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Melville the Poet
A Study in the Civil War
Poetry of Herman Melville

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Abstract

The American Civil War (1861-1865) marked the initiation of Herman Melville, one of America's most potent and original novelists, into the realm of poetry. Melville's new creative phase was firmly established with the publication of his anthology *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* - the main focus of this study, which set the tone for Melville's subsequent career as a poet.

This essay attempts in particular to explore the following :

1. In most of the poems under analysis, Melville seems to have lived the turmoil of the Civil War, and artistically transformed it . His power to generalize is based on particular knowledge and fidelity to historical fact and detail .
2. The Civil war deepened Melville's sense of the widening gulf between history and the ideal . It seems to him that human idealism when unchecked, inevitably leads to disaster.
3. Melville's reactions towards the war concealed themselves within a rigid framework of an extremely subtle and complex imagery characteristic of Melville's emphatically paradoxical, dramatic, and tragic vision.
4. Melville's tragic vision reveals itself not only through antinomial imagery patterns, but also through stylistic and thematic contrasts which are further intensified by constant shifts in tone and diction. What merits mentioning is the fact that such shifts-which form Melville's most characteristic verbal mannerism-are most effective when they create ironic effects.
5. It is in the juxtaposition of contradictory voices and points of view, and in the variety of dramatic and ironic undertones in *Battle-Pieces* that Melville departs from the overriding subjectivity of nineteenth century poetry. Accordingly, he anticipates sensibilities which are to figure later in a great deal of twentieth century poetry.

ملخص

بقدم الحرب الأهلية الأمريكية (1861 - 1865) شهدت المسيرة الأدبية والفكرية للروائي الأمريكي الشهير، هرمان ميلفل، نقطة انعطاف هامة، وهي انتقاله إلى الشعر كمحطة أخيرة في رحلته الإبداعية والفنية، إذ كان ديوانه، قصائد عن الحرب وأهم معالمها، أول إنجاز شعري له والذي ساهم إسهاما كبيرا في بلورة شخصيته كشاعر وفي تحديد مسيرته الشعرية المستقبلية.

تسعى هذه المقالة بشكل أساسي لاستكشاف النقاط التالية:

- 1- أن ميلفل عاش الاضطراب المهائل الناجم عن الحرب بكل أبعاده ثم أعاد صياغته فنيا، كما تبين معظم القصائد التي هي قيد الدراسة في هذه المقالة. وبالتالي فإن مقدرة ميلفل على التعميم تقوم أساسا على إلمامه الكبير ومتابعته اللصيقة للحقائق والتفاصيل التاريخية التي أحاطت بالحرب.
- 2- عمقت الحرب الأهلية إحساس ميلفل بالحوة المتسعة بين التاريخ والمثل. وما بدا جليا الآن هو أن النزعات الإنسانية المثالية إذا ما تجاوزت حدود المعقول ستؤدي لا محالة إلى نتائج مأساوية.
- 3- استترت ردود فعل ميلفل إزاء الحرب في قالب جامد من الصور الذهنية المعقدة والمحكمة التنسيق التي كانت السمة الدائمة لنظرة ميلفل المأساوية، الدرامية، والظاهرة التناقض.
- 4- تظهر رؤية ميلفل المأساوية هذه جلية ليس من خلال نماذج متباينة من الصور الذهنية فحسب بل أيضا من خلال تناقضات فكرية وأسلوبية ترافقت مع تحولات مستمرة في الطابع العام ونحجر الألفاظ. وما يجدر ذكره في هذا السياق هو أن مثل هذه التحولات - التي ميزت أسلوب ميلفل الأكثر خصوصية - تغدو في أوج تأثيرها عندما تنجح في إثارة جو من السخرية اللاذعة.
- 5- انه بمقتضى هذا التباين في الأصوات والآراء، والتنوع في النغمات التهكمية والدرامية، نجح ميلفل في التحرر من النزعة الذاتية التي سيطرت على شعر القرن التاسع عشر ممهدا في الوقت ذاته لظهور حساسيات أدبية وفنية سادت فيها بعد في كثير من شعر القرن العشرين.

