

Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the Conference on Melville and Whitman in Washington

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Photo courtesy of Judith Wright.

Were I fastidiously anxious for the symmetry of this conference, I would allow its closing notes to resound their long recall and refrain from commenting, but all literary scruples are overridden by John Bryant's gracious offer of a byline in *Leviathan*.

Because this was a conference on both Melville and Whitman, I am tempted to remember that Allen Ginsberg famously claimed in what he called a "lineage of gossip" that he had slept with Neal Cassady, who had slept with Gavin Arthur, who had slept with Edward Carpenter, who had slept with Walt Whitman. I cannot claim as intimate or extended a lineage to Melville, but I did study his life and works forty years ago with Sidney Kaplan, who was F. O. Matthiessen's student, and with Robert Ryan, who studied under Harrison Hayford, and thus I was exposed to both the political/ideological and the textual/genealogical strains in Melville studies and, through them, to the Melville revival that began in the 1920s. If not exactly a shock of recognition, this intellectual lineage creates at least a tingle.

The text that I focused on in those far-off days of the last century was *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, which was something of a neglected orphan, along with *Clarel*, in Melville's oeuvre among scholars and critics, who concentrated justifiably on the great prose masterpieces of *Moby-Dick*, *Benito Cereno*, and *Billy Budd*. Thanks to Kaplan I had become a student of American history as well as American literature, and *Battle-Pieces* offered an opportunity to explore both Melville and the Civil War. It helped that Kaplan had just published an annotated paperback edition of *Battle-Pieces* in 1972 with the University of Massachusetts Press, where I was working as an editor at the time. And when I came to study with Ryan, it helped a great deal that he had edited Melville's unpublished poetry and had developed an excellent ear for and command of Melville's often difficult verse. Those who read *Battle-Pieces* are often brought up short by Melville's apparently clanking rhymes and violated meters, which require us to read hard to figure out what he was up to. Bob Ryan taught me how to read *Battle-Pieces* as poetry, and Sid Kaplan taught me how to read the book as a historical document.

Imagine my delight, then, to come to a conference populated with young, smart, energetic scholars who were taking seriously the Melville of the Civil War poems and offering by rough count some 37 papers (out of roughly 125) dealing in whole or in part with aspects of *Battle-Pieces*. Indeed there were so many that I was not able to hear all of them. One wishes there were (and perhaps the Internet could offer via Dropbox) a limbo where scholarly papers still in process could be made available for study before they have atoned for their venial sins and ascended into the paradise of peer-reviewed publication: a sort of messy, incomplete conference proceedings that would fly under the radar of tenure and promotion committees. Because my notes are cryptic and incomplete and because I missed some of them, I shall refrain from mentioning by author's name or title the many excellent papers delivered on race, gender, philosophy, ethics, labor, nationalism, memory, sexuality, politics, poetics, and aesthetics. The quality seemed to me uniformly high, the scholarship deep, and the critical commentary sharp and focused.

I would, nonetheless, like to call attention to Evander Price's stimulating paper, "Foreshadowing a Disaster: A Coming Storm," which resonated with my long-term interest in wood-engravings, paintings, and the graphic arts in relation to individual poems in *Battle-Pieces*. Price treated Sanford Robinson Gifford's "A Coming Storm" (1863), one of the featured paintings in a major Smithsonian American Art Museum show I had recently seen on "The Civil War and American Art," which unfortunately had moved on to the Metropolitan Museum in New York by the time of our conference. Melville saw the painting, which was owned by the actor Edwin Booth, at the April 1865

National Academy of Design show in New York City, moving him to compose “The Coming Storm” as a meditation on the assassination of Lincoln by Booth’s brother, John Wilkes Booth. Price deftly wove a reading of the painting and the poem with an exploration of allusions to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, whose title role made Edwin Booth famous.

