
What Like a Bullet Can Undeceive?

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In the days after the World Trade Center attacks in September 2001, Robert Pinsky—the former poet laureate and creator of the “America’s Favorite Poems” project—appeared on television reading poems of consolation. This seemed to many people a natural thing to do, I’m sure. Art is commonly thought to have a redemptive task in difficult times. The poem that I will discuss here, Herman Melville’s “Shiloh,” was written in New York at a similar time of violent crisis. The poem clearly answers to the expectation of redemption through art. But consolation and redemption are precisely what I’d like to avoid here. What is most interesting about the poem to me is a paradox in its redemptive language—one that says much about how violence comes to be scandalous, about the traps of redemption, and about the dilemmas of liberal culture.

“Shiloh” refers to an 1862 battle in the Civil War, the first of the colossally destructive battles that stunned participants on both sides by the scale of mechanized killing. Melville probably wrote the poem in 1864 or shortly after and published it in 1866 in *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, his first and best book of poetry, written after his novelistic career had essentially ended in failure. It is an unaccountably beautiful poem, building up to an extraordinary single line, which it shudders away from and contains in parentheses: “(What like a bullet can undeceive!).”¹

1. Herman Melville, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, ed. Sidney Kaplan (1866; Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars Facsimiles, 1960), 63.

Shiloh.
A Requiem.
(April, 1862.)

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
The swallows fly low
Over the field in clouded days,
The forest-field of Shiloh—
Over the field where April rain
Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain
Through the pause of night
That followed the Sunday fight
Around the church of Shiloh—
The church so lone, the log-built one,
That echoed to many a parting groan
And natural prayer
Of dying foemen mingled there—
Foemen at morn, but friends at eve—
Fame or country least their care:
(What like a bullet can undeceive!)
But now they lie low,
While over them the swallows skim,
And all is hushed at Shiloh.

It is not hard to see why Melville might have felt the need for parentheses to cordon off the climactic burst of recognition. (In other ways the parentheses expand its resonance, as we will see.) The line looks forward to the prose “Supplement,” tucked in the back of *Battle-Pieces* after the notes; there, in convoluted and defensive language, Melville argues for amnesty in Reconstruction—a position that goes a long way toward explaining the dismal commercial failure of the book.² (It sold 486 copies in its first eighteen months.) Like Walt Whitman, who published *Drum-Taps* in 1865, Melville clearly thought that a book of war poetry would feed some new public hunger in the war’s immediate aftermath. *Battle-Pieces* appeared amid Northern triumphalism, and many of its poems celebrate the causes of union and antislavery. Yet the climactic line of “Shiloh,” like other moments in the book, forswears any motivating structure for violence.

The line, in short, encapsulates the dilemma of Northern liberal intellectuals,

2. Robert J. Scholnick, “Politics and Poetics: The Reception of Melville’s *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*,” *American Literature* 49 (1977): 422–30.

whose moral framework had provided both the rallying language for the war and a powerful incitement to repudiate war, even their own war.³ Was their vision of a free humanity a way to redeem the violence in which they had been involved? Or did it promise and require a redemption *from* violence?

This dilemma should sound familiar.

The Civil War was in many ways a special case of official state violence, not least because the centrally disputed point was whether it was an inter- or intra-state conflict. The metapragmatics of war was complexly reflexive; people were fighting largely over the question of who was fighting, and for what. There was, however, at least one clear answer available to the North. The war, occurring at the climax of a period of intense Christianization in American culture, was partly driven on the Northern side by a redemptive vision of war in general and of the United States in particular as the redeemer nation. This vision was given chilling expression in the most popular of all Civil War poems, “The Battle-Hymn of the Republic,” written by the feminist and abolitionist Julia Ward Howe and printed in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the same month as the battle of Shiloh:

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.⁴

Here, in “The Battle-Hymn of the Republic,” violence does not appear as such. The poem does not say, “let us kill,” or even, “let us delegate some professional killing and dying”; it says, “let us die.” And it says we should do this not to rule, but “to make men free.” It appears not as a program of cruelty, but as a redemption from cruelty. The poem certainly has what we might call a violent program, but what it makes visible is the neutralization of violence by means of the state and an encompassing theodicy. Human cruelty is remediated in this world by the delegated human violence of the state and in the next world by the judgment for which the American state is an instrument and a foreshadowing type.

