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**The Role of the Poet in the American Civil War: Walt Whitman's
Drum-Taps (1865) and Herman Melville's *Battle-Pieces* (1866)**

TREBALL DE RECERCA

Laura López Peña

Tutor: Dr. Rodrigo Andrés González

Universitat de Barcelona

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To them who crossed the flood
And climbed the hill, with eyes
 Upon the heavenly flag intent,
 And through the deathful tumult went
Even unto death: to them this Stone—
Erect, where they were overthrown—
 Of more than victory the monument.

Herman Melville, *Battle-Pieces*

There rises in my brain the thought of graves—
to my lips a word for dead soldiers
The Dead we left behind—there they lie, embedded low,
 already fused by Nature
Through broad Virginia's soil, through Tennessee—
The Southern states cluttered with cemeteries
the borders dotted with their graves—the Nation's dead.
Silent they lie—the passionate hot tears have ceased to flow—
time has assuaged the anguish of the living.

Walt Whitman, Manuscript Poem

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to analyze both Walt Whitman and Herman Melville's almost simultaneous responses to the American Civil War (1861-1865). In *Drum-Taps* (1865) Walt Whitman continues the task of bringing the nation together, which he had taken on in his *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Now in the context of a nation at war, with this new collection of poems, the author engages in a reconciliatory project that foregrounds the tragedy of a war between brothers and emphasizes the common humanity inherent in each individual. In the case of Herman Melville, after some years of silence, the war presents him with another opportunity to address a readership that has previously rejected him and will eventually do so again. *Battle-Pieces* (1866), thus, becomes the author's attempt to –like Whitman– turn into the poet and instructor of a country that is faced with a second opportunity to regenerate itself by learning from the errors of the past and becoming a truly democratic and just nation.

This paper finds its roots in 2006, when, while completing my studies in English Philology, I encountered both Walt Whitman and Herman Melville in an introductory course to the United States' literary panorama of the nineteenth century. Knowing very little or nothing about both authors, I was offered at that time the opportunity to read some of their texts (Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* and 1860 "Calamus", and Melville's 1853 short story "Bartleby the Scrivener"), through which I began creating my personal picture of Whitman and Melville and which encouraged me to read more of their literary productions. It was also in those classes that I was surprised to learn that Herman Melville, one of America's most famous novelists, also wrote poetry, something that caught my attention and made me feel curious as to the type of poems this author created. However, this paper probably has its more specific origins in my interest at learning that both Whitman and Melville, when they had exactly the same age

(both writers were born in 1819), wrote about the same event, both in poetry, and almost immediately as the events of the Civil War unfolded. This information –to my eyes– brought the two authors together, establishing what appeared as an important connection between such different writers and such different careers. This study is the result of these many discoveries and the even more unanswered doubts they fostered, which, now, in being offered this opportunity, my curiosity pushes me to explore.

Despite the large number of existing publications on both Walt Whitman and Herman Melville, not many of them have centered on the effect the American Civil War produced in the literary careers of these writers, and even less have ventured to establish parallelisms between these authors' literary responses to the Civil War. In the case of Walt Whitman, the earliest publications that engaged in the exploration of the impact of the war on the poet were Sam Toperoff's (1963), Dennis J. Reader's (1971) and Mathew F. Ignoffo's (1975), which established the roots of more recent studies, such as those by Betsy Erkkila (1996), David S. Reynolds (1996), M. Wynn Thomas (1981, 1995 and 1998), Jerome Loving (1998 and 2000) and Roy Morris (2000).¹ In the case of Herman Melville, it is surprising that some of his biographies –e.g. Lewis Mumford's (1929), Laurie Robertson-Lorant's (1996), and even the recent Andrew Delbanco's (2005)– have tended to overlook the importance of the Civil War in the author's life. These publications have chosen not to analyze the author and his poetic works in relation to the conflict, presenting Melville as a rather detached man who was indifferent to such central event and critical times for the history of his country. Richard H. Fogle (1959) was one of the first to engage in the exploration of the author *and* the Civil War. This scholar was followed, some years later, by William J. Kimbal (1969) and especially by Joyce S. Adler (1973 and 1981), whose research not only focuses on

¹ The complete reference of all the studies we mention in this introduction can be found in the works cited list included at the end of this paper.

the impact of the war on Melville's life but also on *Battle-Pieces*, to this day, surprisingly, one of the most unanalyzed of Melville's works. It has not been until very recently that a higher number of scholars have engaged in a more detailed analysis of Melville's poetry in general and of this text in particular.² The first readings of *Battle-Pieces* portrayed a rather conservative and even divisive Melville who did not fully accept the possibility of national reconciliation and re-union.³ As a matter of fact, it was not until the 1990s that new perspectives which reread *Battle-Pieces* now as a reconciliatory text started to be published. These new studies consider the volume as a political piece of work that invites dialogue and establishes bridges among the confronted sides of the conflict, in the same way as Whitman's *Drum-Taps*. Among these last investigations, it is important to consider those by Stanton Garner (1993), Robert Milder (1988 and 1989), Deak Nabers (2003) and Hershel Parker (2002 and 2008).

In this respect, our work aims to offer a comparative study inscribed in this more recent line of research that considers Whitman and Melville as fully engaged political poets who, through their writings, struggle to reunite the nation. We would like to contribute to this academic debate by analyzing Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps* and Herman Melville's *Battle-Pieces* in relation to the biographical and historical contexts in which they were produced and, especially, by encouraging new readings that set up dialogues between both volumes and authors, something that –we believe– has scarcely been done so far. Considering that most of the research publications mentioned earlier focus on the biographical aspects of each of the authors during the war and that they offer very little or no textual analysis of either *Drum-Taps* or *Battle-Pieces*, we find it

² Parker's 2002 biography of Melville and his 2008 *Melville: The Making of the Poet* exemplify this affirmation.

³ See, for instance, McWilliams 1971.

necessary to analyze the structure and contents of these volumes, in order to, eventually, help to establish (dis)connections between both texts and poets. Our study, therefore, aims to bring together two literary pieces that have been traditionally seen as entirely opposing but that, in being examined side by side, are able to complement each other and offer readers a portrayal not only of the American Civil War but also of Walt Whitman and Herman Melville as American individuals and citizens.

WALT WHITMAN'S *DRUM-TAPS* (1865)

At the onset of the American Civil War, Walt Whitman was a forty-three year old New Yorker whose age and intense disgust of violence were unable to stop him from participating –though not as a soldier– in what he perceived as *the* event in the whole history of the United States. Having already suffered a triple rejection as a poet after the publication of the 1855, 1856 and 1860 editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman regarded the war as the definite opportunity to make Americans respond to his call and, ultimately, to be embraced as the poet and guide of a nation he never stopped loving. This would be the context in which *Drum-Taps* was to be born.

Whitman's never-ending devotion for his country and his compatriots together with his characteristic craving for popular acceptance led him to express, in a letter sent to Emerson in 1863¹ (shortly after settling in Washington), a fervent longing to produce a book about a war that –he considered– had “already brought [America] to Hospital in her fair youth” (in Murray, Price and Folsom). A year later, he determined to bring out a poetic volume under the name of *Drum-Taps*, and to move soon to Brooklyn for its publication, which he did in early 1865. This way, the poet readily began to put together the poems he had been writing since the beginning of the war. These poems were direct results of Whitman's personal experiences, relationships, and even of the sights and sounds he witnessed during that period, the details of which the poet tended to record in small notebooks or diaries that later became sources for his poems and other documental writings about the war. Whitman believed these records captured the vividness with which he had lived those experiences, an intensity that –he thought– deserved to be incorporated into his poems. As the poet expressed, the actual act of

¹ This is probably the earliest remaining record where Whitman articulates a wish to produce his own testimony of the war. However, the poet was initially considering writing a volume or several volumes in prose recording events of the war for the present and future generations.

writing about any Civil War experience needed “to be done while the thing is warm, namely, at once” (in Lowenfels 11), since “[b]y writing at the instant, the very heartbreak of life is caught” (in Lowenfels 14). This writing method is also reflected in the emotional force contained in some of the *Drum-Taps* poems. According to Whitman,

My little books were beginnings—they were the ground into which I dropped the seed.... I would work in this way when I was out in the crowds, then put the stuff together at home. *Drum Taps* was all written in that manner—all of it put together by fits and starts, on the field, in the hospitals, as I worked with the soldier boys. Some days I was more emotional than others; then I would suffer all the extra horrors of my experience; I would try to write blind, blind with my own tears.

(in Lowenfels 4).

The first copies of *Drum-Taps*, containing fifty-three poems, reached readers in late May 1865. Whitman’s book, nevertheless, passed almost unnoticed by the general readership, as its publishers Bunce and Hungtington did not devote any efforts to advertise it. On top of that, President Lincoln’s assassination in April of the same year must have caused Whitman to feel his *Drum-Taps* incomplete given that the poems –in print since March– were unable to reflect the event. As a result, Whitman hastened to produce his own response to Lincoln’s murder in the form of the poems “When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom’d” and “O Captain! My Captain!”, which he soon included in *Drum-Taps*. The first issue of the book had, therefore, very limited circulation, since –apart from the lack of promotion by its publishers– the volume was held back from distribution during the following months after its publication. Finally, in October, Whitman decided to attach *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, which implied the incorporation of eighteen new poems, including those dedicated to Lincoln. In total, by October 1865, *Drum-Taps* amounted to seventy-one poems and, even though Whitman

initially regarded this volume as a brother to his first-born *Leaves of Grass*, shortly afterwards *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel* were incorporated to the 1867 (and subsequent) edition(s) of *Leaves of Grass*,² which would eventually remain Whitman's "letter to the [w]orld" (Dickinson 211) and the result of the poet's continuous and careful revisions until his death on March 26th, 1892. In this respect, our paper will focus on the final version of *Drum-Taps*, that is, considering the exact order Whitman –aware of his approaching death– attentively established for the 1891-92 *Leaves of Grass*. This edition presents considerable differences with its 1865 precursor, which are mainly explained by the fact that a large number of the original *Drum-Taps* poems were separated and dispersed into other sections of *Leaves of Grass* in the various revisions and editions of Whitman's most famous work throughout the author's life. Whitman's final arrangement of *Drum-Taps* comprises forty-three poems, out of which thirty-eight correspond to *Drum-Taps* as it appeared in October 1865,³ and five to other sections of *Leaves of Grass*, but which Whitman, eventually, –and completely conscious of the final form he wanted his *Leaves* to have– decided to place in *Drum-Taps*.

“[M]y book and the war are one”⁴

Whitman's views about the Civil War and his perception of *Drum-Taps* are central questions to reflect on before reaching a more detailed analysis. On the one hand, Whitman's contradictory feelings toward “the distinguishing event of my time” (in Lowenfels 3) can be best summarized by the distressing vision he frequently

² *Leaves of Grass* underwent continuous revisions throughout Whitman's life, which considerably enlarged the size of the volume between 1855 and 1891-92. In the 1867 edition, *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel* were printed for the first time together with *Leaves of Grass*, even though, as Betsy Erkkila notes, they were not yet fully incorporated and did not appear at the same level as other subgroups like “Calamus” or “Children of Adam”, which signalled that “Whitman had not yet integrated the war into a coherent artistic or national design” (263). At that time, therefore, both *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel* had their own separate table of contents and followed a different pagination. For direct access to the complete 1867 text of *Leaves of Grass*, see *The Walt Whitman Archive's* reproduction of this edition.

³ Whitman included minor changes in each of these poems as well.

⁴ This affirmation is contained in the poem “To The Old Cause” (*Leaves of Grass* 5).

described, in which the triumphant sights of magnificent cavalry regiments marching to battle were juxtaposed to never-ending processions of ambulances coming from the fields. In this vision, these splendid soldiers disappeared in the distance, from which another sadder and cheerless sight drew closer in the form of numerous vehicles coming from the camps and full of the very same soldiers that had so inspiringly marched at the beginning.⁵ Whitman had a deep esteem for these soldiers, whom he considered exceptionally admirable for being disposed to sacrifice their lives “for an emblem, a mere abstraction” (in Pascal 167).

For Whitman and many of his contemporaries, the Civil War had initially been welcomed as a cleansing agent that would wash away all the social evils of antebellum America. The poet, thus, assumed that the conflict would provoke a violent –but necessary– catharsis, enabling the purification of the nation and its emergence as a powerful, truly democratic and (re)united country. Choosing war before disunion, he rejected to present the conflict as “one of North against South” (in Erkkila 208), presenting it, instead, as a “struggle going on within One identity” (*Memoranda During the War* 65) and the only means by which this identity could reunite again. Yet, Whitman’s attitudes toward the war changed throughout the 1860s because of his coming into contact (from 1862) with what he frequently referred to as the “real war” (*Specimen Days* 80). Whitman always claimed that his Washington years had offered him “the most profound lesson of my life.... It has given me my most fervent view of the true *ensemble* and extent of these States” (in Lowenfels 5). All his life he considered he had been fortunate for having had his experiences in the hospitals, which did not only present him with the opportunity of giving himself and his love to others, but also

⁵ The author described this sight in an entry dated from July 3rd, 1863 included in *Specimen Days*, his text of reflections on his own life. This volume also reflects the centrality of the war for Whitman by dedicating almost half of its pages exclusively to such a small span of time as the war years. The vision of “noble-looking fellows” and men “cold in death” (in Lowenfels 139) also appears in a letter to his mother from June 30th, 1863.

of receiving the most rewarding tokens of affection and humanity despite (or, maybe, because of) the overwhelming, scenes of suffering which the poet witnessed at first hand. Looking back on this period, Whitman recalls “I never weighted what I gave for what I got, but I am satisfied with what I got.... I got the boys; then I got *Leaves of Grass*—but for this I never would have had *Leaves of Grass*—the consummated book...” (in Lowenfels 16). This privileged insight into a war he considered the center of his entire career would be the one he wanted to record in *Drum-Taps*. In 1865, Whitman described the volume as capturing

the pending action of this *Time & Land we swim in*, with all their large conflicting fluctuations of despair & hope, the shiftings, masses, & the whirl & deafening din ... the unprecedented anguish of wounded & suffering, the beautiful young men in wholesale death & agony, everything sometimes as if in blood color, & dripping blood. The book is therefore unprecedentedly sad, (as these days are, are they not?)—but it also has the blast of the trumpet, & the drum pounds & whirrs in it, & then an undertone of sweetest comradeship & human love, threading its steady thread inside the chaos, & heard at every lull & interstice thereof ... clear notes of faith & triumph.

(in Morris 217-218).

