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6.

American Romanticisms

Edgar Allan Poe's "Dream-Land" and Herman Melville's "America"

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1. Romanticism and Antebellum America

As early as 1924, the American historian of ideas, Arthur O. Lovejoy, pointed out the difficulties of defining Romanticism in its German, French, and British forms and suggested that "we should learn to use the word 'Romanticism' in the plural" (235). American varieties of Romanticism are at least as difficult to define, and the task is complicated by the complex transnational influence of earlier European Romanticisms within the United States in the period between 1800 and 1865. While the American situation does not evince the (relative) unity of the Romantics in England between roughly 1780 and 1830, romantic forms and motifs abound in early and mid-nineteenth century poems (and many other literary genres) in the United States. Most importantly, New England Transcendentalism is deeply saturated in Romanticism and is often called the American counterpart of European Romanticisms.

Antebellum poetry was shaped by the emerging literary market, the rise of literary nationalism, and the increasing political tension between the North and the South. The lack of an international copyright agreement meant that republishing British literature was much less expensive for American publishers than fostering national authors. In this "culture of reprinting," as Meredith McGill (2003) calls it, romantic and transcendentalist ideas were characteristically disseminated widely via the medium of the literary magazine. An increasing number of writers demanded that America have a literature of its own. Questions about what America was and should be were on the agenda and made urgent by westward expansion, the corresponding ideology of Manifest Destiny, and the opposition between the Southern and the Northern states. The war between the industrialized Union states in the North and the agricultural Confederate states in the South, whose political economy was based on slave labor, fundamentally changed conceptions and images of America. There is critical agreement that the military, political, and cultural clash of the Civil War marked the end of American Romanticism. Nevertheless, a variety of romantic elements survived in postbellum poetry, as will become apparent in Melville's case.

Both Edgar Allan Poe's and Herman Melville's writings differ in important respects from the main currents of American Romanticism and Transcendentalism, particularly with regard to their poetry. Often grouped together with Nathaniel Hawthorne, Poe and Melville are characterized as running counter to an American ideology of optimism and metaphysical transparency, and are viewed rather as exposing the dark and troubled aspects of personal identity and cultural ideology (see e.g., Harry Levin's classic study *The Power of Blackness* (1958)). Melville himself, in his enthusiastic review of Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*, wrote: "this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is al-

ways and wholly free" (Melville 1987: 243). This field of political and artistic tensions in which Poe's and Melville's poems stand has been variously described as negative Romanticism (cf. Hoffman 1972: 19-29), dark Romanticism, or Gothic Romanticism. All of these concepts attempt to grasp the difference to the main characteristics of romantic poetry, which, as Jerome McGann (1983) has shown, is representative of the romantic ideology. Gary Richard Thompson explains that romantic writing "evokes an ideal world, infused with internal energy and dynamically evolving toward a yet higher state, in which the single, separate self seeks unity with nature, itself symbolic of the aesthetic harmony of the cosmos" (1974: 1).

Because of Poe's major influence on French poets from Charles Baudelaire to Paul Valéry, Poe's life and work were and are often viewed in terms of his influence on modernist rather than romantic poetry (see Eliot 1949). While Poe's early poetry was clearly influenced by Byronism, his later poems and his fiction in general are difficult to frame in terms of Romanticism. He published four collections of poetry in his lifetime: *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827), *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems* (1829), *Poems* (1831), and *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845).

Poe is often named as the prime example of the gloomy tradition of American Romanticism, yet the older literary tradition which feeds this type of literature is the Gothic, for a long time regarded as the inferior popular counterpart of Romanticism proper (cf. Botting 1996: 12). Recent research has rehabilitated the Gothic: Tom Duggett, for instance, argues that "the phenomenon known as Romanticism is a reform movement within the Gothic" (2010: 7; see Gamer 2000). The term 'Gothic Romanticism' also has the advantage of stressing the connections of Poe's poetry to both the earlier British and the American Gothic traditions, the latter usually thought to have reached its first heyday with the novels of Charles Brockden Brown around 1800.

Gothic romantic poetry reaches back to some of the most famous works often thought of as 'high' romantic such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) and "Kubla Khan, or A Vision in a Dream" (1816). Its themes and motifs are similar to the Gothic tradition in fiction (and architecture), which was associated with medieval times (and German horror writing), and depicted darkness, madness, and death. In the United States, Philip Freneau's "House of Night" (1779) is an early example of poetry that contains Gothic elements. While most authors entered the tradition to write but a few poems in it (e.g., Henry Wadsworth Longfellow), the majority of Poe's poems fall under the rubric of Gothic, the most famous by far being "The Raven" (1845), but also "The Haunted Palace" (1839), "The Conqueror Worm" (1843), "Ulalume" (1847), and "Annabel Lee" (1849). While almost all of Poe's poems employ elements of the Gothic—desolate landscapes, bereaved lovers, ghostly beings—one of the best examples of American Gothic in general is "Dream-Land" (1844).

