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“Clouds Involved the Land”: Melville, “Donelson,” and the Transatlantic Aspects of National War News

SAMUEL GRABER

“Donelson,” Herman Melville’s Civil War poem about the Union army’s successful attack on the Confederate fort of that name, begins in a strange place. First published in Melville’s 1866 Civil War collection, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, the poem nominally recounts a battle that occurred within the vast landlocked US interior, yet its first lines point toward the sea. The ocean, of course, was where Melville had made his name as an author, and *Battle-Pieces* contains several naval poems. Fort Donelson, however, was in Tennessee. Readers might wonder, then, why the poem’s first lines refer not to the war’s western theater but rather to a famous incident that began in the West Indies in a saltwater strait between Cuba and the Bahamas.

There, in an encounter British and American newspapers would label the *Trent* Affair, Union Navy Captain Charles Wilkes fired on and then boarded the British mail steamer *Trent* in order to capture two Confederate emissaries, James Mason and John Slidell. Mason and Slidell had just set sail from Havana to champion the Southern cause in Europe and had assumed that they would be secure traveling under the British flag.¹ But Wilkes refused to accept the precedents of international law and naval practice. Armed with a fresh

argument and the guns of his own *San Jacinto*, he determined to treat Mason and Slidell as “the embodiment of dispatches” and seized them as contraband of war.² These were “the Envoys” to whom “Donelson”’s third line refers, and the debate over their removal from a British ship on 8 November 1861 would roil the transatlantic press for months.³

Tellingly, Melville does not bother reminding his readers of this international controversy. The poem begins:

The bitter cup
Of that hard countermand
Which gave the Envoys up

(*BP*, 33)

Melville does not actually mention the *Trent* or the dashing Captain Wilkes who had so audaciously prodded the sleeping tiger of a nominally neutral Britain. In fact, the poem originates with news of the affair’s disappointing conclusion: Lincoln’s agreement to free the Southern captives in early 1862. This resolution followed many tense weeks during which bombastic boasting on the Union side—in newspapers more than in official communiqués—had shocked British readers and politicians. The latter responded with outrage and threats to internationalize what Britons were still content to call the American War.⁴

Of course, by the time the *Trent* Affair began, many Britons assumed that they were no longer contending with a single American nation. Seven violent months, several Confederate victories, and a functioning Confederate government meant that there would be many sides to what quickly became a transatlantic controversy over national identity. While excited Confederates hoped that the crisis would secure full national recognition, Unionists felt their own national power swelling as they defied their old British nemesis. But finally, fearing above all Britain’s military and economic might, the Lincoln administration surrendered the commissioners, humbling the United States before Britain

and the eyes of the world, or at least all the world that had eyes to see—which is to say, the parts with newspapers. Thus, the “bitter cup” where “Donelson” begins was actually the popular Anglophone press, a cauldron brimming with overheated international communication and competing nationalist commitments. The *Trent* Affair would have been unimaginable apart from the disjointed and often contradictory experience of transatlantic news, a critical arena of wartime journalism that Civil War scholarship has nevertheless left largely unexamined.

“Donelson,” a complex poem that has resisted both anthologization and easy interpretation, has likewise been largely unappreciated for nearly all of the one-hundred-fifty years since *Battle-Pieces*’ publication; if Melville’s twentieth-century admirers mentioned the poem, they often dismissed it as an unsuccessful experiment.⁵ More recently, critics interested in popular print’s relationship to poetic production have made “Donelson” more difficult to ignore. Faith Barrett, for example, whose broader scholarship has demonstrated how popular Civil War poetry “worked to both constitute and subdivide national audiences” partly through engagements with war news, has also argued that Melville’s unusual poem “offers a microcosm of the structure of *Battle-Pieces* as a whole.” Barrett shows how, as a compressed reflection on war news and war writing, the poem “makes explicit [Melville’s] interest in the ways wartime texts work to divide and build communities,” as well as “the questions of how journalists represented the war and the related question of how poets use journalism to create poetry.” Appearing early in the collection, “‘Donelson’ offers arguments that are key to our understanding of some of the more conventional poems that follow it.”⁶

Just as “Donelson” helps unlock *Battle-Pieces*, so too the *Trent* Affair illuminates “Donelson.” Though almost entirely overlooked by literary critics, the *Trent* reference provides an ideal starting point for the poem’s explorations

of wartime nationalism.⁷ Historically, it reminds readers that Anglophone news' international circulation shaped how audiences understood a domestic struggle between dueling nationalist visions. More fundamentally, the seemingly tangential transatlantic controversy establishes a basis for questioning the relationships among newsprint, nationality, and community, which scholars of nationalism have long associated with the advent of distinctly modern nation-states.⁸ By situating "Donelson"'s nationalist considerations between an expanding Anglo-American print world on one side and profound internal divisions on the other, Melville's opening destabilizes common beliefs that a unified mass community could ground itself in a particular national homeland. Geographical confusion is hardly unique to "Donelson"; as Helen Vendler has observed, "even the most topical of Melville's history poems tend to begin somewhere other than their actual locale."⁹ Yet it is impossible, finally, to locate *where* "Donelson" begins: certainly not at the eponymous Tennessee fort, nor at the unnamed Bahaman channel. It does not even really begin where news of the *Trent* Affair and then the battle is read; although the poem foregrounds a particular bulletin board that posts the latest developments from the Tennessee battlefield, Melville begins smack dab in the middle of the *transatlantic* world—which is to say, neither here nor there, but in between.

I will argue that the poem's unusual temporal framing, which places local news-reading within the broader field of transatlantic communication, highlights unnatural connections and delusions Melville associated with the US public sphere and modern mass communities. The essay's first section recovers the *Trent* Affair's contemporaneous importance. Here, I argue that the affair—as an event, as a transatlantic news spectacle, and ultimately as a diplomatic crisis over national sovereignty—echoed Melville's antebellum fiction and signaled its literary potential. Historically, the envoys' seizure represented a complex engagement with

shifting nationalist symbols, uncertain international laws, and dubious exertions of national power over international waters. Moreover, as an *affair*, the original event spawned cyclical transatlantic news reports that reflected nationalist opinion back and forth between two continents through the anxious winter of 1861–62. The international controversy's resonance with a transatlantic news cycle's jarring rhythms made it a perfect backdrop for Melville's reflections on nationalism in "Donelson" and in *Battle-Pieces* as a whole. The international communication in the originating scene sets the terms for "Donelson"'s critical reflections on nationalist audiences, concerns recent interpreters have located at the heart of the *Battle-Pieces* project.¹⁰

The essay's final section uses close reading to show how the *Trent* persistently haunts "Donelson"'s later passages, amplifying the poet's lament over the modern loss of place and the delusional mass communities he indicts as derangements of nature. Thus, the transatlantic starting point returns to confuse and conflate national and international identities, as the poet attacks nationalist formations that arise through advanced international communication. Refusing both nationalist and internationalist connections, the poem might seem to endorse nihilistic surrender. Nevertheless, Melville also gestures toward an alternative imaginative mode, one that corresponds to a more immediate community than any constituted by mass print. Rather than escaping to an imagined utopia (*no place*), "Donelson"'s conclusion strives toward the topographical realities of place and attempts to remind real readers of their embodied local connections. Thus, it combats newsprint's political by-products, which include America's first modern war and the modern forms of nationalism that made that war so deadly. Melville presents both nationalist identification and international communication emerging in lockstep midcentury to challenge authentic communal attachment. Ultimately, all mass communities, whether national or international, fall

under the poem's equanimous ax. Melville imagines his poetry's reader, however, as his best hope for recovering community from the thoroughly modern predicament of reading transatlantic war news.



THE *TRENT* AFFAIR AND THE CRISIS
OF TRANSATLANTIC NEWS

On its surface, *Battle-Pieces* seemingly supports both the Northern cause and sectional reconciliation, and Melville's Unionism sometimes obscures his distaste for nationalist pretensions. Moreover, in evaluating "Donelson"'s initial reference to the *Trent* Affair, readers cannot avoid the poet's prior literary connection to Charles Wilkes. Melville had admired the sea captain since long before he waylaid the *Trent* and had used Wilkes' work, the five-volume *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition, 1838–1842* (1844), as background for *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), and *Moby-Dick* (1851). Stanton Garner, noting Melville's personal regard for Wilkes and their shared Unionist convictions, has suggested that "Donelson"'s opening lines express the author's own patriotic frustration.¹¹ Nevertheless, as many readers have observed, *Battle-Pieces* harbors considerable ambivalence toward American nationalism and patriotic enthusiasm.¹² Although Melville may have possessed partisan attachments to Wilkes as a literary source and Union hero, these attachments likely did not exhaust his interests in the *Trent* Affair.

