THE WOUND-DRESSER

1

An old man bending I come among new faces,
Years looking backward resuming in answer to children,
Come tell us old man, as from young men and maidens that love me,
(Arous'd and angry, I'd 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;)
Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these chances,
Of unsurpass'd heroes, (was one side so brave? the other was equally brave;)
Now be witness again, paint the mightiest armies of earth,
Of those armies so rapid so wondrous what saw you to tell us?
What stays with you latest and deepest? of curious panics,
Of hard-fought engagements or sieges tremendous what deepest remains?

2

O maidens and young men I love and that love me,
What you ask of my days those the strangest and sudden your talking recalls,
Soldier alert I arrive after a long march cover'd with sweat and dust,
In the nick of time I come, plunge in the fight, loudly shout in the rush of successful charge,
Enter the captur'd works—yet lo, like a swift-running river they fade,
Pass and are gone they fade—I dwell not on soldiers' perils or soldier's joys,
(Both I remember well—many the hardships, few the joys, yet I was content.)

But in silence, in dreams' projections,
While the world of gain and appearance and mirth goes on,
So soon what is over forgotten, and waves wash the imprints off the sand,
With hinged knees returning I enter the doors, (while for you up there,
Whoever you are, follow without noise and be of strong heart.)

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass the ground,
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd hospital,
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss,
An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,
Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again.

I onward go, I stop,
With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,
I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,
One turns to me his appealing eyes—poor boy! I never knew you,
Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you.

3

On, on I go, (open doors of time! open hospital doors!)
The crush'd head I dress, (poor crazed hand tear not the bandage away,)
The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through I examine,

Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard,
(Come sweet death! be persuaded O beautiful death!
In mercy come quickly.)

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood,
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and side-falling head,
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump,
And has not yet look'd on it.

I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,
But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,
And the yellow-blue countenance see.

I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound,
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive,
While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail.

I am faithful, I do not give out,
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame.)

4

Thus in silence in dreams' projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals.
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,

Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

Melville

The Portent.

(1859.)

Hanging from the beam,
Slowly swaying (such the law),
Gaunt the shadow on your green,
Shenandoah!
The cut is on the crown
(Lo, John Brown),
And the stabs shall heal no more.

Hidden in the cap
Is the anguish none can draw;
So your future veils its face,
Shenandoah!
But the streaming beard is shown
(Weird John Brown),
The meteor of the war.

Misgivings.

(1860.)

WHEN ocean-clouds over inland hills
  Sweep storming in late autumn brown,
And horror the sodden valley fills,
  And the spire falls crashing in the town,
I muse upon my country's ills—
  The tempest bursting from the waste of Time
On the world's fairest hope linked with man's foulest crime.
Nature's dark side is heeded now—
  (Ah! optimist-cheer disheartened flown) —
A child may read the moody brow
  Of yon black mountain lone.
With shouts the torrents down the gorges go,
And storms are formed behind the storm we feel:
The hemlock shakes in the rafter, the oak in the driving keel.

The Conflict of Convictions.

(1860–1).

ON starry heights
  A bugle wails the long recall;
Derision stirs the deep abyss,
  Heaven's ominous silence over all.
Return, return, O eager Hope,
  And face man's latter fall.
Events, they make the dreamers quail;
Satan's old age is strong and hale,
A disciplined captain, gray in skill,
And Raphael a white enthusiast still;
Dashed aims, at which Christ's martyrs pale,
Shall Mammon's slaves fulfill?

The House-top.
A Night Piece.

(July, 1863.)

No sleep. The sultriness pervades the air
And binds the brain—a dense oppression, such
As tawny tigers feel in matted shades,
Vexing their blood and making apt for ravage.
Beneath the stars the roofy desert spreads
Vacant as Libya. All is hushed near by.
Yet fitfully from far breaks a mixed surf
Of muffled sound, the Atheist roar of riot.
Yonder, where parching Sirius set in drought,
Balefully glares red Arson—there—and there.
The Town is taken by its rats—ship-rats
And rats of the wharves. All civil charms
And priestly spells which late held hearts in awe—
Fear-bound, subjected to a better sway
Than sway of self; these like a dream dissolve,
And man rebounds whole æons back in nature.
Hail to the low dull rumble, dull and dead,
And ponderous drag that shakes the wall.

