ABSTRACT

SAMUEL W. PERRIN. “Thus the law”: Augury and Poetry in Melville’s Battle-Pieces. (Under the direction of Professor Anne Baker.)

Although the American reading public knows Herman Melville for his prose fiction, he spent the last three decades of his life writing almost exclusively poetry. His first published volume of poetry was Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War (1866), a collection of poems on the American Civil War capped with a prose “Supplement” in which he delivers some political recommendations for the treatment of Southerners during Reconstruction. The collection long lay neglected, but has more recently received renewed critical attention both for its formal qualities and its politics. In this paper, I argue that the poems are ideologically aligned with the Supplement, and that the political recommendations of both parts are informed by a deterministic worldview that colors Melville’s moral assessment of the war and its aftermath. Melville figures this determinism in a variety of ways throughout the volume, but he repeatedly uses astronomical, astrological, and prophetic language to explain the way that the historical figures like John Brown, Stonewall Jackson, and Nathaniel Lyon who feature in the poems were constrained by fate. This constraint prevents Melville from vilifying Confederate soldiers, even as he recognizes that their cause was wrong and fated to fail. Finally, I demonstrate that Melville regards the study of poetry as a form of augury that, like astronomy, can foretell the future. These insights into Melville’s poetry help explain the conservative and charitable recommendations of the Supplement.