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Transcendentalist Sympathies: A Contextual Study of *The Wound-Dresser*

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TRANSCENDENTALIST SYMPATHIES:

A CONTEXTUAL STUDY OF THE WOUND-DRESSER

by

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My document takes as its subject *The Wound-Dresser* by American composer John Coolidge Adams (b. 1947). Published in 1988, this twenty minute work for baritone voice and orchestra remains Adams's sole contribution to the non-operatic solo voice repertoire.

In *The Wound-Dresser* Adams grapples with the historical churning of his own times by looking to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Charles Ives. A brief biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson begins the document in order to elucidate Emerson's connection to Adams and Whitman. I then introduce Walt Whitman, the author of the text used in *The Wound-Dresser* and suggest that Whitman's literary voice can be seen as resonating with Adams's compositional voice in *The Wound-Dresser*. I will argue that Whitman's work of *care* is central to Adams's reading of Whitman in his conception of *The Wound-Dresser*.

Next I give a biographical sketch of John Adams, with a focus on his geographical association with the Concord School, identification of his primary artistic influences, and a discussion of his own personal search for a unique and authentic

compositional voice. I illustrate that in Adams's self-proclaimed "post-style," he looks to create a fertile emotional environment that is motivated by his conception of a Whitmanian authenticity. This "post-style" utilizes minimalist techniques and electronic components, but rejects what Adams understands as the aesthetic of minimalism (non-narrative/process oriented).

After a brief discussion of the musical language and forces Adams uses in *The Wound-Dresser*, I will argue that Adams's composition can be viewed as a musical avatar for Whitman's text. I conclude by stating that Adams's clear intention in *The Wound-Dresser* and the context provided by Whitman's text provide substantial evidence to say, in the Ivesian sense, that the work has "caught in [its] canvas" a "sympathy" of Transcendentalism.

PREFACE

I first became aware of John Adams's *The Wound-Dresser* as a Masters student during my first year at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The visceral emotional reaction that *The Wound-Dresser* stirred within me has remained with me ever since that first encounter. The ethereal quality of the rocking figures in the violins, the hum of the synthesizer and the time altering roll of the timpani balances poignantly with the high clarity of the solo violin stretched out over the orchestra.[1] Like the electric atmosphere of stillness, this music pulls you into the present moment where you hear Whitman's words speaking through the baritone soloist, describing what Adams calls, "the most intimate, most graphic, and most profoundly affecting evocation of the act of nursing the sick and dying that I know of."[2]

In my reflection on Adams's work, I became convinced that it contained some ineffable quality that invoked the spirit of American Transcendentalism.[3] I "came up" with the phrase "Transcendentalist Sympathies" in an attempt to describe the idea that a musical work could be consubstantiated with Transcendentalism. I mentioned this to my father (who like Adams, was a world-class clarinetist) and within a week a small volume containing Charles Ives's "Essays before a Sonata" arrived in my mailbox. In this short aesthetic treatise, I was floored to find Ives discussing my idea at length. This ignited a

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1 Sarah Cahill, "Fearful Symmetries and The Wound-Dresser (1988)," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May, (Pompton Plains, New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2006), 120-126.

2 Cahill, 124..

3 This sentiment reflects the pre-scholarly naïve view that sparked my initial (and, perhaps, continued) interest in this project.

desire in me to try to understand the inspiration for *The Wound-Dresser* and to see whether or not I could construct a framework for understanding the work within a context of Adams's relationship, first, to Whitman, and secondly, to Emerson and his legacy of American Transcendentalism. For me, the goal became to illustrate that Adams's music seeks to amplify the emotional and symbolic content of Whitman's detailed text. Or, in other words, what of the expressive content of *The Wound-Dresser* may be said to resonate with Transcendentalist thought in this modern context? Would the intention in *The Wound-Dresser* and the context provided by Whitman's text provide evidenence that, in the Ivesian sense, this work had "caught in [its] canvas" a "sympathy" of Transcendentalism?[4]

Published in 1988, this twenty minute work for baritone voice and orchestra remains Adams's sole contribution to the solo voice repertoire. Adams's setting has been recorded at least four times: Nonesuch (1989) with baritone Sanford Sylvan, conductor John Adams, and the Orchestra of St. Luke's; BBC Worldwide (2002) with baritone Christopher Maltman, conductor John Adams, and the BBC Symphony Orchestra; Naxos (2004) with baritone Nathan Gunn, conductor Marin Alsop, and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestral; PentaTone (2011) with baritone Sanford Sylvan, conductor Carlos Kalmar, and the Oregon Symphony. However, despite how paradigmatic of his oeuvre the orchestral soundscapes and text setting appear it has yet to be written about extensively. Even in his autobiography, *Hallelujah Junction,* Adams discusses *The Wound-Dresser* for only two pages (150-151). *The John Adams Reader: Essential*

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[4] Charles Ives, "Essays before a Sonata," in *Three Classics In The Aesthetic Of Music* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), 183-184.

Writings on an American Composer does little more, simply reprinting Sarah Cahill's liner notes from Nonesuch's 1989 release of *Fearful Symmetries/The Wound-Dresser*. In the more than 25 years since its composition a mere two theses have taken *The Wound-Dresser* as a focal point: 'Das Verhältnis von Musik und Sprache in "The Wound-Dresser" von John Adams' by Jeanette Baur (2001), and the B. A. Honors Thesis, "A Conductor's Thesis in Three Parts" by Daniel Curtis (2008). Because of what I believe to be the uniqueness and profundity of *The Wound-Dresser* I hope that my study of the work from a new perspective will generate in each reader a deepened aesthetic appreciation of the work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank the many wonderful people who have made this document possible: Thank you to the Hixson-Lied College for providing me with a Creative Scholarly grant in order to purchase the rights to perform this work and to rent the scores and electronic components; a huge thank you to my amazing collaborators in the Nebraska premiere of *The Wound-Dresser*, most especially David Galant, Hannah Willard, and Matthew Boring for offering me the invaluable gift of their time and energy; for the illuminating conversations and commentary from my brother, Vincent Hiscock; for the support of my doctoral committee, Dr. Peter Lefferts, Dr. Jamie Reimer Seaman, Dr. Kenneth Price, and, last but not least, my teacher Dr. William Shomos for his guidance and mentorship. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

For Damie

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CHAPTER 1:
EMERSON AND HIS SPECTRE

> All the more credit, then, must go to Emerson for identifying the real traits of the New World sensibility. His admonishments to individualism and personal independence signaled a turning point in American self-awareness, a change that would be felt first in literature and poetry and much later in painting and music. Thus a homegrown, truly indigenous American poetical expression, most provocatively embodied by Whitman, gradually began to take hold shortly after the Civil War. That war in itself was so devastating to the national psyche that it may have precipitated a new maturity in the minds of the country's artists.
>
> -Adams[5]

Adams and the American life

There is a four page blink-of-an-essay nestled inconspicuously towards the front of *The John Adams Reader* with the newspaper headline, "Voice of America: Composer John Adams Speaks for the Nation."[6] The headline appears above music critic Joshua Kosman's Spring 2003 article for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, after the premiere of Adams's *My Father Knew Charles Ives*, under the baton of Michael Tilson Thomas. Kosman says of the piece,

> Its fusion of personal and cultural history—the way Adams intertwines his own musical past with that of the United States, as exemplified by Ives—suggests that there is more at work here than simple nostalgia. What Adams is attempting, I think—as he has before but more explicitly

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5 John Adams, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (New York: Picador, 2008), 179.

6 Joshua Kosman, "Voice of America: Composer John Adams Speaks for the Nation," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2006), 59.

> this time—is to define the terms of an indigenous American musical tradition. And the assertion is twofold: The tradition begins with Ives, and it is encapsulated today by Adams's music.[7]

Five years later, with the publication of his autobiography, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life*," Adams confirms Kosman's assertion. Adams describes a childhood that oozes American Romanticism. Moreover, in the language Adams uses in these depictions of his adolescence, Adams explicitly ties himself to Emerson and Whitman, creating a triad. As a child he wandered the woods of New England, where he played at his imaginary alter-ego, Bruce Craigmore, who, "when not guest-conducting major orchestras in his works he lived alone, Thoreau-style, in a cabin on a remote lake some sixty miles to the north of East Concord."[8] Adams even describes his first adolescent exposure to Bernstein's *West Side Story* as the moment "when I felt most aroused to the potential of becoming an artist who might forge a language, Whitman-like, out of the compost of American life."[9] Adams's clear evocation of an "American life" is an admission of a belief that he is part of an American Modernism which is continuous with American Transcendentalism. As such, it is important to begin this study of *The Wound-Dresser* by looking at Emerson, to pull out what is most essential about Emerson with regards to Adams.[10]

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7 Kosman., 61.

8 John Adams, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (New York: Picador, 2008), 19.

9 Adams, 23.

10 Together with the biographical information on Emerson, the biographical sketch of Adams in chapter 3 is curated to highlight the analogous nature of Emerson's and Adams's shared emphasis on nature, rejection of European classicism, and reliance on intuition as a primary means of knowing.

Essential Emerson

On Christmas Day, 1832, twenty-nine year old Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1892) stepped onto the brig Jasper, setting sail from Boston for Europe.[11] His first wife, Ellen, interred, and his ordained Unitarian ministry resigned, Emerson was palpably alone. In limbo he roamed the history soaked streets of Naples and Rome, of Florence and Paris, letting the circulation of his imagination begin to course again. He traveled to Great Britain to see European culture for himself and to meet with British intellectuals whose ideas Emerson cared for. All the while, Emerson was waiting. As he wrote in his 1842 lecture, "The Transcendentalist," he had not yet been called to his work: "Be it so: I can sit in a corner and perish, (as you call it,) but I will not move until I have the highest command…"[12] That command came in the form of an overnight conversation at the home of Thomas and Jane Carlyle in the Scottish Highlands.[13] Ronald Bosco writes of that meeting, "in effect, Carlyle had invited Emerson back into the world of the living; his counsel to the young American was, in so many words, 'seize and channel the power that resides within you.'"[14]

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[11] Ronald A. Bosco, "Ralph Waldo Emerson (1812-1892): A Brief Biography," in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13.

[12] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist" (Raleigh, N.C.: Generic NL Freebook Publisher, n.d. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCO*host*.

[13] At the time of Emerson's first meeting with Scottish philosopher and satirist, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), Carlyle was deeply influenced by German Idealism and was devoted to the rejection of materialism and to the reality of the divine in human thought. Emerson considered this "reformulated" Platonism of the British Romantics (such as Carlyle, Wordsworth, and Coleridge) to be a revolutionary kind of modern idealism. This strain of modern idealism became central to American Transcendentalist thought, as apposed to the Empiricism of John Locke or the skepticism of David Hume. Barbara Packer describes the thought process of the Transcendentalists in this way: "If Carlyle preached a new gospel, how were his American disciples to put it into practice?" For more on the topic of the impact of British Romantics on Emerson, see Barbara L. Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 20-45.

[14] Bosco, 16.

Emerson returned to the United States in the fall 1833, optimistic that God would reveal "where & how I ought to live."[15] Emerson soon found a seamless transition from the world of homiletics to lecture in the growing Lyceum movement. For Emerson, lecturing was a natural threshing-floor on which to shake out his ideas.[16] By 1835 Emerson had a well established presence as a lecturer throughout Boston and he began to focus his energies on writing. After the death of Ellen, Emerson married his second wife, Lidian Jackson, in September of 1835, and the two settled into a large home in Concord, Massachusetts. Here, like Adams after him, he established a routine of long solitary walks through the woods of Concord during which he studiously observed nature.[17] He was coming into the vision he had for himself back in 1833 during a trip to the Cabinet of Natural History at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris: "I feel the centipede in me—cayman, carp, eagle, & fox. I am moved by strange sympathies[;] I say continually, 'I will be a naturalist.'"[18] In taking up this mantra, Emerson identified himself as someone who believed that through the careful observation of nature, spiritual truth could be discerned, or rather, intuited. For Emerson, it was intuition that allowed one to "see through the remoteness or ambiguity of words and things to the unifying source of all in the universe: thought."[19] What he felt in the "botanical classification" of the Jardin des Plantes, Emerson now felt in his morning jaunt: "the constantly transmuting yet interwoven

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15 Ralph Waldo Emerson in *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 16 vols., ed. William H. Gilman, Ralph H. Roth, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960-1982), 4: 252.

16 Andrew J. George, "Biographical Note," in *Emerson's Essays* (New York, N. Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Inc., 1951), xx.

17 Bosco, 16-21.

18 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *JNM*, 4: 200.

19 Bosco, 23.

processes of the natural world, a unified cosmos defined by its perpetual energy and unending metamorphosis"; this is what he declared with his first publication, "Nature," in 1836.[20] Like Ezekiel's inaugural vision of Yahweh, Emerson also had an original vision of God, not one groped from "among the dry bones of the past…", but one which would give "insight into to-day."[21] As he announced in his 1837 Harvard lecture, "The American Scholar:"

> I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic, what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provençal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and the future worlds.[22]

Amidst the devastation of the loss of his beloved younger brother and "truest companion," Charles, in May of 1836, Emerson found encouragement in the formation of the Transcendental Club a few months later.[23] Only weeks after the September 9 publication of "Nature," a group of like-minded-thinkers, including Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, and Henry David Thoreau, gathered for the first time to discuss their radical philosophical and theological desire to depart from the "hopeless mediocrity" of imitating classical and European models of

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[20] David M. Robinson, "The 'New Thinking': Nature, Self, and Society, 1836-1850," in *Mr. Emerson's Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 83.

[21] Emerson evokes the hopelessness of Ezekiel's vision of the "valley of dry bones" in Ezekiel 37. R. W. Emerson, Nature (Boston, MA: James Monroe and Company, 1849), The Gutenberg Project Ebook. & R. W. Emerson, "The American Scholar," in Alfred R. Ferguson, ed., The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. I, Essays, First Series, Introduction and notes by Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971), p. 67; My occasional use of Biblical references throughout this document represent an attempt to reflect the language of "sympathy" as *moral sentiment* or *pity* stemming from the important idea of *Christ-likeness*. The idea of "sympathy" as I am using it--and as Emerson and Whitman used it--comes from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

[22] Emerson, "The American Scholar," in the WSU Digital Emerson: A Collective Archive, http://digitalemerson.wsulibs.wsu.edu/exhibits/show/text/the-american-scholar.

[23] Bosco, 23.

thought in order to uncover a "new religion of life."[24] The main tenet of this religion would be "that God was immanent in all aspects of the Creation."[25] This was the Transcendentalist expression of the modern idealism gleaned from the British Romantics and smelted into its strongest form; as Emerson wrote in "The Transcendentalist," "what is properly called Transcendentalism among us is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842."[26] David Robinson explains the idealism of Emerson and the Transcendentalists in this way:

> For Emerson, idealism breathed new life into the physical world, transforming it from lifeless matter into energy, and giving it vast religious dimensions. "Idealism saith: matter is a phenomenon, not a substance", he wrote in Nature, reaffirming his Parisian insight that creation was not static and unmovable but changing and malleable, a cycle of energies and interactions.[27]

It is this idealism that Emerson professed when he wrote:

> Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and particle of God…I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.[28]

For Emerson, this is possible because of the immanence of the spirit—spirit is thoroughly devolved into matter. If this is true for your own individual spiritualism, without Calvinism or Unitarianism, or any other religious conduit, it is possible because

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[24] Jacques Ranciére, "The Poet of the New World," in *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (Brooklyn, NY: Verson, 2013), 195-196.

[25] Bosco, 24.

[26] Emerson, "The Transcendentalist."

[27] Robinson, 86.

[28] R. W. Emerson, *Nature* (Boston, MA: James Monroe and Company, 1849), The Gutenberg Project *E*book.

matter/nature now has a moral or spiritual basis and your own spirit resonates sympathetically with it. Therefore, access to truth is immediately accessible through intuition. For Emerson, if this is mystically true, then making it actively true is the hope, and the wish will be for people to become more fully self-reliant, spiritually and in every other way.

With the birth of his son Waldo in October 1836, Emerson was brimming with a fullness both personally and professionally—worlds away from the Emerson that left Boston for Europe in 1832.[29] Over the next few years Emerson developed his ideas further as he prepared for the publication of his *Essays*, in which he expounded on the varied application of his idealistic philosophy and, in particular, the importance of the "infinitude of the private man" or the fundamental relation of everything in the universe and their unification through thought.[30] In the essay, "History," he wrote:

> There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same… What Plato thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand.
>
> Of the worlds of this mind history is the record. It is illustrated by the entire series of days. Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history… The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn, and Egypt, Greece, Rome, Gaul, Britain, America, lie folded already in the first man. Epoch after epoch, camp, kingdom, empire, republic,

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29 Bosco, 24.

30 Lawrence Buell, "The Infinitude of the Private Man: A bicentennial appreciation of Ralph Waldo Emerson," in *Harvard Magazine* (May-June, 2003), https://harvardmagazine.com/2003/05/the-infinitude-of-the-pr-html.

> democracy, are merely the application of his manifold spirit to the manifold world.[31]

And, furthermore, since we are explicable in all of history:

> We are always coming up with the facts that have moved us in history in our private experience and verifying them here. All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is properly no History, only Biography. Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself—must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know.[32]

This emphasis on private experience will become increasingly important as we look at Whitman and at Adams's use of Whitman.

Along with his embrace of the "infinitude of the private man" Emerson felt that the self-reliance of each individual was paramount: "Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession."[33] It was up to each person to take hold of the truth of the divinity within themselves and to trust the "primary wisdom" of their intuition in order to become their most authentic self.[34] As God came to the sheep-herder Moses in a burning bush, Emerson calls for a new kind of American scholar who would reveal the phenomenal spirit of God in the common, in the Everyman. "Let us stun and astonish the intruding

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31 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," in *Emerson's Essays* (New York, N. Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Inc., 1926) 1-2.

32 Emerson, "History," 6.

33 Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Emerson's Essays* (New York, N. Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Inc., 1926), 60-61.

34 Emerson, 46.

rabble of men and books and institutions by a simple declaration of the divine fact. Bid them take the shoes from off their feet, for God is here within," Emerson wrote.[35]

In January of 1842, Emerson's first child, Waldo, died suddenly at age five. Emerson was thrown into a world of confusion and pain; loss was impressed in his every relationship and thought.[36] Emerson, man of idealism, felt the cold irons of grief: "I am too bereft…" he wrote, "O truth's and nature's costly lie! O trusted broken prophecy!"[37] However numbed he might have been by the death of his son, Emerson continued to lecture and write, and, in 1844, he published his second series of essays. Although critics have noted that this volume is sharper or more abrupt in tone and, at times, even reads as fatalistic, in this volume Emerson explored an honest counting of his idealistic philosophy that was a true testament to the iron string, the character, which vibrated in Emerson's heart. "I accept the clangor and jangle of contrary tendencies," he wrote, "I have set my heart on honesty… and can see nothing at last, in success or failure, than more or less of vital force supplied from the Eternal. The results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable. The years teach much which the days never know."[38]

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35 Emerson, 51. For more on Emerson's reference to removing shoes see the story of Moses and the burning bush, Ex. 3.

36 Bosco, 29. It should be noted that in his September, 2015 article for the New Yorker, "Influence of Ecstasy: Ralph Waldo Emerson's American poetry," Dan Chiasson paints a picture of Emerson as startlingly calloused against grief, so that it had nothing left to teach him. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/09/07/ecstasy-of-influence. For an expanded view of the position I have taken, see "Tears for Emerson: *Essays, Second Series*," by Julie Ellison in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 140-161.

37 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Threnody," Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Early Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, Boston, Thomas Y. Crowell & Company: 1899, Introduction by Nathan Haskell Dole), https://emersoncentral.com/texts/poems/threnody/.

38 Emerson, "Experience" in *Emerson's Essays* (New York, N. Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Inc., 1926), 305, 310.

