omoo and may have read Moby Dick. Melville's "The Portent" may have been written after an impulse imparted by the reading of "Year of Meteors," a poem originally part of Drum Taps and now included in the "Birds of Passage" section.⁴⁷ Herndon notes that Drum Taps was published in May, 1865. Battle Pieces (hereafter referred to as BP) was not to come out until August, 1866, and as Harry E. Hand has pointed out, it originally listed only 71 poems, omitting "The Portent."⁴⁸ Judging from internal evidence, Herndon speculates that Melville may have borrowed the connection between John Brown and meteors from Whitman:

Year of meteors! brooding year!
 I would bind in words retrospective some of your deeds
 and signs,
 I would sing your contest for the 19th Presidentiad,
 I would sing how an old man, tall with white hair,
 mounted the scaffold in Virginia,
 (I was at hand, silent I stood with teeth shut close,
 I watch'd,
 I stood very near you old man when cool and indifferent,
 but trembling with age and your unheal'd wounds
 you mounted the scaffold.)

(LOG, p. 283)

Melville transposes the images into symbolic representations. John Brown becomes "the portent"; his hanged figure is "the meteor of the war."⁴⁹ Melville's poem also includes the reference to the "unheal'd wounds" in his line, "And the stabs shall heal no more." Whether or not Melville had read Drum Taps, we don't know. That he was able to versify complex emotions certainly is proven in "The Portent."

"Misgivings (1860)" lives up to its name as it portrays all of Melville's apprehension about the impending conflict. Two strong symbols appear in this second poem of the collection. The storm symbolizes the dark forces of nature, and the church spire stands for religious authority.⁵⁰

When ocean-clouds over inland hills
 Sweep storming in late autumn brown,
 And horror the sodden valley fills,
 And the spire falls crashing in the town,
 I muse upon my country's ills--
 The tempest bursting from the waste of Time
 On the world's fairest hope linked with man's
 foulest crime.

Nature's dark side is heeded now--
 (Ah! optimist-cheer disheartened flown)--
 A child may read the moody brow
 Of yon black mountain lone.
 With shouts the torrents down the gorges go,
 And storms are formed behind the storm we feel:
 The hemlock shakes in the rafter, the oak in the
 driving keel.

(BP, p. 37)

Melville, who recognizes an evil force even in Nature, seems to relate this storm to the inevitable dark forces overtaking man. Much as John Brown's body had sent a shadow over the Shenandoah Valley, this storm sweeps over

the countryside fulfilling the portent. The storm sends the church spire crashing, indicating the loss of the restraining, purifying power of the church, the best that man had been able to create. The "world's fairest hope," America, the promise of a democratic New Eden, is linked to "man's foulest crime," which may be either slavery, as Shurr interprets it, or civil war, according to Hudson.⁵¹

Shurr sees the second stanza as a forceful anti-transcendentalist statement. "Nature's dark side is heeded now," so those eternal optimists must admit to the evil which even "a child may read." Shurr goes on to say, "The fundamental institutions of civilization are threatened by this bursting forth of evil: church, home, and ship of state--the spire, the rafter, and the driving keel."⁵² In a poke at the Romantic poets, Melville turns their own ideal Nature into the opposite evil force. Even more important is the promise that future chaotic "storms are formed behind the storm we feel." In the final line the use of hemlock seems curious, requiring the reader to question if this is a reference merely to the death of Socrates, a good man, or if this is another example of "nature's contribution to man's self-destruction."⁵³ Hennig Cohen suggests instead that the rafters or upper part of a building are illustrations of man's attempts to control the land, and the keel, the longitudinal axis of a ship, illustrates man's attempt to use the sea for his own purposes. These two are imagined in their original state as hemlock and oak, nature products.⁵⁴

Interestingly, the poem begins and ends with single references to the ocean.⁵⁵ The storm for Melville is a metaphysical tempest which threatens to wreck the American dream because of slavery. He is certain that the destruction will touch every venture on both land and sea.⁵⁶

"Misgivings" has an a-b-a-b-a-c-c rhyme scheme with the stanzas concluding in alexandrines which lengthen with the gathering weight of Melville's reflection. The prevailing meter is iambic tetrameter except for some puzzling word choices that easily could have remedied the strain on the meter. "Over" in the first line could easily have been "o'er." "Horror" in the third line, unless shortened by regional speech habits, also strains the meter. Why Melville would purposely choose to do this is uncertain. Some lines seem marred by word inversions: "And horror the sodden valley fills," "With shouts the torrents down the gorges go." Although this technique was fashionable in Melville's time, it seems very tiresome to the modern reader. Hudson points out that the fifth line verges on absurdity, given the power of the storm in the preceding line. Why does he only muse?⁵⁷ However, the general effect of the poem is applauded in spite of these difficulties. The distance of the storm in the first stanza is narrowed to specifics in the second stanza, creating powerful imagery of the impending war.

These then are the opening poems of Drum Taps and Battle Pieces. Obviously, the introductory poems of the two

poets could not be much different. Where Whitman patriotically celebrates the preparations to fight for a cause, Melville explores the ominous implications of John Brown's death as a symbol for the entire nation and the fury of the storm that could topple the church spire, symbol of religious authority in a land founded on Christian precepts. Later in Melville's collection he does allow that "The banners play, the bugles call" (BP, p. 44), but these thrills of patriotic fervor are always muted by hints of the desolation that fate will mete out to both sides in this war. These opening poems are particularly illustrative of the vast differences in philosophy of the two men. Whitman lauds the impending war as a clean chance for the American Dream to emerge victorious. Melville loves his country and fears that the war could so ravage it that his worst possible scenario could be realized. For this reason we see one poet encouraging the preparations and the other despairing, warning, always filled with skepticism.

Once the tenor of the collections had been introduced, each poet began experimenting with style.

Chapter 3

POETIC STYLES

By the time of the Civil War, Walt Whitman and Herman Melville had each chosen to be unconventional writers. Neither expected public adoration of his work, and neither was inhibited by poetic tradition. Instead, they modeled their poems to fit the incident. Perhaps they could be labeled impressionistic, for they created atmosphere for a poetry of texture. Most notably, each man chose to be true to his subject.

Whitman had shaken the literary community with his free verse. Forsaking all convention, he utilized parallelism in ideas, in images, and in phrase constructions to achieve a poetic sense. Rather than striving to create end rhyme, Whitman composed phrases begun with the same word repeatedly or with the same part of speech, such as participles or interrogative pronouns. He did not feel bound by strict rhythms. His hovering stress, to use Gay Wilson Allen's phrase, distributed the accent along a word or a pair of words rather than emphasizing specific syllables.⁵⁸ Generally, a comma at the end of nearly every line indicates a pause in his catalog of images.

Perhaps the single most important element of Whitman's poetry is his extensive vocabulary. Gay Wilson Allen speaks of his "ransacking" dictionaries for unusual words that would most accurately convey the feelings and images Whitman wished to express.⁵⁹ Whitman's goal was an indiscriminate mixture of all levels of linguistic usage. He felt that the vicarious experiences of the poet are locked in the words. Even bare lists are suggestive and exciting.⁶⁰ Allen claims that Whitman's theory of words was mystical in that Whitman was trying to delineate the meaning in things. He says further, "Language is conduct, and words are merely gestures" inadequate at finding the meaning that is somewhere behind the words.⁶¹

Whitman felt that if he could identify his own ego with the creative processes of nature, he could reveal the spiritual limits of the universe. Panoramic imagery was his answer to the search for a means of expression. So Whitman's craftsmanship was proven by his combining of thought, rhetoric, syllabic accent, and stanzaic form into an organic whole using alliteration, assonance, repetition, refrain, and parallelism. He was a poet, even without meter and rhyme.

Melville's versifying has not been generally accepted as Whitman's has, perhaps because it never satisfies readers with its beauty of expression, but his poetry does haunt readers. Melville never intended to satisfy, however. In fact, his aim more often was to make readers uncomfortable.

He viewed the war as a threat to the union and a disruption of order. To portray this discordance, he employed near-rhyme, sometimes purposely rhyming incongruous pairings (heroic-caloric). He experimented with wrenched meter in order to accentuate words that he felt were particularly important ("horror" in the poem "Misgivings"). He inverted natural word order, a practice of his day which seems contrived to modern readers. At times he used fantastic imagery to magnify a point. Critics labeled him a "fearful" poet, a "poet of shreds and patches."

Yet time has moderated opinions. Randall Jarrell admits that judged by nineteenth century poets, Melville's poetry may have seemed crude and unpolished. But the fact that he chose to write that way should have alerted readers to another experiment by an acknowledged artist. Evidence has indicated that he was a painstaking reviser, finicky in his choice of diction and strategy of expression.⁶² William Bysshe Stein is convinced that Melville wished to deromanticize the idealistic poetic tradition of the nineteenth century. By choosing discordance and incongruity in meter, rhyme, image, symbol and language, Melville was more closely approximating the truth of war.⁶³

A closer examination of several poems by Whitman and Melville will clearly illustrate the variety of stylistic effects they strove to achieve.

Whitman's Poetic Style

One of Whitman's earliest Civil War poems, "The Centenarian's Story," recalls an early Revolutionary War battle. The contrasts between that battle and the preparations being made in Brooklyn for impending warfare show Whitman's skill in weaving the similarities. Rendered in conversational rhythms, the poem records a dialogue between Whitman and a centenarian remembering the Battle of Long Island. Whitman foregoes his habit of cataloguing images in order to allow the centenarian's story to unfold. He begins the poem by describing the scene to the nearly blind old soldier. The centenarian then takes over to recount the story of the earlier battle. Whitman artfully recaptures statements in the centenarian's speech that had been introduced in Whitman's description. The old man harkens back to Whitman's detection of his hands clutching and unclutching, and he explains how the scene brings back the very same feelings as those he had so long ago. He remembers the weather being the same and the sense of expectancy.⁶⁴ The centenarian's scene in his mind is more panoramic than Whitman's. He details the view in each direction as seen from the hill top, erasing the changes that eighty years had wrought. He even recalls the glint of the general's sword and the pep in the step of the eager young brigade. But following the battle, the centenarian, recalling Whitman's introduction, says there were "No women looking on nor

sunshine to bask in, it did not conclude with applause / Nobody clapped hands here then" (LOG, p. 298). Instead, darkness and a chilling rain further dampened the defeat. Finally, just at dawn the centenarian remembers watching the general's retreat, but he also recalls catching a look in the general's eye that signaled anything but retreat. Whitman concludes the poem by drawing a parallel between that battle and those soon to come. He wishes to "preserve that look as it beam'd on yon rivers of Brooklyn" (LOG, p. 298). He wishes to restate the value of this land that men have fought and died for before and would soon again.

Each stanza is composed of one long sentence, but stanzas are of varying lengths depending on the centenarian's paragraphing of his story. Whitman seems content to let the story be told rather than trying to impose some conventional poetic techniques, even those that he usually enjoys using. Too, the format of a dialogue was not common for Whitman. Nor was the strict narrative account a form he usually employed. However, his experimentation with these techniques is successful in this poem. The imagery is bold, and the comparison of that early defeat to those sure to come emphasizes Whitman's intention to try to mine the ore of new material in ways he had not attempted before.

A short vignette "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" differs markedly from "The Centenarian's Story." Vintage Whitman, this poem has been said to resemble Dutch genre painting.⁶⁵ Its one-sentence structure in free verse seems appropriate

to this single unit of soldiers first seen at a distance and then brought into sharp focus.⁶⁶ Richard Allen Davison sees this poem as a good example of "Whitman's adept use of the zoom lens technique."⁶⁷ Viewing the soldiers from a fuzzily romantic distance at the beginning of the poem, Whitman uses flatly lyrical words and a slow regular rhythm. With the introduction of sound, "hark to the musical clank," the poem focuses in on groups and then individuals. As Roberts French has noted, verbs become imperative, "Hark," "behold."⁶⁸ From what was originally a static scene, the individual movements are detailed. It becomes apparent that these soldiers are not the epitome of military spit and polish. Contrasting word choices evoke differing reactions from the reader. Positive romantic phrases such as "green islands," and "silvery River" are interspersed with harsher words, "serpentine," "clank," "negligent."⁶⁹ And the use of color in the poem seems to contrast the earthy "green islands," "silvery river," and "brown-faced men" with the pristine "scarlet and blue and snowy white" of the flags. Gradually the focus moves back again to take in groups, "some emerge on the opposite bank, others are just entering the ford," before settling on the flags.

Davison feels Whitman has masterfully manipulated the perspectives of the reader. Perhaps he is purposely contrasting the ideal vision of war with the realistic view. The fairy tale scenic view closes in on tired, slack men and horses. A final close-up of the unsullied flags seems to

Davison a touch of irony with an accompanying hint of indomitability.⁷⁰ Whitman was, after all, first and foremost the patriot.

In "Come Up From the Fields Father" Whitman uses still other poetic devices, most notably reiteration. The first two lines repeat the same idea as it applies to each parent:

Come up from the fields father, here's a letter from
our Pete,
And come to the front door mother, here's a letter from
thy dear son.

(LOG, p. 302)

The next two stanzas place the season as autumn. The first two lines beginning with "lo" are examples of initial reiteration, a technique which makes for melody of rhythm, in this case a sonorous effect which unifies the impression.⁷¹ The second line elaborates on the color of the trees by using comparative adjective forms, "deeper green, yellower, redder" to emphasize the colors. The last two lines of that stanza are questions, each beginning with the words "Smell you." Then Whitman appeals to the sense of sound in the buzzing of bees. The next stanza consists of only two lines, but each begins with a similar construction, "Above all," and "Below too." This stanza stresses the urgency of the daughter's summons.

In the first three lines of the sixth stanza Whitman repeatedly uses an "O" sound, perhaps to suggest repeated sharp intakes of breath. The family is certainly alarmed

and excited at the receipt of the letter.

Open the envelope quickly,
 O this is not our son's writing, yet his name is sign'd,
 O a strange hand writes for our dear son, O stricken
 mother's soul!

