Teaching the Civil War through Poetry and Poetry through the Civil War

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**the story**: the Civil War catapults poetry— as it does the nation— toward a permanently fractured modern identity

**the story’s benefits**
- suggests Civil War may be profitably studied through poetry and poetry through the Civil War
- may help students think about poems in social and literary historical contexts and consider relation between their formal features and publication circumstances

**the story’s caveats**
- one story (supported by selective examples) among many about poetry and Civil War
- Civil War one of many (arguable) contributors to split between “popular verse” and “serious poetry” and to rise of a modern and modernist poetics
Some poetic purposes

- Persuasion
- Instruction
- Praise / Commemoration
- Documentation / Story
- Self-expression
- Observation, meditation, exploration
- Language exercise, experiment, or examination
ANTEBELLUM POETRY: PUBLICS, CONVENTIONS, CONDITIONS, PURPOSES

- Popular form of social address on subjects of general interest, ephemeral & eternal
- Newspapers of all kinds principal vehicle of publication (and arbiter of typographic Form)
- Memorized, recited, and used for pedagogical purposes (e.g. moral instruction) in schools
- Feature of all ceremonial and celebratory occasions
- Often sung, and associated with song by church hymn lyrics (everyone’s first poems)
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, “Bury Me in a Free Land” (1857)

Make me a grave where’er you will,  
In a lowly plain, or a lofty hill;  
Make it among earth’s humblest graves,  
But not in a land where men are slaves.

I could not rest if around my grave  
I heard the steps of a trembling slave;  
His shadow above my silent tomb  
Would make it a place of fearful gloom. . .

If I saw young girls from their mother’s arms  
Bartered and sold for their youthful charms,  
My eye would flash with a mournful flame,  
My death-paled cheek grow red with shame.

I would sleep, dear friends, where bloated might  
Can rob no man of his dearest right;  
My rest shall be calm in any grave  
Where none can call his brother a slave. . .
Henry Timrod, “Ethnogenesis” (1861)
Written during the meeting of the First Southern Congress at Montgomery, February 1861.

1.
Hath not the morning dawned with added light?
And shall not evening call another star
Out of the infinite regions of the night,
To mark this day in Heaven? At last, we are
A nation among nations; and the world
Shall soon behold in many a distant port
Another flag unfurled!
Now, come what may, whose favor need we court?
And, under God, whose thunder need we fear?
Thank Him who placed us here.
Beneath so kind a sky – the very sun
Takes part with us; and on our errands run
All breezes of the ocean; dew and rain
Do noiseless battle for us; and the Year,
And all the gentle daughters in her train,
March in our ranks, and in our service yield
Long spears of golden grain!

*Ode: Established, Elevated, Ceremonial form

*God and personified nature enlisted in cause

*Rhetorical address of audience (First line allusion to star-spangled banner)

*Formal argumentation of Abolition’s anti-scripturalism and ‘wage slavery’s’ moral inferiority to paternalistic servitude

*Biblical typology & prophecy

3.

... On one side, creeds that dare to teach
What Christ and Paul refrained to preach;
Codes built upon a broken pledge,
And charity that whets a poniard’s edge;
Fair schemes that leave the neighboring poor
To starve and shiver at the schemer’s door,
While in the world’s most liberal ranks enrolled,
He turns some vast philanthropy to gold;
Religion, taking every mortal form
But that a pure and Christian faith makes warm,
Where not to vile fanatic passion urged,
Or not in vague philosophies submerged,
Repulsive with all Pharisaic leaven,
And making laws to stay the laws of Heaven!
And on the other, scorn of sordid gain,
Unblemished honor, truth without a stain,
Faith, justice, reverence, charitable wealth,
And, for the poor and humble, laws which give,
Not the mean right to buy the right to live,
But life, and home, and health!
To doubt the end were want of trust in God,
Who, if he has decreed
That we must pass a redder sea
Than that which rang to Miriam’s holy glee,
Will surely raise at need
A Moses with his rod!
Julia Ward Howe, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (1861)

Mine eyes have seen the glory of / the coming of the Lord;
[It] is trampling out the vintage where / the grapes of wrath are stored;
[He] hath loosed the fateful lightning of / His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.                  (Chorus)
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps,
They have built Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps:
His day is marching on.                  (Chorus)

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:
"As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal";
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on.              (Chorus)

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat:
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.              (Chorus)