This essay attempts to explore the ambivalent and extremely complex texture of the imagery structure in Melville's *Battle- Pieces and Aspects of the War* which corresponds with Melville's tragic and dramatic vision which sees experience as a configuration of opposites, in which every event is contradicted or qualified by succeeding event. One of the critical terms available to describe such a configuration is the term "antinomial" rather than "dialectical", because thesis and antithesis often exist in Melville's antinomial patterns, but there is rarely anything that could be described as

a synthesis. Thus these poems extend that convulsively dualistic vision present in the earlier prose.

Thematically, Melville's war poems are manifestations of the universal dualism which is working at the heart of things; they express the universal conflicts of the forces of Good and Evil or what Robert Warren calls "the ironical dualities of existence." He identifies them as "will against necessity, action against ideas, youth against age, the bad doer against the good deed, the bad result against the good act, ignorance against fate". (210).

These dualities are profoundly and intricately established in one of the introductory poems in *Battle - Pieces*, "The March into Virginia", a poem which portrays poetically and philosophically the experience of those young soldiers who marched into their first battle and were killed. The poem starts with a broad philosophical proposition, reasoning about the paradoxical relationship between youth and war, about the complexity of man's fate, of his existence, and of his feelings:

- 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-
- 5 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
- 10 Stimulants to the power mature,
Preparatives fo Fate.

The second part of the poem is a demonstration of the previous proposition, as revealed in an interplay of the gaiety of the march, of the enchantment of romance, and of a consequent profound sense of horror:

- Who here forecasteth the event?
What heart but spurns at precedent
And warnings of the wise,
15 Contemned foreclosures of surprise?
The banners play the bugles call,
The air is blue and prodigal.
No berrying party, pleasure- wooed,
No picnic party in the May,
20 Ever went less loth than they
Into that leafy neighborhood.
In Bacchic glee they file toward Fate,
Moloch's uninitiate;
Expectancy, and glad surmise
25 Of Battle's unknown mysetries.
All they feel is this' tis glory,
A rapture sharp, though transitory,
Yet lasting in belauereled story.
So they gayly go to fight
30 Chatting left and laughing right.

The final part of the poem presents two opposing visions of death, one tragic and the other nihilistic. The latter is conclusive and final:

- 31 But some who this blithe mood present,
As on in lightsome files they fare,

Shall die experienced ere three days are spent-
Perish, enlightened of the vollied glare;
35 Or shame survive, and, like to adamant,
The throe of Second Manassas share.

The poem abounds with diverse registers: legal, chemical, metaphoric, literal, lyrical, and realistic. It opens formally with legal terminology "lets and bars" which appears again in lines 13 "precedent," and in line 15 "foreclosure." The word "let" is archaic; in law, it means "permission" and thus it is juxtaposed with "bars" which means "obstacles".

The first three lines suggest that if things are going to turn out well we do not need to be pessimistic, but if we know that they are not, then we do not need trust. Aptly, Melville continues applying legal terminology in the following lines:

Who here forecasteth the event?
What heart but spurns at precedent
And warnings of the wise,
Contemned foreclosures of surprise?
(lines 12-15)

Those lines have metaphors built on law, as in the words "foreclosure" and "precedent". In law, the word "foreclose" means "to deprive a mortgage of the right to redeem" (a mortgage or pledge). It also means "to shut out"; "bar, to prevent or hinder". The word "foreclosures" means "prior discoveries", but it also means "preventions". Compared with "precedent" (line 13) and with "lets and bars" (line 1), "foreclosure" suggests the contempt of the young for the pessimism of the old. The construction of lines 6-11 is compact and

complicated. "The turbid ardors and vain joys" (of youth) do not barrenly without consequences) abate (lessen, or end), but act as stimulants for mature action, and prepare fate (which is beyond will or knowledge).

