

# *The Solitary Singer*

A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY OF

*WALT WHITMAN*

*by*

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Although in these articles for the *Star* Whitman paid little attention to national affairs, there was one exception. The dispute between England and the United States over the Oregon boundary had become acute in 1845, and many editors were shrill in their denunciation of England. When the *Democratic Review*, which had previously been in favor of peace, began urging war unless England gave in, Whitman felt that he must speak out in protest. He had thought, he said, that the tension between the two countries was lessening and he was afraid the *Democratic Review* would revive the danger. He still approved Bryant's firm but reasonable stand in the *New York Post*. He believed in a "high and glorious destiny for this republic," but asked "what crying outrage have we now to avenge?" He was so opposed to war that he would even sacrifice the nation's "destiny" if it "were to be achieved through blood and rapine—if our fame and honor could come in no other path except the path of the cannon balls . . . and the groans of dying men—we could turn our face aside and almost say, let us never be a great nation!"<sup>34</sup>

While with the *Star* Whitman also began to pay a good deal of attention to books recently published, but almost invariably they were books that could be used in the schools, or books suitable for self-education. None of his brief reviews was literary. At that time he seemed to be unconcerned with any esthetic values except in music, and even in music he always found means for moral improvement. This trait led him, however, to espouse many good causes, such as night and technical schools in Brooklyn. The School Board was interested in a night school, but dallied, and Whitman repeatedly tried to stir it to action.<sup>35</sup>

## II

In the midst of Whitman's editorial battles for these causes, the much-loved editor of the rival Brooklyn *Eagle*, William B. Marsh, died on February 26, 1846. He left a wife and several children almost destitute, and on March 3 Whitman published in the *Star* a signed appeal for financial aid for the Marsh family. The following week he succeeded William Marsh as editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle*.

The *Eagle* was only five years old and had had only one editor before Whitman.<sup>36</sup> Marsh, like Whitman, had worked as a printer in New York, and Horace Greeley was a friend of his. He had come to Brooklyn when the city had a population of about forty thousand, and during his editorship the *Eagle* had become not only the outstanding paper in Brooklyn



was a foregone conclusion biologically and psychologically—a brute fact, as inescapable as the ultimate doom of the Indian nations after European colonists had gained a foothold on the Atlantic coast. New England moralists, like Emerson and Thoreau, would condemn their government for seizing Texas and California (almost everyone wanted Oregon), but even they felt the magic attraction of the “West” and were unconsciously expansionists in their dreams and thinking. These unexploited lands had become a part of the American myth.

It was not until several weeks after Whitman began writing editorials for the *Eagle* that he showed any marked concern for the great problems facing President Polk and the nation. On March 18 he did print a strong condemnation of the laws that permitted Negro slaves to be imported by way of Brazil,<sup>66</sup> but he had not yet connected slavery and Western expansion. Nor had he given much thought to expansion itself. We may remember that as late as the previous December he seemed to doubt that the Oregon lands were worth risking war with Great Britain. But as General Taylor marched toward the Rio Grande, Whitman’s patriotic fervor grew. On April 3 he crowed loudly over the American victory at Buena Vista and began to hero-worship General Taylor.<sup>67</sup> He was exactly the kind of man Whitman might be expected to admire: rugged, tenacious, careless in dress, and with no regard whatever for conventions or protocol. Historians agree that he was absolutely honest and fearless, but deficient in military science and imagination—and some say in intelligence.<sup>68</sup> More than one bright young officer (whose name would become famous later in the Civil War) staved off defeat by supplying the leadership he lacked, or won victories by improvised tactics not thought of by the general. But he captured the loyalty of his backwoods troops and the imagination of the newspaper correspondents. The Whigs were quick to see his possibilities as a candidate for the Presidency in the next election, and it was not difficult for them to suggest this idea to “Old Rough and Ready” himself. Thus he waged the war with half his attention on the Mexicans and the other half on the next Whig convention, and co-operated very willingly with the newspapermen. President Polk knew what was going on, and the prospect of having a hero-general oppose the Democrats in 1848 worried him about as much as the Mexicans did. But Whitman took the newspaper stories at face value and worshiped the general.

On the evening of April 15 the front of the *Eagle* building was covered by a “transparency” which showed the illuminated names of

the places which American soldiers had made glorious in the newspapers: "Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, Monterey, Buena Vista, Vera Cruz . . ." Next day in the editorial column of the *Eagle* Whitman expressed his continued hopes for peace, but warned that "the desire on the part of our government for peace with Mexico must be met with a willingness for peace on the part of Mexico herself."<sup>69</sup> The difficulty was that the Mexican government was so unstable that it was impossible for the United States government to find anyone with whom to negotiate. By May most Americans, outside New England, were convinced that the Texas problem could only be solved by military force. On May 11 Whitman called for a declaration of war,<sup>70</sup> only four days before President Polk signed a resolution stating that a state of war existed.

On June 7 the great orator and radical clergyman in Boston, Theodore Parker, thundered from Melodeon Hall that "aggressive war is a sin . . . a denial of Christianity and of God . . . Treason against the people . . ."<sup>71</sup> But the editor of the *Eagle* not only supported the war, he had unlimited faith in the benefits that the American government could bestow upon the peoples of any territory conquered. On the day preceding Parker's anathema Whitman read a report that the province of Yucatan wished to be annexed by the United States, and he declared in his editorial: "The scope of our government . . . is such that it can readily fit itself, and extend itself, to almost any extent, and to interests and circumstances the most widely different."<sup>72</sup> He looked forward to seeing California and Santa Fe (New Mexico) "shine as two new stars in our mighty firmament." But he warned that "the mere physical grandeur of this Republic . . . is only desirable as an aid to reach the truer good, the good of the whole body of the people."

Some days later (June 23) Whitman thought the expansion of the United States natural and inevitable: "And for our part, we look on that increase of territory and power . . . with the faith which the Christian has in God's mystery."<sup>73</sup> Since the early days of their Republic most Americans had had the idealistic faith that their democratic form of government could not only be a beacon of freedom to other nations—an example and an influence—but that its success would hasten the day when oppressed people of all the world would throw off their shackles. It was a revolutionary doctrine, and as such feared by most European governments. In that very same "year of decision" William Cullen Bryant, recently returned from Europe, expressed these convictions in a poem, "Oh Mother of a Mighty Race":

Oh mother of a mighty race,  
 Yet lovely in thy youthful grace!  
 The elder dames, thy haughty peers,  
 Admire and hate thy blooming years.

They know not, in their hate and pride,  
 What virtues with thy children bide;

There's freedom at thy gates and rest  
 For Earth's down-trodden and opprest,  
 A shelter for the hunted head,  
 For the starved laborer toil and bread.

Power, at thy bounds,  
 Stops and calls back his baffled hounds.

To Bryant and Whitman this was both a political and a religious conviction. "Over the rest of the world," continued Whitman in his editorial, "the swelling impulse of freedom struggles, too; though we are ages ahead of them."<sup>74</sup> On July 7, discussing the prospect of annexing California, he asked in all sincerity: "What has miserable, inefficient Mexico— . . . with . . . her actual tyranny by the few over the many—what has she to do with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race?"<sup>75</sup> And on July 28, almost as if paraphrasing Bryant's yet unpublished poem, Whitman wrote: "The old and moth-eaten systems of Europe have had their day, and that evening of their existence which is nigh at hand, will be the token of a glorious dawn for the down-trodden people."<sup>76</sup> This anti-Europeanism was one aspect of American social idealism. On October 8 Whitman reiterated: "Long enough have priestcraft and kingcraft stalked over those [European] lands, clothed in robes of darkness and wielding the instruments of subjection."<sup>77</sup>

These editorials were preliminary drafts of what was to become the famous 1855 preface of *Leaves of Grass*, but the sentiments represented the feelings of a great many Americans in 1846. And Bryant had considerable influence on their formation and growth in Whitman's mind. On the occasion of Bryant's death Whitman recalled that he had known him over thirty years, "and he had been markedly kind to me . . . We were both walkers, and when I work'd in Brooklyn he several times came over, middle of afternoons, and we took rambles, miles long, till dark, out towards Bedford or Flatbush, in company. On these occasions he gave me clear accounts of scenes in Europe—the cities, looks, architecture, art, especially Italy—where he had travel'd a good deal."<sup>78</sup>

