

AMERICAN LITERATURE OF THE CIVIL WAR  
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**WALT WHITMAN During the Civil War**  
(b. May 31, 1819 –d. March 26, 1892)

**BOOKS by WHITMAN**

*The Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Inner Sanctum Edition, edited by Louis Untermeyer. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949.

*Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, edited by Justin Kaplan, New York: The Library of America, 1982.

*Leaves of Grass*, A Norton Critical Edition, edited with Preface and Introduction by Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett. New York: W. W. Norton, 1973. Updated with minor revisions by Michael Moon, 2002.

*Walt Whitman's Blue Book*, edited with Introduction by Arthur Golden. New York: New York Public Library 1968. *The Blue Book*, so called because it was encased in blue wrappers, was the personal copybook in which Whitman scribbled his revisions of the Third Edition of *Leaves* of 1860 while preparing the Fourth Edition of 1867.

*Memoranda during the War & Death of Abraham Lincoln* (reproduced in facsimile from 1876 first printing), edited by Roy P. Basler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962).

*Specimen Days & Collect* (republication of the original 1883 volume put out by David McKay in Philadelphia and Wilson & McCormick in Glasgow, Scotland). Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1995.

*The Wound-Dresser*, edited and published by Richard M. Bucke in 1897, republished with Introduction by Oscar Cargill (New York: The Bodley Press, 1949). Three short essays and letters from Whitman to his mother.

*Walt Whitman's Workshop: A Collection of Unpublished Manuscripts*, edited by Clifton Joseph Furness. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928.

*Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Two volumes, edited by Emory Holloway. New York: Peter Smith, 1932.

*Walt Whitman and the Civil War: A Collection of Original Articles and Manuscripts*, edited by Charles I. Glicksberg. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 1933.

*I Sit and Look Out: Editorials from the Brooklyn Daily Times by Walt Whitman*, Selected and Edited by Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwarz, New York: Columbia University Press, 1933.

*Walt Whitman's Civil War*, a collection of Whitman's writings "Compiled & Edited from Published & Unpublished Sources." Edited by Walter Lowenfels. New York: Knopf, 1961.

*The Correspondence of Walt Whitman*, Six volumes, edited by Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961-1977).

### **Biography**

Walter (later changed to Walt) Whitman, Jr. was born in the village of West Hills on Long Island, New York, a place where his paternal ancestors had owned some five hundred acres and a dozen slaves. (Not until 1827 did the state of New York abolish slavery.) The second of eight children born to Walter Whitman, Sr. and Louisa Van Velsor Whitman—six boys (three of whom were named after Presidents Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson) and two daughters—Walt was brought up in a family tradition of strong democratic patriotism in politics and a Quaker heritage in religion. Of special importance to Whitman's poetic creativity was the Quaker concept of the Inner Light—the potential for divine insight vouchsafed to every human soul—propagated by the famous preacher Elias Hicks, to whom Whitman wrote an impassioned tribute some sixty years after hearing him preach. It seems likely that Quaker pacifism may have determined Whitman's non-violent manner of service to the nation during the war years.

After the family moved to Brooklyn in 1823, Whitman completed just five years of formal education in the public schools; from age twelve he earned his livelihood at jobs such as office boy, schoolteacher, and printer's apprentice. During his twenties and thirties, he edited and wrote for several newspapers in and near New York City and, for several months in 1848, for the *Daily Crescent* in New Orleans. The latter job, which entailed an arduous trip South and a return journey up the Mississippi, across the Great Lakes, and down the Hudson River, gave Whitman a panoramic view of American life at mid-century which may have helped point his sentiments of patriotism toward writing what he later called "the epic of Democracy." Along with his travels, decades of voracious reading gave Whitman a vast intellectual growth to complement his clear and selective reporter's eye. (In this regard, Ralph Waldo Emerson called *Leaves of Grass* a "singular blend" of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and *The New York Herald*.)

Although he published a temperance novel, *Franklin Evans*, in 1842 and scattered some stories and poems among the newspapers he worked for, nothing in Whitman's earlier career could explain the appearance, in July 1855, of *Leaves of Grass*, consisting of twelve untitled poems (on 95 pages) and a Preface that in its own right comprises a crucial document in American literary history. "I greet you at the beginning of a great career," Emerson wrote to the poet two weeks after the book came out; "I find [*Leaves of Grass*] the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that American has yet contributed." On the opposite end of the critical spectrum, the sexual candor of poems such as "Song of Myself" and "I Sing the Body Electric" (titles added in later editions) caused *The New York Times* to declare that Whitman "roots like a pig among a rotten garbage of licentious thoughts," while *The New York Criterion* called the book a "gathering of muck" and *The London Critic* said its "indecentencies stink in the nostrils."

Comparing later versions of *Leaves of Grass* to the growth-rings in a tree, Whitman produced eight editions in all, published in 1855, 1856, 1860, 1867, 1871, 1876, 1881, and 1891. In the 1881 edition he gave his poems their "final" arrangement, though he added poems in the subsequent decade to make up his "deathbed" edition of 1891, which he said "supercedes [sic] them all by far." In 1856, the second edition presented thirty-two poems on 384 pages, with titles now attached to the poems. In 1860, the first edition not published by Whitman himself came out under the imprint of Thayer and Eldridge, a respected Boston firm, with 456 pages containing 124 new poems. Among these new poems were two segments filled with homosexual and heterosexual erotica, later titled "Songs of Calamus" and "Children of Adam" respectively. Here, against the earnest advice of Emerson, Whitman portrayed sex without guilt—part of his lifelong effort to reverse the Puritan doctrine of Man's Fall, in so far as it implies guilt about sex (causing Adam and Eve to put on fig leaves immediately after the Fall).

By the time of Lincoln's election in November, 1861, Whitman had become a well established—and infamous—poet whose work up to then would have placed him permanently in the foremost rank of American writers. Yet when he looked back over his career in his seventieth year in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," Whitman made a strong claim for the impact of the Civil War on his poetic oeuvre: "Without those three or four years and the experiences they gave, 'Leaves of Grass' would not now be existing." Whitman scholars in recent years have agreed with him: "The Civil War saved Walt Whitman" says Roy Morris, Jr. in the opening sentence of *Walt Whitman in the Civil War*. Likewise, the opening chapter of Jerome Loving's magisterial biography, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* begins not with the poet's early years but with Whitman's life during the Civil War.

The chief agency that transformed Whitman's poetry during the Civil War years grew out of the intensity of both the poet's and the nation's experience. It was one thing to

capture in visionary transports the democratic promise of the nation in 1855, when Whitman's Preface to the first *Leaves* had declared that "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." It was something else entirely to witness the cost of the American experiment in the broken lives of countless youths whom Whitman tended for many hours every day as a volunteer hospital worker in Washington—a cost that culminated in the martyrdom of a beloved President.

Perhaps the most profound effect of the war on Whitman was this psychic journey out of himself and into the real lives of other people. Prior to the war, he had exhibited a magnificent imagination regarding other lives than his, but the heart of his work expressed an exploration of himself: recording his expanding vision of reality in "Song of Myself," probing his unconscious mind in "The Sleepers," expressing his grief over lost love in "Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking" ("We two together no more"), confronting his slough of despair in "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," and audaciously flaunting his erotic feelings in "Children of Adam" and "Songs of Calamus." During the war, by contrast, his tender personal ministry to thousands of young soldiers, all terribly sick or maimed and many dying, fastened his eyes intensively on the lives and deaths of others as a vitally palpable reality, not an imaginary construct.

Whitman's personal participation in the war effort began in earnest when his brother George Washington Whitman, who had enlisted in April 1861, was listed in New York newspapers as one of the wounded in the battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862. Whitman left at once for the battlefield in search of his brother. "I went down to the war fields in Virginia (end of 1862)," Whitman recalled in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," and "lived thenceforward in camp—saw great battles and the days and nights afterward—partook of all the fluctuations, gloom, despair. . . filling those agonistic and lurid following years, 1863--'64--'65—the real parturition years (more than 1776—'83) of this henceforth homogeneous Union."