By linking his work to the war, he reinforced the closeness between *Drum-Taps* and his own direct experiencing of the conflict, attributing to his book a highly subjective tone. Hence, *Drum-Taps* is not just a poetic volume about the Civil War; it is Whitman’s volume about Whitman’s Civil War, as it contains an extremely personal (and, therefore, partial) approach to the conflict which corresponds to the aspects the poet had been directly in contact with and which highlights –above all– the human and

individually-centered dimension of a war that, Whitman thought, would and could never be recorded in any book.⁶

At the same time, Whitman did what he could to record the “real war” he witnessed (*Specimen Days* 80). His distress at the impossibility of commemorating the thousands of dead soldiers –North and South– who gave their lives for the nation is reflected in *Drum-Taps*, which the poet uses as a written monument to honor all the individuals he so much regretted were obliterated under the word “unknown” (*Specimen Days* 79-80). However, the collection also contains poems that oppose this realistic picture by portraying an idealized image of a war the poet cheers to invade the hearts of all Americans in order to encourage them to join the militias and participate in it.⁷ Yet, despite the different revisions and arrangements of *Drum-Taps*, Whitman did not choose to eliminate any of these poems, as he considered they reflected different aspects of himself because they had been composed at different stages of his life. Thus, such apparently contradicting points of view in Whitman’s poems mirror the poet’s own contradictions and personal evolution during the 1860s, something that is implicitly stated in the final (1891-1892) arrangement of *Drum-Taps*.⁸

⁶ In *Specimen Days*, Whitman expresses his concern in front of the impossibility of capturing the “real war”, which he defines as the “seething hell and the black infernal background of countless minor scenes ... (not the official surface-courteousness of the Generals, not the few great battles)...” of the Civil War (80).

⁷ An example of these poems is “First O Songs for a Prelude”, the opening poem to *Drum-Taps*, which presents the war as a unifying force that agitates the city. Impregnated by the spirit of war, Manhattan is led to arms in a proud celebration of the enthusiastic response of its citizens, who are willing to abandon everything for the defense of their country. It is interesting that Whitman portrays the war as a democratizing spirit, since it makes no distinctions (particularly of class and age) among those men it recruits. This makes the war capable of penetrating equally in the hearts of mechanics, blacksmiths, lawyers, judges, salesmen, young boys and old men, and of persuading them to join the militias that will later advance toward “the red business” of battle (*Leaves* 281).

⁸ We will explore why Whitman’s personal evolution during the 1860s is implicitly stated in the 1891-92 arrangement of *Drum-Taps* when we analyze the structure of this text.

The Poet as Instructor and Wound-Dresser

We already talk of Histories of the War ... —technical histories of some things, statistics, official reports, and so on—but shall we ever get histories of the *real* things?

Walt Whitman, *Memoranda During the War*

If the Whitman of the 1850s had already announced the significance of the national poet, he continued emphasizing this centrality (and, therefore, his own value as poet of America) more fervently during the war, as he perceived the poet had to assume an essential function in a fundamental moment of the history of the United States. It is true that, when the war began, he remained expectant for some years as if considering the voice he was to adopt.⁹ Erkkila argues that, during the Civil War, Whitman abandoned the romanticism of the 1850s in order to take on a more realistic perspective: “[i]f in the prewar period Whitman had viewed himself as a poet-prophet ... during the war years he came to see himself as a kind of poet-historian, preserving a record of the present moment for future generations” (205). Though Whitman did not fully abandon his previous prophetic voice, it is observable that his obsession during these years was to record (part of) the war not only for future generations, but also for those contemporary Americans who had not participated or had any insight into the war. *Drum-Taps*, thus, aims to fulfill this intention. Through his text, Whitman endeavored to connect two worlds that were separated from each other by bringing the experiences of soldiers in direct contact with the war to those civilians in the big cities who enjoyed a sense of peace.

⁹ In fact, Whitman did not produce any new volumes between the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* and the publication of *Drum-Taps* in 1865.

Whitman was himself familiar with the “gulf of unknowing” (Thomas 1995: 31) between those two realities, since, until he arrived to Washington, he had remained in New York completely disconnected from the war he would later discover, knowing but not feeling its presence in his urban daily life. Thus, his stay in Washington exposed him to the tragic aspects of the war and confronted him with overwhelming suffering and death. Nevertheless, during these years, Whitman also went through what in his eyes emerged as the most extraordinary affirmation of life and love he had ever witnessed, since the poet encountered in those hospitals where he volunteered an expression of the ideal society of comrades, an idyllic democracy he had already dreamed in “Calamus” (1860).¹⁰ This perfect society was, according to Whitman, characterized by the capacity to unite (American) men despite differences of age, social class or geographical origin (i.e. North or South, East or West) through a love that would neutralize their differences and highlight their common Americanness, abolishing, thus, any hierarchical relationship among them. This constituted for Whitman his vision of a perfectly democratic society, which –he thought– had to spread to the rest of the United States so that the nation could abandon the materialism and (class)divisions that had predominated until the Civil War and embrace the nurturing values this utopian society represented. But what function did Whitman envision for himself in the creation of this new society? As he had already done in “Calamus”, Whitman one more time took on the role of poet/guide of the nation, trying to become an instrument for bringing individuals (and, by extension, the country) together and healing the economic, political, and racial fragmentation that was already present in antebellum America.

¹⁰ Whitman’s most fervent claim for the inclusion of manly affection in America had already found its expression in his collection of poems “Calamus”, which were incorporated to *Leaves of Grass* in 1860. The section consists of thirty-nine poems (considering the 1891 arrangement) of homoerotic longing, which display the principle of adhesiveness Whitman believed could “counterbalance ... our materialistic and vulgar American democracy” (*Leaves* 112).

During the Civil War, Whitman must have felt the fulfillment of this dream in the hospitals when he saw that, in the midst of suffering and death, men were creating a new type of humanism. Hospitals constituted for the poet an experiment where he could test the power of his affection, and where he could teach, at the same time, other men to welcome and, eventually, incorporate (traditionally feminine) values like caring, warmth, solidarity, and love. Comforting soldiers, mitigating their pain, and satisfying their need for connection with other human beings, Whitman considered himself a “Wound-Dresser” (*Leaves* 308) able to restore the bonds between different types of Americans at such strongly divisive period as the Civil War. Perceiving hospitals as microcosms of the entire nation,¹¹ Whitman believed that, after the war, those men would spread the principles they had learned (from him) to the rest of society. In this respect, *Drum-Taps* was also an instrument to report to civilians the true democracy soldiers had been creating paradoxically, and in the context of the hospitals and tents, during the war. With his collection of poems, thus, Whitman assumed the role of mediator, hoping that his own record of the war (and, by extension, the event of the Civil War in itself) would re-unite the country and persuade its citizens to embrace a new democratic society that departed from corrupted¹² antebellum America and incorporated the values that the soldiers in Whitman’s poems represented.¹³ America, however, was not ready to listen to Walt Whitman at this point. Neither did soldiers

¹¹ Whitman claimed that “[w]hile I was with wounded and sick in thousands of cases from the New England States, and from New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, and from Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and all the Western States, I was with more or less [men] from all the States, North and South, without exception” (in Erkkilä 201).

¹² Though we are aware that the concept of corruption in 19th century America is normally used to refer to postbellum society and is associated to the Gilded Age and the rise of big corporations during the 1880s, we find it appropriate to follow Reynolds and apply this term to antebellum America as well, since it was precisely this perversion of democracy that Whitman –and Melville– had denounced with their writings even decades before the beginning of the Civil War.

¹³ As Jerome Loving points out, “[t]o Whitman these soldiers ... were his brothers in a working-class democracy” (277), as they embodied the values of comradeship, generosity, physical and emotional strength, etc.

transmit this new humanitarianism or utopian democracy to the rest of the nation after the war.

Whitman's Insight of the War: The Washington Years

And curious as it may seem, the War, to me, *proved*
Humanity, and proved America and the Modern.

Walt Whitman, *Memoranda During the War*

When the Civil War began¹⁴ in 1861, Whitman –like many of his compatriots– welcomed it as a violent but necessary catharsis that would heal the fragmentation of the nation. Initially, the poet remained in Manhattan and Long Island, sharing the general mood of excitement and confirming his never-ending support to the Union. This general confidence, however, began to be shattered after the Battle of First Bull Run,¹⁵ which forced Union troops to retreat to Washington. As Whitman expressed, the outcome of this battle provoked one of “those crises ... when human eyes appear’d at least just as likely to see the last breath of the Union as to see it continue” (*Specimen Days* 25). Nevertheless, despite this generalized pessimism, Whitman did not abandon his trust in the Union, a confidence that –as we will analyze– is reflected in the initial poems of *Drum-Taps*, in which he emphasizes that Northerners need to join the army and defend the nation.

¹⁴ The event that signaled the beginning of the war was the attack of Fort Sumter (South Carolina) on April 13th, 1861. As James McPherson states, Fort Sumter “had become a commanding symbol of national sovereignty in the very cradle of secession, a symbol that the Confederate government could not tolerate if it wished its own sovereignty to be recognized by the world” (263). The news of the attack enlivened the North, which was raised into a “patriotic fury” claiming vengeance for traitors (274).

¹⁵ The Battle of First Bull Run took place on July 21st, 1861, near Manassas (Virginia). The victory of the Confederate army there generated a mood of self-confidence for the Southern States and a feeling of despair and failure on the part of Northerners, who (exaggeratingly) considered the outcome of the battle anticipated “the breakdown of the Yankee race” (McPherson 347). Whitman echoed the mood after First Bull Run in his poem “Eighteen Sixty-One”, also included in *Drum-Taps*.

Whitman's situation changed in 1862, when he received news that his brother George had been wounded at Fredericksburg.¹⁶ As both Thomas (1995: 27-28) and Reynolds (410-411) argue, George was the person who offered Whitman a direct insight into the front and the war hospitals, since it was because of him that the poet left his civilian life in order to discover the real consequences of a war he had, not long ago, enthusiastically glorified. Later, Whitman would perceive his encounter with the human side of the war as the center of his professional career and the event that marked his whole existence. In January 1863, after George was already recovered and sent to the front again, Whitman decided to lengthen his stay in Washington for a period that would eventually amount to ten years. There, he became a constant visitor to the wounded in the several war hospitals of the capital where he paid individualized attentions to soldiers, trying to answer each one's specific needs.¹⁷ As we saw earlier, Whitman considered the whole of America was represented in those soldiers, who were in strong need of love and empathic connections with other human beings. The poet believed these soldiers constituted a perfect democracy, as they displayed the values of generosity, affection, manliness and equality that confirmed his belief in comradeship and love as principles that, if incorporated to America, would clean away its social evils and help it emerge as a more powerful and democratic nation. During this period, and despite suffering a decline in health, Whitman's life was absorbed by his work in the

¹⁶ The Battle of Fredericksburg took place from December 13th to December 15th, 1862 and it signified one of the worst defeats of the Union during the war which “[brought] the horrors of war to Northerners more vividly, perhaps, than any other battle” (McPherson 573-574). George Washington Whitman, who fought in the 51st New York Volunteers under Colonel Edward Ferrero, got a minor cheek wound at Fredericksburg. George participated in many battles during the war and was eventually promoted several times by rising from private to captain and, then, to brevetted lieutenant colonel (Reynolds 410).

¹⁷ Whitman performed diverse tasks in his attentions to the wounded in hospitals, depending on the needs of each individual. Some of these tasks were buying and distributing tobacco, providing paper and ink or writing letters on behalf of the men, or just answering the yearning for communication, love and human attachment caused by the feeling of neglect some of the men suffered from. Due to the absence of soldiers' family members, Whitman also performed familial roles in accompanying men through their most delicate moments, some of which the poet reflected in *Drum-Taps* (see for example “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night” or “The Wound-Dresser”, among others). As Reynolds argues, he even “acted as a spiritual and moral adviser to the soldiers, urging them to lead clean, temperate lives” (429).

hospitals, which –he said– made him realize of “the majesty and reality of the American people en masse” (in Loving 262). The poet considered these soldiers formed part of his own family¹⁸ and treated them as brothers or sons (Loving 277). Moreover, in the hospitals, Whitman could test the efficacy of what he called “medicine of daily affection” (in Lowenfels 94), which he used to complement the frequently rushed attention paid by oversaturated doctors and nurses, believing that simple acts of love like “[a] word, a friendly turn of the eye or touch of the hand” (in Lowenfels 104) could heal the wounded, especially those suffering from loneliness and isolation.

Despite realizing the (emotional and physical) slaughtering dimension of the war during these years, Whitman still retained a firm belief in the Union and its leading figure, Abraham Lincoln. In a letter to his mother from September 1863, he confessed that “one’s heart grows sick of war, after all, when you see what it really is; ... it seems to me like a great slaughterhouse and the men mutually butchering each other”; however, immediately after this acknowledgment, he insists on the need to continue the war: “I feel how impossible it appears, again, to retire from this contest until we have carried our points” (in Lowenfels 144). In his war writings, Whitman often appeared torn between his ideal and the realities he was witnessing, but he eventually considered that the Union was destined to succeed, and that the necessity to hold the country together was more impelling than any other reason. Though there may be some truth in Reynolds’s affirmation that Whitman eventually fell in the trap of justifying “authoritarianism in the name of the Union” (437) by idealizing its representative generals and leading figures, the poet also believed that to withdraw from the conflict would be an act of injustice to those who had already sacrificed their lives. To this, we

¹⁸ Whitman’s biological family was changing at that time, suffering from “an odd conglomeration of illnesses, physical and mental” (Reynolds 408). During these difficulties, the poet became a source of emotional and sometimes financial support, receiving “the full weight of the family’s sorrows” (410).

can add Whitman's personal commotion at imagining the disintegration of his country, as he had permanently engaged himself, from his earlier writings, in uniting and claiming the richness of America as a nation integrated by multiple identities, but which constituted a single –though heterogeneous– whole.