Meanwhile, after much bluster and some shrewd bargaining on both sides, England had agreed to settle the Oregon dispute with a boundary line on the 49th parallel, and on June 12 Congress voted to accept this agreement, much to Whitman's relief. Now he could turn his whole attention to Mexico. Whitman felt confident that General Taylor would soon bring the Mexicans to their senses, and he continued to idolize the hero of the press. On October 14th he exclaimed, "The more we hear and read of this man, the more we think he in many respects resembles Washington."<sup>79</sup> And Whitman was infuriated by the means some editors were using to oppose the Mexican War. On November 16 he accused Horace Greeley of the *Tribune* of aiding and abetting the enemy in his "open advocacy of the Mexican cause" and his "sneers at our officers and men."<sup>80</sup> On December 5 he was indignant over the report that General Winfield Scott was to be placed in supreme command.<sup>81</sup>

General Scott was another Whig who aspired to the Presidency, and it galled the President to have to use him; moreover, President Polk distrusted him because he was a West Point graduate and thought in terms of military science. General Scott's political enemies also regarded him as an exhibitionist, and at times he did seem to be conspicuously theatrical. He delighted in splendid uniforms and military ceremony, whereas General Taylor did not care what he wore and his speech and manners were as "common" as an old shoe. The hordes of half-wild backwoodsmen from Tennessee and Missouri under his command, who fought each other if no Mexicans were available, adored him, and though Whitman had never been near the backwoods or the frontier, he had a good deal of the frontier point of view.

General Scott had a plan for ending the war by an invasion through Vera Cruz, and after much urging by the military experts in Washington President Polk finally appointed him supreme commander and sent him off on the expedition. Although Polk consistently placed the good of his country ahead of the good of his party, he never forgot he was a Democrat, and it hurt him not to be able to find a Democratic general who could win the war for him. The Whigs, too, were in a dilemma, for they liked to oppose "Jimmie Polk's" war, despite the fact that their own extremely political-minded generals were conducting it.

Whitman, however, though editor of a party newspaper, did not think of Texas, Oregon, or California expansion in terms of politics, but as the means of extending the benefits of democracy to more people. For this reason he continued to oppose the "Native American" faction because he

wanted to rescue as many people as possible from European despotism. "There is too much mankind and too little earth" in other parts of the world, but "The mind becomes almost lost in tracing in imagination those hidden and boundless tracts of our territory . . ." <sup>82</sup> How then can "any man with a heart in his breast, begrudge the coming of Europe's needy ones, to the plentiful storehouse of the New World?"

## V

Though the question of how to use the Western and Southwestern lands gave rise to various political views, only the "Native American" splinter party opposed immigration outright in 1846. But in August another question arose that was destined to split the Democratic party—as it was already split in New York State—and eventually the nation. President Polk had asked Congress for an appropriation of two million dollars to be used as an advance payment for any territory that might be acquired from Mexico by treaty, and David Wilmot of Pennsylvania introduced an amendment to the bill forbidding the introduction of slavery into any new territory. This amendment, which became known as the Wilmot Proviso, was approved by the House and Senate—though the House later reversed its approval. All along the abolitionists, especially those of New England, had insisted that Southern politicians were fostering the war with Mexico in order to extend slavery and the political power of slavery. President Polk had not regarded the Mexican question as concerned with slavery one way or the other, but after the adoption of the Wilmot Proviso slavery was definitely involved, because it had become a major political issue.

In New York State this new dispute was to become a decisive factor in the next election. Walt Whitman's beloved Silas Wright had not been a very successful governor, and to a large extent because of the very honesty and political integrity that Whitman so much admired in him<sup>83</sup>—though it was also a fact that he drank too much. Having been compelled against his desire to become governor, he felt justified in remaining aloof from all patronage distribution and political conniving. To the idealist or political amateur this might seem like admirable conduct, but the practical result was that the Hunker faction seized the opportunity to press their recommendations, and President Polk inadvertently filled most of the important government positions in New York with appointees who opposed Wright and his friends. Thus as a result of Governor Wright's refusal to



make recommendations, he contributed through inaction, and President Polk through incomplete knowledge of the situation, to a breach in the Democratic party that lost the election in New York State in 1846 and the national election in 1848. Yet despite Silas Wright's failure as a state politician and his expressed desire to retire from politics altogether, he was persuaded, during the summer of 1846, to become a candidate to succeed himself as governor, and leading national politicians of both parties regarded him as the best candidate the Democratic party could run for the Presidency in 1848.

During the summer of 1846 Whitman eagerly supported Wright for the governorship, as he had done in the *Democrat* in 1844,<sup>84</sup> and, as with the earlier newspaper, against the wishes of the owner, for Van Anden was a "Hunker." The party had not, however, yet split into two irreconcilable camps, and the editor of the *Eagle* was permitted to follow his independent course. The tragic split was to come later as a result of the Wilmot Proviso. Governor Wright refused to make a political statement on the subject, but to his friends he had indicated his sympathy with the Proviso and he was generally thought to favor it. This was not openly an issue in New York, though secretly it influenced voters, and indirectly encouraged the gestation of a "free soil" political movement.

One of the open issues in the New York election was the anti-rent movement. In several counties in New York the patroon system of the Dutch still prevailed on many farms. Originally most of the land in the central Hudson Valley had belonged to a few landlords, who had rented it out to tenants on long-term leases. Usually the rent was nominal, and could be paid in produce or money, but the land could not be bought. Collections of rent were often lax, and sometimes the rents were not paid for many years. As a result some tenants got the idea that the land they, and perhaps their fathers and grandfathers, had lived on ought rightly to belong to them without further payments of any kind. Following the death in 1839 of one of the greatest of the "Old Patroons," Stephen Van Rensselaer, tenants began to protest, later to riot, and finally to form an Anti-Rent party. This party was too small to win an election, but it possessed enough power to bargain with either major party. Governor Wright tried to find legal means to solve the rent problem, but he refused to tolerate the flouting of law and order and once put down a rebellion with troops. Whitman regarded his handling of the lawbreakers as highly ethical and commendable, and said so in an editorial on November 2.<sup>85</sup>

On the day after the election Whitman wished to find the reason for



members of the laboring class. To such men Whitman had tried to address "The Eighteenth Presidency!"<sup>27</sup> and he would have liked nothing better than to write poems for them to read, but here he showed himself as blind to their true mentality as he was familiar with their character and habits.

Actually the stage drivers gave Whitman a greater emotional satisfaction than did his literary associates at Pfaff's, for both he and all contemporary observers agree that he took no part in the battles of wit and the spirited debates over art and literature that raged almost every night in the famous restaurant. Whitman was always a slow thinker and deliberate in his speech. He was no match for the mercurial Fitz-James O'Brien, satirical George Arnold, or perhaps even his sardonic friend Henry Clapp. Looking back on these experiences, he summed them up for Traubel in this sentence: "My own greatest pleasure at Pfaff's was to look on—to see, talk little, absorb."<sup>28</sup> But after a while all this noise and jest and desperate effort to be lighthearted seemed unreal to him and in his notebook he wrote down a rough draft of a poem to be called "The Two Vaults,"<sup>29</sup> which he never completed.

The vault at Pfaffs where the drinkers and laughers meet to eat and drink and  
carouse,  
While on the walk immediately overhead, pass the myriad feet of Broadway  
As the dead in their graves, are underfoot hidden  
And the living pass over them, recking not of them, . . .

The "drinkers and laughers" in the brightly lighted vault seemed as unreal to him as those other phantoms in the vault "entirely dark." The poet evidently intended to carry the comparison of the two vaults further, but he never did. Maybe the phantoms were too insubstantial to grasp with words. Perhaps, too, his own macabre fantasy was the product, to some extent at least, of his half-conscious sense of guilt and frustration as a result of his literary idleness. A poet needs to absorb life, but his greatest satisfaction comes from his struggle to express it creatively. However much Whitman may have been absorbing, in the last half of 1860 and the early part of 1861 he created little.