The Gothic is also a strong presence in Melville's writings, the chief instance possibly being *Moby-Dick* (1851). Generally, Melville's writing is rooted in the traditions of Romanticism but also departs significantly from them: "The difference between the Melvillean and the Romantic quests is that, while reproducing the pattern of Romantic myth, Melville's quests thematically abort it: the ascending circle in Melville's writings is never completed . . ., the more inclusive unity never achieved" (Milder 2006: 31; cf. 41). The events of the Civil War, in particular, make both the earlier transcendentalist and Gothic varieties of Romanticism difficult for him to follow.

Melville's collection of poetry titled *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), from which "America" is taken, is part of a large body of poetry about the Civil War. Older scholarship often dismissed Civil War era poetry because of its supposed inferior literary quality; Edmund Wilson, for instance, argued that Melville's *Battle-Pieces* were "versified journalism" (1962: 479). Thanks to recent scholarship, works by canonical writers—first and foremost Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps* (1865) and its *Sequel* (1865-6) and Melville's *Battle-Pieces*, but also individual poems such as John Greenleaf Whittier's "Barbara Frietchie" (1863)—are now supplemented with works by African American poets, Southern poets, and previously unpublished material (cf. Miller/Barrett 2005). During this period, Shira Wolosky explains, "different sections of the country claimed the American language for their own interpretive interests, engendering variant forms of usage, emphasis, and intention" (2010: 52). Recited in front of large audiences or printed for even larger readerships, poetry often served predominantly rhetorical rather than aesthetic aims (ibid.: 64-5). The attempt to overcome the many political, ideological, and literary divisions after the war characterizes Melville's expressed project in *Battle-Pieces*.

Not only was the function of poetry a public one, but many writers metaphorically referred to America itself as a poem. For instance, Walt Whitman declared in the preface to *Leaves of Grass* that the "United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (1965 [1865-6]: 709). By examining mythic beings within American landscapes as scenes of conflict, both Poe's "Dream-Land" and Melville's "America" poetically and rhetorically negotiate what America means before and after the Civil War.

2. Poe's "Dream-Land": An American Antebellum Nightmare

A first reading of Poe's "Dream-Land" (1969 [1844]: 342-7) establishes an initial understanding of the depicted situation and its transformations. The poem consists of a speaker's retrospective description of a voyage in which he traveled through a land of dreams and nightmares. In the first stanza the speaker has arrived in lands that he later calls home, which becomes clear from the use of the present perfect at the beginning and the end of the poem: "I have reached these lands" (l. 5) and "I have wandered home" (l. 55). While it is not entirely clear whether this was his home originally, traveling to dream-land seems to mean, first and foremost, sleeping and dreaming. Thus, the speaker has left the waking world by sleeping, and the poem is the evocative description of what he saw while dreaming. The poem opens just as the speaker has returned to the waking world:

> By a route obscure and lonely,
> Haunted by ill angels only,
> Where an Eidolon, named Night,
> On a black throne reigns upright,
> I have reached these lands but newly
> From an ultimate dim Thule—
> From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,
> Out of Space—out of Time. (ll. 1-8)

Beyond the title and the general setting, many individual elements speak in favor of this initial interpretation of the speaker's traveling as dreaming, which also helps to understand several poetic devices otherwise difficult to explain. The lands described show two aspects of dreaming: the nightmare and the soothing dream. Hence, despite its grotesque and terrible features, dream-land can be "a peaceful, soothing region" (l. 40). The presence of supernatural creatures such as the personification of Night ("an Eidolon, named Night," l. 3; *eidolon* is ancient Greek for 'phantom,' or 'specter') and the "ill angels" (l. 2) is typical of dreams. Individual phrases like the metaphor of "the fringed lid" (l. 48) also become clear: the lid with fringes which cannot be opened while someone is asleep is the eye. The general topic of dreams is arch-romantic and particularly popular in its Gothic tradition. This is perhaps nowhere as well exemplified as in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," which he himself describes in a preface as the result of opium-induced sleep.