But the war did not eventually purify the social and political atmosphere. If antebellum America had been characterized by corrupted administrations and a worship of money and materialism, its postbellum counterpart saw the rise of industries and centralized power, together with “huge corporations, machines, robber barons, advertising agencies, department stores, and rampant consumerism” (Reynolds 495). This new reality, therefore, did not match at all the ideal society of comrades Whitman had imagined during the war, nor did soldiers bring home the values they had practiced at the front or in hospitals. Once the war was over, the poet witnessed how the victory of the Union developed into a strengthening of governmental institutions, corruption and an affirmation of corporate capitalism that widened social divisions. The radicalism of the 1850s had vanished even from its most radical activists, who by the late 1860s were becoming more conservative and beginning to work for the government. In this context, “how was the poetic Atlas to carry the new America ... ?” (Reynolds 495). Despite his deep disappointment at the present situation and at the lack of attention from his contemporaries, Whitman continued to believe that change would come in the future and that (his) poetry would be capable of redeeming the nation. As a result of this never-ending faith –which must have been very fragile at some points during the decades that followed the Civil War– he continued writing and publishing new texts as well as revising *Leaves of Grass*, believing that America would someday be prepared to hear and incorporate him, and calling new generations of “poets to come” (*Leaves* 14) to pursue the project he had begun.

The Structure of *Drum-Taps*: Whitman's 1891-92 Arrangement

As we indicated before, Whitman's continuous revisions of *Drum-Taps* –and, more generally speaking, of *Leaves of Grass*– set significant differences between the first (1865) and final (1891-92) versions regarding the selection of poems included/excluded and the way these are arranged in both volumes. In this respect, as the following pages analyze, the final arrangement presents a structure that parallels Whitman's personal awakening during the years of the war reinforcing the poet's change at the discovery of its human dimension in Washington. Thus, the reader perceives in *Drum-Taps* a sense of growth on the part of the poetic *I*, which –because of the highly personal experiences narrated– parallels the developments Whitman also underwent during the Civil War. Whitman made his first attempt to establish this parallelism between himself and *Drum-Taps* in the 1871-72 edition of *Leaves of Grass*¹⁹ where he included some verses he later incorporated to “The Wound-dresser” –the poem he placed at the very center of *Drum-Taps* in all its editions– as a prefatory epigraph that introduced the entire volume:

Aroused and angry,

I thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless war:

But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd, and I resign'd myself,

To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead.

(*Leaves* 641)

By deciding to add these initial lines Whitman was already announcing the structure *Drum-Taps* was going to follow as well as justifying the arrangement he had decided for this edition, which would show little variation with its 1891-92 successor.

¹⁹ See *The Walt Whitman Archive*'s reproduction of the complete 1871-72 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

This epigraph was removed in subsequent editions,²⁰ but –despite the continuous increase in the amount of poems–, the order remained almost unchanged. If, as Whitman claimed, *Leaves of Grass* “is not book, / [because] Who touches this touches a man”²¹ (*Leaves* 505), *Drum-Taps* mirrors the moods, doubts and anxieties the poet experienced before, during and after the war. Many scholars (e.g. Erkkila or Sychterz) have analyzed the significant changes the poetic voice of *Drum-Taps* undergoes in relation to his attitudes about the war, that is, from his early idealization and enthusiasm at the beginning of the conflict to his subsequent awareness of the real consequences of the war after witnessing its tragic dimension. Yet, we consider that some of these analyses fail to explore the latter part of *Drum-Taps* (both in terms of what Whitman says there and what he does not say), since they tend to concentrate on the first half of the volume, frequently stopping at “The Wound-Dresser”. Besides, these studies happen to be, in our opinion, too general, since they devote their attention only to specific poems that become paradigmatic of the rest. This is the case of the initial poems of *Drum-Taps*, which, as we will analyze, are frequently reduced to enthusiastic songs of patriotism and exaltation of the war, leaving aside the doubts, fears and anxieties the poet already introduces in this part and which serve to announce the terrible aspects of war he later brings us close to. Thus, in our opinion, the volume is divided into three different parts, which remain mutually interconnected and which signal the poet’s progression through this period.

Firstly, in poems 1-9 (“First O Songs for a Prelude”–“The Centenarian’s Story”) Whitman reflects the urban (Northern) excitement and welcoming of the war, and invites the spirit of war to move everyone to defend the unity of the nation. Although, in

²⁰ From 1881, Whitman incorporated this epigraph into the poem “The Wound-Dresser” reducing its four original lines to three.

²¹ This verses correspond to “So Long!”, the poem Whitman placed at the close of all the editions of *Leaves of Grass* since 1860. As Bradley and Blodgett argue, the poem has been considerably revised in form, though, significantly, not in meaning (*Leaves* 502-503).

this part, Whitman contributes to idealize the Union cause in order to convince Americans to join the militias, he also includes traces of doubts, fears or menaces that not only anticipate the topics he will unfold afterwards (especially in the next section) but also mirror his own personal uneasiness in regards to the conflict. In this respect, he places poems like “First O Songs for a Prelude”, “Beat! Beat! Drums!”, or “Song of the Banner at Daybreak”, which welcome and mystify the war, together with other poems such as “Eighteen Sixty One”, “Rise O Days from Your Fathomless Deeps”, or “The Centenarian’s Story”, which question this idealization and announce the human costs of the war Whitman will explore in the second section of *Drum-Taps*.

Thus, in “Song of the Banner at Daybreak”, for example, the poet is impregnated by the Banner’s idealization of the war to the extent that he becomes an instrument to transmit this romanticized point of view. As Bradley and Blodgett state, the poem “is exceptional in *LG*”, as it brings several voices into dialogue, using “... a kind of dramatic colloquy in which the poet, at the beginning and end, instructs himself, and is instructed, to sing the idealism of war” (*Leaves* 285). Whitman presents the conflict as a force opposed to the (Northern) antebellum society of materialism and industrialization and reinforces the necessity to move away from that society by means of the purifying power of war. By the end of the poem, both Poet and Son are absorbed by the Banner rejecting antebellum values in order to embrace an ideal that is “Out of reach ... yet furiously fought for” (*Leaves* 290). This poem contrasts, on the other hand, with others like “The Centenarian’s Story”, which recreates the experiences of a Revolutionary veteran who is reminded of his own participation in the War of Independence (1775-1783) by the soldiers’ present excitement before going to war. In his story, the old man acknowledges how Southerners helped then to construct the United States that are now under the siege of fragmentation, by fighting and dying bravely for the freedom of their

country.²² The battle against the British is described as a massacre, which points at the bloodshed that will soon be repeated. At this point, then, Whitman deglorifies the conflict by connecting the past slaughters of the Revolutionary War to the imminent ones the Civil War will cause, so that the story of the old man serves to announce the future deaths of thousands of Americans who are about to be killed in the hands of brethren countrymen. This poem serves to establish a transition with the second part of *Drum-Taps*, which indeed reveals these human costs.

Part two, which includes poems 10-21 (“Cavalry Crossing a Ford”–“The Wound-Dresser”), offers an insight into the armies and the war hospitals, recording, thus, the aspects of the war Whitman experienced during his years in Washington. In this section, the focus is gradually shifted from the group to the individual, by moving from the armies described in the first four poems (“Cavalry Crossing a Ford”, “Bivouac on a Mountain Side”, “An Army Corps on the March”, and “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame”) to specific soldiers and their relatives. The four initial poems serve, therefore, to introduce readers into the armies and the lives of soldiers at war, who are carefully described not as Unionists or Confederates but as soldiers. It is significant that, in his descriptions of these men, Whitman avoids partisanship, so that he does not relate the armies and individuals portrayed to either side of the conflict in order to reinforce his belief that the consequences of the war he explores in this second part affect, without distinction, the totality of its participants. In these four –almost photographic– poems, Whitman records the quick rhythm of the war and portrays it as a great machine which absorbs each soldier’s individuality. Poems like “Cavalry Crossing a Ford” or “An Army Corps on the March”, among others, present men advancing towards the “real

²² As in the poem “Virginia—the West”, the poet foregrounds the clash between the South’s present willingness to menace “the Mother of All” (*Leaves* 293) and its past struggle to construct and defend the United States.

war” (*Specimen Days* 80), the tragic consequences of which many will directly encounter, as Whitman uncovers in the rest of the poems that integrate this second part.

In the following poems, then, Whitman puts readers through the human costs of the conflict and confronts us with individual instances of suffering, death and mourning. However, in these poems, he also records instances of love and empathic moments among men that are in need of care, interaction and humane bonding. At this point, the poet becomes a mediator and fulfiller of these needs for human warmth, at the same time that he uses his poems to give individuality to all the unknown soldiers left aside by the quick forces of the war. By writing on behalf of wounded soldiers (“Come Up from the Fields Father”), accompanying, keeping vigil or burying the dead (“Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night”), and satisfying (dying) soldiers’ needs for connection with other human beings (“A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown”), the poems pay tribute to soldiers who have died almost unnoticed and alone.²³ This homage reaches its pathos with “The Wound-Dresser”, which is placed at the end of this second section and at the center of *Drum-Taps*, and which describes the sights, smells and sounds Whitman witnessed in the hospitals. Through this poem, where hospitals appear as microcosms of America, Whitman consolidates his self-imposed role as Wound-Dresser of the nation, believing that –like in the hospitals– he has the potential of helping to heal the current fragmentation of America, a poetic and personal fantasy he wanted his *Drum-Taps* to fulfill. Thus, already announcing what he will develop in the third section, he encourages the nation to hear and learn from what he has exposed in this second part and to undergo a similar evolution as his.

²³ As the soldiers who dig and inscribe the tomb of a fallen friend in “As Toilsome I Wander’d Virginia’s Woods”, Whitman tries to inscribe with *Drum-Taps* all the nation’s dead who, in his opinion, can never be commemorated with any visible monument (*Specimen Days* 79-80).

The third and last section of *Drum-Taps* includes poems 22-43 (“Long, too Long America”—“To the Leaven’d Soil They Trod”) and it concentrates not only on the present but also on the future of the country. In this part, Whitman encourages the United States to learn from the experience of the war and emphasizes his role of poet/guide whose major aim is to restore unity and to contribute to America’s improvement and democratization.²⁴ Whitman, thus, believes himself in possession of certain privileged knowledge because of his insight into the war, which he feels he has the duty of transmitting to the whole nation. As a result, he assumes the role of mediator between the separate realities of soldiers and civilians, becoming an instructor who is willing to share his knowledge to a readership that, for the most part, remains as ignorant and detached from the actual war as he was at the beginning of the conflict. In this respect, in “Long, Too Long America”, Whitman asks (again) the nation to learn from the war he has portrayed, at the same time that he claims himself as the only one who “has yet conceiv’d what your [America’s] children en-masse really are” (*Leaves* 312). This knowledge enables him, in “Reconciliation”, not only to celebrate that the spirit of war he –and Americans– welcomed at the beginning is now leaving the nation (e.g. “Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost” [*Leaves* 321]), but also to perform an act of individual reconciliation by kissing the lifeless face of his “enemy”, after realizing that he is “a man divine as myself” (*Leaves* 321). As the title announces, in this poem, the poetic *I* (here a soldier) is capable of reconciling with his enemy,²⁵ which is set to exemplify the future re-union of the nation Whitman expected would be taking place after the war. The last image of *Drum-Taps* in “To the Leaven’d Soil They Trod” significantly reinforces this eagerness to reconcile

²⁴ The arrangement of the *Drum-Taps* poems, therefore, not only mirrors the evolution Whitman underwent during the Civil War but can also be read as a proposed evolution for the reader to follow in order to reach the state of knowledge the poet has achieved.

²⁵ See our comparison of Whitman’s “Reconciliation” and Melville’s “Magnanimity Baffled” on pages 45 and 46 of our paper.

America(ns), as the poet absorbs and allows the nation, North and South equally, to absorb him and impregnate his poems: “The Northern ice and rain that began me nourish me to the end, / But the hot sun of the South is to fully ripen my songs” (*Leaves* 327).

But, why did Whitman take so much interest in reflecting his personal evolution in the overall structure of *Drum-Taps*? As we have seen, the poet reiterated several times throughout his life the wish to connect himself to his work, but by reinforcing this idea, he was, moreover, inviting his contemporary readership to undergo a progression similar to his own. This intention –which, as we saw earlier, was not yet articulated in the 1865 *Drum-Taps*– became clearer from the 1871-72 arrangement of these poems, in which he decided to make this process explicit by including an epigraph that announced the structure of the volume. After the 1870s, he removed the epigraph but kept this evolutionary structure in all subsequent editions, considering that –if not in the present– America would, at some point in the future, be receptive to his voice and be encouraged to create a more humane and egalitarian nation. However, as Whitman asserted in “As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado”, although “I have urged you onward with me, and still urge you” he still had not “the least idea what is our destination, / Or whether we shall be victorious, or utterly quell’d and defeated” (*Leaves* 322).

The Reception of *Drum-Taps*

Even though Whitman considered *Drum-Taps* “superior to *Leaves of Grass*” (in Morris 217), America would once more turn its back on the poet with this volume, as it had done with the 1855, 1856 and 1860 editions of *Leaves of Grass* and would do again with his future publications. If it may be true that some reviews of *Drum-Taps* noticed a

change in Whitman's style (Howells, for example, maintained it was at least more "decent"), others actually attributed no artistic worth to it:

Walt Whitman is the Poet of Roughts. His style is as rowdyish as his habits. Some years ago he published a volume of trash entitled Leaves of Grass [sic], in which he modestly characterized himself as 'Kosmos.' It was worse than stupid, it was beastly. This last effort lacks the obscenity of its predecessor, but it is equally destitute of merit. We cannot imagine any punishment more dreadful than that of being compelled to read it through.

(The San Francisco Bulletin)

Most of these reviews were mainly concerned with the form of the poems included in the volume, as they considered them neither poetry nor prose,²⁶ something which, according to some critics, was an "offense against art" (James). These reviewers, however, did not fail to recognize Whitman's "noble service" during the war (*The Independent*).

On the other hand, there were also defenders who counteracted the denial of artistic value in *Drum-Taps* by claiming that "it is vain to deny artistic treatment in Walt Whitman's poems because they are not constructed in accordance with canons previously laid down", since "[t]he true poet discovers new and unsuspected laws of art, and makes his own rules" (*The Radical*). These positive reviews, moreover, exposed how Whitman's volume had been almost neglected due to the fact that its publishers had not made any attempt to announce or circulate the book among the general readership and had even printed the volume without their names on it. They, thus, denounced that the book "is scarcely to be got at a bookstore, has hardly been noticed by a newspaper, and, though full of the noblest verses, is utterly unknown to the mass of

²⁶ In his review of *Drum-Taps*, Henry James claims that "Mr. Whitman does not write verse, [but] he does not write ordinary prose [either]", arguing that the volume "begins ... like verse and turns out to be arrant prose". However, he does not consider Whitman's "good prose" either, which brings the reviewer to dismiss the author by stating that "[h]e must have something very original to say if none of the old vehicles will carry his thoughts" (James).

readers” (*The Boston Commonwealth*). But the most positive –and clearly idealizing– defense of Whitman and his war poems came from John Burroughs –a writer himself and one of the poet’s closest friends and most loyal admirers–, who in late 1866 published “Walt Whitman and His ‘Drum Taps’”, an essay that responded against the dismissal of the poet and his work(s). This review offered a ramble through the poet’s life and work, paying special attention to Whitman’s patriotism and public service during the war and announcing a new edition of *Leaves of Grass* to be released soon,²⁷ which would demonstrate that –despite America’s dismissal of the author– Whitman had not fallen into bitterness or cynicism.