For the next three years, he worked in Washington in the Department of the Interior in the mornings and tended war casualties in the military hospitals throughout the afternoon and often deep into the night. Though he was not a trained nurse, he provided psychological and spiritual comfort to the wounded men he visited, along with small but precious gifts. John Burroughs, Whitman's close friend and biographer, cites a news correspondent's eyewitness account of the poet's efficacy in the wards of the hospital:

**"When he appeared, in passing along, there was a smile of affection and welcome on every face, however wan, and his presence seemed to light up the place as it might be lighted by the presence of the God of Love. From cot to cot they called him. . . ; they embraced him; they touched his hand; they gazed at him. To one he gave a few words of cheer; for another he wrote a letter home; to**

others he gave a few comfits, a cigar, a pipe and tobacco, a sheet of paper or postage-stamp. . . . From another he would receive a dying message for mother, wife, or sweetheart; for another he would promise to go an errand; to another, some special friend very low, he would give a manly farewell kiss. . . and, as he took his way toward the door, you could hear the voices of many a stricken hero calling, 'Walt, Walt, Walt! come again! come again!'"

From his experiences during the war, Whitman derived one major volume of poems, *Drum-Taps* (1865) along with some of the finest individual poems of his career, most notably his threnody on the death of Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." The war also produced Whitman's two greatest prose works, *Democratic Vistas* (1870), which combined two essays published in 1867 ("Democracy") and 1868 ("Personalism"), and *Memoranda during the War* (1875), a set of diary-like sketches that became the central feature of *Specimen Days & Collect* (1883), a similar work covering his whole lifetime. The following account will take up the prose and the poetry of the decade in separate sections.

## **The Prose of the 1860s**

### ***Memoranda during the War* and *Specimen Days***

"The most wayward, spontaneous, fragmentary book ever printed," Whitman called *Specimen Days*, his assemblage of journal entries first published in 1882-1883. Within this 200-page collection is a 60-page segment that he had previously published under the title *Memoranda during the War*). In becoming subsumed within *Specimen Days*, the *Memoranda* remained largely unchanged except for undergoing a substantially improved mode of organization. At the outset, Whitman's description of the writing process is worth noting:

**"The war of attempted secession has, of course, been the distinguishing event of my time. I commenced at the close of 1862, and continued steadily through '63, '64, and '65, to visit the sick and wounded of the army, both on the field and in the hospitals in and around Washington city. From the first I kept little note-books for impromptu jottings in pencil. . . . Most of the pages from 26 to 81 are verbatim copies of those lurid and blood-smutched little note-books."**

One reason the journal begins in December, 1862, a year and a half after the war started, is that Whitman had lapsed into a long silence when his beloved Union, so joyously celebrated in his earlier work, faced the dire prospect of dissolution. Looking back on that period in *Specimen Days*, he recalled that the first battle of the war—known

as Bull Run to Northerners, First Manassas to the South—was a traumatic moment equaled only by the murder of Lincoln. The total rout of the Northern army was bad enough, but worse yet was the subsequent defeatist attitude in the North, as Whitman recalled it: “If the secesh officers and soldiers had immediately follow’d, and by a bold Napoleonic movement had enter’d Washington the first day, (or even the second), they could have had things their own way, and a powerful faction north to back them.” That hour, he goes on to say, “was one of the three or four . . . during the fluctuations of four years, when human eyes appear’d at least just as likely to see the last breath of the Union as to see it continue.”

“The Stupor Passes,” Whitman titles his next entry, speaking of the North’s slow recovery from this disaster; his own stupor, if this period of sparse creativity merits that term, passed when in December 1862 his younger brother George (Washington) Whitman was listed in the New York newspapers as among the wounded in the battle of Fredericksburg. Whitman immediately headed to the battlefield in search of his sibling, and his arrival there is the point at which his *Memoranda* picks up the thread of wartime narration. Dated December 21, 1862, his first view of the front gives him a sense of horror—“at the foot of a tree. . . I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, & c., a full load for a one-horse cart”—but the same paragraph also indicates the remarkable gift of service that might rightly be called his ministry: “Some of the men were dying. I had nothing to give at that visit, but wrote a few letters to folks home, mothers, &c. Also talked to three or four, who seem’d most susceptible to it, and needing it.”

At this time, Whitman was no stranger to volunteer hospital work. For many years he had devoted substantial efforts to bringing gifts and good cheer to hundreds of patients in the city hospitals of New York, many of whom were stagecoach drivers of his acquaintance (a highly accident-prone profession). But now Whitman threw himself into the work with a passion. Two weeks after finding his brother at Fredericksburg (who was not seriously wounded), Whitman obtained a job in the army paymaster’s office in Washington, and from early January 1863 until after the war ended, Whitman ran himself to exhaustion with daily visits to hospitals in and around Washington, spending many hours each day (and sometimes all night) bringing candy, fruit, tobacco, stationary and stamped envelopes, newspapers, small amounts of money, and his own vast sympathy and patience to maimed and deathly ill young men. Along with “every kind of wound, in every part of the body,” Whitman listed the “prevailing maladies” as “typhoid fever, . . . diarrhea [sic], catarrhal infections and bronchitis, rheumatism and pneumonia. . . . There are twice as many sick as wounded.”

Spending so many hours each day for several years immersed in the germs and filth of Civil War hospitals (Dr. Lister’s discoveries were several years in the future) eventually ruined Whitman’s own health, leading to a six-month return to Brooklyn in 1864 for

recuperation and probably contributing to the devastating stroke that paralyzed his left side in February, 1873. By the end of the war, his condition was weakened enough that he was never fully healthy again.

Originally supported by a volunteer organization called the Christian Commission, he soon found independent sources of money, including some wealthy ladies in the capital city, which enabled him to serve “from twenty to thirty persons” per visit up to several hundred. Frequently, he noted, “it was in the simple matter of personal presence, and emanating ordinary cheer and magnetism, that I succeeded and help’d more than by medical nursing, or delicacies, or gifts of money, or anything else.” Sometimes, despite his unorthodox religious views, he found himself acting as a Christian minister, “[reading] passages from the Bible, expounding them, prayer at the bedside, explanations of doctrine, &c. (I think I see my friends smiling at this confession, but I was never more earnest in my life.)” And not infrequently, his ministrations included intimacies normally restricted to the family circle:

**“I staid to-night a long time by the bedside of a new patient, a young Baltimorean, aged about 19 years,. . . very feeble, right leg amputated. . . Visiting him daily for about two weeks after that, while he lived, (death had mark’d him, and he was quite alone,) I loved him much, always kiss’d him, and he did me.”**

Among the major highlights of the *Memoranda* are two personal sightings of Lincoln, the first in the middle of the war and the second at its end. Whitman begins his August 12, 1863 entry with the remark that “I see the President almost every day, as I happen to live where he passes to and from his lodgings.” The burdens of office, he says, have left their mark in Lincoln’s “dark brown face, with the deep-cut lines, the eyes, always to me with a deep latent sadness in the expression.” Two years later, at the Inauguration parade of March 4, 1865, the President “look’d very much worn and tired; the lines, indeed, . . . cut deeper than ever upon his dark brown face; yet all the old goodness, tenderness, sadness, and canny shrewdness, underneath the furrows.” That evening, Whitman observed the reception line in the White House, where “I saw Mr. Lincoln, drest all in black, . . . shaking hands, looking very disconsolate, as if he would give anything to be somewhere else.”