A substantial part of "Dream-Land" is devoted to topographical description. In his portrayal of the vast landscape in the second stanza, Poe makes use of adjectives with the suffix *-less* along with other types of grammatical negation:

> Bottomless vales and boundless floods,
> And chasms, and caves, and Titan woods,
> With forms that no man can discover
> For the dews that drip all over;
> Mountains toppling evermore
> Into seas without a shore;
> Seas that restlessly aspire,
> Surging, unto skies of fire (ll. 9-16)

The effect of this passage can be summed up with the term Poe uses in the first stanza in line seven: the awe-inspiring and grotesque picture of gigantic natural phenomena is sublime. While the origins of the sublime lie in ancient rhetoric, the term gained in importance during the second half of the eighteenth century. In his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), Edmund Burke used it to describe the peculiarly positive physiological and mental experience of something terrible at a distance. Burke's definition linked the sublime closely to the terrible, and Ann Radcliffe, the English author who pioneered the Gothic novel, further developed this link in her dialogue "On the Supernatural in Poetry" (1826). The idea of the sublime relates not only to the nightmarish terror of the landscape but also to its vastness. At the heart of Immanuel Kant's definition of the (mathematical) sublime was the notion of boundlessness—that which makes it impossible to comprehend the object in its entirety (2003 [1790]: 248-60). Poe's poem has the phrase "forms that no man can discover" (l. 11), which encapsulates the paradox of the sublime: the speaker is experiencing and speaking about something which is so huge that it is virtually unspeakable of.

As the middle part of the poem, the third and longest stanza diverges somewhat from the impressive vastness of the second, yet it reinforces the effect of terror. It describes the dreamscape in natural terms and progresses in the manner of the zoom shot in cinematography, moving from big to small, for instance, from *lakes* to *pools* to *nooks*. This is reinforced by the anaphoric structure of what is grammatically a single sentence, in which "by the" is repeated at the beginning of the subclauses:

> By the lakes that thus outspread
> Their lone waters, lone and dead,—
> Their sad waters, sad and chilly
> With the snows of the lolling lily,—
> By the mountains—near the river
> Murmuring lowly, murmuring ever,—
> By the grey woods,—by the swamp
> Where the toad and the newt encamp,—
> By the dismal tarns and pools
> Where dwell the Ghouls,—
> By each spot the most unholy—
> In each nook most melancholy,—
> There the traveller meets aghast
> Sheeted Memories of the Past—
> Shrouded forms that start and sigh
> As they pass the wanderer by—
> White-robed forms of friends long given,
> In agony, to the Earth—and Heaven. (ll. 21-38)

At the end of this process of gradual magnification, the poem becomes once more supernatural. Up to this point, while the dreamscape in stanzas two and three offers a heightened and sublime description of nature, the negated elements of the landscape nevertheless make up a natural inventory of the wilderness: from vales and chasms to rivers and swamps (ll. 9-29). The line "Where dwell the Ghouls" (l. 30) is specially marked in several ways: it has only four syllables (as opposed to the usual eight), which makes it stand out typographically, and it is at the precise center of the middle stanza of the poem. This structural demarcation reinforces the semantic shift from the description of the sublime landscape (ll. 9-29) to the supernatural creatures peopling dream-land (ll. 30-50).

This supernatural second half of the stanza changes our conception of dream-land and also reintroduces the speaker in the third person as a "traveller" (l. 33) and "wanderer" (l. 36). Dream-land is apparently not merely the land of dreams and nightmares, but also that of the dead: Hades or Heaven. The ghouls (l. 30) and specters (ll. 34-8), which line the traveler's route, invoke not only darkness and sleep, but also the mythological brother of sleep: death. "White-robed forms of friends long given, / In agony, to the Earth—and Heaven" (ll. 37-8) describe ghosts who are no longer able to communicate with the living, even in their dreams. Moreover, the effect on the dreamer is described as terrifying or horrifying: he is "aghast" (l. 33). These motifs add to the sense of Poe's dream-land as a land of the dead through which dreaming people pass. In fact, the Gothic tradition in poetry began in England in the eighteenth century with so-called Graveyard Poetry by authors such as Thomas Parnell, Edward Young, and Thomas Gray. Aimed at "moral instruction rather than excitement," its principal motifs were "night, ruins, death and ghosts, everything, indeed, that was excluded by rational culture" (Botting 1996: 34, 32).

