Anthological Form of Unity: Herman Melville’s Battle-Pieces

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Introduction

In part because of Edmund Wilson’s negative judgment of it as “versified journalism” without literary merit (ix), American Civil War poetry has been largely ignored by scholars. Recently, however, the critical attention awarded to print capitalism has significantly altered the evaluation of miscellaneous war poems published in newspapers and periodicals. For instance, “Words for the Hour” (2005), a recent anthology of Civil War poetry edited by Christen Miller and Faith Barrett, places great emphasis on mass media forms that waged a literary war between the North and South, and includes poems by lesser-known as well as canonical poets. Critics have also begun to investigate Civil War print culture. While Alice Fahs examines the role played by anonymous and popular poetry in instilling and consolidating patriotic ideals during the war, Franny Nudelman, Mary Loeffleholz, and Jessica Roberts focus on war anthologies, analyzing how the accumulation of conventional poems has conditioned readers’ experiences of the war.

Particularly important to my study is Jessica Roberts, whose essay “A Poetic E Pluribus Unum” draws attention to anthologies of war verse, concomitant with contemporaneous politics and ideologies. Under the influence of Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Community (1983), she argues that the burgeoning popularity of anthologies, especially the massive compendium The Rebellion Record, contributed to producing and enacting “a kind of poetic national unification,” and points out that Melville’s Battle-Pieces is also evocative of the form and purpose of such an anthology (“A Poetic E Pluribus Unum” 186). Following her lead, this paper will demonstrate that the anthological form of Melville’s Battle-Pieces operated in the service of nationalist concerns. However, my argument radically differs from hers in terms of what exactly “poetic national unification” means. Where Roberts sees evidence of the homogeneity of the Northern Union, I see evidence of reconciliation after the war. As I will demonstrate, the form of Battle-Pieces—that is, the form of a chronological anthology—challenges the validity of the teleological understanding of the war that was so prevalent in historical accounts provided by Northerners. In its place, Melville offered a heterogeneous means of persuasion for sectional reconciliation.

1. Anthological Form of Unity

The most distinctive characteristic of Battle-Pieces is its formal multiplicity, a result of Melville’s extraordinarily eclectic methods of describing the war. Almost all the poems in the collection are written in different prosodies so as to give the impression that they were not composed by a single author. This impression is further fostered by the variety of poetic personas he employs. Whereas some poems uphold Northern wartime ideologies, others, such as “Stonewall Jackson (Ascribed to a Virginian)” and “The Frenzy in the Wake,” are narrated from a Southerner’s viewpoint. In addition to the variety of speakers, Melville incorporates various new forms of media, such as photographs and telegraphs in his poems. For instance, in “Donelson,” by presenting newspaper accounts as though they were live reports from several war correspondents, he examines the influence of newspaper accounts on the reading public, critically observing their often-erroneous nature. His use of these heterogeneous...
elements without imposing a particular view makes *Battle-Pieces* so distinct among popular contemporary war poetry.

To what end did Melville compose *Battle-Pieces* in the way that emphasized multiplicity? Critics investigating this heterogeneous quality of the collection tend to ascribe it to the totalizing war that prevents a governing point of view. For instance, Franny Nudelman argues that like modernists, Melville employs "shards of language," conveying the damage done by the war in its "emphatic materiality," and that *Battle-Pieces* communicates "the alien and incomprehensible nature of wartime suffering" (99). For Nudelman, multiplicity in the collection is understood as fragmentation: "the debris the war leaves behind" (102).

However, the formal variety in *Battle-Pieces* cannot be attributed only to the incommensurable scars caused by war. In the "Preface" of the collection, through an association with a romantic Aeolian harp, Melville explains its wayward quality in a more positive manner:

"With few exceptions, the Pieces in this volume originated in an impulse imparted by the fall of Richmond. They were composed without reference to collective arrangement, but, being brought together in review, naturally fall into the order assumed. . . . The aspects which he is not imposing any deliberate order on these multiple verses and memories. Yet, on the other hand, when viewed retrospectively ("being brought together in review"), without any pressure from an outside authority, they "naturally" (and spontaneously, as is suggested by Melville’s reference to Romantics through his mention of the Coleridgean harp) fall into the appropriate order. Therefore, the collection is to be read neither as multiples nor as an abstract unity; rather, according to Melville’s view, it takes a position that mediates between the two, namely, a condition where individuals constitute an organic whole.

