



Sacrifice and Modern War Literature: The Battle of Waterloo to the War on Terror

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CHAPTER

4 The Poetics of American Civil War Sacrifice

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Abstract

The nature and meaning of sacrifice were fiercely contested in the aftermath of the American Civil War. Historians have documented a long struggle by veterans to ensure the continuing remembrance of their sacrifice. At the same time, American politicians tended to demur from acknowledging these sacrifices, as doing so would reopen the rift that had prompted war in the first place. This chapter probes the work of three Civil War poets—Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman—to uncover the meaning of sacrifice during and after the war. Dickinson’s verses about psychic pain and dislocation are increasingly understood as simultaneous expositions of the personal and political: Melville’s knotty, multi-perspectival poems about the war, *Battle-Pieces*, question the ideological freight of sacrifice, and Whitman sought to honour the sacrifice of soldiers through a poetics he hoped would heal the body politic. Ultimately only Whitman’s consolatory poetry would find a postwar audience.

Keywords: [Emily Dickinson](#), [Herman Melville](#), [Walt Whitman](#), [American Civil War](#), [poetry](#), [sacrifice](#)

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Soon after the firing upon Fort Sumter and the eruption of civil war in the United States, the Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier announced: ‘The old fires of Liberty are rekindled, and there is a spirit of sublime self-sacrifice pervading all classes. It is more than I had ever dared hope for.’¹ Whittier, a fervent abolitionist, had long viewed the nation as unregenerate, tainted by the sin of slavery and unwilling to atone for its iniquities. For twenty-five years he had assumed the role of Old Testament prophet, castigating the United States for its moral compromises and its propensity for political expedience. Like the wayward Israel of Scripture, America had broken its covenant with God and was now called upon to make a sacrifice as absolute as those of Abraham or Christ.

History seemed to pivot in the right direction during the John Brown affair of 1859. The abolitionist attempted to capture Harpers Ferry, the largest federal armoury in the United States, so that he might distribute rifles and revolvers to a slave population that would in turn rise up and slaughter its oppressors. Brown’s raid was a fiasco—his tiny group of fighters failed to secure the armoury and was quickly surrounded by a detachment of US Marines led by Robert E. Lee—but the testimony he gave at his trial

inspired abolitionists throughout the North. 'I see a book,' Brown announced on the day of his sentencing, 'kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament, that teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them.' His raid upon the federal arsenal had been an endeavour 'to act upon that instruction ... Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice ... I submit; so let it be done!'²

p. 66 The nation soon entered upon a sacrificial war that would last four years and claim the lives of some three-quarters of a million men. Approximately one in four soldiers who went to war never came home, prompting a demographic catastrophe throughout the nation and, in the South, an economic disaster from which it would take nearly a century to recover. According to one regimental historian who served in the war, 'the emergency was great, but no one even dreamed how terrible a sacrifice of precious human lives was to be laid on the country's altar in expiation for the ↪ injustice done the African Negro'.³ As this testimony suggests, the scope of the sacrifice exacted by the Civil War so exceeded expectations as to call into question the nature and meaning of that sacrifice. The war's cost in human life would indeed become a fiercely contested topic during and after the conflict. Brian Matthew Jordan has recently described a 'decades-long struggle' by Union and Confederate veterans after the war 'to ensure that the scope and significance of their sacrifices would not be forgotten'—a struggle that included the organization of veterans' groups and charities explicitly intended to keep their wartime service before the public.⁴ At the same time, American politicians and intellectuals tended to demur from fully acknowledging these sacrifices, afraid that to do so was to risk reopening the sectional rift that had prompted the conflict in the first place. It was thus left up to the nation's poets to come to terms with the blood sacrifice of fratricidal war.

It is easy to forget that poetry was the most highly respected genre of antebellum America. Millions of readers might read triple-decker novels with sentimental themes, tens of thousands might hear an Emerson address over the course of one of his annual lecture tours, but poetry was the genre that commanded the most cultural respect. As Lawrence Buell notes, 'of the three major fictive genres, poetry alone was held in anything like high regard' during the period immediately preceding the Civil War.⁵ Both Herman Melville and Walt Whitman considered the Civil War a subject that could be addressed only through the heightened language of poetry; both ultimately produced books of war poetry soon after the conflict in self-conscious bids to become the national poet. Emily Dickinson produced no book of Civil War poetry—with a few exceptions, none of her poetry was published during her lifetime—but, like Melville and Whitman, the war served as poetic provocation for her, an impetus for addressing the nation's suffering and sacrifice. All three poets employed sacrifice as a central thematic in their work during the Civil War and immediately afterwards. Each poet attempted to render the conflict in language that was new enough to prove commensurate to unprecedented killing, and each poet grappled with the meaning of sacrifice, ultimately questioning its value to the still fragile nation.