It is in this spirit of honesty that Emerson took two important steps in his intellectual evolution during the 1840's. Firstly, Emerson saw represented in his personal loss larger social injustices, in particular of the institution of U.S. slavery.[39] Ellison points out in her critical analysis of Emerson's "Experience" that, "Self-loss in the affective realm is likened to slavery in the domain of labor."[40] Begrudgingly at first and then fervently, Emerson recognized his responsibility as a public figure to become an advocate for the abolitionist movement.[41] Encouraged by his wife and the other female figures closest to him, Emerson immersed himself in a study of slavery in the West Indies in preparation for his 1844 address to the Concord Female Anti-slavery Society, "Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies."[42] In this address, Emerson denounced slavery as an egregious moral wrong: "The blood is moral: the blood is anti-slavery: it runs cold in the veins: the stomach rises with disgust, and curses slavery." Secondly, Emerson reaffirmed his idealism and in his essay, "The Poet," moved beyond the idealism of Carlyle. In "The Poet," Emerson recognizes the symbols of the spiritual world as not only embodied in works of art and the flags and banners of great countries

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[39] While this assertion could be interpreted as over-zealously stated, I would point them to the following statement of Julie Ellison from her critical essay "Tears for Emerson: *Essays, Second Series* in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 140-161:" "To link a biographical event (Waldo's death) to the family culture of work and feeling, and then to read the essays as texts composed in negotiation with and out of resistance to both paternal and national occasions, is a strategy consistent with the new referentiality of Emerson studies and of literary studies in general."

[40] Julie Ellison, "Tears for Emerson: *Essays, Second Series*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 144.

[41] Robinson, 103.

[42] Robinson, 107.

and their heroes, as Carlyle elucidates in *Sartor Resartus*, but in everything.[43] Emerson wrote:

> We are symbols, and inhabit symbols; workman, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and, being infatuated with the economical uses of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. The poet, by the ulterior intellectual perception, gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes, and a tongue into every dumb and inanimate object. He perceives the independence of the thought on the symbol, the stability of the thought, the accidency and fugacity of the symbol. As the eyes of Lyncaeus were said to see through the earth, so the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. … All the facts of the animal economy, sex, nutriment, gestation, birth, growth, are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change, and reappear a new and higher fact. He uses forms according to the life, and not according to the form.[44]

Once again, it is in our sympathizing with the symbols of everyday life that Emerson saw the human capacity for spiritual evolution. However, we need the poet to give us the confidence to see the spiritual possibilities of material objects.[45] Jacques Ranciére comments:

> We must thus take note: it was not in London under the glass-and-steel arcs of the Crystal Palace, nor in the fin de siècle Paris of the Eiffel Tower, in the New York of skyscrapers or Russia of futurist and constructivist revolutionaries; it was in Boston in 1841, capital of genteel culture, intellectuals and aesthetes enthused by classical philology, French civility, and voyages to Italy for its antique ruins and Renaissance master-pieces, that the

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43 For more on Carlyle's views see *Sartor Resartus*, Ch. 3 "Symbols."

44 Emerson, *The Poet* in *Emerson's Essays* (New York, N. Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Inc., 1926), 274-275.

45 Emerson, 274.

> modernist ideal, in the strong sense, was first formulated in all its radicalism — the ideal of a new poetry of new man.
>
> But one must also notice where the paradox lies in this declaration. The man who announces it has no personal taste for banking, or electoral stands: he thinks they turn man away from the only worthwhile quest — namely, the accomplishment of his own nature.[46]

By the time of Emerson's death in April of 1882, the aspirational force of his original message of Transcendentalism had become, as Bosco boldly writes, an "American New Testament."[47] Emerson's evocation of the American *experience* was assimilated to the degree that it not only heralded the rise of a new and distinctly American artist, "who addressed American subjects directly to an American audience," it seeped its way in the marrow of the collective American consciousness as "American priest and visionary."[48] Even in the year 2019, a group of middle-Americans asked to identify what cultural traits define America unanimously agree on "individuality" and "self-reliance."[49] It was Emerson's radical insistence on the infinitude of the private man, self-reliance, and idealism whose spectre has continued to guide the American public and haunt the American artist, as both Whitman and Adams attest.

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46 Ranciére, 189-190.

47 Bosco, 44

48 Bosco, 46-47.

49 I witnessed this anecdotal evidence at a training session held at the "Child Advocacy Center" in Omaha, NE during Fall 2019.

CHAPTER 2:
WHITMAN—DRESSER OF WOUNDS AND POET OF AMERICA

> Take my leaves America, take them South and take them North,
> Make welcome for them everywhere, for they are your own off-
> spring,
> Surround them East and West, for they would surround you,
> And you precedents, connect lovingly with them, for they connect
> lovingly with you…
>
> I will make the poems of materials, for I think they are to be the
> most spiritual poems,
> And I will make the poems of my body and of mortality,
> For I think I shall then supply myself with the poems of my soul
> and of immortality…
>
> I will sing the song of companionship,
> I will show what alone must finally compact these,
> I believe these are to found their own ideal of manly love, indi-
> cating it in me,
> I will therefore let flame from me the burning fires that were
> threatening to consume me,
> I will lift what has too long kept down those smouldering fires,
> I will give them complete abandonment,
> I will write the evangel-poem of comrades and of love,
> For who but I should understand love with all its sorrow and joy?
> And who but I should be the poet of comrades?...
>
> - Whitman[50]

In this chapter I will discuss Whitman's background with regards to *care*, as it synthesizes or draws from a set of experiences that have deeper roots in his life. I have chosen to use Jerome Loving, one of the most authoritative recent biographers of

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[50] Walt Whitman, "Starting from Paumanok" from *Leaves of Grass*. Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891-1892. https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/26 (accessed October 27, 2020).

Whitman's journey of *care* as the provided source material in order to develop a coherent picture of Whitman as wound-dresser.

Loving says that, in his poetry, Whitman celebrates "his own nature as representative of all humankind in its endless variety."[51] This endless variety makes it unsurprising that Whitman's close friend John Burroughs said that Whitman was "so hard to grasp, to put in a statement."[52] One aspect of Whitman that is not hard to, as Burroughs said, "get to the bottom of," was his *care* and concern for his family.[53] Born into a working class family in Long Island, New York in 1819 as the second of nine children, Whitman took on a heavy load of household responsibility. He concluded his formal education at the age of eleven and at twelve he began to look for employment so that he might contribute to the family's income. Whitman worked in a number of different jobs; he took working class positions as an assistant and typesetter at various newspapers, worked as a schoolteacher, and pursued a career in journalism.

Whitman's first book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, which he published in 1855 at the age of thirty-six, was initially reviled as obscene and chaotic. Even the praise of Emerson, that this slim self-published collection was "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed," could not save it from those who found its characterizations of the working-class and of "athletic love" (as Allen Ginsberg says)

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51 Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000), XI.

52 Loving, VIII.

53 Loving, VIII.

uncouth.[54] Despite the scandalous reception of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman continued to sing of the Negro, and of Manhattan and the Mississippi; he sang of Brooklyn and of the Native peoples of Long Island. This was *his* highest command.[55] As Whitman indicates in "Starting from Paumanok" (excerpted at the top of this chapter), it was through his poems that he believed he surrounded and connected in loving comradery with the farthest reaches of America. Poet Ezra Pound reflects in his 1909 essay, "What I Feel About Walt Whitman," "he *is* America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it *is* America."[56]

When Whitman's father died, shortly after the publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Whitman took on the role of the family caretaker. In 1861 he returned to the old whaling village of Greenport, the last stop on the Long Island railroad, to watch out for his sister, Mary Elizabeth. Loving says, "[Whitman] also attended to the problems of his other married sister, a hypochondriac caught up in a bad marriage to a New England landscape artist, as well as those of an older brother with mental deterioration, resulting from a shipboard accident, and probable case of syphilis, another brother beset by

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54 Allen Ginsberg, "Composed on the Tongue," in *Walt-Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, 2nd Ed., ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom & Dan Campion (Duluth, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 1998) 331; An anonymous reviewer from *The Saturday Review* 1 (15 March 1856) writes, "After poetry like this, and criticism like this [Emerson], it seems strange that we cannot recommend the book to our readers' perusal. But the truth is, that after every five or six pagers of matter such as we have quoted, Mr. Whitman suddenly becomes exceedingly intelligible, but exceedingly obscene. If the *Leaves of Grass* should come into anybody's possession, our advice is to throw them instantly behind the fire." Excerpted from, "Walt Whitman and the American Civil War: From Wound Dresser to Good Gray Poet" by Karilyn Lindeen (master's thesis, Kansas State University, 2016), 13.

55 Reminiscent of the call Emerson received from Carlyle that night 1832, Whitman later recalled Emerson's 1855 visit to Brooklyn. Recalling the event thirty-three years after the fact, Whitman wrote, "I shall never forget the first visit he paid me—the call, the first call." (Loving, 210).

56 Ezra Pound, "What I Feel About Walt Whitman," from *Walt-Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, 2nd Ed, ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom & Dan Campion, (Duluth, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 1998), 112-113.

alcoholism and tuberculosis, and a third mentally and physically handicapped."[57] This expanded role of *care* gives further dimension and context for Whitman's understanding of sorrow and love, and his extending desire for comradery.

When Whitman's brother George, who had enlisted in the Union army after the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861, was reported as either wounded or killed by the December 16, 1862 *New York Herald,* Whitman leapt to "defuse the panicky state of his Brooklyn household" and left for Washington the same day.[58] Whitman found his brother's regiment on December 19. Writing to his mother, Whitman described his three day ordeal as "the greatest suffering I ever experienced in my life;" but that "when I found dear brother George, and found that he was alive and well…O you may imagine how trifling all my little cares and difficulties seemed—they vanished into nothing."[59] On December 28, Whitman traveled with a transport of wounded back to Washington. There he stayed, taking on a new role of *care,* that of wound dresser. As Loving says, watching "Americans literally die for the democracy he had celebrated in the earlier editions of *Leaves of Grass*" changed Whitman.[60] Karilyn Lindeen writes in her 2016 thesis:

> During those years of service [Whitman] attended to tens of thousands of wounded soldiers in the hospitals, writing letters home to their families and giving them comfort and companionship. Whitman tirelessly went from hospital to hospital until he was physically and emotionally exhausted…After the war, it was America that was broken

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57 Loving, 7.

58 Loving, 13.

59 Loving, 15.

60 Loving, 22.

> both emotionally and physically, and Whitman's poetry was like a soothing dressing over a tender wound.[61]

Whitman carefully folded a sequence of forty-three of his Civil War poems entitled "Drum-taps" into the revised versions of *Leaves of Grass.*[62] These were the poems about which Whitman wrote to Emerson, "[I intend] to write a little book about this phase of America, her masculine young manhood, its conduct under most trying of and highest of all exigency, which she, as by lifting a corner in a curtain, has vouchsafed me to see America, already brought to Hospital in her fair youth—brought and deposited here in this great, whited sepulcher of Washington itself."[63] Unlike the continuous reworking of the rest of *Leaves of Grass*, Loving writes that "Drum-Taps" was the "poet's monument to immediate experience and as a result could never be revised. In one sense…the war froze him in time."[64] For Whitman, it was his immediate proximity to the horrors of the Civil War that he asserted as proof that he was the only poet qualified to speak for and to America.

War changes men, to which Whitman's dramatic physical aging during this period attests.[65] But, according to Rancieré, Whitman wasn't a mere man, he was Emerson's

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61 Karilyn Lindeen, "Walt Whitman and the American Civil War: From Wound Dresser to Good Gray Poet" (master's thesis, Kansas State University, 2016), 10.

62 Whitman first published 53 war poems as a separate book in 1865, but by 1881 had reduced "Drum-taps" to 43 poems and fully incorporated them into *Leaves of Grass.* For a more complete picture of the difficulty Whitman experienced in trying to incorporate his civil war poems into *Leaves of Grass*, Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price's, "Blood-Stained Memoranda" in *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/anc.00152.html#chap5.

63 Loving, 22.

64 Loving, 21.

65 To see this physical aging in daguerreotype, ca. 1854, and photograph, ca. 1864, see Kenneth M. Price, *Whitman and Tradition: The Poet in His Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), title page, 76.

"new poet," "the complete man;" "he is the one to reattach words to things, and thus inform his contemporaries of a common wealth, that of the universal soul which exteriorizes itself in the material world."[66] Despite scholarly objections to assertions of a mentorship relationship between Emerson and Whitman, other aspects of the relationship between the two men is more clear. As Loving says, "in 'Song of Myself'—Whitman had portrayed himself as a bachelor before the American democracy, 'of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding.' This prewar self was representative of the American people, in the best tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson (where the artist descends into the minds of everyone when he thinks for himself), but it also represented the egotist that found 'no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.' "[67]

Whitman says that the complete man is one of contradictions, a divided self. Even if Whitman did not share the mystic cosmology of Emerson, he still had the notion of the self that generates this potent transcendental self—The "my soul" is one persona, "myself" another, and "me-myself" another knowing self or spirit. As Whitman explained in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads", the epilogue to *Leaves of Grass*:

> "Leaves of Grass" indeed (I cannot too often reiterate) has mainly been the outcropping of my own emotional and other personal nature—an attempt, from first to last, to *a Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America) freely, fully and truly on record.[68]

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66 Jacques Rancière, "The Poet of the New World: Boston, 1841 – New York, 1855," in *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Verso, 2013), 210.

67 Loving, 2.

68 Walt Whitman, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," from *Leaves of Grass*. (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891-1892), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/399 (accessed October 27, 2020).

Whitman took his contradictions and embraced them, and through learning to love himself, loved America. As Loving writes:

> First [Whitman] learned to love himself, overcoming the degradation of a poverty school in Brooklyn run by supercilious, ferruling teachers; then avoiding the use of the rod as a teacher himself; and finally learning from Emerson and the transcendentalists to see himself and every other human being as an emblem of God because all were part of nature. Nature, as Emerson had said, was the last thing of God. This idea Whitman never forsook…[69]

In "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" Whitman affirms that this belief was the driving force behind *Leaves of Grass*, which was "the comfort of my life."[70] He wrote, "while I cannot understand it or argue it out, I fully believe in a clue and purpose in Nature, entire and several; and that invisible spiritual results, just as real and definite as the visible, eventuate all concrete life and all materialism, through Time."[71] In this admission, Whitman seems to echo what Emerson wrote in "The Poet":

> …It is dislocation and detachment from the life of God, that makes things ugly, the poet, who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole,—reattaching even artificial things and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight—disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts. Readers of poetry see the factory-village, and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their readings; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the bee-hive, or the spider's geometrical web. Nature

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69 Loving, 23

70 Walt Whitman, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," from *Leaves of Grass*. (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891-1892), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/399 (accessed October 27, 2020).

71 Whitman, https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/399

> adopts them very fast into her vital circles, and the gliding train of cars she loves like her own.[72]

In his embrace of the lowly, the "commonwealth," of America as "veins full of poetical stuff," Whitman, even more than Emerson, seemed to understand Christ's parable of the sheep and goats: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."[73] It was in Whitman's compassionate *care* for and companionship with the young men of the civil war that "he found 'divinity' in the crucified sons of God in addition to the resurrected self of 'Song of Myself.'"[74] Whitman's Nature was not one of mean egotism or transparent eyeballs, but, like the virgin birth, Whitman was born of the same stuff as America, the same materials, bringing it close and breathing its same air, taking the "infinitude of the private man" for himself. The "Poet of Democracy…breaks with a certain idea of time, one regulated by great events and rhythms inherited from the past. It finds its material no longer in historical succession, but in geographical simultaneity, in the multiplicity of activities distributed in the diverse spaces of a territory. It finds its form no longer in regular meter inherited from tradition, but in the common pulse that links these activities."[75]

Whitman accomplished this when he rescued poetry from "New England graveyards and snowy country lanes…and gave it a rhythm that required a new meter and a new reader, fashioned not merely out of 'pure' nature but from the raw essence of emerging cities and family farms. He went beyond Emerson's emblematic nature to

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72 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *Emerson's Essays* (1951, repr., New York: HaperCollins Publishers, 1990), 273.

73 Matthew 25:40.

74 Loving, 22.

75 Rancière, 191.

celebrate nature for its own sake."[76] Rancieré expands on the redemptive capacity of Whitman's poetry:

> Thus, in the first of the poems, the one that will become the Song of Myself: the farmer contemplating his oats, the lunatic carried to the asylum, the printer with gaunt jaws turning his quid of tobacco, the malformed limbs of a bloodied body tied to the anatomist's table, the removed parts falling off into a pail with a horrible sound, the quadroon girl sold at auction, the drunkard nodding close to a kitchen stove, the mechanist rolling up his sleeves, the express-wagon driver, the wollypates hoeing in the sugar-field, the platform reformer with a nasal voice, the pavingman leaning on his rammer, the drover, the pedlar sweating under his pack, the opium eater, the prostitute with her blackguard oaths, the masons calling for mortar, the pikefisher, the coon seeker, and a few dozen other genre portraits, among which the poet has knowingly dispersed a church contralto, deacons waiting to be ordained, an art connoisseur walking through an exhibition gallery, and the president surrounded by his cabinet. No one had attained the pure enumeration presented by the following poem, the future Song of Occupations mixing the slave's ankle-chain and the plates of the forger with grain "clay, bins and mangers, tongs, hammer, jointer and smoothing plane; plumbob, trowel and scaffold; the sailor's compass and stays; powder and shot; the surgeon and the oculist's étui; steam saws, the cotton bale, the working knife of the butcher, the handpress, goods of gutta-percha or papier mâché, the veneer and the gluepot, awl and cobbler's kneestrap, billiard sticks, stockings for women, the walking beam of the steam-engine, bonfire of shavings, coffins stored in the sexton's wareroom, beef on the butcher's stall, the milliner's ribbons, dressmakers patterns, wanted ads in penny papers, and hundreds of other items that contain both far more and far less than the price they are evaluated at, and that the poet's soul welcomes without worrying about their price. An auctioneer's catalogue, the disdainful would say. But their disdain falls flat. The poet has anticipated their judgment by identifying himself with the one who puts up the vilest and the noblest merchandise for auction: this black slave, this 'curious creature', this admirable

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[76] Loving, 23.

> frame of bone and muscle, the gaze full of life and this disconcerting brain whose value no bidder can afford to pay, 'For him the globe lay preparing quintillions of years, without "equality that they get from all being microcosms of the whole, susceptible of being attached to the interminable chain of beings, to the inexhaustible life of the whole

This "material" or "common pulse" or "raw essence" is a catalogue of extreme and vulgar and mundane *and* noble scenes as poem, with Whitman at the center, one "rough" and one "kosmos" acting as the (Emersonian) Namer of things:[77]

> The interminable display of vulgar objects and activities is the strict application of the spiritualist principle articulated by Emerson: the symbolic use of nature abolishes distinctions of low and high, honest and vile. 'Small and mean things serve as well as great symbols. The meaner the type by which a law is expressed, the more pungent it is, and the more lasting in the memories of men.' And the same vertigo of common names of common things follows Emerson's indication on the role of the poet as a giver of names, the suggestive value of 'bare lists of words' borrowed from a dictionary for 'an imaginative and excited mind'…
>
> Above all, it is related to the vast redemption of the empirical world proclaimed by German idealism: the redemption of a sensible world where spirit recognizes the exterior form of a divine thought that it knows from now on as its own thought. The initial declaration of the collection expresses this primordial reversal, and not some silly uncouth Yankee arrogance: 'I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume.' The formula does not simply translate Emerson's formula affirming that 'All men have my blood, and I have all men's.' It puts to work, more profoundly, the Emersonian virtue of 'self-reliance', which is no self-infatuation but the

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[77] Emerson writes in "The Poet," "The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the center. For the world is not painted, or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe." Emerson, 264.