In contrast to such moral intentions of earlier Gothic poems, Poe's poetry, in general, is characterized by a strong opposition to edification or moral lecturing. In his critical writings, he dismissed anything close to what he called the "heresy of *The Didactic*" in poetry (Poe 1984 [1850]: 75-6): "Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to

be adjudged" (ibid.). Against this doxa, Poe posited his idea of the "poem written solely for the poem's sake," (ibid.) an idea which would become influential for literary modernity, particularly for the *l'art pour l'art* movement. The consequent moral indeterminacy also characterizes the fourth stanza of "Dream-Land":

> For the heart whose woes are legion
> 'Tis a peaceful, soothing region—
> For the spirit that walks in shadow
> O! it is an Eldorado!
> But the traveller, travelling through it,
> May not—dare not openly view it;
> Never its mysteries are exposed
> To the weak human eye unclosed;
> So wills its King, who hath forbid
> The uplifting of the fringed lid;
> And thus the sad Soul that here passes
> Beholds it but through darkened glasses. (ll. 39-50)

This stanza complicates our impression of dream-land as a vast, sublime land of ghouls and ghosts in that it offers consolation to melancholy people. But rather than provide ethical and intellectual answers to the questions raised by the land of dreams and the afterlife, the traveler catches only a glimpse of its secrets. The paradox is that to really grasp dream-land, one would have to be awake while dreaming of it. As with the "forms that no man can discover" (l. 11), "its mysteries" (l. 45) are never exposed to waking eyes. While night is often personified as a female figure, here it is likely that "King" refers to the night on its "black throne" (l. 54), making other interpretations, such as Death or the Christian God, less likely. The final metaphor reinforces the link between the land of dreams and the afterlife since "through darkened glasses" (l. 50) is an allusion to a biblical phrase in Paul's 1 Corinthians 13:12: "For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face," 'then' referring to the state after resurrection (King James Version, Mabbott in Poe 1969: 347).

This device points to the larger context of Poe's Gothic poetry which, as David Reynolds points out, made use of the techniques of the so-called visionary mode of religious writing: in Poe, the visionary mode "begins to be summoned into the human psyche, as dreams are no longer passively experienced for their religious lesson but rather are actively conjured up for their regenerating beauty" (2011 [1988]: 44). In Poe's "Dream-Land" the reader is not given a definite answer by an angel bringing the gospel as would have been the case in earlier visionary writing, but instead is faced with the impenetrability of the mysteries of the lands of the dreaming and the dead. The absence of religious certainty also distinguishes Poe's poetry from other American romantic poetry, such as Bryant's "Forest Hymn." Alan Shucard says that with Bryant, "there is always a heavenly, often patriotic, glow behind his clouds" (1990: 84) that is absent from Poe's writing. Generally, metaphysical uncertainty contrasted Gothic romantic writing from the "cosmic optimism of Romantic thinkers:" Thompson concludes that "the apprehension that there was a dark substratum to the rock of Romantic faith obsessed those Romantic writers who turned to the Gothic mode of terror and horror in an effort to express a complex vision of the existential agony confronting man since the Age of Faith" (1974: 5). "Dream-Land" thus draws in secularized fashion on ideas of the afterworld, but Poe's interest lies in the workings of the human psyche and its poetic representation.

The general effect of mystery in "Dream-Land" is amplified by the almost hypnotic sound texture of the poem. Poe makes extensive use of the technique of repetition with variation, which he often used and also theorized in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846). Taken together, the first and last stanza constitute a refrain, and an 1844 version of the poem had two additional repetitions of this refrain (cf. Poe 1969: 345). The varied repetition of the lines about the lakes (ll. 17-24) has a similar effect: the phonetic texture is often equivalent or identical both at the beginning of sound clusters (alliteration) and in the vowel sounds within the words (assonance). Where alliteration and assonance are combined (in such phrases such as "lolling lily," ll. 20, 24), they almost *lull* the reader into dream-land. This hypnotic effect is varied since the poem formally combines regular with irregular features as in the line "Where dwell the Ghouls" (l. 30). While not conforming to a rule-bound form such as the sonnet or the villanelle, the poem exhibits end rhymes and its lines are mostly written in trochaic tetrameter. It is remarkable that the formal regularity of the poem is not fractured by its disorderly content. While the mountains might topple into the shore, the rhythmic and semantic integrity of the lines describing it is conserved.

A first comparison of Poe's "Dream-Land" to Melville's "America" shows similar themes such as landscapes and dreams, but Melville's extended allegory of America suggests the necessity of a further examination of the historical conditions under which Poe composed his poem. In antebellum America, the centers of publishing were in the Northern states, and Poe, as a Southern writer, often criticized the literary coteries in the North. Despite Poe's involvement with the construction of a national American literature, the line "Out of Space—out of Time" from "Dream-Land" was for a long time taken as an apt self-description by Poe who was viewed as more of a displaced European than as an American writer (see Eliot 1949). While primarily a poem about the land of the dreaming and the dead, a reading of "Dream-Land" that takes into account the historical situation in antebellum America discloses links to the aforementioned ideological commonplace of America as a poem in its own right. Poe actually gives a further epithet to the wild, weird, and sublime land of dreams that is at once poetic and historically allusive:

