

# Scenes of Uncertainty in Melville's *Battle-Pieces*

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After the chilly reception of his last major novel, *The Confidence-Man* and the failure to publish his volume of *Poems* in 1860, Melville probably acquiesced in the barrier between what his work had to offer and what the public was ready to receive. Yet the Civil War, the nation's most serious crisis since it came into being, compelled him once again to reestablish the bond of artistic communication. *Battle-Pieces*, Melville's only volume of poetry published with the intention of appealing to a national audience, would become an experimental attempt at articulating a collective experience, and, at the same time, reworking his own image of America within the ideational complexes of an increasingly pessimistic vision. The resulting work bears the mark of competing, although not wholly irreconcilable, commitments. The voice of the artist and thinker, whose disillusionment must have been further increased by the violence and irrationality of the Civil War, had to be brought into harmony with the public role of the poet speaking for the Union. Besides Whitman's *Drum-Taps*, although much less acclaimed, *Battle-Pieces* remains the only considerable body of Civil War poetry by a canonical author who experienced the war as a contemporary. The poems in the volume reveal, on one hand, the genuine patriotism of the New Englander, and, on the other, admiration for the heroes and compassion for the victims on both sides. The volume finally fell short of success, and Melville's artistic achievement is still largely considered as thwarted by what seems to be a certain clumsiness in craftsmanship: the unconventional stanzaic and rhyme patterns, the crooked syntax and an imagery frequently judged as clumsy and incongruous with the subject. However, the fact that *Battle-Pieces* succeeds Melville's major fiction seems to be considerable justification to revise assumptions of artistic inadequacy. As occasional poetry about the Civil War, appealing first of all to a contemporary public, it failed to satisfy expectations about a clear-cut poetic and political stance, and most probably struck a dissonant note in a political climate where political and ideological values expected justification, and those committed to these values needed reassurance. And, although Melville's poems reflected in a most original manner on the major issues and events of the conflict, the density of his dream-like

scenes and unfamiliar imagery elicited little enthusiasm in a public immediately affected by the experience of war. A contemporary reviewer for *The Atlantic Monthly* remarked an ambiguous and disturbing detachment from the factual in favor of the visionary, denouncing it as the poems' major flaw:

Mr. Melville's work possesses the negative virtues of originality in such degree that it not only reminds you of no poetry you have read, but of no life you have known. Is it possible. . . that there has really been a great war, with battles fought by men and bewailed by women? Or is it only that Mr. Melville's inner consciousness has been perturbed, and filled with the phantasms of enlistments, marches, fights in the air, parenthetical bulletin-boards, and tortured humanity shedding, not words and blood, but words alone? (quoted by Leyda 685)

The reviewer actually touched upon one of the distinctive features of Melville's method: the themes related to "enlistments, marches, fights" are integrated into the anatomic treatment of the Civil War. Besides, *Battle-Pieces* lends itself to an approach as philosophical poetry tackling the problems of transcendence, morality, the nature of knowledge and existence, all the while keeping a tight focus on the particular. The experimental character of Melville's poetry derives from a different source as Whitman's: it performs a radical shift in focus towards the relativity of perspective and language, and, as a result, to the duplicity of poetic expression.

Beginning with the mid-fifties, contiguous with the concern with knowledge, is the change of emphasis in Melville's thought and vision, aptly coined by Merlin Bowen as "the path of acceptance," or "armed neutrality" (243). His fiction after *Pierre*, especially *The Piazza Tales*, is pervaded by an awareness that the human condition is definitely cut off from the transcendental realm. The tales are laying bare man's perpetual inclination for myth-making and "the identity of illusion and ideal" (Sarbu 150), yet do not propose, through their plots and heroes, any kind of Ahab-like heroic defiance. Instead of staging the tragic fight against an inscrutable, perhaps malevolent transcendental force, Melville poses the problem of how readily man can accept the metaphysical barrenness of his condition, and how he can find his way in a labyrinthine world with the sole aid of his limited knowledge and insight. The poetry of *Battle-Pieces* attempts a quest for meaning in a world where communication with the God-realm has ceased.