> knowledge that 'there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works'.[78]

Nowhere does Whitman perform a more redemptive work, reattaching humanity and nature and soul, than in the "vulgar objects" of his poem, "The Wound-Dresser." Kenneth Price grapples with this reattaching when he writes, "against Emerson's claim that 'the soul knows no persons,' Whitman stressed personality and an identified soul. Recasting Emerson's impersonal deity, Whitman makes the Universal Being into 'a loving bedfellow,' a dispenser of letters, grassy handkerchiefs, and plentiful baskets."[79]

To Price's list we might add "the more pungent"…refuse pail…appealing eyes…crush'd head…stump of the arm…yellow-blue countenance…putrid gangrene…soothing hand… These are the great poetic materials of "The Wound-Dresser." Whitman wields these materials (what Emerson would call symbols) with the same tender *care* that he dressed the wounds of the young soldiers he attended.

The opening two verses of the sixty-five line "The Wound-Dresser" introduces the poem's narrator, "an old man," who describes the oft repeated scene of being asked for war stories by those who do not share in those experiences.[80] These "new faces" want stories of "hard-fought engagements" and "sieges tremendous"; they ask for the stories that have stuck the most clearly in the old man's mind.[81] Together with the final

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78 Rancière, 222-226.

79 Kenneth Price, "Strangle the singers who will not sing you loud and strong"—Whitman and Emerson Reconsidered" in *Whitman and Tradition: The Poet in His Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 48.

80 Walt Whitman, "The Wound-Dresser," from *Leaves of Grass*, (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881-1882), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1881/poems/169 (accessed October 27, 2020).

81 Whitman, https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1881/poems/169.

paragraph of the poem, they form a poetic "envelope" for the poem's interior content (with which Adams begins his excerpt).[82]

> 1
>
> An old man bending I come among new faces,
> Years looking backward resuming in answer to children,
> Come tell us old man, as from young men and maidens that love me,
> (Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the Alarum, and urge relentless war,
> But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd and I resign'd myself,
> To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead;)
> Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these chances,
> Of unsurpass'd heroes, (was one side so brave? The other was equally brave;)
> Now be witness again, paint the mightiest armies of earth,
> Of those armies so rapid so wondrous what saw you to tell us?
> What stays with you latest and deepest? of curious panics,
> Of hard-fought engagements or sieges tremendous what deepest remains?
>
> 2
>
> O maidens and young men I love and that love me,
> What you ask of my days those the strangest and sudden your talking recalls,
> Soldier alert I arrive after a long march cover'd with sweat and dust,
> In the nick of time I come, plunge in the fight, loudly shout in the rush of successful charge,
> Enter the captur'd works—yet lo, like a swift running river they fade,
> Pass and are gone they fade—I dwell not on soldiers' peril or soldiers' joys,
> (Both I remember well—many of the hardships, few of the joys, yet I

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[82] Harold Aspiz, "Wound-Dresser, The" (1865), in J.r. Le Master and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), reproduced by permission, https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_749.html.

was content.)[83]

The old man (author surrogate), responds,

> But in silence, in dreams' projections,
> While the world of gain and appearance and mirth goes on,
> So soon what is over forgotten, and waves wash the imprints off the sand,
> With hinged knees returning I enter the doors, (while for you up there,
> Whoever you are, follow without noise and be of strong heart.)[84]

The poet tells "you up there," the reader, to be "strong of heart," because America's collective memory of the Civil War is not for the faint; America was traumatized in a way it could not name or define. Whitman believed that it ached for an interpreter who would be a guide through the trauma of suffering and death that this internal violence brought; this interpreter would help America define its own identity, re-discover its belief in the goodness of humanity, and ground it once again in nature, body and soul. Whitman saw himself as, perhaps, the only one qualified to act as this interpreter. Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price write, "as soon as the war ended, he [Whitman] began to realize that the nation's hopes and history had to be reunified and that his original goals for *Leaves of Grass*—to project an optimistic and democratic future for America—should not be abandoned but rather had to be integrated with the trauma of the Civil War."[85]

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83 Walt Whitman, "The Wound-Dresser," from *Leaves of Grass*, (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881-1882), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1881/poems/169 (accessed October 27, 2020).

84 Whitman, "The Wound-Dresser," in *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860-1861), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1881/poems/169; Harold Aspiz comments that, "In an incantatory stanza (lines 20–24) he conveys the reader into the hospital milieu."

85 Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price, *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 86.

Through the "dreams' projections" of the wound-dresser persona, Whitman begins the work of defining the Civil War, lifting the curtain on what is, for us in the post-modern era, a sanitized history, breaking across time to allow us to share in the idealized memory of his experience—the divinity in the "appealing eye"—"poor boy." For Whitman, it was in sleep, where "dreams' projections" appear, that the lines between self-identity and collective experience blur most precipitously. Sleep is where we all experience a suspension of the conscious control of our thoughts and the boundaries of gender, class, and race become fully fluid.[86] Folsom and Price explain, "not only do we all sleep, we all know and have felt the 'breakdown' of 'sleep-chasings,' the way that falling asleep gives us the experience of losing control, the ways that dreams allow us to undergo shape-shifting, to wander worlds beyond our own waking experiences. Sleep…allows us finally to move into deeper and deeper levels of common psychic territory, where we all descend at night to plumb the depths of human emotion."[87]

It comes as no surprise, then, that Whitman sets the bulk of "The Wound-Dresser" (lines 25-65) in this democratic sleep-state, where the wound-dresser winds his way through the intense scenes of human suffering. As we will see, the lucidity of this dream continues to intensify as our poetic proximity to the suffering narrows.

Whitman not only democratizes the "psychic territory" of "The Wound-Dresser" through the poetic device of sleep; by using the second-person pronoun, "you," in lines 23 and 24, Whitman physicalizes us, the reader, into the poem, so that reading now

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[86] Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, 49.

[87] Folsom and Price, 49.

becomes, as Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price comment, “an intimate experience.” They continue, “the ‘you’ does not seem impersonal and distant; rather, the ‘you’ enfolds us in the poet’s embrace and makes each of us a kind of co-creator of the poem.”[88] By continuing to read, we consent to the closeness of our body to that of Whitman’s, just under the ink of the page or the glow of the screen. We participate in the “I” of the poet, and enter into the fray of a tent hospital, where the great killers of the Civil War fester: typhoid fever, malaria, and diarrhea.[89] “Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,/ Straight and swift to my wounded I go…”[90] We are there, sharing in the poet’s experience.

> Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
> Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
> Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
> Where their priceless blood reddens the grass, the ground,
> Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof’d hospital,
> To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
> To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss,
> An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,
> Soon to be fill’d with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill’d again.
>
> I onward go, I stop,
> With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,
> I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,
>
> One turns to me his appealing eyes—poor boy! I never knew you,
> Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that

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88 Folsom and Price, 47.

89 Sylvia Foley, Dalia Sofer, and Joy Jacobson, “I Am Faithful, I Do Not Give Out,” in *The American Journal of Nursing* 100, no. 10 (2000): 48, www.jstor.org/stable/3522316.

90 Walt Whitman, “The Wound-Dresser,” from *Leaves of Grass*, (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881-1882), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1881/poems/169 (accessed October 27, 2020).

would save you.[91]

For the reader of "The Wound-Dresser," the graphic scenes of the sick and dying are not repugnant—transmuted by the poet's new confession they become a vehicle for seeing the body as the place where nature, "the grass, the ground," touches and subsumes the divine spark, the breath of life, the "precious blood." Whitman confessed this years earlier when he wrote, "I Sing the Body Electric" and closed the first stanza by posing his conclusion as a question, "And if the body does not do fully / as much as the soul? / And if the body were not the soul, what / is the soul?"[92] Whitman does not shy away from a detailed close-up of the fleshly imagery, visceral and rank, of the dead and dying sons of America, and, in-so-doing, Whitman does what all trauma-informed *care* demands, he *names* the trauma so that the pain carried in the body can be released and healing begin. The "natural, perfect, varied attitudes, the / bent heads, the curv'd neck and the / counting; / Such like I love…" of "I Sing the Body Electric" become "curv'd neck and side falling head" of the wounded soldier in "The Wound-Dresser"; "His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he / dares not look on the bloody stump, / And has not yet look'd on it." The "Strong set of thighs, well carrying the trunk/ above,/ Leg fibers, knee, knee-pan, upper-leg, under-leg…" which Whitman celebrates as "not the parts and poems of the/ body only, but of the soul,/ O I say now these are the soul!" are no longer strong, nor ample, but are now "The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the/ abdomen…" It is as if Whitman begins one of his infamous catalogues in "The Wound-Dresser," but a catch

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91 Walt Whitman, "The Wound-Dresser," from *Leaves of Grass*, (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881-1882), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1881/poems/169 (accessed October 27, 2020).

92 Walt Whitman, *I Sing the Body Electric*, from *Leaves of Grass*, (New York: W. E. Chapin & Co., 1867), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1867/index.html (accessed October 27, 2020).

of emotion in his throat cuts it short, like the lives of the young men he attended to. Still, "I am faithful, I do not give out…" he says, "these and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast a fire, a / burning flame.)"

3

On, on I go, (open doors of time! open hospital doors!)
The crush's head I dress, (poor crazed hand tear not the bandage away,)
The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through I examine,
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard,
(Come sweet death! be persuaded O beautiful death!
In mercy come quickly.)

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood,
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and side falling head,
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump,
And has not yet look'd on it.

I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,
But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,
And the yellow-blue countenance see.

I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound,
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive,
While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail.

I am faithful, I do not give out,
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame.)

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Thus in silence in dreams' projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,

> The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
> I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
> Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,
> (Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross's and
> rested,
> Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)[93]

With the "impassive hand" of a true *care*-taker, Whitman believes he has allowed us, like doubting Thomas, to touch the wounds in the hands and feet of America. Unlike British poets, whom Whitman degraded as "emasculated" and only "specters in books," Whitman firmly, yet tenderly, presses the rough, manly flesh of his words against the readers'.[94] Whitman was doing "something new, closer to the body, a poetry expressed out of a primitive urge rather than the result of studied procedure."[95] Folsom and Price write:

> Whitman emphasizes that words don't come into existence as print on paper; they begin in an actual process of the body. Without "the beating of my heart," the blood does not circulate to the brain and ideas don't form; and blood needs to circulate to the arms and hands so that ideas can get put on paper by the workings of muscles and bones. And words don't get pushed out of the mouth by their own power, either, but rather by the physiological functioning of "the passing of blood and air through my lungs." Whitman often works to reattach the act of writing and speaking poetry to the functioning of the body: "I believe in the flesh and the appetites, / Seeing hearing and feeling are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle" (LG 1855, 29).

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93 Walt Whitman, "The Wound-Dresser," from *Leaves of Grass*, (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881-1882), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1881/poems/169 (accessed October 27, 2020).

94 Folsom and Price, *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, 43-45.

95 Folsom and Price, 45.

Whitman thus invents a style that captures the easy influx of sensory experience, that catalogs the world he sees, hears, smells, tastes, and touches.[96]

As we will later see in Adams's excerpted version of "The Wound-Dresser," it is in the body of the wound-dresser that Whitman invites us to identify ourselves: We are partakers in the history of his experiences. It is in his body (or, rather, soul) that we recognize our own capacity for good, as we *care* for and share in the suffering of others. We are the ones who say, "I never knew you, / Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you."[97] Whitman felt that he was in a special position to speak to and for America in this way, because of his direct experience of the Civil War and his time as wound-dresser. Whitman believed the he was, as Emerson wrote in "The Poet," "the true and only doctor; he knows and tells; he is the only teller of news, for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes."[98] Price writes:

> [Whitman] frequently suggested that the hospitals offered a key to the war and the war was *the* defining experience of the nation. Thus, his implicit argument runs, poets who lacked close contact with the war—including Bryant, Longfellow, Poet, and Emerson—could hardly speak for America. Only Whitman could claim to be the poet of modern American *experience*.[99]

Whitman believed that it was in the experiences of his body and of nature, distilled in the sensorially charged material of his poems, that all things would resonate together, charging them with a sympathetic concord. It was this sympathetic resonance

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96 Folsom and Price, 46.

97 Walt Whitman, "The Wound-Dresser," from *Leaves of Grass*, (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881-1882), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1881/poems/169 (accessed October 27, 2020).

98 Emerson, 265-266.

99 Price, *Whitman and Tradition: The Poet in His Century*, 94-95.

that would bring us into a state of reciprocating empathetic identifications that would create an American community (or American material). For Whitman (and Emerson) the more one *leaned into* this "common pulse" or sympathized with it, the more one could rely on intuition and be truly self-reliant.[100] It was in the democratic reverberations of Whitman's poems chanting together that America would recognize its relationship to all things, the reflection of their souls in nature, and thus be healed/redeemed not only through their lives, but also in their deaths. Lindeen describes Whitman's use of nature to redeem the deaths of his young soldiers in this way:

> During a dark time in American history Whitman wrote of death and nature as if the two were indivisible… The good deaths that Whitman depicted were naturalistic, and through his transcendent faith and beliefs, the lost dead were revitalized through the earth to live again. This was the essence of his Wound Dresser persona.[101]

Although to suggest that Whitman was an animist in the Emersonian sense would be untrue, it is astounding and important to see the way that Whitman harnesses the power of his poems to reattach and to redeem the body to nature as he does in "WE two—how long we were fool'd" from the sexually charged "Enfan d'Adam," which Emerson strenuously urged Whitman to cut from *Leaves of Grass*:

> WE two—how long we were fool'd!
> Now transmuted, we swiftly escape, as Nature escapes;
> We are Nature—long have we been absent, but now
> we return;
> We become plants, leaves, foliage, roots, bark;
> We are bedded in the ground—we are rocks;
> We are oaks—we grow in the openings side by side;
> We browse—we are two among the wild herds, spon-
> taneous as any;

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[100] Rancière, 191.

[101] Lindeen, 45.

> We are two fishes swimming in the sea together;
> We are what the locust blossoms are—we drop scent around the lanes, mornings and evenings;
> We are also the coarse smut of beats, vegetables, minerals;
> We are two predatory hawks—we soar above, and look down;
> We are two resplendent suns—we it is who balance ourselves, orbic and stellar—we are as two comets;
> We prowl fang'd and four-footed in the woods—we spring on prey;
> We are two clouds, forenoons and afternoons, driving overhead;
> We are seas mingling—we are two of those cheerful waves, rolling over each other, and interwetting each other;
> We are what the atmosphere is, transparent, receptive, pervious, impervious;
> We are snow, rain, cold, darkness—we are each product and influence of the globe;
> We have circled and circled till we have arrived home again—we two have;
> We have voided all but freedom, and all but our own joy.[102]

In this mixture of nature images Whitman sees reflected the freedom and joy of two liberated bodies, a new Adam and Eve, so to speak, intimate and together. This is an intimacy that Whitman always sought, most especially in the kind of "physical and emotional tenderness that he recognized existed between men."[103] As Whitman scholar, Huck Gutman notes, "The Civil War, despite or perhaps because of its violence, disruption, and widespread suffering, paradoxically allowed him to experience that

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[102] Walt Whitman, "We two—How long we were fool'd," in *Leaves of Grass*, from *Leaves of Grass*, (New York: W. E. Chapin & Co., 1867), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1867/poems/11 (accessed October 27, 2020).

[103] Huck Gutman, "'Drum-Taps' (1865)," in J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_83.html.

comradeship on the most profound level."[104] In Whitman's poetic expression of these experiences in "Drum-Taps" he places "The Wound-Dresser" at both the literal and climatic center. Here, most especially in the final parenthetical outpouring of the poem, Whitman gives us a sensorially charged illustration, that in love and companionship, in the physical act of *caring* for our fellow humans in need, we reattach all things: "(Many a soldier's / loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested, / Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)"[105]

As I will illustrate in the following chapters, John Adams has attempted to tap into this sympathetic resonance in his musical setting of "The Wound-Dresser," in order to amplify the emotional content of Whitman's mission of *care*.

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104 Gutman, "'Drum-Taps' (1865)."

105 Walt Whitman, "The Wound-Dresser," from *Leaves of Grass*, (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881-1882), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1881/poems/169 (accessed October 27, 2020).

CHAPTER 3:
ADAMS—A SONG OF HIMSELF

> It would be nice to hear someone say, 'Look at that gas station in the moonlight. It's pure John Adams.'
>
> -Adams[106]

John Coolidge Adams was born into a New England family of artists and amateur performers in 1947. John's father and mother, Carl Adams and Elinore Coolidge, spent John's early years struggling to maintain a semblance of economic stability amidst the bohemian affluence of Woodstock, Vermont. It was at the extravagant alcohol fueled gatherings of what Adams recalls as "politically liberal, intellectual Jews living in rural Vermont" that he was first introduced to classical music.[107]

After his father's brief excursion into full-time artistic work, Carl took a job as a traveling salesman and pragmatically Adams's mother and father moved the family to the solidly conservative East Concord, New Hampshire. Here, during his third grade year, Adams had, as he says, "[his] first serious experiences with music."[108] He began to take clarinet lessons from his father, and, after being inspired by a biography about Mozart, he began taking regular lessons in composition, harmony, and theory at the nearby private Saint Paul's School. Beyond that, the Christmas 1957 arrival of a "high fidelity" 33-rpm record player into the Adams house took John by storm. He says, "no other event in my

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106 Alex Ross, "The Harmonist," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings On An American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2006), 33.

107 John Adams, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (New York: Picador, 2008), 9.

108 Adams, 14.

childhood changed my life as abruptly."[109] Lying in front of the record player's single speaker for hours at a time, Adams listened to an ever expanding list of LP's brought home weekly by his father and sometimes by his much older sister: Brandenburg Concertos, Beethoven symphonies, Mozart string quartets, *Rhapsody in Blue*, the big band recordings of Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington, Pete Seeger, the Mozart clarinet Concerto and A-Major Quintet.[110]

Adams's rapid growth as a clarinetist soon outpaced the offerings of the local public schools, so he joined the New Hampshire State Hospital Auxiliary Orchestra, "a community ensemble sponsored by the main mental hospital in the state," and, during the summers, the Nevers' 2nd Regiment Band, a semiprofessional ensemble that gave concerts in the city parks in and around Concord. As mentioned in the opening chapter, during these formative pre-teen years, while wandering in the woods surrounding his home, Adams developed his alter ego, "Bruce Craigmore," a "New Hampshire" composer who was some amalgam of Adams's childhood heroes, Thoreau and Bernstein. By the age of thirteen, Adams had determined to become a composer.

At a summer music camp in 1962 Adams began conducting in earnest, and, stirred by this newfound authority as a conductor, his teenage sexuality, and the sensuousness of Bernstein's newly released *West Side Story*, he "felt most aroused to the potential of becoming an artist who might forge a language, Whitman-like, out of the compost of American life."[111] Throughout high school, Adams continued to excel on the

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[109] Adams, 16.

[110] Adams, 16.

[111] Adams, 23.

clarinet. Adams took the train along the Merrimack from Concord to Boston to play with the Greater Boston Youth Orchestra and to take lessons. He spent his summers, at the Congregation of the Arts music festival on the campus of Dartmouth College, playing with the orchestra, studying conducting with the music director, and taking lessons in harmony & analysis from a protégé of Boulanger.

In 1965, Adams entered Harvard University at a time of explosive musical, social, and political change when the Beatles, acid-trips, Burroughs, and war protests were ramifying the halls with Ancient Greek, Boulezian ideology, and Stockhausen's dispassionate scientific approach to composition. In 1969, Adams dodged the draft, graduated magna-cum-laude, and traded out the Boulez scores he had toted religiously for a copy of John Cage's book *Silence,* given to him by his mother as a graduation present. Adams decided to hang on for a few more years at Harvard, and, with a full scholarship, hundreds of hours to spend experimenting in the Electronic Music Studio, and a serious relationship with the violin playing, black soul music loving Hawley Currens, shook off his fears about composing and began his search for his own personal compositional voice. Two years later, along with his college sweetheart, now wife, Adams took his newly minted masters degree, piled his possessions into a Volkswagen Beetle, and spurned on by depictions of the West he'd encountered in the writings of Cage, Kerouac, and Ginsberg, headed towards the Pacific.

