

compelling ways to address these issues. I hope they provide as much stimulation for other readers as they have for me.



Whitman and the Civil War
Ted Genoways

It was shortly after midnight on April 13, 1861. The performance of Verdi's *A Masked Ball* had just let out on Fourteenth Street in New York, and Walt Whitman was walking down Broadway toward his home in Brooklyn. Newsboys darted from one side of the street to the other, shouting out the headlines of the extras rushed from the presses. At Prince Street, Whitman stopped, bought a copy for a dime, and crossed over to the Metropolitan Hotel, where the gaslights still burned and people were gathered to read the news. As the crowd grew, one person read the telegram from Charleston aloud for all to hear. The dispatch in the *New York Times* began, "The ball has opened. War is inaugurated" (1).

Within a matter of days, Lincoln issued a call for 75,000 troops, and Whitman's brother George signed a hundred day commitment with the 13th Regiment of the New York State Militia.¹ After only four days of drilling and training, George's unit, the 13th New York, marched down Broadway, past buildings hung with bunting and streamers, sidewalks jammed with well-wishers shouting encouragements. "First O Songs for a Prelude," the opening poem of "Drum-Taps," seems to draw from Whitman's experience of inner turmoil George felt as he left his worried mother but also thrilled to the excitement of the crowd:

The tearful parting, the mother kisses her son, the son kisses
his mother,
(Loth is the mother to part, yet not a word does she speak to
detain him,)

The tumultuous escort, the ranks of policemen preceding,
clearing the way,
The unpent enthusiasm, the wild cheers of the crowd for their
favorites . . .

After the termination of his hundred-day service, George was mustered out of the 13th New York State Militia on August 6, 1861, his military obligation complete—but the real war was only about to begin. The 13th left Virginia just before the beginning of the Battle of Bull Run—a disaster for the Union army that culminated with a panicked retreat back to Washington, D. C. Many of George's former comrades were wounded or killed. When members of the 13th Regiment arrived in New York, they quickly joined new units then forming in the city. George reenlisted in the Shepard Rifles (later the 51st New York) and the following day was promoted to sergeant major.

While George was encamped at the Palace Gardens on Broadway, preparing to see his first real action in Virginia, Whitman began work on his poem "Beat! Beat! Drums!"—a rousing call to arms, rife with the martial rhythms of the recruiting drums and the fervor of the daily newspapers. When the poem appeared on Saturday morning, September 21, 1861, in the new issue of *Harper's Weekly*, "Beat! Beat! Drums!" was tucked unassumingly on the last text page of the issue. Nevertheless, the poem's popularity was instantaneous. Within a week it had been reprinted in the *New York Leader*, the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, making "Beat! Beat! Drums!" the most widely circulated poem of Whitman's career to date.

"Beat! Beat! Drums!" is comparatively conventional in structure. The poem is divided into three seven-line stanzas, each opening with the heavily accented refrain "Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!" and ending with a slightly modified second refrain. Furthermore, the closing refrain of each stanza is broken into two parts, each divided by a central dash to mark the caesura. In all

three cases, the first part of the line is eight syllables, the second part six syllables. This structure roughly resembles the common measure used in church hymns and can be heard most clearly in the first iteration of the refrain: “So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so shrill you bugles blow.” Here the meter follows a remarkably regular iambic rhythm that would have been familiar to the ears of Whitman’s contemporary readers.

Such regular meters also mimic the harsh beat of the recruiting drum, calling the nation away from the humdrum of daily life to the common cause of defending the Union:

No bargainers’ bargains by day—no brokers or speculators—
 would they continue?
 Would the talkers be talking? Would the singer attempt to sing?
 Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case before the
 judge?
 Then rattle quicker, heavier drums—you bugles wilder blow.

By the poem’s close, this pulsing rhythm drowns out any appeals for peace; old man, child, and mother alike are silenced by the snare drum’s staccato taps and blasts from the wild bugles of war.

For Whitman, however, the project of writing about the common soldier began in earnest on December 16, 1862—the day he recognized the misspelled name of his brother George in the *New York Herald* among the lists of wounded at Fredericksburg. Whitman rushed to the front, searching the hospitals in Falmouth, Virginia, across the Rappahannock River from the Fredericksburg battlefield. When he reached the Lacy House, he was directed outside to the dooryard to search amid a grisly scene of human carnage:

Out doors, at the foot of a tree, within ten yards of the front
 of the house, I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms,
 hands, &c., a full load for a one-horse cart. Several dead
 bodies lie near, each cover’d with its brown woolen blanket.

(*Prose Works* 32)

Whitman approached the three bodies lying on untended stretchers. In his notebook, he wrote, “Three dead men lying, each with a blanket spread over him—I lift one up and look at the young man’s face, calm and yellow. ’Tis strange.” Then, almost an afterthought, he added a parenthetical line directly addressing the young man: “I think this face of yours the face of my dead Christ.” Nearly the entirety of the poem “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim” resided in that short entry. Whitman later added poetic touches and tropes—the persistent grays of the daybreak, the blanket, and the old man’s hair, for example—but most of the poem is only a more elaborated version of that notebook jotting.

After finding George alive and well, having suffered only a superficial facial wound at Fredericksburg, Whitman was nevertheless determined to return with him to Washington, D. C., to find work in the government and volunteer in the military hospitals. Eventually, he found a part-time job as a copyist in the army paymaster’s office, and cut his expenses by moving in with an abolitionist couple that supported his work. Visiting the hospitals almost every day for all of 1863 and for months at a time in 1864 and 1865 gave Whitman the intimate understanding of the common soldier he so craved.