The middle strophe (16-30) marks the shift from the abstract to the concrete, the actual visual details of the jolly march of the soldiers. The preparation for this change of register, starts with the lines 12-15 with their regular iambs running rapidly through couplet rhymes ("event- precedent", "wise-surprise") and enjambments. Particularly the first two lines from the middle strophe (lines 16-17) and the last two lines (29-30) with their brisk and light movement, reflect aptly the movement of the jolly march. The entire section focuses on the central theme of the poem, the ignorance of the young of the omnipresence of evil. Their ignorance is cast against the tragic awareness of the ironic voice, which is the voice of the elders, of the voice of the poet, foretelling the tragic mysteries in store, generating a sense of shock and terror. Thus the entire section is based on tonal contrasts, optimism versus pessimism, life versus death. Such ironic contrasts are basically evoked on the level of diction and by the use of a cluster of metaphors. For instance, the word "prodigal" is a key word which is suggestive of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-32) who receives enlightenment through experience, but Melville also must be aware that the prodigal son returns home. The phrase "prodigal air" evokes the notion of air as life- giving element. Also the word "prodigal" has a cluster of root meanings such as: "to waste," "to scatter," "to drive forth." There is a secret grim pun in the phrase "berrying party," which could thus be taken as "burging party." Then a succession of ominous signals follows. "The picnic party" is a march to the "leafy neighbourhood," which usually signifies cosiness and friendliness, but here it hides something

sinister of which the youngsters are not aware. In the midst of the "ritualistic" merriment of the march, through "Bacchic glee," the young soldiers march toward Fate.

The contrast between Bacchus and Moloch is startling here. Bacchus is the Roman god of fertility and wine - personification of the blessings of nature. In contrast, there is Moloch: in the Old Testament deity it is called the abomination of the Ammonites- Sun god, emphasizing the savage aspects of the sun's heat, who is the bringer of plague. His rites included human sacrifice, especially of first born infants, ordeals by fire, and self- mutilation. By extension his name is applied to cruel doctrines and evil practices. Thus the allusion to Moloch evokes a sense of resigned horror and associations with death; it suggests that the young soldiers are marching to a Moloch of "fire" and "noise" and "death". Tragic mysteries, and sinister implications continue to be evoked on the level of vocabulary, by the words "surmise" and "mysteries", which also involve death as the inevitable end. The line "The rapture sharp, though transitory" is a complex combination of vanity, phantasms of fame and glory, a dramatic sense of duty, a sense of adventure, hunger for experience and self- realization. The "rapture" ironically reverberates the idea in lines 8-11 in the first section. The word "rapture" is deliberately used here probably for the knowledge of its derivation from "raptus"- "raped", "seized", "carried away"- since it is followed in the same line by "transitory," from "transire"- to "cross over" (and so disappear). Bitterly the boys are entirely ignorant of the deeper prophetic meanings of those words uttered by their elders, the irony that the seemingly romantic journey to pleasure and glory turns out to be a journey to death.

This paradox was impressively expressed in this stanza by appropriately

using metaphors and words which invite sudden shifts of perspective, and thus create a sense of dislocation. Melville dislocates us particularly by emphasizing the abrupt transition from youth to death, by showing us how to see something we would miss in its ordinary context, and what he wants to see is the real truth about things. The last section of the poem (lines 31-36) does not surprise us with the announcement of the deaths of the young soldiers, since by this time, we must have become conditioned to expect the most tragic consequences to happen. But in rhythm, this section seems to be cast against the previous strophe which describes the jolly march. The opposing movement is set by the first line of this section, "But some who this blithe mood present," with its noticeable heavy succession of monosyllables, and with retarded and scarcely resolved accentuation. This establishes the slow slackening of the complex rhythm of the entire passage. However, for the sake of ironic contrast, interestingly the second line in this passage, "As on in lightsome files they fare" is set against the relaxed rhythm, carrying with it the swift tempo of the middle section, as referring to the gaiety of the march. The next lines become increasingly heavy and retarded, "an effect based primarily on a dramatic handling of forced pauses, vowel weighting, and unresolved accentuation." An instance of forced pauses is the transition from "vollyed" to "glare" in line 4 in the last section of the poem, which requires a slight pause. Also many nasals used in those lines enter into the effect with the prolongation.

The last stanza portrays the disenchantment of the young soldiers with death. In other words, ironically death grants experience and knowledge, which are the ultimate aims of life. The word "enlightened" has a double function; first it contrasts ironically with the "lightsome" manner of departure, and second

it gives reflection of the literal and physical lighting up of the field by the cannon- fire. This word can be taken in the Shakespearian sense of tragic action: spiritual, and in the poem physical as well, illumination which emerges at the moment of death.

