



Melville's Epitaphs: On Time, Place, and War

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THE epitaph has rarely been considered a high or lofty form of poetry: it is slight in length, workaday in content. A familiar genre, it allows writers to display their expertise or play up their inventiveness; it is also a form that lends itself to questions about poetry's ability not only to memorialize a person but to memorialize anything, to create meaning and futurity out of a void. The epitaph is tied to its materiality—generally carved onto a gravestone sunk into a particular spot of ground—in ways that many other verse forms are not, and thus it lends itself to thinking about place and time. Even the literary epitaph, which is found on the page rather than the tombstone, holds, in the words of Paul H. Fry, “traces of nostalgia for the surface on which writings of this sort no longer appear inscribed.”¹

The stone marker on Herman Melville's grave in the Bronx's Woodlawn Cemetery carries a traditional ornament, a paper scroll. It bears, however, no inscription. Perhaps an epitaph was planned, but the expense of engraving it was too great; perhaps the blank scroll was meant to represent the blank page a writer confronts when beginning his work.² The inscrutability of that blank scroll, its irony perhaps, deepens when we observe that throughout his career, Melville was a proficient and prolific writer of epitaphs, as were many of his nineteenth-century poetic contemporaries, a genre he explored most thoroughly in

¹Paul H. Fry, “The Absent Dead: Wordsworth, Byron, and the Epitaph,” *Studies in Romanticism* 17.4 (Fall 1978): 414.

²Judy Logan, “Melville's Last, Grave Joke?” *Melville Society Extracts* 122 (February 2002): 7–11.

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his 1866 book of verse about the American Civil War, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*.³ Melville once called the war “an upheaval affecting the basis of things,” among which he included, I will argue, poetic form.⁴ In *Battle-Pieces*, Melville adopts and adapts the epitaphic genre to come to terms with the events and aftermath of the Civil War, employing the epitaph’s trope of giving voice to the dead to theorize about how the war had unmoored American lives from their rootedness in place, stranding bodies in unfamiliar places. Disrupting the typical epitaphic relationship among the dead person being remembered, the poem itself, and the reader who encounters the epitaph and is often addressed by it, Melville suggests that modern warfare destroyed bodies in such numbers that the epitaph could no longer function in its traditional form. Thus, a once indispensable poetic genre collapsed under the weight of historic events as well as of a literary culture that increasingly valued a more personal poetic form, the lyric.

The Epitaph: History, Form, Function

The epitaph, which translates from the Greek as “upon a tomb,” is a short poem commemorating a deceased person. Form and function meet in the genre: it is short because it is intended to be inscribed on a tombstone, though it also exists outside the graveyard, on the written page. As a poetic form, the epitaph dates back to the Greeks, though the idea of composing a few lines to remember someone by seems as old as writing itself. Generally, epitaphs catalog the families and accomplishments of their dead subjects while also reminding living readers of their own mortality. They also, perhaps

³In addition to the formal epitaphs explored in this essay, Melville often wrote on themes of monumentality and remembrance of the dead. We might think, for instance, of the juxtaposition of Potter’s lonely grave and the personified Bunker Hill monument in *Israel Potter* or the extended meditation on biblical stones in part 10 of the Wilderness section of *Clarel*. Other nineteenth-century American writers who composed epitaphs include Lydia Sigourney, William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Emily Dickinson.

⁴Herman Melville, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1866), p. 259. Further references will be to this edition and will be included in the text.

paradoxically, have a voice: epitaphs frequently allow the dead person being memorialized to speak from beyond the grave, particularly to summon a living reader. At other times, the speaker of an epitaph is someone who is knowledgeable about the person being memorialized, an outside presence who confides remembrances to the epitaph's readers. Melville, as we shall see, used both types of epitaphic speaker in his exploration of the form. This dialogue between speaker and reader lends epitaphs their conflicting force: epitaphs produce the fiction that the dead can speak (or, at least, tell their secrets to an outside presence who will speak for them) while at the same time, through the written artifact, emphasizing that they are no longer able to do so.⁵ During the early modern period, the genre blossomed in England, where poets ranging from John Dryden to John Gay to Sir Walter Raleigh penned epitaphs both humorous and dolorous.⁶ A second flowering occurred among the English Romantic poets, with William Wordsworth the form's primary advocate and theoretician.

On this side of the Atlantic, the literary epitaph has an equally impressive pedigree. One of the earliest poems written in the English New World was a seventeenth-century epitaph commemorating Nathaniel Bacon, the leader of a 1676 armed rebellion in colonial Virginia. Anne Bradstreet, who composed elegies (mournful verses lamenting the deceased) for several prominent historical figures, including Philip Sidney and Queen Elizabeth, embedded epitaphs in the poems' closings. A century later, Phillis Wheatley offered the same poetic tribute to a number of notable Bostonians. Cotton Mather featured elegies and epitaphs honoring good Puritans in his *Corderius Americanus* (1708), while Benjamin Franklin wrote a mock epitaph for himself, one that humorously reveals the epitaph's complex relationship among body, text, and materiality (on the page

⁵For more on this paradox and on the ability of epitaphs to vocalize the dead, see Debra Fried, "Repetition, Refrain, and Epitaph," *ELH* 53.3 (Autumn 1986): 615–32.