> I have reached these lands but newly
> From an ultimate dim Thule—
> From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,
> Out of Space—out of Time. (ll. 5-8)

"Ultima Thule" is a commonplace in classical poetry used as a reference to "an island north of Britain," as Poe's editor Thomas Mabbott explains (Poe 1969: 345), or used figuratively as a catchword for a mythical place. On an ideological level America was viewed as an ultimate Thule in the sense that it fulfilled the utopian expectations connected to this mythical place. The most eloquent pronouncement of this topos was given in the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa oration at Harvard in 1824 by one of the most renowned orators of the nineteenth century, Edward Everett, who said about the United States: "the farthest Thule is reached; there are no more retreats beyond the sea, no more discoveries, no more hopes. Here, then, a mighty work is to be performed, or never, by mortals" (1850 [1836]: 42). This is a myth of an ultimate Thule that had been reached already and yet was still to be performed as "a mighty work" or, indeed, as a

poem. Far from writing a nationalist poem in praise of America, as earlier epic poets such as Joel Barlow or Richard Emmons had tried to do, Poe's "Dream-Land" turns inward and shines a light on the nightmarish aspect of America as a "promised land."

3. Melville's "America": Dreaming of the United States after the War

In contrast to Poe, whose first collection of poetry appeared when he was eighteen years old, Melville published poetry only late in his career. After his early success with his autobiographical South Sea novels *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), his later works, even *Moby-Dick; or The Whale* (1851), did not meet with public approval. Melville is often said to have abandoned prose for poetry because of his lack of success, yet he had studied poetry with a vigorous and systematic approach from early on (cf. Parker in Melville 2009: 330). In 1999 Lawrence Buell claimed that Melville's poetry "remains largely unread, even by many Melvillians" (135), but today scholars are reassessing the importance and influence of Melville's poetry, not only of *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) and *Clarel* (1876), but also of his privately and posthumously published collections, *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888), *Timoleon* (1891), and *Weeds and Wildings Chiefly, With a Rose or Two* (1924).

His first poetry collection, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, was published almost immediately after the Civil War in 1866. The poems evince an occupation with romantic forms, but also include factual reports about the war (mostly taken from the newspaper articles collected in the *Rebellion Record*) and some formal experimentation. Despite its topic and its position as the last poem of the central section of the book, "America" is only rarely anthologized and has so far received comparatively little scholarly attention, partly due to the fact that Melville's poems have often been studied in isolation rather than in context (cf. Dryden 2004: 89). Robert Penn Warren went so far as to deny the poem any merit whatsoever, arguing that it was "written to resolve—no, gloss over—the very issues raised in the body of the book," and "as far as the virtues of 'America' as a poem, the less said the better" (in Melville 1970: 375). The poems in *Battle-Pieces* are generally arranged chronologically so that structurally "America" has a summarizing function: it can be called "a culminating point" (Garner 1993: 395).

In the four stanzas of "America," Melville describes the Civil War as a conflict with four stages: (1) a life of innocent happiness before the war (2) is interrupted by fierce combats, and only after (3) a nightmarish coma-like state can America (4) reawake at the end of the war as a wiser and more lawful country. The poem develops around a personification of America as a female figure much more individualized than any of the mythical beings in Poe's "Dream-Land." America's complexity is brought out by comparisons and contrasts to several mythical women, but is also compared to the flag as an emblem of national identity. The first stanza centers on the flag and introduces the main personification of America:

WHERE the wings of a sunny Dome expand
I saw a Banner in gladsome air—
Starry, like Berenice's Hair—
Afloat in broadened bravery there;

With undulating long-drawn flow,
As rolled Brazilian billows go
Voluminously o'er the Line.
The Land reposed in peace below;
The children in their glee
Were folded to the exulting heart
Of young Maternity. (ll. 1-11)

This peaceful, romantic landscape, full of cosmic harmony, could hardly be more different from Poe's dream-land. Where Poe isolates the landscape and negates its individual features to create an effect of Gothic sublimity, Melville's stanza creates a pastoral atmosphere to depict the United States before the Civil War, using both idyllic imagery and harmonious sound patterns. One major contributing factor is the sound of the nautical simile of the "long-drawn flow" (l. 5) of Brazilian waves; the comparison is mirrored in the phonetic texture of lines 5-7, which adds to the fairly regular iambic tetrameter an abundance of similar /r/ and /l/ sounds. Alliteration and end rhymes as in "broadened bravery" (l. 4) and "glee . . . Maternity" (ll. 9, 11) further heighten the sense of idyllic lands that culminates in the harmonious unity between Mother America and her children.

