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Walt Whitman and Civil War Washington

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Walt Whitman famously described his visits to thousands of wounded Civil War soldiers in *Memoranda During the War*, a volume with a largely ignored subtitle: “Written on the Spot in 1863-’65.” I want to highlight that subtitle and its emphasis on space and time—its geo-temporal specificity—to ask what it meant to have a writer of Whitman’s sensibilities thrust into the nation’s capital city in the final three years of the war, when it had become a city of hospitals. More wounded soldiers were treated in Washington, DC, than in any other city, and Whitman, a visitor to dozens of hospitals, gravitated toward the epicenter of suffering. He spent most of his time at Armory Square Hospital, which hosted the worst cases and had the highest death rate. At a time of unprecedented maiming and killing, Whitman engaged in the work of healing. *Leaves of Grass*, his poetic masterpiece, intertwined the physical bodies of men and women and the symbolic body of the nation and saw in both a capacity to embrace contradictions and diversity while still remaining united and whole. Both the nation and Whitman’s poetic project were at risk as he confronted innumerable broken and battered bodies. In this new context, he reassessed the possibilities for poetry, the future of democracy, and even the efficacy of affection, a quality that he had always believed sustained civil society. Faced with massive destruction, in what ways did Whitman succeed and fail in making meaning of it, in finding reasons for hope?

The crisis of war remade both Whitman and Washington, DC. The city more than tripled in size from 63,000 to 200,000 inhabitants and underwent profound change, as the maps available on the Civil War Washington digital site illustrate; once a relatively quiet town with a busy political season, it absorbed a new and year-round population of soldiers, bureaucrats, prostitutes, adventure-seekers, merchants, doctors, nurses, and undertakers. During the course of the War, forty thousand fugitive slaves, known as “contrabands,” fled to the nation’s capital: they often resided in camps run by the government and charitable organizations and many worked on military projects. (The term “contraband of war,” used by General Benjamin Butler in 1861 to refer to former slaves who reached Union lines, became widely adopted thereafter.) The routine of life in the city was frequently interrupted by military drills and the

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fear or rumor of imminent Confederate attacks. From the First Battle of Bull Run, Confederate armies continually threatened Washington as part of General Robert E. Lee's strategy of taking the war to the north. Lee's offensives of 1862 and 1863, leading to key battles at Antietam and Gettysburg, were meant to threaten Washington, to encourage the numerous Southern sympathizers in the North, and to challenge President Lincoln's administrative authority. In response, Lincoln ordered the creation of a 37-mile ring of forts and batteries, effectively transforming the capital city into a citadel (Winkle xii).

Prior to coming to Washington, Whitman had experienced a life far removed from armed conflict. He had spent the pre-war years in the New York area where he had worked as a printer, school teacher, journalist, occasional politician and stump speaker, and a successful builder of homes. He was a remarkably competent and effective builder: he sold homes for profit, established his mother and the extended family under her care in a dwelling he constructed in Brooklyn, and arrested the family's economic decline (Roper 54–66). He also mastered the lingo of building with its grounding in concrete particularity, and this approach to language informed his breakthrough book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855: he wanted his style to be as stout as a plank, as sturdy as a crossbeam. Yet if Whitman's language was often concrete—even earthy—it could also reach to the stars. Or as Ralph Waldo Emerson explained, Whitman's writing was a “remarkable mixture of the Bhagvat Ghita and the New York Herald” (Sanborn 144).

Writing with great resourcefulness across verbal registers, Whitman established himself as a poet who could see immense value and potential in the ordinary. His opening poem (ultimately known as “Song of Myself”) in the first *Leaves of Grass* was like no verse before or since in its brash experimentation, its exuberant hopefulness, its embrace of what others might find homely or rank. Moreover, he brought the body into American literature in new ways. Recently the poet Alicia Ostriker explained what Whitman meant to her as a teenager growing up: “Like some improbably open-minded parent, he would permit everything. . . . That was the primary thing I noticed. The degree and quantity and variety of love in Whitman are simply astonishing” (Ostriker, 457–58). He has been a liberating force for men and women, gays and straights, blacks, whites and other hues of humankind. Writing before words like gay and homosexual were in use, Whitman developed his own language of manly attachment and comradeship, articulated most fully in his section of poems called “Calamus.” On the eve of a war in which men would kill more than 750,000 of their fellow Americans, he sought ways to deepen and extend love between them.