Even for two writers so ardently committed to the Union cause as Whitman and Melville, this vision came to seem repugnant. A war fought in the public

3. This context is described in George Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), though Fredrickson mentions Melville only briefly and “Shiloh” not at all.

4. Julia Ward Howe, “Battle-Hymn of the Republic,” in *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. John Hollander (New York: Library of America, 1993), 1:709–10. For a wider selection of poetry from the war, see Richard Marius, ed., *The Columbia Book of Civil War Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

sphere, reported from the front for the first time; a war that escalated beyond anyone's imagination and altered the cause for which it began; a war too mechanized to supply much redemptive glory to valorous manhood; a war in which each side contested the self-understanding of the other as a legitimate state; a war whose ironic and unforeseen consequence was to build the apparatus of the state to a new level; a war that turned on General Sherman's decision to carry the terror of warfare to a civilian population—the Civil War (to use the name attached to it by the victor, just as “Shiloh” is the North's name for the battle) seemed to these writers to reopen the problem of cosmodicy in a unique and terrible way.

In Melville's parenthesis, the whole idea of a war fought for a cause, any cause, is made to seem absurd. This was not easily said in 1866. Wartime patriots could be counted on to abominate a sentiment such as “Fame and country least their care.” In that line, Melville pointedly rebuts “The Battle-Hymn of the Republic.” In the poem's scene of injury, abandonment, and impending mortality, he subsumes legitimate state violence under the more general heading of violence as a suspect category, an intrinsic evil.

I will say more about the poem's resources for achieving this effect, but here I'd like to note that its dilemmas in a way inhere in the very concept of violence as an abstract category of suspicion. As an organizing category, *violence* holds out a temptation to pastoralism. In much contemporary criticism, for example, the term is a kind of anathema, even if—especially if—the violence is of the symbolic variety, as for example when George Eliot's compassion is analyzed as a kind of violence.⁵ The unstated assumption of this debunking move is that violence should not be—even if it is nonviolent violence. To call something violence is to name it as a scandal wherever we find it, whether in the normal workings of the state or in the categories of liberal ethics.

But we have no clean analytic or normative concept here. Violence is always the violence of another.

Not everyone shares the sense that what we call violence is self-evidently and invariably wrong, let alone our willingness to metaphorize it so violently, as it were. That we do so is a measure of our distance from the warrior ethic, or Florentine virtue, or absolute divinity, or ritual scarification, or ordinary injury, or the structure of feeling behind terrorism. To classify these as forms of violence is already to stand outside them. The act of naming violence involves a denaturaliz-

5. This is the argument of a paper titled “Fatal Compassion,” presented in September 2000 by Neil Hertz at the English Institute, Harvard University, and forthcoming in *Compassion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (New York: Routledge).

ing stance external to the action frameworks of force, allowing us to think of violence as aberration. In this sense, redemption comes before violence, not after.

How did we come to be habituated to the normal invisibility of injurious force and capable of externalizing its motivations? This state of affairs might require as much explanation as violence itself. I would like to know more about the genealogy of this abstraction, *violence*, and about its secular deployment. This essay is meant to be a small contribution to such a study.

Among the conditions that insulate us from the unbarred meanings of violence is the modern state, which by monopolizing and delegating violence, delegitimizes it in civil life. That function has come to be coupled with the sanctification of life and the consensual individual. So one thing that we might mean by *redemption* is the devaluation of violence created by the foundational premises of the nation-state and radically extended in certain moments of liberal culture to devalue even the official force of the state.