Adams's romantic notion of being, as he would later write, "proletarian worker during the day and avant-garde composer at night," proved a "pipe dream."[112] Adams

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[112] Adams, 68.

spent his first year in Berkeley, California unloading shipping containers at a warehouse for an import company called Regal Apparel, by day, and at night, drained by the day's work, drinking cheap wine. After a year of no music, an old friend directed him towards a position at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music where he would teach composition and organize the school's New Music concerts. Adams stayed in this position from 1972-1982, during which time he was able to slowly find his own voice as a composer in a milieu that welcomed the process oriented, homemade modular synthesizer sounds that typified Adams's early avant-garde experiments.[113] During this period his marriage dissolved rapidly and, by late 1974, Adams lived alone in a tiny two-room beach house.[114]

For Adams, the last half of the 70's was filled with what has become the stuff of West coast avant-garde legend: hanging out in an abandoned hotel with a handful of performance artists and students from Mills College in Oakland, lugging cumbersome synthesizers up stairs, and carefully using microphones to collect "found objects" on cassette tapes for future compositional use. However, as time went on, Adams found himself more and more frustrated by the Cage-ian brand of patience required to appreciate the music in which he was immersed. Adams writes:

> I was charmed for the first half hour, and then I became gradually bored and finally irritated, a frequent behavioral vector for audiences of avant-garde music in those days…I could feel a restlessness and lingering dissatisfaction with the avant-garde position. Boredom has its uses in a work of art…But the avant-garde, especially the musical version of

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[113] Adams, 70.

[114] Adams, 79.

> it, brought boredom to the foreground as a fundamental aesthetic principle.[115]

During this period of trial and error, two compositions that helped to shake Adams from his boredom were Terry Riley's, *In C*, with its slowly evolving musical form and incessant pulsation on C, and Steve Reich's precisely organized and sensually energized *Drumming*.[116] [117] These works, as well as others by Philip Glass, pointed the way forward for Adams. The way that these so-called minimalist composers built "large, expressive structures by the repetition of small elements" made sense to Adams.[118] For Adams, this way of composing heralded back to Italian Renaissance architects who built magnificently ornate buildings though the repetition of small motifs. With this newfound sense of direction Adams composed what he considers his first mature composition at the suggestion of his friend, the pianist, Mack McCray. In 1977 *Phrygian Gates* emerged, a twenty-four minute work for piano, and initiated Adams into Minimalism.[119] The now thirty-year-old Adams was beginning to find his voice and his footing; Adams even transformed an initially horrid premiere of his *Wavemaker*, performed by the *Kronos Quartet*, into one of his most recognized compositions, *Shaker Loops*.[120]

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115 Adams, 85-86.

116 Keith Potter, "Minnimalism (USA)," *Grove Music Online* (January 2014), https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.libproxy.unl.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002257002.

117 Adams, 89.

118 Adams, 93.

119 Adams, 88.

120 In *Hallelujah Junction,* Adams describes the comedy of errors surrounding the premiere of *Wavemaker*, including his trip to the Santa Cruz Hospital ER after being stung by a number of bees while on a walk in Golden Gate park and losing consciousness. After the premiere, Adams returned to the under-rehearsed and overly sparse *Wavemaker* and edit it extensively; he made the addition of three string instruments, including a double bass, and renamed the piece *Shaker Loops*. 90-91.

Although established as a local Bay Area avant-garde composer, Adams had not received much attention beyond his own musical circles; this changed in 1980 when the young music director of the San Francisco Symphony, Edo de Waart, commissioned a large-scale work from Adams for the inaugural season at the orchestra's new venue, the Louise M. Davies Symphony Hall. Adams composed a gigantic surging Choral Symphony called *Harmonium*, which premiered in April of 1981 to thrilled critics and enthused audiences.[121] Composers and conductors from around the world began to look up Adams in San Francisco to listen to the tape of *Harmonium*, and after Steve Reich introduced Adams to the head of ECM Records the studio produced a commercially available recording of the work at significant expense.[122]

Over the next few years, Adams, now remarried and with a child on the way, was hard at work building his reputation and fulfilling commissions. During this time, he first met Peter Sellars, the young director and fellow Harvard alum, who would have an enormous impact on his creative life. At their first meeting, during the summer of 1983, Sellars proposed that they collaborate on an opera; Sellars already had the title worked out, *Nixon in China*.

It took Adams nearly two years to realize that *Nixon in China* was a brilliant idea for an opera, and in the meantime, he simultaneously secured the position of composer in residence with the San Francisco Symphony and seemed to lose his compositional powers, entering a "perplexing and deeply disturbing creative block."[123] Adams describes

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[121] Adams, 114.

[122] Adams, 115.

[123] Adams, 128.

recurrent nightmares in which Schoenberg abducts his children during this period.[124] Although Adams had in certain respects arrived at what he calls his "minimalist-inspired pulse-driven personal language," he still felt a deep need to get back in touch with his personal and musical roots to learn what his "real identity" was and to "be comfortable" with himself "both as a person and as a creative artist."[125] Adams writes, "my own personal narrative was about extricating myself from what I felt to be the cold, dead hand of the academic avant-garde, from the theory-bound orthodoxy that held sway in the sixties, and from the fealty paid to European serialism and its offshoots."[126]

Adams also felt a level of frustration at what the music writer and journalist, Thomas May, describes as being pigeonholed into the minimalist fold.[127] Adams needed something else, something more. Reflecting, nearly a quarter-century later, Adams writes:

> A weakness of the Minimalist aesthetic was its tiresomely uniform surfaces. To be sure, in the best of Glass's and Reich's works the uniformity of texture could produce in the listener an ecstatic, trancelike state. This was the Minimalist doctrine of order and precision, the clean machine, the answer to the chaos and jarring unpredictability of post-serialism. But I wanted something less sleek and orderly than the orthodox Minimalist sound, something less predictable, capable of evoking multiple layers of atmosphere and activity.[128]

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124 Adams, 129.

125 Adams, 128-129, 230.

126 Adams, 257.

127 Thomas May, *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, xiv.

128 Adams, 227.

Adams, like all composers after Cage, had to contend with the aesthetic challenge posed in *Silence.*[129] Riley and Reich had provided Adams with a way forward, but Adams needed to make a new move—to go behind Cage, as it were. Adams looked to authorize and focus his emerging compositional style by intoning the 19th century optimism of Ives and Whitman, Emerson and Dickinson. Adams felt he needed to follow his intuition to embrace the musical desire found in Wagner and, in the words of May, "the maverick impulses of Ives…"[130] The child of this struggle was the forty-minute symphony, *Harmonielehre,* with its title taken from a treatise on tonal harmony by Schoenberg.[131] *Harmonielehre* or "theory of harmony" was Adams's statement that tonal harmony was here to stay. As if channeling his childhood alter-ego, Bruce Craigmore, Adams lay aside the Buddhist Cage-ism of letting the tones be themselves and took up Emerson's dictum to "trust your emotion."[132] May comments, "purists of the minimalist flock were bothered by its reintroduction of a vaster emotional rhetoric that had been a casualty of the aesthetic battles of recent decades."[133]

Soon after this breakthrough, Adams joined the now artistic director of the American National Theatre, Peter Sellars, and the American poet and librettist, Alice Goodman to begin work on *Nixon in China.* After two years of hard work, *Nixon In China* premiered in October 1987 at the Houston Grand Opera. Despite Adams's own

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[129] For more on this topic see—Erik Anderson, "In a silent way," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* (Jan. 2020, 12:1) DOI: 10.1080/20004214.2020.1712764.

[130] May, xvi.

[131] Adams, 129.

[132] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Emerson's Essays* (1926, repr., New York: HaperCollins Publishers, 1990), 41.

[133] May, xv.

admission that his "vocal writing could strain the limits of even the most talented singer," the opera received more than the anticipated number of performances.[134] As May describes, Adams's "Whitmanesque openness to artistic experience led him to embrace an expansive array of styles and forms."[135] Like Whitman, Adams would defy categorization; entraining himself on Whitman's use of vernacular English and Ives's use of popular music, Adams developed a compositional style that intoned his roots in American jazz and rock music, embraced the pulsation and tonal harmony of minimalism, and strove for the pathos of Wagner.[136]

In the year following *Nixon in China*'s successful first run, Adams came across a book on Whitman while browsing in a bookstore near his home in Berkley, California. The book paired Whitman texts with graphic historic photographs of young Confederate and Union soldiers wounded and dying. Adams would connect the link between the rawness of the 19th century images and the stories he had heard from his San Francisco friends of the losses they endured at the hands of the 1980's AIDS epidemic. While Adams had originally planned to set prose cameos of Whitman's account of his work as a nurse on the Civil War frontlines, as he began to work more intimately with the Whitman texts, Adams says, "I found myself plunged into the memory of a more personal story, that of the long, slow decline of my father from Alzheimer's disease."[137] The changes Alzheimer's wrought on his father were excruciating for Adams, and Adams was terrified

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134 Adams, 142, 145.

135 May, xv.

136 Adams, 90, 181.

137 Adams, 150.

to return to New Hampshire to see his father, Carl. But when he finally did visit his father, in the fall of 1987, Adams recounts, "he had tears in his eyes, so overwhelmed was he at the sight of his son and little granddaughter."[138] In the days before Carl's death, Adams visited again, this time his father almost unrecognizable. Adams writes, "all I could find comfort in were his hands, which still bore the vestigial bumps and calluses from his years of driving around New England and from playing the clarinet…When I came to write my Whitman piece I kept thinking about my mother's struggle and the devotion with which she nursed him."[139] For Adams, the image of his mother caring for his dying father had become a stand-in for the wound-dresser's care of the wrecked bodies of civil war soldiers. Adams's mother, like the wound-dresser, was faithful, and did not give out, nursing her husband "with impassive hand, (yet deep in [her] breast a fire, a burning flame.)"[140]

It is hard for me to resist the urge to imagine Adams sitting across from Whitman, sharing stories and a pint; turning over the past slowly and carefully to feel with rough hands, the small dents and scratches that lie deep and so often unseen by the casual on-looker. In a certain sense, this is probably not so far from the truth. Adams describes repeating a text over and over until "I have internalized its inner rhythms" so that "its musical setting has a sense of rightness…"[141] Couched in Adams's almost cliché comment about text setting is a particular aesthetic idea that is central to American

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138 Adams, 151.

139 Adams, 152.

140 Walt Whitman, "The Wound-Dresser," in *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860-1861), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1881/poems/169.

141 Adams, 223.

Romanticism. Adams believes that he can resonate, that he can sympathize, with the text, or rather, with its thoughts, and take them into his own personal experience. In the world of his personal experience he believes he can build a bridge, using the symbols of his music, between the text and the experience of modern America, thereby participating in the continued creation of the American material. Adams takes on the Whitmanian idea of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," in which, "the similitudes of the past and those of the / future," tie his experiences to those of Whitman's and, more broadly, to all American life— "it avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a / generation, or ever so many generations hence."[142] As I have, in part, re-expressed, Adams's own idealized telling of his biography highlights all the tell-tell signs of an American Romantic, a deepened appreciation of beauty—a rejection of classicism—the artist as individual—interest in folk culture.

Adams's autobiography displays an astounding and deliberate connectivity to the most iconic American cultural movements of both the East and West coasts, beginning with his early years growing up in New England, the enclave of Transcendentalism, in which the Americana that infected Ives was also his to claim. Disillusioned by the European traditions, Adams, like Emerson, sought to break free from those European traditions in order to find his own individual voice as a composer.[143] Adams began to find this voice in the intellectual stimulation of the West coast avant-garde, and the pulsating, repetition of minimalism. But, it is Whitman (Ives, Dickinson, Emerson, et al), however,

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[142] Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," in *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860-1861), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1860/poems/122.

[143] It should be noted that with this statement I am buying into Adams's own self-authored mythology.

that brings Adams "to a boil," so to speak, and enables the expanding capacity to process expanding caregiving in *The Wound-Dresser*. What will emerge then, is that Adams has come to understand much of his current times, particularly the aids epidemic, in terms of historical repetition with the times of 1861-1865.[144]

Musicologist John Kapusta argues that Adams's early pulsing, minimalist inspired works, such as *Phrygian Gates* (1977) and *Shaker Loops* (1978), were rooted in the psychology of Abraham Maslow and represent a desire on the part of Adams to share in the mystical experience of self-actualization that was ecstatic and carnal.[145] However, the omission of any mention of Maslow in either *Hallelujah Junction* or *The John Adams Reader* significantly weakens the force of this claim. What Kapusta does effectively highlight, however, is that Adams's music, like Whitman's 'al fresco' poetry, is sensorially charged and that his focus on pulsation as a musical device is intended to be understood not only through the physical act of hearing, but also, like much of American vernacular music of the 20th and 21st centuries, on the skin and in the chest:[146]:

> I'm not the kind of composer that takes a sheet of manuscript paper and a pencil and goes off into another

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144 Other parallels Adams may have come to think in terms of could include social activism & reform (temperance & poor relief), civil rights (abolition, anti-slavery, rise of women's rights movement), student rebellions (student revolt at Harvard), utopian communes (Brook Farm, Fruitlands, etc.), interest in Eastern religions (Vendata/Vedic & Sufi literature, religious mysticism & the occult), return to nature movement (Walden, camping/hiking tours), literary (new musical) ferment (American 'Renaissance' especially exemplified as Whitman's ferment vis-à-vis Emerson).

145 Maslow (1908-1970) was an American psychologist, who is most well known for his hierarchy of needs. In his theory of self-actualization he argued that the primary goal of psychotherapy should be the integration of the self. For a more detailed understanding of Maslow and self-actualization see Nishi Tripathi and Moakumla, "A Valuation of Abraham Maslow's Theory of Self-Actualization for the Enhancement of Quality of Life" in *Indian Journal of Health & Wellbeing* (2018, 9 (3): 499–504) http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=129285067&site=ehost-live.

146 With regards to the 'al fresco' comment, Adams takes pains to put in writing that is both his connection to the body and to nature that are the starting point for his compositional process. Adams writes, "I usually get my first ideas when I'm walking or on a hike in the mountains. There's something about physical movement that's very productive for creating thinking." May, 20.

> room with no other apparatus and creates music," Adams told an interviewer in 1986. "For me, creativity is very much like being an athlete. … It's a very physical activity for me. … I'm of a breed of composer for whom the physical touch of the sound is paramount to the creative act." Phrases like "very much like … an athlete, " "physical activity," and "physical touch of sound" all evoked the muscular demands of *Birth of a Sonority* and *Shaker Loops*. In the image of Maslow and Palestine before him, Adams was a composer in touch with his body.[147]

I find it unusual that Kapusta chooses to attribute Adams's reference to the athleticism of his music to a Maslowian influence, rather than to those literary and musical influences that Adams openly references; Adams is not cryptic in this respect. This is particularly true when you read Kapusta's very next paragraph:

> When Adams elaborated on this point, he suggested that the physicality he had in mind was expressly carnal. Referring to a line of text from *Harmonium*, Adams's 1981 follow-up to *Shaker Loops* for chorus and orchestra, Adams told the interviewer, "Then there's this wonderful image of throwing away the compass, 'Done with the compass'. … And in a sense, my odyssey as a composer has had to do with throwing away the compass, throwing away the chart, and saying I believe that my intuitive sense is far more powerful than any rational, intellectual processes."[148]

Adams, in very plain language, is not talking about Maslowian "peak-experiences," but rather, by deliberately quoting the transcendental adjacent Emily Dickinson when he says, "done with the compass," and by using the phrase "intuitive sense," is deliberately and unapologetically implicating himself in the genealogy of Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson, and Ives.[149] Adams himself, in discussing his study of

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147 John Kapusta, "The Self-Actualization of John Adams," in *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 12, no. 3 (2018): 333-334.

148 Kapusta, 334.

149 Kapusta, 334.

Ives's fourth symphony, draws the thread among the "transcendental optimism" (idealism) of Ives, his own compositional life, and the contention with the thick historical events fomenting in the contemporaneous United States:

> What I love about Ives and I particularly love about this symphony is that it's fundamentally a spiritually optimistic work. What strikes me about this is that the words written in Europe at this time were so bathed in pessimism—I feel that in the common comparison between the last movement of the Ives Fourth and the last movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, they both kind of fade out into twinkling outer space, but that the Mahler is one of deep, Schopenhauerian resignation and pessimism, and the Ives is just the opposite. It's a kind of New England transcendental optimism. For me, this is a tremendously meaningful thing because it defines a spiritual difference between the Eastern and Western hemispheres, and I think that, although a lot of American composers have been ridiculed and belittled in Europe for many years, as being naïve or optimistic or simplistic, I think in a sense what makes American music very powerful now—and this includes jazz and ethnic music, as well as American classical music—is there is a fundamental optimism about it—whether it's Cage or Gershwin or Copland."[150]

Adams seems to have taken a page from the Epilogue of the aesthetic treatise Ives wrote to accompany his *Concord Sonata*, entitled "Essays before a Sonata," when Ives describes his aesthetic schema: "'substance' leans towards optimism, and 'manner' pessimism. We do not know that all this is so, but we feel, or rather know by intuition that it is so…"[151] For Ives, this "substance" is born in "the spiritual consciousness" and has a moral fibre or strength of character that gives whatever it imbues a sense of

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[150] John Adams, Interviewed by Ingram Marshall, "John Adams on Conducting Ives," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Readings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey, Amadeus Press, 2006), 268.

[151] Charles Ives, "Essays before a Sonata," in *Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music* (New York, N.Y., Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), 161.

rightness.[152] Even in the very narrow sample of Adams's words that have been used in this chapter, it should be noted that the idea of *in a sense* is important to Adams's way of thinking. For Adams, American music *is* in a sense. This could have been elucidated from Adams's brief comment about text repetition alone; not only does repetition serves as a means of bodily connection to thought (like Whitman's catalogues), but, for Adams, internalized experience or intuition can be relied on because of its "sense of rightness."[153] Still, intuition is not a neutral faculty. Like the pedagogy of intuition found in Wordsworth, in which you learn and invigorate your powers of intuition by entraining on nature, or rather, good objects, Adams entrained himself on the substance of Whitman (Ives, Dickinson, Emerson, et al). It is only a small leap to say that composer David Schiff was describing the "substance" in the music of Adams when he wrote in *The Atlantic*:

> Composers today can get tripped up by contrary expectations. They are told to be mavericks in the hope that quirkiness will lure bright young listeners from alternative rock. But they are also told to make their music accessible and romantic, in order to reach—or at least not repel—the traditional (and older) concertgoer. What sets Adams apart, even more than his technical flair, is his ability to heed these mixed signals with a Whitmanesque desire to embrace contradictions. Adams's music contains multitudes of ideas and moods.[154]

Adams may have rediscovered his musical joy in the pulsating, repetition of minimalism, but he was looking for the emotive potentialities of a less restrictive

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[152] Ives, 160.

[153] Adams, 223.