### III

For some months after the election of Lincoln in November, 1860, events seemed to confirm the growing conviction Whitman had had for several years that incompetence and misrule were as possible in a democracy as in

any other form of government. Senator Douglas had actually received a popular majority, but Lincoln had won in those states which had the largest electoral votes and thus attained the Presidency of a precariously united nation. As soon as the results were known, the South at once began taking steps to carry out its threat to secede, though the North was inclined to interpret these actions as more of the South's sound and fury. But in New York City, especially, anti-Lincoln feeling was very strong. Fernando Wood, the extremely corrupt mayor whom Whitman had often vigorously denounced in the *Brooklyn Times*, had managed to crawl back into office at the November election, and he courted the support of the numerous Southern sympathizers in the city by threatening to carry the metropolis into a secession from the Union and form a new state, composed of Manhattan, Long Island, and Staten Island, to be called, *Tri-Insula*.<sup>30</sup>

In the midst of these threats and uncertainties, the President-elect passed through New York City on February 18 on his way to his inauguration, and by chance Whitman saw him for the first time.<sup>31</sup> Despite—or perhaps because of—Lincoln's unpopularity in the city, many people gathered to see him alight from his barouche at the Astor House. The general fear of violence was so great that a hush descended upon the crowd as the tall figure climbed out of his conveyance. On the same spot Whitman had seen noisy demonstrations for Jackson, Clay, Webster, Kossuth of Hungary, "Filibuster" Walker, and the Prince of Wales.

But on this occasion, not a voice—not a sound. From the top of an omnibus, (driven up one side, close by, and block'd by the curbstone and the crowds,) I had, . . . a capital view of it all, and especially of Mr. Lincoln, his look and gait—his perfect composure and coolness—his unusual and uncouth height, his dress of complete black, stovepipe hat push'd back on the head, dark-brown complexion, seam'd and wrinkled yet canny-looking face, black, bushy head of hair, disproportionately long neck, and his hands held behind as he stood observing the people. He look'd with curiosity upon that immense sea of faces, and the sea of faces return'd the look with similar curiosity. In both there was a dash of comedy, almost farce, such as Shakspeare [*sic*] puts in his blackest tragedies. The crowd that hemm'd around consisted I should think of thirty to forty thousand men, not a single one his personal friend—while I have no doubt (so frenzied were the ferments of the time), many an assassin's knife and pistol lurk'd in hip or breast-pocket there, ready, soon as break and riot came.

But no break or riot came. The tall figure gave another relieving stretch or two of arms and legs; then with moderate pace, and accompanied by a few

unknown-looking persons, ascended the portico-steps of the Astor House, disappear'd through its broad entrance—and the dumb-show ended.<sup>32</sup>

Though this "dumb-show" made a deep and lasting impression on Whitman's mind, outwardly his life showed no change since the fateful election. While he rode up and down Broadway with his favorite stage drivers, or visited New York Hospital, or sat moodily observing the Pfaff crowd, Lincoln slipped quietly and unobserved into Washington without mishap, and was peacefully inaugurated. But the clamor from the South and the newly organized Confederacy increased in violence, and the capital itself was a house divided; yet most people still did not expect outright war.

On April 13, however, the whole nation was electrified by the news that Fort Sumter had been fired upon the previous evening by Confederate batteries. Whitman himself has left one of the most vivid accounts of this event:

News of the attack on Fort Sumter and *the flag* at Charleston harbor, S.C., was receiv'd in New York City late at night (13th April, 1861,) and was immediately sent out in extras of the newspapers. [The early morning papers would have been dated the 13th; the bombardment started on April 12 and the fort held out until the next day.] I had been to the opera in Fourteenth Street that night, and after the performance was walking down Broadway toward twelve o'clock, on my way to Brooklyn, when I heard in the distance the loud cries of the newsboys, who came presently tearing and yelling up the street, rushing from side to side even more furiously than usual. I bought an extra and cross'd to the Metropolitan hotel (Niblo's) where the great lamps were still brightly blazing, and, with a crowd of others, who gather'd impromptu, read the news, which was evidently authentic. For the benefit of some who had no papers, one of us read the telegram aloud, while all listened silently and attentively. No remark was made by any of the crowd, which had increas'd to thirty or forty, but all stood a minute or two, I remember, before they dispers'd.<sup>33</sup>

It is not likely that Whitman felt like talking to his friends on the ferry boat crossing the East River that night. Whether he was able to sleep when he got home we can only guess, but it is certain that the news profoundly affected him, for three days later, under the recorded date of April 16, 1861, he wrote in his notebook: "I have this day, this hour, resolved to inaugurate for myself a pure, perfect, sweet, clean-blooded robust body, by ignoring all drinks but water and pure milk, and all fat meats, late suppers—a great body, a purged, cleansed, spiritualized, invigorated body."<sup>34</sup>

There is a story that Whitman left Pfaff's in anger when someone of

ferred a toast to the Confederacy,<sup>35</sup> but as late as September he dined there with Fred Gray, who had recently taken part in the battle at Antietam, Maryland.<sup>36</sup> And John Burroughs wrote a friend of his in the fall of 1862 that Whitman frequently attended Pfaff's.<sup>37</sup> Burroughs, who had been a constant reader of the *Saturday Press*, and had even contributed to it, had already become acquainted with *Leaves of Grass*, and he had gone to New York for the specific purpose of meeting Whitman. The *Saturday Press* was then defunct, but Henry Clapp was employed on the *Leader*, for which Ada Clare and others of the Bohemian group were writing as they had for the *Press*. Burroughs called at the *Leader* office, and Clapp told him that Whitman was at Pfaff's almost every night.

In the days immediately following the attack on Fort Sumter the President began mobilizing an army, and in the popular mood of the moment even Mayor Wood began issuing patriotic statements for the press. But almost no one in the North had any real understanding of the magnitude of the war that had just begun. Whitman recalled later that, "Nine-tenths of the people of the free States look'd upon the rebellion, as started in South Carolina, from a feeling one-half of contempt, and the other half composed of anger and incredulity."<sup>38</sup> Senator Seward predicted that it would blow over in "sixty days." Whitman remembered talking about it on a Fulton ferry boat with the Brooklyn mayor, who said he only "hoped the Southern fire-eaters would commit some overt act of resistance, as they would then be at once so effectually squelch'd, we would never hear of secession again—but he was afraid they would never have the pluck to really do anything." Two companies of the Thirteenth Regiment marched out of the city "all provided with pieces of rope, conspicuously tied to their musket barrels, with which to bring back each man a prisoner from the audacious South, to be led on a noose, on our men's early and triumphant return!"

Among the sanguinary recruits of the Thirteenth Regiment was George Whitman, who had enlisted for a hundred days after Federal troops on their way to Washington were attacked by secessionist mobs in Baltimore on April 19. He received his training in and near the capital, which he also helped to guard throughout the summer of 1861,<sup>39</sup> for both government officials and citizens in Washington feared and expected an imminent attack from Confederate troops massed in Virginia. On July 12 Walt wrote George that the whole family was glad he was coming home (evidently anticipating the expiration of George's first period of enlistment) because they were afraid there was "something in" the accounts they



had been reading in the papers about the shameful negligence of the commissariat in his regiment, though George had denied these reports in his letters, and Walt realized that the *Eagle* was playing up the charges "to stop men from enlisting." But Walt himself showed how little he understood the military situation by adding: "All of us here think the rebellion as good as broke—no matter if the war does continue for months yet."<sup>40</sup>

Soon, however, "All this sort of feeling was destin'd to be arrested and revers'd by a terrible shock—the battle of first Bull Run. . . ."<sup>41</sup> On Monday, July 22, the routed Union troops began pouring into Washington, coated with mud, soaked to the skin by a steadily falling rain, and often without their weapons, which had become too burdensome to carry. Some thoughtful people hastily improvised kettles of hot soup and coffee. Many of the men, too exhausted to eat or move a step further, dropped on the sidewalk and slept in the rain. Washington was thrown into "a mixture of awful consternation, uncertainty, rage, shame, helplessness, and stupefying disappointment."<sup>42</sup> Southern troops could probably have taken the city with ease if they had arrived promptly. Whitman was to look back on this as the bitterest hour in the history of the Union. But the President immediately set about "reorganizing his forces, and placing himself in position for future and surer work." From this day on Whitman's admiration for Lincoln steadily increased.