⁶For more on the Greek origins of the epitaph and its flourishing in the early modern and Romantic periods, see Joshua Scodel, *The English Poetic Epitaph: Commemoration and Conflict from Jonson to Wordsworth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

and on the gravestone). Scripted by the twenty-three-year-old, it reads:

THE BODY
OF
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
PRINTER
(Like the cover of an old book
Its contents torn out
And stript of its lettering and gilding)
Lies here, food for worms.
But the work shall not be lost
For it will (as he believed) appear once more
In a new and more elegant edition
Revised and corrected
by
The Author.⁷

In Franklin's hands, the epitaph becomes a site for punning on his printer's profession, for viewing his deceased body as a text awaiting revision by the Author of all creation. Franklin employs his knowledge of the genre's three fundamental tasks—simultaneously to commemorate the dead, remind the living of life's brevity, and urge readers to repent their sins—to demonstrate his writerly mastery while also reflecting on the ephemerality of the material text, which decays just as dead bodies do. Although more playful than most early American epitaphs, like them Franklin's demonstrates that death poems are interested as much in world making and regeneration as in world decaying and finality. The genre offers its readers possibilities for beginning (that they, too, can be "revised and corrected") as they commemorate and interpret lives ending, though it lost luster as a high literary form in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Romantic lyric gradually usurped the authority of other poetic forms, particularly when they set out

⁷Quoted in Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1793) (Cambridge: Houghton, Mifflin, & Company, 1888), p. 238.

to describe such difficult human subjects as the horrors of war.⁸

To understand how literary epitaphs were intended to function before modern war unleashed its massive, annihilatory force, it is instructive to look to William Wordsworth's "Essay Upon Epitaphs," published as a supplement to his poems in 1810. Wordsworth establishes the purpose of the epitaph accordingly:

[An epitaph] is a record to preserve the memory of the dead, as a tribute due to his individual worth, for a satisfaction to the sorrowing hearts of the Survivors, and for the common benefit of the living; which record is to be accomplished, not in a general manner, but, where it can, in *close connection with the bodily remains of the deceased*: and these, it may be added, among the modern nations of Europe, are deposited within, or contiguous to, their places of worship.⁹

For Wordsworth, the epitaph serves a tripartite purpose: it is a tribute to the individual who has died; a source of comfort for his living friends, who are reassured that he is being remembered; and a reminder to living people that all will go this way. Melville, who, according to Thomas Heffernan, carried an edition of the complete works of Wordsworth with him on a voyage from Boston to San Francisco in 1860, just before the war started, was likely familiar with Wordsworth's definition of the genre, although in essence that explication merely clarifies traditional poetic practice.¹⁰

⁸Virginia Jackson theorizes this historical process of lyricization most fully in her *Dickinson's Misery* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005). Although the epitaph fell out of favor as a high literary form, the genre retains its popularity as a folk form. We might think, for instance, of Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915). Although the work has received little critical attention, it has frequently been adapted to the stage—a twentieth-century example of the persistent popularity of the epitaph.

⁹William Wordsworth, "Essay Upon Epitaphs," *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Henry Reed (Philadelphia: Troutman & Hayes, 1854), p. 702.

¹⁰Thomas F. Heffernan, "Melville and Wordsworth," *American Literature* 49:3 (November 1977): 338–51. In *Monumental Melville* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), Edgar A. Dryden writes extensively on Melville's relationship with the Wordsworthian model of the epitaph and calls *Battle-Pieces* an "epitaphic collection" (p. 69).

Adhering to the first requirement of the epitaph—to preserve what was unique about the deceased—was obviously problematic during the Civil War, a particularly gruesome conflict in which a soldier's facial features were all too often obliterated, thus stripping him of his most particular defining—and enduring—feature, his name.¹¹ The second function Wordsworth ascribes to the epitaph—to preserve the memory of the deceased for the benefit of his living friends and family—was clearly hard to fulfill during a war in which men were generally buried far from their homes. In the English countryside in 1810, Wordsworth bemoaned the fact that burials were increasingly being moved away from village churchyards (where monuments reminded readers of “the surrounding images of nature”)¹² and into towns and cities, where crowding interrupted the reflective relationship between the cemetery and its natural surroundings. Of course, the exigencies of battle had always disrupted that bucolic ideal, but the Civil War had dramatically reoriented America's burial practices at the same time as it had altered its landscape. Men's bodies decomposed on the very spots where they had been struck and fallen, or, more often, soldiers were hastily buried beside the hospitals and prisons in which, ravaged and diseased, they had died. One of the great ironies of visiting Civil War battlefields today is that they are among the country's most beautiful, unmolested, and serene topographies; this could not have been said in 1865, when bones and “iron cones and spheres of death” (p. 173)—as Melville puts it in one of his most striking epitaphic poems—still littered the soil.

The popular epitaphic impulse—the desire to mark a site of death with words that honor the dead and remind the viewer of his or her own mortality—was strong in 1865, as the Civil War came to an end and the process of memorialization began in earnest. Throughout the fall of that year, as Melville

¹¹During the last two years of the war, soldiers pinned scraps of paper listing their names and ranks inside their uniforms so that they could be identified in case of death. See Noah Andre Trudeau, *Bloody Roads South: The Wilderness to Cold Harbor, May–June 1864* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1989), p. 280.

¹²Wordsworth, “Essay Upon Epitaphs,” p. 702.

composed the majority of *Battle-Pieces*, the *New York Times* reported that Andersonville Prison was being converted into a national cemetery that would serve as a fitting memorial to those who had died there and a site where those who were left behind could stop and mourn. In a note on one of his memorial verses, Melville remarks that the lines were “written prior to the founding of the National Cemetery at Andersonville” (p. 253). Elsewhere, a note appended to “Gettysburg: A Check” relates the fighting that took place among tombstones on Cemetery Ridge to the layout of Gettysburg National Cemetery, which is “on the same height with the original burial ground” (p. 249). Melville connects the pre-war town cemetery with the post-war national cemetery as a way of returning to naturalized antebellum burial practices; in the epitaphs of *Battle-Pieces*, however, it is clear that such a return is not possible. In a sense, then, the circumstances of the Civil War forced the country to fold Wordsworth’s first and second epitaphic purposes into the third. There were simply too many dead to commemorate each individually. The “personal head-board, inscribed from records found in the prison hospital” (p. 253),¹³ memorialized some soldiers, but poems strategically placed throughout graveyards and cemeteries came to serve as epitaphs for the vast multitudes buried there, a powerful statement indeed of the mortality of all humanity.¹⁴

A popular lithograph of the period exemplifies that while epitaphs were more needed than ever and no less desired, they were increasingly difficult to personalize in a war that was reducing individuals to just one more body among those massed on disparate battlefields. The 1862 Currier and Ives print portrays a conventional headstone bearing the traditional iconography of mourning and grief—weeping woman, willow tree, patriotic eagle (fig. 1). But whereas that form of standardization is comforting, the tombstone’s invitation to insert the

¹³Particularly good records existed at Andersonville thanks to the efforts of Dorence Atwater, a captured Union soldier who kept a highly detailed list of the dead while working in the prison’s hospital.