In this context, the word "glare" is effectively and appropriately used; it is of mixed connotations; it gives benign and inimical implications: the blaze of knowledge is both deadly and enlightening. The youngsters are disillusioned by the "vollied glare". The survivors are disillusioned too; their lives are darkened by the shadow of shame. Enlightenment, which basically gives knowledge of truth and the facts of life, is needed here to help forge the "adamant"-an impenetrable legendary stone- and softens the burden of the "throee"- death.

But Melville's antinomial patterns reveal themselves best in *Battle - Pieces* through strikingly powerful elemental and natural imagery: of astronomy (stars, constellations, metecors, comets, eclipses), of meteorology (winds and storms, thunder and lightning, rainbows) and of geology and geography (earthquakes, cataracts, rivers, strands, the sea, and the primordial deeps).

This elemental imagery falls into two opposite patterns which determine the image structure of these poems. One is associated with Light-of day, spring, youth and life. The other is associated with Darkness - its images are night, winter, rain and snow, age and death. The opposing images act upon each other in an antinomial manner which is central to Melville's diction.

One of the opening poems which best illustrates the use of weather imagery in antinomial patterns in "Apathy and Enthusiasm." This poem consists of two opposing parts:

I

O the clammy cold November,
And the winter of 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 was lost,
Like the thunder-cracks of massy ice
In intensity of frost-
Bursting one upon another
Through the horror of the calm.

II

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 the springing of the grass,
They rebounded from dejection
After Easter came to pass.

The first part of the poem is a seasonally dramatic prelude to the second part. The poem starts with images of death and ominous events. Two key malignant symbols are appropriately adopted, the color "white" and the season of winter" both are emblematic of catastrophe and death. The winter fades away slowly preparing for false regeneration with the coming of Spring and Easter. The setting with its images of disaster is typical of Melville. It

particularly recalls the sinister setting at the beginning of Melville's celebrated short story entitled "Benito Cereno" where sudden sheer stasis and gray color seem to envelope all objects, creating a sense of disaster with the coming of an ominous ship, "The morning was one peculiar to the coast. Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roads of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mould". (168)

This elemental imagery becomes in other poems charged with more complex and profounder emotions. Melville's reaction to the war was veiled in very paradoxical natural imagery which conceals Melville's apprehension of the war; a radical ambiguous emotion of mingled horror and elatedness, some wild, frightful, but nevertheless splendid convulsion in the natural world; some sudden and shocking eruption, of primordial forces of destruction and recreation. "Misgivings" is an early example of Melville's ambiguous response as concealed in natural imagery:

**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 storms we feel:
The hemlock shakes in the rafter, the oak in the driving keel.

This reads as a political comment veiled in natural imagery. Melville's political visions here are meddled with sensationalist imagery. Society has to be shaken from its very roots, as "Misgivings" may implicitly suggest, a rebellion of some undefined sort must take place. In "Misgivings", the metaphor of the tempest is used for the expression of a kind of exhilarated dismay. Melville may be thrilled at the coming of the tempest, a devastating agent of Fate fumbled into motion, and here it stands for the Civil war, to put an end to a society which has completely stepped out of law and order, and thus has to break down. At the same time, Melville looks with horror at the havoc and destruction the tempest may cause.

More sinister storm imagery appears in "The Coming Storm," another poem which occurs later in the book and echoes "Misgivings". It introduces the second storm which anticipates the catastrophe of Lincoln's murder. Melville has taken the title and the theme from a picture by the well-known Robert Swain Gifford, a native of Massachusetts (1840-1905). The owner of this picture was Edwin Booth, the famous actor who had been playing Hamlet at the time of the death of Lincoln; and he is the brother of John Wilks Booth, the assassin of Lincoln. The poem reads:

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

Mystery of coincidence characterizes both poems. The landscape in Booth's painting is perceived in Melville's poem as an allegory, the idyllic Lake threatened by elemental blackness symbolizes the political murder of Lincoln-the innocent Lincoln is the lake, and the evil John Booth is the "demon- cloud."

