

Stanton Garner

The Civil War World of Herman Melville

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Reviewed by Marvin Fisher

Stanton Garner's book subjects Melville's Civil War years to closer scrutiny than most biographers impose on their targeted figures. Or to shift the metaphor slightly, this book about Herman Melville's life from 1859 to 1866 has three aims: (1) the historical context and the political issues pertinent to the Civil War in its several stages; (2) the genealogical background and the biographical foreground of Herman Melville; (3) the intrinsic character and structure of Melville's book of Civil War poems and their extrinsic relationship to historical events and sociopolitical themes. In a sense the real subject of this book is *Battle-Pieces*, that book of poems in which a major author of American romantic fictions became the chronicler of fratricidal struggle.

These poems, so unlike the received poetic norms of Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, and Holmes, and distinct also from the bardic innovations of Whitman's poetic broadcasts, are literally and figuratively "battle pieces"—historical fragments of the struggle, aspects of the war as seen from different locals and diverse perspectives, reports from different marksmen. Critics who focused primarily or exclusively on the literary text have described *Battle-Pieces* in terms of discordance and incongruity, of harshness and constriction, of violent imagery and wrenching symbolism. Their perceptions were not wrong, but they were partial and incomplete, and they could not portray or convey a full understanding of the sequential structure or narrative medley of diverse American perspectives. Garner is exceptional for seeing the breadth of the big picture and the details of the smaller pieces. While recognizing the tortured versification, he connects it to important thematic as well as technical concerns. He also effectively links Melville's poetic experimentation to qualities present in Melville's fiction, early and late. The implication is that understanding Melville's fiction constitutes the best preparation for understanding Melville's poetry.

In his brief preface to *Battle-Pieces*, Melville wrote, "I seem . . . to have but placed a harp in a window, and noted the contrasted airs which wayward winds have played upon the strings." (Ironically, this prose statement is closer to conventional poetic diction than anything in the poems.) Garner admirably matches "the contrasted airs" and "wayward winds" to "the varied and conflicting perceptions and attitudes of different kinds and persuasions of Americans, including those of Southerners." Unlike Whitman's attempt to express American diversity through the embrace of a mythic expanded self, Melville's Civil War poems present a multiplicity of perspectives and a medley of voices similar to the multivocal narrative of *Mardi* and to the experiments in point of view that characterize his short fiction of the 1850s. Melville challenged readers of his fiction with the need to learn that not every narrator is fully credible or readily identifiable with the author. What may appear ambiguous, shifting, and inconsistent may be a fiction writer's attempt (or in this case a poet's attempt) to convey the complexity of social experiences, the conflicting values, and the divergent outlooks of Americans in times of great stress.

Although the bulk of this hefty book is devoted to historical, political, military, and biographical matter, its most vivid and valuable pages are those that analyze individual poems and integrate their national concerns, military campaigns, and personal circumstance. A volume of *Battle-Pieces* is an essential accompaniment to reading and appreciating Garner's book, which in turn supplies a fuller understanding of the poems than can be found in previous discussions.

I offer two examples: the well-known poems "The Portent" and "The House-Top." "The Portent," an unconventional depiction of John Brown's execution in 1859, launches the cycle of poems and forecasts the coming conflict. It also portends a new poetics that breaks free of Tennysonian diction or Longfellow-like platitudes and elevates verbal iconography, surreal imagery, and symbolic foreshadowing into a pained, intense poetic incantation. Fond as I am of Thoreau's unconventional wit, I have always winced at the propagandistic spin of his "Plea for John Brown." Melville's "Portent" is no such hypocritical jeremiad. The pendant corpse of the martyred murderer, living man made into weighted pendulum by man's law and nature's law, conveys Melville's pain and grief at the fatal dissolution of national union and the shattered ideals under the sway of war, brutality, and death.

Garner has enriched my understanding of "The House-Top," a difficult poem about class and caste issues in the New York draft riots of 1863. He presents a historically informed, sociologically sensitive, and aesthetically subtle interpretation, and demonstrates how the poem draws upon the narrative and thematic strategies employed in "Bartleley" and "Benito Cereno," and anticipates the irony and indirection of *Billy Budd*.

In writing so large and detailed a book about such a small and cryptic book of poems, Garner may also have overburdened his most appreciative readers. Many of the Civil War historians who read it are likely to undervalue this book's most impressive intellectual achievements, for they are primarily literary. Many of the literature specialists may grow impatient at the massive accumulation of detail on matters large and small designed to tell us what Melville lived through in order that we might better understand the poetic record of what he thought about the times and events he lived through.

We are probably better acquainted with the historical record, the journalistic record, and the visual record of the war than with the poetic record. Melville would not satisfy readers of Bruce Catton, but what he offers is as important as the drawings of Winslow Homer, the photographs of Matthew Brady and more philosophically challenging than the *Red Badge of Courage* or "Drum Taps." In artfully rendered pieces he has deepened our understanding of history and the shared trauma of war. Against a hopeful backdrop of American origins and ideals, *Battle-Pieces* depicts the irreversible force of technological change as it recast the conduct of war and severed a people irrevocably from their pastoral past. In these poems, as well as in much of his fiction, Melville perceives American experience as a mythic progress from painfully lost innocence to tragedy without transcendence.