Wise Draco comes, deep in the midnight roll
Of black artillery; he comes, though late;
In code corroborating Calvin's creed
And cynic tyrannies of honest kings;
He comes, nor parlies; and the Town, redeemed,
Gives thanks devout; nor, being thankful, heeds
The grimy slur on the Republic's faith implied,
Which holds that Man is naturally good,
And—more—is Nature's Roman, never to be scourged.

Notes

The capitalization of the original edition has been followed for the poem titles in the text. It has been modernized for the table of contents and, as here, the notes.

The Portent

John Brown with 21 followers captured the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia on October 16, 1859 in an abortive attempt to foment slave insurrection. He was tried on charges of "treason to the Commonwealth" and "conspiring with slaves to commit treason and murder," found guilty, and executed by hanging on December 2.

The imagery of the poem is predominantly visual and much of it derives from the human body, usually Brown's. Kinetic images such as that of the body swaying pendulum-like from the gallows (lines 1–2) help to establish the stress pattern and to justify the nearly identical syllable count in corresponding lines of the two stanzas. Opposing this regularity is the substitution of assonantal, consonantal, identical, and eye rhymes for those of a more usual sort. The avoidance of conventional rhyme creates intensity by playing regularity against irregularity. It also seems to be part of a deliberate attempt at understatement, as though under-rhyming might prevent the "horrors of war" theme from getting out of control and interfering with the reconciliation theme which is to come. Furthermore, it emphasizes by subtle contrast the regularity of the double refrain which is vital to the structure and meaning of the poem (see note on line 4). Finally, it makes possible the use of rhyme as a means of unifying the two stanzas (cf. lines 2 and 9), as do the alliteration (cf. lines 1 and 8) and the double refrain.

In the original edition "The Portent" is not listed in the table of contents but follows immediately after it, in format serving as a preface to the other poems. The only poem set in italic type, it is further distinguished by an intervening blank verso.

Line 2. *such the law*: the laws of physics and the laws of man. References to the law occur often in *Battle-Pieces* and in Melville's other writings—most memorably in his last work, *Billy Budd,* where society requires the hanging of a man who, like John Brown, is not clearly and unequivocally guilty. This phrase is also used ironically in "Lee in the Capitol" (line 174).

Line 3. *Gaunt*: as a description of the shadow this is suitable because Brown is haggard from his experience and is forbidding both in his personal appearance and in what he symbolizes. The dark shadow represents the intrusion of death into the green valley. Cf. "Misgivings" (lines 2–3) where "autumn brown" sweeps into a "valley."

Lines 3–4. Major military operations in the Shenandoah Valley include General T. J. (Stonewall) Jackson's brilliant diversionary campaign of May–June 1862, which slowed General George B. McClellan's advance on Richmond, and General Philip Sheridan's activities as commander of the Middle Military Division from August 1864 to March 1865, as a result of which, according to Sheridan himself, "A crow would have had to carry its rations if it had flown across the valley." Therefore, "the shadow on your green" is not only literally John Brown's with all accompanying symbolic significance, but also a reference to the devastation brought to the Shenandoah by war.

Line 4. Because the Shenandoah Valley was noted for its fertility and beauty and had already accumulated a romantic aura, and because of the euphony of the word itself, it is an apt choice for the refrain. It gains importance from its central position in both stanzas, thus serving to separate lines with iambic emphasis from those with trochaic emphasis; from its brevity in contrast to lines which precede and follow; and from the considerable number of words with which it alliterates. With "John Brown," it forms a double refrain which enhances the meaning as well as the formal unity of the poem. The "Shenandoah" refrain suggests fertility, life, and peace; the "John Brown" refrain suggests devastation, death, and war. The modulated accents of "Shenandoah" contrast with the three heavy and ominous stresses of the second refrain. The color contrast is mentioned above (notes on lines 3, 3–4). Symbolically, the image of the Shenandoah Valley represents the outcome of the sins of the South and an extension of the sins of the nation and of mankind.