Even as a news story, the dramatic capture at sea contains unusual narrative details that resonate thematically with Melville's antebellum fictions. When Melville first read about the *Trent's* boarding in the papers, he would almost certainly have been drawn to the story as a complex dispute over national symbols, state sovereignty, and the vicissitudes of political representation in international waters. The public debates surrounding the seizure, arising in quotidian

newspaper columns, nevertheless confounded simplistic assumptions of national identity. Efforts to assess Mason and Slidell's nationality quickly veered into the same complex semiotic spaces and slippages that Melville had spent his antebellum career navigating and which partially motivated his postbellum poetic projects.¹³

Most obviously, the crisis concerned whether the captured envoys stood for an idea or a real place. Mason and Slidell had been commissioned as representatives of a nation that Melville's government did not believe existed, and they sought the European recognition that would ratify their status as newly-minted national ambassadors. Then, there was the *Trent* herself and the flag that, though it flew above her in the West Indian breeze, identified the vessel with a land half a world away, and with a global military power that could defend that land's honor at sea. Finally, as if to fully extend a theme of disputed political identities, there was Wilkes' insistence that the Confederate commissioners were the "embodiment of dispatches," the beguiling phrase he coined to justify his otherwise unlawful seizure of persons.¹⁴

Melville the news-reader must have reveled in these symbolic complications. For an author of intricate and philosophically astute sea stories, such representational entanglements with violent power must have complemented the briny attractions of the close exchange between ships in a narrow saltwater strait. After all, Wilkes had authored this celebrated seizure, and his previous adventures had helped inspire Melville's literary reflections on profound social complexities. Similarly, Wilkes' audacious attempt to convert persons to paper reproduced Melville's signature tropes; the captain's embodied and imprisoned dispatches distantly echo the pale paper-like maids of Melville's *Tartarus*, and even shadow the living text of his famous scrivener.¹⁵ Mason and Slidell proved fundamentally inscrutable as public figures: Were they loyal Confederates, traitorous Americans, or emblems of the Union Jack? In the end, British pressure

secured their release without settling the basic issues of national identity and sovereignty that their capture had raised. Thus, as was often the case in Melville's narrative conclusions, the *Trent* Affair's resolution raised doubts, not only about its meaning, but also about whether such meaning could ever be determined: whether political realities, and an individual's corresponding stability within society, were always illusory; whether one's placement within any mass community depended on partially concealed power; whether the nation was an unnatural state arising from the threat of violence.

Many critics now believe that Melville's antebellum preoccupations with American public life continued to motivate his postbellum poetics.¹⁶ Seen as a point on a transbellum continuum, the *Trent* Affair's brief poetic treatment extends the violent internal divisions and dubious associations that dominated Melville's prior literary examinations of American society. Nevertheless, these hovering uncertainties received a new context as well as a confirmation from the transatlantic news network in which the *Trent* Affair took shape. Coming early in the war, the affair projected the new division between Union and Confederacy against a broad history of transatlantic wrangling over American identity and sovereignty. Yet it did so while also highlighting fresh transatlantic connections and conflicts that emerged through the international circulation of explosively popular newspapers. In short, the *Trent* Affair epitomized the competing cultural claims and communication breakdowns that characterized Melville's earlier work, even as it nearly reignited the old revolutionary struggle against Britain by sparking a novel national crisis fueled by the global mass media.

Thus, the *Trent* Affair created a perfect launching point for "Donelson"'s poetic reflection on nationalism and the news—a place that was no place, at the origin and the margin of the paper-places we call nations. As the affair played out

in the transatlantic press, it presented precisely the sort of tale that might have inspired a younger Melville to concoct a complex and subversive fiction. Instead, it became the understated prelude to one of his most important poems, as the poet used the controversy to expose a mass community’s hollow core.

The bitter cup
 Of that hard countermand
 Which gave the Envoys up,
 Still was wormwood in the mouth,
 And clouds involved the land,
 When, pelted by sleet in the icy street,
 About the bulletin-board a band
 Of eager, anxious people met,
 And every wakeful heart was set
 On latest news from West or South.

(*BP*, 33)

Comprising only a few short opening lines, the affair’s positioning nevertheless signals its significance within the larger work. As Vendler has noted, Melville’s experiments with history poems and the lyric form in *Battle-Pieces* led him to situate lines devoted to philosophical reflection at the beginning of poems, prior to the narrative that inspires them.¹⁷ “Donelson” adopts a similar model through an overture that raises several theoretical objections to nationalist assumptions. The transatlantic infiltration exposes the nation’s permeable borders, while the Southern envoys challenge the nation’s internal coherence. Furthermore, Lincoln’s “hard countermand” to Wilkes’ bold order suggests how state power arbitrarily draws and redraws the globe’s borders and redefines nationality through an ultimate appeal to force. By its conclusion, the affair revealed the concealed violence that could make a Confederate envoy of a native-born American, a Union traitor of a patriotic Virginian, or a British emblem of a Southern ambassador—just as Wilkes

had used his cannon to make a dispatch out of a diplomat. Finally, Melville's turn to the bulletin board in line 7 implicitly questions the mode of communication around which the poem and many nationalist dreams revolve: the advanced information network whose most tangible consumer product was the mid-nineteenth-century newspaper, but whose most powerful by-product may have been the modern nation itself.

Public-sphere theorists, drawing on the pioneering work of Jürgen Habermas, have long associated newspapers' capacity to advance public opinion, debate, and consensus with the modern nation-state, and Benedict Anderson famously drew a causal connection between the newspaper's rise and modern nations' status as "imagined communities."¹⁸ Anderson associated this development with the Western hemisphere, where the United States had made cheap popular newspapers the centerpiece of national politics by the mid-nineteenth century. Recently, Trish Loughran has challenged elements of Anderson's theory, basing her argument partly on how American news actually circulated in the early national period. She points out that early nineteenth-century American print "spectacularly failed to use its new technologies to manufacture consensus" during an era that culminated in a great national fracturing.¹⁹ Loughran's research suggests that the national imagination foundered upon imperfectly implemented communication technologies and other obstacles to newsprint's circulation. Moreover, many antebellum writers were busily assessing the imagined nation and the American public sphere long before Anderson or Habermas took them up; Civil War-era authors actively explored the relationship between news-reading and nation-building while simultaneously identifying the news' failure to bind the nation together. In other words, critical reflection on the imagined national community and the nationalized public sphere did not emerge merely in the late twentieth century or come under review solely in more recent twenty-first-century scholarship. As Jennifer

Greiman notes, nineteenth-century writers staged, explored, and tested similar concepts, and Herman Melville stood prominent among them.²⁰ Ian Finseth has similarly shown that the political aesthetics and symbolic potency of imagined communities permeate Melville's *Battle-Pieces* as sources of a productive tension at the heart of his postbellum poetics.²¹ In light of these insights, we can recognize "Donelson"'s transatlantic starting point as a staging ground for the poet's prolonged attack on the news-driven imagined community and nationalized public sphere.

Nancy Fraser, in crafting a critical response to twenty-first-century globalization, has suggested the theoretical potential for a transnational public sphere that might be compatible with existing venues of national discourse and formation. During the Civil War, however, Unionists increasingly regarded international connections facilitated by transatlantic news, and British public opinion in particular, as threats to national existence.²² Early in the war, many Northerners anticipated a potential Anglo-American communion organized around the international antislavery movement. Yet Britain's announcement of neutrality and the waves of Confederate sympathy rippling through the mainstream British press quickly doused their hopes. Occurring five months after the Queen proclaimed neutrality, the *Trent* Affair began a prolonged transnational incursion into the US public sphere, raising fundamental questions about national identity and sovereignty that remained contested for months. Wilkes captured Mason and Slidell in early November and Lincoln ordered them released in late December, yet Fort Donelson fell in February, over three months following the capture and more than a month after Lincoln issued the release order. The poem's seemingly anachronistic description suggests an unnaturally long hangover from the *Trent* seizure. Nevertheless, Melville accurately depicts a Unionist audience's experience of an affair that could only end once American papers published

Britain's response to Lincoln's order. That news arrived in the last half of January, just before Grant began his campaign to capture key forts on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. Thus, Melville organized his chronology not around a well-ordered sequence of wartime events, but rather around one of the "aspects of the war" he is keen to expose: the temporal distortions and political confusion wrought by the transatlantic news cycle.

Similar distortions inform *Battle-Pieces* as a whole; by introducing the global reach of war news, "Donelson" evokes the problematic relationship between Melville's entire collection and the wartime events its author encountered, mostly through the Anglophone news network. Melville had personal reasons to attend to both the *Trent* crisis and the larger war, but he relied on various newspaper accounts as the primary basis for "Donelson" and his other war poetry, and *Battle-Pieces* unabashedly confessed its use of "previously published journalistic accounts."²³ Melville's sourcing has led some readers to conclude, with Edmund Wilson, that the poet was simply producing "versified journalism ... as day by day he reads bulletins from the front."²⁴ But Melville does not endorse blind dependence: the collection does not merely draw on journalism, but also critically appraises the general American reliance on news as a conduit of national history. Rendering war news as poetry, *Battle-Pieces* models the news-reader's experience of encountering America's violent history-in-the-making; yet it also makes that reading experience an important war story in its own right. Appearing early in the journalistically indebted collection, "Donelson" explicitly evaluates the same practices of news-reading that were necessary precursors to *Battle-Piece's* own creation.