At least since Weber, it has been common to remark that the state is itself an action framework for violence, and indeed most contemporary critiques of the state rest on this as a point of suspicion. But the state's way of legitimating its force (i.e., of making it seem something other than mere violence) is different from other action frameworks, such as parental punishment of children or the blood feud. Unlike the latter, the modern state framework not only legitimates its own use of injurious force but globally delegitimizes all others. The more established the state framework, the further this delegitimizing effect can be put into practice: in weak states, hardly at all; in other cases, extending even to cover parental punishment of children or neglectful treatment of animals. In the latter kind of state, more and more forms of force and injury come to be regarded as violence, and thus as illegitimate, if they are not delegated to officials. By delegating violence we neutralize it in nonstate contexts, so that it can appear only as scandal or crime, contrasted with a normal state that is understood as pacific. Violence appears violent insofar as it can be contrasted with legitimate force; the more legitimately force comes to be delegated, the more illegitimate all undelegated force—violence—comes to seem.

This process of enlarging the category of violence and its catchment of suspicion takes a surprising turn when it leads people to name a state apparatus itself as violent, throwing suspicion on its use of force. In such cases, however, the normative standard behind the criticism is the same othering of violence that is the state's own means of legitimation. It is possible to turn this kind of criticism on the state largely because the modern democratic state leads us to assume a kind of transparency between the sovereign citizen who instructs the state and the

national subject on whom the state acts. State force applied to citizens looks illegitimate, a kind of sovereign self-injury, unless the injured persons can be externalized as criminals rather than citizens.

I might note that the state as a structure of redemptive delegation is itself a principal target of terrorism, in which the decision to bypass the delegated representatives of violence, in favor of what are locally called innocent civilians, is just as central a strategy as the exploitation of the mass public's asymmetry of agency. The scandal of terrorism is not just that it is violent, but that the terrorist sees no scandal in the violence and does not respect its delegation to a special subclass of legitimately violent and violatable persons such as the army or the police.

The point I want to make here is simply that neither violence nor redemption comes with uncontested valuations. While it remains virtually impossible for us to think about violence outside the redemptive frame of state delegation, the ongoing conflicts over the modern state also mean that the most basic evaluative problems of cosmodicy—why is the world bad, and what should we do about it—can still be reactivated with as much unsettled urgency as if history had only just begun.

In the West, the neutralization of violence by the state/civil society relation is also interwoven by another, more ancient kind of redemption: the distinctively Christian scheme in which suffering is seen as compensated, remediated, even meritorious. In Christianity after Augustine, the problem of cosmodicy is displaced by theodicy: the badness of the world is not the fault of creation, nor of its creator, but of humanity. A flawed and violent world is the just punishment for evil that flows from human freedom. The creator god is immunized from blame by the redeemer god, who suffered and died, and who calls us to embrace our suffering in opposition to our own fallen humanity.⁶

It is this radical redemption, I think, that first enables a stance sufficiently external to human action to allow *violence* to appear as an abstract category. The perfect state of peace is now imagined not as the precarious accomplishment of wisdom and just rule but as a heavenly state, beyond human affairs altogether. The suspicion of fallen humanity attends even the forceful virtues. Injurious force can cease to be seen as valorous striving and can come to be seen as human evil, insofar as a realm beyond history and humanity can be imagined as a point of aspiration. Redemption in this sense now has secular variants, which lead us to

6. Here I follow Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).

believe just as powerfully that people do not suffer and die in vain. Leo Bersani has argued that this stinky redemptive function—stinky because it is a lie (people do suffer and die in vain) and stinky because it locks people into very specific forms of suffering by convincing them that pain gives them access to compensation—has been reoccupied in modernity by aesthetics: art is supposed to compensate the flaws of the world.⁷

All of these elements of redemption can be glimpsed in “Shiloh.” From the beginning, the landscape localizes the violence as strictly human. Unlike many of the poems in *Battle-Pieces*—a strange collection of hybrid genres, never adequately appreciated partly because its technique is so anomalous—“Shiloh” is instantly recognizable as lyric.⁸ Its surface is quite simple, a kind of snapshot. The poem opens with a pastoral landscape, a redemptive backdrop against which violence can appear only as scandal.⁹ As in poems such as “Malvern Hill,” Melville

7. Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

8. The anomalies of technique are discussed in William Spengemann, “Melville the Poet,” *American Literary History* 11 (1999): 569–609. Helen Vendler comments on the generic hybrids in the volume in “Melville and the Lyric of History,” *Southern Review* 35 (1999): 579–94. Vendler endorses “Shiloh” precisely as an example of redemptive vision. Other important critical essays include Lawrence Buell, “American Civil War Poetry and the Meaning of Literary Commodification: Whitman, Melville, and Others,” in *Reciprocal Influences: Literary Production, Distribution, and Consumption in America*, ed. Steven Fink and Susan S. Williams (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 123–38; Lawrence Buell, “Melville the Poet,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 135–56; Elizabeth Renker, *Strike through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Rosanna Warren, “Dark Knowledge: Melville’s Poems of the Civil War,” *Raritan* 19 (1999): 100–121.

9. Here the summary of the poem by Stanton Garner, which, though almost entirely unreflective and manifestly wrong as to the temporal setting of the poem, can serve as a kind of indicator of the poem’s conventions:

“Shiloh: A Requiem (April, 1862)” is a soft, elegiac, conciliatory poem that survives the technical difficulty of rhyming the name “Shiloh.” Its double inspiration was the church that gave the battle its name and the Sabbath on which this part of the battle was fought. . . . A counterpart to “Donelson,” it takes the reader to the scene long after the battle, after neutral nature has healed the land. The fields surrounding the church are hushed and swallows wing in circles of eternity, uniting symbols of spring—the swallows—and resurrection—the church. These turn memory back to the spring rains that on the battle evening of that Sunday fell on broken and waning lives. It had been a dark and brutal day in which men had frowned across the “curs’d ravine” at brothers whom they aspired to kill. But “what like a bullet can undeceive!” Divided as Israel was at ancient Shiloh, these modern disputants had learned late that causes—“Fame and country”—paled before their own mortality and that their suffering was theirs alone. The rebirth of spring, the worship represented by the humble country church, the inviolability of the Sabbath, and the dedication to country that inspired both sides had become moot. Their prayers were “natural,” and natural too was the friendship that resumed as enemies shared the brotherhood of pain and death. . . .

frames catastrophe against beauty. The swallows in the first line are untouched by the drama of humanity below them, even blithely so. It seems almost perverse that they should be “skimming lightly.” Melville drives this home by bringing them back at the end of the poem, where again they skim as though Shiloh—and history—never happened. (When they are said to be “wheeling still,” two senses of “still” seem relevant; they wheel *still* yet, and they seem in wheeling to be *still*, motionless, almost out of time.) In classic fashion, the landscape is sublime to the extent that it is alien to humanity, even to such human endeavors as the poem we are reading, which shushes itself in the final line: “And all is hushed at Shiloh.” The inhuman but vaguely benign indifference of the landscape turns out to be the ground, so to speak, for the bombshell parenthesis.

Melville’s Calvinist/Augustinian background has a good deal to do with the way the poem intensifies the effect. As in many of the other poems of *Battle-Pieces* (most conspicuously in “The House-top” and “The Conflict of Convictions”), the war dramatizes the guilt of humanity. Nature and nature’s god are exonerated. Nature’s god comes into the picture in the one conspicuous human structure on the landscape: the eponymous log church. The church is a note of pathos, not least because it is “log-built,” Arcadian. (The meter and diction, by the way, have a homespun, log-built crudeness that brings out this primitive association; to the purist of poetic technique Melville’s touch in rhymes like “Shiloh / lie low” or “one / groan” has often felt rough, and the seemingly improvisational alternation between end-rhyme and internal rhyme—“them / skim”—has seemed like uncultured form.) The men, we are reminded, have been fighting on Sunday. Where Howe’s fighting Jesus had led men into battle, Melville’s implacably transcendent creator stands apart, on Sabbath, a supreme antithesis to a violence that by contrast is made purely human, and purely evil. Pastoral theodicy makes violence categorically illegitimate—even though in this case it is violence of the most legitimate variety.

But if humanity here seems to bear the guilt of the world’s badness alone, the poem’s picture of injured humanity also invokes a competing Christian ethics, one in which suffering can be seen as revirginating.