[154] David Schiff, "Memory Spaces (*On the Transmigration of Souls*) (2002)," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey, Amadeus Press, 2006), 190.

harmonic language that would allow him to express these multitudes in his music.[155] In his conversation with Thomas May, Adams admits:

> You can tell in a work like *Phrygian Gates*, which was written in 1977, that I was uncomfortable with the rigors imposed by the minimalist aesthetic. Right from the start, you can sense that I'm already gnawing at my ropes and trying to get free of that sort of procedural rigor. I needed to find a musical language that could contain my expressive needs, a language that was formally and emotionally much more malleable, much more capable of a sudden change of mood, one that could be both blissfully serene and then violently explosive within the same minute.[156]

Like Ives before him, Adams's music is, "aesthetically ambitious."[157] That is to say, Adams's music is fiercely individualistic, and, at the same time maximally conjuring with the magnitude of his contemporaneous moment in a way that intones the affirmative potentialities of his compositional powers. This is potently felt in *The Wound-Dresser*, where Adams conjures and processes Whitman's poetry and his times through and as a relation to the AIDS epidemic and, more privately, Adams's experience of his father's decline and his mother's caretaking. This is a composer who writes music that is both deeply personal and, as Schiff writes, "spiritualized democracy."[158]

But, what does this Whitmanesque quality sound like in a piece of Adams's music? I will argue, in chapter four, that *The Wound-Dresser*, provides a well-spring of

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155 "In my case, during my formative years, I was striving for a language that had these three critical elements without which I couldn't live: (a) pulsation, (b) tonality and/or modality, and (c) repetition." John Adams, Interviewed by Thomas May, "John Adams Reflects on His Career," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Readings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey, Amadeus Press, 2006), 23.

156 May, 22.

157 Schiff, 189.

158 Schiff, 193.

musical material with which to gather a sense of the ways in which Adams, by excerpting Whitman, raises the matter of the historical churning, detail, and extraordinary human loss to the level of sustaining the artistic conjuring I have called “aesthetically ambitious.” I will illustrate that the prominent aesthetic value that Adams places on the intelligibility of the Whitman’s text, his use of symbolic instrumentation, pulsating rhythms, and his energetic text painting all work in dynamic concord to create a sense of sympathy with Whitman’s text within the context of the different but comparable magnitude of the confounding historical trauma of his own contemporaneous America.

CHAPTER 4:
MUSICAL AVATARS IN *THE WOUND-DRESSER*

> Perhaps the memories of the old soldier, to which this man still holds tenderly, may be turned into a "strain" or a "sonata," and though the music does not contain, or even suggest any of the old war-songs, it will be as sincerely American as the subject, provided his (the composer's) interest, spirit, and character sympathize with, or intuitively coincide with that of the subject.
>
> -Ives[159]

Introduction

The epigraph above, from Ives's "Essays before a Sonata," invites the question: What, substantively, does "it will be as sincerely American as the subject" mean? That art has (or might have) a key role in the making of a mental shape of the Civil War? For Ives, this is a matter of sympathy and intuition. But, what about for Adams? As I argued in the previous chapter and will continue to build out in the following analysis of *The Wound-Dresser,* Adams grapples with Whitman's text and his own contemporaneous America through the 'resonating' of sources, or, as Ives would say, sympathizing with, the good objects of Emerson, Ives, and Whitman. Adams, like Whitman, sustains a faith in a unity that extends beyond oneself to find a union with something larger, to which Adams's score attests.

In *The Wound-Dresser,* Adams utilizes a baritone vocalist, two contrasting solo instruments, and a keyboard sampler (Kurzweil K2000), in addition to an orchestra of

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[159] Charles Ives, "Essays before a Sonata," in *Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music* (New York, N.Y., Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), 164.

two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, clarinet, bass clarinet, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet (doubling piccolo trumpet), timpani, and strings. Adams harnesses these large musical forces to go beyond the surface imagery of the text and peer into the space between the words and into is own emotional life to compose a musical landscape that evokes multiple layers of atmosphere and activity. In this chapter I will track three, often overlapping and intertwined, musical layers in *The Wound-Dresser*: the vocal line, the orchestra, and the solo violin and trumpet. I will use a selection of examples from Adams's score to argue that Adams orchestrates a musical avatar to Whitman's poem, by projecting the subjective function onto Whitman's text, amplifying the text's varying degrees of emotional intensity.[160]

The Vocal Line

In the liner notes for *Fearful Symmetries/The Wound-Dresser*, American pianist and music critic Sarah Cahill writes:

> There is a powerful tension in Whitman's poem between the physical and the metaphysical, between bodily sickness, which he records with almost scientific detachment ("From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand/I undo the clotted lint"), and a spiritual transcendence of the corporeal. Whitman the attentive nurse coexists with Whitman the

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[160] I have used the word avatar here in the sense of Giles Deleuze's *Cinema 1. L'Image-Mouvement* (1983) where the movement image (cinema) can incarnate to the point of view of perception, action, or affection. In her book, *Avatar Bodies*, Ann Weinstone futher defines avatar as a zone of reciprocal relationality where, "expressions such as sound, image, gesture, powers, and personality" are "involute." For Weinstone, Deleuze's use of the word avatar poses the ethical question, "how might we induce caretaking, or more commonly, guarantee responsibility for others when we are fatally separate, self-interested invidviduals?" I find this parallel between this usage of the word avatar and sympathy to be particularly enticing; Ann Weinstone, *Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Posthumanism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 24, 40-42, 118-119.

> visionary, and Adams is acutely sensitive to this dual role in his setting.[161]

Cahill is correct in calling to our attention the large Whitmanian themes of corporality and spirituality. However it is not the “transcendence", but rather the *phenomenon* of the corporeal that Adams picks up on in Whitman’s poem. For Whitman, spirituality is in and of the body. The musical sensitivity with which Adams sets Whitman’s *sensorially* charged text is immediately evident in both the setting of natural speech rhythms in the baritone’s vocal line and Adams’s use of text painting. Adams has, as he said, “internalized its inner rhythms” in a way that not only has a “sense of rightness” but that, as Cahill asserts, “enhances and deepens, rather than distorts, Whitman’s lines.”[162]

Because of the prominent aesthetic value that Adams places on the intelligibility of the Whitman’s text, Adams’s treatment of text in *The Wound-Dresser* differs from many of his earlier works, such as *Harmonium*, in which the chorus unfurls the text slowly one piece at a time in an orthodox Minimalist procedure. This kind of minimalist treatment of text can also be seen in *Nixon in China* where, “certain words are repeated so often…that their meaning is stripped away” (see ex. 1a and 1b).[163]

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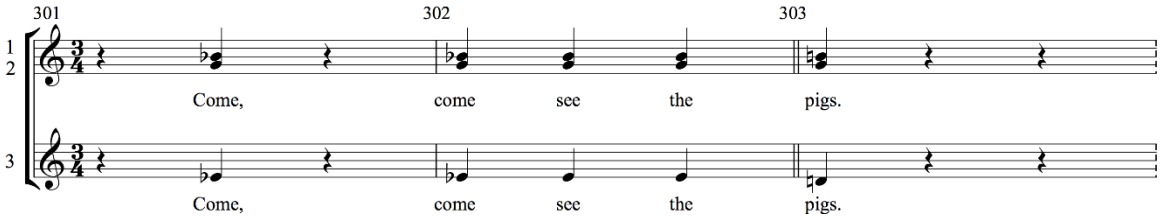
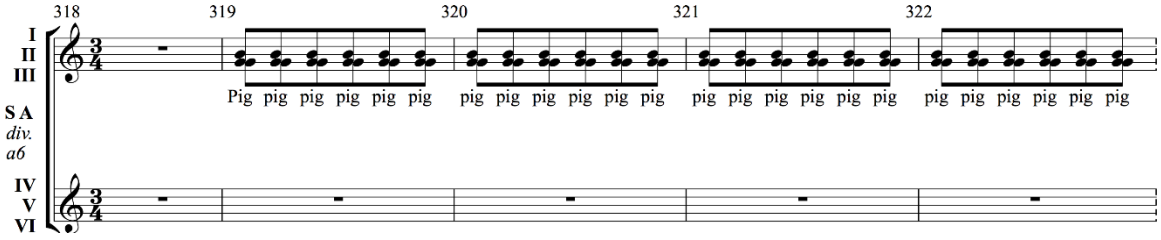
[161] Sarah Cahill, “*Fearful Symmetries* and *The Wound-Dresser* (1988),” in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey, Amadeus Press, 2006), 124.

[162] John Adams, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (New York: Picador, 2008), 223; Cahill, 125.

[163] David Schwarz, "Postmodernism, the Subject, and the Real in John Adams's “Nixon in China”," *Indiana Theory Review 13, no. 2* (1992): http://www.jstor.org/stable/24046021, 126.



Example 1a. *Nixon in China,* Act II, Scene 1, mm. 301-303.[164]



Example 1b. *Nixon in China,* Act II, Scene 1, mm. 318-322.[165]

Jeanette Baur writes in her 2001 dissertation, *Das Verhältnis von Musik und Sprache in The Wound-Dresser von John Adams*, "the Wound-Dresser demonstrates an even stronger reaction of the music to the text, in which Adams has set this (the text) to the music in a extremely nuanced manner and in the process different semantic, but also conveying and showing the formal and structural aspects of the poem."[166]

In order to musically convey the formal and structural aspects of the text, Adams sets almost the entirety of Whitman's poem. Cahill elaborates:

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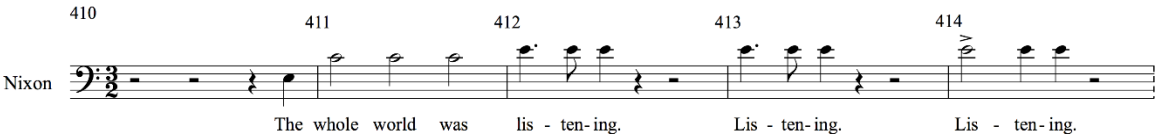
164 John Adams, *Nixon in China: An Opera In Three Acts* (Hedon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company, 1999).

165 John Adams, *Nixon in China: An Opera In Three Acts* (Hedon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company, 1999).

166 "The Wound-Dresser zeigt eine noch starkere Reaktion der Musik auf den Text, in dem Adams diesen ausserst differenziert in Musik gesetzt hat und dabei verschiedene semantische, aber auch formale Aspekte des Gedichts vermittelt und dargestellt werden." Jeanette Baur, "Das Verhältnis von Musik und Sprache in *The Wound-Dresser* von John Adams," (diss., Musikwissenschatfliches Institut Basel, 2001), 12.

> Adams chose to omit the prefatory section of the poem, in which the narrator as an old man is asked to talk about his experiences, to "be witness again, paint the mightiest armies of earth./Of those armies so rapid so wondrous what saw you to tell us?/What stays with you latest and deepest?" The main body of the poem, then, is a flashback in which the narrator tells not of wondrous armies but of the suffering war victims. By beginning his piece with the hospital scene—"Bearing the bandages, water and sponge"—Adams places us firmly in the immediate present. "It was mostly a matter of tone," [Adams] explains. "The first section is an overture to the actual event, the vision, and seems very dated, but the moment Whitman says, 'Bearing the bandages,' he is speaking very plainly."[167]

Adams maintains Whitman's tone of immediacy and plain speaking, by not only setting nearly the entirety of Whitman's poem, but also by forgoing almost any repetition of the text, choosing to do so only twice throughout the nineteen odd minutes of declamatory vocal line. The first instance of text repetition, in bars 158-159, feels initially as though it is a bit of *Nixon in China* peaking through, with the word "life" repeated for the same duration, on the same D4, and in the same strong downbeat position; all while underscored by undulating staccato sextuplets in the violins (see ex. 2a and 2b).



Example 2a. *Nixon in China*, Act 1, Scene 1, mm. 410-414..[168]

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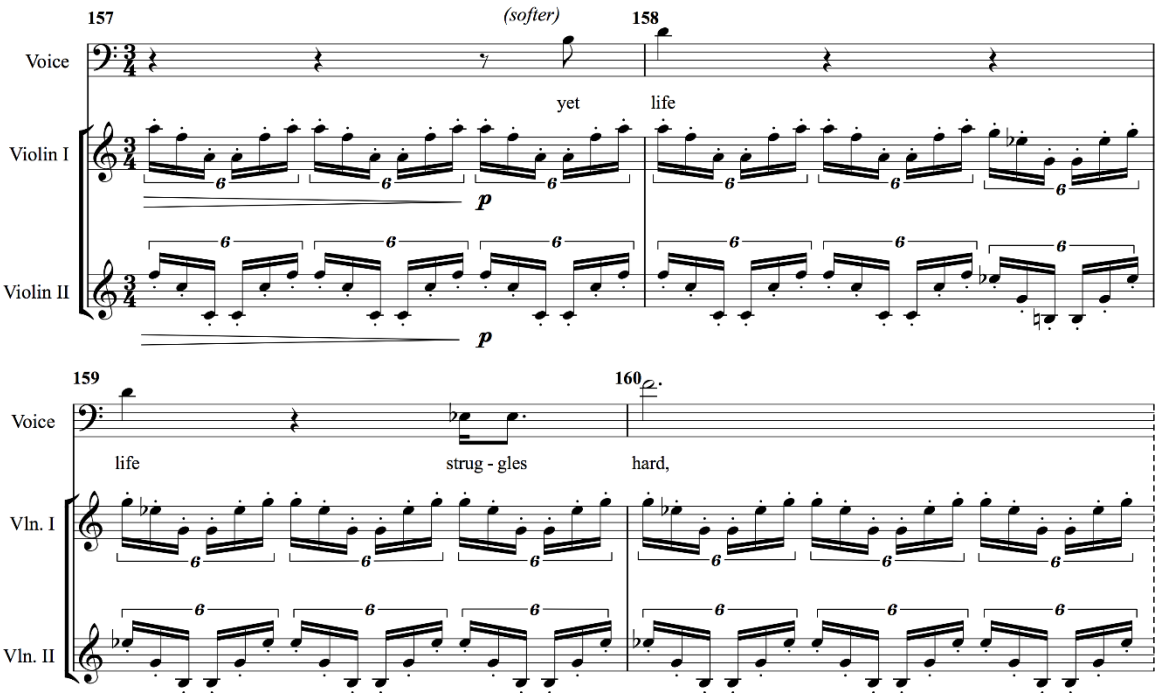
167 Cahill, 124.

168 John Adams, *Nixon in China: An Opera In Three Acts* (Hedon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company, 1999).



Example 2b. Repetition of the word "life" in mm. 157-160.[169]

However, a more convincing musical narrative is that the repetition of "life" is used deliberately to amplify the emotional content the singer is working out, in struggling with the bigness of "life struggles hard." Over the racing pulse of the violins, the singer works to form coherent words and mentally find the end of the phrase. Adams has composed a vocal line that amplifies the sensorial and emotional quality of Whitman's text in at least three specific ways: 1. The phrase "yet life [life] struggles hard" spans four measures with an eighth-note pick up to a downbeat quarter-note on m. 158, two quarter rests, a second downbeat quarter-note on mm. 159, quarter-note rest, and a sixteenth-note, dotted-eighth pick-up to a dotted half-note on the downbeat of m. 160. This

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169 John Adams, *The Wound-Dresser* for baritone voice and orchestra, text by Walt Whitman (Hedon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company, 1989).

rhythmic organization reflects the spoken phrase with the stressed word, "life" coming on the strongest beat of the measure, the downbeat, and following the spoken inflection is melodically higher than "yet." "Life" is also longer in duration to accommodate the word's diphthong. "Struggles" comes on the third beat, the second strongest beat of the three-four bar with the leap up to the F4 "hard," elongated to intensify the quality of the sentence. 2. Adams keeps this phrase very high in the *tessitura* of the baritone with "life" sitting in one of the most precarious parts of the voice, the middle of the *passaggio,* where the musical indication of "(softer)" is a significant technical challenge for the vocalist. The singer must then immediately execute a treacherously difficult leap across the disjunct and dissonant interval of a ninth on the text "struggles hard." Because of the nature of the vocal instrument, that is, that the singer's instrument is, quite literally, their body, the meaning of the text is immediately manifested in the bodily effort of the singer. 3. The major third leap from B-flat to D of the vocal line of "yet life" anticipates "struggles hard" as it dissonantly pushes against the A, C, and E-flat of the orchestra. The vocal line then makes a painful melodic journey across a major-seventh, falling D4 to E-flat3, then leaping a minor-ninth, E-flat3 to F4 on "struggles" creating, along with the orchestra, a dissonant cluster chord built B-flat, C, E-flat, F, G on the downbeat of m. 160. As Adams himself reflected on his use of harmony to Thomas May, "at the core of a moment in music lies some form of pain, no matter how attenuated or muted."[170] Adams's use of harmonic and melodic dissonance in bars 157-160 show clear intention to serve as a musical avatar to the description of struggle in Whitman's text.

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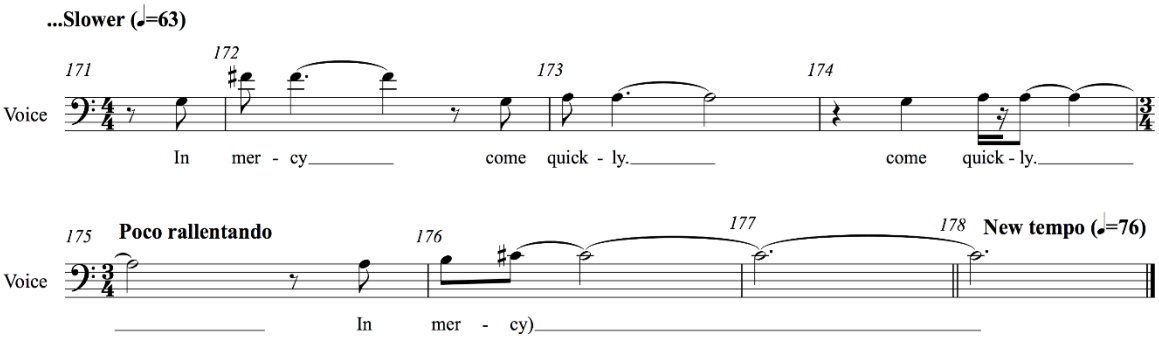
[170] John Adams, Interviewed by Thomas May, "John Adams Reflects on His Career," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Readings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey, Amadeus Press, 2006).

Only a few bars later, in mm. 172-178, we hear the final instance of text repetition in *The Wound-Dresser*, along with a slight reordering of the text (see ex. 3).

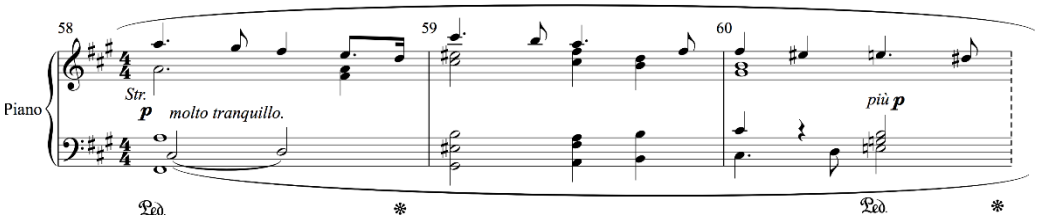


Example 3. Mm. 172-178 repetition and reordering of line 44 of Whitman's text, "In mercy come quickly."[171]

The initial "in mercy" cries out, pleading for death to come with a disjunct leap up a major-seventh from G3 to F#4. Adams then sets the word "quickly" in a fashion that's mimetic to its meaning by giving it a short duration and placing the second syllable on an offbeat both times, accentuating the feeling that the quick arrival of death is too soon. The repetition of "in mercy" is set as a kind of prayerful supplication, rising, as if to heaven (or, perhaps, to the dark…), to a lingering C#4. In this stepwise motion from A3 to C#4 it is as if Adams is nodding to the angelic A-major of Wagner's *Prelude to Lohengrin* (see ex. 4). This A major nod could even be construed as a 'musical trope,' like the poetic tropes aligned with night and death in Whitman, i.e. the unifying use of the word "death" in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." In his 2010 thesis, Mayo Ishiguro shows that A-major has been used to portray feelings of heavenly love and true

[171] John Adams, *The Wound-Dresser* for baritone voice and orchestra, text by Walt Whitman (Hedon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company, 1989).

sincerity throughout the storied history of the affectations of musical keys.[172] However, this fleeting moment of A-major peacefulness is hedged in on all sides by a cluster chord in the orchestra (built, C#, D, E, F#, G, A, B) as death lingers in the air. Once again Adams is very careful to maintain the intelligibility of the text while using his unique compositional voice to mirror and amplify the emotional quality contained in Whitman's profound moment of supplication to death.