²⁷ Burroughs is referring here to the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which included *Drum-Taps* for the first time, though –as we have seen– not yet fully integrated or at the same level as the other clusters (see footnote 2 on page 10).

HERMAN MELVILLE'S *BATTLE-PIECES* (1866)

Though many scholars have undermined the impact of the Civil War on Melville's life and work,¹ his writing a volume like *Battle-Pieces* indicates that the author was not indifferent to the ongoing events and debates of those years. When the Civil War began, Melville –like Whitman– was a forty-two year old man who, despite numerous attempts, had not tasted the literary recognition he felt he deserved,² and who, to the eyes of his contemporaries, had fallen into a long literary silence after the publication of *The Confidence-Man* in 1857.³ Thus, it was not until 1866 that he would publish another work, but little could his fellow citizens suspect that this new volume, *Battle-Pieces*, would see the light in the form of poetry. Considering, as Whitman, the war was his definite opportunity to attract Americans and to participate in the political life of the nation, he raised his voice again expecting to be greeted as a mediator and a guide of the country not only in the turbulent period of war but also in the ensuing heated political debates and in the fragile process of peace-making.

It is difficult to establish the exact moment when Melville began composing *Battle-Pieces*, as the author –unlike Whitman– never expressed any intention to write about the war in any surviving document. In a prefatory note to the volume, Melville states that “[w]ith few exceptions, the Pieces in this volume originated in an impulse imparted by the fall of Richmond” (*Battle-Pieces* 5), but we know that despite this affirmation Melville began writing some poems before April 1865.⁴ Nevertheless, it is

¹ In talking about Melville and the Civil War we are faced with a documental problem, since, unlike Whitman, Melville kept very few written documents that might help us reconstruct these years of his life.

² Melville was still –to his deep regret– regarded as the author of *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), his first and most successful novels that determined his reputation as a writer of adventure narratives in exotic islands.

³ Even though many scholars have highlighted this nine-year literary silence from the publication of *The Confidence-Man* (1857) to that of *Battle-Pieces* (1866), Hershel Parker –as we will see– provides evidence of Melville's having a poetic volume ready for publication by 1860.

⁴ The author, for example, contributed “Inscription For the Slain at Fredericksburgh” to the volume *Autograph [sic] Leaves of Our Country's Authors* in 1864, which indicates that, by then, he had already written some of

possible that he did not think of compiling these poems in a book until the close of the war, since it may have been just then that he saw he had gathered enough material to encourage himself to write further and create his own poetic response to the conflict in the form of a monographic volume. In this respect, the fall of Richmond may have imparted the desire of compilation and eventual publication, since, as Melville maintains, the poems “were [initially] composed without reference to collective arrangement” (*Battle-Pieces* 3). As Stanton Garner claims, “[w]ith his imagination crammed as it was with information and experience,^[5] Herman might have written a lively poetic recreation of the war ...” (32), but he did not choose to do this in *Battle-Pieces*. Unlike Walt Whitman, who claimed he wanted to write a volume on the war “while the thing is warm” (in Lowenfels 11), Herman Melville waited until his (and Americans’) emotions had settled in order to incorporate a certain historical perspective into his poems. This willingness to write about emotions in recollection⁶ made his readers consider *Battle-Pieces* a distanced portrait of the war.⁷ As a matter of fact, Melville did not want to produce an emotionally vivid rendering of the event but an examination of it only permitted by the perspective of time. With this aim, Melville may have delayed the composition of most of his poems until he could analyze the war as a historical whole and have full control over his emotions.

the poems he later included in *Battle-Pieces*. This volume, which we include in the works cited list at the end of this paper, was published in Baltimore in 1864.

⁵ Though Melville was not involved in the Civil War and, therefore, he did not participate in it, Garner uses the word “experience” to make reference to Melville’s trip to Virginia’s battlefields in April 1864, which –as we will see– offered him the possibility to have a direct insight into the war that would be later reflected in *Battle-Pieces*.

⁶ This technique, used by many Romantic poets, is enacted in William Wordsworth’s famous poem “Daffodils” (1804), in which, after having intensely enjoyed the pleasures of nature, the poet goes home and recalls the emotions he has experienced in tranquillity in order to write about them in his poem.

⁷ As we will see on page 53 of our paper, William Dean Howells described the volume as containing “not words and blood, but words alone” (in Parker 2002: 623). Most significant is Andrew Delbanco’s use of (and, therefore, agreement with) Edmund Wilson’s words to describe *Battle-Pieces* as a “secondhand ‘chronicle ... of the patriotic feelings of an anxious middle-aged non-combatant as, day by day, he reads the bulletins from the front’” (268).

Even though Melville did not participate in the war, he was not detached from its continuous events, the news of which kept reaching him in Pittsfield (Massachusetts). During those years, the author was deeply interested in all sources of information on the developments of the war as well as in the political transformations the country was experiencing. This demonstrates he was not a disengaged civilian who was only “marginally aware of the greatest national convulsion in American history” (Garner 289 [my italics]), since, as Nathaniel Hawthorne emphasized, this was impossible for any living American.⁸ If not physically implicated, Melville was surely concerned with one of the major events in the history of his country, which made him welcome any new information he received about the war either in the shape of the newspapers he read both in Pittsfield and New York or in the form of telegraphs that conveyed more immediate news. Moreover, he was frequently exposed to the narration of first-hand war experiences by family members who were directly involved in it⁹ and participated with his wife Lizzie and the children in celebrations and patriotic events that took place in Pittsfield and New York between 1861 and 1865.

Although *Battle-Pieces* was not published until August 1866, some poems reached readers before that date. However, as it remains impossible to trace back the order of composition of Melville’s war poems, we can only speculate about the dates some of them were likely to be composed on, and that is by considering their style and their relation to the events they describe. Thus, the fact that Melville could contribute “Inscription For the Slain at Fredericksburgh” already in 1864 may be an indication that the first poems the author wrote were the ones contained in the cluster “Verses

⁸ Hawthorne affirmed that “there is no remoteness of life and thought, no hermetically sealed seclusion, except, possibly, that of the grave, into which the disturbing influences of this war do not penetrate” (in Garner 389).

⁹ Melville’s cousins Guert Gansevoort (1812-1868) and Henry Sanford Gansevoort (1812-1896) participated in the Civil War. On the one hand, Guert worked, from 1861 to 1863, in the New York Navy Yard helping to prepare ships that would later be used for blockades, and became commander of the *Roanoke* in 1865. On the other hand, Henry was a Union officer and an artilleryist in McClellan’s army who was involved in many of the war’s important campaigns.

Inscriptive and Memorial”, which constitutes a separate group from the main battle-pieces in the volume.¹⁰ Apart from these, other poems were previewed separately in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* throughout 1866, before the entire volume was actually published, namely “The March to the Sea” (appearing in February), “The Cumberland” (March), “Philip” (April), “Chattanooga” (June), and “Gettysburg” (July) (Parker 2002: 593). On August 17th, *Battle-Pieces* was published by the Harpers¹¹ in the edition that has been reprinted until now. In this respect, the edition used for this paper is a facsimile reproduction of the original 1866 *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*.

America’s Enlightening Nightmare: Melville’s Perception of the Civil War

So vast the Nation, yet so strong the tie.

What doubt shall come, then, to deter

The Republic’s earnest faith and courage high.

Herman Melville, *Battle-Pieces*

Melville was “independent and politically negligent, but Democratically so” (Garner 24). Like Whitman, he was a conservative democrat opposed to any radicalism, including that of abolitionists, which might imperil the unity of the country, but he, nevertheless, had consistently condemned since his earliest writings not only the enslavement of African Americans but also, in more general terms, all forms of human oppression or slaveries.¹² In this respect, Melville and Whitman shared the belief that, in face of the approaching war, the priority of the nation was to stick together and fight

¹⁰ Hershel Parker also argues that nautical poems may have been among the first Melville composed (2002: 562).

¹¹ It is curious that Melville chose to have *Battle-Pieces* published by the Harpers, as he had been previously disappointed by these brothers in the publication of his previous works. Moreover, in the instructions he left to his brother Allan and his wife Lizzie for the publication of *Poems* in 1860 (see footnote 19 on page 36), he explicitly advised them to seek an alternative publisher (*Letters* 198-199).

¹² Already in *Mardi* (1849), Melville nullified his country’s assertion of complete democracy, equality and freedom by creating an allegory of the United States through the island of Vivenza, which he used to denounce that “In-this-re-publi-can-land-all-men-are-born-free-and-equal.... Except-the-tribe-of-Hamo” (*Mardi* 423-424).

secession, which made them both convinced supporters of the cause of the Union. However, despite identifying with these ideas and having a Northern understanding of the conflict, Melville was capable of sympathizing with Southerners and praising the positive qualities that many Confederates were displaying during the war, as well as condemning inadequate behaviors of Unionists. But, above all, for Melville –and Whitman– “America meant the North and the South together” (Garner 27). In the same way as Whitman, Melville understood the Civil War as a terrible but necessary fall that would remove the evils of antebellum American society. In this sense, he hoped the conflict would purify the nation and enable the birth of a truly democratic country where slavery and its different materializations would have no place. Thus, regardless of America’s faults, Melville retained a strong hope for his country and wanted to contribute his part in the construction of the renewed and united America that would result from the war.

Although there are no available testimonies about how Melville regarded *Battle-Pieces*, this volume established a definite change of direction in the author’s career, since it departed from his previous –and very prolific– literary production as a prose writer¹³ and set a new literary direction Melville adopted in later works.¹⁴ However, the Civil War did not bring Melville the recognition he might have expected to achieve as, on the contrary, the author had to confront again America’s bafflement at poets who, like Walt Whitman or himself, aspired to contribute to their nation’s democratization. It is true that, as a matter of fact, with *Battle-Pieces* Melville was not only recording the

¹³ By 1866, when *Battle-Pieces* appeared, Melville had already published ten works in prose: *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), *White-Jacket* (1850), *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852), *Israel Potter* (1855), *The Piazza Tales* (1856), and *The Confidence-Man* (1857).

¹⁴ After *Battle-Pieces*, Melville published other volumes of poetry: *Clarel* (1876), *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888), and *Timoleon* (1891). Moreover, he also left the manuscript of the novella *Billy Budd, Sailor* unfinished at his death, which was published posthumously in 1924.

tensions of the war years but also engaging in the political debates that arouse during and immediately after the conflict.

Melville, Poet?

Melville's turn to poetry has been perceived as resulting from the author's necessity to reinvent himself after the failure of his previous career as a prose writer, which left in him a feeling of having been neglected that pushed him into a literary silence of nine years between the publication of *The Confidence-Man* (1857) and *Battle-Pieces* (1866). Though it is true that Melville was indeed reinventing himself literarily during these years, it is also certain he had read poetry extensively and had written poems before this period, probably as early as in his adolescence and early youth. This is shown, for example, by his contributions to his school magazine, as well as by his poetical satires of the heroes of the Mexican War (1846-1848). Today, the extent of Melville's literary silence between 1857 and 1866 is starting to be questioned. Most significantly, Hershel Parker¹⁵ has engaged in the analysis of Melville's career as a poet, counteracting the until-now dominant myth that Melville abandoned prose and turned to poetry only during the war in order to overcome his feeling of having been deliberately ignored as a prose writer. Nonetheless, Melville possibly used the Civil War –the event that, he thought, would renew the whole nation– to renew himself in the eyes of readers who continued to reduce his whole career to *Typee* and *Omoo*, two novels Melville himself despised calling them “Piddledee” and “Hullabaloo”, respectively (“Melville's Reflections”). Moreover, he probably considered that the war was the necessary

¹⁵ Parker has very recently devoted an extensive and rigorous study to Melville's relation with poetry: *Melville: The Making of the Poet* (2008). However, in his 2002 biography of the author, he had already pointed toward new directions for the study of Melville as a poet and not as a mere disappointed writer that begun flirting with poetry in order to overcome his feeling of being neglected.

opportunity to acquire the literary recognition he thought he deserved, since it offered him the possibility of re-launching his career.

We can only speculate about why Melville chose poetry to write about the Civil War.¹⁶ Though he, apparently, had wanted to keep it secret he had been writing poetry, in mid-1859, Melville sent a note¹⁷ to the Harpers asking them to publish two of his poems in their magazine, which were eventually rejected. That refusal did not prevent him from continuing increasing his poetic production, which may have been considerable by 1860, before embarking on his trip aboard the *Meteor*, the ship captained by his brother Tom. It was at that time that he left very detailed instructions¹⁸ to his brother Allan and, especially, to his wife Lizzie for the publication of what was meant to be his first volume of poems, which he wanted to be simply titled “*Poems by Herman Melville*” without mentioning “[f]or God’s sake ... *By the author of ‘Typee’ ‘Piddledee’ &c on the title-page*” (*Letters* 199). When the *Meteor* reached San Francisco, however, Melville did not find himself a published poet. At his arrival, he received a letter from Lizzie informing him of the refusal of *Poems*,¹⁹ at the same time that his wife expressed her belief in the value of his poems. But little did these words comfort Melville at this point, who returned home feeling a failed poet. Nevertheless, Melville’s first book of poetry cannot be ignored even though it never reached publication.²⁰

¹⁶ We will address this question when we reach the comparison between Whitman and Melville at the end of this paper.

¹⁷ The note read: “Here are two Pieces, which, if you find them suited to your Magazine I should be happy to see them appear there.—In case of publication, you may, if you please, send me what you think they are worth” (*Letters* 194).

¹⁸ See Melville’s “Memoranda for Allan *concerning the publication of my verses*” in *Letters* 198-199.

¹⁹ Even though this volume was never published, in our paper we will follow Parker and refer to it in italics as *Poems*, since this is the title Melville had explicitly chosen for his first collection of poems.

²⁰ As Parker claims, *Poems* did exist in the sense that “Melville wrote it, Lizzie copied it, Evert and George Duyckinck read it, publishers looked at it [and] Melville himself, by the time the *Meteor* reached the Pacific, assumed that it had been published, and was being reviewed” (2002: 441).