The next line contains three present tense verb phrases of similar construction: "All swims before her eyes, flashes with black, she catches the main words only" (LOG, p. 302). And the stanza is concluded by italicized bits of quotations from the letter that the mother hears.

The seventh stanza focuses first on the mother and then moves out to pan across the entire Ohio countryside before returning to the scene of the mother crumpling in the door way. Curiously in the last line of that stanza Whitman uses inverted word order, "By the jamb of the door leans" (LOG, p. 303).

The ninth stanza is very alliterative. The first line is filled with "b's" and the phrase "be better." The second and third lines repeat a "d" sound, "While they stand at home at the door he is dead already, / The only son is dead." The dull thud of this consonant echoes the pounding of the mother's heart as she fears the worst.

The final stanza utilizes participles, "sleeping," "waking," "weeping," "longing," and concludes with infinitives, "To follow, to seek, to be with her dead son" (LOG, p. 303). Whitman, the master of the reiterative technique, has pulled out all the stops to use a variety of repetitive devices throughout the poem.

"Come Up From the Fields Father" has been frequently anthologized. Agnes Dicken Cannon has researched Whitman's sources of inspiration for this poem as an aid in understanding why he chose to construct it in this way. Of course, the initial idea must have sprung from Whitman's own curiosity about the effects on the families receiving the letters he wrote for men in the hospitals. Early in his hospital service he had written just such a letter for a young man the doctors felt would recover. When he died instead, Whitman felt so concerned that he wrote a lengthy follow-up letter detailing the son's final days. The father then made the trip to the hospital to claim the body and take it home. This experience deeply moved Whitman who wrote his own mother about it. Cannon explains the Ohio setting for the poem by citing Whitman's interest in another soldier, a young man from Ohio, who lingered ill in the hospital for over a year. Whitman had corresponded with his sister during the entire illness.⁷² Perhaps this accounts for the importance of the sister's conveying the message to the family in the poem. Finally, he must have remembered his own mother's reactions to the news that his brother George had been shot. Her lack of appetite and the detached drugged emotional state must have made their impression on Whitman.

Whitman, then, has carefully created a moving scene in "Come Up From the Fields Father." By taking various personal experiences and using one of his favorite poetic

techniques, he has successfully depicted the emotional impact of a letter from the hospital.

"A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown" is interesting in that the poem is taken almost entirely from an account of an experience told to Whitman by a soldier named Milton Roberts. Cannon quotes the source and in brackets cites corresponding lines from the poem. Notice how closely the poetic style corresponds to the verbal account.

After the battle of White Oaks Church, on the retreat, the march at night--the scene between 12 and 2 o'clock that night at the church in the woods, the hospital show at night, the wounded brought in--previous the silent stealthy march through the woods, at times stumbling over bodies of dead men in the road, (there had been terrible fighting there that day, only closing at dark) --we retreated, the artillery horses feet muffled, order that men should tread light and only speak in whispers--[A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness, (1.2)]

Then between midnight and 1 o'clock we halted to rest a couple of hours at an opening in the woods--[We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by the dim-lighted building, (1.5)] in this opening was a pretty good sized old church used impromptu for a hospital for the wounded of the day thereabouts--[Tis a large old church at the crossing roads, now an impromptu hospital. (1.6)] with these it was filled, all varieties, horrible beyond description--[Entering but for a minute I see a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made, (1.7)] the darkness and half darkness--[Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps, / And by one great pitchy torch stationary with wild red flame and clouds of smoke (ll. 8, 9)] the crowds of wounded bloated and pale, the surgeons operating-- [Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood, (1. 15)] the yards outside also filled, they lay on the ground, some on blankets, some on stray planks, or--[The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, the yard outside also fill'd / Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating, (ll. 16, 17)] the

despairing screams and curses of some [An occasional scream or cry, . . . (l. 18)]--the murky darkness, the gleaming of the torches, the smoke from them too--out of their senses, the doctors operating, the scent of chloroform, [Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood, (l. 15)] the glistening of the steel instruments as the flash of lamps fell upon them. [The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches. (l. 19)]⁷³

Only the short reference in lines 11-12 to the soldier's stanching the flow of blood for one of the wounded is an interjection of Whitman's own experience. In his Memoranda During the War he recalls the wounded from the battle of Chancellorsville being unloaded on a Washington wharf. He was then overwhelmed by the scene of crowded suffering. The torch-lit spectacle of that rainy night mingled perfectly with Roberts' account in the White Oaks Church to create a powerful poem of emotional intensity. In this poem, then, as in "The Centenarian's Story," Whitman does not work out specific artistic designs. Rather, he lets the story tell itself, only relying on his own sense of appropriate imagery to flesh out the poem.

Whitman achieved an eloquent effect in "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim." Robert B. Sweet examined this poem from the vantage point of another writer and found himself touched in a very powerful way.⁷⁴

A sight in camp in the daybreak gray and dim,
 As from my tent I emerge so early sleepless,
 As slow I walk in the cool fresh air the path
 near by the hospital tent,
 Three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought
 out there untended lying,

Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish
 woolen blanket,
 Gray and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.

Curious I halt and silent stand,
 Then with light fingers I from the face of the
 nearest the first just lift the blanket;
 Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with
 well-gray'd hair, and flesh all sunken about
 the eyes?
 Who are you my dear comrade?

Then to the second I step--and who are you my
 child and darling,
 Who are you sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming?

Then to the third--a face nor child nor old,
 very calm, as of beautiful yellow-white ivory;
 Young man I think I know you--I think this face
 is the face of the Christ himself,
 Dead and divine and brother of all, and here
 again he lies.

(LOG, p. 306-07)

From the first line the reader is arrested. The very quietness is laden with expectancy as he feels himself there, a participant in the scene. The odd word order in the early lines becomes important because it stretches a reader's perception of time and then helps him to identify with the scene. Exhaustion is suggested by words such as "sleepless," "slow," and "dim," and long slow modifying phrases. The first two five-stress lines give way to two eight-stress lines, the first of which reveals a slow nearly leaden walk on the path near the hospital, when suddenly on the fourth line the three forms are there, obviously dead. William Woartman sees spiritual despair evident here when the narrator sees the corpses as forms not men, "untended," without nurse or doctor hovering by, and they have been "brought out there," out of the way of the busy people

intent on saving lives.⁷⁵ The next two lines concentrate on the blankets, perhaps giving the reader time to digest the obvious fact without invoking embarrassment on the one hand or boredom on the other. Sweet feels Whitman uses time very adeptly here, allowing the reader to accept the fact by concentrating on the blankets.⁷⁶

Other critics, Gay Wilson Allen among them, have said that Whitman's heavy pathos and too obvious symbolism detract from the effect of the poem. But Sweet argues that in spite of this, Whitman has established such a delicate paradox in the first stanza with his "brownish woolen blanket" and the "cool, fresh air" of several lines above that he is able to increase the poem's tension throughout. Reacting to corpses as if they were still alive but knowing they can't speak nor he to them, the poet causes the strangeness which is sweet yet works without becoming a Christian diatribe about redemption.⁷⁷

In the second stanza the abrupt first line enables the reader to recover from the heaviness of the previous lines and prepares him for the confrontation with the bodies. In addition it contrasts with the repeated word "lying" in the previous stanza. This may be one of the finest effects in the poem. Then in the fragmented second line, almost, as if not even breathing, "with light fingers" the narrator "just lifts the blanket." He is curious, an extraordinarily honest word. And then the narrator proceeds to address the body in present tense. That "gaunt," "grim,"

"sunken" body is still a man, not just a corpse. But the question is universal: "Who are you?" could be turned inward, "Who am I?"⁷⁸

Purposely he steps to the second body. At this point perhaps Whitman errs. This body is too "blooming," "a saccharin corpse," Sweet calls it.⁷⁹ But assurance replaces the halting probing of the first body. The contrast with the elderly first man may be important, but the description is trite albeit Whitmanesque. Omitting subject and verb in the fourth stanza, the poet views the face of Everyman.⁸⁰ The quick recognition allows Whitman to transcend his understanding of this death as he looks beyond it. Rather than addressing this body, he uses a more objective address as if he is speaking to himself or the reader. More emphatic hard consonants and long vowels and strong rhythm contrast with the long slow phrases of stanza one. He sees Christ in the face of the third man only after achieving a spiritual plane of acceptance of death. Thus this "brother of all" is ennobled while the poet overcomes his despair and finds a faith and holiness similar to that of the disciples.⁸¹ The poem survives because this third corpse is incredible, according to Sweet.⁸² Not only is the imagery of the "yellow white ivory" "face of the Christ himself" effective, but the final line is positively musical. The rhythm "Dead and divine and / brother of all" slows to the three final iambs in which the poem's heart has slowed to a stop.⁸³ The

intense lyricality of the last line is reminiscent of a Gregorian chant.

"A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim" is a moving piece. Whitman has used a few of his favorite devices. The repetition of "lying" in the fourth line is effective in its inverted construction. "The blanket spread, ample brownish, woolen blanket, gray and heavy blanket, folding, covering all" is a vastly repetitive two line segment, but the two participle forms in the last line convey the finality of their use. To each of the first two men he has asked--"Who are you?"--a favorite repetitive Whitman device. But, finally, the stillness of the scene contrasts with the impact of the experience. Whitman has carefully detailed a common but profoundly intense picture of war.

Two more poems from Drum Taps are interesting for the regularity of their stanzaic forms. "Dirge for Two Veterans" employs four line stanzas with the indented first line having three stresses, the second and third lines having four beats, and the fourth line indented with varying stress. This poem harkens back to the drum taps of the collection's title. In the fourth stanza, particularly, each line ends with words associated with the image: "pounding," "whirring," "drums," "through." Similarly, end word associations occur in stanza three (flooding, tears) and stanza five (father, fell, together). The second stanza has been highly praised for its

reiteration of "moon," modified by two adjectives--"ascending" and "silent" (LOG, p. 315). This poem has a stately solemnity corresponding to the drum beat of a death march. The final stanza in elegiac beauty weaves the symbols of the moon and the drum with Whitman's heart in a tribute of love for a fallen father and son.

"Ethiopia Saluting the Colors" is a five stanza poem with each stanza containing three lines, the last two of which rhyme, while the first utilizes internal rhyme. Unusual as this is for Whitman, it contains other familiar Whitman devices. The first stanza is composed of three questions beginning "Who . . . With . . . Why . . .?" The second stanza in parenthesis explains the circumstances, Sherman's march to the sea. The third stanza in italics is rendered dialectically. It requires close reading because of the somewhat confusing syntax.

Me master years a hundred since from my parents
 sunder'd,
 A little child, they caught me as the savage
 beast is caught,
 Then hither me across the sea the cruel slaver
 brought.
 (LOG, p. 318)

The passive subject, "me," in the first line is separated by many words from the verb "sunder'd." Too, "hundred" and "years" are inverted. Again in the third line the passive voice is used allowing the line to end in the verb "brought." The colorful speech of the ancient negro woman matches the vivid, color words Whitman uses to describe her, "dusky,"

with "wooly-white" head, "darkling eye," and turban "yellow, red and green." The poem closes with another series of questions to which she must be answering in her actions, "Yes!"

Thus, Whitman uses a variety of poetic techniques in this assortment of poems from Drum Taps. In two of these poems, "The Centenarian's Story" and "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest," Whitman allows the free verse to unfold the tale. Specific imagery and Whitman's determination to render the pieces in stanzaic form qualify them as poems. Two others, "Dirge for Two Veterans" and "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors," are written in strict poetic form complete with rhyme and rhythm, unusual in Whitman yet illustrating his ability at conventional poetics. "Cavalry Crossing the Ford" is a careful study emphasizing perspectives and word choice while "Come Up from the Fields Father" shows Whitman at his best using repetition, alliteration, and parallel constructions. "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim" contrasts the reaction to three dead bodies in such a carefully modeled piece that critics have lingered over each word, phrase and construction to marvel at the delicacy of Whitman's craftsmanship. That Whitman exhibits a remarkably varied talent in Drum Taps cannot be questioned.

Melville's Poetic Style

Melville, upon close examination, reveals a long ignored facility for poetry, a poetry unconventionally expressing the ironic distortions of war. Battle Pieces poems such as "The Conflict of Convictions," "March Into Virginia," and "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor" illustrates Melville's craft.

"The Conflict of Convictions" has been termed Melville's most complex poem of Battle Pieces. It consists of seven stanzas each followed by a very unpoetic chorus. The entire poem is metrically irregular and coarse with both stanzas and choruses being of varied lengths.⁸⁴ In his analysis of the poem, William Shurr identifies three voices. The first voice appears to be debating with itself. Faced with chaos, this intelligent yet ordinary voice alternates between hope and despair as it views the alternatives presented by the war. The second voice (here shown in parentheses) seems to have a larger more cynical view. It is more remote, sometimes sneering at the sincere inquiry of the first voice, for it is skeptical about finding any workable explanation for the chaos. The final voice, rendered in capital letters, is still more removed as it declares both of the previous approaches to be inadequate.⁸⁵

Imitating Milton's theme and setting from Paradise Lost, Melville strives to portray "man's latter fall." As the original fall precipitated the war in Heaven, so this

latter fall had provoked the Civil War, Melville suggests. The Transcendental concept of America as the New Eden inspired Melville to explore the parallels using Miltonic imagery and illusions.⁸⁶

On starry heights
 A bugle wails the long recall;
 Derision stirs the deep abyss,
 Heaven's ominous silence overall.
 Return, return, O eager Hope,
 And face man's latter fall.
 Events, they make the dreamers quail;
 Satan's old age is strong and hale,
 A disciplined captain, gray in skill,
 And Raphael a white enthusiast still;
 Dashed aims, at which Christ's martyrs pale,
 Shall Mammon's slaves fulfill?

(Dismantle the fort,
 Cut down the fleet--
 Battle no more shall be!
 While the fields for fight in aeons to come
 Congeal beneath the sea.)

The terrors of truth and dart of death
 To faith alike are vain;
 Though comets, gone a thousand years,
 Return again,
 Patient she stands--she can no more--
 And waits, nor heeds she waxes hoar.