Through all of this, the poem takes *Battle-Pieces* a step forward, into that area of realism in which real men suffer and die on real battlefields.

Stanton Garner, *The Civil War World of Herman Melville* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 141–42. Garner’s notion that the poem is set “long after the battle” is clearly a mistake; the wounded but living men remain on the battlefield because it is Sunday evening and their comrades have retreated at dusk to return in the morning.

Over the field where April rain
Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain

These men, the only men we see in the poem, are not seen in the act of violence but rather as sufferers. Their suffering is suffused with theology: it is April, crucifixion season; the men are both parched and stretched out like Christ (a not uncommon effect in *Battle-Pieces*; compare the Daphne figures of “The Swamp Angel” and “Malvern Hill”); and nature deigns to solace them with rain. In contrast to “The Battle-Hymn of the Republic,” the impulse of the Christian ethic here is not to redeem force, but to redeem men from their own force, visible as violence because it is inflicted upon them outside the frame of the poem.

In midcentury America this picture of suffering as a moral center had acquired a distinctly anti-Calvinist association. It is a moral vocabulary for liberalizing Christianity. Melville indexes the modern vision of an essentially good humanity in the highly ambiguous phrase “natural prayer” at the middle of the poem. (Readers of Melville will recognize the conflict between Calvinist and liberal conceptions of humanity here as an excruciating topic in his work, which he returned to in the radically sentimentalized picture of natural innocence in *Billy Budd*, his only attempt at fiction after the Civil War, left unpublished at his death.) The men, seen only as sufferers, acquire innocence. They are almost features of landscape, all the more so because we see them through the placeless eternal present of lyric witnessing.

By treating the foemen without distinction of North and South, Melville eliminates violent agency from war. Partisans of both sides are seen only as patient subjects. They seem to have injured themselves—or, better yet, they seem to exist in an intransitive state of collective injury. This absolutized pain, if I may put it so, framed only by a structure of sympathy (“Foemen at morn, but friends at eve”) delegitimizes the war and sets the stage for the provocative turn of that still astonishing parenthesis:

Foemen at morn, but friends at eve—
Fame or country least their care:
(What like a bullet can undeceive!)

The rhetorical exclamation is in parentheses, I think, partly because it sits oddly against the picture of the innocent suffering that has preceded it. If any agent has injured these men, it can only be their own former state of deception—fame or country.

To imagine that the men have been injured by such agents as fame or country is of course to shift our attention from a social conflict to an inner struggle. In one

of the very few extended and thoughtful essays about Melville's poetry, Robert Penn Warren notes that one of the central themes running through *Battle-Pieces* is "the theme of the ironical split between concern with the human being and concern with the idea, between the individual and ideology."¹⁰ Warren did not cite examples, but this parenthesis must have been one of the main passages he had in mind.

In Americanist criticism it has become conventional to describe Warren's terms as the Cold War reading of Melville, in which the American individual is pitted against a demon of ideology that is identified with everything except the American individual. (Thus, the fluidly uncommitted Ishmael versus the totalitarian Ahab.) Critics like Warren are thought to have inclined to this reading because of their own commitments to liberal Americanism.¹¹

But Warren is onto something about that parenthesis, which to me at least has a power to move that far exceeds any Cold War idealization of the uncommitted individual. For one thing, "Shiloh" powerfully reminds us that because the ideology in question could not be considered other or alien—it was, in Northern intellectuals' eyes, the very cause of freedom—the war created an unsolvable dilemma. A delegitimizing perception of the war was not easy for Melville or anyone else. It is not entirely sustained in *Battle-Pieces*, and perhaps the full power of negation in the parenthesis could not be sustained. But as Louis Menand has recently argued, its aftershocks were a defining ethical crisis for many of the intellectuals of the postwar period, for whom the central perception carried forward from the war was horror at the idea of any vision—of fame, of country, as Melville says, but also of justice or freedom—that commits one to violence of this unbearable sort. Menand argues that the project of pragmatism sprang precisely from this challenge to redemptive vision (though again let me note that the devaluation of violence has its own redemptive character—hence the insoluble dilemma). Pragmatism, he notes, opens an unbridgeable gap between belief and its transcendent grounding. It developed the ability to explain everything about ideas except why anyone would die for them, and that limitation was ironically its point.¹²

Something like this problematic opens up in Melville's exceedingly odd word choice: *undeceive*. There is no direct object, no modifier. We are not told who is

10. Robert Penn Warren, introduction to *Selected Poems of Herman Melville: A Reader's Edition*, ed. Robert Penn Warren (New York: Random House, 1970), 9.