These glimpses of the President presaged his annual lectures on “The Death of Abraham Lincoln,” given every mid-April (health permitting) in cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia over the last dozen years of Whitman’s life. (Whitman’s intimate friend Peter Doyle, having witnessed the murder in Ford’s Theater, gave him some details that he used in the lecture.) To the lecture he added another fragment from his Civil War memories, namely his first look at Lincoln (from atop an omnibus) in February 1861 as the new President traveled from Illinois to New York before going on

to Washington for his inauguration. The huge crowd on Broadway, which Whitman reckoned to be “thirty to forty thousand men,” maintained “a sully and unbroken silence” as Lincoln stepped out of his carriage, for “he possess’d no personal popularity at all in New York, and very little political.” In the face of that sullen hostility, Lincoln kept “his perfect composure and coolness,” in Whitman’s recollection, looming above the crowd

**“with his unusual and uncouth height, . . . stovepipe hat push’d back on the head, dark-brown complexion, seam’d and wrinkled yet canny-looking face, black, bushy head of hair, disproportionately long neck, and hands held behind him as he stood observing the crowd.”**

To capture the man’s essence, Whitman judged that “four sorts of genius” would be requisite: “the eyes and brain and finger-touch of Plutarch and Eschylus and Michel Angelo, assisted by Rabelais.”

Other highlights in the *Memoranda* include Whitman’s account of the Grand Review, during which some 200,000 Union troops marched through Washington for two days to mark the end of the war, and his tribute to his brother’s military service—a tour of duty that seems to recapitulate the entire war:

**“my brother George W. Whitman—in active service all through, four years, re-enlisting twice—was promoted [to] . . . lieutenant, captain, major, and lieutenant Colonel—was in the actions at Roanoke, Newbern, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bull Run, Chantilly, South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburgh, Vicksburgh, the bloody conflicts of the Wilderness, and at Spottsylvania, Cold Harbor, and afterwards around Petersburg; at one of these latter was taken prisoner, and pass’d four or five months in secesh military prisons, narrowly escaping with life, from a severe fever, from starvation and half-nakedness in the winter”**

(Whitman’s spellings throughout).

Finally, the segment titled “Three Years Summ’d Up” presents a startling personal reckoning: “During those three years in hospital, camp or field, I . . . went, as I estimate, counting all, among from eighty thousand to one hundred thousand of the wounded and sick, as sustainer of spirit and body in some degree, in time of need.” Despite many “lamentable sights,” he calls his Civil War service “the greatest privilege and satisfaction . . . and, of course, the most profound lesson of my life.” The source of “undream’d-of depths of emotion,” it verified the patriotic theme so typical of his earlier writings: “It has given me my most fervent views of the true *ensemble* and extent of the States” (emphasis Whitman’s).

In the original *Memoranda* Whitman included a Note that is worth citing in some detail for its fiery invective and indignation. (In *Specimen Days* it appears in the appended “Collect” as a separate essay entitled “Origins of Attempted Secession.”) In it Whitman says “The Northern States were really just as responsible for that War . . . as the South,” because “For twenty-five years previous to the outbreak, the controlling ‘Democratic’ nominating conventions. . . [were] composed of more and more putrid and dangerous materials.” Of one such convention he judged that

**“The members who composed it were, seven-eighths of them, office-holders, office-seekers, pimps, malignants, conspirators, murderers, . . . infidels, disunionists, terrorists, mail-riflers, slave-catchers, pushers of slavery, . . . bribers, compromisers, lobbyists, sponges, ruin’d sports, expell’d gamblers, . . . deaf men, pimpled men, scarr’d inside with vile disease, . . . crawling, serpentine men, the lousy combings and born freedom-sellers of the earth.”**

Little wonder that such a crew put up, in the 1850s, the vilest candidates of Whitman’s lifetime: “History is to record those three Presidentiads, and especially the administrations of Fillmore and Buchanan, as so far our topmost warning and shame. Never were publicly display’d more deform’d, sniveling, unreliable, false-hearted men!” The essence of the North’s failure, in Whitman’s judgment, lay in its attitude toward slavery: “The perfect equality of slavery with freedom was flauntingly preach’d in the North—nay, the superiority of slavery. The slave trade was proposed to be renew’d. . . . I say Secession, below the surface, originated and was brought to maturity in the Free States.” During “the score of years preceding 1860,” Whitman goes on to say,

**“the whole country had about an equal hand in it [slavery]. . . . The former Presidents and Congresses had been guilty—the Governors and Legislatures of every Northern State had been guilty, and the Mayors of New York and other northern cities had all been guilty—their hands were all stain’d.”**

Yet there is, for Whitman, national redemption in the overview of history, for

**“now I have myself, in my thought, deliberately come to unite the whole conflict, both sides, the South and the North, really into One, and to view it as a struggle going on within One Identity. . . . What is any Nation, after all—and what is a human being—but a struggle between conflicting, paradoxical, opposing elements?”**

In effect, Whitman herewith nationalizes his famous dictum in “Song of Myself” (Section 51): “Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself,/(I am large, I contain multitudes.)”

### *Whitman on Race*

Because it is so crucial an issue, Whitman's own "paradoxical, opposing elements" about America's black population merit a moment of special attention. In the 1855 *Leaves* he implicitly condemned slavery in several passages, for example when impersonating "the hounded slave" in Section 33 of "Song of Myself" ("I wince at the bite of the dogs,/Hell and despair are upon me") and when portraying the Underground Railroad in Section 9: "The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside/. . . I had him sit next me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in the corner." But before, during, and after the war, Whitman's opposition to slavery fell far short of abolitionist fervor. In his "Anti-Slavery Notes" (cited in *Walt Whitman's Workshop*, edited by Clifton Joseph Furness), Whitman denounced the Fugitive Slave Law mainly in the name of states' rights:

**"I say that the Congress of these states has no right . . .to the unparalleled audacity of intruding in the midst of our local communities anywhere, north or south, ruffians who at their pleasure and on the most flimsy grounds, and in the most summary matter deprive of liberty and carry off one of my countrymen, and American born, an innocent and un-criminal man."**

As the national time of reckoning grew nearer, in the *Brooklyn Daily Times* of July 17, 1857 he favorably compared the state of American slaves to that of blacks in Africa, calling the latter population "degraded, cruel, almost bestial, . . . no education, no refinement, no elevation" in contrast to American slaves being "residents of a land of light" in North America—an argument commonly made by Southern slave-owners. In another editorial, dated May 14, 1857, he likewise remarked that though slavery would eventually become extinct, "in the meantime, it should be remembered that the institution of slavery is not at all without its redeeming points." Repeatedly, moreover, Whitman opposed giving black people the franchise, despite his seeming acknowledgment of the equality of the races. When he visited "the First U.S. Regiment Color'd Troops, at their encampment" near Washington in 1863, for example, he was much impressed with the men—"no one can see them . . . without feeling well-pleas'd with them"--and he admired their well-proven courage under fire.

After the war, however, Whitman praised President Andrew Johnson for rebuffing the Radical Republicans in Congress on the issue of whether blacks should vote:

**"He [President Johnson] will not countenance at all the demands of the extreme Philo-African element of the North, to make the right of negro voting at elections a condition and *sine qua non* of the reconstruction of the United States south, and of their resumption of co-equality in the Union."**

Like Alexis de Tocqueville—and at times Lincoln—Whitman worried that the incompatibility of the races would gravely endanger the future of the Republic:

**“Did the vast mass of the blacks, in Slavery in the United States, present a terrible and deeply complicated problem through the just-ending century? But how if the mass of blacks in freedom in the U.S. all through the ensuing century, should present a yet more terrible and more deeply complicated problem?”**

A century and a third after Whitman framed this question, the racial divide, though much alleviated, remains the nation’s deepest challenge. Presumably Whitman’s final answer to it is folded into the long view that concludes the original *Memoranda*, where Whitman foresees “the real History of the United States”—which began, he says, with the Union victory—as pending “the remove of hundreds, perhaps a thousand, years hence.”