(At a stony gate,
 A statue of stone,
 Weed overgrown--
 Long 'twill wait!)

But God his former mind retains,
 Confirms his old decree;
 The generations are inured to pains,
 And strong Necessity
 Surges, and heaps Time's strand with wrecks.
 The People spread like a weedy grass,
 The thing they will they bring to pass,
 And prosper to the apoplex.
 The rout it herds around the heart,
 The ghost is yielded in the gloom;
 Kings wag their heads--Now save thyself
 Who wouldst rebuild the world in bloom.

(Tide-mark
 And top of the ages' strife,
 Verge where they called the world to come,
 The last advance of life--
 Ha ha, the rust on the Iron Dome!)

Nay, but revere the hid event;
 In the cloud a sword is girded on,
 I mark a twinkling in the tent
 Of Michael the warrior one.
 Senior wisdom suits not now,
 The light is on the youthful brow.

(Ay, in caves the miner sees:
 His forehead bears a blinking light;
 Darkness so he feebly braves--
 A meagre wight!)

But He who rules is old--is old;
 Ah! faith is warm, but heaven with age is cold.

(Ho ho, ho ho,
 The cloistered doubt
 Of olden times
 Is blurted out!)

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

(The poor old Past,
 The Future's slave,
 She drudged through pain and crime
 To bring about the blissful Prime,
 Then--perished. There's a grave!)

Power unanointed may come--
 Dominion (unsought by the free)
 And the Iron Dome,
 Stronger for stress and strain,
 Fling her huge shadow athwart the main;
 But the Founders' dream shall flee
 Age after age shall be
 As age after age has been,
 (From man's changeless heart their way they win);
 And death be busy with all who strive--
 Death, with silent negative.

YEA AND NAY--
 EACH HATH HIS SAY;
 BUT GOD HE KEEPS THE MIDDLE WAY.
 NONE WAS BY
 WHEN HE SPREAD THE SKY;
 WISDOM IS VAIN, AND PROPHECY. (BP, pp. 37-41)

The opening stanza sets the scene and introduces the opponents. Pitting the aged captain against the white enthusiast, the first speaker at once introduces the likelihood of defeat for Raphael, the new Adam who commits the sin of engaging in war. At this moment of historical change, the Civil War challenged Melville to examine the implications of defeat of the moral force in America.

Then the second voice responds with its immediate claim that all this questioning is useless. Time has always erased the significance of such struggles. The clipped ironic assertions of the second voice contrast with the more lengthy rhythm of the first voice which takes up where it left off, this time considering a more optimistic view. It claims that faithful patience will eventually overcome evil. But a mood of panic gains in the last five words, for while faith waits, she also grows old.⁸⁷ The second voice enlarges on this despair changing the waiting faith into a stone statue, forever bypassed. The imagery used by the second voice, both in the chorus to this stanza and in the chorus to the first, is sharp. Here "a stony gate, a statue of stone, weed overgrown" is pictorially evocative of the ironic possibility that faith could wait forever.

In the third stanza the first voice continues as if unaware of the second voice, this time considering "necessity" as a counterpossibility to faith.⁸⁸ Using sharp, choppy words, the first voice considers darker ideas. The maritime image where "Necessity surges, and heaps Time's strand with wrecks" (BP, p. 39) reinforces Melville's fascination with a link between the ocean and time. Monarchs watch the young democracy dying and jeer just as the crowd insulted the new Adam, telling Him, "Ah, thou that destroyed the temple and buildest it in three days, save thyself."⁸⁹ The second voice responds with the jeering "ha ha," cynically laughing at the promise of New Eden which already shows rust on the new iron dome, symbol of its capitol, rusting and decaying while still being declared the hope of the future.

The first voice of the next stanza, still not hearing the second voice, rejects its last despair in a return to faith with the Miltonic Michael leading the way. Michael always has a vision of purpose. But the second voice immediately compares this vision to the miner's meager sight in the dim light of the cave.

The next stanza is but two lines; however, the speaker despairs, finds confidence, and despairs again in those two lines. The second voice laughs heartily at this age old paradox.

The first voice must then explain to itself its theological stance: "God may be old, but he is forever young;

evil must be part of his continuing process toward good."⁹⁰

The core of Melville's doubt is revealed in the image of the wind spinning against the way it drives. But he uses it to explain that it works as the first stage in the construction of "the final empire and the happier world." The second voice with the larger view can only respond with sarcasm. What has happened throughout history? Drudgery and death await with no evidence of eternity.

Conflict is recognized in the first voice's final stanza. Some will gain power as a result of the war, perhaps to go on to tyrannize others. Some, now free, will be overtaken. The Iron Dome of power may seem stronger, may throw her shadows farther, but will the original dream of the founders prevail? The voice realizes that all history has been ruled by man's heart which never changes. All optimism concerning change is finally negated by death.⁹¹

The second voice does not respond. With this final speech he agrees. Another voice speaks now, invoking the wisdom of Solomon and Job. In this response Shurr says we recognize the first voice is much like Job, searching honestly for answers while very close to despair. And the second voice is much like that of the writer of Ecclesiastes, cynical, judging all to be vanity. Thus, finally no answer is found; the voice in capital letters distills only an attitude about the age old problem of evil.⁹²

In this poem Melville reveals the limits of his universe; the bottom of the world, "What if the gulfs their

alimed foundations bare?"; and the Sky, "NONE WAS BY WHEN HE SPREAD THE SKY."⁹³ Forever limited and separated from a Creator who, to Melville, seemed purposely to exclude Himself, Melville felt compelled to explain the cosmic conflicts as they applied to the Civil War. "The Conflict of Convictions" is an approach to the problem through the use of a dialogue. "YEA AND NAY, EACH HATH HIS SAY," but the first voice never heard the second voice, and neither of those could hear the third voice. Melville could only attempt to get at the metaphysical import of this conflict.

"March Into Virginia" may be a more successful attempt at a metaphysical style. Although vastly different from the style of the seventeenth century English metaphysical poets, Melville's style, Robert Penn Warren notes, shares the intensely realistic, prosaic, yet intellectually weighted subject matter. But it always follows the complex contours of his own feelings about the subject.⁹⁴ Melville's subject in "March Into Virginia" is the first Battle of Bull Run near Manassas Junction. Thirty thousand Union troops were routed by twenty-four thousand Confederate troops. A year later the battle was reenacted on the same field with similar results. Melville chose not to deal only with the loss of innocence of the untried young soldiers, but also with the irony of the second defeat.⁹⁵ The poem opens with a series of line-by-line apothegms:

Did all the lets and bars appear
 To every just or larger end,
 Whence should come the trust and cheer?
 Youth must its ignorant impulse lend--
 Age finds place in the rear.
 All wars are boyish, and are fought by boys,
 The champions and enthusiasts of the state:
 Turbid ardors and vain joys
 Not barrenly abate--
 Stimulants to the power mature,
 Preparatives of fate.
 Who here forecasteth the event?
 What heart but spurns at precedent
 And warnings of the wise,
 Contemned foreclosures of surprise?

The first two lines are in perfect iambic tetrameter, with the third line only missing the unaccented first syllable.⁹⁶ But the fourth line forces the reader to deal with the word "ignorant." Not only is it metrically difficult, but it is also the key to the opening lines. As Shurr puts it, "The ignorance of youth is a necessary condition for the 'trust and cheer' they experience in the present conflict."⁹⁷ Melville characteristically forces the reader to deal with this unquestionably true statement, and then he adjusts to trimeter for the short, pithy truth: age will know enough to stay safely back while innocence may be exploited, allowing the horrors of war to flourish. Lines 8-11 are syntactically difficult because of the compression of language. Both "ardor" and "joys" are modified negatively ("turbid" and "vain"). These attractive qualities of youth learn a lesson, yet the lessons do not "abate" with age without some good results. Using medical terminology, Melville's "stimulants" can spur one on to further knowledge and control, while the phrase "preparatives of fate" suggests that

Although maturity may have been gained, by the battle experience, the young soldiers may also have learned of the irrationalities of fate. Shurr suggests a paradox in these lines: "What looks to the adolescent like the freedom of maturity is actually experienced as a greater domination by the uncontrollable forces to which the mature man is subject."⁹⁸ Here, Melville's compression of language forces the reader to add words in order to interpret meaning.

The next four lines continue to develop the contrasting views of youth and age on war. Who forecasted the defeat? Who spurned these warnings? The words "foreclosure" and "precedent," like "lets and bars" of the first line, have legal connotations. Melville's experimentation with legal and medical vocabulary in this poem is interesting. Here in the legal sense, foreclosure means "the extinguishing of a right one previously had."⁹⁹ Obviously the youth will not easily give up their optimism.

The banners play, the bugles call,
 The air is blue and prodigal.
 No berrying party, pleasure-wooded,
 No picnic party in the May,
 Ever went less loth than they
 Into that leafy neighborhood.
 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 belauereled story.
 So they gayly go to fight,
 Chatting left and laughing right.

(BP, p. 44)

The mid section of the poem has often been quoted for its finely honed irony. In contrast to the heavy clogged rhythm of the first part of the poem, this section is brief and light. The near rhythms employed here (Mathieu labels them paraphones)¹⁰⁰ add pungency and excitement to the occasion. But close attention to the word choices reveals the careful crafting of the poem. Warren notes the "berrying party" which will tragically become a "burying party."¹⁰¹ Lawrence Barrett sees interesting root words: prodigal, usually associated with prodigal son, actually comes from a root meaning "to scatter, to waste, to drive forth"; the root for rapture means "raped, seized, carried away."¹⁰² Also he points out that the foliage of the "leafy neighborhood" conceals former neighbors, now enemies.

Joyce Sparer Adler, who views all of Battle Pieces as a three act tragedy, interprets the reference to the "Bacchic glee" of "Moloch's uninitiate" as further proof of Melville's experimentation with seeing the war in terms of a Greek tragedy. These youthful soldiers will be sent through fire as a sacrifice. To say that they face this in "Bacchic glee" signifies more than that they are enraptured about going off to war; it also signifies that tragedy is their destiny, as it always was in the festivals to Dionysus.¹⁰³

The final strophe returns to the heavy succession of monosyllables, reminiscent of the first section:

But some who this blythe mood present,
 As on in lightsome files they fare,
 Shall die experienced ere three days are spent--
 Perish enlightened by the vollied glare;
 Or shame survive, and, like to adamant,
 The throes of Second Manassas share.

(BP, p. 44)

Tortured accentuation forces the ironic conclusion. Before three days, some who now "as on in lightsome files they fare" will "perish, enlightened by the vollied glare" (ll. 32-34). This enlightenment will be physical as well as mental since the gunfire literally produced light.¹⁰⁴ Others will have to share the shame of the Second Manassas, but having survived the enlightenment of this battle, they will be able to bear the second defeat which they would not meet with the same foolish confidence. As Melville knew, the second defeat was not to be a rout.

Warren sees the entire poem as a coherent set of contrasts all embodied in one scene of marching men. The picnic party will become a death march. The ignorance and innocence of youth make war possible, and only in experience can the "adamant" or "extremely hard substance" be forged.¹⁰⁵ However, the cost of this experience may be death. Further, the transitory "rapture" of youthful action will soon enter history ("story"), dying into "glory."¹⁰⁶ Others will fight again, having learned the lessons of the eternal Adamic Fall from innocence.¹⁰⁷ In all, "March Into Virginia" is a finely honed work of art.

Experimenting in a very different vein, Melville wrote "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight," a mechanical

poem. As Hennig Cohen puts it, "The lines grind and clank like heavy machinery, and the rhythm pounds relentlessly."¹⁰⁸

Melville established his purpose in the first lines as he explained what he perceived as the new warfare:

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

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

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.

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

War shall yet be, and to the end;
 But war-paint shows the streaks of weather;
 War shall yet be, but warriors
 Are now but operatives; War's made
 Less grand than Peace,
 And a singe runs through lace and feather.
 (BP, pp. 69-71)

Using enjambment to keep the poem moving along, Melville carefully positioned each word for a monotonous, mechanical effect. He eschewed rhyme except in the second and sixth lines of each stanza, deliberately seeking to achieve a poem accurately depicting the mundane mechanics of

modern warfare as opposed to the historic heroic vision.

The words that do rhyme appear to be deliberate opposites: fans, artisans; heroic, caloric; plates, Fates; weather, feather. The "Fans / of banners" were part of the pomp of former wars, but the "artisans" of modern warfare that Melville saw were the blacksmiths, the gun smiths, the builders and operators of the new ironclad ships who were merely plying their trades.

Bertrand Mathieu is convinced that the dull regularity of the five stanzas is intended to suggest the precision of a well-oiled machine.¹⁰⁹ He also suggests that the terms borrowed from science and industry are in keeping with Melville's intentions in the poem. Hence, "crank, pivot, and screw" are the weapons of artisans and operatives, the modern warriors. The phrase, "calculations of caloric" yields a mathematical connotation. And the engineer's calculated heat at the forge sings the historic plumes and feathers of former military displays.¹¹⁰ So Melville was able to translate effectively the new impersonal war machine into a mechanical poem which is similarly void of emotion.

Another Melville poem employs a mechanical refrain: "Stonewall Jackson. Mortally Wounded at Chancellorsville. (May, 1863)." It is one of Melville's commemorative poems which has been casually dismissed as only that by some critics. However, the ejaculatory "Stonewall!" throughout the poem is arresting:

The Man who fiercest charged in fight,
 Whose sword and prayer were long--
 Stonewall!

Even him who stoutly stood for Wrong,
 How can we praise? Yet coming days
 Shall not forget him with this song.

Dead is the Man whose Cause is dead,
 Vainly he died and set his seal--
 Stonewall!

Earnest in error, as we feel;
 True to the thing he deemed was due,
 True as John Brown or steel.

Relentlessly he routed us;
 But we relent, for he is low--
 Stonewall!

Justly his fame we outlaw; so
 We drop a tear on the bold Virginian's bier,
 Because no wreath we owe.