11. The chief statement of this position is Donald Pease, "Moby Dick and the Cold War," in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald Pease (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

12. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

undeceived about what. Bullets simply undeceive, and the implication is that any motivating framework for action, or at least for violent action, is exposed as deception in this moment of absolute retrospection (a kind of last judgment, implying for a Christian culture an eschatology). Undeception occurs in a partly abstracted mind inhabiting a bullet-torn body but otherwise either individual or collective, Union or Confederate, here or there. The bullet strips away conviction and habit, and we are not told much about what kind of subjectivity is left.

The line itself lingers in parentheses, floating free of its scene. Its picture of subjectivity, apparently merely negative, is in reality mediated by the conventions of lyric, with its eternal, placeless, overheard speech. The exclamatory form of the parenthesis gives us a question that is not merely rhetorical. If the line “What like a bullet can undeceive!” were a question, it would be rhetorically asking for, and therefore pointedly not finding, an analogue for its fatally excavating enlightenment. The text as lyric, however, *is* such an implied analogue to the work of the bullet, though for better and worse a less efficient one. The undeception of the wounded men, after all, is glimpsed only at the threshold of mortality. What good will their undeception do them? But the implication is that it might do *us* some good, as their unremarked witnesses. The work of lyric, by which we give ourselves an analogue to their momentary undeception, makes it possible to imagine their changed recognition as something other than a tragically inconsequential irony.

It has to be said that there is something wishful about Melville’s scenario. We have all too much evidence that neither bullets nor hijacked planes nor cruise missiles can be relied upon to do the work of undeception. If they could, then this would turn out to be another redemptive value. (What like a bullet can undeceive! Hooray for bullets! Obviously, that isn’t the point.) I think this is another reason why Melville encloses the line in parentheses. Its recognition is not exactly attributed to the men as consciousness. It is a kind of notional undeception, ambiguously ours and theirs, in a way uniquely mediated by lyric. This effect differs noticeably from cold detachment, as well as from instrumental rationality, or the reflexivity of the liberal individual’s self-integration. Undeception might be seen as a meta-pragmatic characterization of the lyric itself. Its state of suspended conviction, recalling the dilated sensibilities of John Keats’s “negative capability,”¹³ corresponds to the action frameworks of very few activities other than the reading of lyric. What like a poem can undeceive?

13. Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21 December 1817, in *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. Edward Hirsch (New York: Random House, 2001), 491–92.

For this reason, Melville's undeceived subject must be a special creation of the form, rather than the entirely deracinated individual of liberal theory. The gender marking of the whole scene is also very strong, both because it is fame and *patria* that have been stripped away and because this excavation of inwardness happens in the scene of a suddenly bonded mass of male friends, stretched toward one another in a mutually witnessing physicality that has been intensified to the utmost extremity. What appears to be a subject imagined only in the radically negative state of undeception is in fact vested with a richly unintegrated subjectivity.

Interestingly, Warren connects Melville's skepticism to what he politely calls Melville's "sexual tensions." What Warren in fact says in the sentence I quoted selectively above is that Melville's "self-divisions provide a secret grounding for the theme of the ironical split between concern with the human being and concern with the idea, between the individual and ideology." This insight might be turned around: the strong valuation of mobile, self-divided subjectivity is what makes sexuality visible as a distinctively human capacity, a dimension of unmastered expressivity.