In fact, *Battle-Pieces* was not a mere collection of miscellaneous lyrics. Melville clearly intended it to be a carefully designed whole, and in light of the publishing environment surrounding him, the publication of such a book appears to be a bold and enthusiastic endeavor. Lawrence Buell points out that the Civil War did not offer poets the opportunity to make money, and therefore poets were not eager to publish (124). According to Buell, no more than about twenty collections of poetry by a single author were published during the war and subsequent Reconstruction period (125-26). Of course, John Greenleaf Whittier’s *In War Time and Other Poems* (1864) and *National Lyrics* (1866) or James Russell Lowell’s *Bigelow Papers, Second Series* (1862) were extremely popular during wartime, and, at first glance, they seem to share formal characteristics with Melville’s *Battle-Pieces*. Nevertheless, despite any similarities they may have in terms of their formal experimentation, what makes these Fireside collections so different from Melville’s collection is that they contained many reprints of poems that had already been published in either magazines or newspapers before and during the war. Like them, Melville published five poems in *Harper’s Monthly* between February and July 1866, before publishing *Battle-Pieces* in August of the same year, but this does not necessarily mean that it is a collection of reprints. In fact, a memorandum written by the Harper’s cashier-bookkeeper Alfred Guernsey shows that when these poems were carried in the periodical, *Battle-Pieces* was already complete: “From Mr. Melville’s Volume, besides ‘The March to the Sea,’ settled for, have been used in the Magazine. / ‘The Cumberland’ / ‘Philip’ / ‘Chattanooga’ / ‘Gettysburg’ (to appear in the July NO)” (Melville, *Published Poems* 531). This indicates that rather than selling them piece by piece, Melville allowed publication of these poems while already under contract for publication of a "volume." Simply put, for Melville the collection came first, not a given poem. Although the poems were published separately for the sake of promotion, Melville did not consider each of them single and separate entities but inseparable parts of the volume.

Why did Melville insist on arranging the poems into the form of a single book? It is plausible that he ambitiously attempted to make a name for himself as a national bard with his debut work published by Harper
Brothers, rather than become a newspaper poet. At the same time, however, it is also possible that Melville was skeptical about lyrics as a unit of poetry. Extracting a single poem from a book implies that the poet treats it as an independent and separable entity, but Melville considered each lyric as something more than a self-sustaining poetic form expressing the poet’s private thoughts. In fact, even the most private and meditative lyrics in Battle-Pieces are mask lyrics whose expressed feelings cannot be attributed to Melville. By assuming authorial anonymity, he virtually took the role of editor. He collected a variety of feelings and incorporated them into a unified book that functions as a mock-anthology conveying the incommensurability of individual voices.

My point here is similar to that of Jessica Roberts, who foregrounds The Rebellion Record’s formative effect on Battle-Pieces. Nevertheless, my argument differs from hers—as Roberts accentuates, “The form of the anthology itself creates the illusion of homogeneity” (“A Poetic E Pluribus Unum” 174). She argues, “Just as the writers’ individual identities mattered far less than the fact of their multitude, the poems they wrote mattered far less as individual performances of patriotism than as constituent parts of a broader performance of national unity, which The Rebellion Record both generated and represented” (179). The call-to-arms poem, in particular, typifies the collective work of the Civil War poets in that it “syntactically evokes and subsumes individuals in the creation of a national voice” (180). By their use of first-and second-person pronouns and the imperative mood, the call-to-arms-poems offer an “adoptable patriotic subject position” to readers and transform them into “poetic soldiers” for the sake of the Union (190, 181). She further points out that, in poems such as “Sheridan at Creek,” “Lion,” and “Cumberland,” Melville “dramatically illustrates the stirring work of the conventions of the call-to-arms poems” (187). These poems enact the unification of individual ‘I’s’ and ‘you’s’ into a national ‘we,’” and thereby clarify “the complex and perhaps unexpected relationship between the grisly world of war and the poems that called men to it” (180, 191).