Yet viewed historically, this romantic happiness is rather one-dimensional, especially since the identity of America's children is not specified. In the case *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, the Supreme Court had decided in 1857 that African American slaves were not citizens of the United States; this changed only through the process of the war, especially with the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (1865). In Melville's "America" there is a strong tension between the actual historical situation and the counterfactual harmony, which results in a foreboding of danger at the sight of the picture of political unity.

At the center of this picture, the elevated flag is introduced by a comparison to Berenice, the first of several female figures to enrich the description of America. The allusive simile of Berenice's hair works on three interconnected levels: her hair is a constellation of stars ("Coma Berenices") named after the Egyptian Queen Berenice II (born after 270 BCE) who had consecrated her hair to Aphrodite for the safe return of her husband from war (Ameling 2002). Since the stars on the United States flag stand for the individual states (and the Civil War had seen many changes in both Union and Confederate flags), the connection to the constellation Coma Berenices imbues with mythical powers the relation between the individual states and America as a country. In depicting the flag, Melville evokes a conventional ensign of America, yet not as a sign of victory but as a complex and idealized index of antebellum political unity. The second stanza pictures the war as a violent interruption of this harmonic pastoral scene, turning the flag into an emblem of war:

Later, and it streamed in fight
When tempest mingled with the fray,
And over the spear-point of the shaft
I saw the ambiguous lightning play.
Valor with Valor strove, and died:
Fierce was Despair, and cruel was Pride;
And the lorn Mother speechless stood,
Pale at the fury of her brood. (ll. 12-19)

In describing allegorically a factual and recent historical conflict, the poem departs from earlier Romantic and Gothic poetry. Indeed, poets were acutely aware of the necessity to break with tradition, as becomes clear, for instance, in Whitman's poem on the first year of the Civil War, "Eighteen Sixty-One." In *Battle-Pieces* the allegorization of the war works via intertextual allusions to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as Hennig Cohen points out: "Equating the Civil War with the Miltonic version of the War in Heaven amplified the earthly conflict and infused it with meaning" (in Melville 1964: 11-3, 279; cf. Dryden 2004: 90-2). What is decisive about the allegorical representation is that it prompts the reader to regard both sides in the war as equally valorous. Thus, the lyrical speaker does not take sides: "Valor with Valor strove, and died" (l. 16). In the "Supplement" to *Battle-Pieces*, Melville calls the actions in the war "reciprocal" and points to the fact that history is written by the victors: "had the preponderating strength and the prospect of its unlimited increase lain on the other side, on ours might have lain those actions which now in our late opponents we stigmatize under the name of Rebellion" (2009: 184).

The goddess-like figure of Mother America is elaborated on in the second stanza, standing speechless like a statue. The United States was often represented in statues: America (cf. Dryden 2004: 94), Liberty (as later in the nineteenth century with the Statue of Liberty), or Columbia (a Latinate designation for the United States based on Columbus's name). Since Melville had visited its architect, Robert Crawford, in Rome in 1857 (cf. Leyda 1969, II: 559), he was closely familiar with the Statue of Freedom, which still resides atop the United States Capitol Building. Hence, the "sunny Dome" in stanza one could refer metaphorically to the skies or intertextually to the dome in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (cf. Dryden 2004: 90), but it could also imply the Capitol, as the reference to the "Capitol Dome" in "The Scout Towards Aldie" makes most likely (Melville 2009: 140, cf. Fuller 2011: 198; Garner 1993: 395). In December 1863 the Statue of Freedom was installed on the top of the recently completed cast-iron dome so that for contemporary readers of "America," the Capitol Dome and the Statue of Freedom were still new signs of political power. In the context of *Battle-Pieces*, Melville brings out the ambivalence of this power by contrasting the sunny Dome in "America" with an "Iron Dome" in "The Conflict of Convictions." In the latter poem, "[p]ower unanointed" is represented by the "huge shadow" of the Iron Dome that endangers the American dream as it was conceived by the Founding Fathers of the United States (2009: 10).

The use of allegory and personification as figures of speech in literary and religious texts is most strongly associated with classical, medieval, and neoclassical texts rather than romantic texts. In this tradition, America's gender is in no way unusual. The ancient Roman rhetorician Quintilian had theorized the use of personification in giving a voice to large political bodies, stressing the possibility of making a state or nation speak (cf. 2001: 51). Significantly, America has lost this ability in Melville's poem: even when her children are fighting, she stands "speechless" (l. 18). In the third stanza, this muting of the female figure is escalated as America falls into a comatose state:

Yet later, and the silk did wind
Her fair cold form;
Little availed the shining shroud,
Though ruddy in hue, to cheer or warm.