The historical moment of the war brought to the surface questions of ideological and moral bearing that Melville reformulated as tragic paradoxes pointing further than the immediate actuality of the conflict. *Battle-Pieces*, refusing to see the world as a scene of opposing metaphysical absolutes, envisages the war as a maze of competing, yet incompatible

interests and values which nevertheless have a legitimacy of their own. The Civil War becomes the object of metaphysical exploration, and, simultaneously, an experimental search for an adequate poetic expression. The poems gain their singular effect, as R.W.B. Lewis remarked, from "a struggle with incompatible materials and intractable language suddenly releasing an insight and an idiom of remarkable poise and beauty" (52). The poems of *Battle-Pieces* reflect on the immediate actuality of the war, but take the exploration further: the war appears as a spectacle for the mind's eye. Seeing, in the abstract sense of understanding or foreseeing, belongs to the vatic role of the poet and the hero who prefigure devastation and destruction. In the opening poem of the volume, for the discerning mind of the poet the streaming beard of John Brown becomes an ominous sign, "[t]he meteor of the war" ("The Portent"). In "Misgivings," the marks and signs inscribed in nature become more than evident: "A child may read the moody brow / Of yon black mountain lone." The war hero is a "seer" who "foresaw his soldier-doom, / Yet willed the fight" ("Lyon"). Just as relevant are the visual images describing, metaphorically, enlightenment by suffering and death. "The March into Virginia" figures young boys who will perish "enlightened by the volleyed glare" in the first battle of Manassas. Light, even in its literal sense, always has an additional touch of the otherworldly. The evil peak that "shines in lurid light" in "Look-Out Mountain" tells of a beauty that is infernal. "Running the Batteries" evokes the effulgence of the burning boats and the city in flames as mystical and deceptive: "The fair, false, Circe light of cruel War".

Melville's imagery related to the intermediary state between light and darkness delineates a world of blurred contours, limited discernment and epistemological uncertainty. Opacity envelopes the world which, in Melville's vision, not only lacks, but excludes certainty in all areas of social and historical existence. Historical distance blurs the contrasts which momentarily define and determine the opposing parties. The powerful visual imagery is evocative of the supernatural in "Battle of Stone River, Tennessee," suggesting a parallel between The War of the Roses and the American Civil War:

Even now, involved in forest shade  
A Druid-dream the strife appears,  
The fray of yesterday assumes  
The haziness of years. (54)

In "Running the Batteries" poor visibility serves a practical end as part of General Grant's intricate scheme to approach by water the well-sheltered Confederate fort at Vicksburgh [1]:

A moonless night—a friendly one;  
A haze dimmed the shadowy shore  
As the first lampless boat slid on. (56)

The sense of confusion emerges most powerfully in "The Armies of the Wilderness" [2], where the dynamics of the war is perceived in the pattern of the fatal entanglement between Ahab and the White Whale, but enveloped in a spectral atmosphere:

What husky huzzahs in the hazy groves—  
 What flying encounters fell;  
 Pursuer and pursued like ghosts disappear  
 In gloomed shade—their end who shall tell? (74)

Dwelling on the uncertainty of all knowledge and the impenetrability of the world of phenomena has a long history in Melville's fiction. It found expression in the terrible hieroglyphic inscrutability of Aleema in *Mardi*; in *Moby-Dick*, in the mystery surrounding the White Whale, and ultimately, in the object of the book's multilayered exploration, the whale. Ishmael, unable to decide upon the seemingly simple fact whether the spout is vapor or plain air, takes the issue a step further, questioning the determinacy of all matters: "My dear sir, in this world it is not easy to settle these plain things. I have ever found your plain things the knottiest of all" (373). Like the "twisted tattooing" on Queequeg's body, the universe is a riddle, the key to which is, by now, entirely lost (480-81). In his letter to Hawthorne, dated April 1851, Melville, deeply immersed in the writing of *Moby-Dick*, half-humorously sets an epistemological limit to the Godhead itself: "We incline to think that God cannot explain His own secrets, and He would like a little information upon certain points Himself. We mortals astonish Him as much as He us" (*Correspondence* 186). In *The Piazza Tales*, Melville frequently returns to exposing the limitedness of perception and understanding, as well as man's inclination to indulge in illusions stemming from the inability either to discern or to accept reality. The hero-narrator of "The Piazza" touches upon the nature of illusion as consolation and escape. The lawyer in "Bartleby" displays an unwillingness to penetrate the mystery surrounding the existence of another human being, refusing thus to decipher the mystery of Being itself. The oblique narrative of "Benito Cereno" exposes the ideological narrowness blinding Amasa Delano to the reality behind the seemingly unproblematic surface-level of appearances.