¹⁴*New York Times*, 4 November 1865.

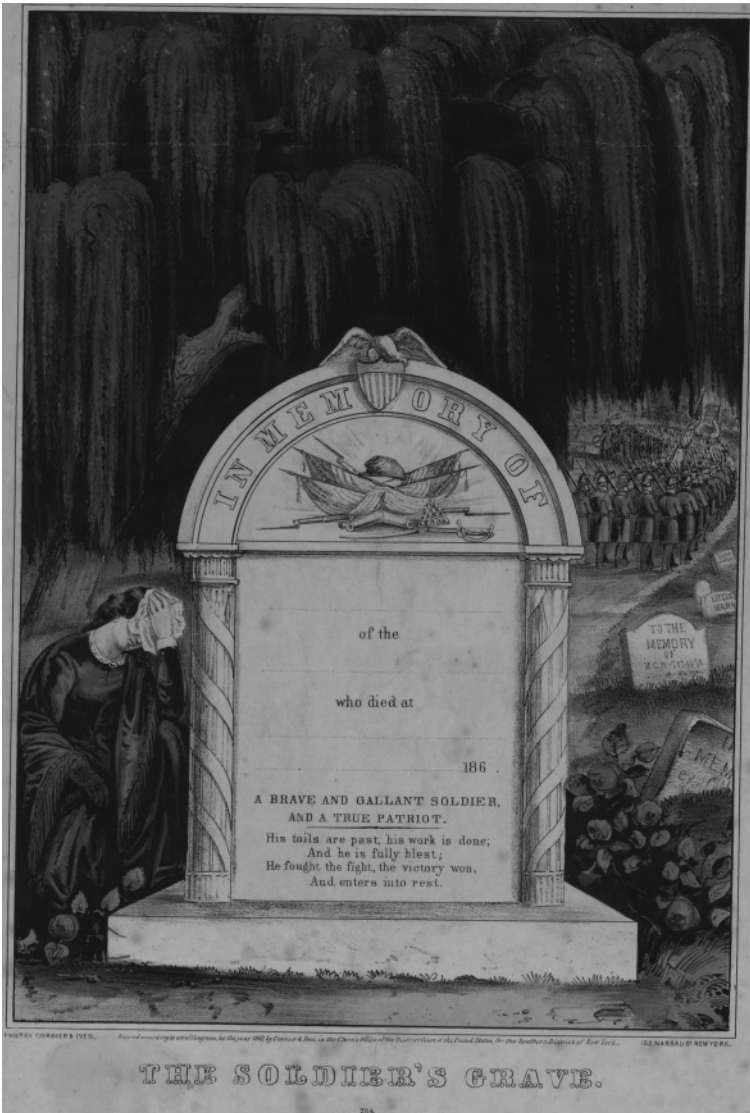


FIG. 1.—Currier & Ives, publisher. The Soldier's Grave. 1862. Image courtesy American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.

name, rank, and date of death of a particular soldier is not. Under the valedictory to “A Brave and Gallant Soldier and a True Patriot” is the following epitaph:

His toils are past, his work is done
 And he is fully blest
 He fought the fight, the victory won
 And enters into rest.

Every soldier deserves an epitaph, the Currier and Ives print seems to say, even if all soldiers’ epitaphs must, in the end, be the same. Whether he fought for the Union or the Confederacy, the “true patriot” is victorious because, the poem implies, he has courageously battled not a particular enemy but death itself.

These opposing forces—the longing for individual commemoration and the impossibility of achieving it in the wake of massive casualties—are felt throughout the epitaphs of *Battle-Pieces*, a work that reanimates tropes of the epitaphic genre while also challenging its viability. Joshua Scodel, in his book on the English poetic epitaph, has argued that “poets after Wordsworth generally consider the poetic epitaph anachronistic.”¹⁵ Although this claim may hold among the literati on both sides of the Atlantic, the epitaph has continued to be a popular form among ordinary Americans, particularly in the national cemeteries that arose during the Civil War, where poetry has always been inextricably linked with remembrance.¹⁶ At stake was the nation’s ability to commemorate the sacrifices of the dead so that the country could move beyond the carnage it had suffered to prepare itself for, as Lincoln famously put it, a new birth of freedom. Melville’s epitaphs, which seem traditional and quiet upon first reading, not terribly different in tone or form from the Currier and Ives epitaph honoring the fill-in-the-blank soldier, are in fact brimful of existential questions about nation and memory.

¹⁵Scodel, *The English Poetic Epitaph*, p. 11.

¹⁶For instance, those who visited the national cemetery at the former site of Andersonville Prison in Georgia in 1865 noted three “white-painted boards” featuring poetic excerpts posted throughout the cemetery. See “Andersonville,” *New York Times*, 4 November 1865.

"Battle-Pieces": War, Remembrance, Silence

In the introduction to *Battle-Pieces*, Melville claims that its poems were "composed without reference to collective arrangement" (p. v), but the ordering of its elements does not bear out that claim. The book's first section follows a roughly chronological sequence that mirrors the historical trajectory of the war, starting with John Brown's hanging in 1859 and ending with Lee's surrender in 1865. The book's second section, entitled "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial," is relatively brief. It contains sixteen poems that deal with the aftermath of war: the graves, marked and unmarked; the requiem songs; the returns home. Separate from the chronological and historically contingent poems that open *Battle-Pieces* and from the longer, also historically dependent meditations that close it, the "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial" have an aura of timelessness, of unboundedness from the rending national event to which Melville's book responds, an odd effect given that the traditional epitaph, tethered as it is to a particular body at a particular gravesite, resists being unmoored from its location in place and in time.