Although I also argue that “variety in unity” exists in Battle-Pieces, from my perspective, the unity that Melville sought to produce from these fragmentary poems could not be understood as the kind of homogeneity the call-to-arms poems presented. Roberts seems to think of Melville solely as a patriotic citizen believing in the righteousness of the Northern cause, without examining his volume’s “Preface” and “Supplement.” However, whether or not he supported the Northern cause during the war, the collection’s retrospective stance toward the war should be kept in mind. As quoted earlier, Melville states in the “Preface” that most of the poems “originated in an impulse imparted by the fall of Richmond” (3), for which reason the collection was primarily organized around a post-war perspective. In addition, he appended a political essay to the collection, in which his views concerning the war and Reconstruction were directly expressed. His main concern is whether Northerners would have feelings of “a less temperate and charitable cast” about the South (181). By appealing to the natural fraternal feelings between the South and the North, and by warning Northerners of the potentially worse consequences of the failure of a retaliatory Reconstruction, he attempted to urge Northern readers to do away with vengeful animosities and emphasized the importance of integrating the two sides into the larger national unit. Insofar as Melville did not yet consider the nation to be sufficiently consolidated, he claims, “events have not yet rounded themselves into completion” (181), even though the war ended with the abolition of slavery.

In fact, the partisan enthusiasm expressed in the call-to-arms poems is not always praised but more often downplayed by the author, for it might revive Northern readers’ antagonistic feelings toward the South. “The Swamp Angel” is a good example of a poem expressing his sympathies for the South. Frank Day points out that

2 Robert Milder, who also reads Battle-Pieces as Melville’s meditation on Reconstruction politics, argues that the “Supplement” should be taken as central to the poet’s project to create a national myth of regeneration. He argues that, to promise “spiritual redemption to the nation” (145), Melville arranges his poems in such a way that allows the reader to re-experience the war from beginning to end: “Where the supplement reasons with its audience on matters of policy, the poetry undertakes the subtler work of conceiving its readers to the prospect of a wide and magnanimous America reestablished on the bedrock of tragic vision” (175). This paper owes much to his insight, and yet, Melville’s retrospective viewpoint seems not to create a teleological history.

3 Melville’s inattention, if not indifference, to African Americans is clearly discernible in the collection, which was harshly criticized by scholars. See, for instance, Katcher.
it is highly possible that Melville was inspired by T. N. J.’s poem “Swamp Angel” published in The Rebellion Record (54). Having the same title as Melville’s, T. N. J.’s poem also introduces “the large Parrot gun used in bombarding Charleston from the marshes of James Island” widely known as the “Swamp Angel.” The poem begins, “Down in the land of rebel Dixie, / Near to the hot-bed of treason, / Five miles away from Charleston, / Amid the sands of James Island, / Swept by the tides of the ocean, / Is the Swamp Angel” (The Rebellion Record VIII, Poetry 3).

Although drawing on T. N. J.’s representation of the parrot gun, Melville’s poem is far from a mere imitation. While T. N. J.’s poem emphasizes the significance of the location of the gun (“Charleston”), associating it with Northerner’s derogatory aspersions on the South (“rebel Dixie” and “treason”), Melville renders his poem highly allegorical and cryptic, without using proper nouns indicative of the location: “There is a coal-black Angel / With a thick Afric lip, / And he dwells (like the hunted 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” (78). The identity of the “coal-black Angel” as the mouthpiece of the North in T. N. J.’s original is obscured and becomes a more nuanced and imaginative representation of an African American: it becomes that of a fugitive slave hiding in a swamp, as Carolyn Karcher acutely observes (208).

It soon becomes apparent, however, that Melville did not intend to foreground the slavery issue by personalizing the black angel; rather, he obscures the status of the black angel as the Northern avenger, and thereby transforms the antagonism between the North and South into a confrontation between African Americans and Southern whites. Instead of delivering the gun’s swift “messengers” to Northern readers as T. N. J. did, Melville shifts his attention from the gun to the sufferings of the Southern people in Charleston (simply called “they”) who “live in a sleepless spell / That wizens, and withers, and whitens” (78). Melville thus uses appropriated source material to reconsider and revise Northerners’ “triumphal closures” through the portrayal of an African American. In his postwar view, justification of military attacks and representation of alignment between African Americans and Northern whites should be reviewed as part of the effort to mollify the sectional tension and to “reestablish” the nation.