### *Democratic Vistas*

In the late 1860s, Whitman collected his thoughts concerning the future of the nation for his arguably most ambitious essay, “Democratic Vistas” (published in 1871). Initially America’s great poet of democracy appears devoid of hope concerning his beloved country. After noting “the appalling dangers of universal suffrage in the United States”—an odd thing for a fervent democrat to say—Whitman unleashes a diatribe that seems to question whether the recent bloodshed had accomplished anything worthwhile. “Society, in these States, is canker’d, crude, superstitious, and rotten,” he declares, marking targets that seem strangely familiar to American citizens of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century:

**“the depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than had been supposed, but infinitely greater. The official services of America, national, state, and municipal, . . . are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, mal-administration; and the judiciary is tainted. . . . In business. . . the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain.”**

Contemporary culture likewise evokes only the poet’s bitter scorn: “I say that our New World democracy. . . is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and aesthetic results.” And most ominously, no sign of a better future can be detected in the postwar generation of young people:

**“Confess that everywhere, in shop, street, church, theatre, barroom, official chair, are pervading flippancy and vulgarity. . . —everywhere the youth puny, impudent, foppish, prematurely ripe—everywhere an abnormal libidinousness, unhealthy forms, male, female, painted, padded, dyed, . . . [with] shallow notions of beauty,**

**with a range of manners, or rather lack of manners, (considering the advantages enjoy'd), probably the meanest to be seen in the world."**

The prospects look grim, yet, by the middle of "Democratic Vistas," Whitman proceeds to change his mood completely, partly by glimpsing national glory in the distant future and partly by remembering national glory in the recent past. "The movements of the late secession war," he says, "show that popular democracy, whatever its faults and dangers, practically justifies itself beyond the proudest claims and wildest hopes of its enthusiasts." Whitman's personal memories play a decisive role in this upsurge of optimism. Speaking of the soldiers he has known in their thousands, Whitman says

**"We have seen. . . the incredible slaughter toward or through which the armies, (as at first Fredericksburg, and after at the Wilderness,) still unhesitatingly obey'd orders to advance. We have seen them in trench, or crouching behind breastwork, or tramping in deep mud, or amid pouring rain or thick-falling snow, or under forced marches in hottest summer (as on the road to get to Gettysburg—vast suffocating swarms, divisions, corps, with every single man so grimed and black with sweat and dust, his own mother would not have known him"**

Directly invoking his personal experience, Whitman describes having "seen this race proved. . . by drearier, yet more fearful tests—the wound, the amputation, the shatter'd face or limb, the slow hot fever, long impatient anchorage in bed, and all the forms of maiming, operation and disease" (820), and "it is from what I learn'd personally mixing in such scenes" that Whitman sees, "towering above all talk and argument, the plentifully-supplied, last-needed proof of democracy."

Whitman's great turnaround in "Democratic Vistas" does not stop with this endorsement of democracy. In contrast to his earlier screed against American business ethics, he now endorses the national creed of rampant materialism: "I perceive clearly that the extreme business energy, and this almost maniacal appetite for wealth prevalent in the United States, are parts of amelioration and progress. . . . Upon them, as upon substrata, I raise the edifice design'd in these Vistas." Rather surprisingly, he goes so far as to observe, approvingly, that "democracy looks with suspicious, ill-satisfied eye upon the very poor, the ignorant, and on those out of business," this despite having said, just a page earlier, that "Of all dangers to a nation, . . . there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn—they not privileged as others, but degraded, humiliated, made of no account." Coincidentally, the date that Whitman cites for writing this passage—"November, 1868"—marked the election of Ulysses S. Grant and with it the initiation of the most corrupt era in American political history, when businessmen and politicians colluded to bring on the Gilded Age.

The remainder of “Democratic Vistas” contemplates the certain, though distant, convergence of Whitman’s three great desiderata for the nation—democracy, religion, and art. “Far, far, indeed, stretch, in distance, our Vistas!” Whitman concedes concerning this glorious apotheosis, confessing “Democracy to be at present but in its embryo condition.” Nonetheless, in a quasi-Hegelian dialectic he foresees the antithesis between the “first principle” of democratic mass identity and the “second principle” of “individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself,” as producing a crowning synthesis—“a new earth and a new man.” This new democratic man—and new woman also, for Whitman foresees “the women of America. . . raised to become the robust equals. . . and even practical and political deciders with the men”—would eventually attain the “ripeness of Religion” that can only exist “when the soul emerges, and all statements, churches, sermons, melt away like vapors.” This level of achievement, in turn, will allow the creation, at last, of a truly worthy national literature, replacing the ephemeral trash of Whitman’s own time with “art in its highest, (which is only the other name for serving God, and serving humanity).” Thus Whitman’s final Democratic Vista is “a sublime and serious Religious Democracy sternly taking command,” raising up “the banner of the divine pride of man in himself, (the radical foundation of the new religion).”

### *The Wound Dresser*

Among Whitman’s other prose writings the most abundant were the letters he sent to a variety of correspondents, some of them to his family and friends, some to former colleagues in journalism, and a great many to the families of the young men whom he tended in the hospitals. In 1897 Whitman’s disciple Richard M. Bucke published *The Wound Dresser*, a collection of Whitman’s prose pieces that was reissued in 1949 (New York: The Bodley Press). In his Introduction to the 1949 reprint Oscar Cargill avers that this collection “should be held in as sacred regard as is *The Little Flowers* of Saint Francis of Assisi,” particularly in view of Whitman’s reckless disregard for his own health as he tended victims of smallpox, tuberculosis, typhoid, pneumonia, and other then-incurable contagious diseases.

*The Wound Dresser* consists of letters written in 1862-1864, mostly to his mother, and three essays that Whitman wrote for newspaper publication: “The Great Army of the Wounded” (the *New York Times*, February 26, 1863), “Life Among Fifty Thousand Soldiers” (the *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 19, 1863), and “Hospital Visits” (the *New York Times*, December 11, 1864). In the first of these essays, he directs uncouth bitterness at the “tyrants and shysters” among the doctors who are “careless, rude, capricious, needlessly strict. One I found who prohibited the men from all enlivening amusements; I found him sending men to the guard-house for the most trifling offence.”

In the second (“Fifty Thousand Soldiers”), he describes a typical visit to a ward that is worth citing in some detail by way of illustrating his routine:

**“Bed 53 wants some liquorice; Bed 6—erysipelas—bring some raspberry vinegar to make a cooling drink, with water; Bed 18 wants a good book—a romance; Bed 25—a manly, friendly fellow. . . refuses money and eatables, so I will bring him a pipe and tobacco, for I see he much enjoys a smoke; Bed 45—sore throat and cough—wants horehound candy; Bed 11, when I come to him again, don’t forget to write a letter for him. . . . One poor German, dying—in the last stage of consumption—wished me to find him, in Washington, a German Lutheran clergyman, and send him to him; I did so.”**

In the third essay, “Hospital Visits,” Whitman discloses his own breakdown in the summer of 1864:

**“The weather was very hot. . . . Very many of the wounds had worms in them. An unusual proportion mortified. It was among these that, for the first time in my life, I began to be prostrated with real sickness, and was, before the close of the summer, imperatively ordered North by the physician to recuperate.”**

The main interest of *The Wound Dresser* is its intimate snapshot of the poet’s life during the worst years of the war. We learn in the first letter (to his mother, on December 29, 1862) that his trip to find brother George at Fredericksburg was nearly terminated by a pickpocket who left him “without a dime” in Philadelphia. By February 13, 1863, he was telling her about the many strings he was pulling to get a job in Washington—“I have seen Charles Sumner three times. . . I have not yet presented my letters to either Seward or Chase.” Then, after he did get a job in the Department of the Interior, he slighted it in favor of his volunteer ministry: “I generally go to the hospitals from 12 to 4—and then again from 6 to 9.”

The intertwining of historic events with Whitman’s deep family feeling gives *the Wound Dresser* a special poignancy. In July 1863, for example, the rebellion against the draft in New York City touched off the worst riots in city history; many black people in particular, including children, were hanged from lamp posts, and the Union army had to come directly from Gettysburg to suppress the violence. “So the mob has risen at last in New York,” Whitman wrote his mother on July 15. The family problem was how to keep younger brother Jeff out of the draft in the aftermath of the riot, and Whitman offered to give a lecture tour to raise the \$300 that the government required for an exemption from military service (a practice that mainly caused the riot in the first place). Meanwhile, there was incessant anxiety about brother George, off fighting in seemingly every major battle of the war, along with worry about sickly brother Andrew, who did in fact pine away and die within the two-year time frame of these letters.