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me.
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.            (Chorus)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emily Dickinson, “My Portion is Defeat—today—” (1862)</th>
<th>Anonymous, “The Soldier’s Fireside, after a Battle”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Portion is Defeat—today—</td>
<td>[... Then mother, and wife, and sister]</td>
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<td>A paler luck than Victory—</td>
<td>Each thought of the loving Father</td>
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<td>Less Paeans—fewer Bells—</td>
<td>Who makes the brave soldier His care,</td>
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<td>The Drums don’t follow Me—with tunes—</td>
<td>And their doubt and despair were routed</td>
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<td>Defeat—a somewhat slower—means—</td>
<td>By the holy power of prayer.</td>
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<td>More Arduous than Balls—</td>
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<td>'Tis populous with Bone and stain—</td>
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<td>And Men too straight to stoop again—</td>
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<td>And Piles of solid Moan—</td>
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<td>And Chips of Blank—in Boyish Eyes—</td>
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<td>And scraps of Prayer—</td>
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<td>And Death’s surprise,</td>
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<td>Stamped visible—in Stone—</td>
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<td>There’s somewhat prouder, over there—</td>
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<td>The Trumpets tell it to the Air—</td>
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<td>How different Victory</td>
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<td>To Him who has it—and the One</td>
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<td>Who to have had it, would have been</td>
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<td>Contented—to die—</td>
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<td>*no God, no “our,” no nature, no sentiment, no family (“scraps of prayer” emptied by location as third in series of eviscerated substantives after “Piles of solid moan” and “chips of blank”)</td>
<td>*metrical and sonic regularity—but resistant to oratorical or musical voicing</td>
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<td>*no triumphalism: victory itself interrogated as differing only “somewhat” and only in degree from defeat (trumpets announce it to no one but “air”)</td>
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<td>*abstracted body not ennobled or transfigured but corporeal body frozen in eternal devastation and pain</td>
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<td>*isolated, unmoored first person</td>
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Herman Melville, “A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight” (1865)

Plain be the phrase, yet apt the verse,
More ponderous than nimble;
For since grimed War here laid aside
His Orient pomp,'twould ill befit
Overmuch to ply
The Rhyme's barbaric cymbal . . .

Yet this was battle, and intense—
Beyond the strife of fleets heroic;
Deadlier, closer, calm 'mid storm;
No passion; all went on by crank,
Pivot, and screw,
And calculations of caloric . . .

War shall yet be, and to the end;
But war-paint shows the streaks of weather;
War yet shall be, but warriors
Are now but operatives; War's made
Less grand than Peace,
And a singe runs through lace and feather.

*De'naturing & disenchantment both of war and of verse; utilitarian orientation toward world and language

*Deliberate awkwardness of form, anachronistic fastidiousness of diction; “barbaric” and ironic rhymes (heroic / caloric)

*Depopulation of poem—no embodied subject or addressed audience

*Emptying of conventional commemorative and narrative purposes of battle poem

(Compare to Tennyson’s 1854 “The Charge of the Light Brigade”)
Walt Whitman, "Spirit Whose Work is Done" (1865)

SPIRIT whose work is done! spirit of dreadful hours!
Ere, departing, fade from my eyes your forests of bayonets;
Spirit of gloomiest fears and doubts, (yet onward ever unaltering pressing;
Spirit of many a solemn day, and many a savage scene! Electric spirit!
That with muttering voice, through the war now closed, like a tireless phantom flitted,
Rousing the land with breath of flame, while you beat and beat the drum;
—Now, as the sound of the drum, hollow and harsh to the last, reverberates round me;
As your ranks, your immortal ranks, return, return from the battles;
While the muskets of the young men yet lean over their shoulders;
While I look on the bayonets bristling over their shoulders;
While those slanted bayonets, whole forests of them, appearing in the distance, approach and pass on, returning homeward,
Moving with steady motion, swaying to and fro, to the right and left,
Evenly, lightly rising and falling, as the steps keep time;
—Spirit of hours I knew, all hectic red one day, but pale as death next day;
Touch my mouth, ere you depart—press my lips close!
Leave me your pulses of rage! bequeath them to me! fill me with currents convulsive!
Let them scorch and blister out of my chants, when you are gone;
Let them identify you to the future, in these songs.

"...and the Year, / And all the gentle daughters in her train, / March in our ranks, and in our service wield / Long spears of golden grain!"
—"Ethnogenesis"

"I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel!"
—"Battle Hymn of the Republic"

*Different sort of invocation (of what sort of spirit? for what purpose?)

*Different sort of song (Tasked with the salvage and Poetic re-purposing of prosaic rhythms, mechanical energies, destructive power)

*Nature not enlisted as weapons of war, nor weapons sanctified, but weapons installed in place of nature, and war’s “scorch and blister” invoked as animating spirit not only of finished past and of poem’s present but possibly (prophetically?) of future as well.