During his voyage aboard the *Meteor*, Melville engaged in extensive readings of epic poetry, which, we could speculate, might indicate his ambition to write an epic poem himself. If this hypothesis is correct, then, Melville may have begun acquiring at this point the voice he would later adopt and develop not only in *Battle-Pieces*, but also, and most significantly, in later poetic works such as the almost 18,000 line-long *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876). Such a historically central event as the Civil War must have provided Melville with the perfect context to write a poem of epic scale, as, through it, he would be able to answer this personal ambition and, at the same time, achieve the national literary recognition he had craved for many years. As a consequence, Melville possibly regarded the war –like Whitman– as his definite opportunity to speak to his contemporaries and to try to persuade the nation of the need to learn from the conflict and to create a new America free from the social and political evils he had formerly denounced in his novels.

Herman Melville *and* the Civil War

During Fort Sumter’s attack, Melville was alone at Arrowhead²¹ but this rural location did not prevent him from sharing the tensions of the opening of a war which placed “the United States ... in suspension, awaiting its own burial—or resurrection” (Parker 2002: 473).²² At such critical times, the author –whose name, given his age, appeared on the Militia lists– must have been eager to read the news indicating the initial proceedings and political decisions adopted by the Washington government. The inevitable had finally arrived and a fratricidal war had broken in the midst of a country that was no longer united.

²¹ Arrowhead was Melville’s home in Pittsfield (Massachusetts) from 1850 to 1863. There he wrote *Moby-Dick* (1851), among other texts.

²² Garner claims Melville did not hear the war had begun until the next morning (April 14th) “[b]ecause of the bad weather and because the news of Sumter did not arrive until late at night” (87).

In Pittsfield, Melville witnessed how the local Volunteer troops marched toward war, possibly feeling thankful his eldest son Malcolm was not old enough to accompany them. Unlike Whitman, Melville seems not to have participated in his contemporaries' glorification of the war in this initial phase, since, considering the first poems in *Battle-Pieces*, which we will analyze later, the poet appears to have distanced himself from these reactions being aware that the Civil War, more than bringing glory, would expose Americans to man's darkest side by turning them not only into victims of death and suffering but also into the instruments of the suffering of their fellow countrymen. By the end of 1861, there were certain naval events that must have impressed Melville. One of them was the destruction of the United States' whaling fleet, which included the sinking of some ships in which the poet had traveled in order to block the Confederates' advancement by sea. Only someone like Melville could mourn so sincerely the deaths of these ships and pay homage to them in *Battle-Pieces*, considering these were sacrifices that had to be made for the maintenance of the Union. Besides, Melville was offered a glimpse at the tragic side of the war in New York when he saw the corpse of Commander James Ward,²³ the first Union naval officer killed in the war. After all, "[i]t was one thing to cheer the Pittsfield boys off to war and to raise flags on the village green, [but it was] another to stand before the catafalque of a fellow man struck down by enemy fire" (Garner 103).

By 1862, Americans already knew the war would be long.²⁴ Melville spent this period in Pittsfield with his family, apparently reconsidering the previous poetry he had

²³ As a matter of fact, Melville may have even known Ward, as he was a colleague of his cousin Guert. However, considering that "under slightly different circumstances, the body before Herman might have been that of his cousin" (Garner 103), it is no wonder the poet was moved after seeing this scene.

²⁴ Melville expressed this concern in the following letter (from May 25th, 1862) to the youngest of his brothers, Captain Thomas Melville, in which he shows he was well updated with the events that were taking place: "Do you want to hear about the war?—The war goes bravely on. McClellan is now within fifteen miles of the rebel capital, Richmond. New Orleans is taken &c &c &c. You will see all no doubt in the papers at your Agents. But when the *end*—the wind-up—the grand pacification is coming, who knows. We beat the rascals in almost every field, & take all their ports &c, but they don't cry 'Enough!'—It looks like a long lane, with the turning quite out of sight" (*Correspondence* 378).

produced in the light of recently acquired ideas about poetry and poetics. It may have been at this point that he began thinking about writing new poems on the Civil War, a task for which he continued preparing through extensive reading and individual study.²⁵ Although Nathaniel Hawthorne complained about how the Civil War had prevented him from writing any new romances, and that, in more general terms, it was killing the present literature of the country, the author of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) was also convinced that it would bring about the emergence of new and better authors.²⁶ Melville—like Whitman—, however, would not fall into Hawthorne’s literary paralysis and, as a matter of fact, the war did not stop his creativity but possibly made him reevaluate himself in order to achieve the position of America’s national poet. Nevertheless, 1862 did not end well for Melville. At the same time that Whitman left New York for the battlefields in search of his wounded brother George, Melville was recovering from an accident²⁷ that kept him weakened and in a state of pain for some months. Garner argues that this episode may have signified a sort of death and rebirth for the poet, who, in early 1863, established parallelisms between his recovery and the important advancements the country was experiencing,²⁸ and which he interpreted as an indication of the future victory of the Union (213-214). Though Garner assumes that, by January

²⁵ For a detailed description of Melville’s possible reading interests during 1861 and 1862, see Parker 2008: 153-187.

²⁶ “It is impossible to possess one’s mind in the midst of a civil war to such a degree as to make thoughts assume life.... I feel as if this great convulsion were going to make an epoch in our literature as in everything else (if it does not annihilate all), and that when we emerge from the war-cloud there will be another and better (at least, a more national and seasonable) class of writers than the one I belong to” (Hawthorne in Garner 192).

²⁷ The *Berkshire County Eagle* described Melville’s accident thus: “On Friday forenoon last [November 7th, 1863], as Mr. Herman Melville ... was riding, in his box wagon, from his house in the village to his farm house, ... a portion of the iron work of the wagon gave way, letting down the thills about the heels of the horse. The animal, which is a young one, naturally took fright and ran, throwing Mr. Melvill [sic] violently to the ground.... Mr. M., we regret to say, was very seriously injured, having his shoulder blade broken and several ribs injured, and his whole system badly jarred” (in Parker 2002: 522).

²⁸ At that time, several laws were passed concerning the country’s economy, the distribution of public soil, higher education, and the construction of the transcontinental railroad. Also significantly, antislavery bills were approved, which signified important steps toward the emancipation of blacks that culminated in the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1st, 1863.

1863, Melville may have already begun writing some of his war poems,²⁹ it was certainly still early and difficult for him to write after such a serious injury as the one he had had. Moreover, in February, feeling he needed a change of airs, Melville was surely busy traveling between Pittsfield and New York and negotiating the details of his future house in this city, where he would eventually move with his wife and children in the fall of 1863, remaining there until the end of the war.

In New York, Melville had access to a wider range of newspapers and other sources of information about the war. When the New York Draft Riots³⁰ began, Melville was not in New York, though this did not prevent him from being moved by the incident, since he could empathize with the rioters' worries and understand their denunciations at the same time that he rejected their use of violence and the following repression with which the State responded to the events. By the end of 1863, the family had definitely established in a New York that gave the impression of being at war due to the wide display of forces of order that had resulted from the past riots. During these months, Melville may have written "Inscription For the Slain at Fredericksburgh", as well as seen the parade of the 20th Colored Troops going to war (Garner 292).

However, Melville's insight into the war came in April 1864, when the poet went on a trip to Virginia's battlefields with his brother Allan. This may be an indication that, by then, he "was far enough committed to the idea of writing about the war to feel he needed to witness it first hand" (Parker 2002: 562). In his trip, Melville was given permission to visit the Army of the Potomac in Vienna and was later invited to accompany the men on an expedition toward Aldie in search of Mosby and his

²⁹ Garner claims Melville may have written "Inscription For the Slain at Fredericksburgh" immediately after this battle in December 1862 (215).

³⁰ For a more detailed analysis of the New York Draft Riots see McPherson 609-611.

guerrillas.³¹ In this expedition, Melville met General Tyler, an experienced officer whose conversations may have been to the poet as “thumbing through an encyclopedia of the war” (Parker 2002: 572), as well as General Grant. Melville used these incidents to write some poems in *Battle-Pieces*, for instance “The Armies of the Wilderness” and, most significantly, “The Scout Toward Aldie”. Though Garner is correct in pointing that not even Whitman (or other major authors in the North) had “ridden out on such a scout as Herman” (329), we also need to consider that, at the time Melville was in this expedition, Whitman remained in the hospitals of Washington witnessing sights Melville (and others) did not see. These different experiences is what makes both authors and their respective war volumes such an interesting complement to each other, as they center on aspects of the war the other could only imagine, recording and immortalizing what the other poet does not reach out –or want– to portray. Nevertheless, it is true that, owing to these experiences, Melville went back to New York “better equipped to write his book” than ever (Garner 329).

After the expedition, Melville fell ill, but he managed to keep updated with the information that could reach him in New York since, by the end of 1864, as the presidential reelection came nearer, the debate over the continuation of the war was emphasized. Melville –like Whitman– did not sympathize with those claiming for compromise with the South, as he could not agree with the interruption of the war despite its terrible consequences. This seems to have been the general feeling among civilians in the North:

For civilians at home, war had brought anxiety, pain, want, taxation, and for many the death or mutilation of a brother, father, husband, son, lover, or friend. For all it had brought a litany of real or imagined atrocities.... The only acceptable recompense for the

³¹ John Singleton Mosby (1833-1916) and his guerrillas had become myth-like figures as well as serious threats to Union troops defending Washington (see McPherson 737-738).

painful investments on the war exchange was victory, and peace without victory rendered the suffering meaningless....

(Garner 361)

Melville may have regarded Abraham Lincoln as the “man who would end the war on the most favorable terms” (Garner 360). Like his co-citizens he envisioned the end of the war was near, which provided him with a sense of security and hope for the future of the nation. After many successful campaigns, the Confederate troops surrendered Richmond on April 3rd, 1865, a victory that was received with endless enthusiasm throughout the North. However, these triumphant celebrations were soon darkened by the assassination of Lincoln on April 15th, which increased the North’s thirst for vengeance over the South.

Now that the war was over, Melville was perfectly conscious of the difficulties and challenges the nation had to confront. Apart from the Northerners’ wish of revenge, the poet witnessed how ex-Confederate soldiers that had been released from prison were left wandering in the streets of New York, and perceived the serious difficulties emancipation would carry for ex-slaves, who would at present become “victims as well as beneficiaries of the war” (Garner 400). But, above all, Melville sympathized with the South’s devastation and suffering, and considered that the priority of the nation after the war was to carry out a careful re-union in order to heal the fragmentation of the United States and enable the construction of a better America.

The Structure of *Battle-Pieces*: A Symmetrical Asymmetry

Even though, in the “Supplement”, Melville claims he has no concern for the symmetry of his book (*Battle-Pieces* 259), *Battle-Pieces* as a whole is quite symmetrical. The volume is divided into eight sections that, together, provide readers

not only with Melville's picture of the war, but also with the challenges the country faces once the conflict has ended. These parts are: (1) a dedicatory to the "three hundred thousand" who fell for the "maintenance of the Union" (*Battle-Pieces* 3); (2) a preface where the author introduces and justifies his volume; (3) fifty-three war poems; (4) sixteen "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial"; (5) "The Scout Toward Aldie"; (6) two Reconstruction poems; (7) Melville's "Notes"; and (8) a prose "Supplement" which concludes the volume.

On the one hand, the first group of poems in *Battle-Pieces* is dedicated to the preparation, developments and closing of the war, between 1859 and 1865. In this respect, the five initial poems, from "The Portent"³² to "The March into Virginia", serve to introduce the menace of a war that is not real yet. This is particularly shown in "Apathy and Enthusiasm" and "The March into Virginia", which the poet uses to contrast the attitudes of the young, who, blinded by their excitement, are eager to fight, with the feelings of elders, who announce the terrible fate many of these soldiers will encounter and with whom Melville identifies.³³

The next pieces, from "Lyon" to "The Frenzy in the Wake", concentrate on the particular battles and developments of the war. In some of these poems, as in *Battle-Pieces* in general, Melville chooses³⁴ to include the naval side of the conflict not only by referring to major generals or battles but also by celebrating common sailors who died at sea³⁵ and lamenting the loss of ships sacrificed to the war.³⁶ It is significant that, in

³² Melville added "The Portent", which does not appear in the table of contents of the volume, after writing the "Supplement". This indicates the author was to a certain extent concerned about the symmetry of his book, since this poem acts as an opening to the volume in the same way the "Supplement" serves to conclude it.

³³ These poems differ from Whitman's recruiting ones, the speaker of which –ignoring the dark aspects of war he later experiences– contributes to convince youths to participate in the conflict.

³⁴ Just as Whitman's *Drum-Taps*, Melville's volume offers a subjective (and, therefore, partial) approach to the war, which is made evident by the particular events and individuals the poet decides to include in/exclude from *Battle-Pieces*.

³⁵ See, for example, "In the Turret", Melville's song for a "Bold sailor" who sacrificed his life for duty (*Battle-Pieces* 55).

³⁶ See "The Stone Fleet" or "The Temeraire".

most of the poems in this part, Melville juxtaposes triumph with its terrible consequences. In “Donelson”, for example, the news of battle, the good spirits of the troops and the final celebration of the Union victory stand out against the harshness of war and the crowds’ anxious searching for familiar names in the long lists of casualties and wounded. Similarly, in “Running the Batteries”, Melville highlights the “three cheers” of the victors as opposed to the “three tears” of the defeated whose town is being burned (*Battle-Pieces* 76), exposing that the victory and gladness of one side is always at the expense and sufferings of the other. This emphasizes Melville’s condemnation of violence against civilians, which is most significantly exposed in “The March to the Sea” and “The Frenzy in the Wake”, Melville’s description of Sherman’s abuse of power and destruction during his 1864 and 1865 campaigns through Georgia and the Carolinas. By the end of this part, there has been a transition from the innocence of “Apathy and Enthusiasm” and “The March into Virginia” to the enlightenment of “The College Colonel”, which describes the return of a regiment and its captain. These men, who have been away for two years, appear “battered, and worn, / Like castaway sailors” as they have witnessed the deaths of many of their comrades during this period. The horrors they have been exposed to, however, have made them discover the truths of war (“Ah heaven!—what *truth* to him” [*Battle-Pieces* 121]), at the same time that they have made them acquire a higher degree of maturity.