The poem that came most directly from his hospital experiences is undoubtedly “The Wound-Dresser.” First, the poem opens with an imagined scene in the future, in which children gather around the speaker, by then an old man, and beg him to describe his service during the war. The frame itself establishes a fanciful setting, but more importantly, the second section begins with the veteran’s memory of combat:

Soldier alert I arrive after a long march cover’d with sweat
and dust,
In the nick of time I come, plunge in the fight, loudly shout in
the rush of successful charge,

Enter the captur'd works—yet lo, like a swift-running river
 they fade,
 Pass and are gone they fade. . . .

The veteran insists that it is not memory of the combat itself that still troubles his sleep, but the lingering images of the human toll. In this reverie, “this dreams’ projection,” the speaker returns to the hospitals to tend to the wounded. In these unexpectedly gory war memories, the veteran further surprises his audience—both the imagined children and ourselves as readers—by recounting not his own heroism, but rather his helplessness. He lowers to his knees in reverence and supplication to clean and dress the wounds of the soldiers in their cots and, in a moment of radical identification, declares, “poor boy! I never knew you, / Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you.”

From that moment of deep intimacy, Whitman moves to one of his signature catalogs, listing the amputations, the bullet wounds, and “the gnawing and putrid gangrene.” Then, in section four, this connection is made overt, as the veteran recalls, “The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand, / I sit by the restless all the dark night.” In the end, however, it is not the wound-dresser’s healing touch that lingers; instead, the speaker concludes: “Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on these bearded lips.” The essential word here is “dwells”—because it is present tense, not a past and completed action, and because “dwells” implies that after so many years those kisses still live, the most basic act of survival. Thus, no matter the fate of the individual soldier, he lives on the lips of the poet and is spoken—through the language of the poem—back into life.

Scenes of similar loss pervade “Drum-Taps.” Whether it is the visceral carnage of a makeshift hospital in the woods in “A March in the Ranks Hard-press’d, and the Road Unknown” or the tender quiet of one soldier sitting by his comrade’s side on the battlefield waiting all night for him to die before burying him at sunrise in “A Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night,” Whitman focuses our

attention unflinchingly toward the impact of the war, but as he completed work on the first edition of *Drum-Taps* in March and early April 1865, Whitman could not have known that the Union preserved by the bloodshed of soldiers was soon to have its national martyr.

Whitman completed the typesetting for *Drum-Taps* on April 14, 1865, and must have gone to sleep believing that his book of war poetry was complete. Little did he know that that very night Abraham Lincoln was shot at Ford's Theatre and died the following morning. When word of Lincoln's death reached New York by wire, everything halted. In his notebook, Whitman recorded, "business public & private all suspended, & shops closed—strange mixture of horror, fury, tenderness, & a stirring wonder brewing," and "The stores were shut, & no business transacted, no pleasure vehicles, & hardly a cart—only the rumbling base of the heavy Broadway stages incessantly rolling." Whitman spent the morning with his mother passing the newspapers back and forth in silence, and in the afternoon ventured into the rain to join the crowds around the bulletin boards, where the evening editions were posted (*Notebooks* 764).

Whitman quickly set to writing a poem for the funeral of Abraham Lincoln. All the newspapers announced that the funeral would be held in Washington, D. C., on April 19. Manuscript drafts of "Hush'd be the camps to-day" indicate that Whitman was working on the poem on or before that date, for the poem refers to "the lower'd coffin" and "the shovel'd clods that fill the grave," the poet apparently unaware that Lincoln was merely to lie in state in the Capitol before being placed on the funeral train. He was able to insert it into *Drum-Taps* before printing began, but the poem clearly did not satisfy Whitman; he soon began drafting two very different poems that have endured as more lasting memorials to Lincoln—including his war masterpiece, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

"Lilacs" is, in many ways, more conventional than the majority

of Whitman's work. The imagery, in particular, relies heavily on images of death and rebirth that are typical of the elegy. In constructing the poem, Whitman connects and counterpoints three central images: the lilacs of spring (a symbol of eternal rebirth), the evening star sinking in the west (the fallen president), and the song of the hermit thrush (the poet's death chant). The first two images were drawn from literal details around Washington in the Spring of 1865. The lilacs were, in fact, in full bloom, and Venus, the western star, was sinking in the night sky. The addition of the hermit thrush harkens back to Whitman's great pre-war song of death, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," but, unlike the mockingbird of that poem, "singing yourself, projecting me," the hermit thrush is "withdrawn to himself" and only sings at the poet's urging.

Thus, the alternating structure of the poem creates a tension, as the poet simultaneously documents the westward progress of Lincoln's funeral train, "[c]arrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave," and follows the poet's journey further into the swamp in search of the hermit thrush whose song he believes will help him to eulogize the fallen Lincoln. All the while, Whitman also watches the disappearance of the western star and with it the memory of a night before Lincoln's assassination, when the poet, filled with woe, found some consolation in the "sad orb."

When the poet finally finds the hermit thrush, however, and records his song, "*joyously sing[ing] the dead*," it does not provide him merely with the words to memorialize Lincoln. Instead, the four long years of national anguish come pouring out:

And I saw askant the armies,
 And I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,
 Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with mis-
 siles 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 dead soldiers of the
war . . .

But, despite the visionary depiction of mass death, the poet finds a shred of reassurance in the notion that, "They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not." It is not the dead who suffer but the living who "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." And with this odd consolation, the poet at last leaves aside the lilac with its heart-shaped leaves and the western star sinking on the horizon, but charges the reader to remember the song of the hermit thrush and "the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul." In this way, the reader is asked to permanently pair, as the poet does, the fallen soldiers—"the dead I loved so well"—with the slain president—"the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands."