Then the great New York papers at once appear'd, (commencing that evening, and following it up the next morning, and incessantly through many days afterwards,) with leaders that rang out over the land with the loudest, most reverberating ring of clearest bugles, full of encouragement, hope, inspiration, unflinching defiance. Those magnificent editorials! they never flagg'd for a fortnight. The *Herald* commenced them—I remember the articles well. The *Tribune* was equally cogent and inspiring—and the *Times*, *Evening Post*, and other principal papers, were not a whit behind. They came in good time, for they were needed. For in the humiliation of Bull Run, the popular feeling North, from its extreme superciliousness, recoil'd to the depth of gloom and apprehension.<sup>43</sup>

It was soon after Bull Run that Whitman wrote "Beat! Beat! Drums!" and the poem was permeated by the spirit of those editorials. It was, indeed, Whitman's own editorial contribution.

Beat! beat! drums!—Blow! bugles! blow!  
Through the windows—through doors—burst like a force of ruthless men,  
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation;  
Into the school where the scholar is studying:

Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must he have now with his  
bride;  
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, plowing his field or gathering his grain;  
So fierce you whirr and pound, you drums—so shrill you bugles blow.

Beat! beat! drums!—Blow! bugles! blow!  
Make no parley—stop for no expostulation;  
Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer;  
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man;  
Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's entreaties;  
Make even the trestles to shake the dead, where they lie awaiting the hearses,  
So strong you thump, O terrible drums—so loud you bugles blow.<sup>44</sup>

This poem was published simultaneously in *Harper's Weekly* and the *New York Leader* on September 28. The fact that it appeared in so popular a magazine as *Harper's Weekly* shows how timely it was. Though there were still many "Copperheads" in New York City the North as a whole was now determined to get on with the war and wipe out the disgrace of Bull Run.

Walt was not the only member of the family who felt the strong emotions that engendered this poem. Not long after its publication George re-enlisted in the Fifty-first New York Volunteers for three years or the duration of the war, and departed for training camp on October 30.<sup>45</sup> Andrew may also have enlisted,<sup>46</sup> even though he was married and the father of two children, but his record is not clear; and if he did enlist, it was evidently for a short term—or he may have been quickly discharged because of ill health. Later critics were to question Walt's patriotism because he did not offer himself immediately for military service,<sup>47</sup> but one good reason was his age. He was forty-two, and looked much older. Both James Russell Lowell and Herman Melville, for example, were the same age as Whitman, and though both felt very strongly about the Southern rebellion, neither made any effort to volunteer for military service. Another complication was that, with George's long-term enlistment, Walt probably felt himself to be the main support of his mother and sub-normal brother, Edward. Jeff was employed and lived with his mother, but he also had a wife and a year-old child to support, and, as we shall see later,<sup>48</sup> could not be entirely depended upon by his mother either then or later. During the summer Jesse had been employed at the Navy Yard,<sup>49</sup> loading provisions onto the naval vessels, and presumably he was still so employed in the autumn, but he had always been emotionally and mentally unstable. George was undoubtedly the strongest, most practical and com-



pletely normal of all Mrs. Whitman's sons. His eagerness to defend his country was greatly to his credit, but his leaving home increased Walt's responsibilities.

Besides "Beat! Beat! Drums!" Whitman published only two other poems in 1861. One of these was "Little Bells Last Night" (later title: "I Heard You Solemn-Sweet Pipes of the Organ"), printed in the *New York Leader* on October 12, 1861:

War-suggesting trumpets, I heard you;  
And you I heard beating, you chorus of small and large drums;  
You round-lipp'd cannons!—you I heard, thunder-cracking, saluting the frigate from France;  
I heard you, solemn-sweet pipes of the organ, as last Sunday morn I pass'd the church;  
Winds of Autumn!—as I walk'd the woods at dusk, I heard your long-stretch'd sighs, up above, so mournful;  
I heard the perfect Italian tenor, singing at the opera; I heard the soprano, in the midst of the quartet singing;  
Lady! you, too, I heard, as with white arms in your parlor, you play'd for me delicious music on the harp;  
Heart of my love!—you, too, I heard, murmuring low, through one of the wrists around my head—  
Heard the pulse of you, when all was still, ringing little bells last night under my ear.<sup>50</sup>

In this first (newspaper) version the love theme was incidental, though distinctly present, and without any suggestion of "Calamus" emotions whatever. When he later included the poem in *Leaves of Grass* Whitman omitted the first three lines and the seventh, and placed it in his "Children of Adam" group, thus suggesting that for him the sexual associations were the strongest of the remembered experiences alluded to in the imagery; but in the autumn of 1861 the themes of war and sex mingled in the poet's consciousness.

Meanwhile Whitman had also become active again in journalism. Since June he had been contributing, with some interruptions, a series of articles called "Brooklyniana" to the *Brooklyn Standard*.<sup>51</sup> These were primarily concerned with the social history of Long Island and Brooklyn, with a considerable amount of personal reminiscences, ending with an account of a trip to Greenport and an impromptu picnic excursion to Montauk Point that Whitman took in the fall of 1861—though not described until a year later.<sup>52</sup> The first number was published on June 8, 1861, and the last on November 1, 1862. Whitman had long been interested in the history of

his native town and island, and it may have been partly a coincidence that he now became a recorder of local history just at the time when the national events threatened to change the course of the nation's history. However, his faith in the future of his country was unshaken, and he firmly believed that "there will come a time, here in Brooklyn, and all over America, when nothing will be of more interest than authentic reminiscences of the past. Much of it will be made up of subordinate 'memoirs,' and of personal chronicles and gossip—but we think every portion of it will always meet a welcome from a large mass of American readers."<sup>53</sup>

During the winter of 1861–1862 Whitman continued to visit the hospital on Broadway, which had begun to receive soldiers after Bull Run and steadily increased its services to military men as the war continued. By the spring of 1862 this hospital was taking care of several hundred sick and wounded soldiers, and Whitman was regularly spending his Sunday afternoons and evenings visiting them and trying to cheer them up.<sup>54</sup> Though this was a remote contact with the war, it gave him an intimate sense of its reality. Like the stage drivers, these veterans were often unsophisticated country boys, surprisingly youthful, and Whitman found them wonderfully congenial and interesting: "One Sunday night, in a ward in the South Building, I spent one of the most agreeable evenings of my life amid such a group of seven convalescent young soldiers of a Maine regiment." They were happy over leaving next morning to rejoin their regiment. "I shook hands with them all around at parting, and I know we all felt as if it were the separation of old friends."<sup>55</sup>

This report Whitman gave in a new series of articles which he called "City Photographs," published in the New York *Leader*. Ever since his personal sketches of Broadway in the New York *Aurora* this had been one of his favorite types of journalism. And it is not surprising that he made "The Broadway Hospital," which he had been visiting for several years, the subject of his first four sketches.<sup>56</sup>

In his second article, written from notes gathered in the "middle of March, 1862," Whitman gave statistics on the number of patients admitted annually, explained how the hospital was supported (fees, State help, and payments by the United States Government for the soldiers), and mentioned various members of the staff, praising especially "Aunt Robinson," a colored nurse. Obviously the hospital authorities were being as co-operative as possible in supplying information; in fact, part of Whitman's purpose in writing the articles was evidently to bid for wider financial support for the hospital. This purpose became even more apparent in

the third article, which listed and praised the men and women who had promoted the work of this institution, either by personal service or donations of money, since its founding in 1770. In both the third and fourth installments Whitman cited examples of important contributions to medical history made in famous operations or new techniques perfected in this hospital. For example, here in 1817 Dr. Wright Post "tied the right subclavian artery, for a brachial aneurism, above the clavicle."<sup>57</sup> And in October, 1845, Dr. John Kearney Rodgers "performed the operation in which the left subclavian artery was tied for aneurism, on the inner side of the scaleni muscles." Of course the surgeons themselves had supplied these technical details, and Whitman publicly thanked them "for the opportunity of seeing several very fine operations, and for their interesting explanations of them to me, before and after." Thus once more we have evidence of Whitman's deep interest in science and his eagerness to learn by observation and interview, which he always valued more than books. And although he could not have known it at the time, he was also storing up information that would soon be of great use to him in army hospitals in Washington.