The last poems in this section (from “The Fall of Richmond” to “America”) expose the closing of the war and the uncertainty at the future of the nation. While reflecting the North’s enthusiasm at the capture of Richmond, Melville does not participate in this celebration, as—in the same way as he had done in “The Fall of Richmond”—he juxtaposes it with the suffering of the South (e.g. “A city in flags for a city in flames / ... *Sing and pray*” [*Battle-Pieces* 135]). Moreover, the poem ends with

uncertainty at the future of the nation, since, because “God is in Heaven, and Grant in the Town”, it is Grant’s (and, therefore, human) law the one to be applied now that the war is over, a statement that acts as a warning against any possible irresponsible imposition of law by the North after its victory. It is worth noting that it is approximately at this stage of the development of the war that Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* ends³⁷ pointing, like Melville’s work, toward the need for democratic re-union. However, *Battle-Pieces* does not stop at this point, as it not only includes Melville’s response to –or rather Melville’s mirroring of– the Northerners’ reactions to the murder of president Lincoln, but also continues emphasizing the need to be more compassionate than ever with the South after his assassination. It is interesting that Melville does not respond to such a crucial event by producing an elegy of Lincoln –as Whitman does.³⁸ What he does instead is a description of the reaction of the North in order to warn against and, ultimately, mediate in front of, the Northerners’ increasing thirst for vengeance over the South. In this concluding part, Melville also celebrates the restoration of peace, at the same time that he highlights its fragility and the difficulties for authentic re-union. In this respect, although “The Muster” presents the picture of an “Abrahamic river” whose waters eventually merge, in “Magnanimity Baffled”, this reconciliatory image³⁹ is disrupted, since, in this poem, it is finally impossible to bring

³⁷ Whitman published *Drum-Taps* in March 1865 and, therefore, the volume could not capture events of national importance that took place in the following months, one of these being Lincoln’s assassination. As we have previously explained, Whitman aimed to complement the initial volume with *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, published in October of the same year. Consequently, we may consider that, in chronological terms, Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* ends in Melville’s “A Canticle”.

³⁸ Whitman wrote four elegies on Lincoln’s death: “Hush’d Be the Camps To-day” (1865), “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (1865 or 1866), “O Captain! My Captain!” (1865 or 1866), and “This Dust Was Once the Man” (1871).

³⁹ The image portrayed in this poem is that of an anonymous “Victor” offering his hand to his “foe” now that the fight has ended, as an “honest” sign of reconciliation and of recognition of the heroic qualities the latter displayed in battle (*Battle-Pieces* 156). Though the Northerner who speaks in this poem means to honor his rival as an equal to him with this gesture (i.e. “Man honors man” [*Battle-Pieces* 156]), the process is not eventually completed, as he discovers his enemy is in fact dead immediately after reaching his hand.

together the two opposing sides because they are not at equal levels.⁴⁰ The last poem in this section is “America”, which represents the country as a mother who, feeling “Pale at the fury of her brood”, falls into a profound sleep where she encounters a horrible vision of terror. This nightmare, however, purifies America instructing it and allowing it to awake “into promoted life”⁴¹ (*Battle-Pieces* 161).

Following these fifty-three war poems, we reach the cluster “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial”, which contains sixteen inscriptions Melville uses as tribute to the anonymous individuals who gave their lives defending the Union or who contributed to help their country and co-citizens during the war years.⁴² Though these poems seem to be exclusively dedicated to Unionists, some of them retain certain ambiguity as, on the one hand, they are apparently committed to the Union but, on the other, they are also applicable to Confederates because they do not specify which army the fallen individual fought for. This omission of information is used strategically to include –although not explicitly– a lament for *all* unknown individuals who died in the war displaying noble qualities.⁴³ Thus, in “On the Grave” Melville sings the beauty, friendliness and good character of a young Cavalry Officer who died in Virginia, without giving further details about which army he fought for. It is also interesting that, at this point –and unlike Melville’s initial war poems we have previously analyzed, in which youth is synonymous to innocence and ignorance–, the speaker equals youth to wisdom reinforcing the idea that soldiers have gone through an important learning process due

⁴⁰ Melville’s “Magnanimity Baffled” resembles Whitman’s “Reconciliation”, as it describes a similar scene where the poet encounters and kisses “the white face” of an enemy –“a man divine as myself” (*Leaves* 321)– who is dead.

⁴¹ The conclusion of “America” is reiterated in Melville’s closing lines to the “Supplement” signaling its significance to the whole *Battle-Pieces*: “Let us pray that the terrible historic tragedy of our times may not have been enacted without instructing our whole beloved country through terror and pity . . .” (*Battle-Pieces* 272).

⁴² “The Mound by the Lake”, for example, celebrates the kindness of a woman who became a mother-like figure for the soldiers she welcomed and comforted in her home.

⁴³ This willingness to include both Union and Confederate victims of the war is complemented by Melville’s invitation in the “Supplement” to the South to celebrate “the memory of brave men who with signal personal disinterestedness warred in her behalf” (*Battle-Pieces* 263).

to the war. Similarly, in “On a natural Monument”, the poet celebrates a “nameless brave” (Northerner or Southerner) whose deeds have been forgotten after the war. With this poem, Melville not only remembers –and makes readers remember– these men but also attributes them “fame” as individuals who “did endure— / ... when fortitude was vain” (*Battle-Pieces* 179). Melville’s intention to celebrate valiant anonymous individuals can be traced back to his novel *Israel Potter* (1855), in which the author pays homage to a brave soldier whose entire life is affected by the War of Independence and who dies absolutely unrecognized by his fellow citizens. Knowing what neglect was, in *Battle-Pieces*, Melville –like Whitman– continues including (poetic) monuments dedicated to the also neglected men who died in the Civil War.⁴⁴ This disposition to recognize the qualities of the enemy is the attitude needed to make the future re-union of Americans possible, a behavior Melville –as poet/guide of the nation– exemplifies.

The next part of *Battle-Pieces* corresponds to “The Scout Toward Aldie”, which appears in capitals in the table of contents of the volume. This poem is inspired by Melville’s expedition to Virginia’s battlefields in April 1864, which provided him with first-hand material he would later *re-create* in this poem. By being placed immediately after “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial” and before the Reconstruction poems, and by depicting such a scene as the one we are going to consider, the poem points toward the future re-union of the nation and the neutralization of differences between the North and the South. Thus, Melville uses this lengthy poem to establish a transition from the horrors of war he has already explored at this point to the possibilities of reconciliation for the future of the nation. This is clearly stated in one of the central⁴⁵ episodes of the

⁴⁴ As pointed out before, Melville portrays in *Battle-Pieces* the sea aspects of the Civil War, which is something Whitman does not include in *Drum-Taps*. In the section “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial” this is seen in poems like “A Requiem for Soldiers lost in Ocean Transports” or “Commemorative of a Naval Victory”.

⁴⁵ This scene is described between stanzas 69 and 77 (*Battle-Pieces* 211-215) and it is central to the poem both in terms of structure (the poem has a total of 107 stanzas) and significance.

poem, in which soldiers of confronted sides are able to abandon their differences, eat together, “curse the war” (*Battle-Pieces* 219) and create a moment of bonding and comradeship that highlights the absurdity of the fratricidal war they are involved in:

Ah! why should good fellows foemen be?

And who would dream that foes they were—

Larking and singing so friendly then—

A family likeness in every face.

(*Battle-Pieces* 213)

By placing “The Scout Toward Aldie” outside the main body of battle-pieces⁴⁶ and before the Reconstruction poems, Melville is able to claim this episode of reunion as an example of the type of national reconciliation that America needs to enact now that the war is over, an argument he continues pursuing in the following section.

The fourth part of *Battle-Pieces* consists of two Reconstruction poems, “Lee in the Capitol” and “A Meditation”, in both of which Melville puts forward poetically some of the arguments he develops in the prose “Supplement”. On the one hand, “Lee in the Capitol”, based on Lee’s apparition in front of the United States Congress in February 1866, gives voice to the disempowered South. However, in this poem, Melville escapes from a historically accurate portrayal of the event and rewrites Lee’s speech, making the poetic Lee assume the opportunity the actual Lee, in Melville’s eyes, had not been inclined to fulfill, that is, to speak on behalf of the South and express the concerns of its people. Melville presents the Confederate General as a stoic figure who accepts the conditions imposed by the North while trying to accommodate into his new situation of loss (of his cause, comrades, richness and power). The poem acts both

⁴⁶ Melville could have placed this poem in the war section of *Battle-Pieces*, as it refers to the Union army’s prosecution of Mosby’s guerrillas in 1864 and, therefore, like the other poems in this part, it is related to a specific Civil War event. However, the poet does not include any date in this poem, attributing to it a wider dimension that makes it a transition between the war and Reconstruction.

as a vehicle through which Melville presents the challenges ahead of the United States now that the war is over, and also as a platform from which he defends the South. In this respect, Melville/Lee claims the need to save the North from its own victory and assigns to it the responsibility of eventually healing the current fragmentation of the nation, as it is the North that needs to empathize with a South that has been left in a state of destruction and desolation. This speech, thus, serves Melville/Lee to highlight the necessity to avoid perpetuating hatred and divisions in the name of the Union during the Reconstruction period. On the other hand, the Northern voice of “A Meditation” articulates the feelings of “Horror and anguish” that made men betray their own blood “for the civil strife” (*Battle-Pieces* 241), at the same time that it expresses the moments of human bonding that took place during the war in which “foeman unto foeman called” in order to smoke “The pipe of peace” (*Battle-Pieces* 242). Besides, the poem celebrates great people in both armies by including the human side of a Confederate soldier who valiantly stopped in the middle of battle to rescue a wounded Union boy. Maybe because of all of this, the poem ends with a mixture of skepticism and optimism, as it reiterates –like “Lee in the Capitol”– the need to stop blaming the South in order to advance toward a new reconciliatory future where accusations, hatred and divisions are abandoned. These two poems are immediately followed by the “Notes”; but *Battle-Pieces* concludes with a prose “Supplement” in which Melville speaks in his own voice⁴⁷ and which he uses to address openly most of the anxieties he has voiced in the previous poems with the aim to instruct the nation so that it can be finally re-united. Now that men have stopped fighting, the poet will have the last say⁴⁸ and assume the role of mediator in the Reconstruction of the country.

⁴⁷ This supposes a change from the previous poems in *Battle-Pieces*, in which Melville includes several voices (among which he disguises his own) with the intention of reflecting the multiple and frequently opposing perspectives of his compatriots on the Civil War.

⁴⁸ Melville, indeed, *has* the last say in *Battle-Pieces* with the “Supplement”.

The Poet as Mediator: The “Supplement” to *Battle-Pieces*

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry”

In front of the increasing call for vengeance against the South after the war, Melville saw the need to append to his volume a prose supplement that enabled him to participate in this debate. This document was probably written shortly after the first anniversary of Lee’s surrender⁴⁹ and it is an overtly political essay in which Melville “hymn[s] the politicians” (*Battle-Pieces* 259) by encouraging them to apply prudence in their treatment to the South. Despite Melville’s claims that the “Supplement” disrupts the symmetry of his book,⁵⁰ this essay, in fact, is an explicit conclusion to the volume as it vindicates the need to learn from the war and to construct a better future for the United States, a responsibility Melville places entirely on the North, which has to be magnanimous in its victory assuming that there were “[b]arbarities⁵¹ ... for which the Southern people can hardly be held responsible” as they were “perpetrated by ruffians in their name” (*Battle-Pieces* 264). Therefore, Melville becomes at this point mediator between these confronted Americans, refusing to act “on paper a part any way akin to that of the live dog to the dead lion” even though he celebrates the triumph of the Union because it implies “an advance for our whole country and for humanity” (*Battle-Pieces* 264).

⁴⁹ Lee’s surrender to Grant at Appomattox took place on April 9th, 1865.

⁵⁰ In the initial lines of the “Supplement” Melville indicates: “Were I fastidiously anxious for the symmetry of this book, it would close with the notes. But the times are such that patriotism—not free from solicitude—urges a claim overriding all literary scruples” (*Battle-Pieces* 259). This will find echoes in the author’s assertion in *Billy Budd, Sailor* that “[t]he symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial” (405). Such a statement is organic both to the court testimonies or depositions Melville included in “Benito Cereno” (1856), and to the several appendixes he added to *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924).

⁵¹ Melville is referring here to Lincoln’s assassination, which, as described in “The Martyr”, increased the Northerners’ desire to enact revenge over the South, which was collectively blamed for the event.

In the “Supplement”, Melville deals with such an important issue as slavery, as well as with the challenges the nation has to face in front of the present emancipation of slaves after the Civil War, which is a subject Whitman entirely avoids in *Drum-Taps*. Melville, however, not only anticipates the possible problems derived from emancipation but he –unlike Whitman⁵²– is also capable of moving away from racial prejudices (as he had uncompromisingly done in his previous writings) and of claiming ex-slaves are part of America and, therefore, of the future of the nation. However, Melville realizes that the coexistence of the two races in the South will be a troublesome matter, though he trusts institutions will, with time, react and allow future generations of blacks to reap the benefits from emancipation. This belief in the common destiny of different Americans is the reason why the poet highlights the need to contribute to the immediate wellbeing of the whole nation (including ex-slaves) by focusing exclusively on how the North is going to treat the South after the war. Thus, Melville gives the North the entire responsibility to act with prudence in order to allow the birth of a truly democratic and united United States after the war, in which Southerners will again be represented in Congress and allowed to participate in the political debates of their country.

Through the “Supplement”, then, Melville takes part in the political life of America as one of the many “thoughtful patriots” (*Battle-Pieces* 272) who expect their opinion to be heard and taken into consideration by their fellow citizens. Maintaining that just like “[t]he years of the war tried our devotion to the Union; the time of peace may test the sincerity of our faith in democracy” (*Battle-Pieces* 271), the poet tries to persuade his contemporaries of the need to accomplish a true renewal of the country,

⁵² Although in “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors” Whitman gives voice to a former slave, the poem is eventually unable to move beyond racial stereotypes and presents a “hardly human” black woman who contemplates the marching of the Union army (*Leaves* 318).

praying that “the terrible historic tragedy of our time may not have been enacted without instructing our whole beloved country through terror and pity; and [that] may fulfillment verify in the end those expectations which kindle the bards of Progress and Humanity” (*Battle-Pieces* 272). Just like Whitman with *Drum-Taps*, with *Battle-Pieces* Melville tries to become a “bard of Progress and Humanity”, even though his contemporaries would again refuse to listen to his voice.