(BP, p. 85)

"Stonewall" Jackson, the subject of two poems by

Melville, is eulogized here from a northerner's point of view. The man must have represented the complexities of issues for it is clear that Melville both respected and regretted his part in the war. Each stanza is split by the awkward intrusion of his name. Mathieu suggests that "Stonewall" is insistently brought before the reader in order to keep the energetic leader constantly in mind.¹¹¹ The choppy rhythm represents the bumptious personality of the southern general whose heroism was undenied but whose menace was very real for the North.

In the second stanza where Jackson is compared to "John Brown or steel," Melville's diction is particularly sharp-edged. "Steel" suggests durability and strength. But the regular rhythm is jerked abruptly short by this word as if by an "expert swordsman's deadly lunge," as Mathieu puts

it.¹¹² Surely this is illustrative of the threat Jackson posed to northern armies. Within the context of the poem that is largely regular in meter and contains end rhyme in lines 2, 4, and 6, the poet has still injected an ironic tone with the sonorous repetition of "Stonewall."

Another poem containing a refrain is "The March to the Sea," a poem which becomes increasingly sinister as its nine stanzas unfold. What begins as a jubilant account of the victorious union march through confederate territory shifts, finally centering in the pillaged viewpoint of helpless southerners. The intentional change in point of view makes the bouncing refrain even more ironic for in every stanza except the ninth, the refrain is repeated, "It was glorious glad marching, / That marching to the sea." Yet as can be seen by the ninth verse, there was nothing glorious in that destructive march. Verses five and nine are quoted below to illustrate the growing desperation of the refrain:

All nature felt their coming,
 The birds like couriers flew,
 And banners brightly blooming
 The slaves by thousands drew,
 And they marched beside the drumming,
 They joined the armies blue.
 The cocks crowed from the cannon
 (Pets named for Grant and Lee),
 Plumed fighters and campaigners
 In that marching to the sea:
 It was glorious glad marching,
 For every man was free.

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

Was it Treason's retribution--
 Necessity the plea?

They will long remember Sherman
 And his streaming columns free--
 They will long remember Sherman
 Marching to the sea.

(BP, p. 121, 123)

Bertrand Mathieu faults the poem on the refrain. He claims that Melville's indignation at Sherman has been made sufficiently evident without the relentless refrain.¹¹⁹ He feels that the refrain prevents a sense of repine at the conclusion. However, others disagree, maintaining the refrain accentuates a point that must be very clear: the jubilant march ravaged a conquered South.

Melville's primary source for this poem has been traced to a popular book found in his library, The Story of the Great March by Major George Ward Nichols. This account emphasized the remarkable high spirits of the troops. Nichols devoted an entire section to the soldiers' maintenance of game cocks while on the march. Losing cocks were indeed named after southern leaders, while winners sported northern leaders' names. Melville incorporated this information in the fifth stanza, and, like Whitman, searched carefully for material which would fully and realistically reflect the events of the war.

One line of the final stanza was twice revised, indicating Melville's progressive softening in attitude toward

the South. Hibler notes that originally the poem had concluded with the sentiment that the destruction, terror, and blazing households were necessary because, "It was Treason's retribution / (Necessity the plea)." This version was published in Harper's prior to the release of Battle Pieces. It was changed to a question for Battle Pieces. Finally, in his personal copy, Melville had penned the last change, "Was it havoc, retribution / But howsoe'er, it be."¹¹⁴ Obviously, he was becoming more and more aware of the dark side of this victory.

According to general consensus, Melville's "Formerly a Slave" is not as good a poem as Whitman's "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors."

The sufferance of her race is shown,
 And retrospect of life,
 Which now too late deliverance dawn 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.

(BP, p. 139-40)

Where Whitman's poem suggests a painting, Melville's was actually inspired by a painting by E. Vedder of a former slave. However, Melville's poem seems void of color much as it lacks ordered rhythm and rhyme. As Vaughan Hudson states, the lack of color, so effectively used in Whitman's poem, and so appropriate to this poem, only contributes to

general disappointment in the overall effect.¹¹⁵ In fact the entire poem is singularly ineffective. Wrenched rhythm, which in other poems may serve a purpose, forces the reader to struggle with this work. "Deliverance" will never fit into the third line, and the inverted syntax of the line only makes it seem more awkward. Again in the fourth line, subject and verb are inverted with no question mark at the end of the line. Iambic trimeter is found only in the second and fourth lines. The first lines are tetrameter, and the third are pentameter. This seems to have been done for no purpose. Why the careful stanzas separate the last line of the second from the first line of the third stanza is unclear. This is not a common ploy in Melville who was not bound by stanza length, and it certainly does nothing to help the poem. In contrast with Whitman's fine poem, "Formerly a Slave" demonstrates why critics have not regarded Melville's poetry too highly.

The penultimate poem of Melville's collection, "Lee in the Capitol," offers a puzzling conclusion full of the conflicts Melville felt about the end of the war. This long poem is intended to describe General Lee's appearance before the Reconstruction Committee of Congress. Lee was given the opportunity to make a statement before the Committee, an opportunity which in reality he waived. But taking liberties with the possibilities of the situation, Melville, in fine historic or Shakespearean manner, depicted Lee as responding in a poignant plea for understanding.¹¹⁶

The poem is written primarily in iambic tetrameter.

Frequently lines are rhymed in couplets, although at other times alternate lines rhyme. Stanza length seems to be determined by paragraphing in this quiet stately poem.

Throughout, the image of Lee, the unbowed leader, prevails.

"Rebellion's soldier-chief" walked humbly to the Northern Dome, the new capitol building which Melville used as a northern symbol throughout the collection.¹¹⁷ Conducting himself in a confident manner, he meets the Committee here.

As the poem draws to a close, the Committee dismisses Lee, unswayed by his moving plea. This was in keeping with the situation as it really took place. Paradoxically, Melville appended a final six lines to the end, lines which reassert faith in reconciliation.

But no, Brave though the Soldier, grave his plea--
 Catching the light in the future's skies,
 Instinct disowns each darkening prophecy:
 Faith in America never dies;
 Heaven shall the end ordained fulfill,
 We march with Providence cheery still.

(BP, p. 193)

When taken with the rest of the poem, these lines are very unconvincing, as if Melville was trying to convince himself. Rejecting a future filled with vengeance, he encouraged optimism on the basis of instinct alone. This empty platitude is made even more inappropriate by the use of the word "cheery" which is contrary to the formal language used throughout the rest of the poem.¹¹⁸ So the general effect of the poem is perverted in the end. A finely visualized meeting of the southern general with the northern statesmen

provides the opportunity for an heroic speech. The calmly dignified rhythm and tone compliment the image Melville wanted to present. But an enigmatic ending leaves the reader perplexed, perhaps much as Melville himself was regarding the future course of the country.

These selections comprise a sample of Melville's craft. More spotty than Whitman, Melville usually utilized rhythm and rhyme in his poetry. Often he strained the rhythm to focus attention on particular words and their attending ideas. And his use of near-rhyme lent irony to his images. "March Into Virginia" and "Stonewall Jackson" are good examples of this technique. But sometimes he failed, as in "Formerly a Slave." Experimentation with different levels of awareness makes "The Conflict of Con-
victions" an unusually complex study. The mechanical aspects of warfare are explored in the equally mechanical poem "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight." In "The March to the Sea" and "Lee in the Capitol" Melville treats important events of the war with careful consideration to tone and implication.

Poetic style, then, was an important consideration for Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. The Civil War challenged these two poets to stretch their creative imaginations to cover a wide expanse of events and emotions. They chose to accomplish this end by expanding their approaches to

poetry. Whitman, the free verse poet, tried rhythm, rhyme and dialogue, in what were for him stylistic experiments. Melville, who constantly tinkered with varying rhythms and rhyme schemes, compressed ideas and caused words to explode with meaning. For their efforts history has judged them the poets of the Civil War, and succeeding poets have built on their ventures into unconventional realms of expression.

Chapter 4

THEMES

The theme of a poem determines the style a poet will choose for expression. With single-minded determination, both Whitman and Melville strove to illustrate the Civil War with poetry that resounded of the chaos they saw in their land. The inner turmoil of these men as they grappled with understanding is apparent in each collection.

Whitman was true to his conviction that universal brotherly love would end all war and strife. Poem after poem in Drum Taps reflects this belief. Even while he recognized the war as a great test of America as the New Eden, and even while doubt swept over him in the hospitals as he ministered to men experiencing horrible agonies, he would not suppress his indomitable conviction that love was the answer. The reader might wish, however, that at some time in his poetry Whitman would admit that America had not yet attained the ideal that he and all Transcendentalists longed for. The war should have cleared his mind of this illusion. Instead he clung to the belief that some day, in one way or another, the country would be spiritualized in a powerful unity--a theme which permeates Drum Taps and all of Leaves of Grass.¹¹⁹

Melville, on the other hand, dealt with the dark realities of human anarchy. He, too, yearned for absolutes, but he always recognized the complicated contexts of any action such as a Civil War. His recognition that all experience is relative caused a war within himself as his mind wore a path between his hard-edged cynicism and his ferocious desire to know the ideal truth.¹²⁰ Ultimately, as Hennig Cohen details in his introduction to Battle Pieces, the central theme of Melville's collection is one of opposition and reconciliation.¹²¹ Using this idea as a framing device, Melville achieved a unity in his work. Poems depicting the renting force of the opposing northern and southern factions open the work, while the dream vision of the mother goddess in "America" depicts the longed-for reconciliation in the end. Throughout, Melville sought unity in other ways. Poems were grouped by related subjects, by repetition of themes, by interweaving certain images, and by infusing the total historical experience of the war with symbolic importance.¹²²

Two themes allied to the overall ideas of opposition and reconciliation were the themes of death and of the integrity of law.¹²³ The many elegiac poems found in the section consisting of "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial" and scattered throughout the collection testify to the importance of the theme of death. A collection of war verse necessitates dealing with the theme, but surprisingly, the mother goddess awakens from her own death sleep with "Law

on her brow and empire in her eyes" (BP, p. 147). Melville shows that even death may be overcome.¹²⁴

Melville saw the integrity of law as the only way to preserve order in society. Rebellion against the union was a clear disruption of the law, and reconciliation could only come upon restoration of the law. Buttressed by religion, the law, to Melville, was sacred. Repeatedly, phrases invoking the word "law" or legal terms echo throughout the collection. William Shurr designates law as one of two cycles of thought predominant in Battle Pieces. Shurr states that Melville, in keeping with conservative tradition, believed that states and individuals should not rebel against duly constituted civil authority. Harmony and peace would only return when law was reasserted.¹²⁵

Shurr believes that a second thematic cycle in Melville's work is the cycle of evil. He says that poems in this cycle are often more dramatic, more convincing, more ironic than the poems of the law cycle.¹²⁶ In Melville's conviction that God must be the source of evil as well as good, Shurr says that Melville alludes to Milton's war in heaven and other mythological events of cosmic significance to depict the pervading complexities and underlying implications of the Civil War. The poet was striving to understand the forces controlling the Civil War. Shurr says that the cycles superimpose on each other as the poet vacillated in his view of the war. The resulting tension generates fascinating conflict in the collection.¹²⁷

Each poet closed his volume with the theme of reconciliation. But along the way each treated numerous subjects and experiences that were eventually to mold into this theme. A look at exemplifying poems will illustrate the development of these themes.

Whitman's Themes

"Pioneers! O Pioneers!" was included in the first two editions of Drum Taps. Whitman subsequently moved it, but inspection of this marching song will prove its place in thematic consideration of the Drum Taps poems. Verses 1, 2, and 5 are given below:

Come my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,
Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of
danger,
We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

All the past we leave behind
We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and
the march,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

(LOG, p. 229)

This exhilarating poem proclaims that war will clarify the ideal brotherhood of the common man.¹²⁸ Placed before the Drum Taps section, it anticipates the war, establishing a mood of dedication to a calling.

Another poem which Whitman moved out of Drum Taps to a position shortly preceding that section is "O ME! O Life!"

O me! O life! of the questions of these recurring
 Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities
 fill'd with the foolish,
 Of myself forever reproaching myself, (For who more
 foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
 Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects
 mean, of the struggle ever renew'd,
 Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and
 sordid crowds I see around me,
 Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the
 rest me intertwined,
 The question, O me! so sad, recurring--What good amid
 these,
 O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here--that life exists and identity,
 That the powerful play goes on, and you may
 contribute a verse.

(LOG, pp. 271-2)

In a period of doubt Whitman seems to be asking if life is meaningful progress or merely purposeless struggle. With a growing feeling of alarm, he observes that the stars of America's destiny are being blotted out by the storm.¹²⁹

The response is that whether or not man sees his goal amidst the confusion of life, he still has a higher destiny which he must fulfill. The poet once again remembers his duty to call man's attention to this destiny. Whitman's sense of duty will also be his salvation from pessimism since it will drive him on to seek the dawn of New Eden beyond this storm.¹³⁰

One of the most tender poems of the Drum Taps collection itself is "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night." In a monologue the narrator recounts the night he

spent beside the body of a fallen comrade finally to bury this brother in the dawn of the new day. Aware of the soft fragrant breeze and the silent starlight, he spent the long night in a remarkable vigil free from emotion. As the hours passed, he seemed to absorb a consciousness of a powerful brotherly love. This mystical experience reinforced his belief in a cosmic brotherhood beyond life and death.¹³¹ And the love he attained from this experience served to sustain him through the blood bath that was to come. The strength of the American Dream would not be extinguished by death, as the narrator says, "I think we shall surely meet again" (LOG, p. 304). Tenderly, he buried this beloved comrade, reassured that this loving vigil was the highest tribute he could pay to a fellow American.

"The Wound Dresser," a poem in four cantos, conducts the reader on a tour of the hospital following the typical chores of a wound dresser. In Canto One the poet states that he had been questioned, "What stays with you latest and deepest? of curious panics, / of hard-fought engagements or sieges tremendous what deepest remains?" (LOG, p. 309). The poet then admits to mistaken idealistic zeal in beating the drums for war. Facing the horrors of war in the hospitals, the poet answered, "my faced droop'd and I resign'd myself / To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead." The poem then becomes an autobiographical account of Whitman's changing attitude toward war.