At New York Hospital Whitman also made another observation that was to have a profound influence on his own life during the following three or four years. He reported that a lady who wished to remain anonymous had been doing much good among the soldiers by going quietly through the wards distributing papers, books, delicacies to eat or drink, and other comforts or conveniences not provided by army or hospital. When Walt made his rounds the soldiers delightedly exhibited to him what this kind woman had left, and thus he witnessed the effects of her simple but valued donations.<sup>58</sup>

The remaining articles in this series were devoted to "The Bowery," its stores, hotels, places of amusement, and its polyglot life. Whitman very graphically revealed the crudity and vulgarity of this part of the city, but without condescension or satire. In a vivid sketch he described "A Popular Lager-Beer Hall," and in another a nearby dance hall, which he visited May 9: "Here, too, on one side, is a shooting gallery. A placard annexed informs patriots who wish to join the army, and desire first to perfect themselves in the art and mystery of hitting the mark, that they will be taught free by an accomplished professor."<sup>59</sup>

During the spring of 1862, when Whitman was roaming the Bowery and writing "feature" articles for the *Leader*, he may have had an affair

with a woman who signed herself mysteriously "Ellen Eyre." After Whitman's death Traubel showed to his friends a love letter that she wrote the poet, and copies were made of this interesting epistle.<sup>60</sup> Though the authenticity of the copy quoted below cannot be guaranteed, it nevertheless seems worth quoting:

Tuesday, Mar 25 1862

MY DEAR MR. WHITMAN:

I fear you took me last night for a female privateer. It is time I was sailing under my true colors.—but then today I assume you cared nothing piratical though I would joyfully have made your heart a captive. Women have an unequal chance in the world. Men are its monarchs, and "full many a rose is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air." Such I was resolved would not be the fate of the fancy I had long nourished for you. A gold mine may be found by the divining rod, but there is no such instrument for detecting in the crowded streets of a great city the unknown mine of latent affection a man may have unconsciously inspired in a woman's breast. I make these explanations in extenuation not by way of apology. My social position enjoins precaution and mystery and perhaps the enjoyment of my friends [friend's?] society is heightened while yielding to its fascination. I preserve my incognito, yet mystery lends an effable charm to love and when a woman is bent upon the gratification of her inclination she is pardonable if she still spreads the veil of decorum over her actions.

Hypocrisy is said to be the homage that sin pays to virtue, and yet I can see no vice in that generous sympathy in which we share our caprices with those who inspired us with tenderness. I trust you will think well enough of me soon to renew the pleasure you afforded me last p.m. and I therefore write to remind you that this is a sensible head as well as a sympathetic heart, both of which would gladly evolve with warmth for your diversion and comfort. You have already my whereabouts and hours. It shall only depend on you to make them yours and me the happiest of women.

I am always yours sincerely,  
ELLEN EYRE.

Whatever may have taken place between Walt Whitman and "Ellen Eyre" during the spring of 1862, the relationship had probably come to an end by midsummer. In a little notebook that he carried in his pocket Whitman recorded of an acquaintance he had made: "Frank Sweeney (July 8 '62) 5th Ave. Brown face, large features, black moustache (is the one I told the whole story to about Ellen Eyre)—talks very little."<sup>61</sup> Of course "whole story" is ambiguous, but it implies something that had happened in the past, and a history that Walt Whitman himself regarded as in



some way remarkable. If he ever told it to anyone besides Frank Sweeney, that person evidently talked as little as Frank did.

Only a few details of Whitman's life during the fall of 1862 have survived. Clapp told Burroughs that Whitman managed to exist on his earnings of six or seven dollars "per week writing for the papers."<sup>62</sup> He did not say for the *Leader*, but "papers," and since the *Leader's* finances were extremely precarious<sup>63</sup> it is likely that Whitman was not solely dependent on it for support. Possibly, he also did odd jobs of copying or other work to bring in needed money. And he was probably working on some of the poems that he was later to publish in *Drum-Taps*,<sup>64</sup> such as "Rise O Days from Your Fathomless Deeps," which was a call to Democracy, in the midst of a rising sea and darkening clouds, to "Thunder on! stride on . . . strike with vengeful stroke!" or "City of Ships":

In peace I chanted peace, but now the drum of war is mine;  
War, red war is my song through your streets, O city!

Whitman had not yet seen war at first hand, and George was so anxious to keep his mother from worrying that in his letters he minimized the dangers and horrors which he was experiencing. It would be difficult to imagine a more compassionate man than Walt Whitman, but far away from the actual slaughter, safe from immediate danger, he felt impatient, and perhaps secretly a little guilty because he was safe while so many of his countrymen were fighting and dying. Therefore he wanted the Union armies to strike hard, and personally longed for "an intense life, full to repletion and varied!" He was excited by patriotic crowds, "the torchlight procession," the "dense brigade bound for the war," and the noise, bustle, and nervous activity of a great city mobilizing.

#### IV

During the early months of the war Whitman had jotted down in his notebook the first lines of another poem, which began, "Quicksand years that whirl me I know not whither."<sup>65</sup> He could hardly have realized in the fall of 1862 how prophetic these words were, for events were shaping up to whirl him into a new emotional and geographical orbit.

Naturally the whole Whitman family was continually uneasy about George, despite the fact that he seemed to lead a charmed life in the Army, going through battle after battle without a scratch and winning promotion after promotion. The day after he re-enlisted in the fall of 1861

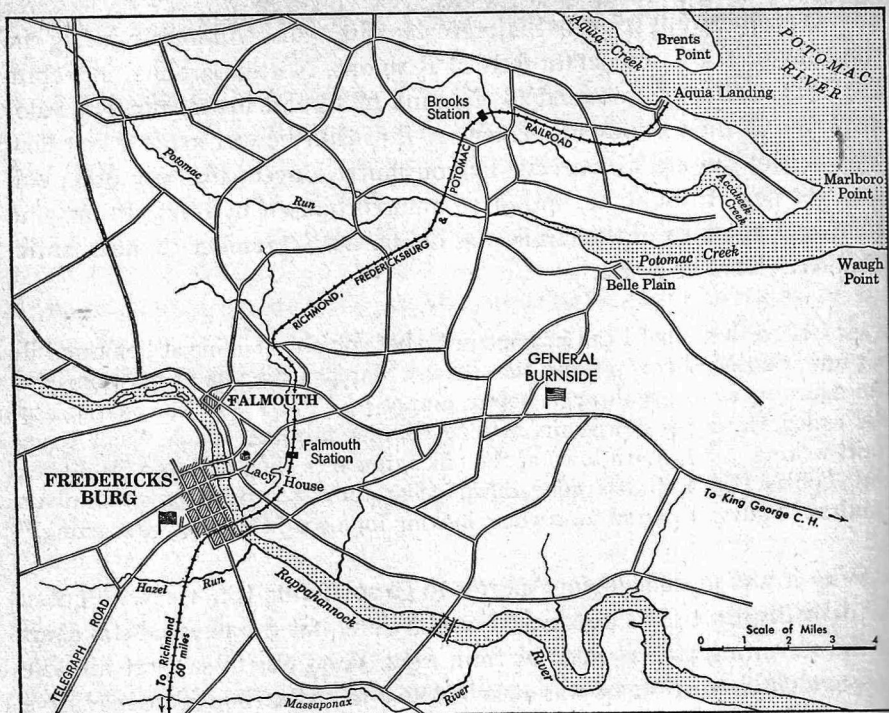
he was promoted to sergeant-major.<sup>66</sup> He distinguished himself during the storming of the Confederate forts at Roanoke, North Carolina, in February, 1862, and was promoted to the rank of second lieutenant. For valor displayed in the second engagement at Bull Run he was made a first lieutenant. But despite his success, he constantly longed, like any other soldier, for news from home, and often amused himself by trying to imagine what each member of the family was doing. On September 30, near Antietam, Maryland, he wrote:

... I often think that I can imagine just what you are all doing at home and I bet now, that Mother is making pies. I think Mat is putting up shirt bosoms like the deuce so as to get through before dinner [...] I guess Sis [Manahatta, usually called Hattie] is downstairs helping Mother mix the dough, Walt is upstairs writing, Jeff is down town at the office, Jess is peeling Potatoes for dinner, and Tobias [Edward] has gone down cellar for a scuttle of coal. Bunkum [Andrew] I guess is around somewhere looking for a good chance to go sogering.<sup>67</sup>

Why it was so difficult for Andrew to go soldiering is not easy to guess. Actually his health was unequal to military life, but the physical standards of the recruiting officers were far from rigid. Who was to support his wife and two children while he was away is also a mystery, though he may have expected his mother to do so from George's salary, which George regularly sent to his mother to bank for him or use whenever she needed funds.

The Whitmans knew in December that George was camped near Fredericksburg; consequently, when the newspapers announced that a great battle had taken place there on December 13 they were even more than usually apprehensive, and the headlines on the 14th and 15th reporting continued skirmishes increased their fears. Then on Tuesday, December 16, the *New York Herald* printed in a supposedly final and complete list of the wounded in the Fifty-first New York Volunteers the name of "First Lieutenant G. W. Whitmore, Company D." Exactly how the Whitman family knew that this name was a misprint for G. W. Whitman we can only guess, but they had no doubt that George was intended; perhaps in his letters he had mentioned all the officers in his company and they knew it did not contain a Whitmore. At any rate, they were filled with consternation. No details were given in the bare list and they had no way of finding out how serious the wound was. The casualty lists<sup>68</sup> in the *New York Times* and *Tribune* did not include any name resembling George's.<sup>69</sup> Mother Whitman was almost frantic. The excitable Jeff, we may be sure, had an idea a minute as to what to do, none of them practicable. Martha





### FREDERICKSBURG BATTLEFIELD

Redrawn from "Topographical Map of the Seat of War on the Rappahannock," printed in the *New York Herald*, December 16, 1862.

wanted to go down to Virginia to find and nurse her brother-in-law,<sup>70</sup> but Walt dissuaded her from this rash plan by announcing that he would go himself—immediately.<sup>71</sup>

They had evidently not seen the *Herald* until late in the morning; probably Walt discovered it on his way to the ferry and rushed home with the bad news. These surmises are based on Walt's statement that he left Brooklyn on an hour's notice and that he started on the trip early Tuesday afternoon.<sup>72</sup> He also set out carrying a purse of \$50 (probably drawn from the bank by Mrs. Whitman out of the funds she had been depositing for George). In those days there was no direct train connection between New York and Washington. Walt had first to take a ferry over the East River, then cross Manhattan, and take another ferry across the Hudson to Jersey City, where he could catch a train to Philadelphia, at which point he had to change again for the Washington train.

In the confusion of the hurrying, crushing throng in Philadelphia a pickpocket got all the money Walt carried.<sup>73</sup> As a result of this misfortune and his anxiety over George, he "put in," as he wrote his mother, "about three days of the greatest suffering I ever experienced in my life." For two days he searched the hospitals of Washington, "walking day and night, unable to ride, trying to get information—trying to get access to big people" who would not see him.<sup>74</sup> There were nearly forty military hospitals in and around the city<sup>75</sup> and the only means of locating a patient was by use of the incomplete and inaccurate lists published in the Washington newspapers, none of which contained the name of George Whitman. Finally Walt had the good luck to run across one of the friends he had made in Boston, William D. O'Connor, who was employed in the capital as a clerk in the Treasury Department.<sup>76</sup> O'Connor loaned him some money, but was not able to help him locate George.

On Thursday, however, Walt decided that his brother might still be with his regiment near Falmouth, across the river from Fredericksburg, and in the afternoon he discovered that he could go there on a government boat that ran to Aquia Creek, where he could take a train (under Army control) to Falmouth.<sup>77</sup> After a wearisome trip he arrived at the camp Friday afternoon and without much difficulty traced the Fifty-first Volunteers. But before he actually found George he had to pass a huge pile of amputated arms and legs lying under a tree in front of an army hospital. This would have been a shocking encounter at any time, but at the moment the thought that some of George's own limbs might be in that horrible heap almost overcame him.<sup>78</sup> He went on, however, and soon found George whole and in good spirits. A shell fragment had pierced one cheek, but the wound was healing nicely and George was on active duty.

Since George's wound had not been serious enough to confine him to a hospital, he had not expected his family to hear of it. In fact, he tried to make sure that his name was not on the official list of wounded; thus he was surprised to learn from Walt that they had been alarmed.<sup>79</sup> Walt immediately dispatched the good news to his mother by messenger to Washington, where it could be telegraphed, and wrote letters both to her and to Hannah. Despite his exhaustion, now that he had found his brother alive and well, all his difficulties of the past four days seemed of no importance, and he was delighted to accept George's invitation to share his tent for a few days. That evening and the next day he proudly observed how universally his brother was liked and admired by the soldiers and of-

ficers who knew him. For his conduct in the recent battle he was promoted to captain, and Walt had the pleasure of being present when the commission arrived.<sup>80</sup>

Walt remained at the camp for eight or nine days, living as he described in a letter to his mother:

While I was there George still lived in Capt. Francis's tent—there were five of us altogether, to eat, sleep, write, etc., in a space twelve feet square, but we got along very well—the weather all along was very fine—and would have got along to perfection, but Capt. Francis is not a man I could like much—I had very little to say to him. George is about building a place, half hut and half tent, for himself, (he is probably about it this very day [December 29, 1862],) and then he will be better off, I think. Every captain has a tent, in which he lives, transacts company business, etc., has a cook, (or a man of all work,) and in the same tent mess and sleep his lieutenants, and perhaps the first sergeant. They have a kind of fireplace—and the cook's fire is outside on the open ground.<sup>81</sup>

Though Walt readily adapted himself to this life, that revolting sight of amputated human limbs in front of the hospital which he had seen on the day of his arrival was hard to get out of his mind. The hospital had been set up in a large brick mansion, the "Lacy house," on the banks of the Rapahannock. On December 21 Walt visited the men confined there, and then began systematically making the rounds of all the hospitals in the region. But it was at the Lacy house that he "struck up a tremendous friendship with a young Mississippi captain (about 19)" who had been badly wounded at Fredericksburg and taken prisoner. Walt met him soon after one of his legs had been amputated—perhaps he had contributed to that pile under the tree. In a short time he was sent to a Washington hospital, where Walt continued to visit him, and wrote two of his young friends in New York, "our affection is an affair quite romantic."<sup>82</sup>

While at Camp Falmouth Whitman also went out under a flag of truce to help direct the burial of the dead still lying on the field of battle.<sup>83</sup> One morning at daybreak he had an experience that he later elaborated in a poem, "A Sight in Camp in the Day-Break Grey and Dim." Emerging from his tent, early in the morning, into the cool, fresh air, the poet beheld three stretchers covered with heavy army blankets. Lifting one corner of the nearest blanket, he saw the corpse of an elderly man, "gaunt and grim, with well-grey'd hair, and flesh all sunken about the eyes." Under the second was a "sweet boy, with cheeks yet blooming."