More than in any other of his writings, in *The Wound Dresser* Whitman opens himself fully to emotional self-exposure. To his mother he can share without stint his belief that “no men ever loved each other as I and some of these poor wounded sick and dying men love each other.” He can openly state his “pride in telling you that I have the consciousness of saving quite a number of lives by saving them from giving up. . . the men say it is so, and the doctors say it is so.” He can claim unique status among the hospital personnel: “I go among the worst fevers and wounds with impunity. I go among the smallpox, etc.—just the same. . . . No one else goes.” And to her he can display his emotional vulnerability: “Mother, it is the most pitiful sight, I think, when first the men are brought in. I have to bustle round, to keep from crying.”

In the later stages of *The Wound Dresser* the letters gain both dramatic power and narrative coherence as the war moves toward its grand climax in central Virginia. In 1864, with the accession of General Grant to supreme authority, Whitman observes a massive assemblage of military force centered in Washington, and his hopes for victory and fears for brother George—whom he spots marching by in a parade—rise accordingly. Marching alongside George to make conversation, Whitman sees a revealing vignette involving President Lincoln:

**“There were, I should think, five very full regiments of new black troops, under General Ferrero. . . . It looked funny seeing the President standing with his hat off to them just the same as the rest when they marched by.”**

It is about this time, too—April, 1864—that Whitman confides to his mother his current literary aspiration: “I want to come on in a month and try to print my ‘Drum-Taps.’ I think it may be a success pecuniarily, too.”

In the end *The Wound Dresser* concludes with Whitman’s own physical and emotional breakdown. The stress of seeing so many young men suffer and die horribly begins to catch up with him in the spring of 1864 as

**“my feelings are kept in a painful condition a great part of the time. Things get worse and worse, as to the amount and sufferings of the sick, and [medical personnel] are getting more and more callous and indifferent. . . . Mother, . . even the dying soldier’s money is stolen from his body by some scoundrel attendant, or from [the] sick one, even from under his head.”**

Finally, in the last few letters, he can no longer conceal the truth that “it is now beginning to tell a little upon me, so many bad wounds, many putrefied, and all kinds of dreadful ones, I have been rather too much with.” And again, “It is awful to see so much, and not be able to relieve it.” But things just keep getting worse:

**“We receive them here with their wounds full of worms—some all swelled and inflamed. Many of the amputations have to be done over again. One new feature is that many of the poor afflicted young men are crazy.”**

In the end the doctors’ intervention is decisive. “The doctor tells me I have continued too long in the hospitals” he writes his mother on June 10, 1864, and he has to admit “I am not feeling very well these days.” But even after the doctors order him out of the hospitals, “I send there by a friend every day; I send things and aid to some cases I know, . . . but I do not go there myself at present. It is possible that the hospital poison has affected my system.” In the final letter of *The Wound Dresser*, he admits to having “bad nights and bad days too” wherein “Some of the spells are pretty bad.” So “I think I shall come home for a short time, and pretty soon.”

The editor, R. M. Bucke, adds a terminal page saying that though Whitman had been vigorously healthy up until he began doing the hospital work, his health steadily deteriorated from 1864 to early 1873—the time of his paralytic stroke—and contributed to his death in 1892. Yet somehow, throughout the daily ordeal of sickness, death, and the madness of war, he managed to keep the flame of his creativity flickering. Somehow the poetry of the war and its aftermath got written. In Walter Lowenfels’ *Walt Whitman’s Civil War*, a collection of Whitman’s writings “Compiled & Edited from Published & Unpublished Sources,” Whitman gives his own cost accounting of the whole adventure:

**"I had to pay much for what I got. . . . I had to give up health for it, my body, the vitality of my physical self. . . . And what did I get for it? I never weighted what I gave for what I got, but I am satisfied with what I got.**

**"What did I get? Well, I got the boys, for one thing—the boys, thousands of them. . . . I gave myself for them—myself. I got the boys; then I got *Leaves of Grass*—but for this I never would have had *Leaves of Grass*—the consummated book. . . . I got that—the boys, the *Leaves*—I got them. . . ."**

## ***The Poetry of the 1860s***

### ***Drum-Taps***

According to his own testimony, the monstrous ordeal of loss and suffering that Whitman witnessed during the war had a tremendous effect on his subsequent career as a poet. In 1865 he published “Year of Meteors (1859-60),” in which the poet looked back at the prologue to the war, epitomized in the hanging of John Brown on December 2,

1859: “an old man, tall, with white hair, mounted the scaffold in Virginia,/(I was at hand, silent I stood with teeth shut close, I watch’d.” As the war came on in earnest, Whitman sought to help the Union effort with a group of poems he tentatively called “The Banner at Day-Break,” which eventually were absorbed into “Drum-Taps” in 1865—the major new entry in the fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1867.

The early poems in “Drum-Taps” indicate the unfounded bravado that pervaded Union expectations before the first battle of Bull Run brought its shocking awakening. “War! be it weeks, months, or years, an arm’d race is advancing to welcome it,” boasts the opening poem of “Drum-Taps” (“First O Songs for a Prelude”), whose speaker is eager to let it rip: “O for a manly life in the camp.” “Song of the Banner at Daybreak” carries forward the same tone—“I hear the jubilant shouts of millions of men, I hear Liberty!”—and “Rise O Days from Your Fathomless Deeps” further inflates the abstract rhetoric: “Thunder on! stride on, Democracy! strike with vengeful stroke!”

By the midpoint of “Drum-Taps,” however, Whitman’s tone and style change radically. Short, vivid images characterize this segment, portraying vignettes from the front with the immediacy and objectivity of a photograph. “Calvary Crossing a Ford” is one of the best known such poems—“They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in the sun—hark to the musical clank,/Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses loitering stop to drink.” Wholly devoid of bellicose rhetoric, this poem never even indicates whether the soldiers wear the blue or the gray.

In another much-anthologized poem, “Reconciliation,” the poet subjects “war and all its deeds of carnage” to a delicate vision of healing: “the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash again, and ever again, this soil’d world.” The furor of war now gives way to a new wisdom—“my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,” and I “Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.” In the midst of these poems Whitman sets his own portrait, drawn in modest tones in “Not Youth Pertains to Me”: “Beauty, knowledge, inure not to me—yet there are two or three things that inure to me.” In fact, there are just two things, it turns out, but those two are his double career as nurse and poet—“I have nourish’d the wounded and sooth’d many a dying soldier,/And at intervals waiting or in the midst of camp,/Composed these songs.”

As the current deepens in “Drum-Taps,” the presence of death permeates these poems. In the poignant “Come Up from the Fields, Father,” a letter of the sort that Whitman often wrote reaches a soldier’s parents with a hopeful message—“**taken to hospital,/At present low, will soon be better**”—but, as the speaker realizes, “Alas poor boy, he never will be better. . . ./The only son is dead.” A gruesome scene of carnage attends “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown,” which reflects Whitman’s grisly experience in the hospitals:

**“Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood,/ . . . some in the death spasm sweating,/An occasional scream or cry, the doctor’s shouted orders. . . .”**

And in the aftermath of the war, the trauma of it all will not let go. In “Old War-Dreams,” originally assigned to “Drum-Taps” but later placed in the “From Noon to Starry Night” segment of *Leaves of Grass*, the poet says “In midnight sleep of many a face of anguish,/Of the look at first of the mortally wounded, (of that indescribable look,)/ . . . I dream, I dream, I dream.”

Faces of the dead likewise haunt the speaker of “Ashes of Soldiers,” where “Phantoms of the countless lost,/Invisible to the rest henceforth become my companions,/Follow me ever. . . .” This poem and “Camps of Green” (a metaphor for cemeteries) were also originally part of “Drum-Taps” but later were gathered the “Songs of Parting” segment of *Leaves of Grass*. And finally, one other poem of the same vintage, “Pensive on Her Dead Gazing,” describes “the Mother of All”—Whitman’s term for the newly redeemed Union—calling “with mournful voice” for the earth to absorb “my young men’s bodies” and “Exhale me them centuries hence, breathe me their breath, let not an atom be lost.”