As Barrett notes, this focus on reading news makes the poem crucial for understanding *Battle-Pieces* as a whole, and far more important than a cursory assessment would indicate (*FA*, 261). The poem presents several challenges for today's readers. It is among *Battle-Pieces's* longest poems

and possesses a complicated structure; some might find its deliberately circuitous approach to its subject baffling if not tedious. Reconstructing the entire five-day battle not as it happened but rather as it might appear in a newspaper, the poem layers multiple perspectives within a rough five-part structure. The brief opening that recalls the *Trent* Affair prefaces the middle portion, a historical narrative depicting how local readers encountered the news. This middle section juxtaposes several italicized news reports from the front with three major episodes involving a local community's complex responses, when a community member explicitly designated to "read aloud" vocalizes dispatches appearing on the board (*BP* 33, 41). The poem's conclusion inverts the prelude's transatlantic past by envisioning a localized future in which the war and news-readers have abandoned the fort to nature.

This somewhat disjointed arrangement epitomizes the "long-noted formal blocks and stumbles" of Melville's postbellum poetry, obstacles that, as Elizabeth Renker acknowledges, "have their corollary in his sometimes bewildering use of perspective." Yet as Renker also observes, Melville's supposed "formal ineptitude" as a poet actually signaled a "fresh and unfamiliar poetic project."²⁵ In its calibrated unwieldiness, "Donelson" offers a case study in the "disorganization of consciousness" that Richard Terdeman counts among the modern news' chief side effects.²⁶ Through all its disconcerting turns, the poem forces its readers to mimic the wartime news-readers it describes; like these fictional readers, Melville's real audience is compelled to decipher fragmentary and sometimes confusing reports on a battle spanning five days and several posted editions. In the end, this uncomfortable process produces only unconvincingly ordered chaos, as Melville's italicized news reports imperfectly organize information from the front; despite the poet's carefully rhymed verse, the underlying news narrative seems to resist all pattern. As each day contributes to a fractured national history, haphazardly cobbled together

on a newsboard in what Vendler aptly characterizes as “a symbol of modern epic discontinuity,” the news repeatedly gives way to vocal commentary from news-readers, action in the street, and descriptions of the local weather.²⁷ Partly for this reason, the poem’s more comprehensible lines deliver a chronology not of the battle itself but rather of the news’ twisted reception, as when a confusing breakout attempt and an ominously sudden change in the weather still produce a cheer around the board:

“Hurrah for Grant!” cried a stripling shrill;
 Three urchins joined him with a will,
 And some of taller stature cheered.
 Meantime a Copperhead passed; he sneered.
(BP, 39)

These persistent returns to the local scene make “Donelson”’s transatlantic origins at first appear that much stranger. Yet in opening a poem about the news’ reception with an account of the *Trent* Affair, Melville reproduces a particularly unsettling but mostly forgotten wartime phenomenon: war news’ transatlantic audiences and their undeniable influence on how Americans experienced the war. No American news-reader could avoid the British readings of American war news; the potential for British intervention made British public opinion crucially important for war planners and the public alike, and thus all major papers testified to the war news’ international transmission. Unionist papers carried the constant threat that a decisive British response could end the war and give the Confederacy its independence. This same uneasy exchange of events, responses, and counterresponses was precisely what had made the *Trent* Affair so problematic. Passions flaring in New York in early November might cool by the time they registered in London ten days later, at which point a hot British response would take another ten days to return to the source of the ire, allowing a December cycle of recriminatory zeal to begin.

Ultimately, the British would respond to Northern actions and attitudes with troops as well as furious editorial commentary. Even after Lincoln backed down, British soldiers would land in Canada to defend imperial interests and forestall a more egregious violation of the British flag than even the bold Captain Wilkes had envisioned. Thus, when *Battle-Pieces* appeared, members of the Civil War generation could easily recollect both the *Trent* Affair's major events and their own habitually anxious focus on Britain during the war years. Whether they would choose to do so in the wake of the Northern triumph was another matter.

Battle-Pieces' preface links "the aspects which the [war's] strife as memory assumes" to "moods of involuntary meditation," and in recalling the war's international aspects, Melville reestablished a mood of nationalist uncertainty that many postwar readers would not voluntarily adopt (*BP*, v). "Donelson"'s opening recovers the uncomfortable pressure that transatlantic audiences exerted on the American practice of reading war news. In doing so, the prelude reveals that practice's nationalist pretensions, even as it recalls British readers who could have exposed the American nation itself as not merely imagined, but also as wholly imaginary. The poem's later narrative passages, by casting light on Northern news-readers, unsettle the imagined national community that Union victories at places such as Donelson had supposedly secured; the Northern Copperhead alluded to above warns his townsmen that

These 'craven Southerners' hold out;
 Ay, ay, they'll give you many a bout.
 (*BP*, 40, original emphasis)

He then flees the scene under duress. Yet it is the *Trent* Affair's significance that gives Melville's poem the pattern of reversal that Vendler recognizes as his most distinctive formal innovation, for the meaning of the narrative sections becomes clear only in the light of the opening's philosophical

insights.²⁸ Imperfect international communication and uneasy Anglo-American connections exposed the weak textual foundations of national identity. By conjuring up a transatlantic place that was no place, the poet underscores the false sense of place upon which national news and its imagined national community depend.

The poem's sprawling narrative sections finally confirm the hollowness of nationalism's communal claims. In long passages involving local news-readers, Melville interrogates the many contradictory assumptions required to form a shared national history from the news.²⁹ The rest of this essay will engage in a close reading that puts significant later sections of the poem in conversation with the prelude; it will highlight how Melville's bifurcated focus on a unique local scene *and* a transatlantic reference point lay the structural foundation for an elaborate criticism of nationalist war news. Throughout "Donelson," the poet never forgets the *Trent* Affair's lesson. Finally, its memory helps him show that the news' national imaginary offers a shoddy, and therefore dangerous, substitute for the more authentic version of history shared in a more intimate local scene.



"A PERVERTED BUNKER HILL":
INTERNATIONAL ECHOES, LOCAL POETICS

At its heart, "Donelson" measures war news' real and imagined communal results, and more specifically assesses how reading the news from distant battlefields fractures an actual public square. Its lines describe a single local community's public interaction with war correspondence, taken off the wire during the battle and posted to provide passersby with the latest details from the front.³⁰ Yet it becomes gradually apparent that these wartime readers are trapped in a collective illusion, and that war news is not national history in any deep sense. As Eliza Richards remarks, the news-reading public understood the limits of

Civil War reporting, for the "nearly immediate transmission of information from the battle fronts ... made people acutely aware that they were not present, that others were fighting and dying for them."³¹ Such paradoxical distancing through improved communication only magnified print's more fundamental incapacity to represent the soldiers' reality to co-nationalists at home. At the poem's precise midpoint, a long journalistic description of death on the field underscores this disconnect, mentioning the troops' gruesome suffering but finally suggesting that the war's horrors are frozen in the space around the fort:

*Great suffering through the night—
A stinging one. Our heedless boys
Were nipped like blossoms. Some dozen
Hapless wounded men were frozen.
During day being struck down out of sight,
And help-cries drowned in roaring noise,
They were left just where the skirmish
shifted—
Left in dense underbrush snow-drifted.
Some, seeking to crawl in crippled plight,
So stiffened—perished.*

*Yet in spite
Of pangs for these, no heart is lost.
Hungry, and clothing stiff with frost,
Our men declare a nearing sun
Shall see the fall of Donelson.
And this they say, yet not disown
The dark redoubts round Donelson,
And ice-glazed corpses, each a stone—
A sacrifice to Donelson;*

(BP, 43)

As I will demonstrate, the war news' paradoxical capacity to both connect and divide communities was central to how Melville understood the war, and clearly motivated his

decision to portray Donelson exclusively through battlefield reporting. Yet the poet also shows how the other side of this paradox of news-reading lay in newsprint's capability to extend its connections far beyond the national community's imagined limits, and in the process to confuse the lines distinguishing rebels from Union men, or even Yankees from redcoats. Melville's news-readers ultimately appear no more communally bound to the action at the battle site than they are to London's streets; despite the wonders of telegraphy, the news-readers are hardly more connected to the fighting than transnational readers thousands of miles distant. Thus, the news fails to provide a solid basis for national identity, partly because the same network linking American readers to their virtual war history also links them to a much wider international context of those who can read and respond (sometimes violently) to Anglophone war news.

Furthermore, to the extent that transnational war news could address respective Anglo and American audiences differently, it could also divide Northern readers from the new national public to the South. Thus, transatlantic influence and sectionalism in the poem become closely related international challenges to a unified American nationalism and to the tenets of modern nationalism itself, just as they had in the *Trent* Affair's conflation of Southern envoys with British honor. Throughout "Donelson"'s long development, Melville's initiating reference to that earlier international news event gradually emerges as the inverse of his central domestic question: Could the Unionist news narrative extend to accommodate internal divisions—between North and South, soldier and civilian, Republican and Copperhead—and still shield itself from the international influences that Anglophone print facilitated?