Then to the third—a face nor child, nor old, very calm, as of beautiful yellow-white ivory;  
Young man, I think I know you—I think this face of yours is the face of the Christ himself;  
Dead and divine, and brother of all, and here again he lies.<sup>84</sup>

Christmas day at the front impressed Whitman particularly. In the afternoon he walked out to a large deserted camp ground, still littered with the debris of the departed soldiers. From this point of observation he began to realize the enormity and bitter irony of the war. On a road nearby passed interminable caravans of six-mule teams carrying military supplies. As far as he could see was open ground, not a fence standing; the trees had been cut down for fuel and building purposes. In the distance were several teamsters' camps, and in the middle-distance carcasses of horses and mules. Sitting on a pine log and facing southeast, Whitman could see "the depression in the landscape, where the Rappahannock runs, and one or two signs of Fredericksburgh, (a battery could easily shell it from where I sit.) I hear the sound of bugle calls, very martial, at this distance—a fine large troop of cavalry is just passing, the hoofs of the horses shake the ground, and I hear the clatter of sabres. Amid all this pleasant scene, under the sweet sky and warm sun, I sit and think over the battle of last Saturday week."<sup>85</sup>

But interested as he was in every detail of these unfamiliar scenes, Whitman's thoughts were principally occupied by the suffering of the sick and wounded in the "division hospitals":

These are merely tents, and sometimes very poor ones, the wounded lying on the ground, lucky if their blankets are spread on layers of pine or hemlock twigs, or small leaves. No cots; seldom even a mattress. It is pretty cold. The ground is frozen hard, and there is occasional snow. I go around from one case to another. I do not see that I do much good to these wounded and dying; but I cannot leave them. Once in a while some youngster holds on to me convulsively, and I do what I can for him; at any rate, stop with him and sit near him for hours, if he wishes it.<sup>86</sup>

When not in the hospitals, Whitman frequently toured the camps, especially at night, when he sat with the men around the fires in their "shebangs." Sometimes he went out with them on picket duty. Everyone seemed to like him, officers and enlisted men. In less than two weeks he accumulated impressions that would influence the remainder of his life,



and literary material for two or three dozen poems, a number of newspaper articles, and a considerable portion of a book of essays.

On Sunday, December 28, Whitman left the camp at Falmouth before sunrise in charge of a trainload of wounded bound for Washington. The wounded were loaded on flat-top cars and thus transported ten or twelve miles to Aquia Creek, where they were transferred to a steamer for the journey up the Potomac.<sup>87</sup> At the creek landing were many more wounded men also waiting for the steamer to arrive, and Walt went among the stretchers, talking to the men and taking messages to be sent next day (Monday) by mail to some member of their families. No provisions had been made for this sort of personal aid, and Whitman could see how much the sufferers were helped by his sympathy and promises to send the messages. During the boat trip he had his hands full trying to wait on all his patients, and despite his efforts one man died on the steamer.

After delivering his charges to the hospital authorities, Whitman went early in the afternoon to call on the O'Connors at 394 L Street, near 14th, to ask William to help him find a room.<sup>88</sup> Although Mrs. O'Connor had heard a great deal about Whitman from her husband, this was the first time she had seen him. Fortunately, she instantly liked him as much as William did. Whitman told them that he was planning to stay in Washington only a week or ten days in order to visit the soldiers from Brooklyn who were in various hospitals in and near the capital. In Virginia he had heard about these men from members of the Fifty-first Volunteers.

After searching for an hour or two for an inexpensive room, Walt and William returned without success to the O'Connors' place, where Walt rented a small bedroom on the second floor from the Irish landlord. The O'Connors rented larger rooms on the third floor, and they urged Whitman for the present to take his meals with them without charge. This arrangement he agreed to, thinking it would be temporary. But in the next day or two he met another friend, his recent publisher, Charles W. Eldridge, who was now assistant to the Army Paymaster, Major Lyman Hapgood, and through Eldridge Whitman secured an appointment as copyist in the Paymaster's office.<sup>89</sup> This work kept him occupied for only two or three hours a day, but it paid enough to meet his immediate expenses and left him much time for visiting the boys in the hospitals. It was so satisfactory an arrangement, in fact, that his intended stay of a week or ten days stretched into months and finally into years.

Each day after he had completed his secretarial work Walt had the free-

dom of the Paymaster's office for his own correspondence or other writing. On January 2, near the end of his first week with Major Hapgood, he described his office in a letter to his sister-in-law. It was on the top floor of a large building on the corner of 15th and F Street, with a grand view of the Potomac and Georgetown. But Walt could not enjoy the view for the misery he daily witnessed among the soldiers coming from the hospitals to collect their pay, which many needed for their fare home. "They climb up here, quite exhausted, and then find it is no good, for there is no money to pay them; there are two or three paymasters' desks in this room, and the scenes of disappointment are quite affecting. Here they wait in Washington, perhaps week after week, wretched and heart-sick—this is the greatest place of delays and puttings off, and no finding the clue to anything." <sup>90</sup>

Although Whitman himself did not know it, this sympathy for the sick and discouraged would make it impossible for him to leave Washington, except temporarily, so long as the war continued to take its toll in human suffering. On the same day that he began his letter to Martha (quoted above) he visited two Brooklyn boys in Campbell Hospital. One had had a forearm amputated and the other was recovering from frozen feet. Both were recuperating rapidly and were in good spirits. Of course, they were glad to see someone from Brooklyn, but they did not especially need Walt's help. As he passed through the wards, however, other cases deeply stirred his emotions. One young man, John Holmes, half dead with diarrhea and bronchitis, had been overlooked by the nurses and doctors and had received no medical attention whatever. Walt sent for the doctor, who made a thorough examination and said the young man would recover. Walt wrote a letter to his family, gave him some money to buy a glass of milk, and thus gave him the will to live, which he had lost. <sup>91</sup>

This work of bolstering the morale of the sick and discouraged was the one thing that Walt Whitman seemed especially created to do. The poet who in "Song of Myself," vicariously imagined "I am the man, I suffered, I was there," <sup>92</sup> had accurately divined his own nature and unconsciously forecast his later conduct in the Washington hospitals:

Agonies are one of my changes of garments,

To any one dying, thither I speed and twist the knob of the door,  
Turn the bed-clothes toward the foot of the bed,  
Let the physician and priest go home.



I seize the descending man and raise him with resistless will,  
 O despairer, here is my neck,  
 By God, you shall not go down! hang your whole weight upon me.<sup>93</sup>

John Holmes was only one of many similar cases that Whitman recorded in his notebooks and newspaper articles. In one of the articles which he contributed to the *New York Times* he expressed this observation: "To many of the wounded and sick, especially the youngsters, there is something in personal love, caresses, and the magnetic flood of sympathy and friendship, that does more good than all the medicines in the world."<sup>94</sup>

In his description of his preparation for these visits later published in *Specimen Days*, Whitman showed how well he understood the psychology of his hospital work:

In my visits to the hospitals I found it was in the simple matter of personal presence, and emanating ordinary cheer and magnetism, that I succeeded and help'd more than by medical nursing, or delicacies, or gifts of money, or anything else. During the war I possess'd the perfection of physical health. My habit, when practicable, was to prepare for starting out on one of those daily or nightly tours of from a couple to four or five hours, by fortifying myself with previous rest, the bath, clean clothes, a good meal, and as cheerful an appearance as possible.<sup>95</sup>

The Army provided a fairly adequate staff of physicians and nurses, whom Whitman found, with a few notable exceptions, to be competent and efficient. But with hundreds of cases to take care of, they had no time for individual attention, and many of them soon became callous and indifferent to the mass suffering which they had to witness day and night. The Government had also been entirely unprepared for the casualties of the first battles, and both hospital facilities and staffs had had to be improvised, with consequent confusion, bungling, and sacrifice of human lives. Some months before Whitman arrived in Washington many citizens had become aroused by the conditions in the military hospitals. Patients were not supplied with adequate clothing, and the food was often poorly prepared, or too coarse for a sick man to eat. A few hospitals became notorious for their inefficiency or brutality, such as Judiciary Square, where the dead were dumped naked on a vacant lot to await burial.