In addition to de-emphasizing the conflicts between North and South, Melville warns of the institutionalization of the war that presupposes the silence of the defeated. In the “Supplement” he notes, “Let it be held no reproach to any one that he pleads for reasonable considerations for our late enemies, now stricken down and unavoidably debarred, for the time, from speaking through authorized agencies for themselves” (184). With this consideration in mind, in “Lee in the Capital (April, 1866),” Melville undertakes a poetic venture to deliver a plea for leniency toward the South through the mouth of Lee. In the note about the poem, he justifies his “poetical liberty” to deviate from historical facts: “In the verse, a poetical liberty has been ventured. Lee is not only represented as responding to the invitation [by the senators to speak] but also as at last renouncing his cold reserve, doubtless the cloak to feelings more or less poignant” (180). By portraying his Lee as a spokesperson of the Southern people who have “no voice or proxy” (165), he seems to balance his viewpoint as a Northern poet.

Therefore, to some extent, Battle-Pieces shares with The Rebellion Record its editorial policy with regard to the inclusion of Southern voices. The inaugural issue’s editorial declared that it would provide “in a digested and systematic shape, a comprehensive history of this struggle and reserved space for a section ‘Songs of the Rebels’ to introduce poems composed by Southerners (The Rebellion Record 1 iii).” Ezra Greenspan states that, without betraying its comprehensiveness and ostensible impartiality, The Rebellion Record’s editor, George Putnam built his reputation by fending off both foreign and domestic ideological pressures: “Although he unquestionably took it as a commercial venture and kept it only as long as it remained commercially attractive, Putnam also saw The Rebellion Record as an effective means of promoting the cause of the Union both domestically and internationally” (412). Putnam felt distributing the Southern cause to be a “civilian duty” and a “decade-long mission” to redress European criticisms of America.

Not surprisingly, Putnam’s principle of “entire impartiality” is not without question. Beginning with the term

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4 Paul Dawling also makes a similar point: “Lee receives the honor of becoming the poet’s spokesman” (337).
rebellion," employed in the title, The Rebellion Record's partisan interests gradually become clear. In fact, the "Songs of the Rebels" sections, which ostensibly advocate impartiality as their ideal, are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. While they are a manifestation of comprehensibility without discrimination, they also appear to be a means of demonstrating the force of the North over the South. In The Rebellion Record, a large number of Northerners' poems are juxtaposed with a relatively small number of songs of the "rebels." For instance, when the poetry section of the seventh volume included 100 poems but 24 songs of the "rebels," this relatively small sampling of Southern poems could be considered equivalent to the shortage in the South's military forces, making the tide of the war immediately obvious.

In contrast, as a retrospective narrative of the war, Battle-Pieces critically revisits and debunks the demarcation between North and South. Instead of composing clusters of poems according to which section each poem belongs, Melville juxtaposes companion pieces, placing them side by side. Northerners' praise of General Jackson's valor in "Stonewall Jackson" is juxtaposed with a Southerner's admiration of him in "Stonewall Jackson (ascribed to a Virginian)" (59-61); the portrayal of Sherman's conquest in "The March to the Sea" is juxtaposed with the infuriated perspective of a Southerner in "The Frenzy in the Wake" (94-98); and the fury Northerners expressed at Lincoln's death in "The Martyr" is accompanied by a Southerner's static view of it in "The Coming Storm" (104-06). This juxtapositional arrangement of contrasting poems emphasizes different views of single incidents, but it stops short of demonstrating the North as overpowering the South, just as it refuses to regard the Northerners' view of these events as more justified than that of the Southerners.

2. Battle-Pieces as a Chronicle

Through formal diversity, Battle-Pieces seeks to convey a complex tension between the need for a coherent national consciousness and for individualism. To argue that national unity requires diversity may sound paradoxical, but the diversity in Battle-Pieces is a form of resistance to the suppression of voices from South. As I will demonstrate, Melville's careful arrangement of poems as a chronicle of the war helps create a history that resists the victor's authoritative narrative and places the monolithic understanding of the nation's past under scrutiny.