Example 4. *Prelude to Lohengrin,* mm. 58-60..[173]

An exhaustive study of the speech rhythms used in Adams's setting of *The Wound-Dresser* is not within the scope of this document; however, I will offer two additional examples to serve as a fleshing-out of Adams's claim that he internalizes the speech rhythms of the text. The first is the declamatory opening line of the Adams's setting, "Bearing the bandages, water and sponge, / Straight and swift to my wounded I go." As my scansion of the text reveals, Adams's setting is a clear example of the

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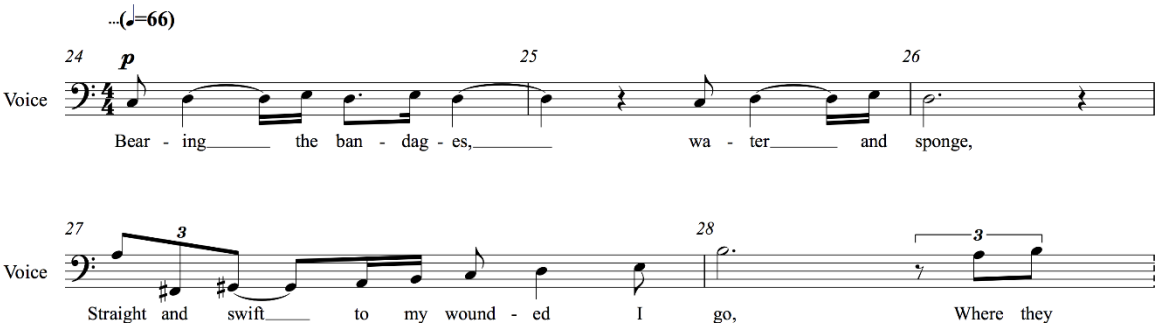
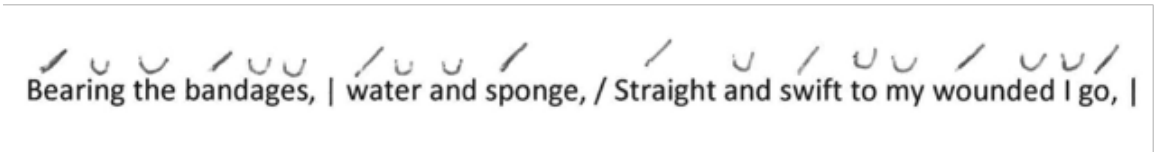
172 Mayo A. Ishiguro. "The affective properties of keys in instrumental music from the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries," (master's thesis, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2010), 48.

173 Richard Wagner, *Lohengrin: A Romantic Opera in Three Acts,* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1897).

integrity of the speechlike rhythmic quality he maintains throughout his setting of Whitman (see ex. 5a and 5b).[174]



Example 5a. Vocal line, mm. 24-28.[175]



Example 5b. Scansion of line 25-26 of the poem *The Wound-Dresser*.

As we see in example 3, the initial stress of the word "bearing" lands in the strongest rhythmic position, musically. On the downbeat of mm. 24, the plosive [b] propels the word quickly through its short eighth-note duration into a quarter-note tied to a sixteenth for the suffix "-ing", whose many phonatory sounds take a longer duration to form. "The" connects "bearing" to "bandages" across the naturally very short duration, written here as a sixteenth note where the second stress of the sentence, the syllable "ban-" is placed on the stressed third beat of the 4/4 bar. After the comma, Adams writes a

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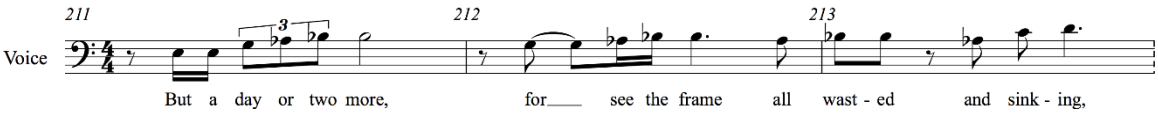
174 As a point of clarification, I am saying that Adams seeks to accurately render or even dramatize the rhythms as spoken in Whitman's poetic style, not a claim about the Whitman's 'ordinary speech' or 'plan speak.'

175 John Adams, *The Wound-Dresser* for baritone voice and orchestra, text by Walt Whitman (Hedon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company, 1989).

quarter rest, allowing a pause for punctuation and for the listener to absorb the meaning of the word in the syntactically complex sentence. The next part of the sentence, "water and sponge," follows the same pattern as "bearing the bandages" both rhythmically and melodically, not straying from the lower-middle voice surrounding D3, where the quiet stalwart character of the baritone voice is supple and warm. The adverbs "straight and swift" wind with a sudden assurance through a triplet rhythm from A3 to F#2 to land squarely on G#2 on the word "swift." While hurrying through the preposition, "to," and the possessive pronoun "my" on two sixteenth notes, the melodic phrase climbs steadily to the initial stress of "wounded" on the strong third beat of measure 27, moving musically, like Whitman's sentence, straight to "wounded." By mirroring the cadence and rhythmic stress of speech in his musical setting of this phrase, Adams creates a best case scenario for the listener to be able to absorb the meaning of the phrase as a whole, as well as the individual words themselves.

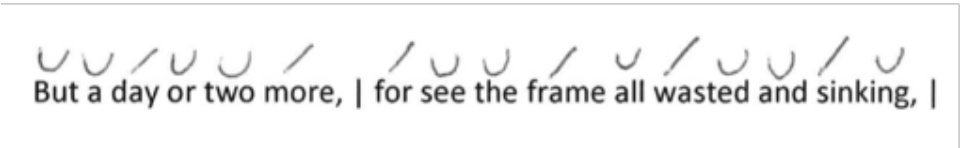
A second example of the speechlike quality of Adams's musical setting of the text is mm. 211-213, when the baritone sings line 51 of Whitman's poem, "But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking" (see ex. 6a).



Example 6a. Vocal line, mm. 211-213.[176]

[176] John Adams, *The Wound-Dresser* for baritone voice and orchestra, text by Walt Whitman (Hedon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company, 1989).

The two sixteenth-notes, triplet, and half-note, coupled with the gentle melodic rise in pitch on “But a day or two more,” reflects the spoken phrase (see ex. 6b). The rhythmic activity and melodic rise of a fifth over bar 211 signal the intensity of the image Whitman describes in the second half of the phrase, “for see the frame all wasted and sinking.”

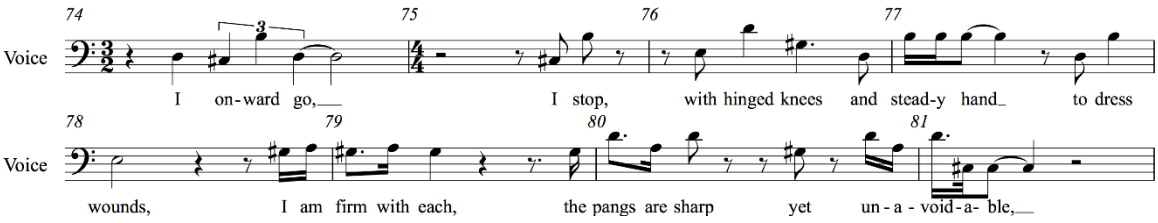


Example 6b. Scansion of line 51.

After the first caesura, Adams set the “for” on the offbeat of beat 1 after an eighth-rest, forcefully giving the listener the sensation of being off-kilter at the recognition by the poet that it will only be a day or two until the countenance of the soldier—whose deep wound he bandaged—will be “yellow-blue.” Adams elongates the “for” by tying two eighth-notes so that the rhythmic stress of “for” remains intact. In this phrase, Adams musically anticipates the wound-dresser’s gut wrenching reaction— “so sickening so offensive”— to the “gnawing and putrid gangrene” Whitman describes in the next sentence. Instead of letting the music waste or sink away in pitch or rhythmic activity, Adams pushes the melodic line over the angst-filled interval of a minor 7th rising to a D4 on the offbeat of beat three in m. 213. Adams’s nuanced text setting is important, not only because it indicates the importance he places on the clear communication of Whitman’s text, but also, as I illustrated in chapter three, because Adams believes that he has intuited a “sense of rightness” in the rhythms he has chosen for the text.

Adams adds another layer of emotional amplification into the vocal line by utilizing text painting to imitate the actions and capture the emotions of the text through

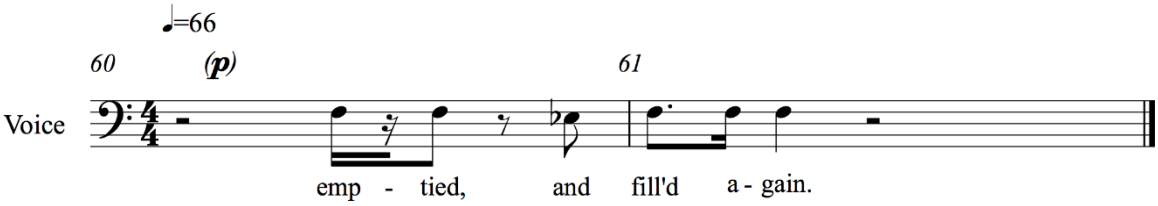
musical gesture. Perhaps the most exciting phrase of text painting, in my opinion, comes towards the beginning of the work, in mm. 74-81. For textual and emotional clarity, Adams carefully breaks up the phrase "I onward go, I stop, with hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds, I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable…" (see ex. 7). The quarter-note triplet figure of "onward go" on the weak second-beat of the only compound bar of the phrase gives the music a feeling of driving forward; the eighth-note "stop" followed by an eighth-rest halts the melodic line on the fourth beat of m. 75. The string bass, which has been oscillating between a kind of leading-tone C# and pitch-center D-natural, propels the music forward once again with its pizzicato D on the downbeat of m. 76. The "hinged-knees" then bend the music, leaping up a minor-seventh from E3 to D4 before falling to G#3 on beat 3. Adams then steadies the music with the first non-syncopated entrance of this melodic phrase on the downbeat of m. 77 with the words "steady-hand." The phrase ends with the melodic line rocking violently across the scurrilous tritone G#3 to D4 and the painfully close G#3 and A3 on "the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable" before dropping a tortured minor-9th from D4 to C#3 on the second half of the word "unavoidable."



Example 7. Vocal line, mm. 74-81.[177]

[177] Adams.

Additionally, three brief examples of Adams's synthesis of the natural speech patterns and text painting in the vocal line can be seen in mm. 60-61, m. 152, and m. 197.



Example 8: Vocal line, mm. 60-61.[178]

In bars 60-61, Adams paints the text by literally emptying the space between the syllables of the word "emptied" with a sixteenth-note rest over the last two beats of measure 60 (see ex. 8). It could be argued that this space constitutes a mimetic use of negative space, because the word "emptied" itself empties the voice from the middle of the word by the nature of the intervocalic unvoiced [p] followed by the unvoiced [t]. Immediately after the word "emptied" the pitch of the vocalist drops, or empties, a whole step from F to E-flat before rising, or filling up, to the F on the downbeat of m. 61 with the word "filled." Adams then connects the first two beats of m. 61 so that the voice sounds continuously across the text "fill'd again," filling the acoustic space. Because of the way that Adams took this brief musical moment, in a highly active harmonic work, to compose a placid moment, in which five of the six notes in the two bars are F, the listener is able to feel these small ripples in the vocal line as it ebbs and flows around the text.

Adams once again paints this kind of negative space around the text of bar 152 to musically mirror the text, "hard the breathing rattles" (see ex. 9). Adams surrounds this phrase with a full measure of rest in bar 151 and 153. Out of that vocal silence the

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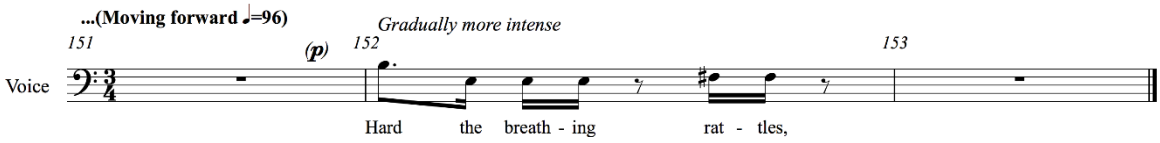
178 Adams.

baritone expels his hard won breath on the stressed and unvoiced [h] of "hard," stretching the word out over a dotted-eighth note before a burst of three sixteenth notes on "the breathing." The baritone seems to gasp for breath on a eight-rest on the and-of-two, then chokes out the word "rattles" on two-sixteenth notes before gasping for another breath on the eight-note rest on the following offbeat of three. Adams's compositional ability to create this kind of negative space is particularly interesting because of they way this phenomenon preoccupies the poet; this dynamic is in the relationship between syntax and line (where the line ends, at times, producing such negative space) e.g. "back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and side- / falling head."



Example 9: Vocal line, m. 152.[179]

In m. 197 Adams employs a triplet figure on the two syllable phrase "curv'd neck" to evoke a smooth, rounded quality to the vocal line (see ex. 10). Adams then cuts the baritone off for the duration of an eighth note before reentering on the weak offbeat of beat two a major-7th lower on a C-flat and leaping across the disjunct C-flat to B-flat twice on the text "and side-falling head." These repeated leaps across the highly dissonant major-7th interval musically imitate the sharp falling of the head from side-to-side.

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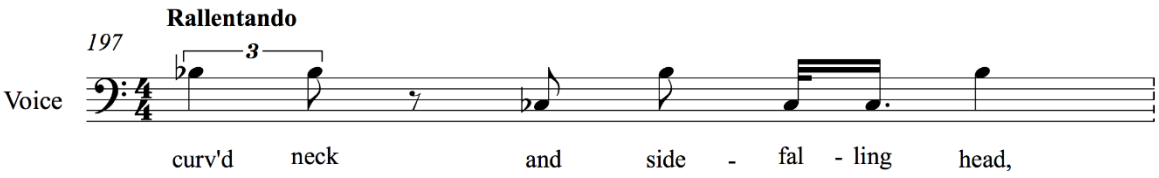
[179] John Adams, *The Wound-Dresser* for baritone voice and orchestra, text by Walt Whitman (Hedon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company, 1989).



Example 10: Vocal line, m. 197.[180]

Adams's layering of the natural speech rhythms of Whitman's text coupled with the emotionally amplifying text painting would be enough to say that *The Wound-Dresser* is a musical avatar to Whitman's text; however Adams keeps this same careful dedication to textual and emotional clarity throughout the remaining layers of this work. While the solo instruments and the orchestra often serve to generate a detailed atmosphere in the rendering of psychological process—thought working itself out (as in "life struggles hard")—at times they move concretely into the mimesis of physical actions (actions of care) following and even anticipating the recollections of the singer. An example of this can be found in m.295-296 when, in the present tense, the singer proclaims, "I thread my way through the hospitals…"; here soli oboe and the clarinet, anthropomorphized, wind their way in a triplet figure, clearly taking on the role of the poet's legs and feet as they thread through the hospital (see ex. 11).

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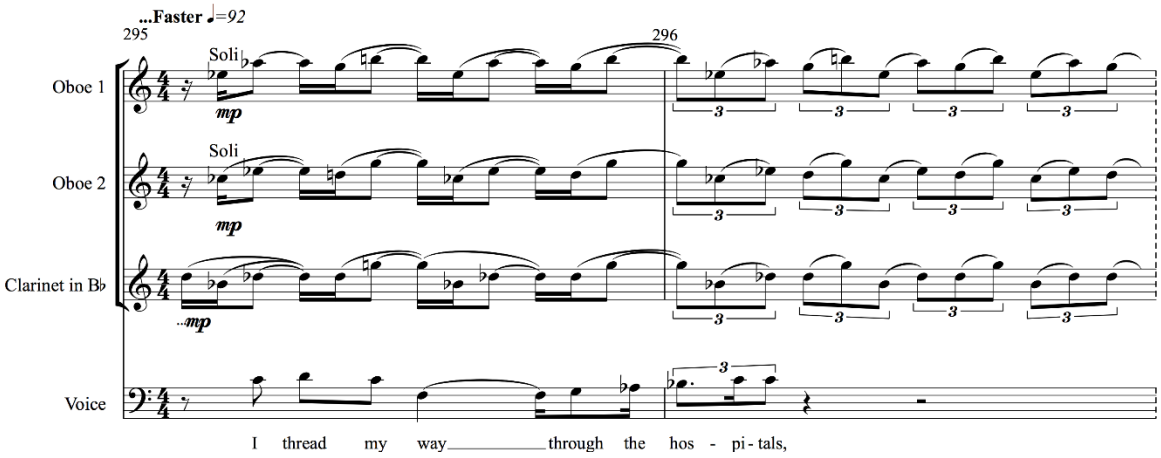
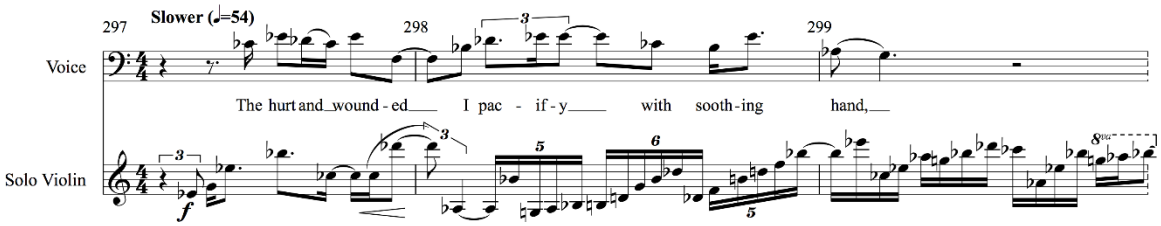
[180] Adams.



Example 11: Vocal line, mm. 295-296.[181]

The solo violin then becomes the singer's "soothing hand" pacifying the hurt and wounded with its soaring cadenza (see ex. 12).



Example 12: Vocal line, mm. 297-299.[182]

Although the majority of Whitman's poem consists of this kind of detached imagery a rare and sudden outburst of sentimentality comes, not from seeing gruesome wounds, but from the human connection in the "appealing eyes" of a young soldier; "poor boy!," the poet cries, "I never knew you/Yet I think I could not refuse this moment

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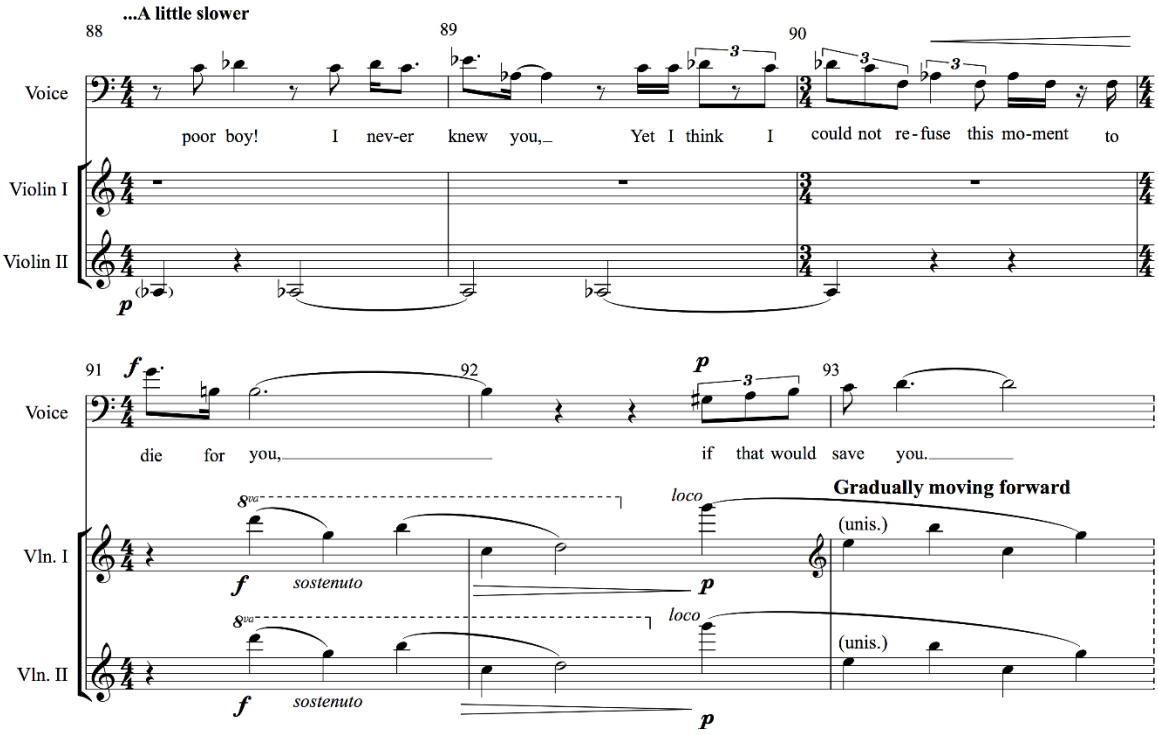
181 Adams.