As is well-known, Whitman's candor about sexuality outraged nineteenth-century reviewers: one called the book an explosion in a sewer, another

suggested that Whitman should be publicly whipped, another urged him to commit suicide. His descriptions and language are not in themselves shockingly literal, but his voice was intimate. Whitman wanted to “pass”: from poet to reader, from one identity to another, from his time to later generations, and he reimagines the very act of reading, making it a bodily, at times even erotic, experience:

This is no book,
Who touches this, touches a man,
(Is it night? Are we here alone?)
It is I you hold, and who holds you,
I spring from the pages into your arms—. (Whitman, *Leaves* [1860] 455)

And yet in other moods Whitman was less confident about his ability to convey personal presence. In lines published in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* but later deleted, he declared:

This is unfinished business with me. . . . how is it with you?
I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us.

I pass so poorly with paper and types. . . . I must pass with the contact of
bodies and souls. (Whitman, *Leaves* [1855], 57)

This need for personal presence, this desire for contact and connection, would later guide his approach to healing in the hospitals.

Frustrated by political events in the early 1850s, Whitman developed a vision of democracy that involved the remaking of the inner life of people as a necessary response to the looming national crisis. Some of his early lines are as unconventional in poetic style as they are in thought:

I am the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves
I am the poet of the body
And I am

I am the poet of the body
And I am the poet of the soul
I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters
And I will stand between the masters and the slaves,
Entering into both and so that both shall understand me alike (Whitman,
“albot Wilson” 67)

For Whitman to be sufficiently large (or to “dilate” as he said elsewhere) to encompass seemingly irreconcilable views was a precondition for writing breakthrough poetry and for attempting to heal a nation fracturing before his eyes. In Whitman’s manuscript notes toward the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, it is clear that he once planned to close the book with a poem that pivots on the selling of a slave at auction, the work ultimately called “I sing the Body

Electric.” Had he done so, he would have further emphasized the painful paradox of slavery in a democracy devoted to freedom. Slavery itself lent urgency to his pre-war poetry and probably intensified his interest in writing about physical bodies then and later. This abbreviated account of Whitman’s pre-war thinking may help us appreciate how he developed during the war when he confronted the pressures of a newly emancipated population in Washington, DC, and the bodies of innumerable wounded soldiers.

In the late 1850s as he drafted the second and third editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman expanded his repertoire, writing powerful love poetry focused on the bonds between men. Even as the nation careened toward its bloodiest war, Whitman sought to bring men together through a kind of love that he often called (borrowing the term from phrenology) adhesiveness. He was emboldened in his exploration of this new terrain through his developing friendships at Pfaff’s beer hall on Broadway in New York, a bohemian hangout. Here Whitman found a sustaining network of friends—a variety of workingmen, writers, clerks, actors, and others—who offered opportunities for sociability, good humor, intellectual stimulation, publishing ventures, and sexual exploration. In an 1863 letter to a friend, Nathaniel Bloom, we hear Whitman’s fond recollection of a lost life of camaraderie even as he is at pains to remake it, in vastly different circumstances, in the Washington hospitals:

dear friend, how long it is since we have seen each other, since those pleasant meetings & those hot spiced rums & suppers & our dear friends Gray & Chauncey, & Russell, & Fritschy too, (who for a while at first used to sit so silent,) & Perkins & our friend Raymond—how long it seems—how much I enjoyed it all. What a difference it is with me here—I tell you, Nat, my evenings are frequently spent in scenes that make a terrible difference—for I am still a hospital visitor, there has not passed a day for months (or at least not more than two) that I have not been among the sick & wounded, either in hospitals or down in camp—occasionally here I spend the evenings in hospital—the experience is a profound one, beyond all else, & touches me personally, egotistically, in unprecedented ways—I mean the way often the amputated, sick, sometimes dying soldiers cling & cleave to me as it were as a man overboard to a plank, & the perfect content they have if I will remain with them, sit on the side of the cot awhile, some youngsters often, & caress them &c.—It is delicious to be the object of so much love & reliance, & to do them such good, soothe & pacify torments of wounds &c—You will doubtless see in what I have said the reason I continue so long in this kind of life—. (Whitman, *Correspondence* 1: 142)