From its inception, the war created a controversy among historians: should history be written contemporaneously or retrospectively? As Thomas Pressly demonstrates, even before the shock over the Union's defeat at Bull Run had subsided, the initial volumes of histories of the war were being published. Popular historians, most notably J. C. Abbott, famous for their "dramatic simplifications of history" written in a "sentimental moralizing tone," sought to make their own views synonymous with the historical memory in order to justify their partisanship (12). Of course, not all historians appreciated an attitude that regarded history as the accumulation of information to meet the public desire for news. Some, whom Pressly calls "trained historians in the modern sense of the word," such as George Bancroft and Frances Parkman, tended to avoid writing histories while the war was in progress, for fear that their opinions on its causes would be far too influenced by the heat of the conflict (12). By maintaining a cultivated distance, they aim to observe events "objectively" and, in doing so, find causal relationships between the events in question.

Melville's historiography in Battle-Pieces is anything but clear-cut: his attitude toward past events seems to be similar to those of both popular and professional historians. Whether or not he actually composed most of Battle-Pieces after the fall of Richmond, as he declares in the "Preface," the "Supplement" clearly represents his retrospective stance on the war and not his contemporaneous tracking of events through immediate emotional responses. In this sense, Melville's detached position, which enables a panoramic view of the course of the war, is close to that of a professional historian who maintains distance from variable wartime ideologies. Just as importantly, however, by drawing on newspapers and periodicals, which recorded immediate responses to battles, Melville participated in a literary environment that affected and was affected by popular historians. His use of The Rebellion Record thus enables his work to mediate between sympathetic immersion and impartial analysis.

The two contradictory impulses to historicize the war operating in Battle-Pieces might be better understood through Walter Benjamin's view of history as interruption of time, where the "Angel of History" is violently propelled toward the future by a storm, while he turns
his face toward "the pile of debris" of the past (392). By recognizing history as catastrophe, but not devoid of hope, Melville also reflects on the past by collecting newspaper accounts from *The Rebellion Record*, which had already lost its function as a 'news' source by that point and become "piles of debris."

As mentioned, Putnam attempted to make *The Rebellion Record* as comprehensible as possible. If one reads all the volumes thoroughly from cover to cover in chronological order, causes and effects may become discernible. Because of its bulk, however, the compendium may prevent such a reader from taking a linear approach, thus disrupting the reader's coherent understanding of the war as an entire sequence. Or, from the beginning, the reader may not seek causal explanations of the war in *The Rebellion Record*, which was originally bound weekly and monthly into massive volumes "for the sake of preservation" (Roberts, "Genealogies of Convention" 130). Instead of reading through a series that comprises 600 to 700 pages, the reader may instead seek out articles that accord to his or her own interests and freely extract the information.

My point here is to call attention to the element of randomness the chronological organization of poems entails. Melville's way of putting the dates of incidents in the subtitles of his poems seems arbitrary, but a close comparison of the battles referenced in *The Rebellion Record* demonstrates that, far from being "a mere loose collection in which there is but a rough chronological dimension," it is very accurate and precise in terms of the chronology of events (Cox 312). We might expect a chronological order to give shape and historical context to the collection, the form of which might otherwise appear too diverse and random. However, although it is precisely chronologically ordered, *Battle-Pieces* actually lacks any plot that could govern the succession of events by giving them a causal direction. It seems to overlook those core events generally considered important determinants of the war's course, such as Fort Sumter, Bull Run, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the death of President Lincoln. Newspapers and periodicals contained numerous accounts of these events that constituted the rise and fall of the war narrative, and eventually, after the war, these events came to occupy key positions in popular apocalyptic narrative. George Fredrickson argues that such an understanding of the Civil War—as a trial and tribulation to overcome—was widely shared among Northern intellectuals, as it gave them ideological support to reconstruct the nation after the "purification" of the war (80-82). In contrast, in Melville's *Battle-Pieces*, these key events are largely pushed into the background, while the author's antiwar sentiment is clearly discernible—from anxieties felt at the beginning of the war to grief over the dead.