Some of the most important poems in *Battle-Pieces* are analytic incursions into the matter of deception and self-deception. The attitudes dramatized in the dialogically structured "The Conflict of Convictions" alternate the willingness to accept the complexity of the world (even if it implies the acknowledgment of its mysterious malignity), with the inclination to engage in optimistic myth-making about reality. In the paradigmatic contrast between innocence and experience, innocence must inevitably end in victimization, while the wisdom of experience is acquired at the price of shedding all illusions about the real nature of the world and man. Whereas *Moby-Dick* was Melville's counter-argument of

the Romantic and Transcendentalist conception of the universe as benign, *Battle-Pieces* brings the refutation of the Enlightenment ideal of man's natural goodness. However, there is no trace in the poems of the tragic fight against "the subtle demonisms of life and thought" (*Moby-Dick* 184): there is no Ahab attempting to strike through the mask. The universe of *Battle-Pieces* includes, on one hand, heroes made wise by experience and resigned in their wisdom, and victims whose innocence is only dissipated by the illumination of death. The fighters in this war are painfully deceived Amasa Delanos, "undeceived" by bullets.

Melville's Civil War poetry figures a universe pervaded by mystery and confusion which does not—as Romantic notions of nature sustain—reveal the divine, but rather hides the evil. And, since *Battle-Pieces* stages a world at war, the quality of uncanniness is projected on the foe. As a Blakean trace in Melville's thought, evil appears as complexity. "The Conflict of Convictions" shows Satan, and by implication, the Confederacy, to be "a disciplined captain gray in skill," while Raphael, representing the Union, is "a white enthusiast still" (8). The South is itself a complex mystery, the dark other, with the evil principle inherent in nature as its ally. Besides the pity and compassion shown towards the losers, there is a strong undercurrent of Melville's philosophy of evil attached to the South. In "Donelson," a long poem about the storming of the Confederate fort, nature takes from the beginning the shape of a mystical enemy:

*The ancient boughs that lace together  
 Along the stream, and hang far forth,  
 Strange with green mistletoe, betray  
 A dreamy contrast to the North.* (23, originally in italics)

"Donelson" shows the Union forces fighting hostile nature as well as their human foes. The winter forest, the snow, the dun, leaden sky are reminders of "the monumental white shroud" wrapping the "palsied universe" of *Moby-Dick* (195). The fight going on endlessly through alternating nights and days, to-and-fro motions of the front-line, back-and-forth firing and skirmishing, the picture of enemies sharing the same tree for a shelter lends the description an air of indeterminacy that by definition excludes clear discernment and distinction. The absence of color, except for the color of blood, reveals the barren reality of a world in which meanings are indecipherable, which is essentially indifferent, and, more than that, malignant. The scenery of "Donelson" displays, to refer again to *Moby-Dick*, the "colorless, all-color atheism from which we shrink" (195). The poem stages the war as a confused disarray of obsessive but senseless violence where the dead lie "heaped in horned perplexities" (25). The vision of war as unfathomable mystery is reinforced by Melville's artful handling of narrative obliqueness. The events of the battle are revealed indirectly, in the form of reports posted on the bulletin board of a small Northern town. The narrative of the poem performs

the same to-and-fro movement as the fight itself. Accounts of the unfolding battle alternate with the unfolding story of the people who receive its news. Significantly, the central concern of "Donelson" is the way the townspeople attempt a "reading" of the reports. The only possible way of assigning any sense to the chaotic events is by consciously distorting information in order to confirm belief in victory. The patriots gathered in the street silence the dissonant voice of a dissenter who dares to question their forced optimism:

'We'll beat in the end, sir,'  
Firmly said one in staid rebuke,  
A solid merchant, square and stout.  
    'And do you think it? That way tend, sir?'  
Asked the lean Copperhead, with a look  
Of splentic pity. 'Yes, I do.'  
His yellow death-head the croaker shook:  
'The country's ruined, that I know.'  
A shower of broken ice and snow,  
    I lieu of words, confuted him;  
They saw him hustled round the corner go,  
    And each bystander said—'Well suited him.' (27)