But grief is not always the companion of untimely death. In “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night,” the speaker stays all night by a soldier’s body, keeping “Vigil for boy of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding),” before burying him at sunrise. What makes the vigil “Strange” is the upbeat mood of the vigil-keeper: “But not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh. . . ./Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with you dearest comrade—not a tear, not a word.” A similarly sacred moment concludes “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim,” in which a view of two corpses, of an old man and a youth, precede a third, with “a face nor child nor old, very calm,” evincing a special pedigree: “Young man I think I know you—I think this face is the face of the Christ himself,/Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.”

For many readers, Whitman’s masterpiece in “Drum-Taps” is probably “The Wound-Dresser,” a grippingly poignant account of the poet’s experience during the war. The poet begins by admitting his early mistake--“Angry and arous’d, I’d thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless war”—but soon, he says, “my face droop’d and I resign’d myself,/To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead.” Characteristically, the telling detail carries the poem: “Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,/Straight and swift to my wounded I go,” with an attendant holding “a refuse pail,/Soon to be fill’d with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill’d again.” A diverse catalogue of patients appear in succession: “The crush’d head I dress,” “[I] Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive,” “From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,/I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the

matter and blood” for a youth who “dares not look on the bloody stump,/And has not yet look’d on it.” The conclusion recalls Whitman’s letters to his mother: “(Many a soldier’s loving arms about this neck have cross’d and rested,/Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)”

As seen by major literati of the time, “Drum-Taps” was dishearteningly unsuccessful. Although William Dean Howells was pleased that “the poet has cleansed the old channels of their filth, and pours through them a stream of blameless purity,” he declares the collection “unspeakably inartistic. On this account it is a failure.” Another figure of genius, the twenty-two year old Henry James, was even more dismissive. “It has been a melancholy task to read this book,” James begins, before going on to declare it “an offense against art. . . . It is monstrous because it pretends to persuade the soul while it slights the intellect; because it pretends to gratify the feelings while it outrages the taste.” In the end he compares it to child’s play, “the little nursery game of ‘open your mouth and shut your eyes.’” As an older man, however, James came around to a directly opposite appreciation, as recorded by his close friend Edith Wharton in her reminiscence entitled *A Backward Glance*:

**"Some one spoke of Whitman, and it was a joy to me to discover that James thought him, as I did, the greatest of American poets. *Leaves of Grass* was put into his hands, and all that evening we sat rapt while he wandered from “The Song of Myself” [sic] to “When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed” [sic] (when he read “Lovely and soothing Death” his voice filled the hushed room like an organ adagio), and thence let himself be lured on to “Out of the Cradle,” reading, or rather crooning it in a mood of subdued ecstasy."**

#### *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d*

“Oh, yes, a great genius; undoubtedly a very great genius!” was James’s concluding judgment in this episode. As his choice of reading indicates, a major reason for James’s transformed judgment was his response to “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” a poem written shortly after the murder of President Lincoln in April, 1865 and published in the fall of that year in a volume called “Drum-Taps and Sequel.” Other major artists responded in similar fashion to this poem, including the English poet Algernon Charles Swinburne who called it “the most sweet and sonorous nocturne ever chanted in the church of the world.” (Swinburne reversed Henry James’s posture, however, choosing in his later years to downgrade Whitman to “a seat beside such writers as Ebenezer Elliot.”)

What James and Swinburne held in common, as indicated in James’s reading of “Lovely and soothing Death,” was—as Swinburne put it—the sense that “[Whitman’s] views of death are invariably noble.” In short, Whitman in this poem succeeds, perhaps

better than any other poet in world literature, in attaining the purpose he had announced in the opening stanza of “Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking” (1859), to become the “uniter of here and hereafter.” “Lilacs” is in that sense a great religious poem, for one of the prime uses of any religion is to reconcile human kind to their mortality.

From the outset, Whitman’s verse had promulgated this theme. “The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,” said “Song of Myself” in 1855, “And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier” (section 6). “Song of Myself” thereafter moves towards Whitman’s acceptance of his own mortality, which arrives in full force in section 49. Here Whitman addresses his own corpse—“I think you are good manure”—as, after death, his fusion with all of nature resembles a sexual union: “I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish’d breasts of melons.” Death here is not an end but a transition, a perfectly benign turn in nature’s wheel of “perpetual transfers and promotions.” In the end the poet accepts with ease his own “transfer”: “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love/If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.” Four years later, “Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking” portrayed death even more benignly in its title metaphor of death as an “old crone rocking the cradle,” lulling us gently to sleep.

What had been an intuition of death’s benignity became personal observation during Whitman’s war service, as time and again he witnessed a blessed terminus of suffering. “I have seen so much horrors that befall men,” he wrote his mother in August 1863, “such suffering and mutilations, etc.” that “death itself has lost all its terrors—I have seen so many cases in which it was so welcome and such a relief.” Something similar lies behind the supplication in the poem “The Wound-Dresser”: “(Come sweet death! be persuaded O beautiful death!/In mercy come quickly.”

With “Lilacs” in 1865, Whitman registered the profound effect of the war on his three grand themes of Love, Democracy, and Religion. Regarding love, the erotic focus of “Songs of Calamus” and “Children of Adam” now gives way to agape love, which appears in “Lilacs” in the recurring motif of “him I love,” meaning not just President Lincoln but “all the slain soldiers of the war”—the “battle-corpses” and “white skeletons of young men” like those whose deaths Whitman had attended (section 15). His second theme, democracy, seems subsumed within his lines concerning Lincoln’s tomb in section 11. “O what shall I hang on the chamber walls/. . . To adorn the burial-house of him I love?” is the question, to which the answer is Whitman’s picture of the Union that was preserved at the cost of the President’s martyrdom, “the varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light.” And his third and most important theme, religion, inheres in the movement toward uniting here and hereafter.

The “here” and “hereafter” of the poem, along with the poet-uniter, are figured in its three dominant images--lilac, star, and bird. The fragrant loveliness of the lilac, fragile and transitory, represents the “here”; the star, inaccessibly distant and hidden in “black murk” like the realm of the dead, is the “hereafter”; and the bird warbling in the swamp—that borderland between dead and living matter—provides the voice of reconciliation between these opposing contraries of living and dead.

Once the poem gets underway, the three images intertwine much in the fashion of a musical fugue, with each motif presented in separate stanzas at the start, then interweaving in the body of the poem before fusing totally in the last two lines of the poem: “Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul” (LA 467). The ancient tradition of the pastoral elegy also influenced this poem in that it begins with grief and loss (“O helpless soul of me!”), lingers over the ritual of heaping flowers on the bier (“With loaded arms I come”—section 7), and then moves on to its consolation.

And finally, it anticipates modern poetry—most notably T. S. Eliot’s work--in its symbolist technique. In “The Waste Land,” lilacs figure into the most famous opening lines in modern poetry—“April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land”; a “fading star” represents the inaccessibility of the dead in “The Hollow Men”; and a hermit thrush gives voice to mystic propensities at the beginning of “Burnt Norton,” the first poem of “Four Quartets.” Moreover, both poets use the same gambit in ascribing the cruelty of April to the irony of new life springing up at the time of “The Burial of the Dead” (to cite Eliot’s title of Part I of “The Waste Land”). In “Lilacs” the cruelty of April is all the worse because the death of Lincoln was so untimely: “Passing the yellow-spear’d wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen,/ . . . Night and day journeys a coffin” (section 5).

At the heart of the poem is the thrush’s song in section 14, the lyric that Henry James crooned “in a mood of subdued ecstasy” in Edith Wharton’s reminiscence, which reconciles here and hereafter through the power of metaphor. Doubtless influenced by the scenes he had witnessed in Washington hospitals, he begins with a welcome to death—“*Come lovely and soothing death*”—and then goes to coin the metaphor of death as a lover—“*the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.*” The love in this instance turns out to be mother-love, like that of the “old crone rocking the cradle” in “Out of the Cradle”—“Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet. . . I glorify thee above all.”