Crucially, these questions involved not merely passive reading but also an invasive power exerted across national borders into a supposedly nationalized public sphere. British readers, by appropriating and interpreting American war

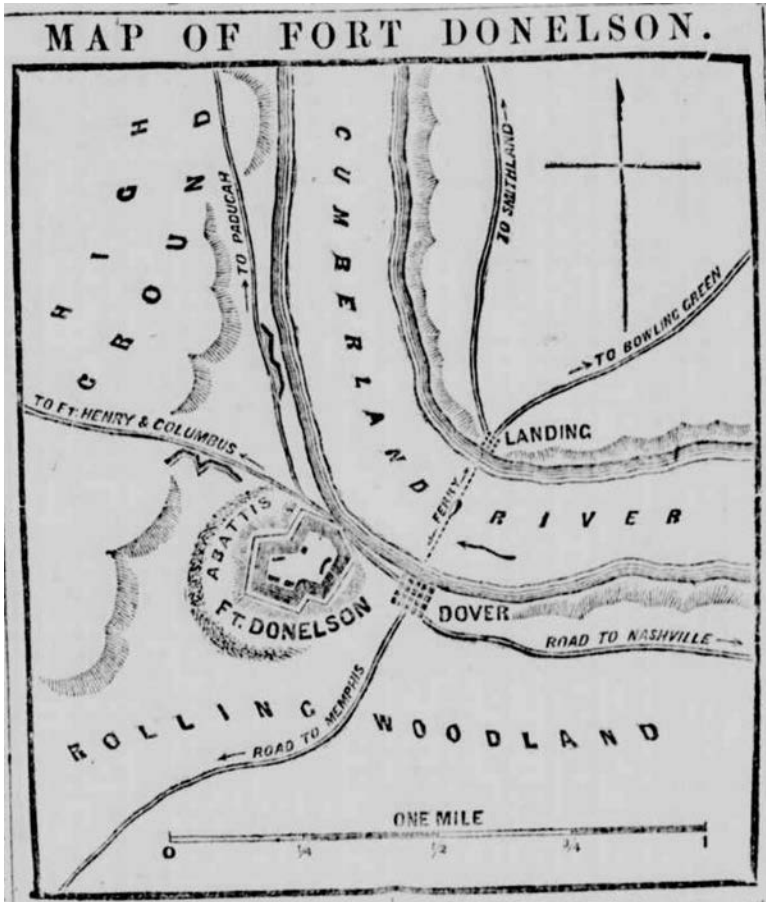
news, had redefined the Southern envoys on their own terms and forced Wilkes to release his seized dispatches. The victory at Donelson, and in a larger sense the Union's legitimization, would prove similarly subject to British interpretations, which always carried the potential threat of violent intervention in the conflict. Both the *Trent* Affair and the Tennessee battlefield, in other words, raised a fundamental question about whether print could reinforce national borders, national news, and national histories within a global information network. The central conceit of the nineteenth-century news network held that distance no longer mattered; to Melville's contemporary, the newsman James Gordon Bennet, the development of modern news meant that "the whole nation is impressed with the same idea at the same moment." Nevertheless, if Bennet supposed that "one feeling and one impulse are thus created and maintained from the center of land to its uttermost extremities," then "Donelson" begins by asking how far such a single emotionally-charged history can stretch before it breaks.³² Ultimately, the potential for the transatlantic cross-pollination of national news, represented by the *Trent* Affair, encouraged Melville to discard the news-driven notion of a national community as illusory.

The following discussion highlights several transatlantic echoes of the *Trent* Affair, in which the poet stages collisions between differing notions of shared space and time that complicate Civil War news' transmission and consumption. Beginning with the British influences that signaled Anglophonic news' international extension, the poem sways from the abstractness of shared language toward the concreteness of shared land, from print communication toward bodily community, from national news texts toward more localized forms of communal memory.³³ Along the way, Melville reminds the reader of the logical and political contradictions that organizing a nation around shared information demands.

Most of these contradictions should have been fairly obvious, but Melville's poem suggests that Northern civilians were willfully duped by the news. His news-readers actively and consistently mistook a mass communication system for an intimate national community even as they associated the immediacy of their news bulletins with the real bullets Union soldiers faced.³⁴ Northern journalists encouraged this misapprehension by anchoring their war history, which the home audience could only share virtually, to a communal vision of a nationally shared homeland that included both the home front and the battlefield. The first battlefield reports pinned on the bulletin board focus on the contested geography near the battle site, as "General Grant, / Marching from [Fort] Henry overland" seeks the "stronghold" that "crowns a river-bluff." As the conquest proceeds, the second report makes clear that the news-readers' imagined homeland can only be secured by blood, for "Each cliff cost / A limb or life. But back we forced / Reserves and all; made good our hold;" (*BP*, 33–34; 35).³⁵ Thus, Melville's poetically reproduced dispatch both imposes and discounts the moral cost for the audience's vicarious occupation of the national homeland. After all, only the troops bleed for it. Yet the poem also refuses to blame the state or the media for warmongering, choosing instead to underscore the active support of a desperately credulous public in crafting a common history of national news.

This critical part of Melville's argument also echoes the *Trent* Affair, and "Donelson"'s opening lines that reflect the moment when citizens begin to read the reports from the front:

The bitter cup
 Of that hard countermand
 Which gave the Envoys up
 Still was wormwood in the mouth[.]
(*BP*, 33)



"Map of Fort Donelson." *New-York daily tribune*, 17 February 1862. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress. Accessed 17 November 2017. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>>

Thus, the poem relocates a transatlantic conflict from beyond the nation's geographical boundaries firmly "in the mouth" of local imaginings. The *Trent* Affair's indeterminate reference point underscores how imagining national community depends not on actual shared land, but on the sort of highly affective and determinedly nationalistic responses to global information that allow war news to masquerade as a shared history. Though lacking any solid geographical placement, Melville's opening lines drip with emotionally-charged bodily realities and translate the Union's narrow escape from a calamitous second war into an acutely felt national humiliation.³⁶ Lincoln's countermand, through which the North had lost almost nothing other than face, tangibly alters the experience of local readers with little else at stake in the *Trent* Affair than their nationalistic pride. Their original bitterness, initiated by their ongoing involvement in the transatlantic news cycle, "still" remained poignant even three months after the envoys' original capture.

Although Melville does not immediately reveal his purposes, his Northerners' gloomy responses to this transatlantic news controversy establish a dialectical contrast between the bonds available to a local community and the wider virtual associations the news can easily market. The local scene emerges tenuously in this first verse paragraph:

And clouds involved the land,
When, pelted by sleet in the icy street,
About the bulletin-board a band
Of eager, anxious people met.

Water, transformed and transported from ocean to land as cloud, reinforces the mysterious way Atlantic information impinges upon the townsfolk who are "pelted by sleet in the icy street," even as global pressures harden into nationalist responses on the local Northern scene (*BP*, 33).³⁷ By referring to the affective state that a transatlantic news story elicits from the local community, the poem highlights the

ironies characterizing the American dependence on news as a common national history.

As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that this dependence is Melville's real target. The *Trent* Affair's transatlantic invasion establishes a polar opposition between the shared space of local community and the shared international information network; throughout the rest of the poem, the nation remains suspended somewhat ridiculously between these poles, a patchwork of ragged abstractions wrapped around the perceived solidity of shared space. "Donelson" repudiates its pretensions, partly by confirming a "temporal gap that divides readers and listeners from soldiers on the battlefield" (*FA*, 263). Despite readers' expectations, the newspaper does not connect them to the army any more than it links them together under the abstract categories of the Union and the North.

As Jennifer Greiman has demonstrated, Melville's antebellum fiction had already interrogated the American tendency to define the national public sphere and maintain public faith in popular sovereignty through staged spectacles of belonging and exclusion.³⁸ The news in "Donelson," by facilitating transatlantic intrusions and internal divisions, pushes the nationalist combination of an inclusive public sphere, defined as an exclusive mass community, to an absurd limit. In the process, the poem generates clouds of ambiguity, beginning with the refusal to specify whether "the land" in line 5 refers to the nation—which the language of international diplomacy and State Department directives in lines 2 and 3 would indicate—or to line 6's unequivocally local environment surrounding "the icy street." In fact, the potential metonymic confusion over the meaning of "land"—land as imagined nation-state or as immediate physical environment—eventually emerges as one of Melville's central points. What makes "the land" such a cloudy term are sophistic conflations of actual local environments with a news-bound national public. As the poem's focus moves from

a location-less *Trent* Affair to follow a local community's five-day interaction with reports sent from the land around Fort Donelson, the poet will resist the national news' tendency to map images of shared land onto a mass-mediated public .

The remainder of "Donelson," which runs almost three thousand words, preoccupies itself almost exclusively with war reports and their localized responses. As the poem explores both the nationalizing consensus and the social conflicts that reading war news generates on the local scene, it reveals a cacophony of communal frauds and fractures. In the particularly striking episode already mentioned, a Copperhead arrives to physically divide the Unionist crowd and to emphasize the gap between the battle itself and the public enthusiasm for partisan reporting. "Win or lose," he quips, "caps fly the same Like to see a list of the dead The country's ruined, that I know." This Copperhead news-reader represents an obvious internal division and challenge to Northern nationalism, until he is chased from the scene by "a shower of broken ice and snow" that, "in lieu of words, confuted him" (*BP*, 39–40).