Finally, the will for creating the desired meaning gives way to the acknowledgment of its futility. The people of the town admit the powerlessness of reason when faced with the metaphysical complexity of war, and turn away from the bulletin board "Musing on right and wrong / And mysteries dimly sealed" (30). Despite its account of a Union victory, the poem avoids any note of triumph. "Donelson" ends with the metaphorical image of the death list as river, suggesting the inscrutable and elemental power of both water and pain: "The death-list like a river flows / Down the pale sheet, / And there the whelming waters meet" (36). In its final conclusion, the poem meets the general perspective of "The Armies of the Wilderness." The metaphysical dimension of war reaches beyond comprehension, and Melville's powerful poem confesses the impossibility of rendering the violent events by any means, even by the means of art:

None can narrate the strife in the pines,  
    A seal is on it—Sabaeen lore!  
Obscure as the wood, the entangled rhyme  
    But hints at the maze of war—  
Vivid glimpses or livid through peopled gloom,  
    And fires which creep and char—  
A riddle of death, of which the slain  
    Sole solvers are. (75)

In *Battle-Pieces* the natural world is more than the scene of the war: it lends its hidden meanings to the events which have sprung equally from historical necessity and from the elemental violence inherent in nature. The fact that one of Melville's central philosophical concerns emerges most powerfully in his narrative poems reinforces the link between his poetry and major fiction. Apart from "The Armies of the Wilderness" and "Donelson," his short story in verse, "The Scout toward Aldie" brings together several major themes of *Battle-Pieces* and *The Piazza Tales*. The poem, the longest in the collection, was directly inspired by Melville's visit to his cousin Henry Gansevoort [3] on the front in Vienna, Virginia. But just as important was the impact Major John S. Mosby had upon his imagination. Mosby's legendary person had all the requisites that made him eligible for figuring in Melvillean narrative. The dreaded Confederate leader of the Virginian guerrilla troops is the Moby Dick of *Battle-Pieces*, with the additional serendipity of the coincidental resemblance of their names. The figure of the mysterious Mosby is projected against a scenery reminiscent of the magical world of one of Melville's favorite readings, *The Faerie Queene* [4]: "The Scout" is Melville's "darke conceit." The poem recounts the story of a Union scout starting out on the adventurous errand of capturing the Confederate leader who is just as elusive and ubiquitous as the White Whale. The party is led by a young and inexperienced Colonel, accompanied by a subaltern, an experienced, middle-aged Major whose wise precaution serves as a balancing force beside the young commander's heedless enthusiasm. The scout is made complete by a priest, a surgeon and a handful of soldiers. Implied in the initially established pattern of the quest-journey, and growing more explicit as the story unfolds, is the inversion of the initial relations between pursuer and pursued. "The Scout" reworks the familiar theme of entanglement between Ahab and Moby Dick, Babo and Benito Cereno, Claggart and Billy Budd, and along with this, as Edmund Wilson remarks, "an ambivalent relation between them which mingles repulsion and attraction but which binds them inescapably together" (326). The Unionists' quest-journey through the territory controlled by Mosby's irregular troops of guerrillas, according to Melvillean logic, is certainly doomed to fail. The mystical forest does not yield its secrets, and the Confederate Major, endowed with the same inscrutable, malignant intelligence as the White Whale, keeps imposing his own meanings instead of being deciphered.

"Mosby-land," the becharmed forest of Virginia has the visionary quality that belongs to some of the most relevant sceneries in *Battle-Pieces*:

They lived as in the Eerie Land—  
 The fire-flies showed with fairy gleam;  
 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.

(135)

The guerrilla troops inhabit a space that Melville envisages as a self-sustaining dream-land. But neither does he supply the newly-built Capitol, visible from the Virginian forests, with more materiality: "a vision breaking on a dream." The Dome, symbol of order and political authority, cannot assert itself any more than the subversive foe haunting the neighboring wilderness. "The Scout toward Aldie" fashions a universe in which meanings encroach upon their referents. Similarly to key chapters tackling the issue of meaning in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, "The Doubloon" and "Enceladus," Melville's narrative poem discusses the potentiality of the natural object as signifier. In "The Scout," however, finding out the hidden significance of things has a more immediate existential implication. For those who read the signs, deciphering is the essential prerequisite of survival.