As in “Out of the Cradle,” the sea—the original symbol of infinity (before outer space became known)—provides the context, “the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,” but the culminating image comes back to the image of mother. Death, in Whitman’s treatment, is as benign as the maternal embrace to a child at bedtime, “the body gratefully nestling close to thee.” Though the poem never mentions Lincoln by

name, “Lilacs” clearly addresses the fallen President at its close, offering its balm, the “sacred knowledge of death” to “the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands.”

A companion poem on the death of Lincoln, “O Captain! My Captain!,” was hugely popular in its time, partly because of its conventional metrics and rhyme scheme, but its three brief stanzas now constitute mainly a curiosity of literary history. Its central metaphor, of a captain who dies (apparently non-violently) just as his ship comes in to port, appears appropriate to Lincoln’s circumstance at the end of the war, but it seems a slight exercise compared to the majestic grandeur of “Lilacs.” Two other poems about the fallen leader seem even more ephemeral--“Hush’d Be the Camps To-day (May 4, 1865)” and “This Dust Was Once the Man.” The latter poem, only four lines long, does pose a significant riddle, as to whether Whitman’s phrase “the foulest crime known in any land or age” refers to slavery, secession, or the murder of Lincoln. We are told only—in unusually clumsy syntax--that against that crime “Was saved the Union of these States.”

#### ***Leaves of Grass:*** Fourth Edition

In 1867 Whitman brought out his Fourth Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which included “Drum-Taps and Sequel,” several new poems, and numerous revisions of poems in the earlier editions. An account of these changes is rendered in Arthur Golden’s Introduction to *Walt Whitman’s Blue Book* (so called because it was encased in blue wrappers, was the copybook in which Whitman made revisions to his earlier poems.) Probably the most revised poem of the lot is “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” originally published in 1856 under the title “Poems of Many in One,” but revised in 1867 to sound “with trumpet voice the proud victory of the Union in that secession war” (section 12).

In section 17, however, he renounces this purpose, speaking instead of “that war so bloody and grim, the war I will henceforth forget,” thereby signaling his turn away from the tragedy of the nation’s past and toward the promise of its future. Even “The Return of the Heroes” (dated 1867) follows this pattern. Although the returning soldiers initially recall the poet’s period of wartime trauma--“When late I sang sad was my voice/ . . . [as I] pass’d with slow step through the wounded and dying” (section 4)—the poem soon abandons that theme: “But now I sing not war.”

Supplanting the recent bloodshed (“melt away ye armies—disperse ye blue-clad soldiers”) is a vision of oncoming peace, unity, and prosperity: “the sunlit panorama,/Prairie, orchard, and yellow grain of the North,/Cotton and rice of the South and Louisianan cane . . .” (sections 6, 7). And in “Years of the Modern,” originally part of “Drum-Taps” in 1865, the triumphal note evokes patriotic abstractions like those of Whitman’s early war poetry: “I see Freedom, completely arm’d and victorious and very

haughty, with Law on one side and Peace on the other.” Ironically for twenty-first century readers, Whitman foresees and welcomes a world war for the sake of liberty: “The earth, restive, confronts a new era, perhaps a general divine war.”

### *Chanting the Square Deific and A Passage to India*

With his beloved Union saved and democracy confirmed for the long term, in the later 1860s Whitman turned his attention to “a purpose enclosing all, and over and beneath all,” as he put it in “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads.” This ultimate motive was to express his religious sensibility, a theme that had threaded through his work from the beginning (e.g. sections 41 and 43 of “Song of Myself”) but which now attains a heightened maturity.

“Chanting the Square Deific” (1865-1866)—which Whitman at one point named as his favorite poem among his own works—carries the reconciliation of opposites to a theological extreme in its four stanzas. Incurably unorthodox, Whitman commits two flagrant heresies against the traditional Trinity in this sequence of four monologues. The voice in section 1 is reasonably orthodox in its portrayal of God the father as a harsh Jehovah for the Hebrews, Brahma for the Hindus, and Saturn for the Greeks: “Relentless I forgive no man—whoever sins dies. . . /I dispense from this side judgments inexorable without the least remorse.” Still recognizably orthodox, the second stanza counteracts the first in its portrayal of Lord Christ (as well as Hermes and Hercules) as “Consolator most mild, the promis’d one advancing. . . /my sweet love bequeath’d here and elsewhere never dies.” The third stanza, however, is a breathtaking departure from orthodoxy in assigning Satan a place in the Square Deific while also giving psychological justification to his revolt against higher authority.

Consigned to the lowest caste in the Hindu system (“sudra”) and to racial subjection in America, Satan rebels splendidly against the injustice of it all: “With sudra face and worn brow, black, but in the depths of my heart, proud as any. . . /Defiant, I, Satan, still live, still utter words, in new lands duly appearing” (LA 559-560). And the climactic fourth stanza compounds this offense against orthodox tradition by assigning the highest member of the godhead, the Holy Spirit, a female identity. Here the feminine form, “Santa Spirita,” replaces the masculine Spiritus Sanctus of the traditional Latin Mass. An avatar of Emerson’s Oversoul, this female side of the Square, while “Including all life on earth, touching, including God, including Saviour and Satan,” also infuses the poet’s work with divine meaning: “I, the general soul,/Here the square finishing, . . . /Breathe my breath also through these songs.” In these original portrayals of Satan and of the Holy Spirit, Whitman’s religious vision clearly encompasses a major thrust toward social equality and justice.

Another major poem of the religious sensibility is “A Passage to India,” published in 1871 after years of fitful development. Inspired in part by great unifying technologies of the late 1860s (the laying of the Atlantic cable in 1866 and the completion of the Suez Canal and America’s transcontinental railroad in 1869), the poem reaches across from the youngest world civilization to one of the oldest—from America to India—and ultimately from the human soul to God. Section 8 of “Passage to India,” which Whitman had earlier written as a separate poem, comprises one of the poet’s greatest acts of religious imagination. “O Thou transcendent,” he addresses the Creator, “Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou centre of them.” As for the soul, “thou actual Me,” “Thou matest Time, smilest content at Death,/And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of space.” The poem ends with the metaphor of sailing “the seas of God”: “O farther, farther, farther sail!”

### ***Whispers of Heavenly Death***

In October, 1868 Whitman published five new poems in an English magazine under the title “Whispers of Heavenly Death” (later expanded to eighteen poems). The adjective in that title indicates Whitman’s ongoing theme of uniting here and hereafter, reconciling human kind to their mortality by depicting death as a fulfillment of life and a welcome new beginning. The poem from which the cluster took its title, “Whispers of Heavenly Death,” includes within its dozen lines a remarkable synthesis of diction, imagery, and sound effects to bear out its purpose: “Labial gossip of night, sibilant chorals,/Footsteps gently ascending, mystical breezes wafted soft and low/. . . . With at times a half-dimmed sadden’d far-off star/Appearing and disappearing/. . . . (Some soul is passing over.)” “The Last Invocation” similarly portrays the arrival of death in remarkably delicate imagery of the soul leaving the house of the body: “Let me glide noiselessly forth;/With the key of softness unlock the locks—with a whisper,/Set ope the doors O soul.”

In concluding this review of the 1860s, two additional poems from the 1868 “Whispers of Heavenly Death” cluster deserve mention. “Darest Thou O Soul?” approaches “the unknown region/Where neither ground is for thy feet nor any path to follow” with sublime assurance of an afterlife not encumbered by the limitations of bodily existence: “Nor darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bounds bounding us.” Instead “we burst forth, we float,/In Time and Space O soul, prepared for them.” And finally, one of Whitman’s most often anthologized poems, “A Noiseless Patient Spider,” renders the search for a final destiny in terms of the insect casting forth “filament, filament, filament, out of itself.” So, too, the soul, “seeking the spheres to connect them,” reaches out unceasingly, “Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold,/Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.”