The experience was mutually beneficial, as Whitman acknowledges, or as he elsewhere said more succinctly: these were “terrible, beautiful days” (Traubel 1: 115).

How did he find himself in these Washington hospitals? In December 1862, Whitman left Brooklyn for Virginia to search for his brother George, who had been wounded at the battle of Fredericksburg. Once assured of his brother's safety, Whitman assisted more badly wounded soldiers, accompanying them on their trip to Washington and its hospitals. He then settled in the city, making it his home for the next ten years.

Washington was a booming place because of the war, and there were chronic housing shortages. In a city of increasing wealth, Whitman lived simply, with notable economy. What little money he had often went to help support his mother; he routinely enclosed a dollar or two in his letters to her, at a time when a dollar meant something. He moved more than once a year during his time in Washington. He economized by moving out when he went home to Brooklyn for a visit, saving a bit of rent, and finding a new place on his return. He lived without paying board for the first six months or so with a friend he had met through their reliance on a common book publisher, William Douglas O'Connor, and his wife Ellen or "Nelly." As Nelly O'Connor recalled about her home at 394 L street North:

Washington had no general system of water supply or drainage, and a pump at the corner of our street was reputed to be of very pure water . . . fed from a spring at Rock Creek. To this pump every morning Walt would go for a pitcher for our table, and he was especially fond of taking a long draught . . . (Calder 828)

Whitman met some of the children of the city on his morning outings for water, on his way to work at the Army paymaster's office (where he first found work as a copyist), and on his way to the hospitals. Despite the weight of concerns he felt for wounded soldiers, for his often troubled family back in Brooklyn, and for his multifaceted literary life—he found time for casual play with children on Washington streets. In a letter of reminiscence dated March 8, 1891, Mary Jordan asked Whitman:

Do you remember when you lived near the corner of 12th and M streets in Washington, D.C., some little children who lived on the other corner? Probably you do not, nor that you used to be very good to them, playing "tag," and marbles with them—now and then letting them drink out of your brown water jug . . . a great honor. It happens that I was one of those children—my father was Solicitor of the Treasury Edward Jordan. Now I am teaching English rhetoric in this college for girls and am even more indebted to you for pleasure and help than I used to be in the old days. (Feinberg)

It is not surprising that Whitman would be memorable to a child since he was often seen walking the streets, looking a bit like St. Nicholas on his way to

the hospitals, haversack and pockets full to bulging with the candy, oranges, tobacco, stationary, and small gifts of all kinds he would distribute, along with copious amounts of love, to the wounded soldiers.

Only a few blocks away, the poet also encountered black children. In what is apparently a draft piece of journalism dated 8:30 a.m., April 1, 1863, Whitman wrote:

Washington Sight / for instance

You see ^{^ for instance} such a sight as the following as you walk out for ten minutes before breakfast. Over the muddy crossing, ^{^ (half past 8, morning of April 1st, '63)} at 14th and L street, ~~came~~ a stout young wench wheeling a wheelbarrow—the wench perhaps 15 years old, black and jolly and strong as a horse;—in the wheelbarrow, cuddled up, a child-wench, of six or seven years, equally black, ^{shiny black} and jolly with an old quilt around her, ^{^ sitting plump back, riding backwards,} partially holding on, a little fearful of ~~being tumbled out~~, and trying to hold in her arms a ^{^ full grown} young lap-dog, curly, ^{^ beautiful} white as silver, with ^{^ sparkling peering,} round black ~~bright~~ eyes—the child-wench bareheaded;—and, ^{all,} with the dog, and the stout-^{armed} negress, firmly holding the handles, and pushing on through the mud—the heads of the ~~beautiful~~ ^{pretty} silver dog, and the ^{pictorial} black child ~~the~~ ^e round and young & with alert eyes, as she turned half way around, ^{^ twisting her neck} anxious to see what prospect, (having probably been overturned in the mud on some previous occasion)—the gait of the big girl, ^{^ strong so sturdily} with her short petticoats ^{her legs stepping, plashing steadily along through [deleted word, illegible] obstructions}—the shiny-curl'd dog, standing up in the hold of the little one,—^{she} huddled in the barrow, ^{riding backwards} with the patch-work quilt around her, sitting down, her feet visible poking straight out in front [?]^{as}—made a passing group which I stopt to look at it, you may if you choose stop and imagine (quoted in Price 231–32).

As far as we know, neither one of these black children ever wrote to Whitman. Nonetheless, the two accounts—one written by Whitman and one written to him—shed light on Whitman and race. A key difference between the two accounts is that Whitman engages directly in play with the white children while remaining more detached, more of an observer, with the blacks. The proximity of black and white children on the streets of Washington was not a surprise. The 1860 census of Washington indicates that a very high proportion of the African American community was integrated, after a fashion, with the white community. That is, they frequently lived in or near white homes as slaves or servants. What is new in the scene Whitman depicts is the “prospect” for the black children in a time of fundamental change. It was a prospect that few people, including Whitman, could adequately imagine.

The lack of a proper water system noted by Nelly O'Connor and the mud on the streets mentioned in Whitman's account of the black girls reminds us how much Washington was a city under construction at this time. Prostitution flourished, and there were hundreds of brothels in operation. A fetid canal ran from the Anacostia River to the Potomac, passing behind the Executive Mansion or what is now called the White House. At times dead livestock were left to rot there, and the canal functioned in the war years primarily as a sewer and storm drain system. It was a genuine health hazard and probably caused the death, from typhoid fever, of Lincoln's son Willie. Key structures were far from complete: the Capitol building itself had yet to be crowned with a dome, and the Washington Monument remained half built. The only paved street was Pennsylvania Avenue, where the mud seeped through the bricks. Whitman saw all the muck and problems but also recognized the potential of Washington as a work in progress: "Washington and its points I find bear a second and third perusal. . . . Upon the whole, the city, the spaces, buildings &c make no unfit emblem of our country, so far, so broadly planned, every thing in plenty, money & materials staggering with plenty, but the fruit of the plans, the knit, the combination, yet wanting" (Whitman, *Correspondence* 1: 82). More significantly, human possibility was yet to be fully etched and imagined. The possibilities for African American life were unresolved at this time, as were the possibilities for male friendship and love in a pre-Freudian age.

If Whitman had a seemingly limitless capacity to reach out to white soldiers, he did not always have a corresponding capacity to sympathize with or "imagine" African Americans. He wrote to his mother:

there are camps here of every thing—I went once or twice to the Contraband Camp, to the Hospital, &c. but I could not bring myself to go again—when I meet black men or boys among my own hospitals, I use them kindly, give them something, &c.—I believe I told you that I do the same to the wounded rebels, too—but as there is a limit to one's sinews & endurance & sympathies, &c. I have got in the way after going lightly as it were all through the wards of a hospital, & trying to give a word of cheer, if nothing else, to every one, then confining my special attentions to the few where the investment seems to tell best, & who want it most. (Whitman, *Correspondence* 1: 115)

At other times the casual racism of the nineteenth-century is seen in Whitman's remarks: "the contrabands, all sorts, some with the physiognomies of hogs or chimpanzees, others again, as dandified and handsome as any body—a long train of wood wagons twenty thirty forty of them passing up the avenue, slowly, heavily rumbling, driven by black drivers, the mules straining with their tails out, as it is up hill here" (Whitman, "Hospitals / Culpepper" 2: 557). Whitman regularly criticized slavery before the war, but like many Americans, he was

ill-prepared to imagine a post-emancipation United States. Washington was the nation's first emancipated city. The Compensated Emancipation Act of April 1862 ordered all 3,000 slaves in the District of Columbia to be freed, marking the first time the US government had officially liberated any group of slaves. The city led the way, then, in the liberation of slaves eight months before Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation extending freedom much further across the land, though not of course everywhere, since slaves in loyal Border States remained in bondage.