The forest setting of "The Scout" has the symbolic power of the ocean as it appears in Melville's fiction. Mosby himself assumes the form of one of its lurking dangers: "As glides in seas the shark, / Rides Mosby through green dark" (134). By its haziness, opal vapors and obscure shadows the forest is a close replica of the morning seascape introducing "Benito Cereno" [5], where the color of the sky and the sea is gray, the sea surface is "iike waved lead," prefiguring "[s]hadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come" (46). Both scenes involve birds, Melville's recurring symbolic motif with a developing meaning. Earlier, in *Moby-Dick* birds belonged to the gentle, feminine, transparent air (542). *Battle-Pieces* figures them in "Shiloh," in the image of the swallows skimming over the deserted battlefields, evoking a nature indifferent to human suffering. In *Benito Cereno* their element is air devoid of transparency: "Flights of troubled gray fowl, *kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed*, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms" (46, italics added). In "The Scout," ("Caw! caw! the crows through the blueness wing" 136), they inhabit an element that only masquerades in the color of innocence, and are ominous signs in a complex, fallen world, "A strange land, long past the prime, / Fit land for Mosby or for crime" (138).

The young Colonel's deliberation to break the spell, like Ahab's resolution to "strike through the mask," are overpowering his love for his young bride who is present in the camp to see him off. The bond that ties him to Mosby is evidently stronger. The fascination is also Melville's, who is once again exploring the limits of man's power to understand the mysteries inscribed in the phenomenal world. "The Scout toward Aldie," similarly to *Benito Cereno*, figures a mastermind—a kind of proto-artist—and readers with more or less skill for deciphering. The artfulness of Mosby comes near to the intricate dissimulations of Babo, the subtle plotter of the San Dominick. In either case the self-effacing narrator



whose “protocinematic eye . . . depicts visual surfaces rife with suggestion” (Wenke 197) creates an atmosphere of ominous suspense that baffles and disquiets the hero whose consciousness the narrative is focusing on. The poem’s early statement, “A scout toward Aldie broke the spell” (135) inspires less confidence in the success of the enterprise if read with an eye on *Benito Cereno*: Amasa Delano, “[t]rying to break one charm . . . was but becharmed anew” (74). The young Colonel’s attitude towards the world of subtleties and complexities matches Delano’s, whose nature is “undistrustful”—the double negation implied in the word that best describes him is Melville’s statement about the adequate epistemological position towards the deceptive world of appearances. The condition that *Benito Cereno* proposes as positive, natural [6], must be *distrustful*—an appropriate response to the challenge of a world of perplexing and misleading surfaces. Captain Delano and the young Colonel equally fall short of this recognition.

Those who have the capacity of seeing through the masks and masqueradings of phenomena are the experienced, or rather the stricken: Don Benito and the Major. Benito Cereno looked evil in the face. The Major, the experienced older man lived through the Seven Days’ Battle; the scar on his neck is “Kind Mosby’s Christmas gift” (146). He can evidently read the ominous signs of fallen nature, the becharmed forest. While the Colonel never gives up his cheer, the old major is often startled: “But what’s that—Mosby?” “No, a bird” (141). The Colonel is quick to provide the rational explanation, and his ordinary perception contradicts the Major’s intuitive understanding. For the young Colonel, natural objects represent nothing but themselves: a tree is a tree, and a bark is a bark. The experienced major knows that a single tree may incorporate the complexity of a forest:

A huge tree hydra-like in growth—  
Moon-tinged—with crook’d boughs rent or looped—  
Itself a haggard forest. ‘Come!’

The Colonel cried, ‘to talk you’re loath;  
D’ ye hear? I say he must be stopped,  
This Mosby—caged, and hair close cropped.’

‘Of course; but what’s that dangling there?’

‘Where?’ ‘From the tree—that gallows-bough’;

‘A bit of frayed bark, is it not?’

‘Ay—or a rope; did *we* hang last?—

Don’t like my neckerchief anyhow’;

He loosened it: ‘O ay, we’ll stop

This Mosby—but that vile jerk and drop!’ (141-42)

The Colonel stands perplexed, like Amasa Delano was, with “knot is his head, knot in hand” (76) when faced with a situation reaching well beyond his capacity of understanding. And yet neither hero is, however

gullible, devoid of inner complexity. Delano's consciousness is complicated by the ideology of liberalism and racism. The young Colonel, on one hand, is unable to detach himself from war ideology and rhetoric. On the other hand, there may be darker, unacknowledged psychological forces partaking in his attraction to Mosby. Edmund Wilson regards the "mutual fascination of each of the two camps with the other" as revelatory of "the intimate essence of a conflict which, though fratricidal, was also incestuous" (326-27). In the Colonel's attraction to Mosby there is a hint of the homoerotic, prefiguring the fatal and ambivalent attraction between Claggart and Billy Budd.