Even before the war, Melville was contemplating the role that the epitaph plays in the preservation of memory, especially when the deceased had not been laid to rest in a nearby graveyard. "The Lee Shore," for example, the much-dissected twenty-third chapter of *Moby-Dick* (1851), serves as an "apotheosis" to the sailor Bulkington, who meets his end when he falls overboard during a storm.¹⁷ A textual bit-player from the start, Bulkington makes only a brief appearance in the third chapter before, twenty chapters later, sinking into the churning sea. Yet, it is precisely because he knows nothing about Bulkington that Ishmael is able to translate the sailor's demise into an opportunity to contemplate the advantages of shoreless "deep thinking" and to reflect on the degree to which words can and cannot do justice to the mysteries of death: "Wonderfullest things are ever the unmentionable; deep memories

¹⁷Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1967), p. 98.

yield no epitaphs; this six-inch chapter is the stoneless grave of Bulkington."¹⁸ But while acknowledging the limitations of the epitaph to embody the most important facets of a man's life, Ishmael feels compelled to offer some record of Bulkington's death, and so he leaves behind his six-inch inscription, the chapter's exact length in the novel's first printing, which highlights how, with epitaphs, materiality affects text and vice versa. Ishmael's ode to Bulkington may remind readers of the final sketch of "The Encantadas; or, Enchanted Isles" (1854), in which the narrator describes the graves of seamen buried on the islands. The sketch concludes with an example of a "doggerel epitaph" left by a sailor in honor of his fallen comrade (albeit continuing the fiction that the dead sailor speaks from beyond the grave):

Oh, Brother Jack, as you pass by,
As you are now, so once was I.
Just so game, and just so gay
But now, alack, they've stopped my pay.
No more I peep out of my blinkers,
Here I be – tucked in with clinkers!¹⁹

In both works, Melville surveys the generic structure of the epitaph—its temporality, its assumptions about who is left to speak for the dead, its physical and material essence—and how that structure is challenged when bodies are lost to the sea or buried in places far away from home simply because the hapless man died there.

The story of China Aster in *The Confidence-Man* (1859), which is related by the disciple Egbert to Frank the cosmopolitan, is a distillation of the themes of money lending and friendship that run throughout this final part of the novel. More to our present investigation, though, when Aster dies, deeply in debt, he leaves behind an epitaph in his otherwise empty wallet. Giving Aster the last word on his life's purpose and excusing

¹⁸Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 97.

¹⁹Herman Melville, "The Encantadas; or, Enchanted Isles," *The Piazza Tales* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), p. 399.

him his mistakes, the epitaph states that his career "was an example of the truth of scripture, as found in the sober philosophy of Solomon the Wise." The epitaph is, on the one hand, a send-up of religious moralizing and, on the other, an extended meditation on who actually gets to speak for the dead. For we learn in the course of the story that Aster's friends accept the epitaph's sentiment but not its wordiness. They resolve to pare it down but in the end add another sentence, a "post-script . . . chiseled at the left-hand corner of the stone, and pretty low down": "The root of all was a friendly loan."²⁰ Unlike Bulkington, Aster is able to craft his own memorial, yet even so, he must relinquish control over his memory to those who remain after he is gone. Epitaphic temporality is not, therefore, detached from or unbounded by history: it is always contingent on the living, who will read and interpret it in different, later times. In other words, the epitaph is recursive but not necessarily recuperative.

War, of course, intensified Melville's realization that memory is a battlefield, a site at which the past is written and rewritten, revised and corrected over and over again. Just as the old forms of grief and burial did not fit the new horrors of war, so too did the old forms of poetry come up short. As his earlier fiction attests, Melville recognized and explored the tension between materiality and text that the epitaph presents. Even the most traditional of the epitaphic poems in *Battle-Pieces* reflect this tension, magnified by the realities of fratricidal war in which the fabric of national cohesiveness, and even of time itself, seemed torn. The poem "An Epitaph," for instance, tells of a soldier's widow whose contented heart cheers the "priest and people" of her town (p. 169). The way in which the poem operates as an epitaph is obscured, however, for it makes no reference to the widow's death, unless the speaker's parenthetical allusion to her "summering sweetly here, / In shade by waving beeches lent" means that she is as dead as her husband and, thus, that her cheer is felt in, and delivered from, the grave. "An Epitaph"

²⁰Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 221.

appears to naturalize the temporality of mourning, connecting it with seasonal cycles that would eventually ameliorate the pain of grief, yet its insinuation that the soldier's widow herself is now deceased forces the reader to ask how the priest and people will deal with the grim "Sunday tidings from the front" now that she is gone.²¹

"An Epitaph" recognizes the value of an individual, in accordance with Wordsworth's declaration that the epitaph's perfection "lie[s] in due proportion of the common or universal feeling of humanity to sensations excited by a distinct and clear conception, conveyed to the Reader's mind, of the Individual, whose death is deplored and whose memory is to be preserved."²² It also appeals to the "common or universal feeling of humanity" that might greet the poem's description of the cheerful and faithful war widow. Yet the disconnect between the poem's assigned genre, an epitaph, and its lack of clarity about who is being memorialized points us toward other strange and discomfiting instances when epitaphic tropes are transformed in the "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial."

Take, for instance, the seemingly straightforward epitaphic poem "On the Grave of a young Cavalry Officer killed in the Valley of Virginia":

Beauty and youth, with manners sweet, and friends—
 Gold, yet a mind not unenriched had he
 Whom here low violets veil from eyes.
 But all these gifts transcended be:
 His happier fortune in this mound you see. [P. 175]

Fulfilling all three of Wordsworth's prescribed epitaphic duties, the poem also brings to light the typical object-inscription-reader relationship represented in epitaphs: the reader (who is often beckoned to stop with the engraved injunction "Pause, Traveler!") encounters the inscription written upon the object itself—the stone tablet or monument that the epitaph,

²¹For more on the sacred time of mourning, see Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

²²Wordsworth, "Essay Upon Epitaphs," p. 704.