A watcher looked upon her low, and said—
She sleeps, but sleeps, she is not dead.
But in that sleep contortion showed
The terror of the vision there—
A silent vision unavowed,
Revealing earth's foundation bare,
And Gorgon in her hidden place.
It was a thing of fear to see
So foul a dream upon so fair a face,
And the dreamer lying in that starry shroud. (ll. 20-33)

Like the whole of "Dream-Land," this stanza stresses the interconnectedness of sleeping, dreaming, and death. This connection had ancient mythological roots and reached a height in Romanticism. The motif of a death-like sleep recalls mythical female figures such as Brynhild (Brünnhilde) in the Volsunga saga and the Nibelungen or the fairy tale character, Sleeping Beauty. Extended poetic versions of the motif are frequent in Gothic romantic poetry, for instance in Poe's "The Sleeper" (1842) and Christina Rossetti's "Dream Land" (1862). Such associations work to contrast the positive personification of America with the dangers of terror, war, and rebellion.

"The terror of the vision" of America's dream is brought out through additional mythological female figures that embody revolution and chaos. The most important of these sources of terror is the "Gorgon" (l. 30)—whose name is that of the deadly sisters in Greek mythology with snakes for hair and a petrifying gaze. The most famous of the three Gorgons, Medusa, came to signify a revolutionary woman in the romantic era, outlined by Dennis Berthold as "one of the most powerful emblems of revolution and emergent feminism in the nineteenth century" (1997: 449). Medusa's decapitation by Perseus was connected to the guillotining in post-revolutionary France, so that the Gorgon embodied "conservative male fears of revolution conflated with misogyny" (ibid.). This dual fear of revolution and feminism also informs Melville's allusion (cf. l. 32) to the witches in *Macbeth*, whose speech in the very first scene of the play is a classic topos of a world in chaos: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (Shakespeare 2005 [1606]: 971). Both the witches' upending of the values of good and bad and Medusa's lethal glance contrast strongly with the mother-figure of America. There is a misogynistic aspect to America's passivity and speechlessness, yet these features also work to send a political message about the frailty of a union endangered by civil war.

It is easy to recognize in the Gorgon and the witches the contemporary view of the Southern states as rebels. Yet through its allusiveness the poem is far from attempting to pigeonhole the parties into good and bad. All of the images keep a certain distance and only indirectly describe the war and its ideological conflicts. Significantly, despite America's vision, Melville does not enter the visionary mode as Poe does, but introduces another character in the "watcher" who utters the only sentence spoken in the poem: "She sleeps, but sleeps, she is not dead" (l. 25). The nightmare that America has of revolutionary Medusa and the "earth's foundations bare" (l. 29) remains a temporary one. The flag has now become a "shroud" (ll. 22, 33), and yet America herself has narrowly escaped becoming a fatality of the Civil War. In the final stanza, the end of the war is not spelled out but likened to a mystical awakening, indeed a rebirth:

But from the trance she sudden broke—
The trance, or death into promoted life;
At her feet a shivered yoke,
And in her aspect turned to heaven
No trace of passion or of strife—
A clear calm look. It spake of pain,
But such as purifies from stain—
Sharp pangs that never come again— (ll. 34-41)

The "shivered yoke" at America's feet is the broken yoke of slavery, and her glance is directed toward heaven rather than earth or hell. While there are traces of pain visible in her face, even this pain is "such as purifies from stain" (l. 40): the pains of war are characterized as a necessary evil to reattain political union. The noun phrases that make up a large part of the stanza are as much descriptive as hortatory. The North is admonished to not mistreat the South and disregard the regained union; on America's face, there is pain:

And triumph repressed by knowledge meet,
Power dedicate, and hope grown wise,
And youth matured for age's seat—
Law on her brow and empire in her eyes.
So she, with graver air and lifted flag;
While the shadow, chased by light,
Fled among the far-drawn height,
And left her on the crag. (ll. 42-9)

This ending speaks against the way in which critics such as Robert Penn Warren have often viewed the poem as a simplistic celebration of postbellum America. Indeed, the last lines of the poem leave America in a potentially dangerous situation on a crag above an abyss. The phrase "promoted life" (l. 35) is ambivalent and might allude to such female mythical figures as the statue built by the ancient sculptor Pygmalion, which was given life by Venus (cf. Dryden 2004: 94); "promoted life" suggests an external source of life that might once again disappear. At the same time, Melville envisions a development of the United States, as suggested by the various metaphorical depictions of growing wise with age. This is particularly visible in the line "Law on her brow and empire in her eyes" (l. 45). Melville does not go so far as to question the concept of empire here (in his first novel, *Typee*, he had criticized commercial and religious imperialism to the extent that he had to censor later editions); but the nation is to be founded upon law. Robert Milder spells out the developmental connection between the individuals and the nation: "America will come to be an 'empire,' just as its citizens will become sober adults, but the character of 'empire' has shifted, for it now rests upon reasserted Law as tempered by tragic wisdom" (2006: 182).