The drama staged by Mosby unfolds as more characters step on the scene. The scouts take prisoners, one of whom is seriously wounded, probably has some inward bruise. Despite the joint efforts of the surgeon and the priest to ease his suffering, "Mosby's poor man more pallid grew" (145). Finally, on the following morning the dying man is left behind. The scout also arrest a veiled lady and his humpback servant, "black in hue." They confiscate a letter from the lady, an invitation to a dance celebrating Mosby's latest victory, and the Colonel readily contrives a plan to take Mosby by surprise at the party. In a generous mood, he condescendingly befriends the "darkey:" "Pooh! pooh! his simple heart I see— / A faithful servant" (149), to which the humpback rubs his "yellowish wool" in helpless embarrassment. The Colonel's judgment later proves to be just as erroneous as when Delano likens negro slaves to Newfoundland dogs and appreciates them as "natural valets and hairdressers" (83). The irony in this masterly rounded-off scene of "The Scout" is directed against an unsophisticated mind's simplistic notion of naturalness: what is really manifested in the figure of the seemingly humpback, seemingly negro servant is Nature's irregularity, complexity and deceitfulness [7]. In *Benito Cereno* Babo turns out to have been the mastermind of the performance aboard the *San Dominick*. Likewise, in "The Scout" the lady and her "servant" have been enacting the scene in which the letter of invitation is part of Mosby's plan to ensnare the unsuspecting scouts. The Confederate guerrillas promptly carry out their plan to rout the small Unionist party, and the self-satisfied young Colonel is among the first to be killed. Upon hearing a familiar voice from among the attackers, the defeated Northerners also realize that the dying prisoner they had abandoned in the forest the day before was Mosby himself.

As the scouts are volleyed and scattered by Mosby's troops, Nature plays out its malignancy once again: "Maple and hemlock, beech and lime, / Are Mosby's confederates, share the crime" (156). The young Colonel dies without being illuminated by any kind of recognition. "[H]eedless in death," his entrapment and ignorance is final: "Careless of Mosby he lay—in a charm!" (157). The experience, however, affects those who stay alive, entering in the possession of the sad wisdom of the stricken: "All faces stamped with Mosby's stamp" (158). Sudden enlightenment about the mysteries of the created world, evidently, has its dan-

gers. *Moby-Dick's* Pip, who took a glimpse of "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it," was called mad (414). Benito Cereno, faced with the complexity of evil embodied, for him, in Babo, makes his silent exit from life. The small party of survivors in "The Scout" have deciphered an ultimate existential truth: "'Tis Mosby's homily—*Man must die*" (159, italics in the original). Although the recognition will leave an imprint on their consciousness for ever, it is relevant that the lesson they learned from the experience refers to being rather than knowing. The hermeneutics of distrust provides them with a certain degree of ontological awareness, but no epistemological certainty. Nature is more ready to yield the essential truth about man's finite condition than any kind of circumscribed knowledge about the *why* and *how* of existence.

One of the central concerns of Melville's major fiction since *Moby-Dick*, also abiding in his poetry, is whether there lies concealed, beneath the world of phenomena, any ultimate Truth that can be conceptualized, or the seeker is only facing uncertainty, "the haunting enigma of phenomenal surfaces—surfaces that suggest but cannot reveal a fixed or final essence" (Wenke 196). In figuring out his solutions, Melville gradually transgresses the Romantic paradigm, pre-empting twentieth-century developments in the conception of language, meaning and subjectivity. During the composition of *Moby-Dick*, when the influence of Carlyle and Emerson [8] was still fresh in Melville's mind, the answer was formulated in the dualistic terms of German and English nature philosophy. Ahab's quarter-deck speech qualifying "[a]ll visible objects" as "pasteboard masks" echoes the Romantic view of nature as "clothes" or "the living garment of God," although its argument about an evil essence behind appearances is countering Carlyle and Emerson's implied reassurance about nature as the manifestation of the divine [9]. Ahab's resolute interpretive stance, however, is counterbalanced by the participant-narrator's more compliant intellectual attitude in deciphering hidden meanings. Ishmael's emphasis falls on the indeterminacy of whatever invisible transcendental content the visible object may have. He does not attempt to dispel the air of secrecy that surrounds all phenomena when, in "The Doubloon" chapter, he suggests that "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher" (430). *Pierre* probes further limits of the indefiniteness of meaning, asserting "the everlasting elusiveness of Truth," and conceiving Nature as "the mere supplier of that cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson, according to his own peculiar mind and mood" (342). Melville's argument about the relativity of meaning, however, does not yet disclaim its ultimate source, the God-realm; it rather implies that this source is hermetically isolated from the inquiring intellect. The transcendental realm is inscrutable, and the Voice of God is profound Silence (208).