The Reception of *Battle-Pieces*

*Yet this I do affirm, that from all which I have written I
never receiv'd the least Benefit, or the least Advantage,
but, on the contrary, have felt sometimes the Effects of
Malice and Misfortune.*

Abraham Cowley, Preface to *Cutter of Coleman-Street*

Melville must have had great expectations at the publication of *Battle-Pieces*, thinking his volume had the potential to become successful and turn him into an acknowledged poet. However, with the first reviews he realized his poems would “never ... really touch the common heart” (Henry Gansevoort in Parker 2002: 601). Considering his verse was “pregnant but not artistic” (in Parker 2002: 618), most reviews agreed that “[n]ature did not make him a poet” (in Maden), going as far as to criticize the specific words Melville had made to rhyme in his poems.⁵³ Differently, William Dean Howells criticized *Battle-Pieces* as a detached portrayal of the war,⁵⁴

⁵³ Melville’s decision to make “law” and “Shenandoah” rhyme turned him into an object of ridicule among reviewers. While the *American Literary Gazette and Publishers Circular* of Philadelphia “decried the rhymes as ‘fearful’”, the *Independent* “enumerated the various words Melville had rhymed with ‘Shenandoah,’ ‘regardless of incompatibility,’ then added that ‘Shenandoah’ made ‘another Mormon marriage with half-a dozen unfit terminations ...’” (in Parker 2002: 618).

⁵⁴ It is interesting that, in the same way that Howells criticized Melville’s *Battle-Pieces* for failing to capture the emotional dimension of the war, he also criticized Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* despite capturing it (see Howells 1865).

arguing that the volume failed to move readers because it remained too vague and distant:

Is it possible—you ask yourself, after running over all these celebrative, inscriptive, and memorial verses—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, parenthetic bulletin-boards, and tortured humanity shedding, not words and blood, but words alone?

(in Parker 2002: 623)

Nevertheless, there were also –though not many– positive reviews of *Battle-Pieces* in general and of some of its poems in particular. The Boston *Traveller*, for example, stated that “little poetry that is worth preserving” had been produced by the war, “but Mr. Melville’s poems are an exception to the rule, for they have both vigor and sweetness, and often rise to the element of grandeur” (in Parker 2002: 619). “Donelson” and “Sheridan at Cedar Creek” received the praise (though also the condemnation) of reviewers, some of whom qualified them as the best poems in the volume and which, therefore, allowed the reader to forgive Melville’s “multitude of ... poetic sins” (*The Albion* in Parker 2002: 620).

On the other hand, the “Supplement” was met mostly with opposition, though there were some who shared Melville’s thoughts over the need to carry out a non-punitive Reconstruction. This was the case of Henry Raymond, editor of the *New York Times*, who praised the “Supplement” and the volume in general for “mak[ing] the more pleasant a contribution to the literature of the war” (in Parker 2002: 616). Similarly, the *New York Herald* argued that “far from spoiling the symmetry of his book, this supplement completes it, and converses [sic] it into what is better than a good book—

into a good and patriotic action” (in Parker 2002: 617). Nonetheless, the “Supplement” outraged the very same group of readers it tried to persuade, that is Radical Republicans, as they fervently opposed Melville’s views about prudence and magnanimity toward the defeated South and dismissed him as “mischievous” (New York *Independent* in Parker 2002: 617-618).

Battle-Pieces, then, added to the list of Melville’s disappointments, and his intention to intervene in the instruction of his fellow citizens could not be satisfied because of the poor sales of the volume. Instead, Melville had to “acknowledge the almost universal opinion that he was no poet, and as the months passed he had to face the book’s failure to sell more than a few hundred copies” (Parker 2002: 624). Like Whitman, Melville received –again– America’s dismissal of the work he had probably considered would definitely gain him the respect of his countrymen and a place in American letters.

CONCLUSIONS: COMPARING *DRUM-TAPS* AND *BATTLE-PIECES*

As we have seen, *Drum-Taps* and *Battle-Pieces* constitute two central literary responses to the American Civil War by two of the United States' most significant poets of the nineteenth century. It is not rare that both Walt Whitman and Herman Melville felt the need to write about the Civil War, since they considered this event had the potential of transforming the history of their country. Though both *Drum-Taps* and *Battle-Pieces* were published almost simultaneously –the former in May 1865 and the latter in August 1866–, they present considerable differences which reflect the personal intentions (and contradictions) of their authors. After analyzing *Drum-Taps* and *Battle-Pieces* separately in the preceding sections of our paper, the aim of these concluding pages is to establish a dialogue between these two collections of poems in order to carry out a comparative analysis of the role of the two authors.

Drum-Taps and *Battle-Pieces* may be read as complementing each other, since they offer two different portrayals of the same historical event. Adopting their own point of view in their renderings of the war, both Whitman and Melville incorporate aspects the other author leaves aside or deliberately chooses not to include, enabling readers to go through different experiences and dimensions of the conflict and to obtain a more critical vision of the historical event. This offers the possibility of constructing part of the picture of the American Civil War, even if, in both cases, it is through a Northern perspective and permeated with the personal tensions and contradictions the two poets endured in such a critical situation for themselves and their country. Both Whitman and Melville felt the need to write about the war and to create poetic monuments to the thousands of unknown individuals who lost their lives in it. With their texts, Whitman and Melville engaged in the process of rescuing from the “eternal darkness” of the grave (*Memoranda* 8) those anonymous men who had been neglected

by the big forces of war, in order to make them visible and acknowledged by their nation. Whitman asserted that the million human beings dead during the war were obliterated under “the significant word UNKNOWN”, adding that in some cemeteries “nearly *all* the dead are Unknown” and wondering if any “... visible, material monument can ever fittingly commemorate [them]” (*Memoranda* 103-104). Whitman and Melville created their personal poetic monuments with *Drum-Taps* and *Battle-Pieces*¹ and tried to rescue these unknown men from their anonymity. Choosing to pay attention to different elements, both poets included the events or experiences by which they had felt most moved, creating their own representations of the war, transmitting them to the nation, and expecting the United States to incorporate their voices and learn from their poems.

Why Poetry? What Poetry?

But battle can heroes and bards restore.

Herman Melville, *Battle-Pieces*

If it is true that it would have been difficult for Whitman and Melville not to write about the Civil War, it is by no means strange they chose the same literary genre to articulate their responses. As Hershel Parker has noticed, still in the 1860s, “critics who hoped for the emergence of great American literature were looking for it to come in the form of poetry” (2002: 402-403), which made writers regard poetry –especially epic poetry– as the definite form to achieve immortality in literature (Parker 2002: 403). We know that Whitman and Melville shared a similar yearning for recognition, since in their literary career before the Civil War they had continuously tried to be embraced by

¹ Whitman’s *Memoranda During the War* is another attempt to create literary monuments to the dead of the Civil War and to record part of the hospital drama between 1863 and 1865, which –Whitman believes– “deserves indeed to be recorded—([though] I but suggest it)” (*Memoranda* 7).

their readers and celebrated as great American authors. After encountering only the disdain of their contemporaries, Walt Whitman and Herman Melville were probably expecting another chance to present their talent to a nation that, in spite of their gift and laboriousness, would continue receiving them with dismissal. The Civil War must have precipitated such opportunity. Due to the crisis the country was experiencing at the moment, both authors hoped to be eventually greeted by an America that was prepared to listen to their voices.

Though writing about the war was possibly a necessity for both authors, they might have also expected such historically central event to potentially spread part of its immortality to them and to their volumes of poems. Moreover, the Civil War offered the perfect theme and context to create an epic poem that would celebrate the United States. Whitman had already done this the previous decade with *Leaves of Grass* (1855), with which he desired to respond to Emerson's call for a genuinely American poet and poem.² If it is true, therefore, that the question "Why Poetry?" is not so revealing if applied to Whitman, it is also certain that *Drum-Taps* signified a turn from the more romantic voice the poet had used in the 1855, 1856 and 1860 editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Without fully abandoning his characteristically prophetic voice,³ in *Drum-Taps*, Whitman acquires a more realistic and even pathetic tone. In this collection of poems, the poet chooses not to celebrate the greatness of specific battles or figures of the war, but to praise unknown individuals of both sides who suffer the consequences of these major events. This is something organic to his previous work in *Leaves of Grass*, where

² Just as he had called for America's intellectual independence in "The American Scholar" (1837), in his essay "The Poet" (1844) Emerson defined the characteristics and function a national poet should assume claiming that "[w]e have yet had no genius in America ... which knew the value of our incomparable materials.... Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for meters" (*Essays and Lectures* 465). These essays inspired young Walt Whitman, who expected his 1855 *Leaves of Grass* to become the epic poem of the United States and himself, therefore, its poet.

³ This prophetic voice emerges especially in the first and last group of poems of *Drum-Taps*, though, as we have seen, it is juxtaposed with a more realistic voice that reminds readers of the non-glorious side of the war.

Whitman had focused on random anonymous people whom he had struggled to dignify. In order to continue with his homage to common people, in *Drum-Taps*, Whitman makes use of the experiences he was exposed to during the years he spent in Washington, which bring him to commemorate not presidents, generals, or glory in battle but the humblest men who died nameless and uncelebrated. In this respect, the poems do not celebrate heroes *in* battle, as they concentrate either on its preceding moments or its aftermath but not on the fight itself. This serves Whitman to highlight the bravery and noble qualities soldiers embodied, together with the tragic consequences these men encountered in the Civil War. Nonetheless, Whitman's portrayal of the conflict is characterized by a certain degree of unintentional irony: if it clear that, in *Drum-Taps* (and in other later prose writings), Whitman demystified the war and realized it did not lead to personal glory but, instead, to suffering, death and anonymity, it is also true that he expected the war would conduct him to literary glory, since he considered it was his (definite?) opportunity to rise from public neglect. This question can also be applied to Melville, who saw in the war a new opportunity to achieve the recognition of his compatriots. However, in the same way as it brought anonymity and neglect to unknown soldiers, the Civil War would also result in the neglect of both Walt Whitman and Herman Melville.

The question "Why Poetry?", then, is probably more relevant if applied to Melville. As we saw earlier, the Civil War brought Melville the opportunity to renew himself in the eyes of readers who kept associating his name to his earlier literary production of adventures in exotic islands in the Pacific, and who continued forgetting his many attempts to write "Truth[s] uncompromisingly told" (*Billy Budd, Sailor* 405).⁴

⁴ In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne from June 1851, Melville –talking about *Moby-Dick*– complains that "[t]hough I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter" (*Correspondence* 192), adding the following: "All Fame is patronage. Let me be infamous: there is no patronage in *that*. What 'reputation' H. M.

Leaving the unpublished *Poems* (written ca. 1860) aside, *Battle-Pieces* signified a turn from his previous career as a prose writer. After failing to achieve the immortality he expected first with *Moby-Dick* (1851) and later with *Pierre* (1852), Melville –like Whitman– maybe considered that the Civil War offered him the perfect context to reinvent himself in the midst of such a process of renewal, he thought, the nation was also undergoing. In this respect, his turn to poetry can have been inspired by his desire to remove not only his readers’ almost-automatic association of his name with *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) but also to clean away the scorn with which his other works in prose had been reviewed. Therefore, taking the opportunity the Civil War offered, Melville saw in poetry a vehicle to start anew, even though it was, by no means, a new genre to him.⁵ However, Melville, unlike Whitman, decided to depict an apparently more epic dimension of the conflict in *Battle-Pieces* by focusing on specific battles and on leading Civil War (mostly Union) heroes. Melville established a strict chronological ordering of the poems, which included the date of the event they referred to and, in some cases, a short explanation (given in the “Notes” section) about aspects the poet considered could need further clarification. Nevertheless, at the same time, the volume is not controlled by a single dominant voice corresponding to that of the narrator. The poems in *Battle-Pieces* are polyphonic, as they incorporate a variety of voices that intend to reflect the different ideologies, opinions, beliefs and expectations that different types of Americans had about the war, rejecting, thus, one single dominant narrative or official version of the events described. In this sense, although it may be true that some of these voices, at some points, make *Battle-Pieces* acquire an epic tone, this multiplicity of points of view –among which Melville disguises his own– also serves to

has is horrible. Think of it! To go down to posterity is bad enough, any way; but to go down as a ‘man who lived among the cannibals!’” (*Correspondence* 193).

⁵ As we saw earlier, Melville had been familiar with poetry since his early youth and had frequently engaged in extensive periods of study of poetry and poetics during his life, especially in the late 1850s and 1860s.

counteract the dominant and unquestioned heroic tone that characterizes traditional epic poems. By the end of the volume, therefore, readers realize *Battle-Pieces* is in fact no celebration of the Civil War or America, but a portrayal of the human costs of the conflict and a homage to unknown individuals of both sides. Moreover, as we will see later, this volume enables Melville to participate in the debates the United States was forced to face after the war, allowing him to warn his contemporaries about the necessity to conduct reconciliation in a responsible manner.

While both Whitman and Melville saw in poetry the genre to respond to the American Civil War as well as the potential vehicle for achieving immortality in American literature and, in the particular case of Melville, for renewing himself in the eyes of his readers, both Whitman and Melville adopted this genre in different ways. In the case of Whitman, he abandoned his celebratory voice of the 1850s in order to adopt a more realistic and pathetic style, whereas Melville, on the other hand, engaged in an apparently epic portrayal of the war only to, eventually, subvert from within his poems this epic and celebratory point of view.

Immediacy vs. Historical Perspective; Praying vs. Warning

A major difference between *Drum-Taps* and *Battle-Pieces* is the way these volumes were composed, which relates to the intention Whitman and Melville might have had when writing their poems as well as to the tone and point of view they used. In the case of *Drum-Taps*, it permeates a feeling of vividness and immediacy that reflects the intensity with which Walt Whitman might have gone through the events that inspired these poems. In the midst of the war's "convulsiveness"⁶ (*Memoranda* 105), Whitman felt he had to record his experiences and transmit them with the same

⁶ "Convulsiveness" was the word Whitman thought offered a best definition of the Civil War, as he saw the conflict as a "convulsive struggle for Unity among opposing sides of the same identity" (*Memoranda* 133).

emotional power as he had lived them. Such was his obsession that, during the years in the hospitals, he kept small notebooks in which he entered annotations that, later, enabled him to re-capture and recreate the events he had witnessed in a similar way as to how he had experienced them. Moreover, this eagerness for recording and transmitting immediacy and emotional intensity hastened him to produce *Drum-Taps* as soon as he could, since he wanted readers to have the war present while reading the volume so that his poems could move them by touching the recent memories and personal losses each had experienced. Thus, believing that publication had to be done while the Civil War was still fresh in the national imaginary, he rushed to publish *Drum-Taps* immediately after the fall of Richmond.⁷ Nevertheless, in wanting to reflect the vividness of the war as he experienced it, Whitman fails to pronounce himself about the responsibilities the nation has to assume after the conflict as well as about the challenges the United States has to face to promote true reconciliation among Americans and to ensure future democracy. Therefore, despite his use of the term *democracy* and his almost desperate call for this idea to be central again in the country, Whitman never defines the type of democracy he expects or the kind of equality he envisions among Americans; neither does he make explicit the type of Americans who are included in his imagined democratic society. As we saw earlier, hospitals constituted for Whitman democratic experiments in which the need for love neutralized differences of class, age, geographical origins (and even race in some instances)⁸ among men who were equalled by their suffering and need of human warmth. However, not even when talking about hospitals does Whitman define the type of democracy he

⁷ As we saw earlier, such rush in the publication of *Drum-Taps* made Whitman leave aside one of the most crucial events of the war, that is, Lincoln's murder. This event was recorded later in *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, which was appended to the original volume in October 1865.