Whitman was convinced before the war of the necessity of African American freedom, but he was unclear about the consequences of that freedom after emancipation. At the beginning of the war, both Lincoln and Whitman saw the conflict as being about the preservation of the union. But Whitman, unlike Lincoln, did not evolve in his thinking. By the time of the Second Inaugural address, Lincoln was ready to state unmistakably that "One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war" (Lincoln 8: 332). Whitman, in contrast, never saw the war as fundamentally about slavery, so he was deprived of a positive resolution to his war narrative. The arc of his narrative did not reach toward liberation, and so he could not argue that the terrible toll of suffering was offset by an extraordinary achievement: the liberation of three million people.

In *Memoranda* and in *Drum-Taps*, his book of war poems, Whitman says very little about famous battles or key officers in part because he had little experience near the front lines, but more importantly because he was convinced that a top-down approach was distorting. To write an account of masterful men was to guarantee that the "real war will never get in the books" (Whitman, *Specimen Days* 116). He argued that the gulf between the great body of the men and the individual officers must be removed entirely or our "whole American theory is a big wind-bag" (Whitman, "Confession to Make" 2: 662). Thus his poems do not treat major historical events. One looks in vain for mentions of Gettysburg, Shiloh, and Manassas, nor can we find Sherman, Grant, Lee, and Stonewall Jackson in his poems. Unlike Herman Melville, Whitman avoids naming places, events, and people in his Civil War poems. Melville's *Battle-Pieces* mentions specific engagements and key leaders as his volume progresses from the execution of John Brown through major battles to the surrender at Appomattox and the martyrdom of Lincoln. Whitman in *Drum-Taps* perceived a chaotic war, and he refused to impose on events a single narrative line.

Instead, Whitman strives to capture the felt experience of common soldiers. "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" illustrates his approach:

VIGIL strange I kept on the field one night,
 When you, my son and my comrade, dropt at my side that day,
 One look I but gave, which your dear eyes return'd, with a look I shall never
 forget;
 One touch of your hand to mine, O boy, reach'd up as you lay on the
 ground;
 Then onward I sped in the battle, the even-contested battle;
 Till late in the night reliev'd, to the place at last again I made my way;
 Found you in death so cold, dear comrade—found your body, son of
 responding kisses, (never again on earth responding;)
 Bared your face in the starlight—curious the scene—cool blew the moderate
 night-wind;
 Long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly around me the battle-field
 spreading;
 Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet, there in the fragrant silent night;
 But not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh—Long, long I gazed;
 Then on the earth partially reclining, sat by your side, leaning my chin in
 my hands;
 Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with you, dearest
 comrade—Not a tear, not a word;
 Vigil of silence, love and death—vigil for you, my son and my soldier,
 As onward silently stars aloft, eastward new ones upward stole;
 Vigil final for you, brave boy, (I could not save you, swift was your death,
 I faithfully loved you and cared for you living—I think we shall surely meet
 again;)
 Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed just as the dawn appear'd,
 My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop'd well his form,
 Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head, and carefully under
 feet;
 And there and then, and bathed by the rising sun, my son in his grave, in
 his rude-dug grave I deposited;
 Ending my vigil strange with that—vigil of night and battle-field dim;
 Vigil for boy of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding;)
 Vigil for comrade swiftly slain—vigil I never forget, how as day brighten'd,
 I rose from the chill ground, and folded my soldier well in his blanket,
 And buried him where he fell. (Whitman, *Drum-Taps* 42–43).