182 Adams.

to die for you,/if that would save you." After a heart-wrenching leap up to a G4 by the singer on the word "die" the strings gush forth in a high lyric melody, evocative of the inner yearnings of the singer (see ex. 13).



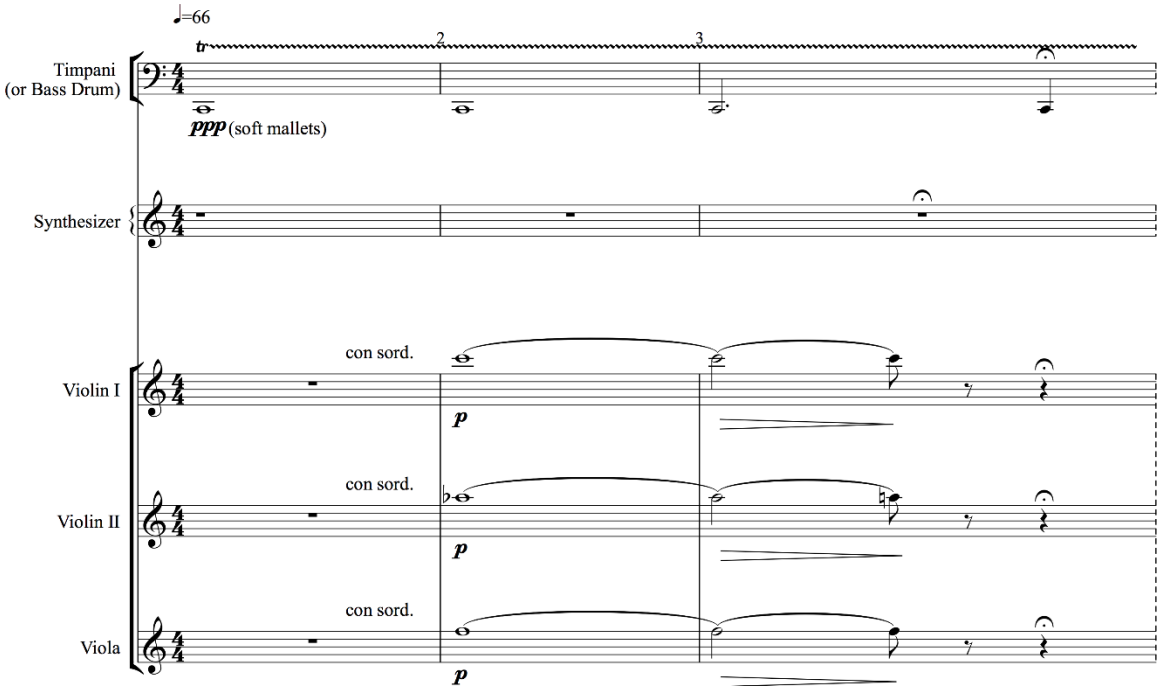
Example 13: Vocal line, mm. 88-93.[183]

The Orchestra

In the previous section of this chapter, I touched briefly on the role of the orchestra as it pertains to text painting; however, the orchestra also possesses the powerfully atmospheric repetition and pulsation that is integral to Adams's personal compositional style. The affecting atmospheric quality of *The Wound-Dresser* is apparent

183 Adams.

from the downbeat of the first bar as the timpani (or bass drum) begins to roll a *ppp* C2 on soft mallets while the rest of the orchestra remains tacit (see ex. 14).



Example 14. Full score, mm. 1-3.[184]

In live performance, the atmospheric effect of the timpani is immediate and palpable—there is a *tactility* to it.[185] Here the timpani is not meant to be heard, really—it is meant to be felt. The bass reverberations of the timpani charges the air with a pressure that is felt against the skin and in the chest.[186] These pulsating reverberations affect not

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[184] Adams.

[185] The effect of the timpani's pulsating for someone listening to the 2005 Nonesuch recording of baritone, Sanford Sylvan and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra led by John Adams, however, is negligible. In a recorded medium the opening timpani roll, which continues for an astonishing sixty-six measures (the entirety of the A Section), is essentially impossible to experience, let alone hear, even at extremely high volumes.

[186] I collected this anecdotal evidence on December 7, 2017 when I gave the Nebraska premiere of *The Wound-Dresser* at the University of Nebraska Lincoln's Kimball Hall with conductor David Michael Gallant.

only the body but the mood of the listener. In his autobiography Adams addresses his belief/understanding about the effect of these pulsations:

> The science of psychoacoustic perception alone cannot explain the emotional power of a vibrating string or air column. Pulsation, whether it's the throbbing kick drum of a rock band or the much faster pulsation of a musical tone, has an immediate effect on the emotive structures of the brain and is capable of producing a palpable change of mood in the listener.[187]

In the opening bar of *The Wound-Dresser* Adams uses the pulsation of the timpani roll to musically pull the listener, as Cahill says, into the "immediate present" twenty-three measures before the singer enters and delivers their first line of Whitman's text. This musical avatar to Whitman's text is significant because Adams paints the palpable or sensorial quality of the text in a substantially preemptive fashion. The timpani is a tactile experience for the auditor which is why it is affective; this pulsation is affective tactile sonic matter. Going further down this line of thinking pulsation (affective tactile sonic matter) relates to or raises a question of 'the background,' the background of the world as the intelligibility of the world, a world which is not raw, but *with* Whitman, a deep mystery. In Adams's pulsation there begins a whole of immersion from which body develops (much like a photograph in an acid bath).

The entrance of the strings in bar two on the first of a repeated long, sustained, and muted F-minor chord shimmer with a cinematic quality that bring the listener into the scene. The introductory chords of *The Wound-Dresser*, however, are philosophical in as much as they are atmospheric. From both an auditory and visual perspective, Adams has

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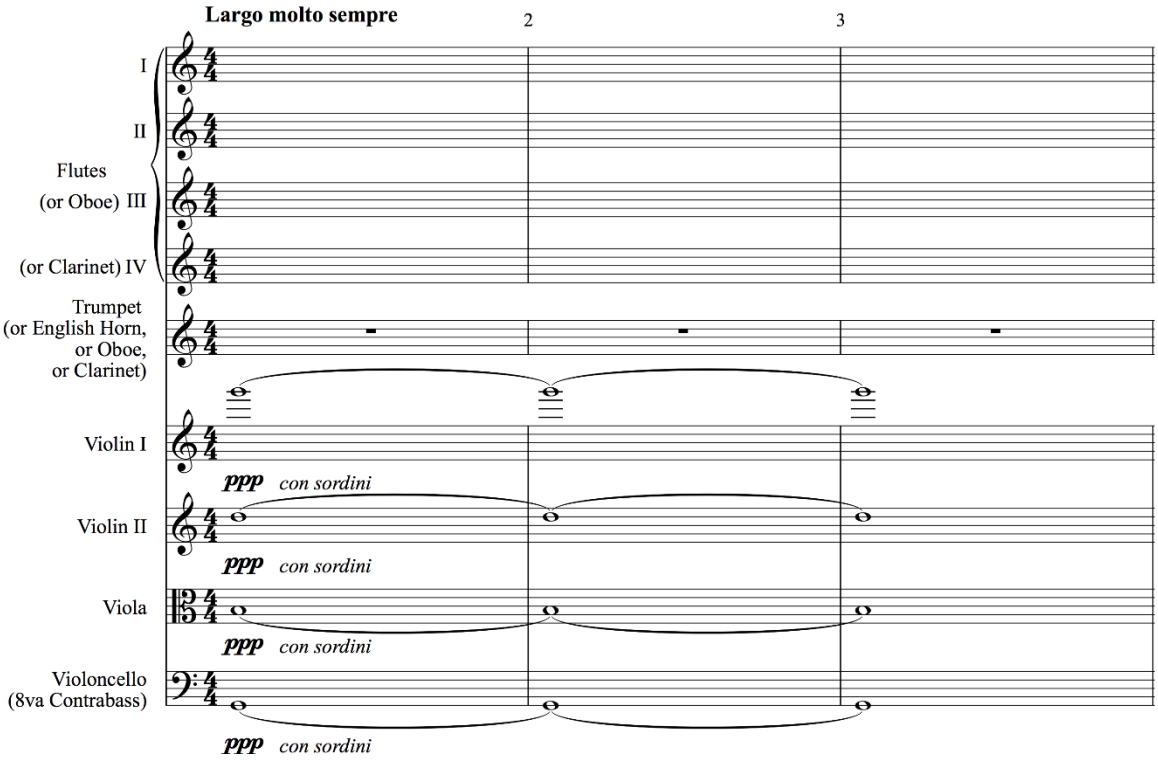
[187] John Adams, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (New York: Picador, 2008), 198-199.

made an unequivocal intertextual reference to the sonic landscape of the G major chord poised hauntingly across long stretches of time in the opening of Ives's *The Unanswered Question* (see ex. 14 and 15). In this opening the G chord is a musical figure from Ives that Adams takes into his own piece. Adams, who could have very effectively begun *The Wound-Dresser* with the pickup to measure seven, chooses to filter Whitman's poetic struggle to reconcile his own understanding of the nature of existence through the philosophical musical statement of Ives, a devoted American Transcendentalist.



Example 15: *The Unanswered Question*, mm. 1-3[188]

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188 Charles Ives, *The Unanswered Question* (New York: Southern Music Publishing Co., 1953), https://petruccimusiclibrary.ca/files/imglnks/caimg/8/89/IMSLP05327-Charles_Ives_-_The_Unanswered_Question.pdf.

The opening bars of both *The Unanswered Question* and *The Wound-Dresser* share the unmistakable slow and impossibly quiet *con sordini* strings—Ives's "sonic representation of silence."[189] According to musicologist Wayne Shirley, *The Unanswered Question* (Ives's musical statement about the philosophic question of existence) was directly inspired by Emerson's poem "The Sphinx," from which Ives takes the title of his work.[190] By making this reference, Adams once again strengthens his ties to Ives and accentuates the connection between himself, Emerson, Ives, and Whitman from the outset of *The Wound-Dresser*. More than a connection, we are building a more specific version of the constellation with which Adams sees himself to be resonating or sympathizing: the deep questioning in the musical figure from Ives, the basic riddle or deep mystery in the back of the human from Emerson, and the emergent corporeal-spiritual from Whitman e.g. Whitman's elegiac mode.

In the pickup to bar seven Adams takes the referential opening chords and begins to spin it out in his unique compositional voice. Using his own brand of minimalist procedure the violins begin "a plaintive rocking figure" on even quarter-notes between the interval of a major-third and a minor-third creating, what Cahill calls, "a ghostly atmosphere to evoke the 'dreams' projections' through which the poem is filtered."[191] The gentle "*sempre sostenuto*" pulsations of the violins blur the 4/4 beat as if winding through the haze—the thick pull of a Whitmanian dream state (see ex. 16). This is

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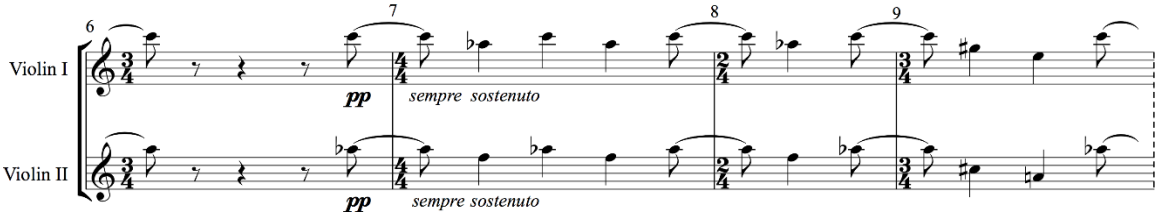
189 Meg Ryan, "The Unanswered Question: Charles Ives," https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/765/the-unanswered-question (accessed October 20, 2020).

190 "In 'The Sphinx,' Emerson's favorite of his poems, and perhaps his most confounding, the poet says to the Sphinx, 'Thou art the unanswered question.'" Ryan (accessed October 20, 2020).

191 Cahill, 124.

important because Adams has attempted to use the pulse (and harmony) of the orchestra to create a musical atmosphere to place the listener in the same sensorially driven spatial position of Whitman's poem before any text has been declaimed by the baritone.[192]



Example 16: Violin I & II, mm. 6-9.[193]

The dream-like haze of the orchestra continues throughout the opening section, ending on measure 66 as the timpani roll fades away.

Adams completes the scalar descent in the Bass Clarinet, Synthesizer, and Cellos from mm. 66-67 by groaning down the half-step from D to C# as the piece springs into a new section with a new, faster tempo, and brilliant tonality. This section needs the musical assuredness of the wound-dresser pushing forward, "steady" and "firm." "I onward go," sings the baritone, and once again Adams uses the pulse of the orchestra to anticipate and illumine that forward moving resolve. This kind of musical avatar can be seen in the assertive presence of the String Bass section. A look at measures 71-76 shows the chromatic alternation of the bassists from C# to D, who play, first, with four beats of

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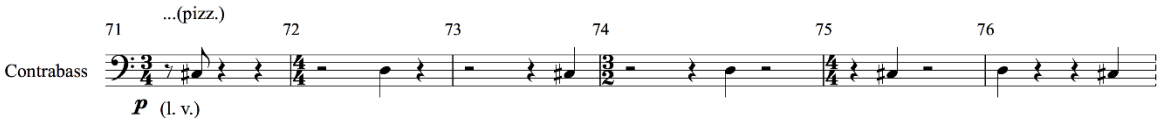
192 It is interesting to note that the opening 23 bars of orchestral introduction are approximately equal in number to that of the lines of text omitted from the beginning of Whitman's poem.

193 John Adams, *The Wound-Dresser* for baritone voice and orchestra, text by Walt Whitman (Hedon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company, 1989).

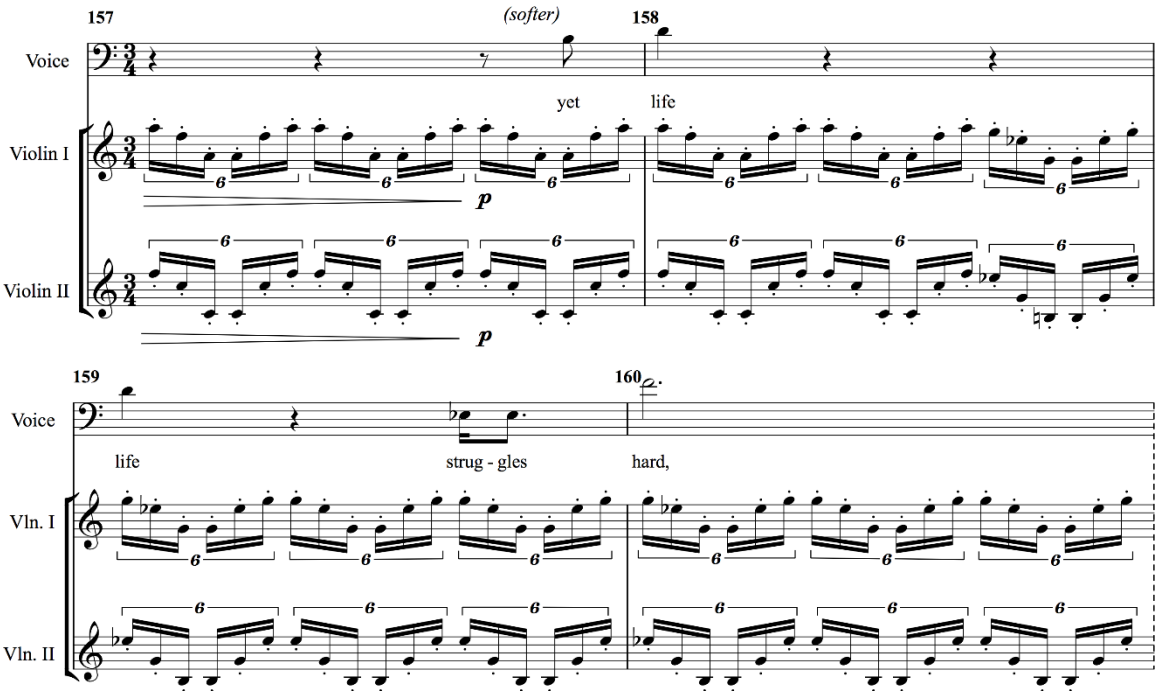
rest between each pizzicato strum, then 3, and finally 2, as the steps of the wound-dresser quicken steadily (see ex. 17).



Example 17: String bass pizz., mm. 71-76.[194]

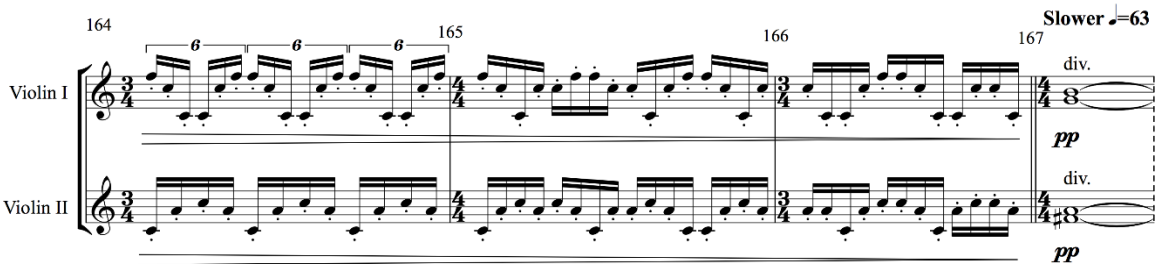
The clarity of effect in Adams's orchestral repetition and pulsation remains evident throughout *The Wound-Dresser*, but emerges with prominence in two noteworthy examples, mm. 154-166 and mm. 226-233. Like a racing pulse, the sextuplets in the violins arch across an f-minor chord for fourteen beats before following the B-natural to D of the vocal line's "yet life" by modulating down to the stretched out and thin sounding augmented E-flat chord on beat three of bar 158 (see ex. 18). The violins then shift back to f-minor on the second beat of mm. 162 as the third section of the work diminuendos to a *pp* as it *rallentandos* from the "moving forward" 96 to the quarter note to a much "slower" 63 to the quarter (see ex. 19).

194 Adams.



Example 18: Vocal line and violins, mm. 157-160.[195]

The *rallentando* slows the violins to a musical stasis as they arrive on a new section at bar 167 holding all the tension of the cluster chord F#, G, A, B (juxtaposing an E-minor triad against a D-major triad) over two bars of tied whole-notes.