Yet, like the icy street in the poem's prelude, the hardened nationalism motivating this internal fracas points beyond its humble local iteration. Such violence arises from the wider global network of shared information and from common language's capacity to create as well as bridge social divisions. The clearest signs of this broader perspective arrive as transnational interruptions that complicate the narrative rhythm of battlefield correspondence and local reception, of reported trauma and self-organized consensus. The chivalric tinge infusing Melville's descriptions of modern war—the fort that "crowns" the heights, the armies that charge the "foeman" guarding the Confederate "castle"—may correspond to contemporary journalistic conventions and the poet's typical diction (*BP*, 34–37; 47–48). However, more distinctive Old World echoes sound at key points. The journalistic description of the freezing night that left

Union troops "ice-glazed corpses, each a stone," for example, concludes with a highly disruptive transatlantic reference to a famous Revolutionary War battle (*BP*, 43). In these passages, Melville directly challenges the two pillars of popular Northern nationalism with which he has been most concerned: the nationalization of landscape and the local audience's sympathetic responses to embattled troops.

The living comrades of the frozen men continue to maintain their brave defiance of "*a flag, deemed black, flying from Donelson*" (*BP*, 43).³⁹ Yet the Confederates who still fought under that flag, the correspondent acknowledges, had also sought to assist wounded and freezing Union soldiers. As the dispatch reports:

*Some of the wounded in the wood
Were cared for by the foe last night,
Though he could do them little needed good,
Himself being all in shivering plight.*

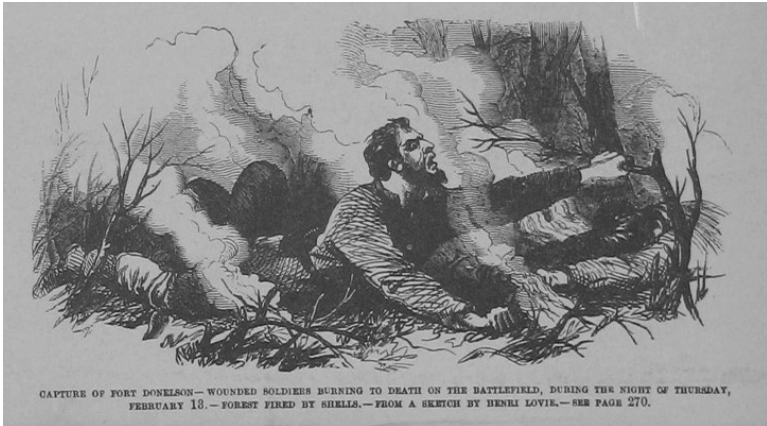
The Northern and Southern troops' common suffering, as well as the rebels' care for Union wounded, forces the Northern correspondent's admission:

*The rebel is wrong, but human yet;
He's got a heart, and thrusts a bayonet.
He gives us battle with wondrous will—
This bluff's a perverted Bunker Hill.*

(*BP*, 43–44)

In Melville's depiction, the Southerners' brave stand on the heights around the fort and their care for the Northern wounded immediately make the crowd of Unionist readers uneasy:

The stillness stealing through the throng
The silent thought and dismal fear revealed;
They turned and went,



CAPTURE OF FORT DONELSON—WOUNDED SOLDIERS BURNING TO DEATH ON THE BATTLEFIELD, DURING THE NIGHT OF THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 13.—FOREST FIRED BY SHELLS.—FROM A SKETCH BY HENRI LOVIE.—SEE PAGE 270.

“Capture of Fort Donelson—Wounded Soldier Burning to Death on the Battlefield . . .”
Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper (New York): 15 March 1862.

Musing on right and wrong
And mysteries dimly sealed—

(*BP*, 44)

It is not merely the rebels' humanity that leaves the people confused and despondent; it is the revelation of the rebels' Americanism. Their sympathetic openness to the soldiers dying on the other side of the nationalist battle line seemingly mirrors and exceeds the sympathies of the co-nationalists far removed from the shared field of suffering. Furthermore, the rebels' determined fight for the ground around the fort simultaneously complicates the Union forces' supposed defense of the national homeland and recalls a troubling historical precedent. Bunker Hill—the Revolutionary War battle site that Daniel Webster had in 1825 famously recommended as the basis for perpetual Union—seems to have reversed itself at Fort Donelson, as Melville assigns the Northern Unionists the British role.⁴⁰ A central national tradition seemingly inverts itself at the fort, forcing distressed Northern readers to consider the possibility that, as Union partisans, they have paradoxically lost their American identity. The transatlantic analogy implies that the Northern armies are now suppressing a new American revolution among Confederates, who would have seen the Bunker Hill allusion as a repetition rather than a perversion of their own American struggle against tyranny. Thus, the memory of Bunker Hill, recalled by the Northern correspondent, now forces the Northern audience to imagine Union soldiers as redcoats charging a brave band of outnumbered Americans who are grimly holding the high ground. The Northern soldiers and their supportive readers have become uncomfortably British, deploying force to dislodge the guardians in Tennessee from both the land and their chosen nationality; yet if these Southerners are "people of the country," they ostensibly have as much claim to both ground and national status as the

founding patriots had to the heights around Boston (*BP*, 37).⁴¹

The hill itself, now transfigured as the potentially sacred ground of a Southern struggle against an overstretched Anglophone empire, produces Northern doubts, as a transatlantic frame of reference exposes a contradiction in Unionist arguments from geography.⁴² In fighting to reclaim Southern territory, the invading troops at Donelson seemed instead to be subduing the land's ordained defenders, just as the British had in the previous century. As the reporter at Donelson puts it, the rebels may be "wrong"—about the Constitution, slavery, the rights of states—but this objection involves a comparatively abstract argument over the interpretation of a text. The defenders' care for the Northern soldiers' bodies, on the other hand, proves they are not wrong in an absolute moral sense—for they accomplish precisely the actions that, despite all their nationalist sympathies, the readers at home cannot. Their brave defense of Southern land against an invading army from distant states suggests a more convincing argument from geography—especially since Northern readers can connect to their own version of a national homeland only through their newspapers' text.

Continuing his description of the troubled townfolk, Melville again compounds the moral quandary that Bunker Hill's perverse echo represents by describing dark clouds that evoke those appearing in the poem's opening. The people "turned and went" from the newsboard,

Breasting the storm in daring discontent;
 The storm, whose black flag showed in heaven,
 As if to say no quarter there was given
 To wounded men in wood,
 Or true hearts yearning for the good—
 All fatherless seemed the human soul[.]

(*BP*, 44)

The "black flag" implies that, despite the superiority of the Union cause, neither its wounded soldiers nor their hearty supporters at home can hope for divine sustenance. Indeed, the stormy flag of heaven clearly recalls both the clouding anxieties that inform the poem's transatlantic prelude and the journalistic reference to Unionist hatred of a rebel "flag, deemed black, flying from Donelson" (*BP*, 43). The mimetic connection between these black flags raises the agonizing prospect that heaven in this case may favor the rebels. Yet it seems more likely that the only truly black flag in Melville's mind, a flag that exposes the provincial antipathy toward all flags merely "deemed black," was a death faced by all those who were "human yet" (*BP*, 44). It is death's flattening of nationalist distinctions that sends Melville's news-readers away, pensive and uncertain.⁴³ A generation earlier, Webster in his Bunker Hill Monument oration had famously recalled the struggle against Britain, hailing "the sepulchres of our fathers," and the "ground distinguished by [the fathers'] valor, their constancy, and the shedding of their blood" as the sure foundation of the Union.⁴⁴ Now, the Northerners' facile Unionist bond dissolves before the absolute isolation of a universal mortality that leaves them "all fatherless." This false fraternity finds itself bereft of any familial connection either to the original Bunker Hill defenders or to the Northern troops.