This poem captures the intensity of loss through figuring comradeship as a familial bond. The bond between the men is what matters here rather than the location of the battle (omitted) or its place in the strategic movements of an army (ignored). The vigil, “wondrous” and “sweet” serves, if anything, to intensify the loss and suffering in this last moment of earthly connectedness and first of ongoing remembrance, the “vigil I never forget.” The foreshortened final line, by far the briefest in the poem, signals a life abruptly cut off. Elegant

in its simplicity, the final line is made up of nickel words—nothing fancy. The only word of more than one syllable is the one that counts: buried.

The kinship portrayed in “Vigil Strange I Kept” resembles Whitman’s attachments to the wounded with whom he took on shape-shifting roles depending on circumstances. In his early forties—though prematurely gray and looking so much older than his years that the men commonly called out to him “old man!” when he entered the wards—he took on a fatherly, motherly, avuncular role. At other times, he was the impassioned friend. That there were attachments of various kinds between Whitman and some soldiers is unmistakable, just as there was an electric current flowing between female nurses and their patients at times.

Whitman’s prose—his journalism, notebooks, and *Memoranda During the War*—is highly specific about the hospital settings: he often gives the exact location of bed, ward, and building. For Whitman, this was a war about the common man:

Lieut Wm Hubbard, co B 27th Indiana regt. Bed 34—ward H. . . .
 Henry Benton, co E. 7th Ohio vo. Ward K, bed 44 wants a little jelly, & an
 orange . . .
 Henry Eberle, bed 8 Ward K—co H. 28th Penn Vol. / wants a German
 prayer book . . .
 bring bed No 4 Ward H. a pipe /
 Hiram F. Willis ward I, bed 21 co I. 84th Penn. / wounded at
 Chancellorsville Sunday. wounded in hands &c. & in thigh
 Don’t forget ward D. Austin. Lawton (also Chas Moody, bed 44) ward D.
 North side near the door right arm badly wounded—left hand slightly
 wounded (Whitman, “From Hooker’s Command” 630–31).

Whitman was capable of finding a “volume of meaning,” even a “tragic poem . . . in every one of those sick wards! Yes, in every individual cot, with its little card-rack nailed at the head” (Whitman, “City Photographs” 3). Here and elsewhere, he makes clear that he could find a “poem” in the very bodies of the wounded or in something as seemingly inconsequential as a bed-end name tag. For him and others, the scribbled musings left by the wounded on hospital walls were charged with meaning. Yet even as Whitman broke the bounds of what could be thought of as poetry, finding it often in poignant, unpretentious detail, he also saw value in conventional poetry because he recognized that relatively predictable forms and sentiments could help to soothe traumatized soldiers. Accordingly, when he had occasion to share poems with wounded soldiers, he did not often turn to his own groundbreaking work. He supported the hospital newspapers because he understood that the poetry they featured assisted in the work of recovery.

Whitman perceived Lincoln, too, to be a paradoxical commoner, a member of those he called the “divine average”: “I think well of the President. He has a face like a hoosier Michael Angelo, so awful ugly it becomes beautiful, with it strange mouth, its deep cut, criss-cross lines, and its doughnut complexion. My notion is, too, that underneath his outside smutched mannerism, and stories from third-class county bar-rooms . . . Mr. Lincoln keeps a fountain of first-class practical, telling wisdom” (Whitman, *Correspondence* 1: 82–83). Whitman saw Lincoln regularly, at times daily, as the President commuted between the executive mansion and the Soldiers’ Home (where Lincoln and his family escaped the heat and intensity of downtown Washington). Nodding to the President and being acknowledged in turn by him were recurrent wartime experiences for Whitman. In the death of Lincoln, recounted in his famous elegy “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Whitman reaches beyond the President to encompass and mourn all those lost in the war:

And I saw askant the armies,
I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,
Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc’d with missiles I saw them,
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and bloody,
And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,)
And the staffs all splinter’d and broken.