Example 19: Violins, mm. 164-167.[196]

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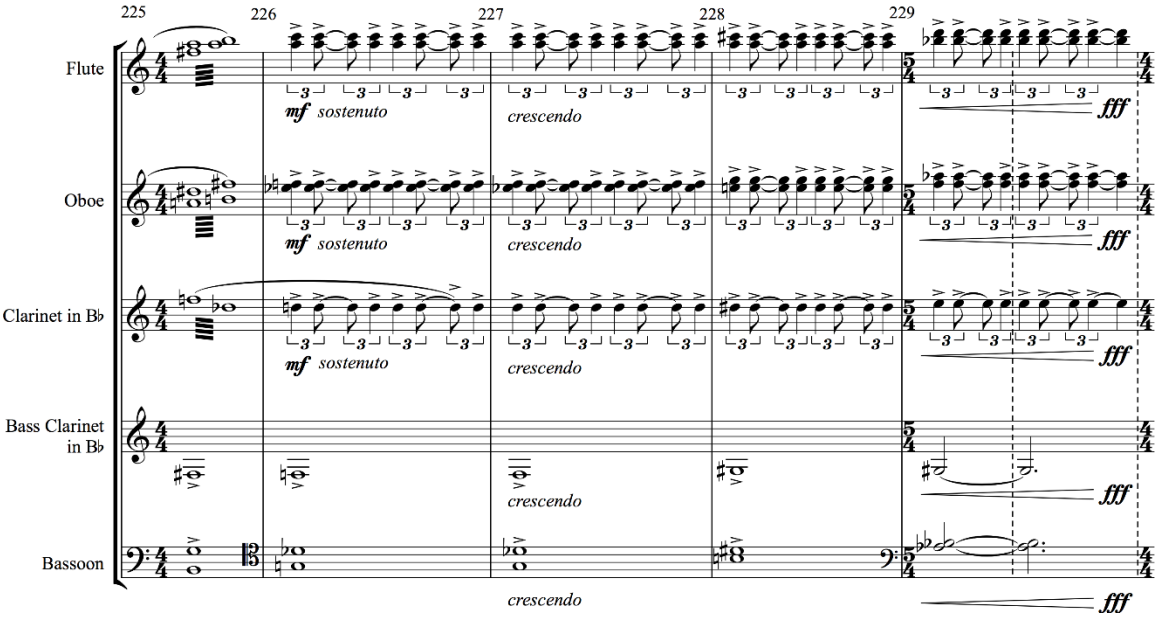
195 Adams.

196 Adams.

This sextuplet pulsation becomes a musical avatar for the physical body as it fights to hold onto life, then relaxes after the intense struggle to a conflicted state of resignation—"come sweet death!" says the wound-dresser.

Adams utilizes repetitive dissonant pulsation in the orchestra again in mm. 226-229 to musically mirror and intensify the growing physical revulsion in the text (see ex. 20).



Example 20: Woodwinds, mm. 225-229.[197]

Whitman's detailed imagery becomes most intensely graphic from mm. 205-230. Here, as Whitman describes dressing the deep bullet wound in the shoulder of a young soldier, he is taken by the gaunt yellow-blue of their countenance as their life ebbs away and is suddenly repulsed by the sickening stench of gangrene. On the text "so offensive"

197 Adams.

the orchestra erupts in pulsing triplets and intensifies by *crescendoing* from a *mf* to an ear splitting *fff* over a span of four bars. As the orchestra *crescendos* it chromatically shifts up a half-step twice as the entire "body" of the orchestra wells up, musically retching with repugnance at the scene before it. The sensorial and emotive force of Adams's orchestral repetition and pulsation provides a musical physicality to Whitman's text that reveals the layers of connection and sympathy between Adams and Whitman.

The Instrumental Soloists

Adams does not veer from his compositional dedication to Whitman's text in the musical symbolism of the solo instrumental forces written for *The Wound-Dresser*, the violin and the trumpet. Adams himself has said, "I like to think of culture as the symbols that we share to understand each other… When we communicate, we point out symbols that we have in common."[198] One of these symbols, for Adams, is the solo trumpet. Adams's use of solo trumpet throughout his compositional catalogue is connected to his aesthetic tie to Ives, whose previously mentioned 1908 composition, *The Unanswered Question* has been called the "archetype" of the "elegiac sensibility" in American music.[199] In his discussion of *On the Transmigration of Souls* Adams himself says his use of solo trumpet is a direct allusion to Ives and *The Unanswered Question*: "It's there. It's a ghost in the background, and every once in a while it peeks through the screen of

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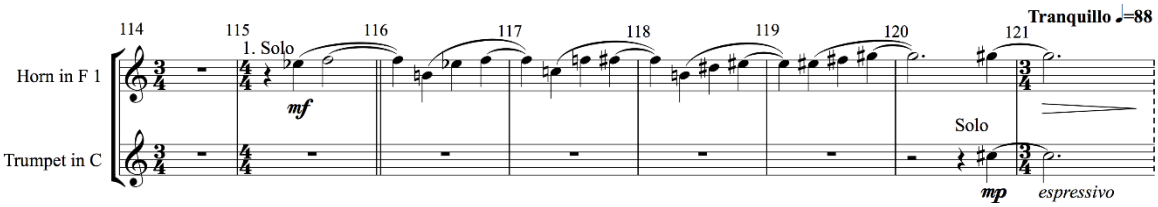
198 Alex Ross, "The Harmonist," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Readings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey, Amadeus Press, 2006), 33.

199 Renaud Machart, "Aspects of John Adams's Music: Floating Elegies and Music Boxes," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Readings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey, Amadeus Press, 2006), 387.

activity."[200] This ghost of Ives and all that he symbolizes (New England, self-reliance, and American Transcendentalism) is invoked by Adams in not only *On the Transmigration of Souls*, but again and again in his most influential works, *Harmonielehre* (1984-85), *My Father Knew Charles Ives* (2003), and, of particular import to this document, in *The Wound-Dresser* (1988). In *The Wound-Dresser* the trumpet is not any trumpet, it is *that* trumpet from Ives. As I will develop in the next paragraph, the trumpet of Ives collates with the civil war personnel (reveille trumpeter), who has a function both *with* and *as* another soldier that we get from Whitman: These trumpeters as *our* trumpeter.

The *espressivo* entrance of the solo trumpet at the pickup to the *Tranquillo* in m. 121 emerges from out of the remnant of the rising solo horn line, which reaches out longingly for its final high G#—pitched at the same C# tonic of the trumpet (see ex. 21).



Example 21: Trumpet solo emerges from Horn solo, mm. 114-121.[201]

Adams's trumpeter, unlike the distant questioning of Ives's solo trumpet, stays, like a musical companion to the baritone, sharing not only its C# and sense of aching

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200 Daniel Colvard, "John Adams Discusses *On the Transmigration of Souls*," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Readings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey, Amadeus Press, 2006), 198.

201 John Adams, *The Wound-Dresser* for baritone voice and orchestra, text by Walt Whitman (Hedon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company, 1989).

sadness, but also its optimistic yearning. Here, the trumpet has not yet reached a fever pitch, and lilts elegiac above the text "on, on I go, (open doors of time! open hospital doors!)" (see ex. 20). [202] While the baritone and the trumpet share a moment of physical and philosophic intimacy, the violins hover above them in the strata of harmonics, a sad aureole hovering over the wound-dresser.

It is interesting to note that the French music critic Renaud Machart ties the "elegiac and meditative" quality of Adams's solo trumpet, not to Ives, but directly to the following lines of Walt Whitman's "The Mystic Trumpeter,"

> Hark, some wild trumpeter, some strange musician,
> Hovering unseen in air, vibrated capricious tunes to-night.
>
> I hear thee, trumpeter, listening alert I catch thy notes,
> Now pouring, whirling like a tempest round me,
> Now low, subdued, now in the distance lost.[203]

The trumpet moves from an elegiac lilt to "pouring, whirling like a tempest" in m. 209. In m. 207 the trumpeter replaces his trumpet in C with the piccolo trumpet in C, calling to mind the Civil War bugler, whose piercing, yet reassuring tone carried across the battle field, signaling commands and invigorating morale when the beat of the drum

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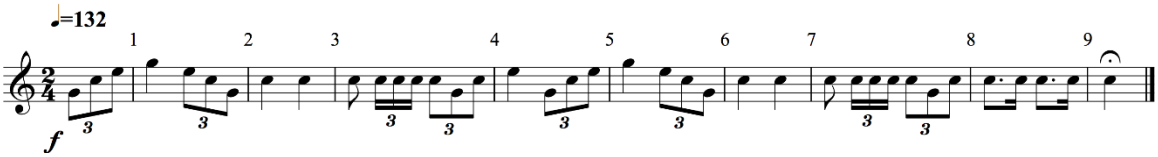
[202] Every time I come across this text I am reminded of a phrase from Emerson's essay "Experience" in which he wrote, "onward and onward! In liberated moments, we know that a new picture of life and duty is already possible; the elements already exist in many minds around you, of a doctrine of life which shall transcend any written record we have." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," in *Emerson's Essays* (New York, N. Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Inc., 1926), 315.

[203] Walt Whitman, "The Mystic Trumpeter," quoted in "Aspects of John Adams's Music: Floating Elegies and Music Boxes," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Readings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey, Amadeus Press, 2006), 387.

and the song of the fife could no longer be heard over the sounds of battle.[204] According to taps historian and professional bugler, Jari Villanueva:

> During the Civil War, company buglers served as messengers, surgical assistants and on ambulance crews. They also performed fatigue duty such as wood hauling, feeding horses, and picket and guard duty. Most of the buglers carried rifles and fought with other members of their company. But their primary duty was musical. They were required to memorize all the calls that were sounded in camp and on the march (25 general calls and 24 skirmishers calls in the Infantry alone).[205]

One example of the characteristic arpeggiation followed by repeated short staccato notes of the buglers many calls is the "sick call" which signaled sick soldiers to report to the dispensary to be examined (see example 22).[206]



Example 22: "Sick call."[207]

The music of the civil war bugler would undoubtedly have been familiar to Whitman, and as a musical symbol the bugle-like quality of the piccolo trumpet sound is

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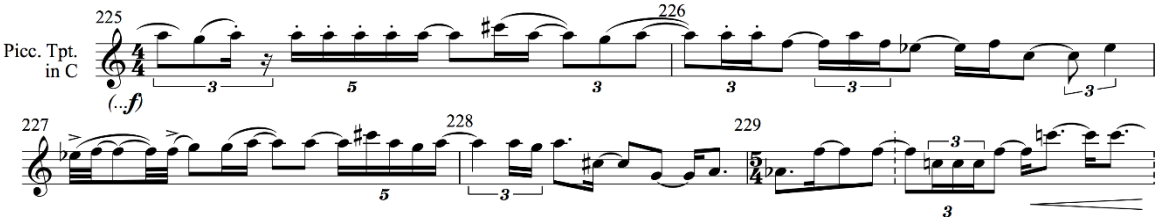
204 After listening to a number of bugle calls being performed by a Gettysburg National Parks Service bugler I could not identify any specific Civil War bugle references in *The Wound-Dresser*, the solo trumpet line of *The Wound-Dresser* takes on the characteristic arpeggiation followed by repeated short staccato notes, for example in mm. 209-225.

205 Jari Villanueva, "Buglers in the Civil War," Taps Bugler, entry posted January 15, 2017, https://tapsbugler.com/buglers-in-the-civil-war/2/.

206 John Pike, "Bugle Calls," Military Analysis Network, entry post updated May 23, 2000, https://fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/land/bugle.htm.

207 The Office of the Chief of Army Bands, "Sick Call," Army Bands Online, https://www.bands.army.mil/music/buglecalls/sickcall.asp.

a potent substitute. Adams calls on the symbolic power of the piccolo trumpet as the wound-dresser recalls revolting image of rotting and gangrenous flesh. In these bars the music surges to its most intense dynamics arriving at a full *fff* in m. 229. "The bullet wound" and stink of death would have provided a shocking and gruesome reminder of the piles of dead bodies Whitman witnessed after the battle of Fredericksburg in December of 1862. This moment of revulsion and disorientation is carried away by the trumpet solo as, dizzyingly, it whirls faster and faster, higher and higher until it extinguishes on a high G (see ex. 23).



Example 23: Solo trumpet, mm. 225-229.[208]

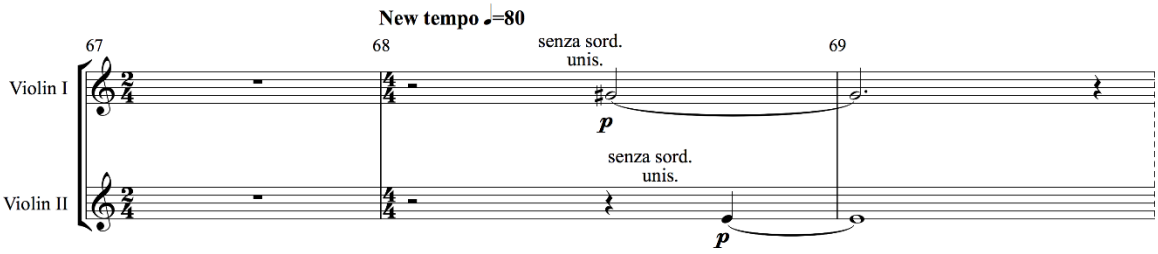
Machart extends the link between Whitman's and Adams's use of an "elegiac and meditative" trumpet part to other examples of "floating elegies" in Adams's music. He writes,

> Further along in Whitman's poem "The Mystic Trumpeter" occur some lines that seem to be a poetic counterpart to the mercurial elegies of which John Adams is a master:
>
> Thy song expands my numb'd embonded spirit, thou freest, launchest me,

[208] John Adams, *The Wound-Dresser* for baritone voice and orchestra, text by Walt Whitman (Hedon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company, 1989).

> Floating and basking upon heaven's lake.[209]

One such example is the second movement chaconne of Adams's Violin Concerto, "where 'the violin floats like a disembodied spirit above the orchestral tissue (in the composer's own phrase)."[210] Adams's description of the solo violin in his concerto could be duplicated for the solo violin in *The Wound-Dresser*. The *senza sordona* entrance of the solo violin on an *8va* high-C floats above the orchestra. The violin's muted quality enhances the ethereal quality while the *espressivo* falling and climbing lines well with great effect, and, like Whitman's trumpeter, are full of the power to expand and free the emotions of the "embonded spirit." After hovering watchfully over the orchestra for 53 bars, the solo violin dissipates back into the body of the orchestra with the first violin's G-sharp in m. 68 (see ex. 24).



Example 24: Solo violin and Vln.I, mm. 67-69.[211]

This dual role of solo violin as both bodily and disembodied can be seen as the violin rises out of the tissue of the orchestra at beginning in m. 324. From m. 324 until

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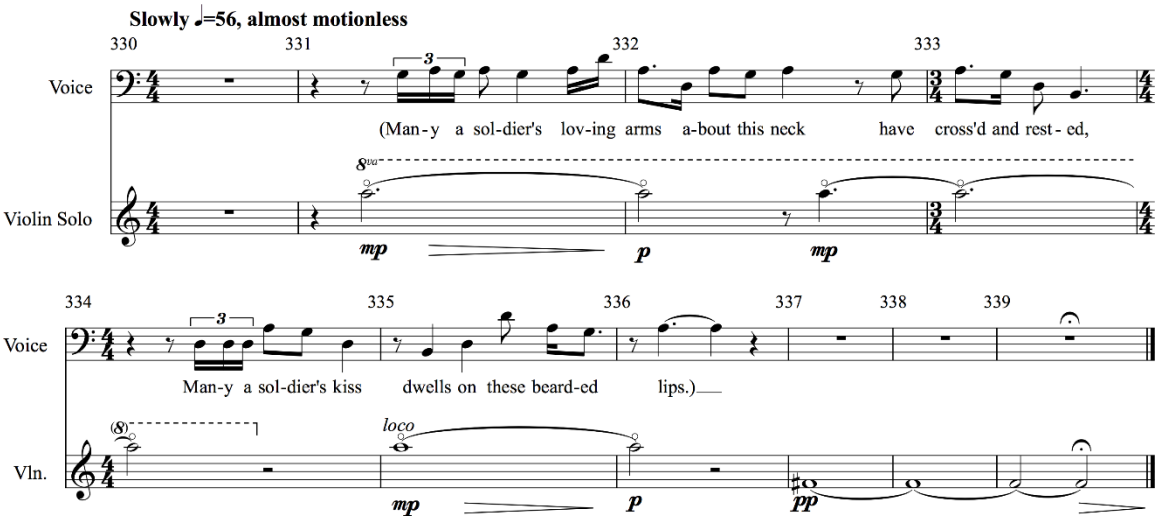
[209] Renaud Machart, "Aspects of John Adams's Music: Floating Elegies and Music Boxes" in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Readings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey, Amadeus Press, 2006), 388.

[210] Machart, 389.

[211] John Adams, *The Wound-Dresser* for baritone voice and orchestra, text by Walt Whitman (Hedon Music, Inc., a Boosey & Hawkes company, 1989).

the downbeat of m. 328 the solo violin plays in unison with the first violins, with the exception of the solo violin's four beats of rest beginning on the offbeat of beat three of m. 324. On the offbeat of beat one in m. 328 the solo violin detaches from the orchestral tissue and begins to rise to the upper limits of the violin's range one final time, extending that range even farther by the use of harmonics playing three *8va* harmonic A's, each held for six beats (see ex. 25). Adams's indication here, as the baritone delivers Whitman's final poetic parenthesis, is "almost motionless." Like Adams's reference to the Ivesian sonic representation of silence that opened the work, here the stasis of the solo violin is, in fact, "almost motionless." These final extended chords hold with poignancy and tenderness the final frame of the scene, "(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross's and rested,/Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)"



Example 25: Vocal Line with solo violin, mm. 330-339.[212]

[212] Adams.

In this motionlessness Adams enters into Whitman's elegy of lost lovers, the internal conflict based in the reality of a lost father, and a turning to the mother side of the civic realm as a caretaker. In this elegy is sustained a purpose, a faith—a poetic hope, in a greater Union (in all senses of the word) through the precarious struggle of life and death.

Conclusion

These examples are only a brief look into the intimate relationship between Whitman's text and Adams's music in *The Wound-Dresser*. However, they serve to illustrate that in every layer of the score Adams musically resonates with the text and amplifies the emotional content therein through his use of selective text repetition, text painting, rhythmic pulsation, and solo instrumentation with symbolic musical characteristics. Through these compositional avatars Adams showed that he attempted to weave himself into an "American Material" along with Whitman, Ives, and Emerson. He also attempted to weave himself into the experience of post-modern America in a way that he believes will allow the experience of Whitman as wound-dresser, Adams's own personal life experiences, and that of caretakers everywhere to resonate together (in a transcendental sympathy), unifying and expanding the unique experience of the individual to encompass much more. Further exploration of this topic might reveal that Adams's 'heaven trope', his use of negative space, the tactile-affective timpani, and pulsation as a mysterious background (that further connects to Ives's deep question) are a musical presentation of Whitman's elegaic mode as Adams's piece comprehends it. Cahill ends her liner notes on *The Wound-Dresser* with this telling quote by the

composer, "it [*The Wound-Dresser*] is a statement about human compassion that is acted out on a daily basis, quietly and unobtrusively and unselfishly and unfailingly. Another poem in the same volume states its theme in other words: 'Those who love each other shall become invincible…'"[213]

It is my hope that this discussion of *The Wound-Dresser* will allow both performer and listener to enter into the world that Adams and Whitman have worked so deliberately to create and have it resonate with them in a more consequential and truer way.

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[213] Sarah Cahill, "*Fearful Symmetries* and *The Wound-Dresser* (1988)," in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, New Jersey, Amadeus Press, 2006), 126.

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