As an example, the attack on Fort Sumter, which Walt Whitman in *Specimen Days* calls one of the two events that he was not able to forget, is only passingly mentioned in "Apathy and Enthusiasm (1860-61)," and none of the political and emotional unrest caused by the outbreak of the war are invoked: "And the young were all elation / Hearing Sumter's cannon roar. / And they thought how tame the Nation / In the age that went before" (12-13). The enthusiasm of the youth at the beginning of the war is memorably foregrounded, but, instead of giving any explanation or comment concerning why and how the war began, the poem suddenly takes on a Miltonic cast replete with biblical imagery: "And Michael seemed gigantical, / The Arch-fiend but a dwarf; / And at the towers of Erebus / Our stripings flung the scoff" (11). With the infusion of these biblical images, the poem ends in ahistorical abstraction, while the Civil War's specific historical necessity and the historical significance of this incident remain untouched.

Melville's technique of evading historical analysis of the war can also be discerned in "The March into Virginia," the subtitle of which is "Ending in the First Manassas." In it, the consequence of the battle, which shocked Northern intellectuals, is significantly downplayed, to the extent that the Northern army's historical debacle is not even mentioned. As the author's decision to refer to the battle setting as "Manassas" (not "Bull Run," as Northerners usually called it) indicates, the poem deliberately avoids reminding the Northern reader of the Union defeat. By expressing fury over the dead youth and mentioning the Second Manassas rather than the First at the end, the poem deflects the reader's atten-

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5 Recently, Cody Marrs has drawn on the image of the "Angel of History" to reevaluate Melville's discursive associations and his sense of history as eternal recurrence (94-95). Melville's associations can, in fact, be taken as acts of quotation that enable the interruption of a linear understanding of history and its opening in a new context.
tion from Northern defeat to the massive casualties suffered by both sides in the second battle ("Or shame survive, and like to adamant, / The three of Second Manassas share") (60; Prometheus Edition). Thus, by obscuring these historical battles, Melville seems to juxtapose the events without prioritizing one over another.

In a sense, Melville placed each poem in a chronological order, but did not give them chronological continuity. His treatment of events resembles that of annals or chronicles, in which events are isolated from their causality or historical significance. Hayden White sees stories and annals as polar opposites and situates chronicles in the middle: "While annals represent historical reality as if real events did not display the form of story, the chronicle represents it as if real events appeared to human consciousness in the form of unfinished stories" (9, italics in original). Annals and chronicles do not produce a coherent story because of "the absence of any consciousness of a social center" based on which historians construct and rank the significance of events (15). Just like annals, Melville's Battle-Pieces decentralizes its perspective by juxtaposing various perspectives through mask lyrics. It is also closer to chronicles, which typically fail to achieve "narrative closure." White notes, "It starts out to tell a

6 Interestingly, the Northwestern Newberry Edition has heavily emended the last line of the poem. The last lines read "Or shame survive, and, like to adamant, Thy after shock, Manassas, share" (15). This emendation is based on their examination of the Harvard Copy C of Battle-Pieces. According to the editors, after the publication of the collection, Melville underlined and then placed a line through the last two printed lines. When Melville began to feel dissatisfied with them is not known, but it is safe to say that, at least at the first publication of Battle-Pieces in 1866, he was concerned more about the two battles in Manassas than the shock of the first battle that he emphasized in his newly written lines.

The juxtaposed poems can be seen as generating spatial, or even visual, simultaneity. Edgar Dryden argues that Melville juxtaposes poems instead of creating a narrative: "Picture can remove poetry from its spatial sequence and suspend it in an eternal present. Like Pound and Eliot, Melville in Battle-Pieces seeks to apprehend past and present spatially, thereby transforming the historical imagination into a myth that represents particular actions and events as universal forms of repetition (67). My argument is close to Dryden's, but I read Melville's juxtaposition of events not as an act of myth-making but rather as means of resistance against the victor's narrative of the North.

story but breaks off in medias res, in the chronicler's own present; it leaves things unresolved, or rather, it leaves them unresolved in a story-like way" (9). In Battle-Pieces, the first section ends with "America," including four descriptive tableaux that depict a Columbia-like mother's grief and rebirth, which recapitulates the main stages of the war. Yet, even this climactic concluding poem does not offer the reader any catharsis, for the two subsequent sections of inscriptions and narrative poems restage the question of the memory of the war instead of allowing readers to retain a sense of ending. As Melville notes in the "Supplement," even though the apocalyptic story depicted in "America" is over, "events have not yet rounded themselves into completion" (181).