Faith Barrett’s “A ‘Conflict of Convictions’: Divided Allegiances in Melville’s and Dickinson’s War Poems” and Eliza Richards’s “Poetry at Sea: Journalism, Realism, and the Battle of Mobile Bay”—both excellent papers in their joint session “Poetry at War”—along with Elizabeth Renker’s stimulating, programmatic keynote address, “Melville and the Worlds of Civil War Poetry,” made evident the need to recover the texts and contexts of nineteenth-century American poetry. Here I would also include Timothy Sweet’s fine paper, “*Battle-Pieces* and Vernacular Poetics,” along with others. When my interest in Melville’s poetry crossed with another of my interests in print culture studies several years ago at the American Antiquarian Society, I was astonished by the broad and deep sea of verse in which Melville (along with Whitman and Dickinson) was swimming. Now I look forward with anticipation to further results of this project like Barrett’s *To Fight Aloud is Very Brave: American Poetry and the Civil War* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2012) and her anthology coedited with Cristanne Miller “*Words for the Hour*”: *A New Anthology of American Civil War Poetry* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2005). (Both of these titles were published after I retired from the Press, in case one suspects a conflict of interest if not convictions).

After years of trying to get it to sound right, I was pleased also to hear some excellent, nuanced readings of examples of Melville’s often difficult verse (and unfortunately to hear a few perfunctory readings that suggested indifference to form in favor of content, as if the two could be separated). The reading that stays in my mind as outstanding was Robert Madison’s performance of stanzas from “Lyon” for Tony McGowan’s paper “The College Colonel in Context” in a session on “Herman Melville’s Officer Corps.” Madison successfully negotiated the troublesome and insistent double rhyming of Lyon’s name in couplets ending each stanza and presented a fluently persuasive performance, leading me to wish that he had read the entire poem. We need more easily available performances of Melville’s poems by readers who have thought through the issues and practiced their responses. Nineteenth-century verse was meant to be read aloud as well as silently, and we have to try to hear the voice or voices behind the mask of the printed page. Perhaps YouTube or some other Internet file-sharing venue would serve this purpose.

Without dropping the E-bomb (*ekphrasis*—look it up; even the OED stumbles over it), I would like to single out the session chaired by Robert K. Wallace

titled “Contemporary Artists on Melville,” in which the usual notion of translation or transmutation of the essence of visual art into literary art was turned inside out by two contemporary visual artists, Matt Kish and Douglas Paisley, who engaged respectively with *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence Man*. Both artists were steeped in their Melville texts and both were articulate and enthusiastic in their inside narratives about the alchemy with which they transformed nineteenth-century words into twenty-first-century images. Kish related in detail the composition of his book, *Moby-Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page* (Tin House Books, 2011), for which he produced a picture a day for all 552 pages of the Signet Edition of *Moby-Dick* (edited by conference keynoter Elizabeth Renker). It was thrilling to see the words that we labor to explain with yet more words fluently explicated with sometimes fantastic, sometimes representational images. Paisley described his ongoing project to produce a painting related to the title of every chapter in *The Confidence Man*. He explained his almost kinetic process of sketching, painting, overpainting, removing paint, starting and stopping in order to get to an image that was adequate to his notion of the text, many involving hats, hands, and banknotes in various expressive configurations. My wife and I were fortunate to sit with Doug, who is a delightful conversationalist, at the banquet and learn more about his processes and his lifelong obsession with Melville. At that same banquet in the Federalist-style Arts Club of Washington, we heard Melville’s and Whitman’s texts in yet another transformation, this time into musical settings for some of their poems.

I found Ed Folsom’s keynote address, “That towering bulge of pure white’: Whitman, Melville, the Capitol Dome, and Black America,” fascinating with its numerous images of the unfinished Iron Dome that figures so strongly in Melville’s *Battle-Pieces*. It was nicely complemented by his colleague Kenneth Price’s later keynote, “Finding Freedom in Pieces: Walt Whitman in the Federal City.” The mention of Whitman and Melville in the same sentence reminded me of how much we wish they had met (or wish we had evidence that they met) either in Washington during the war or in Manhattan before. We can imagine that they at least saw one another in the streets and perhaps for a moment connected across a crowded way.

The final keynote address, John Bryant’s “How Billy Grew Black and Beautiful: Versions of Melville in the Digital Age,” was informed by his influential theory of the fluid text and employed the digital editorial and annotational tools he has helped develop for the Melville Electronic Library (MEL), for which he serves as Director. John showed how diplomatic description of the sequence of small alterations to the manuscript of *Billy Budd* can offer insight into Melville’s creative process and be an aid to interpretation and critical commentary. As always, for Melville and Melvilleans, the devil is in the details.

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