Despite the anxiety that descends following the reporter's Bunker Hill allusion, the "next day brought a bitterer bowl" (*BP*, 44). Here again, Melville echoes the prelude, and the "bitter cup" that symbolized the national audience's unsatisfying compromise with international influence, the anxious waiting upon the whims of British news-readers, and the frustrated nationalist reaction entailed in the *Trent* Affair's conclusion. Now the latest dispatches report the containment, after much bloody fighting, of a fierce Confederate breakout attempt. Despite being checked, the rebels "maintained themselves on conquered ground"

secured during the attack (*BP*, 46). Left doubtful yet again by the persistent Southern attachment to the land, the crowd responds strangely, internalizing the contents of this “bitterer bowl” of news rather than recoiling from it. The narrator describes the scene that the news office’s gaslight illuminates on a dark stormy day:

Flitting faces took the hue
Of that washed bulletin-board in view,
And seemed to bear the public grief
As private, and uncertain of relief;
(*BP*, 46)

Elsewhere in *Battle-Pieces*, as Timothy Sweet has observed, Melville criticizes the news’ tendency to support state violence through “displacement of the body by the disembodied sign.”⁴⁵ These lines, however, emphasize the audience’s responsibility for validating a militant virtual community: Melville’s news-readers offer their own bodies to the disembodied sign of a battle report; each walks away from the board

To find in himself some bitter thing,
Some hardness in his lot as harrowing
As Donelson.
(*BP*, 46)

Melville’s typical news-reader, despite, or perhaps because of, his doubts about the national news’ abstractions, seeks “hardness” by inscribing it onto the intimate, physical substance of his own body. Yet once again, it is a “bitter thing” such readers seek. News-readers, by mirroring the national news on their faces and taking it into themselves, produce the nation’s most superficial but nonetheless politically potent embodiments.⁴⁶

Melville connects the storm clouds and resonant bitterness in this penultimate scene of news reception to the “bitter cup” (*BP*, 33) and bad weather of the *Trent* Affair; each

instance shows Northern nationalism developing through a similar public reaction to the Civil War news' international aspects. In both stories, a transatlantic reference point (the *Trent* Affair and the Battle of Bunker Hill) combines with sectional opposition (the envoys and the rebel defenders), to challenge Northern beliefs that the United States possessed an exclusive history and a nationalized geography. Northern news-readers respond to the challenge by affectively balkanizing a common culture through their local, bodily experience. Thus, Anglophonic nationalism itself becomes the belligerent bitterness news-readers consume from the "bitter bowl" or "bitter cup" of the shared English-language news.

In the poem's final newsboard episode, these fully nationalized readers finally get "news to cheer." They learn that Donelson has fallen to Union troops, and "the spell of old defeat is broke" (*BP*, 49, 51). Grant's army, we should recall, has not yet suffered "old defeat"; the poem refers not to any army in particular, but to the habitually defeated Northern news readership that had vicariously endured humiliating setbacks, from Bull Run to the *Trent* Affair. Now, those in the crowd can also celebrate a victory as their own:

The man who read this to the crowd
 Shouted as the end he gained;
 And though the unflagging tempest rained,
 They answered him aloud.

(*BP*, 51)

Melville again depicts the audience channeling the news through their bodies in a converse version of the previous day's bitterness, as a virtual victory again provokes physical as well as vocal responses:

hand grasped hand, and glances met
 In happy triumph; eyes grew wet.

(*BP*, 51)

Following these bodily displays of sentimental connection, culminating in the final transferal of water from wet and weathered paper to the public eye, the crowd departs to lose themselves further in punch bowls brimming with strong liquor.

Fittingly for a poem that began with a crisis in which persons had become embodied dispatches, “Donelson” identifies lost bodies as the cost of the readers’ psychological and physiological solution to the news’ abstractions. Although the news-readers’ performative responses in one sense embody the North in a dramatic victory ceremony, the audience has ignored the news’ reference to the battle’s more significant corporeal results. The reveling crowd overlooks the dead and wounded who still lie on or in the ground at Fort Donelson, not merely through personal callousness, but because the day’s news fails to report them. The last dispatch from Donelson reads:

*For lists of killed and wounded, see
The morrow’s dispatch: to-day ’tis victory.
(BP, 51)*

The Copperhead exiled from the Northern community early in the poem had articulated a need to consider the “list of the dead” (*BP*, 39). However, “the death list is the one newspaper item that is neither represented directly nor read aloud in the poem,” for it does not appear until the revelers have departed (*FA*, 265). By following the news’ prescription to neglect the dead whom they assumed had fought for them as a national public, the Northern audience reveals that the nation it toasts is almost entirely vacuous apart from its own cheers; here, Melville presents the nation as neither more nor less than the brash but hollow public repetition of a newssheet’s decidedly unreliable victory narrative. The embattled Fort Donelson, as a perverted Bunker Hill marked by transnational confusions, humanistic sympathies, and the universal reality of death, gives Melville a way to call nationalism’s bluff.

Just prior to the victory celebrations, Melville foreshadows this harsh judgment in an image of the bulletin board "barren" of news, as he envisions readers ignoring it:

wistful people passing,
Who nothing saw but the rain-beads
chasing
Each other down the wafered square,
As down some storm-beat grave-yard stone.
But next day showed —

MORE NEWS LAST NIGHT.
(*BP*, 47)

The casual onlooker leaves this metaphorical marker of death unnoticed. But when the final battle report promises to make the board a more literal gravestone with the next day's death list, the as-yet-unseen lovers of the soldiers emerge from the local community, replacing the former news-readers who spent the night rejoicing. Unlike the revelers around them, these worried lovers pass the night uneasily:

[They] wakeful laid
In midnight beds, and early rose,
And, feverish in the foggy snows,
Snatched the damp paper—wife and maid.
(*BP*, 52)

For Melville, this feverish action is not just an alternative response to war news, nor is the bodily connection between lover and soldier just a different version of sentimental attachment to the front: it pointedly contrasts with the nationalized public that Melville has depicted, forming an alternative community based on familial bodily involvement and a material local grounding. The soldiers' lovers did not come to the board for mere information; they did not come to read; they "snatched the damp paper" as if to recover the bodies now physically missing from their beds. Drawn together by a heart-rending absence, the separated lovers

nevertheless form the only deep attachment to be found in war news. Melville's final image of a gathering around the newsboard conjoins the death list, storm waters, and war victims' mourning, envisioning a river that metaphorically subsumes the realities of battlefield suffering on the banks of the Cumberland and authentic suffering on the home front:⁴⁷

The death-list like a river flows
Down the pale sheet,
And there the whelming waters meet.
(*BP*, 52)

This image of grief mirrors the tangle of rivers around Donelson. As Melville sets the finality of their actual bodily losses against a suddenly hollow national victory, the mourners' tangible encounter with each other stands in stark relief against a transformed bulletin board; baptized in such waters, the conduit for national news becomes transfigured into a family gravestone. The literal end of life and love for this group condemns the "end ... gained" by their fellow citizens' triumphal reading of Unionist news, exposing the crowd's pretense of communal connection to armies whose soldiers they are content to leave forgotten and unnamed (*BP*, 51). As Barrett suggests, "the voices cheering the victory can sustain the illusion of a unified Union only temporarily," but "the printed list of the dead—with its power to divide ... will keep growing indefinitely" (*FA*, 266).

Yet Melville seeks not merely to rebuke modern death engines or public callousness in the name of international peace and public virtue, but also to expose the imagined nation as a heresy. Thus, in closing, the poetic narrator turns prophetic, recalling realities to a public mind that had studiously avoided them in pursuit of news.⁴⁸ The image of "whelming waters," that in a moment cleanse the "storm-beat grave-yard stone" of the news' inky abstractions, also clears the way for Melville's concluding topographical vision

of a battle site purged of war. The poem's form throughout the battle has made the community appear to abandon local time in accordance with dispatches punctiliously labeled "3 P.M.," "Saturday morning at 3 A.M.," or "Story of Saturday Afternoon," as each "next day brought" or "showed" a new development from the fort (*BP*, 47, 49, 44, 47). Abandoning this temporal constriction, Melville's conclusion invokes a more divine, millennial Time and Day, capitalized along with God in the poem's last verse paragraph.

Ah God! may Time with happy haste
 Bring wail and triumph to a waste,
 And war be done;
 The battle flag-staff fall athwart
 The curs'd ravine, and wither; naught
 Be left of trench or gun;
 The bastion, let it ebb away,
 Washed with the river bed; and Day
 In vain seek Donelson.

(*BP*, 52)

This prayer is not merely a nostalgic flight, or a pastoral turn, or a call to an end of war. It is all those things, but it is also an apocalypse, a divine unmapping, an abdication of nature's throne by a pretender nation and its news, an oceanic flood poured out upon America's public sphere.⁴⁹ Donelson, "curs'd" and exalted as the seat of war, here returns in a prophetic future to the mundane grace of its natural features. By anticipating the "Day" that will seek Donelson in vain, Melville is also damning the daily news apparatus that had sought the fort so eagerly, discarding the ubiquitous papers' nationalist instruments and recovering the bulletin board as an ordinary artifact placed in a local community that does not need to be imagined. Romantic in tone, Melville's apostrophe nevertheless produces an ecstatic realism by exposing the tangible local foundations beneath the illusions of mass culture.

How should we regard the relation between this strange poem's closing and its opening reference to transatlantic temporality, and how best can we understand Melville's criticism of what falls between? The key to answering these questions lies in the reader who stands in a godlike position above all texts as the true subject of Melville's final address. As Michael Warner argues in a classic interpretation of Melville's "Shiloh," poetry that takes death seriously can provide the reader with "an implied analogue of the work of the bullet" to disillusion those who find themselves mortally wounded by their own nationalist beliefs. Such poetry achieves something akin to "the undeception of wounded men . . . glimpsed only at the threshold of mortality." It allows readers to imagine and adopt in a limited form the dying's "changed recognition as something other than tragically inconsequential irony."⁵⁰ In "Donelson"'s penultimate stanza, the poem's actual reader, having followed all its imagined news-readers through the convulsions of their common history, arrives at an alternative communal vision that takes the form of what the war has most tangibly destroyed. This image forms a kind of antitextual revolt centered firmly in the material world and in bodily remembrance; Melville's empty midnight beds frame an intimate bond beyond both anxious international involvements and the partisan news' nationalizing imagination. Raising death's black flag among widows, Melville asks his reader to recover the bodies behind the dispatches and to escape an imagined community that, extending far beyond its natural bounds in the local environment, so easily forgets its own members. Just as the clouds of the *Trent* Affair had "involved the land" (*BP*, 33) and thus challenged the nation's natural immunity from international pressures, the internal wellsprings of personal grief overwhelm the nation's shallow popular attachments to battlefield suffering.