Wordsworth insists, presupposes.²³ The speaker of this epitaph is not the dead person being memorialized but the knowledgeable outsider who frequently narrates such poems. We might compare this poem with one from Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*, "As Toilsome I Wander'd Virginia's Woods," in which the reader encounters an epitaph, "*Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade,*" hastily "scrawl'd" on a "tablet" and nailed to a graveside tree.²⁴ Here, the speaker of the epitaph is a personal friend ("my loving comrade") of the dead man, and Whitman uses the epitaph embedded within the lyric to foreground a reader's encounter with the inscription. By the poem's end, the reader has so internalized the epitaph that it is as if he is the "loving comrade," the speaker, who penned the original inscription.

Whitman's physical epitaph emphasizes the relationship between the dead man and the "loving comrade" who composes his epitaph; Melville's literary epitaph, while mentioning the deceased's friends, masks the speaker's identity as well as his relation to the dead officer. In five brief lines, three of which end in simple, monosyllabic rhymes—"he," "be," and "see"—the speaker of the inscription celebrates the individual attributes of the officer while at the same time favoring his "transcendence" of these "gifts." Both poems silently gesture toward readers who will happen upon the epitaphs at later dates, thus suggesting the naturalized, recursive dimension of epitaphic temporality, but Melville's epitaph also imposes a Christian temporal dimension, one of bodily transcendence and implied eternity, that some critics have read as the fulfillment of the teleology presented in the chronological poems of *Battle-Pieces*.²⁵ In Whitman's poem, on the contrary, there is no promise of heaven; rather,

²³Wordsworth, "Essay Upon Epitaphs," p. 700.

²⁴Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1996), pp. 441–42.

²⁵Stanton Garner interprets *Battle-Pieces* as a Miltonic epic that "depicts a fortunate fall through which the corrupted nation might be renewed" (p. 423). For Garner, it is the poems and supplement, which address Reconstruction, that revise this Christianized teleology rather than the "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial." See *The Civil War World of Herman Melville* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), pp. 423–32.

the epitaph lives on in the heart of the speaker/reader who has encountered it, and its sweet commemoration returns to him “through changeful season and scene, abrupt, alone, or in the crowded street.” Despite the formal differences in these wartime poems, with Melville’s existing as a literary epitaph that could be inscribed on a grave and Whitman’s embedding an epitaph in a lyric, both authors raise the problem of how to commemorate an individual killed in battle when troops were compelled to move on and little time could be spared to bury bodies, let alone write epitaphs.

Professing a stock sentiment that matches the object it images, “On the Grave of a young Cavalry Officer killed in the Valley of Virginia” is the only poem in “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial” that could technically be considered an epitaph, given that it is inscribed on a gravestone. The simplicity of the classic epitaphic relationship it posits among reader, inscription, and object is an anomaly in *Battle-Pieces*. In other cases, the task of burying the Civil War dead presents specific problems for the epitaph’s conventional functions, and these complications Melville incorporates into the form of his verses inscriptive and memorial. For instance, sometimes the dead person that the epitaph sets out to celebrate cannot be identified. In a note (previously quoted in part) to the poem “On a natural Monument on a field in Georgia,” Melville describes how the desire for an individualized inscription can be thwarted:

Written prior to the founding of the National Cemetery at Andersonville, where 15,000 of the reinterred captives now sleep, each beneath his personal head-board, inscribed from records found in the prison hospital. Some hundreds rest apart and without name. A glance at the published pamphlet containing the list of the buried at Andersonville conveys a feeling mournfully impressive. Seventy-four large double-columned pages in fine print. Looking through them is like getting lost among the old turbaned head-stones and cypresses in the interminable Black Forest of Scutari, over against Constantinople. [Pp. 253–54]

The note—aside from its chilling sentence “some hundreds rest apart and without name,” which succinctly captures one of

the primary challenges for epitaphic poetry in the wake of the Civil War—deserves explication for its fantastic leaps of relationality through simile. The seemingly endless list of names of those buried in Andersonville cemetery is akin to the actual experience of being lost in a cemetery, of wandering among epitaphs in a natural setting similar to the one prescribed by Wordsworth in his essay. The list of names is forced to stand in for the traditional experience of visiting with the dead, just as an epitaph is intended to be a synecdoche for the dead person to whom it refers. In lingering over the “seventy-four large double-columned pages in fine print” that constitute the Andersonville necrology, Melville echoes Ishmael’s material concern about the “six-inch chapter” serving as Bulkington’s epitaph. In both instances, the speaker ponders what it means to substitute words for bodies.

An answer to that question begins to emerge in *Battle-Pieces* in a verse whose form seems traditionally epitaphic: “A Grave near Petersburg, Virginia.” The only of Melville’s epitaphs to name its subject (“Daniel Drouth”), the poem includes a sing-song, symmetrical refrain (“Long may his grave be green!” / “Green may his grave long be!”) and memorializes its subject as a “rebel of iron mould,” quick and full of fire. Not until the poem’s last line is the true character of the grave’s occupant revealed—“The—*Buried Gun*” (p. 153). With this final twist and an explanatory note about how Confederates buried cannon in their graveyards to be unearthed when needed, the macabre drama staged in this mock-epitaph becomes clear. The gun, “Daniel Drouth,” is “named for his metallic barrenness.”²⁶ The rebel’s “iron mould,” “the blaze of his wrath,” and the “flash and a blow” of his temper are witty puns that demonstrate Melville’s versatility with the epitaphic form, recalling Franklin’s punning image of his life as a book. Notably, the poem appears in the main section of *Battle-Pieces*, not in “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial,” as if the poet believed that some solemnity was required in the latter section; yet the epitaph for the buried gun exhibits Melville’s adroitness with and fealty to the genre as

²⁶Garner, *The Civil War World of Herman Melville*, p. 399.

well as—also evident in the more somber and overtly epitaphic “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial” section—a willingness to puncture its conventions.