Line 5. John Brown's letter of October 22, 1859 to Judge Daniel R. Tilden of Cleveland, Ohio, requesting legal aid, begins: "I am here [Charlestown, Virginia] a prisoner, with several cuts in my head, and bayonet stabs in my body." Cf. Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV, i, 245: ". . . but it is no English treason to cut French crowns," and *Richard III*, III, ii, 43–44: "I'll have this crown of mine cut from my shoulders/Before I see the crown so foul misplac'd." In *White-Jacket* (Chap. 56, "A Shore Emperor on Board a Man-of-war") Melville puns on *crown* in the senses of head and

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coronet. He uses *crown* in the sense of head in *Mardi* (Chap. 138, "Of the Isle of Diranda"). The crown is a traditional emblem of the state, which has been hurt by the "cut." It may also signify the sensibility or conscience which has been aroused.

Line 6. *Lo*: behold, also prostrate since line 5 suggests that Brown has been struck down, and dead since *low* meaning death is used in "Shiloh" (line 17), in "Stonewall Jackson" (line 14), and elsewhere. A similar pun on *lo* is in "Shelley's Vision" (line 8) in *Timoleon.* Although Brown lies low in death he hangs high enough on the scaffold to cast a retributive shadow. Ultimately he becomes a symbolic meteor, a heavenly body which influences the destiny of the earth below.

Lines 8–10. As the cap placed by the executioner over the head of the condemned man conceals his face, so the future is also veiled. Brown's personal suffering seems all the more intense because it is thus private and spatially confined.

Line 9. *draw*: remove so as to disclose, as with a veil; portray, delineate.

Line 10. The association of prophecies, prophets, and veils may have been suggested to Melville by Schiller's poem, "The Veiled Image at Sais." He owned a set of Schiller (Sealts nos. 347, 349) and in *Moby-Dick* (Chap. 76, "The Battering-Ram") refers to "the dread goddess's veil at Sais." Melville in 1862 acquired Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh,* consisting of four Eastern stories in verse, the first of which is "The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan" (Sealts no. 370). The phrase, "I am the Veiled Persian Prophet," appears in *Mardi* (Chap. 97, "Faith and Knowledge").

Line 12. The cap cannot completely conceal Brown's beard any more than the significance and result of Brown's death can be suppressed. Attention is further drawn to this striking image because of the length of the line and its position between two of the shortest in the poem.

Lines 12–14. In English literature meteors have been associated with wars and disasters from the time of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Thus the entry for the fateful year 1066 begins with a record of a "hairy star" regarded as an omen, and the tradition continues in Shakespeare, e.g. *King John,* III, iv, 157–58: "And call them meteors, prodigies, and signs,/ Abortives, presages, and tongues of heaven." Milton associated *streaming* with *meteor* in *Paradise Lost,* I, 536–37: "Th'Imperial Ensign, which full high advanc't/ Shone like a Meteor streaming to the Wind"; and Edmund Waller uses similar language in connection with the banner of James, Duke of York, in "Instructions to a Painter" (lines 269–70): "His dreadful streamer (like a comet's hair,/ Threat'ning destruction) hasten their despair." Samuel Butler in *Hudibras* (Pt. 1, Canto 1, lines 239–48), a book Melville knew well (Sealts nos. 104 and 105), describes the "tawny beard" of Sir Hudibras as a "hairy meteor" which foretells disaster. Thomas Gray's

"The Bard: A Pindaric Ode" (lines 19–21) describes a Welsh bard: (Loose his beard and hoary hair/ Streamed, like a meteor, to the troubled air)." Gray's note states that "the image was taken from a well-known picture of Raphael, representing the Supreme Being in the vision of Ezekiel." Henry A. Murray, editor of *Pierre,* argues convincingly that "The Bard" was the source of the name Plinlimmon (p. 475).

Grammatically *streaming beard* is in apposition with *meteor of war* but so is the refrain, "Weird John Brown." This is in keeping with the synecdochic quality of the phrase and emphasizes Brown's function as portent by relating him even more closely to the meteor.