p. 67 In the past few decades, Emily Dickinson has increasingly been recognized as one of the most perspicuous poets of the Civil War. Many of her verses about psychic pain are now understood as simultaneous expositions of personal and civil conflict. Shira Wolofsky finds in Dickinson's syntax 'a world of radical disorder' that reflects the effect of war upon a poet who followed war news assiduously and knew several townsmen who went off to fight and never came back.⁶ Faith Barrett likewise focuses on Dickinson's war poetry, especially her soldier-elegies, which she believes ↪ 'alternate between skeptical and patriotic nationalist stances'.⁷ If Dickinson's poetry can be understood as an effort to create something new and vital from the crepuscular religious traditions and beliefs of a previous era, it must be noted that the war prompted the most creative phase of her life. Between 1861 and 1865 she wrote some 800 poems, producing one incisive piece after another. During the bloodiest period of the war, which began in the autumn of 1862 and would continue for the next year and a half, she wrote as much as a poem a day, sometimes more, dozens of them about the war itself.

Dickinson's familiarity with the war—in letters she comments on everything from minié balls to the difficulty of preserving the remains of soldiers whose bodies had to be transported for burial—provided her with an occasion to express pain. 'Sorrow seems more general than it did,' she wrote to her cousins during the early days of the war, 'and not the estate of a few persons, since the war began ...'.⁸ The national calamity seems to have provided a forum for Dickinson in which to express more personal anguish. A poem such as 'It seems a shame to be Alive—' is an explicit meditation on the nature of Civil War sacrifice for those who remain behind at home. Written sometime in the summer of 1862, the poem is ostensibly about survivor's guilt:

It feels a shame to be Alive—
When Men so brave—are dead—
One envies the Distinguished Dust—
Permitted—such a Head—
The Stone—that tells defending Whom
This Spartan put away
What little of Him we—possessed
In Pawn for Liberty—
The price is great—Sublimely paid—
Do we deserve—a Thing—
That lives—like Dollars—must be piled
Before we may obtain?
Are we that wait—sufficient worth—
That such Enormous Pearl
As life—dissolved be—for Us—
In Battle's—horrid Bowl?
It may be—a Renown to live—
I think the Men who die—
Those unsustained—Saviors—
Present Divinity—⁹

p. 68 Our life, the poem asserts, cannot possibly be worth the heroic sacrifice of those soldiers who have died on

Southern battlefields. All we can hope for in such a destructive world is that these 'Saviors' who have died nobly will encounter 'Divinity' before the rest of us—will be rewarded in heaven for their redemptive sacrifice. But Dickinson's writing grows oblique when it comes to describing 'Battle's—horrid Bowl'; the poem strains to suggest the horrors of combat while at the same time providing a reassurance appropriate for consolatory verse. This tension is never fully resolved: if slain soldiers 'Present Divinity,' they are also 'unsustained'—horribly killed in ways that a civilian population cannot comprehend.

In 'They dropped like Flakes,' Dickinson attempts to convey the vast numbers of war dead by deploying threadbare images of snow, stars, and 'Petals from a Rose'—staples of the lyric tradition in poetry that ultimately prove inadequate to the subject matter at hand. And the wholesale, anonymous death of young men slain in combat, their bodies scattered over hills and fields like nature's leavings, appear in another poem, 'My Portion is Defeat—today—':

'Tis populous with Bone and stain—
And Men too straight to stoop again—
And Piles of solid Moan—
And Chips of Blank—in Boyish Eyes—
And scraps of Prayer—
And Death's surprise,

Stamped visible—in stone—¹⁰

The war dead, here transformed by rigor mortis into statuesque rigidity, appear throughout Dickinson's work of the period, puncturing the grand narratives and high-minded ideals used to justify war at its outset. They also convey the poet's anger and sorrow at recent events. 'It don't sound so terrible—quite—as it did —', she writes, anatomizing the mood swings that accompany the news of sudden death. The poem's narrator 'run[s] it over— "Dead," Brain— "Dead" ', trying to assimilate the knowledge conveyed by telegraph or newspaper that a loved one is no more. The poetic persona labours to convince itself that such news is not as bad as it seems. 'I suppose it will interrupt me some,' she admits, 'Till I get accustomed.' If 'A trouble looks bitterest' while seen 'full in the face', she realizes it will perhaps be necessary to 'Shift it— just'.¹¹

A committed abolitionist such as Ralph Waldo Emerson could describe the sacrifice of young men as part of history's progressive narrative. War's casualties were the necessary, if horrific, cost of emancipating the nation's four million slaves. In his poem 'May-Day' (1876), for instance, he exclaims:

As Southern wrath to Northern right
Is but straw to anthracite;
As in the day of sacrifice,
When heroes piled the pyre,
The dismal Massachusetts ice
Burned more than others' fire.¹²

p. 69 But Dickinson is incapable of portraying the war dead in such reassuring or historical terms. In an era rife with accounts of jagged wounds and shattered bones, Dickinson increasingly wrote poems concerned with the wounded and maimed. In other words, she focused on those who had made a sacrifice rather than trying to make sense of the sacrifice itself. 'The possibility to pass,' she wrote,

Without a Moment's Bell—
Into Conjecture's presence—
Is like a face of steel
That suddenly looks into ours
With a Metallic Grin—
The Cordiality of Death
Who Drills his welcome—in—¹³

As in so many other Dickinson poems, Death appears here as a courtly gentleman. But not even his calm demeanour and impeccable manners can camouflage his 'Metallic Grin', suggestive of bayonets, artillery shells, and minié balls. Poems like this one enabled Dickinson to enter into a wider communion of grief, to participate imaginatively in a national bereavement shared by hundreds of thousands of families. (Her brother, Edward, paid for a substitute to serve in his place.) It also enabled her to speculate about the source of so much sorrow. A significant portion of her poetry from the war period is concerned with the question of religious doubt, and at times she suggests that the violence engulfing the nation was tangentially related to this doubt. Warfare described as 'holy' enabled Americans to demonstrate their commitment to the true faith. It provided them with a crusade, a test to prove their loyalty and devotion. It offered an opportunity to reclaim their Father's aloof and contrary love.

The only problem with this interpretation was that, as the war intensified, as death counts escalated from Bull Run to Shiloh to Antietam, it became increasingly difficult to understand the carnage within the moral framework of God's will. Nor did it help, as Dickinson continually reminded herself, that God refused to communicate His will in the first place. In Dickinson's poetry the war allowed a spirit-hungry nation to

‘Read—Sweet—how others—strove—’ and to consider ‘What they—renounced— | Till we—are less afraid—’. It also enabled the doubtful to feel ‘helped— | As if a Kingdom—cared!’¹⁴ Poetry did not solve the riddle of suffering, but it mirrored the way one’s life could be fractured by loss.

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Herman Melville’s knotty, multi-perspectival poems about the war, compiled in *Battle-Pieces, or Aspects of the War* (1866), ask similar questions about the ideological freight of sacrifice, honouring it in individual instances while also condemning its rhetoric as scarcely veiled warmongering. (‘What like a bullet can undecieve?’ he asks, speaking of the moment when violence unmasks the language of sacrifice.) Melville’s departure from fiction and his turn to poetry have been portrayed as a retreat into a smaller and less demanding form, but in fact it was a prime example of a Promethean literary ambition once more asserting itself. Keenly aware of the public appetite for war writing, he sought to become the poet laureate of the war, to achieve enduring stature in the American republic of letters after the critical failure of *Moby-Dick* (1851) and subsequent novels.

Many of the seventy or so poems in *Battle-Pieces*, which proceeds chronologically through the war, were derived from journalistic accounts Melville found in the *Rebellion Record* and in newspapers. ‘Shiloh. A Requiem. (April, 1862)’ is an elegy to the young men who died in the battle, a funeral hymn for an entire culture in the habit of seeing itself through nature:

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
The swallows fly low
Over the field in clouded days,
The forest-field of Shiloh—
Over the field where April rain
Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain
Through the pause of night
That followed the Sunday night
Around the church of Shiloh—
The church so lone, the log-built one,
That echoed to many a parting groan
And natural prayer
Of dying foeman mingled there—
Foeman at morn, but friends at eve—
Fame or country least their care:
(What like a bullet can undecieve!)
But now they lie low,
While over them the swallows skim.
And all is hushed at Shiloh.¹⁵

The poem’s quietness is sustained by the long first sentence and its central image, the swallows. Like elements in a static landscape painting, the birds’ tranquil flight seems to intensify the eerie aftermath of battle. Melville may have recalled that swallows appear in Renaissance paintings to represent Incarnation and the resurrection, but the poem’s parenthetical statement punctures this idea. While those who die in battle stand metonymically for national sacrifice, the poet suggests that presenting their death in terms of a redemptive afterlife is both too easy and of little comfort to those who sacrificed themselves for their country. Too late have the fallen soldiers learned that the common bonds of humanity have been divided by ideology.