Conceived in the immediate aftermath of the war, these poems about “Heavenly” death offered spiritual therapy to a nation afflicted by the deaths of a half million young men in the recent past. In effect, these poems accomplish the other half of Whitman’s rebellion against the Puritan heritage. Just as his poems of erotic love portray sex without guilt, these poems promulgate death without fear, thereby alleviating God’s punishment in the Garden of Eden (“thou shalt surely die”—Genesis 2:17). Indeed, death betokens a return to Eden in Whitman’s poetry, with paradise here understood not in Biblical terms but as assimilation into the ultimate and eternal synthesis of Being. Together with Whitman’s near-saintly service during the war years, followed by his prophetic writings—in prose and poetry—about the fabulous future of the Republic, Whitman’s effort to unite here and hereafter made the decade of the 1860s a chapter of central importance in the poet’s life and work. As such, the output of those years also comprised a major contribution to American and, in the end, to world literature.

### WHITMAN’S REPUTATION

Although few educated readers today doubt the great eminence of Whitman’s poetry in world literature, any proper evaluation of his literary oeuvre requires some awareness of the remarkably bitter critical controversy that it instigated. In Louis Untermeyer’s Inner Sanctum edition of Whitman’s poetry and prose are a number of excerpts from both sides of this radical divide that date back to the first edition of the *Leaves* in 1855. *The New York Criterion*, for example, called these poems “a gathering of muck” and called for laws with “the power to suppress such obscenity.” To its sophisticated readership in England, meanwhile, *The London Critic* declared that the writer of *Leaves of Grass* “deserves nothing so richly as the public executioner’s whip.” In Boston the *Intelligencer* also favored the idea of corporal punishment, remarking that “We can conceive no better reward than the lash for such a violation of decency as we have before us.” In 1860, a year after Whitman published his erotic “Children of Adam” and “Songs of Calamus,” *The Boston Post* averred that Whitman’s *Leaves* were actually poison ivy: “These [are] foul and rank leaves of the poison-plants of egotism, irreverence, and lust.”

Among the eminent people who had nothing good to say was Whitman’s fellow genius, Emily Dickinson, who at the age of thirty-two wrote to her mentor T. W. Higginson, “You speak of Mr. Whitman. I never read his book—but was told that he was disgraceful.” An eminent critic of the time, Rufus Griswold (Poe’s literary executor), dismissed the Whitman oeuvre as “a mass of stupid filth.” The very popular Southern poet Sidney Lanier coined a metaphor: “Whitman is poetry’s butcher. Huge, raw collops slashed from the rump of poetry, and never mind the gristle—is what Whitman feeds our souls with....” At the time of Whitman’s death in 1892, an eminent Briton named Theodore Watts-Dunton could think of no better obituary than “[Whitman has] fouled with excrement the doorstep of civilisation.” And finally, as late as 1927, the great high

priest of Modern poetry, T. S. Eliot, made the fabulously wrong-headed judgment that Whitman's "political, social, religious, and moral ideas are negligible."

As against this wide-ranging chorus of vilification, which led Whitman in "A Backward Glance" (1888) to call *Leaves of Grass* "worse than a failure. . . [evoking] mark'd anger and contempt more than anything else," the poet's small circle of disciples responded in the fashion of religious converts. Anne Gilchrist, the English lady of letters who came to Philadelphia (unsuccessfully) to marry Whitman, declared that "To me the reading of his poems is truly a new birth of the soul." John Addington Symonds, the English poet, likewise said that Whitman "has revolutionized my conceptions and made another man of me." Robert Buchanan placed Whitman "above Socrates, akin even . . . to Him who is considered, rightly, the first of men," and John Burroughs called Whitman "the greatest incarnation of mind, heart, and soul . . . that has appeared in the world during the Christian era." Ralph Waldo Emerson implicitly compared Whitman to Christ by employing a familiar Gospel reference: "Americans abroad may come home: unto us a man is born." Henry David Thoreau said, "We should rejoice greatly in him." And, coming again up into the Modern period, T. S. Eliot's contemporary D. H. Lawrence confessed in 1923 that

**"Whitman, the great poet, has meant so much to me. Whitman, pioneering into the wilderness of unopened life. Beyond him, none. The Open Road. The great home of the Soul is the Open Road. . . . In company with those who drift in the same measure along the same way. . . . Having no known direction, even. Only the soul remaining true to herself in her going."**

It is unfortunate that Whitman could not live long enough to see his life-work vindicated. But there is little question that, despite some hyperbole, the laudatory voices in the foregoing pastiche were following the true compass of future literary history. And even the hyperbole was not so terribly misstated in so far as a close look at Whitman's hospital work during the Civil War showed him to be a genuinely Christlike figure, sacrificing without stint of reward his time, life, and health for the sake of his fellow man. In the end, his wartime experience deepened his vision of reality and so enriched his poetry with a more compelling sense of life and death as complementary halves of a benign and sacred whole. The national baptism in blood that he had witnessed so horrifically at a thousand bedsides likewise deepened and strengthened his role as the nation's chief prophet, voicing the ongoing epic of America. Though it has taken decades beyond his own lifetime, in the end the prophet has been honored in his own country, thereby fulfilling the promise contained in the concluding sentence of the Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*: "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."

## OVERVIEW OF WHITMAN SCHOLARSHIP

For an overview of Whitman's life and work, three biographies and three anthologies are especially recommended. The biographies are Gay Wilson Allen's *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (New York: Macmillan, 1955); Justin Kaplan's *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980); and Jerome Loving's *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1999). The three anthologies—each filling over a thousand pages—are *The Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Inner Sanctum Edition, edited by Louis Untermeyer with “primary debt to J. [Justin] D. Kaplan” (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949); *Leaves of Grass*, A Norton Critical Edition, edited by Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: Norton, 1973—updated and slightly revised by Michael Moon, 2002); and *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, edited by Justin Kaplan (New York: The Library of America, 1982). Of the three anthologies, the Norton Critical Edition has superb notes throughout, while the Inner Sanctum and Library of America editions excel by including the entire *Specimen Days* and all of Whitman's major Prefaces and essays.

For an account of Whitman's life and writings during and just after the Civil War, a great number of volumes may be consulted, beginning with those written by Whitman's disciples John Burroughs, R. M. Bucke, and Horace Traubel. More recently, the three foregoing biographies by Gay Wilson Allen, Justin Kaplan, and Jerome Loving contain a good analysis of Whitman's war years, as does Roger Asselineau's *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Personality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1960). An excellent book-length account of Whitman's life and work during the war is Roy Morris, Jr.'s recent *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

With regard to Whitman's own account of the Civil War years, his *Memoranda during the War & Death of Abraham Lincoln*, first published in 1876, was reproduced in facsimile by the Indiana University Press (Bloomington: 1962), edited by Roy P. Basler; and his *Specimen Days & Collect*, originally published in 1883, was recently republished by Dover Publications (New York: 1995). R. M. Bucke's *The Wound Dresser* (1897, re-issued by the Bodley Press: New York, 1949) and Charles I. Glicksberg's *Walt Whitman and the Civil War: A Collection of Original Articles and Manuscripts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932) filled gaps in the record of Whitman's wartime writings, as did Walter Lowenfels' *Walt Whitman's Civil War: Compiled & Edited from Published & Unpublished Sources* (New York: Knopf, 1961). And of course *The Correspondence of Walt Whitman*, edited by Edwin Haviland Miller in six volumes, is a rich source of material for Whitman's Civil War period (New York: New York University Press, 1961-1977). (Miller also performed a

valuable service by editing *A Century of Whitman Criticism*--Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969--which reprints classic responses to Whitman ranging from those of Emerson and Thoreau to those of Eliot, Joyce, and Pound.) And finally, among the 198,000 entries listed under "Walt Whitman" on the Internet, "The Walt Whitman Archive" is most highly recommended.

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