Line 13. *Weird* in the sense of odd, eccentric, is appropriate because of Brown's character and physical appearance. Even in death there is a lack of propriety, a shamelessness, in the exposure of his beard. The word also identifies Brown with the Weirds, making him an instrument of fate and prophecy, and paradoxically because of the cap he is a blind seer. The refrain is incremental. Brown is no longer merely someone to whom attention is called. His significance is now stated.

Line 14. Melville's brother Thomas was captain of a clipper ship, "The Meteor." Melville sailed with him from Boston on May 30, 1860, landing at San Francisco on October 12. The poem "To the Master of the *Meteor,*" in *John Marr,* recalls this voyage.

Misgivings

In his note to "The Conflict of Convictions," Melville writes of "doubts and misgivings" rife in 1860–61.

Lines 2–3. The language here recalls the image in "The Portent" of the body of John Brown casting a dark shadow across the Shenandoah Valley.

Line 5. The image of the crashing spire suggests that the restraining and purifying power of the church has declined. Cf. "The House-top" (lines 13–15): "And priestly spells which late held hearts in awe—/ . . . these like a dream dissolve."

Line 7. For other instances of the pairing of "fair" and "foul" see "The Scout toward Aldie," note on line 430.

Line 8. Fogle ("Melville and the Civil War," p. 64) points out that whereas the logical progress of the first stanza is "from the particular to the general, the second stanza reverses the process, as a generalization about nature is exemplified concretely."

Lines 11–13. The Journal of Melville's Voyage in a Clipper Ship" (p. 123) contains this entry for August 7, 1860: "Entered the Strait of Le Maire, & through the short day had a fine view of the land on both sides—Horrible snowy mountains—black, thunder-cloud woods—gorges—hell-landscape." The next day he continued: "Just before sunset, in a squall, the mist lifted & showed, within 12 or fifteen miles the horrid sight of Cape Horn—(the Cape proper)—a black, bare steep cliff, the face of it facing the South Pole; with[in] some miles were other awful islands and rocks—an infernal group." For Melville Cape Horn is often a symbol of anguish and trial. Cf. "The Fortitude of the North" (line 5).

Line 13. The image of the violent storm serves a double purpose: it forces recognition of the dark side of nature and it portends yet other storms to come.

Line 14. The rafters, which as the upper part of a building are suggestive of man's effort to control the land, and the keel, which as the bottom and longitudinal axis of a ship represent man's attempts to use the sea for his own purposes, are imagined in their primal form as hemlock and oak (Berlind, "Notes," p. 33). Cf. "The House-top" (line 16): "And man rebounds whole aeons back in nature."

The House-top

The New York draft riots were precipitated by the publication on July 11, 1863, of the first list of those selected for compulsory military service. Negroes were the principal victims of the rioting. The mob burned a Negro church and orphanage. Other fires caused property losses in the millions. Federal troops put down the disturbance, inflicting an estimated thousand casualties. Less serious riots took place in Boston and other cities.

Lines 3–6. The tiger as a symbol of noble savagery appears frequently in romantic art and literature. Cf. "Charleston" (lines 13–16) by the Confederate poet Henry Timrod, first published in the Charleston *Mercury* of December 13, 1862:

> And down the dunes a thousand guns lie couched
> Unseen beside the flood,
> Like tigers in some Orient jungle crouched,
> That wait and watch for blood.

Also cf. *Moby-Dick* (Chap. 114, "The Gilder"): ". . . beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it. . . ."

Lines 5–6. Libya was proverbial for heat, drought, and sterility. Cf. Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida,* I, iii, 327–28.

Line 8. *roar*: cf. line 3.

Line 9. Sirius in Canis Major, called the Dog Star because it follows its

master Orion, is the brightest star in the sky. During "dog days," July 3 to August 11, according to tradition, Sirius rises with the sun, increasing its heat. "Dog days" is supposedly the period when dogs are susceptible to rabies, a disease said to be characterized by madness and fear of water. The star's name is from the Greek adjective *seiros,* meaning hot, scorching.

Lines 12–13. Shakespeare often used the words *charms* and *spells* together in a context which has to do with witchcraft (see *Macbeth,* III, v, 18–19; *Merry Wives of Windsor,* IV, ii, 185; *Midsummer-Night's Dream,* II, ii, 17; *I Henry VI,* V, iii, 2). Melville seems to be conscious of this usage here, in at once calling for the restraints of law and religion and recognizing that they are never totally effective.