Ultimately, war news, consumed as a bitterly nationalist by-product of competing transnational lines of influence,

recedes before images of embodied love and death. The community imagined through the news fades before a community that wants nothing more than to relinquish both fort and phony homeland for more intimate scenes of home: the hope of a lively bedroom, the fact of a graveyard stone. Donelson, resituated in the reader's understanding as the headwaters of the death list and as the burial ground for the actual beloved, avoids becoming a Bunker Hill monument to hastily manufactured patriots; though Melville leaves the reader in a sisterhood of anguish, that grieving public takes life and death seriously, and thus offers a place where real community can be imagined.⁵¹ Thus, the reader's national disillusionment mirrors the final stanza's destructive unmapping of Donelson and makes Melville's closing vision not merely a vision of an abandoned fort, but also one of a chastened and reformed reader. By insisting on death's destructive reality, the poem attempts to recall that reader to "wakeful" life (*BP*, 52).

This tangible image of death, experienced as both a universal and local reality, threatens to pull us back into the vortex lying beneath Melville's casual initiating reference to transatlantic news. Representing international responses to a war story involving the vicissitudes of national identity, the *Trent* Affair complicated the nationalist imagining that constitutes the poem's historical action. But Melville's real problem is not merely that national divisions organized around Anglophone war news were arbitrary; it is that they were willful efforts to commandeer and thus evade the most basic realities of human experience, death chief among them. The cultural exchanges of the transatlantic world, like those animating the nationalized public sphere, are borne on the wind of a common culture, but beneath them lies the deep ocean of shared mortality: this finality is the true place-that-is-no-place from which history's storms and the bitter dreams of embattled homelands must spring.

“Donelson”’s remarkable final stanza stages a return to this site from which the *Trent* Affair, the imagined community, and national war emerged. We can draw an intriguing parallel between the poet’s vision of a divine Time that brings the signs of war to “waste” and a similar reference to “the tempest bursting from the waste of Time” in “Misgivings,” *Battle-Pieces*’ second poem, which, like “Donelson,” begins with “ocean-clouds over inland hills / sweep storming” (*BP*, 13). According to William Shurr, Melville’s tempest “sharply concentrates [his] view of history . . . Time is a desert or wilderness. But ‘waste’ also suggests that time is a process of attrition and decay. The destructive storm of war has been generated by and within Time, the process which encompasses man and all his institutions. At the present moment it ‘bursts’ forth to destroy the best that man has been able to create.”⁵² Similarly, Cody Marrs argues that “time’s events are for Melville not wholly congruous instants but related moments of undoing in a vast historical cycle,” and thus his poetry is predicated on “the idea that the present is a succession of convulsions and time itself is a long chain of cataclysms.”⁵³ If Shurr and Marrs are correct, then history becomes a constant reiteration of civil war—destroying unities by dividing redcoat from minuteman, John Bull from Brother Jonathan, Yankee from Cavalier, Copperhead from Union man—but never in a way that can forestall endless future divisions. Time, in this view, becomes very nearly equivalent to endless war; yet “Donelson”’s close articulates the hope that war itself (not merely *the* war it describes) will fall victim to the waste of Time.

The key to understanding this paradox lies in Melville’s exclamatory and capitalized reference in the poem’s final lines to a God of judgment. Like Melville’s reader in relation to his news-readers, this God stands counterpoised against the nationalist’s “heaven,” which a few lines previously had punctuated Melville’s public sphere and all its idolatrous appropriations:

though the unflagging tempest rained
They answered him aloud.

.....
And from the deep street came the frequent
shout;
While some in prayer, as these in glee,
Blessed heaven for this winter-victory.
(*BP*, 51)

For the callous, gleeful, or pious Unionists, the rebels' substitution of a flag "deemed black" (*BP*, 43) with a flag of surrender in the final battlefield report has also erased from memory the perverted Bunker Hill reference and its accompanying vision of the black flag of heaven's storm.

Yet it is still raining. The poetic speaker's final movement into the "unflagging tempest," like Ishmael's movement to the sea, implies a gain as well as a loss, and suggests the potential for a generative power beyond history that corresponds to the oceanic depths beneath the transatlantic world where the poem begins. This world is the origin of the clouds from which civil conflicts and nationalist unities emerge, but it is not reducible to them. Thus, in the poem's last two lines the battle site is "washed" as well as wasted "with the river bed" that seems (because of the ambiguous preposition "with") both an agent and an object of destruction. Here the line subtly echoes the previous stanza's "midnight beds" cradling their realities of loss and love (*BP*, 52). In associating the cycles of a destructive history with divine judgment, the poet also infuses history's cataclysms with a paradoxical hope that, like the energy generating the cycles themselves, lies outside of time. "Donelson" ends with the notion that Time's waste may obliterate war itself from memory; the poem's deepest metaphysical or theological layer provides an image not merely of the end of the Civil War but also of all national war, and perhaps of all national history.

We might also read Melville's final resort to an apocalyptic vision as a warning about nationalism's durability in today's

globalizing era. The recent upsurge in transatlantic studies has helped recover historical connections and conflicts that have become obscured by our obstinate tendency to view all history through a nationalist lens. Yet in one sense, such work is not new at all—at least inasmuch as it generates questions pondered by nineteenth-century writers, including Herman Melville, whose effort to explore nationalism’s power within the transatlantic field prefigured some current approaches. Nevertheless, the desperation that Melville’s concluding prayer reflects also complicates any supposition that the mere development of critical treatments, or the mere presence of international associations, will eliminate the brute power of nationalist desires and the wars that so often follow them. Despite all our historical advances and global involvements, or perhaps because of them, Melville’s bitter cup remains mostly full.

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NOTES

1. Dean B. Mahin, *One War at a Time: The International Dimensions of the American Civil War* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1999), 59.
2. For this “novel interpretation” of international law, see Howard Jones, *Blue & Gray Diplomacy: A History of Union and Confederate Foreign Relations* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010), 88–91.
3. Herman Melville, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1866), 33; hereafter cited parenthetically as *BP*.
4. From the moment word of the seizure arrived in Britain in late November, the prospect of British intervention seemed very real, if not probable. See Amanda Foreman, *World on Fire: Britain’s Crucial Role in the American Civil War* (New York: Random House, 2010), 179; and Jones, *Blue & Gray Diplomacy*, 94.
5. William H. Shurr’s book-length study of Melville’s poetry does not mention “Donelson.” Among editors who have printed selections of Melville’s poetry that include “Donelson,” Robert Penn Warren’s

opinion is mixed, for he judges that the poem, “though scarcely a success, is one of Melville’s boldest experiments, an attempt to make poetry out of a style based on realistic, documentary prose”; Douglas Robillard thinks the poem “does not work well, though the poet uses a number of technical effects.” By contrast, Daniel Aaron reads “Donelson,” which he calls “one of Melville’s longest and most revealing poems,” as a chapter in a war narrative that develops into a “parable of human blindness.” See William H. Shurr, *The Mystery of Iniquity: Melville as Poet, 1857–1891* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1972); Robert Penn Warren, ed., *Selected Poems of Herman Melville* (New York: Random House, 1971), 362; Douglas Robillard, introduction to *The Poems of Herman Melville* (Kent: Kent State UP, 2000), 12; and Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 81; 90.

6. Faith Barrett, *To Fight Aloud Is Very Brave: American Poetry and the Civil War* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2012), 3, 262, 260, 261: hereafter cited parenthetically as *FA*.
7. The importance of these opening lines has rarely been addressed in key critical works on *Battle-Pieces*, and Robert Faggen is one of the few scholars who note the reference. See Warren, *Selected Poems*, 362; Aaron, *Unwritten War*, 81; Timothy Sweet, *Traces of War: Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of the Union* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990), 181–82; Stanton Garner, *The Civil War World of Herman Melville* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1993), 138; Robert Faggen, introduction to *Selected Poems*, by Herman Melville (New York: Penguin, 2006), xxv; and Barrett, *To Fight Aloud*, 263–65.
8. For an overview of the origins and controversies surrounding the modernist school of nationalism scholars, see Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Hanover: UP of New England, 2000), 27–51.
9. Helen Vendler, “Melville and the Lyric of History,” *Southern Review* 35.3 (Summer 1999): 586.
10. Sweet highlights the collection’s deep ambivalence toward nationalism as it emerges through Melville’s complex deployment of the pastoral mode. Sweet, *Traces of War*, 165–67. Vendler cites Melville’s refusal to endorse creedal elements of American nationalism as one

reason for his poetry's exclusion from the American canon. Vendler, "Melville and the Lyric of History," 581–83. Ian Finseth focuses on *Battle-Pieces*' critical presentation of nationalist aesthetics and evocation of alternative aesthetic responses. Finseth, "On *Battle-Pieces*: The Ethics of Aesthetics in Melville's War Poetry," *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 12.3 (October 2010): 71. Barrett notes the collection's deep ambivalence toward nationalism. Barrett, *To Fight Aloud*, 251–52, 254, 259, 269–70, 279–80. Cody Marrs argues that the image of violent national division provided "a loose and multiresonant figure" throughout Melville's postbellum years. Marrs, *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2015), 121.