Canto Two begins to detail a soldier's rush to battle, but the poet stops, and instead invites the reader to follow on hospital rounds.¹³² In graphic illustration he paints the scene:

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
 Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
 Where they live on the ground after the battle
 brought in,
 Where their priceless blood reddens the grass
 the ground,
 Or to rows of the hospital tent, or under the
 roof'd hospital,
 To the long rows of cots up and down each side
 I return,
 To each and all one after another I draw near,
 not one do I miss,
 An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries
 a refuse pail,
 Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood,
 emptied, and fill'd again.

(LOG, p. 310)

The remainder of the poem catalogues wound after wound. In mercy the wound dresser analyzes the severity of the wound and wishes for a quick end to the suffering of each man. He admits that "deep in my breast" there exists a "fire, a burning flame." Obviously this meditation touched the core of Whitman's beliefs. Would such suffering be worth it? Or would the outcome of this war be a death blow to democracy? The only answer Whitman could arrive at at this time was the necessity of his ministrations to the wounded. By treating each man as divine and equal, he was recognizing the brotherhood of all men. Only in brotherhood would war cease and democracy return.¹³³

Another poem, "Long, Too Long America," laments the unparalleled prosperity Americans had always known. With

the war Americans grappled with fate. Whitman predicted a new man would evolve from that struggle, "the children en-masse." Only Whitman had dared to conceive what these new men would really be like. These souls forged in chaos should be able to clear away the corruption and confusion clouding the utopia of the New Eden. Ignoffo suggests that Whitman was powerfully affected by the wounded soldiers in the hospitals. He saw them as the men of the future, decent, honorable, loving, made of the essential ingredients desirable in the New Eden. Yet he must have wondered if any nation, torn by such horrible strife, could evolve into the New Eden.¹³⁴ However, his final line claims that he has seen the vision: "For who except myself has yet conceiv'd what your children en-masse really are?" (LOG, p. 312).

In preparing Drum Taps Whitman took a poem from his "Calamus" section and added first and last lines to it, making it an illuminating rediscovery of truth he had once been sure of and would now proclaim again. This poem, "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice," emphasizes victory through amativeness:

Over the carnage rose prophetic a voice,
 Be not dishearten'd, affection shall solve the
 problems of freedom yet,
 Those who love each other shall become invincible,
 They shall yet make Columbia victorious.

(LOG, p. 315)

The second stanza addresses the soldiers, reassuring them that "you shall yet be victorious, / You shall yet laugh to scorn the attacks of all the remainder of earth."

Following the mournful hospital scenes, this poem reveals the poet finding new optimism and new strength: "The continuance of Equality shall be comrades. / These shall tie you and band you stronger than hoops of iron" (LOG, p. 316). The divine equality of all men in democratic love was indeed Whitman's dream for America renewed and prophetic.¹³⁵

"Turn O Libertad" proclaims Whitman's final conviction that his childlike idealism had survived the conflict and been transformed into experienced idealism of the True Dream for America.

Turn O Libertad, for the war is over,
 From it and all henceforth expanding, doubting no
 more, resolute, sweeping the world,
 Turn from lands retrospective recording proofs of
 the past,
 From the chants of the feudal world, the triumphs
 of kings, slavery, caste,
 Turn to the world, the triumphs reserv'd and to
 come--give up that backward world,
 Leave to the singers of hitherto, give them the
 trailing past,
 But what remains remains for singers for you--
 wars to come are for you,
 (Lo, how the wars of the past have duly inured to
 you, and the wars of the present also inure;)
 Then turn and be not alarm'd O Libertad--turn your
 undying face,
 To where the future, greater than all the past,
 Is swiftly, surely preparing for you.
 (LOG, p. 326)

If the idealism had died in the war, cynicism and greed would have conquered America. But in his search through the horrors of pessimism and war, Whitman had still been able to regenerate his idealism, turning his back forever on the failures of the old world.¹³⁶ Whitman was convinced that the American historical experience marked an epochal change

in the course of the history of the world. Liberty of the individual (Libertad) had been won in the Revolution and confirmed for all people in the Civil War. For the future, the common man would reign supreme.¹³⁷ This was Whitman's reconciliation.

Melville's Themes

The opening poems of Battle Pieces all deal in one way or another with opposing opinions that clash in disharmony. "The Portent" presents the ominous hanging of a criminal who has committed his crime for idealistic purposes. His foul punishment ironically takes place in the serene Shenandoah Valley. "Misgivings" recreates the tempest shaking the foundations of the nation, while "The Conflict of Convictions" details three confirmed arguments over the implications of a Civil War in the New Eden.

Another poem, "Apathy and Enthusiasm," displays opposition even in its title, and that opposition governs the thematic structure of the poem. The two sections contrast winter and spring, age and youth, death and resurrection, dejection and elation, doubt and faith, Satan and Michael.

O the clammy cold November,
 And the winter white and dead,
 And the terror dumb with stupor,
 And the sky a sheet of lead;
 And events that came resounding
 With the cry that all is lost,
 Like the thunder-cracks of massy ice
 In intensity of frost--

Bursting one upon another
 Through the horror of the calm.
 The paralysis of arm
 In the anguish of the heart;
 And the hollowness and dearth.
 The appealingings of the mother
 To brother and to brother
 Not in hatred so to part--
 And the fissure in the hearth
 Growing momentarily more wide.
 Then the glances 'tween the Fates,
 And the doubt on every side,
 And the patience under gloom
 In the stoniness that waits
 The finality of doom.

So the winter died despairing,
 And the weary weeks of Lent;
 And the ice-bound rivers melted,
 And the tomb of Faith was rent.
 O, the rising of the People
 Came with springing of the grass,
 They rebounded from dejection
 After Easter came to pass.
 And the young were all elation
 Hearing Sumter's cannon roar,
 And they thought how tame the Nation
 In the age that went before.
 And Michael seemed gigantic,
 The Arch-fiend but a dwarf;
 And the towers of Erebus
 Our striplings flung the scoff.
 But the elders with foreboding
 Mourned the days forever o'er.
 And recalled the forest proverb,
 The Iroquois' old saw:
Grief to every graybeard
When young Indians lead the war.

(BP, p. 41-42)

Likening the leaden cold of winter to the stark chill of brotherly strife in a family, Melville in the first stanza depicts the stony, paralyzed inability to act when man is faced by a situation that seems to have no resolution. The second stanza, although initially sounding more hopeful, cautions against unrestrained activity. Once war had begun,

the frenzy of action carried the masses with an exuberance that mocked previous hesitation. Only the elders remembered that inexperience could lead to tragic consequences. So both stanzas end on a note of foreboding. Cohen feels that Melville was emphasizing the heavy cost of achievement, implying that enthusiasm, even for a just cause, was a callow trait. And apathy displays a melancholy grandeur in its clear-eyed acceptance of doom.¹³⁸ Easter imagery and mythological allusions to death and rebirth clearly display the theme of opposition in "Apathy and Enthusiasm."

"The College Colonel" is another poem of opposition, contrasting the expectations of a young officer with the reality he ultimately faced in the war.

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

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

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

There are welcoming shouts, and flags;
 Old men off hat to the Boy,
 Wreaths from gay balconies fall at his feet,
 But to him--there comes alloy.
 It is not that a leg is lost,
 It is not that an arm is maimed,

It is not that the fever has racked--
 Self he has long disclaimed.

But all through the Seven Days' 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.

(BP, p. 113-14)

At once Melville assaults the reader with the prominence of the crutch. The youth who had faced the war whole only two years before returned maimed and stoical at the head of his regiment. The second stanza compares the regiment to a group of castaway sailors who had braved the surge of the surf again and again before finally making it safely to shore, losing comrades all along the way. What once must have been is only hinted at in opposition to what exists now for this colonel and his men, as the third stanza shows. And this stark contrast is evident in their reaction to the welcoming crowds of stanza four. The final stanza emphasizes the anguish the regiment had shared. In an ironic twist, Melville stresses that the physical hardships the men endured are eclipsed by the ambivalent word "truth" in the final line--the official "truth" and official celebration are meaningless after all that they have experienced.

Opposition and reconciliation are again represented in the poem "Shiloh." Wheeling swallows begin and end this poem serenely unperturbed by the strife and suffering below them. Melville's poem shows nature's indifference to the follies of men as he details their continued orderly flight:

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
 The swallows fly low
 Over the field in clouded days
 The forest-field of Shiloh--
 Over the field where April rain
 Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain
 Through the pause of night
 That followed the Sunday fight
 Around the church of Shiloh--
 The church so lone, the log-built one,
 That echoed so many a parting groan
 And natural prayer
 Of dying foemen mingled there--
 Foemen at morn, but friends at eve--
 Fame or country least their care:
 (What like a bullet can undeceive!)
 But now they lie low,
 While over them the swallows skim.
 And all is hushed at Shiloh.

(BP, p. 71-2)

John Bernstein sees "Shiloh" as a crucial statement of Melville's attitude toward war. It may be justifiable as a clash of abstract ideas, but it is indefensible in its slaughter of individuals.¹³⁹ Here Sunday is desecrated by fighting, the church has been turned into a death house, and the conflict loses meaning as men of both sides die together, no longer enemies. But this is a means of reconciliation. In the midst of death, the conflict recedes. Melville uses the swallows, themselves symbols of Resurrection, to illustrate the forgiveness of death.¹⁴⁰ In addition he uses the circular flight around the church to show the ongoing existence of natural law. "Shiloh" integrates the various themes of opposition, reconciliation, death, and integrity of law.

In an effort to achieve stylistic as well as thematic order in the chaos of war, Melville carefully constructed

this poem. Surprisingly, as Martin Pops notes, the nineteen line poem of imperfect meter and inexact rhyme is well ordered. Every fifth line from the second through the seventeenth lines has precisely five syllables with the intervening four lines containing thirty-one and thirty-two syllables. The last words of lines 2 and 17 rhyme. And the parenthetical sentence has a staccato jarring effect of a bullet.¹⁴¹ A long "o" sound resonates through the poem, repeating the circular structure created by the birds' flights around the church. Melville, the artist, must have been striving for a very intricate balance of mood, structure, and theme in this fine poem.

Another poem stressing the integrity of law is "Dupont's Round Fight." In this particular battle several Union ships were to attack two Confederate forts guarding Port Royal Sound in the mouth of the Broad River above Savannah.¹⁴² The Rebellion Record provided a description of the battle plan:

The plan of attack was simple and effective, being for the ships to steam in a circle, or ellipse, running close to one shore as they came down the river, drifting or steaming as slowly as possible past the batteries there, and paying their fiery respects, then making the turn to go back, and as they went up the river, favoring the other batteries with a similar compliment.¹⁴³

Each ship was within range only a short time and then could reload and maneuver whereas the forts themselves were under constant attack. Melville saw a beautiful simplicity at work, a "victory of Law."

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.

(BP, p. 48-9)

This poem illustrates the beauty, harmony, and order of Law. Jane Donahue was struck by the classical quality of Melville's theory of Law, for, like Greek art, Melville's poems following certain ordering principles. Thus a tension is created between Melville's need for law and order and his romantic bent which together produced a regularity, restraint and unity not always found in his work.¹⁴⁴ At the same time his imagination sees Law pervading art, rhyme, stars, and, in this case, a warring fleet, an extremely romantic concept. Shurr concurs, noting that indeed the poem is "measure perfect."¹⁴⁵ Iambic fourteeners perfectly rhymed contain only one extra syllable in the word "Unity" to which Melville was warranted in calling attention. Law should be the basis for victorious battles for the side "that warred for Right," Melville felt. "Dupont's Round Fight" aptly expresses this philosophical conviction.

The New York Draft Riots inspired "The House-top," a poem describing the mob bestiality of men running free from the restraints of law:

No sleep. The sultriness pervades the air
 And binds the brain--a dense oppression, such
 As tawny tigers feel in matted shades,
 Vexing their blood and making apt for ravage.
 Beneath the stars the roofy desert spreads
 Vacant as Libya. All is hushed near by.
 Yet fitfully from far breaks a mixed surf
 Of muffled sound, the Atheist roar of riot.
 Yonder, where parching Sirius set in drought,
 Balefully glares red Arson--there--and there.
 The Town is taken by its rats--ship rats
 And rats of the wharves. All civil charms
 And priestly spells which late held hearts in awe--
 Fear-bound, subjected to a better sway
 Than sway of self; these like a dream dissolve,
 And man rebounds whole aeons back in nature.
 Hail to the low dull rumble, dull and dead,
 And ponderous drag that shakes the wall.
 Wise Draco comes, deep in the midnight roll
 Of black artillery; he comes, though late;
 In code corroborating Calvin's creed
 And cynic tyrannies of honest kings;
 He comes, nor parlies; and the Town, redeemed,
 Gives thanks devout; nor, being thankful, heeds
 The grimy slur on the Republic's faith implied,
 Which holds that Man is naturally good,
 And--more--is Nature's Roman, never to be scourged.
 (BP, p. 89-90)

To represent the military forces that were brought in to quell the rioting draftees, Melville selected Draco, the stern Greek lawgiver, to stand for law and order. For although Melville lamented the necessity of repression, he also praised its benefits. McWilliams suggests that Melville even saw a civil war in reduced scale in the draft riots.¹⁴⁶ Certainly "The House-top" dispels the reasoning that Melville may have consistently seen the Union cause as good and the Confederate cause as evil. In this poem Melville delves into the deeper recesses of all men, noting the primitive evil quality surging forth as "man rebounds whole aeons back in nature." Melville claimed that the beliefs of

liberty on which the country was founded had to give way to a sterner creed of discipline to restrain man's other nature. This return to a Puritan philosophy probably challenged a chord in Melville's Calvinist heritage that always found itself at odds with any optimistic view of man's nature.