⁸ In a few letters, Whitman referred to black soldiers in the hospitals, whom he nursed and to whom he offered his affection in the same way as he did to white Northerners and Southerners. Nevertheless, it is clear that, for Whitman, the main beauty and interest of hospitals was centered on his satisfaction at seeing and bringing Northerners and Southerners (and also Americans from the East and West) together.

believes the country needs to assume. Despite his optimism and hope for the United States, Whitman never indicates how reconciliation will be accomplished or the difficulties this reunion should address, which makes the concluding part of *Drum-Taps* remain vague as to what type of future the poet envisions for America and in what ways he wants the country to be truly democratic.⁹ Consequently, *Drum-Taps* remains closer to a prayer for peace or re-union than to an explicit statement of Whitman's political convictions about the future of the country (cf. Melville's "Supplement" or his Reconstruction poems) or to a personal involvement of the poet in the political debates of the period.

In the case of Melville, *Battle-Pieces* offers a rendering of the Civil War that differs from Whitman's intention of capturing and transmitting to the rest of society the vividness with which he experienced certain events. In this respect, Melville's poems include a historical perspective that allows poet and readers to detach themselves from the events narrated by placing these in the past and to concentrate on the future of the nation after the war. Thus, whereas Whitman's main emphasis in *Drum-Taps* is placed *during* the war,¹⁰ Melville's *Battle-Pieces* stresses the period *after* the war,¹¹ using the Civil War to instruct about the possibility of America's renewal and to participate in the debates of the Reconstruction. In order to achieve this indoctrinating process, Melville

⁹ In his essay "Future History of the United States, growing out of the War—(My Speculations)", Whitman argues that "[t]he summing-up of the tremendous moral and military perturbations of 1861-'65 ... is, that they all now launch The United States fairly forth, consistently with the entirety of Civilization and Humanity ... leading the fleet of the Modern and Democratic, on the seas and voyages of the Future" (*Memoranda* 133). Whitman, however, never reveals what values the United States must represent in order to become a leading "Modern and Democratic" country.

¹⁰ Though, as we have seen, Whitman also devotes a considerable amount of poems to the end of the war, the main emphasis in *Drum-Taps* is placed in the second group of poems (see our analysis of the structure of *Drum-Taps*), which describe the immediate consequences of the battle. An indication of this is the poem "The Wound-Dresser", which—as we have already argued—is central to the volume both in terms of position and significance.

¹¹ Though the longest part of *Battle-Pieces* is the one formed by the poems relating to the Civil War (from "The Portent" to the section "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial"), Melville uses this portrait of the conflict to make readers learn from it and be seduced into sharing the arguments about the future of the United States he exposes afterwards. Thus, as we saw earlier, "The Scout Toward Aldie" serves as a transition between the Civil War and the Reconstruction poems and leads to the "Supplement" where Melville articulates in his own voice his views about how Reconstruction should be conducted.

pictures the war as an event belonging to the past –even though just a year had passed between the end of the war and the publication of his volume–, using a historical perspective that enables readers to see the conflict not emotionally but as a historical whole. This false time perspective invites a reading of the war from a certain distance, warning the nation against an emotional response to the Civil War¹² and allowing a less immediate analysis of the conflict in order to facilitate the instruction of his readers. With this historical perspective, Melville adopts a warning tone from the beginning of the volume¹³ that differs from Whitman’s participation in the exultation of his contemporaries at the opening of the war and from his enthusiastic cheering of men to participate in the conflict.¹⁴ Melville believes this instructive process can allow a non-punitive reconciliation between North and South, together with a responsible legislation that respects the advancement of those who integrate the United States, that is, not only of Northerners and Southerners in general but especially of recently emancipated slaves. Whereas Whitman silenced such important issue as the future of slaves in the United States,¹⁵ Melville connected their fate to the destiny of the rest of Americans, incorporating them, therefore, in the definition of Americanness and considering them part of the future of the nation. This, however, did not prevent Melville from being aware of the enormous difficulties blacks would have to face in the years following the war. This historical perspective included in *Battle-Pieces*, then, makes it possible for

¹² Similarly, in “The Martyr”, Melville also warns America about the danger of actually giving expression to the immediate thirst for revenge over the South felt by Northerners after Lincoln’s assassination.

¹³ As we saw earlier, in the initial poems of *Battle-Pieces* (e.g. “Apathy and Enthusiasm” and “The March into Virginia”), Melville juxtaposes the enthusiasm and inexperience of youths, who perceive the war as a way to acquire glory, with the sadness of more mature men, who know the real consequences of war and with whom the poet identifies.

¹⁴ Without knowing yet what war is, Whitman shares the enthusiasm of his contemporaries at the beginning of the conflict, though, as we have seen, he also questions at this point this idealizing portrayal by pointing toward the tragedies he later unfolds.

¹⁵ Despite condemning slavery and claiming for racial equality in the years previous to the war (especially in his 1855 *Leaves of Grass* and in the newspaper articles he wrote during the 1850s), after the Civil War, Whitman became more conservative and frequently avoided referring to blacks at all, a change that reflects, as Reynolds states, “the inconsistencies of the politics of the moment” (469). In the few remarks that survive, Whitman condemned “the nigger[’s]” incapacity to “do something for himself” and recognized that, although “I do not wish to say one word and will not say one word against the blacks ... the blacks can never be to me what the whites are.... The whites are my brothers & I love them” (Reynolds 471).

Melville to transcend his own (and Whitman's) plea that the Civil War may teach America, by involving himself directly in the debates of the nation after the war. As a consequence, Whitman's prayer in *Drum-Taps* becomes a warning in Melville's *Battle-Pieces*, since Melville goes beyond Whitman's plea for peace and re-union and participates in the political debates of his country reminding his contemporaries of the challenges the United States faces after the war as well as suggesting to them what kind of pacification and Reconstruction he believes the nation should aim at.

To sum up, whereas Whitman's principal objective with *Drum-Taps* was to capture the emotional impact with which he witnessed the scenes that inspired his poems, and to transmit that impact to the rest of his compatriots in order to facilitate their learning while the war was still warm in the national imaginary, Melville's concern is to enable his fellow Americans to perceive the Civil War as a historical whole so that they can be instructed by the episodes he has described as well as by his direct participation in the present political and social debates of the United States. Both Whitman and Melville, thus, saw themselves as important pieces in this process of enlightenment, since they believed that poets had an essential function as instruments for the instruction of Americans and for the improvement of the United States.

The Role of the Poet

As we have seen, whereas Melville meant his text to extend its political influence into the early postbellum years, Whitman's *Drum-Taps* only reaches up to the victory of the Union, without even including Lincoln's murder. As we described earlier, such rush in the publication of *Drum-Taps* responds to Whitman's eagerness to produce the volume while the war was still fresh in his readers' minds, while, on the contrary, Melville's choice for situating the Civil War in the past relates to his willingness to have

readers analyze it with a certain degree of historical perspective and as a historical whole. However, despite these differences in the span of time their texts cover, both poets considered they had an essential function to perform in relation to the future of their nation, which brought them to assume the role of mediators and instructors of their co-citizens at a period they believed was full of possibilities for the United States to renew itself. At the beginning of our paper, we argued that both Whitman's *Drum-Taps* and Melville's *Battle-Pieces* acted as instruments for the reconciliation of their nation, the serious fragmentation of which had culminated in the Civil War. Now, after having developed our analysis of both authors and volumes, we are prepared to analyze the type of reconciliation these poets envisioned for the United States after the war.

In the case of Walt Whitman, this function of instruction and mediation was closely related to his experiences in the hospitals, which he perceived were an experiment in his ideal society of comrades. In that context, the poet became the source (as well as the recipient) of love of men who were in need of warmth and affection. Becoming a nurse and a "sustainer of spirit and body ... in time of need" (*Memoranda* 101), the poet turned into an emotional wound-dresser for these soldiers and into a substitute of the family, friends, lovers, etc. the war had forced these men to leave behind. Whitman confessed he felt recompensed with all the love he gave and received during those years, which indicates that, from the poet's point of view, the relationships he developed in the hospitals were reciprocally enriching for both the soldiers and himself, as he also felt he was learning from these privileged experiences with different types of Americans. Thus, considering he had acquired the "true *ensemble* and extent of The States" (*Memoranda* 101), Whitman felt ready and willing to teach them to the rest of society, something he longed for his *Drum-Taps* to accomplish. Claiming himself as

guide or instructor of the nation in the opportunity of enlightenment the war offered,¹⁶ he believed it was the poet's function to connect –also through love, as he had witnessed in the hospitals–, the opposing sides of the American identity¹⁷ so that that identity could be truly one again. Whitman's perception of his task as a poet was similar to the wound-dressing role he had been performing in hospitals, as he expected it to be extended to the larger context of the nation so that he could become the healer of the wounds or fissures the war had widened and the instrument through which peace and reunion could finally be accomplished. This is precisely the message of “Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice”,¹⁸ which claims manly love as the principle that can “solve the problems of freedom” (*Leaves* 315) by establishing bonds between men from different and confronted regions of the United States. With this poem, Whitman connects his ideal democratic society (i.e. the society of comrades he had witnessed and helped to set up in hospitals during the war) to the United States at large, at the same time that he becomes the instrument that will bring different Americans together despite their age, geographical origins and social backgrounds. This is probably the closest we get in *Drum-Taps* to Whitman's definition of the nature of the type of democracy he envisioned. Even though, as we saw earlier, Whitman –unlike Melville– does not give a room in his volume to the challenges of the country after the war and he does not make *Drum-Taps* participate in the political debates of the Reconstruction, he does try to

¹⁶ According to our division of *Drum-Taps* in the section “The Structure of *Drum-Taps*: Whitman's 1891-92 Arrangement” of our paper, the poem that opens the third part of the volume is “Long, Too Long America”, in which Whitman establishes the mood of this final section by expressing, on the one hand, his desire to have the nation learn from the “crises of anguish” (*Leaves* 312) it has been exposed to through the Civil War (before the war, the nation learned from “joys and prosperity only” [*Leaves* 311]), and, on the other, his assuming the role of instructor that will help the nation undergo this process of enlightenment, since, he believes, nobody except himself “has yet conceiv'd what your [America's] children en masse really are” (*Leaves* 312).

¹⁷ “What is any Nation, after all—and what is a human being—but a struggle between conflicting, paradoxical, opposing elements—and they themselves and their most violent contests, important parts of that One identity, and of its developments?” (*Memoranda* 126). In talking about the American identity –unlike Melville–, Whitman was mainly referring to white Northerners and Southerners.

¹⁸ Significantly, this poem was originally included in “Calamus” (1860) though Whitman moved it to *Drum-Taps* in 1865. This transfer reinforces, as we saw earlier, Whitman's claim of adhesiveness as the principle for unifying the nation (something he had already done in “Calamus”), as well as the connections between “Calamus” and *Drum-Taps*.

become an instrument toward peace and re-union. After experiencing what for him was a true democratic society in the hospitals, he expected to extend (through *Drum-Taps*) this ideal democracy to his country at large after the war in order to heal the disunion of the nation through the principle of manly affection that, he believed, would bring Americans together and enable the pacification of the country. This ideal, however, never materialized in postbellum American society.

On the other hand, in the face of the potential opportunity of renewal offered by the Civil War, Herman Melville assumed a similar function to Whitman's by trying to become an instructor to his fellow Americans. Whitman's endless plea for peace becomes in Melville a watchful caveat at how reconciliation is going to be enacted and at what price. Melville's belief in the function of the poet is made clear in the "Supplement", which he uses to speak directly to his compatriots and "hymn the politicians" (*Battle-Pieces* 259) so that they can be persuaded to apply a non-punitive re-union based on equality. It is significant that, although most of the arguments he develops in the "Supplement" are already included in the preceding poems, Melville continued feeling the need to reiterate them in the prose "Supplement" and to speak directly in his own voice in order to prevent his contemporaries from falling into patriotic narrowness. Hoping to contribute to the instruction of his nation and to become one of its "bards of Progress and Humanity" (*Battle-Pieces* 272), Melville got involved in the political debates of his country and tried to prevent the North from falling into a blind celebration of victory that would, instead of erase, widen even more the fragmentation between Northerners and Southerners. In order to do this, the poet warned the North about the state of devastation the South had been left in by the war, and highlighted the danger of falling into the temptation of punishing the South collectively for the conflict "pervert[ing, thus,] the national victory into oppression for

the vanquished” (*Battle-Pieces* 269). Melville claimed that reconciliation and reconstruction had to be carried out with the deepest moderation and regard for the rest of Americans (e.g. “Let us be Christians toward our fellow-whites, as well as philanthropists toward the blacks, our fellow-men” [*Battle-Pieces* 268]). If this happened, the whole nation would benefit by healing current divisions and advancing toward a humane democracy that, if not in the near at least in the middle future, would respect differences among Americans, including into its definition not only white Northerners or Southerners but also recently emancipated slaves, a wish not exempt of an important dose of realism which makes Melville’s expectations for the future of the United States differ considerably from Whitman’s utopian society of brothers.

Overall, we hope this paper contributes to rescue frequently neglected chapters in the lives and literary productions of Walt Whitman and, most especially, Herman Melville, and, at the same time, that it serves to establish a dialogue between their two collections of poems, *Drum-Taps* and *Battle-Pieces*. Finally yet importantly, we hope our study helps to celebrate and situate Melville as someone who deserves to be considered, alongside Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, a great American poet of the nineteenth century, since

“The greatest poet is not [s/]he who has done the best; it is [s/]he who suggests the most; ... who leaves you much to desire, to explain, to study, much to complete in your turn” (*Specimen Days* 294).

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