In interpreting and evaluating "America" and all of Melville's *Battle-Pieces*, one should not lose sight of either the author's professed intent or the overall historical situation of the beginnings of Reconstruction after the Civil War. Melville's far from perfect solution to the political problems is one of moderation and compromise; thus he speaks against giving the vote to African Americans immediately and urges Northerners to forgo retribution on the South. He concludes his supplement to *Battle-Pieces*: "Let us pray that the terrible historic tragedy of our time may not have been enacted without instructing our whole beloved country through terror and pity" (2009: 188). The overall goal of *Battle-Pieces*, and of "America" in particular, is to persuade white Northerners to be moderate in their treatment of the South. As Robert Milder phrases it, "the aim of *Battle-Pieces* is persuasion, or the conversion of [terror and pity] into knowledge and action" (2006: 181). To that end, Melville evokes a variety of conventional ensigns of the state, such as the Statue of Freedom and the U.S. Capitol, not to celebrate them but to infuse them with ambivalent meanings and make them emblematic of the ideological strife of war. Using classicist devices such as allegory, Melville paints a picture of America before, during, and after the Civil War, making it complex by the use of such romantically inflected imagery as the revolutionary Gorgon. While "America" urges its readers to 'write America' as a poem of wise law and constant moderation, *Battle-Pieces* as a whole is far from embracing a program of American imperialist exceptionalism: the ground on which the country moves—earth's foundation—remains dangerous to tread on, as Melville writes in "The Apparition": "Solidity's a crust— / The core of fire below" (2009: 116).

4. Conclusion: Beyond Romanticism

Both Poe and Melville refrain from romantic visions of unity between the individual and a higher order of nature, and Melville shares much of the Gothic romantic outlook of Poe's writings. This holds true especially for *Battle-Pieces* due to the socio-cultural ruptures resulting from the Civil War. Where Poe continues to write in traditional forms, Melville often breaks from the traditional; but neither poet shies away from classicist devices, making use of the sublime (Poe) and allegory (Melville), with Milton being a common reference point in their poetry. Both use the motif of the dream, yet approach the problems of American identity from different angles: whereas Poe depicts the sublimity and paradoxical solace of American antebellum nightmares, Melville constructs a postbellum dream of America while remaining intensely aware of how imperiled it is. Making use of romantic elements and inflecting them through Gothic mirrors, Poe and Melville represent a major current in American poetry: fathoming the depths of personal and collective identity, interrogating religious certainties, and criticizing American exceptionalist ideologies.

After the Civil War Romanticism remained a reference point for American poetry. At the threshold of modernist poetry, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman would make use of romantic materials throughout their poetry. While Whitman departed considerably from traditional verse forms and rhymes, his affirmative tone chimes in with earlier romantic writing. In contrast, Dickinson's poems often center on the bleak aspects of nineteenth-century domestic and spiritual life. Taking up the distinction between a darker, extroverted and a lighter, introverted side of Romanticism, Shucard argues that Dickinson "is not the blithe romantic at all," placing her in a tradition with Byron, Poe, Longfellow, Melville, and Stephen Crane (Shucard et al. 1990: 3). In the twentieth century, William Sullivan argues, the romantic tradition "with its insistence on the ideal and the transcendent . . . would also be part of the modernist score," naming Hart Crane, E. E. Cummings, and Robinson Jeffers as modernist romantic visionaries (ibid.: 172).

Although its direct influence was marginal, Melville's poetic work is part of the American tradition of "a poetry of intellectualized, cerebral bound form (rig-

orously disciplined accentually and/or syllabically, if not by rhyme as well)," which Buell contrasts with the tradition of Whitmanian 'democratic' free verse (1999: 152). While Melville's poetry is still in the process of being rediscovered, Poe's poems have remained popular and have influenced symbolist and modernist poetry all over the world. Even T.S. Eliot had to admit that "one cannot be sure that one's own writing has *not* been influenced by Poe" (1949: 327; original emphasis). In their poems, Poe and Melville probed the reflective and persuasive powers of American poetry and thus went beyond the major currents of Romanticism.

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