This rare example of blank verse in Melville's poetry exhibits remarkably violent vigor. The poet makes heavy use of alliteration and chooses adjectives full of irony. Draco of the brutal punishments is deemed wise. Cynical tyrants are called honest, for certainly they understood mob control.¹⁴⁷ The general lack of recognition that the military force which reestablished order was a "grimy slur on the Republic's faith" could only force Melville to remember that even Paul, a citizen of Rome, claimed the right not to be scourged.¹⁴⁸ Truly, the breakdown of law caused Melville to suspect that man is not naturally good; this principle on which the Constitution was based appeared false in his eyes.¹⁴⁹

The failure of law to retain control unleashes evil forces. William Shurr selects "The Apparition (A Retrospect)" as the core poem in the cycle of evil, giving a concise statement of Melville's philosophy. The image of a volcano sleeping for years before its eruption seems to correspond perfectly with Melville's view of America dominated by Transcendental optimism. Once the fire below is exposed,

it cannot be confined by law; it becomes the "permanent and controlling reality," Shurr states.¹⁵⁰

Convulsions came; and, where the field
 Long slept in pastoral green,
 A goblin-mountain was upheaved
 (Sure the scared sense was all deceived),
 Marl-glen and slag-ravine.

The unreserve 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?

(BP, pp. 140-41)

The Civil War had heaved over the pastoral promises of transcendental brotherly love, revealing the evil below the surface in man.

Another poem, "Magnanimity Baffled," is a verse parable hinting that reconciliation may not be a simple matter of good will and good works.¹⁵¹ The evil that has been unleashed will stain every effort to rebuild a loving relationship.

"Sharp words we had before the fight;
 But--now the fight is done--
 Look, here's my hand," said the Victor bold,
 "Take it--an honest one!
 What, holding back? I mean you well;
 Though worsted, you strove stoutly, man;
 Odds were great; I honor you;
 Man honors man.

"Still silent, friend? Can grudges be?
 Yet am I held a foe?--
 Turned to the wall, on his cot he lies--
 Never I'll leave him so!

Brave one! I here implore your hand;
 Dumb still? all fellowship fled?
 Nay then, I'll have this stubborn hand!"
 He snatched it--it was dead.

(BP, pp. 142-43)

Here defeat is represented as death. The dead cannot participate in reconciliation, no matter how sincere the other party. As Cohen points out, those who killed are murderers. Magnanimity is impossible in such a situation.¹⁵²

Melville dealt with various themes, but he finally returned to the prevailing ideas of opposition and reconciliation. Opposition and breakdowns in law were caused by evil, but restoration of the law should introduce reconciliation. As complex as his thought often was, Melville usually let hope glimmer through even in his vacillation. He seemed convinced of man's helpless doomed existence, yet he always hoped he was wrong. Whitman, on the other hand, was certain that man would survive the test of the Civil War and go on to achieve a true Eden in America. This basic disparity in outlook shaped the poetic themes of the two artists. Melville was ever more sure that the transcendental teachings of the final love and brotherhood of all men were false teachings unbacked by historical proof. Frequent allusions to classical examples of order characterized his poetry as he strove to make clear that in all time only law had been capable of reconciling mankind. Each poet portrayed a unified vision of the war's effects as he saw it. The symbols and images they chose to exemplify these themes were most important.

Chapter 5

SYMBOLISM AND IMAGERY

A poet must rely on imagery or symbolism to develop his themes. Melville and Whitman made use of these poetic elements in quite dissimilar fashion.

The element of distance provides the major reason for the vast differences between the poetry of Whitman and Melville.¹⁵⁴ Whitman's immediate contacts with just-wounded soldiers in the hospitals made his a poetry of spontaneous communication. Melville, who wrote in contemplative detachment, took time to develop a complex personal symbolism evolving from the metaphorical imagery that he envisioned while working through his feelings on the Civil War. Thus his poetry is weighted and unified with symbolism and imagery whereas Whitman's unrestrained free verse shows little symbolism but a bountiful delicatessen of images.

Whitman's imagery, constantly employing anticipation and surprise, creates accidental beauty in its very carelessness. Sometimes the apparent disconnectedness of images brought together to form a picture seems crude, but then the juxtaposition of these same materials begins to grow on the reader until he recognizes the artistic sensitivity that went into Whitman's selections. Basil

DeSelincourt observed that Whitman's language is images:

His conception of poetry, his poetic habit, demanded, on the one side, spontaneity; they demanded, on the other, universal simplicity and receptiveness. The forms of poetry are artificial. Language submits to discipline in order to assume theme, and disciplined language cannot express spontaneous feelings. The appearance of spontaneousness can only be obtained by an allowance for the requirements of form, by an imaginative effort so perfect that we are unaware it has been made. This involves a certain conversationalization of feelings to be expressed The tentative processes of growth escape . . . through the meshes of the measured line and stanza; what these give to us is the clear movement and outline which, when the growth is achieved, represent and announce its characteristic features. There is a sense, obviously, in which such handling was beyond Whitman's scope; there is a sense also in which it was not good enough to attract him. His nature was too crude for poetry; but it was also too sensitive; poetry was, in a sense, too crude for him.¹⁵⁴

Indeed, Whitman was attempting to transcend language by emancipating the mind from the bondage of symbols. He wanted to illustrate the universe with the idea that every sample was an index of the quality of the whole. So for a little while the drums of Drum Taps overwhelmed his voice. In the first poems he was "kindled, sometimes a little artificially by the thought of the struggle rather than by the facts of it."¹⁵⁵ Then he realized that the symbolic drum beats were too strident. As he observed the progress of the conflict and became immersed in his hospital work, his mood changed, as did his poetry. It became more personal, somber, reflective, yet dedicated.¹⁵⁶ The symbolism took a back chair, but the rich profusion of images in his poetry expressed his newly moderated vision of America in its days of test.

Much of Melville's poetry, too, reflects his philosophy about poetic expression. Lawrence Barrett explains:

His career is a long struggle to resolve intellect and feeling--the head and the heart, as he called them again and again. The struggle was fought out primarily between his own sense of symbol, which was valid, and his efforts to intellectualize his symbols, which led him to destructive ambiguities. Eventually, when the ambiguity had gone far enough, he learned that in probing into symbols he was thinking simultaneously as poet and philosopher, and that the two could be resolved only by a return to poetry and form.¹⁵⁷

So he began using a symbolism developed from comparisons that had highly personal meanings for him. This was made simpler by the fact that he had resolved to write only for himself; he no longer cared what his audience liked nor even whether he had an audience. This freedom allowed him to explore the conflicts he saw between his feelings and his intellectual assessments. In addition he played with the entire range of conventional verse forms, stretching them and molding them to fit his instinctive sense of style. He began to see that, for him, form gave resolution to his disassociation of sensibility. So by using a carefully worked out set of symbols and images, Melville created a work that took on a unity of structure. Hawthorne is much quoted in his assessment of Melville: "He can neither believe nor feel comfortable in unbelief. And he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other." In symbolic poetry he found a way to answer to the ambiguities that had troubled him for so long.¹⁵⁸

Melville and Whitman do not frequently utilize a common selection of images or symbols. However, parallels may be drawn among those that the poets have selected. Both use a mother figure to represent the Union. Whitman's "Mother of All" is found in his poem "Virginia, the West," while Melville's mother goddess "America" is the central figure of his poem by that title. Melville also makes use of the Iron Dome to symbolize the Union, although at various times the Dome signifies northern strength and established power, rather than the unified states.

Natural elements are incorporated into the works of both poets to achieve varying purposes. Melville uses storms in an early poem, "Misgivings" and toward the end of his collection in "The Coming Storm" to symbolize the tempestuous events of war. In the latter poem Melville makes clear that the destruction will not end with the ceasing of hostilities. More clouds are on the horizon.

Whitman does not draw meaning from such a dramatic symbol. Rather, he chooses to find significance in common, simple images. The flickering flame of a campfire and the quavering shadows of men thrown against a rock embankment cause him to speculate about the mysteries of life and death. Similarly, Melville reflects on these eternal questions in two poems, "Shiloh" and "Malvern Hill" which contain swallows and elm trees as representatives of the regenerative qualities of nature.

In his final poem, Whitman calls the soil "the average earth, the witness of war and peace," symbolizing the new opportunity for the country to rebuild. "Donelson" by Melville uses flowing water imagery to suggest the eventual washing away of the signs of war. These and other natural effects are used throughout the works of each poet to illustrate the war.

Melville was fascinated by aspects of modern warfare developed during the Civil War. The giant Parrott gun used to bombard Charleston took on a significance as threatening as the power of hoards of freed slaves. The new ironclad warships were also capable of more intense battle than history had seen heretofore. Yet their durability might also preclude normal attempts to escape. These objects became symbolic to Melville.

Whitman, on the other hand, concentrated on respect for humanity. He longed to absorb the Spirit of War that had poisoned men around him. He offered to replace the warring spirit with a kiss of reconciliation in "Spirit Whose Work Is Done," "Reconciliation," "The Wound Dresser," "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" and other poems. Since his theme is always union in love, his images reflect this desire to call forth the best in man.

Melville and Whitman share only one common symbol, yet between them a large selection of images are presented. The Civil War gave them four years of national tragedy to use as grist for the collections. It remained for them to

choose representative symbols and images to illustrate their widely differing views of the war.

Whitman's Poems

Their one common symbol is a very traditional symbol, the mother figure who represented the Union. Whitman's poem, "Virginia, The West," satirizes Virginia's secession from the democracy she helped to create. Represented as "the noble sire fallen on evil days," Virginia had brandished a knife toward the "Mother of All" when that state participated in the rebellion against the Union. The irony of Virginia's crime was that the state had produced Washington and numerous leaders from the past as well as the sons who were now pioneering across the entire continent. The state of Virginia seemed to "forever provide to defend" the Union, and even now the sons were hurrying back to fight for the North. In perplexed consternation the symbolic Mother asks, "Why strive against me, and why seek my life?" (LOG, p. 294). Whitman saw the value in using this traditional figure to symbolize the Union he loved.

Another Whitman poem noted for its strong image is "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame." The flickering flame invokes a solemn and slow procession of thoughts "of life and death, of home and the past and loved, and of those that are far away." The image of the "Fitful flame" recalls the often used simile of the Elizabethans who compared life to a

short-lived candle.¹⁵⁹ Here the flame elusively symbolizes the mysteries of life and death for the soldier. Whitman seems to have become more aware of his own separateness in this poem as his personal procession of thoughts trailed by while he sat "by the bivouac's fitful flame" (LOG, p. 301).

A companion piece to "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame" is "Bivouac on a Mountain Side." This compact vignette juxtaposes a transitory army halting to make camp with the eternal sky above. The brief fleeting lives of men are so inconsequential against the backdrop of enduring nature and the eternal stars.¹⁶⁰ At this particular moment in life's journey, the future may hold for some "a fertile valley spread, with barns and the orchards of summer." Behind them are the mountains, abrupt and broken, symbolically difficult challenges in a man's life. Clinging cedars, symbols of life, death and longevity, are "dingily seen" in the background. As fires are built in the valley, the men's shadows against the mountain loom "large-sized, flickering." Here Whitman may have been recalling MacBeth's "life is but a walking shadow." But even these expanded forms are insignificant when seen against eternity.¹⁶¹ Man's struggles and conflicts make so little difference when one contemplates "the sky, far, far out of reach, studded, breaking out, the eternal stars" (LOG, p. 300). Thus the shadows signify the elusive quality of life; the bivouac, the army, the Civil War, the earth, all become very small, very unimportant.

In a poem previously discussed, "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown" it might be worthwhile to note the comparison of the scene in the church-turned-hospital to a vision of hell. Deep shadows are "just lit by moving candles" with "one great pitchy torch" throwing "wild red flame and clouds of smoke." The images of blood on the youngster's face which is "white as a lily," the "surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood, the occasional agonizing cries," "the instruments catching the glint of the torches," and the resumption of a march in the darkness all evoke the quality of a trip to hell (LOG, p. 305). Even if Whitman did not have this in mind, the comparison certainly applies.

"Spirit Whose Work Is Done" is a poem addressed to the Spirit of War. This use of the apostrophe is effective for it personifies a very real psychological experience that pervaded the mentality of the men at war. Whitman deemed it an "electric spirit" that flitted "rousing the land with breath of flame." It was this spirit that had "beat and beat the drum," Whitman says, for he recognized that it had even influenced his poetry. But with the war over, the soldiers were returning home. However, Whitman still recognized the Spirit in their bristling, slanted bayonets.¹⁶² So he requested a kiss, a sacrificial kiss, from which he would absorb the Spirit into himself and from which in the future it would be loosed only by his poetic chants.

Touch my mouth ere you depart, press my lips close,
 Leave me your pulses of rage--bequeath them to me--
 fill me with currents convulsive,
 Let them scorch and blister out of my chants when
 you are gone,
 Let them identify you to the future in these songs.
 (LOG, p. 325)

This strange concept illuminates the self-sacrificing love Whitman felt for his country. The Spirit, although not addressed in other poems, was a very real image for Whitman because he had continually seen his own reactions to the war pulse in response to each turn in events.¹⁶³

In a different stylistic vein, the next poem, "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun," contains imagery rich and precise, illustrating Whitman's long-renowned talent for producing a collection of visual examples to document his point. The sun "with all his beams full-dazzling," "juicy autumnal fruit ripe and red from the orchard," "unmowed grass," "the trellis'd grape," a "garden of beautiful flowers . . . odorous at sunrise" populate the first stanza while the second exalts in the turbulence of the war-excited city streets. The contrast between country and city scenes is vivid:

O such for me! O an intense life, full to repletion
 and varied!
 The life of the theatre, bar-room, huge hotel, for me!
 The saloon of the steamer! the crowded excursion for
 me! the torchlight procession!
 The dense brigade bound for the war, with high piled
 military wagons following;
 People, endless, streaming, with strong voices,
 passions, pageants,
 Manhattan streets with their powerful throbs, with
 beating drums as now,

The endless and noisy chorus, the rustle and clank of
 muskets, (even the sight of the wounded,)
 Manhattan crowds, with their turbulent musical chorus!
 Manhattan faces and eyes forever for me.

(LOG, pp. 313-14)

Whitman comes to realize that he will always revel in the excitement of city life even though he appreciates the serenity of nature. This poem illustrates his forte: cataloguing a variety of specific images ending in a heroic chant of affirmation.