This tension between dedication to and subversion of generic practice is elevated to a formal problem in what we might call the mass epitaph of *Battle-Pieces*, “Inscription for Graves at Pea Ridge, Arkansas.” This poem challenges the Wordsworthian model of the epitaph both in its plurality of dead speakers, who address a reader apt to “misgive” their reasons for fighting and dying, and in the less-than-noble motivations that brought them to their end—they died “amiss” (p. 166). If one of the primary purposes of the epitaph is, as Wordsworth asserts, to preserve the memory of an individual, how, the poem asks, can an epitaph commemorate the joint works of the jointly dead? The use of the first-person plural pronoun to embody the speaker(s) of the poem goes some distance to solve the problem, yet a tension remains between the “we” who are referenced by the single “Inscription” and the material plurality of the “Graves” on which it is presumed to appear (does each grave of each speaker bear this inscription?). This unresolved tension is compounded by the tension between the epitaph’s fundamental task to praise the deceased and attach meaning to his life and the futility the poem expresses. The poem’s opening line—“Let none misgive we died amiss”—whose double negatives leave the reader disoriented, is progressively unwound as the speakers divulge that they fought not out of any principle but only because they were compelled to do so (“The choice of warring never laid with us / There we were ruled by the traitor’s choice”). Such a confession by one man would be troubling, but the fact that it is uttered by many men (how many?) drives the epitaph to its breaking point—the point at which it can no longer serve its primary function to “identify,” in Scodel’s words, “the enduring social significance of the dead.”²⁷

The unsettling plurality of speakers in “Inscription for Graves at Pea Ridge, Arkansas” presages the monumental inscriptions

²⁷Scodel, *The English Poetic Epitaph*, p. 404.

of *Battle-Pieces*, in which Melville offers his most complicated challenge to the generic unity of the epitaph. "An uninscribed Monument on one of the Battle-fields of the Wilderness" attempts to address the issue of multiple speakers presented in the Arkansas poem, but in doing so it introduces further complexities into the object-inscription-reader relationship:

Silence and Solitude may hint
 (Whose home is in yon piny wood)
 What I, though tableted, could never tell—
 The din which here befell,
 And striving of the multitude.
 The iron cones and spheres of death
 Set round me in their rust,
 These, too, if just,
 Shall speak with more than animated breath.
 Thou who beholdest, if thy thought,
 Not narrowed down to personal cheer,
 Take in the import of the quiet here—
 The after-quiet—the calm full fraught;
 Thou too wilt silent stand—
 Silent as I, and lonesome as the land. [P. 173]

The first shock of the poem is that rather than adhering to the generic assumption that the "I" speaking is the deceased or a friend of the deceased, Melville allows the monument, the actual stone on which the inscription appears, to speak for itself. The second shock is that this speaking monument is at once "uninscribed" (according to the poem's title) and "tableted" (line 3)—written upon and unwritten upon, if we take "tableted" to mean inscribed. "Tableted" can also refer to the panel on which an inscription *will* be engraved, which raises the question of whether an inscription does or does not exist, thus opening interpretive possibilities for both the monument's reader and the poem's. The incongruity of the poem's vocalizations—the stone as well as the artillery scattered around it speak—is further complicated when we realize that they are eloquent through, or rather because of, their silence, a silence that offers a dramatic and poignant contrast to the "din" of battle. This focus on speaking silence is made all the more

emphatic when we recognize that the poem—excepting its first line (“Silence and Solitude may hint”), which has no matched rhyme—takes the form of a sonnet, even concluding with a couplet. The excluded line with which the poem begins features the speaking silence that is reified in the remaining lines, though the strange modification of the sonnet form suggests that this speaking silence may represent a structural breakdown, a rending of familiar forms.

The structural and thematic difficulties presented by “An uninscribed Monument,” its constant juxtaposition of opposites—tableted and uninscribed, silent and speaking, inanimate objects animated with breath, calm full fraught—betray a genre at its breaking point but also signal a possible way out of the crisis. In the second half of the *Wilderness* poem, there is a reader—Wordsworth’s Traveler, if you will. The stone speaks directly to its reader, who, “if [his] thought / Not narrowed down to personal cheer,” can “take in the import of the quiet here,” is invited to respond by standing silently by in sympathetic solidarity, thus rendering the passerby another un-inscribed monument to the battle. The poem extends its didactic purpose—demonstrating the “import of the quiet here”—while simultaneously denying the epitaphic act of inscribing, of pinning words on that which is no longer. By turning the reader of the epitaph into another object through which the epitaph can be read, Melville removes the inscription from the traditional epitaphic relationship among reader, inscription, and object while encouraging a communion between reader and object, between passerby and the detritus of war.

There are important stakes here for the temporality of war memory as well. If the junk of war is able to tell us as much about war as are words, then it naturally follows that those artifacts should be preserved, but natural processes work against that objective. In this poem, epitaphic temporality offers no means for healing, only for perpetuating lonesome reflection. As such, it seems to work against the reconciliatory posture that Melville assumes in other sections of *Battle-Pieces*, most notably the controversial prose supplement that concludes the volume. There, Melville writes that

noble was the gesture into which patriotic passion surprised the people in a utilitarian time and country; yet the glory of the war falls short of its pathos—a pathos which now at last ought to disarm all animosity. How many and earnest thoughts still rise, and how hard to repress them. We feel that past years have been, and years, unretarded years, shall come. [P. 265]

The progressive, “unretarded” march of the supplement’s temporal assumptions is distinct from the epitaphic temporality of the “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial,” in which repetitive encounters between readers and texts do not offer a means of healing the fractured country. Among the “aspects of the war” that Melville presents to us in *Battle-Pieces*, then, are the differing modes of reconciliation available in the immediate postbellum context in which he wrote. One offered memory without reunion, an emotional choice favored by many, North and South; the other, the pragmatic option, offered reunion in the realization that memory would fade.