Melville takes the simple contrast of calm and storm and extends its symbolic application to represent the murder of Lincoln, which symbolized to Melville the dualism of good and evil, light and darkness.

In the second stanza, the passive, protectively enclosed, and orderly landscape becomes the victim of the dynamic "demon- cloud," as though Satan were once again invading Eden. Thus as the stanza suggests that horror is compounded by the juxtaposition of storm and peaceful landscape and a hint that it is a desecration of the repose of the dead.

Thus, the assassination of Lincoln equals a storm which is indicative of the

universal conflict of Good and Evil "microcosmized" in man's fate, as creatively portrayed by Shakespeare.

Another celebrated poem in the book, "A Canticle," was inspired by two paintings of Niagara Falls. The first of these is "Sunrise at Niagara" by Dewitt Clinton Boutelle. The second is "The Great Fall, Niagara" by Frederick Chaurch (Cohen, 263). The central image which figures in this poem is that of a mighty cataract roaring downward into a deep pool, from whose foamy billows emerges a shimmering rainbow, the symbol of peace and harmony.

O the precipice Titanic
Of the congregated Fall,
And the deepening thunder call-
And the Gorge so grim,
And the firmamental rim!
Multitudinously thronging
The waters all converge,
Then they sweep adown in sloping
Solidity of surge.

...

Stable in its baselessness
When calm is in the air,
The Iris half in tracelessness
Hovers faintly fair.

However, peace and harmony, as symbolized by the arching rainbow, do not seem to last long; the Iris is buffeted from both sides:

Fitfully assailing it

A wind from heaven blows,
Shivering and paling it
To blankness of the snows;

And from below:

... incessant renewal,
The Arch rekindled grows,
Till again the gem and jewel
Whirl in blinding overthrows-

This poem, which is abundant with Miltonic symbolism, rings a note of optimism at the end:

Till, prevailing and transcending,
Lo, the Glory perfect there,
And the contest finds an ending,
For repose is in the air.

Despite the fact that the conflict comes to a halt, it seems to be constant. The poem seems to put across the message that man and the world are battlegrounds in which the strife between the forces of Good and Evil will never come to an end.

A similar pictorial portrayal of the same idea is envisaged in "Aurora-Borealis." This poem visualizes the wavering display of the aurora borealis, the northern lights, after a federal victory. The poem consists of two stanzas, the first deals with the aurora borealis, a phenomenon of night, and the second stanza deals with the phenomenon of dawn personified in Guido Reni's painting "Aurora" which Melville was familiar with. (Leyda, 303, 349,577). The poem reads:

What power disbands the Northern Lights
After their steely play?
The lonely watcher feels an awe
Of Nature's sway,
As when appearing,
He marked their flashed uprearing
In the cold gloom-
Retreatings and advancings,
(Like dallying of doom),
Transitions and enhancings,
And bloody ray.

The phantom- host has faded quite
Splendor and terror gone-
Portent or promise-and gives way
To pale, meek dawn;
The coming, going,
Alike the God,
Decreeing and commanding
The million blades that glowed,
The muster and disbanding-
Midnight and Morn.

Beyond the pictorial vividness of the play of the lights lies their flickering and paradoxical nature, which becomes symbolic not only of the shifting fortunes of the Northern Army in the war but also of the paradoxical texture of fate, time, and life in general. The contradictory symbolic implications the lights raise for the viewer (Splendor and Terror), "Portent and promise,"

reflect the shifts and reversals which lie in the very character of the lights themselves. As the poem reveals, the night fades away and the dawn appears. But the word "dawn" is significant here; the transient nature of the dawn aptly reflects the basic theme of the poem, the mutability of the aurora borealis and by implication, of time and things.

The poem does not end in a resolution, it closes with a juxtaposition of opposites: "coming and going," "muster and disbanding," "Midnight and Morn." Such a juxtaposition suggests the cyclic pattern things follow, such actions will keep alternating with each other, the armies which mustered at night are disbanded at morning, but night and morning occur alternately, and so do actions like coming and going, war and peace.