In an unusual move for Whitman, "Reconciliation," the title of the next poem, does not appear in the first line of the poem. Instead, he suspends the word "over all, beautiful as the sky" in a symbolic gesture expressing his relief at the reunification of the warring states. The word transcends the deaths that will ultimately be forgotten. The body of his enemy, he realizes, is no longer the enemy but "a man divine as myself." In kissing the body he acknowledges that this man's death was in part his own in that it provided a release from the turmoil of war. The word "reconciliation" is thus incarnated in the kiss placed on the white face in the coffin. These two images, the word and the kiss, become focal points in Whitman's mind as he strives to construct a poem that will clearly and simply express the depth of the concept of reconciliation.

The final poem of the collection, "To the Leaven'd Soil They Trod," eulogizes the soil, "the average earth" from which sprang these leaves of grass. Whitman again professed such profound relief that the war was over, that the

country was reconciled, and that the earth, which witnessed all, was now calling him to attest to his songs. He saw the Civil War as an averaging agent calling forth all the diverse cultures of the continent and unifying them in a struggle which had lasting implications. With the conflict resolved, he felt he could return to the soil, that precious earth spreading across the continent, and more importantly, from North to South once again. That land which men had fought and died over remained the land of promise, purified, unified, and averaged.

Thus Whitman's Drum Taps is concluded not with the beating of the drums, but with the warmth of the sun healing the regenerated earth. Whitman was quick to append his "Sequel" to Drum Taps upon the death of President Lincoln, but that section rightly was never included within Drum Taps proper. The beautiful hymns of the "Sequel" properly deal with Whitman's and the nation's grief for a great man. But they belong apart from the Civil War poems. For the primary images that Whitman chose for Drum Taps, the drums, the marching men, the hospital chores, the flickering flame, the kiss of brotherhood, and the average earth, all symbolized in his mind the forward progress toward the American Dream. Whitman's vision of a cleansed land united in brotherhood fulfilled the Transcendental philosophy that in America this promise was possible. Whitman never strayed from his purpose to remind his readers that even in the hell-like atmosphere of the church-turned-hospital in the dead of night a certain

camaraderie was present. A respect for all men from any part of the nation is constantly reiterated throughout the collection, whether Whitman was cataloguing the hodge-podge collection of men who responded to the drums, or was responding to the sanctity of the dead man who might have been Christ himself, or was glorying in the men streaming home to all sections of the country. This war must have seemed worth it all to the poet whose country was regenerated, growing, progressing, once again taking on the world.

Melville's Poems

Melville was always conscious of the irony implicit in war; he could not convince himself that cycles of regeneration could atone for political disaster or human brutality.¹⁶⁴ To present the irony that he saw, he developed a carefully worked out system of imagery, interweaving images in order to illustrate the symbolic importance of many aspects of the war.

One of the recurring symbols of Battle Pieces was the new iron dome being constructed for the Capitol. This dome replaced an old one made of wood and brick.¹⁶⁵ The symbol is introduced in "Conflict of Convictions" when Melville refers to "rust on the Iron Dome," a horrible thought for the brand new dome (BP, p. 39). Symbolically, of course, he was speaking of the corruption in the Capitol that had erupted in the Civil War. But the Iron Dome, to Melville's

mind, should have been strong, durable, untarnished, shining, an ideal structure symbolizing a country founded on an ideal. However, reality had taught him that such was never possible: rust eventually corrodes all things human.

The Iron Dome occurs again in "The Victor of Antietam," a poem about General John McClellan. This time the line reads, "You manned the wall, you propped the Dome" (BP, p. 77). Having once served as General-in-Chief of the Union Army, McClellan was replaced following the failure of a campaign. He was recalled to service and despite heavy losses, his forces stood at Antietam while Lee had to retire across the Potomac. For this return to leadership he was given credit for propping the Dome, but since he did not order his men to pursue Lee across the river, he was again relieved of command. So although he defended his government well, indeed he had brought success in a time when his government needed support ("propping"), still his efforts were not enough in the eyes of some. However, his soldiers long revered him. Melville could not avoid the irony implicit in this lack of appreciation.

"The Scout Toward Aldie" again mentions the Dome, this time in reference to its close proximity. Rebel raiders were ranging within thirty miles of Washington, taunting that huge symbol of command.

And yet from pine-tops one might ken
 The Capitol Dome--hazy--sublime--
 A vision breaking on a dream:
 So strange it was that Mosby's men
 Should dare to prowl where the Dome was
 seen.
 (BP, p. 164)

The final reference to the Dome is found in the penultimate poem, "Lee in the Capitol." Again from a distance the Dome, symbolic of Washington's government, looms over the situation:

The oaks ancestral all are low;
 No more from the porch his glance shall go
 Ranging the varied landscape o'er,
 Far as the looming Dome--no more.
 One look he gives, then turns aside,
 Solace he summons from his pride:
 "So be it! They await me now
 Who wrought this stinging overthrow;
 They wait me; not as on the day
 Of Pope's impelled retreat in disarray--
 By me impelled--when toward yon Dome
 The clouds of war came rolling home."
 The burst, the bitterness was spent,
 The heart-burst bitterly turbulent,
 And on he fared.

(BP, p. 188)

To a Southerner who all his life until the Civil War had looked to Washington as his Capitol, this large gleaming new structure must have seemed symbolic of the established structure of Government that the South had been unable to erect. And the Senators inside were hardened, impassive men like their Dome, unyielding to Southern sympathies. This use of the Dome, for Melville as well as for Lee, faces squarely the reality that the Union stands regardless of the threats it has recently faced. Whatever stance either man took, the Dome was to remain the symbol of his government.

Melville also tinkered with nature symbolism in Battle Pieces. He was impressed by the enduring quality of nature, yet, unlike Whitman, he could not accept that constant renewal could obliterate the shattering of lives and of idealism.

The poem "Shiloh," previously discussed, makes use of swallows circling the dreary, rain-sodden field during the furious battle that had taken place there. Where fighting circled the church, above the swallows circled and continued to circle even after the battle was over. Similarly, "Malvern Hill" uses elm trees to symbolize enduring nature. A stately home on Malvern Hill, shaded by a majestic grove of elms, is the serene setting for Lee's repeated attacks on McClellan's forces. Lee is forced to withdraw in the night, and Melville pictures the scene the next day:

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

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

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

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

(BP, pp. 75-6)

The image of "some with cartridge in their mouth" lying ready to reload guns, yet dead, vivifies man's willingness to taunt natural consequences. Other men have arms uplifted in an invocation to death, toward cypress glades which traditionally stood for death.¹⁶⁶ Yet a series of questions addressed to the elms lead to the answer that time and nature will prevail. Even in the midst of conflict, some aspects of life are enduring. Such an answer only served to increase the irony of Melville's horror at the price paid in human suffering during war.

The lengthy poem, "Donelson," is most interesting if the fort is viewed as symbolizing war. Fort Donelson was a southern stronghold on the Cumberland River in Tennessee. The battle and eventual victory for Grant was a turning point in the war and in the career of Grant. Covering a period from February 12-16, the poem is rendered in the form of dispatches from the front and the northern crowd's

reaction to those daily dispatches. Although the action of the poem describes the battle for one fort, taken in the larger view, all war may be symbolized by Donelson. The ice-glazed corpses of the winter battle were sacrifices to "Donelson." The earnest northerners watching the bulletin board tried to find something in their lot as harrowing as "Donelson." The fort is eulogized as "This winter fort, this stubborn fort, / This castle of the last resort, / This Donelson" (BP, p. 60). "Duels all over between man and man" refers not only to the fighting for Donelson, but war between men anywhere in the world. Echoes of fighting nearby become reverberations of war in general.

Most eloquent is the imagery associated with flowing water that Melville employs throughout this poem. The northerners viewing the bulletins are frequently "pelted by sleet," "washed by the storm," "watching the rain beads chasing each other down the wafered square" of the bulletin board. Similarly the Union troops who began the campaign in clear weather faced "ere long, chill rains." Some of the wounded were frozen in the night because their cries for help were drowned by the noise of artillery, and snow had drifted over them. "The blood-drops on the snow crust there / Like clover in the white weed show / Flushed fields of death." "A lancing sleet cut him who stared into the storm." Then in one picturesque section, Melville describes the entire infantry rolling out of the fort in counter attack:

Under cover of shot and shell
 Three columns of infantry rolled on,
 Vomited out of Donelson--
 Rolled down the slopes like rivers of hell,
 Surged at our line, and swelled and poured
 Like breaking surf. But unsubmerged
 Our men stood up, except where roared
 The enemy through one gap. We urged
 Our all of manhood to the stress,
 But still showed shattered in our desperateness.
 Back set the tide,
 But soon afresh rolled in;

(BP, p. 59)

Later, again and again referring to the rebels as "stormers," Melville continues to describe them as "flooding the field." But when Union troops strike back, now "Rolled the blue billows, tempest tossed." And finally the rebels "float" a white flag in surrender even as "The sleet winds blow."

Melville continues the water imagery as this news drips from the sodden paper on the bulletin board, mingling with tears of sorrow and relief for the civilians. But when the names of soldiers killed in the battle reach the watchers on yet another rain-soaked sheet, "The death list like a river flows and there the whelming waters meet." Melville concludes the poem in a final triumph of water imagery.

Ah God! may Time with happy haste
 Bring wail and triumph to a waste,
 And war be done;
 The battle flag-staff fall athwart
 The curs'd ravine, and wither; naught
 Be left of trench or gun;
 The bastion, let it ebb away,
 Washed with the river bed; and Day
 In vain seek Donelson.

(BP, p. 63)

The very symbol of war, Donelson, should be washed away into nothingness, just as the grief and exultation give way.

Only "Time" and nature can effect a type of nihilistic reconciliation, this poem contends.¹⁶⁷ So once again, Melville made the connection between nature and regenerative forces. But the duality can only be viewed through a veil of tears.

Melville, more than Whitman, noticed elements unique to the Civil War and utilized them in single poems devoted to interpreting symbolically their place in modern warfare. The coal black Parrott gun, used to bombard Charleston, is used as a symbol in only one poem, "The Swamp Angel," the name given the gun by Union soldiers. Melville identifies the gun with the Negro slave. The presence of the gun haunts the people of Charleston even as the problem of the slaves haunted them:

There is a coal-black Angel
 With a thick Afric lip,
 And he dwells (like the haunted and harried)
 In a swamp where the green frogs dip.
 But his face is against a City
 Which is over a bay of the sea,
 And he breathes with a breath that is blastment,
 And dooms by a far decree.

By night there is fear in the City,
 Through the darkness a star soareth on;
 There's a scream that screams up to the zenith,
 Then the poise of a meteor lone--
 Lighting far the pale fright of the faces,
 And downward the coming is seen;
 Then the rush, and the burst, and the havoc,
 And wails and shrieks between.

It comes like the thief in the gloaming;
 It comes, and none may foretell
 The place of the coming--the glaring;
 They live in a sleepless spell
 That wizens, and withers, and whitens;
 It ages the young, and the bloom
 Of the maiden is ashes of roses--
 The Swamp Angel broods in his gloom.

(BP, p. 104)

The church of St. Michael's, characterized by its venerable tower, was the historic and aristocratic church of the town.¹⁶⁸ Michael, always symbolized by the color white, has fled his own church and sided with his black counterpart, suggesting a reconciliation between black and white in the poem.¹⁶⁹

Swift is his messengers' going,
 But slowly he saps their halls,
 As if by delay deluding.
 They move from their crumbling walls
 Farther and farther away;
 But the Angel sends after and after,
 By night with the flame of his ray--
 By night with the voice of his screaming--
 Sends after them, stone by stone,
 And farther walls fall, farther portals,
 And weed follows weed through the Town.

Is this the proud City? the scorner
 Which never would yield the ground?
 Which mocked at the coal-black Angel?
 The cup of despair goes round.
 Vainly she calls upon Michael
 (The white man's seraph was he),
 For Michael has fled from his tower
 To the Angel over the sea.

Who weeps for the woeful City
 Let him weep for our guilty kind;
 Who joys at her wild despairing--
 Christ, the Forgiver, convert his mind.

(BP, pp. 105-6)

Melville stresses his conviction that the South must suffer for her guilt in seceding from the Union over the issue of

slavery. And the great cannon comes to symbolize the retribution for the sin of slavery. Melville's weaving the thoughts of the cannon, the long-enslaved African, and the doom ordained by God in "The Swamp Angel" is not reserved only for the South, however, for Melville encompasses all in the phrase, "our guilty kind."¹⁷⁰

Another poem in which Melville employs one-time-only imagery is "In the Turret," well-known for its specific imagery of a diving bell. Lieutenant Worden, commander of the Union iron-clad ship, the Monitor, must have pondered his assignment as he endured ironclad battle "sealed as in a diving bell." These new ships greatly impressed Melville, the seaman, for he admired men who dived.¹⁷¹ And Worden, while sustaining severe eye injuries, dutifully endured battle in the ironclad without recorded misgivings. Melville compared such an experience to being trapped in a "welded tomb," perhaps to drown in "liquid gloom." Clearly, Melville and others doubted the ability of the heavy armored ships to succeed in battle, seeing them as clumsy and unsafe. Yet he felt impelled to stress the sense of duty Worden felt by emphasizing it both at the beginning and end of the poem.¹⁷² He also compared the ship itself to the giant Og, from the Bible, who escaped the flood by climbing on top of the Ark but was killed by Moses later when he became entangled with a mountain he was trying to throw at the Israelites.¹⁷³ The huge ship might similarly be self-destructive, taking the crew along with it, Melville

suspected. The specific image of the diving bell in "In the Turret" is so descriptive that the reader empathizes the claustrophobic entrapment in an ironclad vessel.