The Epitaph: Temporality, Dislocation, and the Prospects for Reunification

In the nineteenth century, the epitaph was considered to be a genre within the larger category of the lyric, although it differed from what we now identify as lyric, which is derived from a Romantic tradition and is, in the words of Virginia Jackson, a “short, nonnarrative poem depicting the subjective experience of a speaker.”²⁸ The epitaph, bound to a particular body at a particular gravesite, resists being unmoored from its location in place and time, and therefore it cannot range freely, as does lyric thought. Melville’s epitaphs reveal a poet struggling with the question of how to historicize a cataclysmic national war while, at nearly the same time, the historical process of lyricization, of valuing poetry as a single genre of individual expression, was rendering the epitaph a dead form.²⁹

Critics of Melville’s poetry have focused their debates about genre on *Battle-Pieces*’ opening and closing poems, ignoring the

²⁸Virginia Jackson, “Who Reads Poetry?” *PMLA* 123.1 (January 2008): 183.

²⁹See Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery*.

relatively brief section of “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial,” in which the matter of genre seems, from first appearances, settled.³⁰ However, when we read the “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial” as Melville’s engagement with an established genre outside the Romantic lyric tradition, we can begin to understand how he used those idiosyncratic epitaphs to question the structure of temporality established in the historically ordered battle pieces that precede and follow it.³¹

Indeed, reading *Battle-Pieces* without the “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial” enforces a teleological narrative to the war, one that, according to Michael Warner, “traces out the history of the war, event by event, in chronological order, with every hero and every crisis in its allotted place.”³² On those occasions when Melville’s memorial poems have been analyzed in relation to the rest of *Battle-Pieces*, readers have emphasized the role they seem to play in a Christianized story of the downfall and redemption of the country. Stanton Garner, for instance, suggests that the epitaphic poems of *Battle-Pieces* are part of an overarching plot that depicts “a fortunate fall through which the corrupted nation might be renewed.” In this reading of the book’s narrative trajectory, the “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial”

³⁰Jackson, “Who Reads Poetry?” pp. 181–87; Helen Vendler, “Melville and the Lyric of History,” *Southern Review* 35 (Summer 1999): 579–94; and Michael Warner, “What Like a Bullet Can Undeceive?” *Public Culture* 15.1 (Winter 2003): 41–54. For Vendler, Melville’s battle poetry is a hybrid genre she calls “epic lyric,” while others, including Warner and Jackson, assert that not all the poems in *Battle-Pieces* are lyrics but some undoubtedly are. Warner writes, echoing Vendler while disagreeing fundamentally with her assertion that all the poems in *Battle-Pieces* are lyric, that Melville’s poetry comprises “a strange collection of hybrid genres, never adequately appreciated partly because its technique is so anomalous” (p. 47). Each of these generic assessments overlooks the “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial” section, where voice and temporality become further complicated through Melville’s adaptation of the epitaph.

³¹Cody Marrs, in “A Wayward Art: *Battle-Pieces* and Melville’s Poetic Turn,” *American Literature* 82.1 (March 2010): 91–119, argues that “in the wake of disunion, Melville takes up the lyric in order to account for and reimagine time’s coercive reiterations” (p. 95). While I agree that the temporal disruptions of the Civil War encouraged Melville to posit alternative poetic temporalities in *Battle-Pieces*, I disagree that this was solely a lyric project; rather, the epitaph offered a site in which memory could be questioned outside of the bounds of the lyric speaker’s subjectivity.

³²Michael Warner, “Civil War Religion and Whitman’s ‘Drum Taps,’” in *Walt Whitman, Where the Future Becomes Present*, ed. David Haven Blake and Michael Robertson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), p. 81.

are "in effect a poetic graveyard made up largely of simple, quiet epitaphs that honor the soldiers whose deaths brought the nation its greatest pain."³³

Yet the brief interlude of memorial verse actually casts doubt on the ostensible historic inevitability of the book's first section—the assumption that Northern victory was assured and national reconciliation would follow—as it explores the epitaph's alternative temporality, destabilizing the memory of war by privileging voices that speak from the grave. In ignoring these poems, critics of Melville's poetry, like some historians of the Civil War itself, have neglected the process of memorialization that comes after the battles are done and the killing has ceased.³⁴ This lack of critical attention accorded "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial" says much about the priorities of literary scholars. Inscriptive verse, favored among the English Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth, was also highly esteemed among antebellum American poets. Many, however, did not possess the literary credentials of a Melville, Whitman, or Dickinson, and so the very popularity of epitaphs and inscriptions made them a suspect form among academics, whose labors have traditionally been lavished on high culture.

The "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial" may also seem so obvious as to be not worth mentioning: of course a book about war would include epitaphs and memorial inscriptions. If we are reading *Battle-Pieces* to identify an original lyric voice that uses the war to ponder the individual subject's relation to the nation, then we might necessarily choose to focus on poems like "The Portent" or "Shiloh: A Requiem," which show evidence of lyric development, and ignore those that seem traditional in form or content.³⁵ As Martin Griffin asserts, the "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial" "are designed not to draw attention

³³Gamer, *The Civil War World of Herman Melville*, pp. 423, 425.

³⁴An important exception is Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), a history of how the massive number of Civil War deaths affected the American nation-state.

³⁵For readings of how the subjective lyric voice is evident in these poems, see Jackson, "Who Reads Poetry?" pp. 183–86, and Warner, "What Like a Bullet Can Undeceive?" pp. 41–54.

to themselves.”³⁶ Yet they do so when we realize that they are *not* traditional epitaphic poems; they subvert the expectations of the genre in much the same way that the unprecedented lethality of the Civil War battlefield subverted many of the methods and means of wars that came before. Burying and mourning the dead is, as Garner suggests, of utmost importance to Melville’s understanding of war, which means that his epitaphic poems are anything but “quiet” and “simple”: they force into relief questions about poetic genre, place, and voice just as surely as they do questions about how properly to honor and grieve the war’s hundreds of thousands of dead. That latter concern, which consumed the nation immediately after the conflict ended, elevated the need for the epitaph but also thwarted its ability to function as it traditionally had, faced as it now was with the horrific, unprecedented circumstances of America’s first modern war.