An interesting shift occurs in "Apparition," a poem which is put at a climatic point in the book. The emphasis is not on what is envisaged by the eye but on what is invisible. In this poem, Melville seems to be concerned not with the visible volcano, the central image, whose dormancy may be deceptive for the eye. His actual concern is with the hidden "lava", which the inner eye can realize. The poem reads:

**Convulsions came; and, where the field
Long slept in pastoral green,
A goblin- mountain was upheaved
(Sure the sacred sense was all deceived),**

**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 the fire below,
All may go well for many a year,
But who can think without a fear
Of horrors that happen so?

To express the importance of war, Melville uses in this poem the figure of the volcanic action, a hidden force. Fire, which has been a recurrent symbol in Melville's writings, becomes more and more clearly **"the symbol of that destructive truth which lies behind the pasteboard masks of all visible objects."** (Barret, 610)

The first two stanzas refer back to the upheaval in the opening poems in *Battle - Pieces*. The unreserve of "Ill" echoes "my country's ills" from "Misgivings," and the dominant image in the poem, that of accumulating "Ill" leading to outburst, recalls the tempest of war "bursting from the waste of Time" in "Misgivings" or "the storms behind the one we feel" in the same poem.

The disaster is described in the first two stanzas in a metaphor, first of the sudden convulsion that was the war and then of the deconstruction of the seeming solidity at the end of the war. The convulsions destroyed the green field (America) that long slept, the word "slept" fits perfectly in this context implying the dormancy of a volcano and the unawareness of people. The fertile soil is replaced by a mountain of volcanic lava. The nature of the phenomenon and its causes are beyond the comprehension of the "sacred sense", though the full lava-"Ill"—too much accumulated underground caused such intensity of heat that resulted in eruption – is exposed to view now. But both the eye and the mind are still incapable of comprehending what is in

front of them. A retreat of the flowing lava follows, and then the mountain sinks; the apparition is over and no danger is visible.

Since the poet realizes that there is a failure in understanding, owing to inadequacy of mental and physical perception, he awakens the imagination in the first two lines of the third stanza by addressing the inner eye by generalizing experience: that apparent "Solidity" can, like Earth's face, be broken. But Melville is mainly obsessed with the invisible, intensely aware of those truths behind the masks, and here of the processes working under Solidity's Crust; by implication, of the potential dangers in store which may at any moment emerge, bringing havoc and destruction upon the country.

In much larger reference, the scene in "The Apparition" becomes an image of history itself and of the controlling power of evil. In this respect, Shurr considers this poem as the central poem in *Battle - Pieces*. It is a philosophical speculation on "the dynamics of history," a meditation on "human impotence in the face of the power of destructiveness and evil which, at frequent intervals rises to take over the course of history and human events" (Quoted in Bryant, 58).

In other words, these tropes in the poem illuminate the dark mystery at the heart of Melville's tragic vision; they reflect his profound, terrible, and tragic sense of things, the realization that there is an undecipherable mystery at the heart of the universe, a terrible destiny, of harsh necessity which is the core of tragedy. W. MacNeil Dixon in his book *Tragedy* came to consider that tragedy derives its essence from such a hidden power or mystery which lie at the heart of the universe; the essence of tragedy lies in its mystery, a mystery whose centre, Dixon remarks,

"Seems to display the workings of a great, incalculable, natural force, that great Necessity, whatever it be, which brought us into being, governs us and moves us from the scene; before which, as before the earthquake, the flood or the thunderbolt, the heart standstill. (210-211).

It is this sense of terrible knowledge, of the irrational violence in the world, which was evoked in *Battle - Pieces* by the violent war, that gives many poems in the book their power.

As the previously discussed poems point out, Melville is inclined to see things in antinomial patterns corresponding to his tragic vision of life and the world; there are virtually no images which do not fit into these patterns; the sum of the imagery is Melville's view of the world, and the limitations are the limitations of that view.

Melville's *Battle - Pieces* reflects his steady, uncomforted, and ironic vision, his fidelity to that vision is the one legitimate force in his poetry. Dominated by such an overwhelmingly gruesome vision as it is, Melville's poetry elevates itself above most of the effusive, declamatory, and orotund Civil War poetry from the nineteenth century.

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