Melville, in experimenting with a different genre, incorporated the quest narrative "A Scout Toward Aldie" among his Battle Pieces. This ballad explores the terror lurking everywhere as a Union scouting party searched for the malicious Mosby (ironically, Moby with an "s"), leader of a southern band notorious for their ambush of Union troops. Mosby is even described in terms similar to those used for Moby Dick: "As glides in seas the shark / Rides Mosby through green dark" (BP, p. 163). The images throughout the ballad are stock ballad characteristics--land of enchantment, haunted houses, spells, charms, invisible evil persons. All of this was designed to evoke the terror in the reader that scouting parties often felt. This work is different, too, in that Melville was not rehashing The Rebellion Record for his material; instead he was relying on personal experience, as he had participated in a scouting expedition through Mosby country, and he remembered events told him by soldiers he had met.

The tenth stanza of this lengthy work describes the wounded remnants of previous scouting bands viewing the departure of the latest group.

By the hospital-tent the cripples stand--
 Bandage, and crutch, and cane, and sling,
 And palely eye the brave array;
 The froth of the cup is gone for them

(Caw! caw! the crows through the blueness wing)
 Yet these were late as bold, as gay;
 But Mosby--a clip, and grass is hay.

(BP, p. 165)

The sequence of the second line parades the horrors of war before the eye until the third line drags forth the romantic image of the "brave array." The fifth line emphasizes a macabre humor by rhyming "sling" and "wing" for certainly Melville was employing a double entendre for the latter suggesting the verb form meaning "to wound."¹⁷⁴ And the crows may be likened to Mosby with their sudden deadly raids on their prey. Stein suggests that the repetition of "caw" echoes a distant hah hah from the voice of trailing "blueness," the heavens, or perhaps God himself.¹⁷⁵ The final couplet then crystallizes the irony of the situation with the bizarre analogy of grass and hay. For Mosby, retribution was that simple; scouting parties were easily mowed down.

Following a mysterious meeting with a veiled southern lady and her Negro driver, the party is ambushed. Soldiers find a wig the same color as the driver's "yellow wool-like tow" and realize they are tricked. Of course, the patriotic young bridegroom colonel is killed, and the tattered fragments of this scouting party are led home by the world-weary, war-weary major.

The Hospital Steward who had begun the scout in high spirits ("He teased his neighbors of touchy mood / Into plungings he pricked his steed") returns sobered and grim:

The Hospital Steward--even he--
 Who on the sleeper kept his glance,
 Was changed; late bright-black beard and eye
 Looked now hearse-black; his heavy heart,
 Like the fagged mare, no more could dance;
 His grape was now a raisin dry:
 'Tis Mosby's homily--Man must die.

(BP, p. 184)

An ironic diagrammatic balance is achieved in the contrast between the cripples of the hospital tent and the dreary return of men newly stamped by Mosby.¹⁷⁶ "The Scout Toward Aldie" then becomes one of Melville's finest suspense stories containing unforgettable images of the danger of a scouting party. A most poignant image describes death's unheeding prodigality: "out jets the flame / Men fall from their saddles like plums from trees" (BP, p. 181). The economics of life and death is Melville's overriding concern in this poem.

"The Coming Storm," although one of the first poems written for this collection, was inspired by a picture of the same name by S. R. Gifford and shown in the National Academy Exhibition of 1865. Melville viewed it shortly after Lincoln's assassination and thus placed it near the end of Battle Pieces.¹⁷⁷ The simple contrast between calm and storm in the picture was extended symbolically to represent the Civil War which for Melville symbolized the eternal war between light and darkness and the inherent uncertainties of human experience.¹⁷⁸

All feeling hearts must feel for him
 Who felt this picture. Presage dim--
 Dim inklings from the shadowy sphere
 Fixed him and fascinated here.

A demon-cloud like the mountain one
 Burst on a spirit as mild
 As this urned lake, the home of shades.
 But Shakespeare's pensive child

Never the lines had lightly scanned,
 Steeped in fable, steeped in fate;
 The Hamlet in his heart was 'ware,
 Such hearts can antedate.

No utter surprise can come to him
 Who reaches Shakespeare's core;
 That which we seek and shun is there--
 Man's final lore.

(BP, pp. 131-32)

The owner of the painting was Edwin Booth, noted Shakespearean actor and brother to assassin John Wilkes Booth. Melville must have been startled in his observation of this fact when he viewed the exhibition shortly after Lincoln's death. But the poem serves two functions in the collection. It is a commentary on Lincoln's death, following "The Martyr," Melville's choric dirge, yet it also harks back to "Misgivings," an initial poem featuring a violent storm. Thus it acts as a framing poem, commenting on the insights and experiences which are subjects of those poems between the two.

Edwin Booth was the subject who was first "fixed" and "fascinated" by the picture. The three uses of forms of the word "feel," a favorite type of repetition for Melville, stress his similar reaction to the prophetic picture. For the demon cloud did indeed burst upon the country in the

form of war and also on the actor who retired after the assassination in fear of unfavorable public reaction.¹⁷⁹ Booth, just as Hamlet, seemed doomed by a fate he could not control. But who could better recognize the value of tragedy than this esteemed performer?¹⁸⁰ And Melville, who observed the tragedy in human existence, saw the greater sorrow of a war "which we seek and shun." Thus, "The Coming Storm" stands symbolically as a statement of despair at the suffering and tragedy men inflict on each other.

"America" concludes the main section of Battle Pieces and reviews the major themes of the collection, ordering them into a progression which reveals the meaning of the Civil War. The allegorical mother goddess, America, like Whitman's "Mother of All," represents the united country in a vision in four tableaux.

I

Where the wings of a sunny Dome expand
 I saw a Banner in gladsome air--
 Starry, like Berenice's Hair--
 Afloat in broadened bravery there;
 With undulating long-drawn flow,
 As rolled Brazilian billows go
 Voluminously o'er the Line.
 The Land reposed in peace below;
 The children in their glee
 Were folded to the exulting heart
 Of young Maternity.

II

Later, and it streamed in fight
 When tempest mingled with the fray,
 And over the spear-point of the shaft
 I saw the ambiguous lightning play.
 Valor with Valor strove, and died:
 Fierce was Despair, and cruel was Pride;
 And the lorn Mother speechless stood,
 Pale at the fury of her brood.

III

Yet later, and the silk did wind
 Her fair cold form;
 Little availed the shining shroud,
 Though ruddy in hue, to cheer or warm.
 A watcher looked upon her low, and said--
 She sleeps, but sleeps, she is not dead.
 But in that sleep contortion showed
 The terror of the vision there--
 A silent vision unavowed,
 Revealing earth's foundation bare,
 And Gorgon in her hidden place.
 It was a thing of fear to see
 So foul a dream upon fair a face,
 And the dreamer lying in that starry shroud.

IV

But from the trance she sudden broke--
 The trance, or death into promoted life;
 At her feet a shivered yoke,
 And in her aspect turned to heaven
 No trace of passion or of strife--
 A clear calm look, It spake of pain,
 But such as purifies from stain--
 Sharp pangs that never come again--
 And triumph repressed by knowledge meet,
 Power dedicate, and hope grown wise,
 And youth matured for age's seat--
 Law on her brow and empire in her eyes.
 So she, with graver air and lifted flag;
 While the shadow, chased by light,
 Fled along the far-drawn height,
 And left her on the crag. (BP, pp. 145-47)

Stanza one depicts the pleasure of the mother goddess as she enjoys the innocent happiness of her children. The sunny Dome recalls the Iron Dome of the Capitol, but may be expanded in meaning to signify the heavens over our country. Her banner floats over the peaceful land where her children play. "Berenice's Hair" refers to the constellation named for an Egyptian queen who pledged her locks to Venus to assure the safe return of her husband from war.¹⁸¹ At this point in the poem war has not yet begun, so instead the

reference may be related to the "streaming beard" of John Brown which was compared to a meteor in "The Portent." An omen is implied although in the context of the first stanza it is very delicately drawn.

In the second stanza the banner becomes a battle flag. The "lone Mother . . . is pale at the fury of her brood" while the lightning ambiguously displays both sides defended by men capable of valor, despair, pride. One cannot distinguish who is rightfully carrying the banner.¹⁸²

The third stanza contains a dream within a dream. The banner becomes a shroud for her death sleep during which she has a vision of the horrors that lie at the "earth's foundation bare, / And Gorgon in her hidden place." William Shurr explains that the Gorgon is a precise image which for Melville expresses the central reality of the universe. The Gorgon has the power to become active and destroy anyone who gazes upon her. Thus, Shurr concludes, this final divinity is evil, not good, and knowledge of this causes madness.¹⁸³

However, in the final stanza America is able to break from her trance, matured by her experience and emboldened to face the future with calm assurance. Her resurrection has given her renewed trust in the Law as capable of restoring order to the land. Shurr feels that the poem breaks down in this stanza. How was she able to banish the vision? How did the vision function in reasserting peace and fertility? The "light" of the final lines does not have its source within the universe of the poem.¹⁸⁴

Yet Melville was not apparently dissatisfied with this poem. He gave it the position of primary importance in the collection, calling America's experience a "death into promoted life." His hope of resurrection for America seemingly defies his usual ironic attitude, yet both here and in his "Supplement" an optimistic impulse allows him to transcend his doubts and look to the future.

One final poem is necessary to assure the reader that Melville was never free of his vacillation. "Commemorative of a Naval Victory," a poem from the "Verses Descriptive and Memorial" section, glorifies the valor and history of a sailor-soldier following the war: "In social halls a favored guest" and "Repose is yours--your deed is known, / It musks the amber wine." Here one begins to suspect a subtle irony as the final stanza reveals the truth:

But seldom the laurel wreath is seen
 Unmixed with pensive pansies dark;
 There's a light and a shadow on every man
 Who at last 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.
 (BP, p. 160)

This man has had a revelation of the evil within himself causing the kind of self-division which set him apart from those who praise him.¹⁸⁵ This fine psychological insight recognizes a constant presence of evil fused with good. The shark, symbolizing evil, possesses a demonic energy that he "glides" with swift ease.¹⁸⁶ Melville saw that the chaos

within man was not and would not ever be obliterated. As Mumford put it:

Raw power, raw experience, were uppermost [in America]. White sharks swam everywhere; shark ate shark, and greedily battered upon the refuse of the sinking boat. No use to fight the white whale, if the boat that holds human culture breaks up, and the crew is killed, and only the sharks remain in the waters.¹⁸⁷

Indeed, Melville very carefully engineered this image. A period and a dash give a long pause before a sentence grammatically and logically detached from the rest of the poem brings the revelation. America could never be the New Eden as long as even one man knew that within himself at any time, "The shark / Glides white through the phosphorous sea."

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

Melville and Whitman are, then, the poets of the Civil War. Writing in the 1860's, they had the opportunity of witnessing the trial by fire of their country and the transcendental dream. As the focus of the dream of universal brotherhood and equality, America was threatened with the most treacherous of wars, a Civil War, rending one section of the country from another. Whether the scars from such an action could be mended or perhaps melded into a stronger union than before was the question before the poets.

Whitman's major strength was that he never lost sight of his vision for the country and his calling as the poetic mouthpiece for that vision. Every representational image upon which he focused--three blanketed forms lying outside the hospital tent in the early morning, a cavalry crossing a ford, a grieving mother leaning against a rough-hewn door jamb--served to unify and intensify the emotional response to his dream of universal brotherhood. His free verse writing style was singularly well suited to fulfilling this function, for he was unrestricted by form. Therefore, he was able to concentrate on fully developing the immediate

image, utilizing an expansive vocabulary and a delicate mastery of word order to achieve the desired purity of feeling. In Drum Taps compression, too, was a specific goal for Whitman. He felt he had removed all verbal superfluity and retained only that which was indispensable for meaning.¹⁸⁸ His aim always was to celebrate life, and in war he found he was still able to celebrate life even in death. Acquaintance with a vast new variety of persons and events gave him ever more reason to celebrate all life. Thus he became the experienced idealist, the wound dresser who nursed the most horrible of wounds, and the believer who learned to reconcile mass conflict and malice with his vision of the American Dream.¹⁸⁹

Melville's achievement was more complex for he always felt compelled to analyze. He analyzed each image that he used, and then he analyzed the attitudes evoked by the image. He saw conflicts between men, between beliefs, and within himself, and he was driven to sort through his responses. As Santayana put it, Melville looked for "clear thought," so with great effort he sought "to achieve awareness of the distinctions and paradoxes of life and to resolve them."¹⁹⁰ He would take no refuge in sentiment or verbal chicanery to avoid the complicated context of the war. Although a northerner, Melville had to consider a southerner's view of the action, too. Irony is implicit in nearly every poem because of his constant seeking for absolutes when they were never to be found. Experience had

long since forced him to modify his beliefs, so irony runs rampant through his poetry. Frequently he chose a particular rhythm, or forced an odd rhyme, or chose a peculiar word or image simply to draw attention to the irony in a situation. So the Draft Riots, which ironically involved lynching of Negroes in the North, were quelled by "Wise Draco," known for imposing drastic solutions but in this poem championed for corroborating "Calvin's creed" as well as the "cynic tyrannies of honest kings."¹⁹¹ Similarly, the jogging refrain, "It was glorious glad marching, / That marching to the sea," takes on ever more significance with each stanza as the conquering troops wreak devastation across the swath of Southern landscape.

Following the war each man remained convinced that his perception of its resolution was correct. Whitman clung tenaciously to his conviction that mankind was capable of putting away hatred and living in universal love. Melville, too, counseled reconciliation in his carefully reasoned and restrained supplement to Battle Pieces:

Let us pray that the terrible historic tragedy of our time may not have been enacted without instructing our whole beloved country through terror and pity; and may fulfillment verify in the end those expectations which kindle the bards of Progress and Humanity.¹⁹²

Speaking for himself and the likes of Whitman and all the Reconstructionists, Melville expresses the wish for the country.

Most importantly, Lewis Mumford points out, Melville and Whitman were Americans, bereft of castes and classifi-

cations, allowed to sort themselves according to nature and ability. They stripped away labels, nicknames, party war cries, habits, conventions and acceptances in their search for the central self where "land and sea, day and night, sunlight and shadow and triumph and tragedy are in union, synthesized, an integrated whole. Each man embraced Life, and their vision inspires us."¹⁹³

NOTES

NOTES

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