Melville's last major novel, *The Confidence-Man* irrevocably discredits language as a means of conveying truth or providing any stability of

meaning. The man in gray, one of the Confidence Man's avatars, epitomizes the protean quality of language in an account of his invention, the Protean easy-chair, "so all over bejointed, behinged, bepadding, everyway so elastic, springy, and docile to the airiest touch, that in some one of its endlessly-changeable accommodations of back, seat, footboard, and arms, the most restless body, the body most racked, nay, I had almost added the most tormented conscience must, somehow and somewhere, find rest" (38). The confidence-trickster's language, by its endless multifunctionality, instead of creating, conceals meaning, and, ultimately, identity and opens an endless possibility for word-play and acting. Nevertheless, even while celebrating play, instability and plasticity, Melville asserts the existence of a fundamental, extra-linguistic certainty, a "cold cave of truth" (67), which cannot be conceptualized. The tricksters who follow the Confidence Man's footsteps, Babo of *Benito Cereno* and Mosby of "The Scout toward Aldie" rely extensively on performance, producing a variety of misleading surfaces, further complicating the process of extracting essential knowledge about either the actual state of affairs, or the general condition of man.

The major poems of *Battle-Pieces*, instead of providing unquestioning eulogy of patriotism and heroism, explore man's limited capacity to penetrate the "cold cave of truth," and expose the illusory stability of his commitments. No more than a handful of heroic individuals—whose complexity of thought enables them to penetrate beyond appearances—arrive at intimations of truth about man's fallen condition and vulnerability. Melville's Civil War poetry reflects on a tragic conflict where "Armies like ghosts on hills had fought" (66), and the whole nation is groping in the darkness of a crisis that is not only historical, but also moral. Furthermore, its scenes of perplexities and uncertainties add up to Melville's ironic statement about man's futile attempt to extract meaning from the equivocal world of phenomena.

## Notes

- 1 The poem makes reference to Grant's operation against Vicksburgh, Tennessee. Impossible to approach by land and guarded by batteries on the Mississippi, the fort seemed practically impregnable. On 29 April 1863, under the command of Admiral Porter, troops and supplies were ferried from the opposite peninsula to the fort to begin the siege which brought the Union's first significant victory.
- 2 The Wilderness, a region in North-West Virginia, was the scene of successive battles between Generals Grant and Lee in 1863 and 1864. The name of the place must have strongly impressed Melville. The symbolic significance of the "wilderness" will emerge fully in *Clarel*.
- 3 Colonel Henry Gansevoort's letter to his father, April 1864: "Herman went on a Scout & then spent a day wt. me. He was well and seemed to enjoy it" (Leyda 667).
- 4 Melville acquired a new edition of *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser* on 9 April 1861 (Leyda 640; Sealts 112, # 483).
- 5 Synoptic treatment of "The Scout toward Aldie" and *Benito Cereno* is suggested by Edmund Wilson (*Patriotic Gore* 323). For parallel discussion of the novella and the poem see also John Seelye's *Melville: The Ironic Diagram* (134-36).
- 6 I am indebted to Mark Maslan for the idea that Delano's "undistrustfulness" seems a perverted state from what Melville proposes as the more natural attitude of "distrustfulness."
- 7 Melville probably found much creative potential in the character (mask) of the negro for staging social games of confidence and distrust: the negro cripple, the multiple abject, is also the confidence man's first avatar.
- 8 Melville's readings in Carlyle probably began in 1850 (Sealts 61-3); he first read Emerson in the summer of 1851 (Leyda 925; Sealts 67).
- 9 Aladár Sarbu argues that the passage engages in "the presentation, in pure Transcendentalist terms, of an epistemology and an ontology, each of which is a negation of Transcendentalist assumptions" (161).

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