In narrating the past, the historian must choose events and put them into a sequence according to an organizing principle. As White notes, histories "do not consist only of factual statements (singular existential propositions) and arguments" but are continuously formulated and reconceived in ways that conform to particular story types, such as tragedy and comedy. White emphasizes the inevitability of the desire to find the "true story" within or behind the events that at first appear in "the chaotic form of 'historical records'" (8). The desire to emplot and control events comes from people's psychological need to comprehend their own experiences, which often appear so random and confusing that an individual cannot control them. Thus, fashioning a linear narrative serves as a means of reasserting the primacy of authorship and control.

As Martin Griffin observes, in postwar America, the comprehension and framing of the sequences of the war in story form was seen as necessary for the reconstruction of the nation. Griffin notes, it was the "era during which the dynamic of experience, recollection, and interpretation was moved from the context of individual experience recounted (personal memory) to the wider and more paradoxical field of collective memory" (14). Yet, perhaps it was not Melville but Walt Whitman who was most fully aware of the power of the story to connect people, taking on the task of restaging and replotting the memory of the war. For instance, "The Wound-Dresser" foregrounds how working through past experiences connects generations, and "The Centenarian's Story" also

8 See Miller for Whitman's revisions of Drum-Taps.
describes a process of generating an intimate community and establishing continuity between the past and present through networks of oral histories.

The contrast between Whitman and Melville might then be understood as the contrast between the narrative imagination and chronicle imagination. As poems like "Wound-Dresser" indicate, Whitman considered it his mission to hear soldiers’ stories and anchor individuals to the national story. It seems that for Whitman, telling individual tales was the only way to describe the "unwritten" and "incomprehensible" war. Like Whitman, Melville was keenly aware of the national crisis of memory and the impossibility of comprehending the entirety of the war, but, instead of creating a rather sentimental narrative by recreating a sequence of events, he arranged the events chronologically, leaving gaps between incidents. Melville’s refusal of narrative can also be taken as a refusal to moralize and mythologize the consequence of the war. Instead, as in chronicles, which become multilayered histories through references to newspapers, cross-referential events in Battle-Pieces contribute to producing, as it were, an "imperfect" history, which serves as an alternative to the coherent narrative of the victor of the war.

Conclusion

By publishing Battle-Pieces, Melville aimed to become a national bard who would help reshape the memory of his Northern readers. In Battle-Pieces, he neither emphasizes the appalling reality of the war in order to petrify the viewer, nor repeat a popular narrative of the war as a kind of apocalypse or redemption portrayed from the victor’s viewpoint. Instead of refashioning such narratives, he cast a Gorgon-like glance toward the past, a glance that turns chronological continuity of historical events into a spatial simultaneity of individual voices. The glance keeps the events from being subsumed into a master narrative, leaving them open for future interpretation.

Works Cited


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Synopsis of “Anthological Form of Unity: Herman Melville’s *Battle-Pieces*”

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By publishing his first collection of poetry, *Battle-Pieces*, immediately after the Civil War in 1866, Melville aimed to become a national bard who would help reshape the memory of his Northern readers. To do this, he collected ephemeral materials from a then-popular compendium called *The Rebellion Record*. Though previously underestimated, as recent critics have demonstrated, the *Record’s* influence on Melville was not limited to mere references to details of incidents; rather, significantly, the compendium, as an anthology of multiple poets and as a war chronicle, conditioned and affected his arrangement of the poetry collection. Both the variety of prosodies (like an anthology) and chronological arrangement of events (like a chronicle) in *Battle-Pieces* seem to have a structural affinity with the *Record*. In other words, Melville turned the chronological continuity of historical events into a spatial simultaneity of individual voices.

Significantly, Melville’s juxtapositional (and thus chronological) placement of many voices seems to have a political purpose expressed in the prose supplement of the collection, that is, sectional reconciliation. Though a Northerner himself, Melville avoided refashioning a popular redemptive narrative of the war from the victor’s viewpoint. Rather, through the poetic techniques of recomposing war history, he interrupted it from being subsumed into a master narrative. Without creating a war story with cause and effect, Melville leaves gaps between events open for the future, and in doing so, he challenges the authorized and monolithic understanding of history as told by the victors.