Line 13. John J. Hughes, Roman Catholic Bishop of New York, was asked by the city authorities to address the rioters, many of whom were Irish immigrants. His plea for submission to the law contributed largely to the restoration of order. Bishop Hughes, a native of Ireland, had been an early advocate of conscription.

Line 15. Cf. Shakespeare, *Tempest,* IV, i, 148–58.

Line 16. "I dare not write the horrible and inconceivable atrocities committed," says Froissart, in alluding to the remarkable sedition in France during his time. The like may be hinted of some proceedings of the draft-rioters. [Melville's note]

Melville is quoting from Lord Berners' translation of Froissart's *Chronicles* (Chap. 182). The passage concerns the Jacqueries, a peasant uprising, in May 1358, that was accompanied by excesses which Froissart, despite his statement to the contrary, proceeds to detail. The rebellion was crushed by Charles the Bad, King of Navarre, with "violent reprisals upon the peasants." Melville also drew upon Froissart for *Moby-Dick* (Chap. 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale") and *Mardi* (Chap. 24, "Dedicated to the College of Physicians . . .").

Line 18. *drag that jars the wall* (revision in Melville's copy).

Line 19. Cf. "The Martyr" (line 22): "The Avenger wisely stern." Draco codified the unwritten laws of Athens and administered them vigorously. His code was regarded as harsh and its provisions were much modified by Solon. Solon's opinion of the code is known from Plutarch's sketch, which Melville appears to have read. For Melville on Plutarch, see his note to "The Frenzy in the Wake."

Line 21. The poem is alliterative to an extent unusual even for Melville. Alliteration is used to give the unity elsewhere provided by rhyme. But the alliteration of line 21 is especially heavy and is made more obvious by its position in a section of the poem where alliteration is relatively sparse. The line is further stressed because it is bracketed between the

phrases "Draco comes" (line 19) and "he comes" (lines 20, 22). Another device which points up line 21 is the relation between the words *Draco* and *code,* normally used together but here separated—a device which gives a jarring effect in the interval of waiting for the set phrase to be completed. This concentration on line 21 serves to emphasize a concept of fundamental importance to Melville: the parallel roles in society of law and religion, both needed by man because of his natural depravity (cf. line 26).

Line 22. *cynic*: pessimistic regarding human motives and behavior; but also etymologically pertaining to the Dog Star (cf. line 9). Necessity demands the cynical exercise of discipline—Melville's justification of the ways of God to man. In "The Apparition," in *Timoleon,* Melville refers to Diogenes, the Cynic philosopher, as one of those "cynic minds" who "barked so much at Man." *The Confidence-Man* (esp. Chap. 22) associates "cynic" with "dog" and "canine," and Plotinus Plinlimmon's famous pamphlet in *Pierre* (Bk. XIV, Chap. 3) refers to "dogmatical teachers" whose students turn "like a mad dog, into atheism."

Line 25. *The grimy slur,*—the need for "cynic tyrannies"—derives ultimately from the doctrine of the natural goodness of man, held by the founders of the Republic and incorporated—to its detriment—into the political structure. In spite of having just been rescued from retrogression by "Draco" and "Calvin," man remains heedless of the power of evil.

Line 27. Acts 16:37–38 and 22:25–29 relate how Paul invoked his right as a Roman citizen to exemption from scourging. Cf. *White-Jacket* (Chap. 34, "Some of the Evil Effects of Flogging"): "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman? asks the intrepid Apostle, well knowing, as a Roman citizen, that it was not. And now, eighteen hundred years after, is it lawful to you, my countrymen, to scourge a man who is an American?" Also cf. *Redburn* (Chap. 40, "Placards, Brass Jewellers, Truck Horses and Steamers"), *Billy Budd* (Chap. 9), and "Bridegroom Dick" (lines 373–429), in *John Marr.*

Melville, as a sailor himself subject to the lash, saw scores of seamen flogged during his service aboard the "United States" (Howard, *Melville,* p. 72).