11. Garner, *Civil War World*, 128–29.
12. See note 10.
13. Literary critics have increasingly acknowledged that the aesthetics and politics associated with popular print help explain Melville's distinctive postbellum poetics, even as they forge a link to his antebellum career as a popular writer. See Timothy Sweet, "Battle-Pieces and Vernacular Poetics" in *Literary Cultures of the Civil War*, ed. Sweet (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2016), 101; and Barrett, *To Fight Aloud*, 252.
14. Wilkes quoted in Jones, *Blue & Gray Diplomacy*, 88. Wilkes used the phrase when describing his actions to the Secretary of the Navy in a letter that was widely publicized. See *New York Times*, 11 December 1861, 1.
15. Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Selected Tales*, ed. Robert Milder (New York: Oxford UP), 3–41, 74–96.
16. Hershall Parker, Marrs, Barrett, and Sweet have all debunked the longstanding assumption that Melville turned to poetry after the war in an effort to privatize his art. See Hershel Parker, *Melville: The Making of the Poet* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2008), 6; Barrett, *To Fight Aloud*, 253–54; Marrs, *Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, 91–92; and Sweet, "Battle-Pieces and Vernacular Poetics," 99.
17. Vendler, "Melville and the Lyric of History," 584.

18. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edition (London: Verso, 1991). Current iterations of public-sphere theory vary widely but have typically been associated with modern nation-states, and thus to the sort of national imaginary Anderson posited. See Nancy Fraser, "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World," in *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere*, ed. Kate Nash (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014), 8–42.
19. Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770–1870* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007), xx.
20. Jennifer Greiman, *Democracy's Spectacle: Sovereignty and Public Life in Antebellum American Writing* (New York: Fordham UP, 2010), 27.
21. Finseth, "On *Battle-Pieces*," 72, 76, 79–80, 88–89.
22. See Fraser, "Publicity, Subjection, Critique: A Reply to my Critics," in *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere*, esp. 133–35. More generally, Fraser's identification of the challenges entailed in theorizing a legitimate and efficacious public sphere amid contemporary globalizing pressures suggests why this incursion was so traumatic to its nationalist audience at the end of 1861.
23. Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume 1 (1819–1851)* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2015), 609–10.
24. Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore* (New York: Oxford UP, 1962), 479. Wilson's rather dismissive comment also produced its share of objections. See Warren, *Selected Poems*, vii; and Faggen, *Selected Poems*, xv.
25. Elizabeth Renker, "Melville the Poet in the Postbellum World," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: Cambridge UP, 2014), 131.
26. Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), 37.
27. Vendler, "Melville and the Lyric of History," 590.
28. Vendler, "Melville and the Lyric of History," 584.
29. Several scholars have noted the poem's focus on the inadequacies of print. See Sweet, *Traces of War*, 181–82; Vendler, "Melville and the Lyric of History," 589–90; and Barrett, *To Fight Aloud*, 261.

30. Although the poem does not name the specific community, its reference to “the latest news from West or South” suggests a news center in the Northeast, possibly New York. Melville had read the *New York Times*’ accounts of the battle, most recently in the *Rebellion Record*. See Warren, *Selected Poems*, 361.
31. Eliza Richards, “Weathering the News in US Civil War Poetry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*, ed. Kerry Larson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2011), 114.
32. Quoted in Menahem Blondheim, *News over the Wires: The Telegraph and Flow of Public Information in America, 1844–1897* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994), 38.
33. Recently, Sweet has argued that Melville’s critical reflection on the expansion of such local community can explain many of *Battle-Pieces*’ formal experiments, which are designed to engage, trouble, and transform popular “vernacular forms of hymn, ballad, song, and epitaph, while subordinating the elite omniscience of epic.” Sweet, “Vernacular Poetics,” 100.
34. Finseth finds that *Battle-Pieces* “offers a poetic analysis of the relations of political aesthetics to individual psychology, voicing a suspicion of the cultural symbologies that motivate and direct social action” in the name of national community, and many theorists have pointed to nineteenth-century confusions between mass communication and community as characteristic of the modern public sphere. See Finseth, “On *Battle-Pieces*,” 72.
35. Melville’s determination to ironize war journalism’s pastoral framing of violence is central to Sweet’s reading of “Donelson.” See Sweet, *Traces of War*, 181–82.
36. As Sweet has argued, Abraham Lincoln was especially adept at establishing a basis for Unionist nationalism in geography. Timothy Sweet, “Lincoln and the Natural Nation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Cambridge UP, 2012), 72–90.
37. Although Eliza Richards does not address Melville explicitly, “Donelson” confirms her thesis that “Civil War poetry of all kinds ... draws sustained parallels between weather and the circulation and reception of news.” Richards, “Weathering the News,” 115.

38. Greiman, *Democracy's Spectacle*, 4–7, 192–222.
39. This deadly change to "stern weather" points toward the problems of partisan divisions of the land, for after the sudden change in temperature, the Northern correspondent reports that the Southern "people of the country own / We brought it" (*BP*, 37).
40. Daniel Webster, "Dedication of the Bunker Hill Monument," in *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, ed. James W. McIntyre, vol. 1, *Memoir and Speeches on Various Occasions* (New York: J. F. Taylor, 1903), 235. For an Emersonian critique of Webster's Union rhetoric, see Eduardo Cadava, *Emerson and the Climates of History* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), 106–10.
41. Marrs suggests that Melville's citing such Civil War precedents arises from his interest in history as an endlessly repeating cycle; Melville offers this particular allusion as a perversion, rather than a repetition of a historical pattern. Melville apparently suggests that the Bunker Hill reference is perverse only if we take at face value the journalistic report's nationalist commitments. Were an observer to fully adopt the humanist perspective the stanza alludes to earlier, the reproduction becomes accurate, for little other than time itself will then distinguish the overlapping images of civil conflict. See Marrs, *Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, 93–99.
42. Conflations of topographic contiguity with national unity formed common tropes in political rhetoric as well as journalistic and artistic representations of the war. See Sweet, *Traces of War*, 9–10, 71–72. The Southern regional identification is somewhat complicated by Tennessee's status as one of the northernmost slave states with strong Union contingents; Fort Donelson itself was located some sixty miles from the Illinois border, which only underscores Melville's tendency, through the voice of Northern correspondents, to describe the turf as unfamiliar Southern ground.
43. Michael Warner, drawing partly on Robert Penn Warren, argues that Melville's image of violent death in the poem "Shiloh" accomplishes a similar victory over ideologies of all sorts: "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 introspection.” Warner, “What Like a Bullet Can Undeceive?” *Public Culture* 15.1 (Winter 2003): 51.
44. Webster, “Dedication,” 235.
 45. Sweet, *Traces of War*, 183.
 46. Barrett notes that “the voices cheering the victory can sustain the illusion of a unified Union only temporarily.” Barrett, *To Fight Aloud*, 266.
 47. Robert Penn Warren responds enthusiastically to this “bold, original, and strong” metaphorical combination of multiple rivers, asking: “What other American poet of the period would have risked it?” Nevertheless, he neither considers the poem a success nor notes that the aesthetic power of the overlapping river imagery is also political, in that it artistically resolves the political question upon which Melville has centered his entire discussion—namely, whether the news can mediate a real connection between a local community of readers and events at the front. Warren, *Selected Poems*, 362.
 48. Barrett rightly describes the poem’s final lines as “a somewhat unexpected swerve to the high literary stance of romantic apostrophe”; while these lines certainly take that direction, they also contribute a prophetic lament that follows closely on the heels of public indifference toward sorrowing widows. Within a US ethical culture saturated by a biblical tradition arising from a sacred national history, the final three verses form a natural progression. Barrett, *To Fight Aloud*, 266.
 49. In this sense, Melville’s conclusion directly refutes Grant’s own report on the battle, which Melville had read in the *Rebellion Record*, and which predicted that “Fort Donelson will hereafter be marked in capitals on the map of our united country.” See Warren, *Selected Poems*, 361.
 50. Warner, “What Like a Bullet?,” 51.
 51. Though he prefigures this later group, the Copperhead can claim no deep connection; he mentions the death list only because he would “like to see” it and shakes “his yellow death’s head” for rhetorical effect (*BP*, 39–40).
 52. See Shurr, *Mystery of Iniquity*, 26.
 53. Marrs, *Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, 98–99.