Even in the better hospitals asepsis was little understood. The surgeon wore no gloves, sharpened his knife on his bootsole, and mopped the wound with a sponge that had only been rinsed in water since the last operation. All wounds were expected to suppurate. It is no wonder that, as

one authority says, "Blood poisoning, tetanus, secondary hemorrhage and gangrene were familiar visitors in the finest of shining, whitewashed new pavilions of which Washington was so proud, and helped to fill the pine coffins which went jouncing in the dead carts to the cemetery." <sup>96</sup>

Early in the war Dr. Henry Bellows, a Unitarian minister in New York City, began agitating for a commission to study the discoveries made by the physicians and nurses in the Crimean War and to use this and other scientific information in saving the lives of Union soldiers. Finally a United States Sanitary Commission was set up, with Dr. Bellows as president, and by the end of 1862 this organization had effected many reforms and improvements, but medical science was still very primitive. Consequently, the most appalling losses were still, as Whitman quickly observed, not from battle wounds but diarrhea, "camp fever" (probably typhoid), and other infectious diseases. <sup>97</sup>

A civilian organization called the Christian Commission had also been formed by the churches to provide much the same kind of aid that Whitman was to render, and some biographers<sup>98</sup> have thought that perhaps he may have begun his ministrations as delegate of this organization, but he repeatedly stated in letters and newspaper articles that he was working entirely by himself and on his own initiative. He wrote his mother that he had a high opinion of the Christian Commissioners—"they go everywhere and receive no pay"—but he thought the Sanitary Commissioners "incompetent and disagreeable." He reported that the men lying helpless in bed always "turn their faces from the sight of these agents, chaplains, etc. hirelings, as Elias Hicks would call them—they seem to me always a set of foxes and wolves.)" <sup>99</sup> But he was favorably impressed by the Catholic priests, and was on more friendly terms with them than with the clergymen of any other denomination—whom he habitually distrusted. Years later he said: "When I was in Washington it was surprising how many Catholic priests I came to know—how many took the trouble to get acquainted with me—on what good terms we kept with each other." <sup>100</sup>

As he had done in New York Hospital, Whitman at first merely talked with the soldiers, took messages to send to their relatives, and performed little personal services for them. But gradually he began using his own meager funds to buy stamps, fruit, reading matter, or other inexpensive items that he saw they especially needed or wanted. Although he himself did not use tobacco in any form and most hospital authorities strongly disapproved of its use by their patients, Whitman noticed the solace that it gave to some of the men, and began carrying parcels of tobacco to distrib-

ute to anyone who wanted it. In each case he fitted the gift to the recipient. He was careful to overlook no one, not even the Confederate soldiers confined in these Union hospitals. Some needed special nursing care, and after he had become experienced, Whitman sometimes dressed a wound, or sat up all night with a man at a time of crisis.<sup>101</sup> But this was exceptional. He was primarily a nurse of the soul (in its psychological sense), not the body. The physicians soon observed that his judgment and tact were not only reliable but nearly infallible, and most of them—especially at Armory Square, which he frequented more than any other hospital—gave him the same freedom that he had enjoyed in the Broadway hospital.<sup>102</sup> One physician, Dr. B. B. Bliss, became a loyal friend and admirer,<sup>103</sup> much as Dr. Roosa had in New York.

Walt's descriptions in his letters of the conditions in the hospitals and the good he was doing aroused an immediate sympathetic response from his mother, Jeff, and Martha. Jeff began enclosing small sums of money in his letters and solicited the help of his friends and the staff of the Brooklyn Water Works, where he was employed. His superintendent, Moses Lane, contributed \$10, and everyone else on the staff seems to have contributed something, and continued to do so throughout the remaining months of the war. Whitman wrote to Emerson and other friends in Concord and Boston about his work, and they also began to send contributions.<sup>104</sup> In February he published two articles in the *New York Times* vividly describing the need for his "missionary" work and citing case histories. In the first of these (February 16) he clearly stated, "I am not connected with any society, but go on my own individual account, and to the work that appears called for."<sup>105</sup> This was an indirect appeal for funds, but it had some effect, especially in Brooklyn, for besides being best known there, Whitman attracted local support by mentioning the names of Brooklyn soldiers in the hospitals and giving specific details about their condition, a fact that undoubtedly influenced the *Brooklyn Eagle* to reprint the article.<sup>106</sup> His friend John Swinton was now managing editor of the *Times*,<sup>107</sup> and he aided not only by printing and paying for these articles but also by sending cash contributions of his own.

Despite this help from his friends, however, Whitman very quickly felt the inadequacy of his income from his work in the Paymaster's office and began trying to find more lucrative employment with the Government. He urgently needed more money not only for his hospital work but also to help his mother. Jeff was paying the rent, and apparently providing some of her food, but she was constantly in need of funds for incidental ex-

positions. War was now an observed reality to him, and he did not romanticize or glorify it or the cause for which it was being fought.

Death had been a favorite theme in the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*, but now it was no longer theoretical or mythical. Whitman had seen death at firsthand, and it had brought out the great mother-soul concealed by his huge lumbering body and bearded face. The sight of death did not drive him to protective cynicism or bitter irony, as it often does a man physically or morally weak. Whitman did become angry on hearing of atrocities committed on prisoners<sup>57</sup> or on observing the needless suffering of the wounded caused by the callousness or inefficiency of military officials and medical personnel.<sup>58</sup> But the sight of the dead and wounded did not stir up his hatred for the enemy; his compassion embraced the stricken of both armies and led him to advocate through his poems, even before the end of hostilities, a reconciliation of North and South.

Whitman thought, as we have noticed,<sup>59</sup> that *Drum-Taps* contained none of the "perturbations" of the earlier *Leaves*. He was right, though this was not because his innate nature had changed, but rather because he had found a calming satisfaction in his activities as "The Dresser" ("The Wound-Dresser"):

The hurt and the 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'd and rested,  
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

Later Whitman added three lines to recapitulate the stages of his self-discovery:

(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;) . . . <sup>60</sup>

Whitman had not conquered all his inner "perturbations"; he was, in fact, engaged in a life-time struggle with them. But one means by which he controlled them in his *Drum-Taps* poems was through the transmutation of his private yearnings for affection into a universal philosophy of love as a social force. (He had attempted that, too, in the "Calamus" poems, but sporadically and inconsistently.) The burden of "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice" is that military power may win the war, but



something stronger must preserve Liberty, guarantee Equality, and compact the states:

It shall be customary in the houses and streets to see manly affection;  
The most dauntless and rude shall touch face to face lightly;  
The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers,  
The continuance of Equality shall be comrades.

Here the awkward inversions, found more often in *Drum-Taps* than in the earlier poems, obscure the thought. The poet is trying to say: Liberty depends upon the existence of lovers; only comrades can maintain Equality.

Were you looking to be held together by the lawyers?  
Or by an agreement on a paper? or by arms?  
—Nay—nor the world, nor any living thing, will so cohere.<sup>61</sup>

In the "Hymn of Dead Soldiers" the poet also finds consolation in the thought that not even death can conquer love, a theme continued in the climactic poem of the book, "Pensive on Her Dead Gazing, I Heard the Mother of All." This is not a patriotic poem. The "Mother of All" is not the Nation, or symbolical mother of the states, but Nature:

Pensive, on her dead gazing, I heard the Mother of All,  
Desperate, on the torn bodies, on the forms covering the battle-fields gazing;  
As she call'd to her earth with mournful voice while she stalk'd:  
Absorb them well, O my earth, she cried—I charge you, lose not my sons!  
lose not an atom;

Exhale me them centuries hence—breathe me their breath—let not an atom  
be lost;

O years and graves! O air and soil! O my dead, an aroma sweet!  
Exhale them perennial, sweet death, years, centuries hence.

The poet capable of taking this long-range view of death was also capable of making so impersonal a response to a lover that he must have seemed well-nigh inhuman to the person concerned. On first thought, *Drum-Taps* seems a strange place to publish "Out of the Rolling Ocean," the poem said to have been written to Mrs. Juliette Beach.<sup>62</sup> But presumably it was written during the war years, and the sentiment is in perfect harmony with "Hymn of Dead Soldiers" and "Pensive on Her Dead Gazing . . ."