This is all the clearer in that other great lingering parenthesis of Civil War poetry, the one that closes Whitman's "The Wound-Dresser":

(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have crossed and rested.
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)¹⁴

Whitman's poem similarly repudiates the motivating frameworks of war. It opens with a speaker, imagined as an aged veteran of the war (even though the poem was published in 1865), approached years later by children to tell the usual stories of heroism and victory. The speaker begins but then refuses. Instead, he returns in private memory to his witnessing of injured soldiers in the wartime hospital. The poem creates an antiphony between public narratives of heroism and the private memory, the latter being understood as uniquely available to lyric. The voice of memory is further punctuated by parenthetical interjections—*asides* departing from *asides*—culminating in the quoted lines. So the poem, like "Shiloh," stages a divided subject; in both texts lyrically mediated self-division creates a subject for whom eros, mortality, and the witnessing of injury must be protected against

14. Walt Whitman, "The Wound-Dresser," in *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 442–45. *Battle-Pieces* and *Drum-Taps* have often been compared, though usually in passing. Neither book has been adequately analyzed. The most thorough attempt at the comparison is John P. McWilliams Jr., "'Drum Taps' and *Battle-Pieces*: The Blossom of War," *American Quarterly* 23 (1971): 181–201.

the closure of redemption. In both poems, Christian frameworks of bellicose redemption enter into visible conflict with a distinctive picture of subjective experience and a baseline sanctification of life—themes, I might add, of late-Christian secular culture that we see violently repudiated in our time.

It might seem odd to call so Christian a poem as “Shiloh” paradigmatic of secularism, but I think it is, and in a way that exemplifies a paradox of modern secularism. Secular culture, especially in its American variant, freely names religion as the thing it is not but pointedly refuses to name itself as a discipline of subjectivity or as a public culture. It is not a creed but a way of prescinding from creed.¹⁵ In “Shiloh,” undeception is a movement governed by a kind of ethics of belief, a subjectivity enriched to the point of sanctity by distrust of conviction’s transcendent objects. Properly undeceived, we would distrust not only fame and country but any comparable motivating framework, including Howe’s god. (It is important that both the Melville and the Whitman poems are roughly contemporary with William Clifford’s *The Ethics of Belief*.)¹⁶ As is so often the case with post-Kantian secularism, the movement here looks like a simple negation, freedom from illusion. But it is also, less visibly, a discipline of ethical subjectivity in its own right.

“Shiloh” gives us, as an overdetermined unity, both the negative movement of secularism as the mere negation of creed and the more concrete texture of mortal worldliness, though the latter remains unthematized, performed rather than proposed. The sense of final worldliness comes out even more strongly in the Whitman poem, where the lyric subject is defined less by doubt and distrust than by resolve, attention, and desire. The framework of worry in “The Wound-Dresser” is cosmody, not theodicy, though the poem seeks to render the subjective limits of injury with a contemplative reverence that in other contexts we would call religious.

At the climax of “Shiloh,” as the undeceived float away from conviction, Melville is at his most Emersonian. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson in “Experience” (1844), he imagines a subject shocked to discover its own continuity despite the mortal tragedy of all its attachments. The men outlive, however briefly and uselessly, their redemptive frameworks; and this window of injury-registration is

15. This argument has been made forcefully by William Connolly in *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

16. W. K. Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1999). See the discussion in Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion: William James Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

ironically their most authentic life. What had been sacred justice becomes mere violence, in part because it stands in visible contrast to that which had been violated—namely, a deep subjectivity. Deep because it sustains violent self-division, because it outlives its contents, because it inheres in torn bodies that are both absolutely individual (because facing death) and saturated with social meaning, lingering across death through the work of the text.

I have tried to show here that the apparently simple act of naming violence, of perceiving the damage of a bullet, in fact mobilizes a complex structure of feeling, made possible by a vast historical background and a lot of textual condensation. It requires us to see humanity as alternately evil and innocent, to see the state as legitimate and illegitimate, and to see subjectivity as both empty and rich. These are strong valuations, not to be discarded by the facile critique of some purer undeception. Late-Christian liberal secular culture, as exemplified in “Shiloh,” now finds itself violently embattled, and it is among other things the perception of violence that is so embattled.

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