In concluding, I will turn to two poems written about one Civil War battle, Fredericksburg, at different periods in Melville’s thinking about the war. The first, from the “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial,” is the “Inscription for Marye’s Heights, Fredericksburg,” which reads:

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. [P. 170]

“Inscription for Marye’s Heights, Fredericksburg” challenges the Wordsworthian relationship between reader and inscription. In this poem, there is no passing reader, nor is there a speaker of the inscription. Instead the epitaph, more properly classified as a dedication to the victims of the battle, takes the form of one long prepositional phrase unattached to either

³⁶Martin Griffin, *Ashes of the Mind: War and Memory in Northern Literature, 1865–1900* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), p. 72.

a subject or a verb. The reader is left in suspense, with no agent turning up to explain the source of the inscription or to conclude the dedicatory service that seems to be in progress. Absent an agent, the poem exists solely for those it seeks to commemorate, the object of the dedicatory preposition "to." They alone act—climbing a hill, crossing the flood—while those who are left behind to mourn are afforded no means of doing so. Again, Melville seems to obstruct the epitaphic impulse, truncating the process of inscription and divorcing it from its creation and reception.

The detachedness of "Inscription for Marye's Heights, Fredericksburg" stands in marked contrast to an earlier inscription that Melville wrote for the dead at Fredericksburg, verses that appeared in an 1864 charity volume entitled *Autograph Leaves of our Country's Authors*. This brief poem, which Garner claims is one of the few war poems that Melville indisputably wrote during the conflict, reads as follows:

A glory lights an earnest end;
 In jubilee the patriot ghosts ascend.
 Transfigured at the rapturous height
 Of their passionate feat of arms,
 Death to the brave's a starry night,—
 Strown their vale of death with palms.³⁷

Commenting on the conventionality of Melville's image of "patriot ghosts" ascending to heaven, a conventionality Garner associates with "newspaper verse," he observes: "In *Battle-Pieces*, the gates of Heaven do not open for the Union dead; nevertheless, it would be unwise to ignore the possibility that at this point in the war [Melville] genuinely meant what he wrote, that the ideas of glory and a caring God here suggested had not yet been expunged by sad experience."³⁸ I would add that the most fundamental difference between the 1864 and the 1866

³⁷For more on the dating of "Inscription for the Slain at Fredericksburgh," see Garner, p. 215. Poem quoted in Garner, *The Civil War World of Herman Melville*, p. 215.

³⁸Garner, *The Civil War World of Herman Melville*, p. 216.

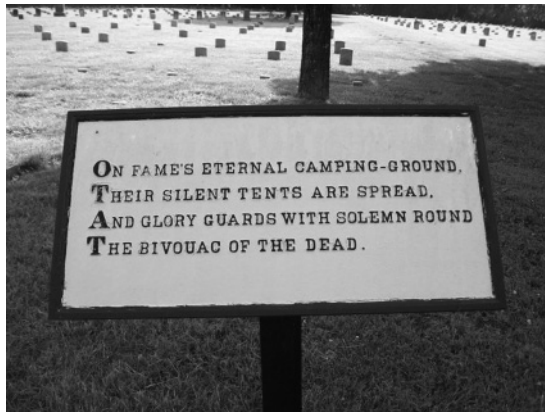


FIG. 2.—Theodore O'Hara. Excerpt from "The Bivouac of the Dead." National cemetery, Marye's Heights, Md. Photograph by Jillian Spivey Caddell.

verses is the monumental turn, the shift from glorious, rapturous transformation to truthful, epitaphic commemoration: the stone the 1866 poem describes is "of more than victory the monument," but what that *more* is is never specified; it is left for the reader to surmise. And, as in the poem about the Wilderness, Melville gives authority not to the inscription but to the object—the stone itself—allowing it, rather than words, to stand, silently honoring the sacrifice of the dead.

Those who visit the battlefield and national cemetery at Marye's Heights today will find there neither of Melville's inscriptions for the site. Instead, the cemetery is dotted with iron tablets featuring stanzas from Theodore O'Hara's Mexican War poem "The Bivouac of the Dead," also popular at Andersonville's cemetery immediately after the war. Echoing the conventionality of Melville's 1864 inscription rather than the challenge of his 1866 verse, the poem is a patriotic paean to the national dead, which as engraved on the plaques, bears no attribution to O'Hara (fig. 2). He, like the soldiers Melville memorialized, is unnamed, anonymous—perhaps because he fought for the Confederacy. The enduring presence of O'Hara's verse as we mark the sesquicentennial of the Civil War signals an impulse that Melville's verse personifies and yet questions. Despite the collapse of all poetry into the genre of the lyric during the modern era, which renders many nineteenth-century



FIG. 3.—Herman Melville's Tombstone. Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

forms, including the epitaph, rote and unworthy of critical attention, the epitaph persists as a popular form of commemoration: the nation still needs its little death poems, even if high literature has no need for them.

In the end, then, the epitaphs of *Battle-Pieces* do promote a form of quietness, much as Melville's inscriptionless tombstone invites passersby to imaginatively project their own interpretations of the memorial's meaning onto its blank scroll (fig. 3).

At a time when the newly reunited country was struggling with how best to memorialize its dead, Melville's "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial" offered an uneasy proposition: that the only fitting way to speak of the war dead was not to speak at all, to write epitaphs that were not really epitaphs. "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial" instantiate a form of memorializing temporality that, because it is recursive without being recuperative, does not offer the promise of national reconciliation. The ostensibly simple but carefully wrought and deeply troubling inscriptive and memorial verses of *Battle-Pieces* reveal, then, a poet not retreating from history, or insisting on history's teleological ends, but confronting it head-on by dismantling a genre that was completely relevant and entirely out of place and time.

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