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,
But I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer’d not,
The living remain’d and suffer’d, the mother suffer’d,
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer’d,
And the armies that remain’d suffer’d. (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* [1881] 261)

No one had literally seen the “debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,” but Whitman had seen an enormous amount in the hospitals. In this extrapolated vision of the totality of destruction, the poet comprehends the magnitude of mass death. “Fully at rest,” the soldiers have perhaps found some comfort in peace and freedom from pain. In the “white skeletons” Whitman sees, it is unclear if he is lamenting the passing of white soldiers, or—as would be fitting in a poem about Lincoln—all soldiers white and black, now reduced to bones and indistinguishable by color and race.

“Lilacs” may be Whitman’s greatest Civil War poem, but current residents of the city, or at least users of the Dupont Circle metro stop, are more frequently reminded of “The Wound-Dresser.” Part of that poem is inscribed on a frieze at the station, and the lines relate directly to Whitman’s hospital experiences:

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 dark night—some are so young;
Some suffer so much—I recall the experience sweet and sad.

One commentator in an online discussion board wrote: "Damn, that's a depressing inscription to have to view every time I ascend from the Dupont station" ("Dupont Metro Gets Poetry"). I do not think Whitman saw it as so thoroughly depressing; it was "sweet and sad," reminiscent of the "terrible, beautiful" days mentioned earlier. For him, the war validated the fortitude and heroism of ordinary individuals and reconfirmed his faith in the ordinary people so vital to the democratic experiment. Two key lines—the last lines of the poem—have been omitted from the Dupont Circle inscription: "(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested, / Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)" Whitman had found in the hospitals a place where male affection could be openly and freely expressed. He had seen its beneficial power when he simply stayed by a soldier's side through an amputation and the long night that followed, and when he held the hand of someone shot through the bladder and left in ceaseless pain and the indignity of resting in a pool of blood and urine caused by an endlessly weeping wound. Whitman no doubt yearned for many of the needy and often dying men he soothed, but he also handled himself with considerable dignity and discipline. As Robert Roper has noted, his efforts were met with "near universal gratitude" from the soldiers, many of whom credited him with saving their lives (Roper 225).

Whitman had come to admire both the wounded soldiers and the city now hosting them. The nature and responsibilities of the capital city were also on Whitman's mind when he wrote "Letter from Washington" for the *New-York Times*. He doubted "whether justice has been done" to Washington, DC: "We all know the chorus: Washington, dusty, muddy, tiresome Washington is the most awful place, political and other; is the rendezvous of the national universal axe-grinding, caucusing . . . and windy bawlers from every quarter far and near." If Washington lacked the "high-life attractions" of other capitals, Whitman did not miss them: "What themes, what fields this national city affords, this hour, for eyes of live heads, and for souls fit to feed upon them!" (Whitman, "Letter from Washington" 2).

In this article, Whitman also reflects on the unfinished Capitol and the sculpture to sit atop the dome, the Genius of Liberty: "A few days ago, poking about there, eastern side, I found the Genius, all dismembered, scattered on the ground, by the basement front—I suppose preparatory to being hoisted"

("Letter from Washington" 2). Like so many young men, the Genius of the country had been cut in pieces. It would later be soldered back together in a way that Whitman could not match despite his best efforts to supply arms and legs for men who had lost them, to embrace the wounded and somehow make them whole again. The scene at the Capitol was not entirely grim, for Whitman saw a huge derrick surmounting the dome and he began to wonder if this "rude and mighty derrick" should remain atop the Capitol as the most fit emblem of the nation and age. Washington and the nation, he realized, would always be under construction.

With an ordinary man's vantage point on the War and an extraordinary artist's sensibility, Whitman, living in the nation's past and future capital, focused on what often escaped attention: the war experiences of the common soldier, the stoicism and heroism of otherwise average individuals, and—above all—the suffering, dignity, and enormous courage he saw in his hospital visits to thousands of wounded men, Northerners and Southerners alike. After his experience of the War, Whitman's poetic voice would never be the same. He had seen too much to remain the exuberant Whitman of the antebellum years. Soldiers from every region of the country came to the Washington hospitals, and through them, in ways terrible and beautiful, he sacrificed the best years of his writing life and became the national poet.

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