A similar idea animates ‘Donelson’, where ‘ice-glazed corpses, each a stone—[are] | A sacrifice to Donelson’,¹⁶ and more particularly in ‘The March to Virginia’, where the Union debacle at Bull Run is portrayed paradoxically as a lethal and necessary passage into mature knowledge. The latter poem describes

p. 71 a company of young soldiers blithely marching towards their fate and rushing into combat in a 'Bacchic glee'. Individual personalities are occluded; groupthink prevails. The soldiers' notions of war are untouched by experience, and modern combat seems a pastoral spree in a 'leafy neighborhood', a 'berrying party, pleasure-wooded'. (Melville intended the funereal connotations of the word 'berrying' when read aloud.) Consumed with visions of glory, excited to prove their masculinity, these naïfs will discover too late the inadequacy of their understanding. A blaze of artillery serves as the instrument of illumination:

But some who this blithe mood present,
As on in lightsome files they fare,
Shall die experienced ere three days are spent—
Perish, enlightened by the vollied glare.¹⁷

Rebutting the notion that war's sacrificial economy ennobles fallen soldiers and redeems the nation, Melville suggests that any renewal derived from sacrifice is outweighed by its destructive force. Sacrifice may be a crucial step in the formation of the self (as modern theorists maintain),¹⁸ but in the context of the Civil War it also marks the eradication of that self, rendering 'enlightenment' moot except to those who survive.

Melville anatomizes this idea still further in 'The College Colonel', which pays homage to those men who forsook secure lives and prosperous careers for a cause they believed in. This poem is not about a march into battle but rather about the return of grizzled veterans. The college colonel 'brings his regiment home— | Not as they filed two years before, | But a remnant half-tattered, and battered, and worn'. Of this saving 'remnant', none is more battle-hardened than their leader, who has lost an arm and a leg in combat and 'has lived a thousand years | Compressed in battle's pains and prayers'. Returning on horseback to the cheering crowds of his hometown, he has also gained something crucial from his suffering:

But all through the Seven Days' Fight,
And deep in the Wilderness grim,
And in the field hospital tent,
And Petersburg crater, and dim
Lean brooding in Libby, there came—
Ah heaven!—what truth to him.¹⁹

Elsewhere the poet suggests that modern, mechanical warfare has produced new truths, new forms of education, obdurate realities that run counter to the emancipatory rationale of war and, more broadly, to the ideology of American exceptionalism. These new truths required new modes of expression. Like Whitman and Dickinson, Melville considered mellifluous language and metrical smoothness a kind of lie: a denial of the harsh, juddering rhythms of contemporary life. But these new truths also required imagery that would illuminate their moral complexity. Melville found such an image in the Wilderness of Virginia, where the Southern backwoods becomes lush, mythical, often ominous. Mentioned in the book's first poem as 'green, | Shenandoah!', these thickets and coverts assume depth and substance as the collection unfolds. 'Nature is nobody's ally', Melville declares in another early poem, setting the stage for the 'ghastly gloom' that induces McClellan to fight at Antietam as well as for the long poem 'The Battle of the Wilderness'. 'None can narrate the strife in the pines,' he remarks in this last work, conjuring up Virginia's tangled wilds as a metaphor for the difficulty of interpreting the great conflict: 'Obscure as the wood, the entangled rhyme | But hints at the maze of war—.'²⁰ For Melville, the Wilderness would come to represent the moral confusion of the conflict gripping the country. Who could claim to act with pure motives when violence was used to enforce a cause?, he asked. Did not aggression and brutality force even the most enlightened people to 'rebound ... whole aeons back in nature'?²¹

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The goal of *Battle-Pieces* was to instruct an America that for too long had regarded itself as morally innocent, to replace platitudes and clichés with a stern, accurate vernacular. Time and again Melville urged the nation to accept a vision of life that was both less arrogant and more tragic. Most of all, Melville insisted that the war might have been avoided—that sacrifice might have been unnecessary—if both sides had been less rigid and unyielding in their convictions. The terrible conflict arose from a stubborn refusal to question one’s assumptions, to examine other points of view. Many of Melville’s war poems attempt to break down this certainty, to reject easy interpretations. In ‘The Conflict of Convictions’, for instance, Melville claimed that God rejected ‘YEA AND NAY—’ in favour of a ‘MIDDLE WAY’. The ambiguity of war, its welter of good and bad acts and motivations, rendered ‘WISDOM ... VAIN, AND PROPHECY’. To dramatize this ambiguity, Melville juxtaposed poems between Northern and Southern perspectives, cramming disparate voices into individual poems. In ‘The Armies of the Wilderness’ he placed rival armies within sight of each other and asked: ‘Can no final good be wrought?|Over and over, again and again | Must the fight for Right be fought?’²²

Competing voices and disparate perspectives were, of course, a product of democracy, and many of Melville’s poems wondered whether the nation could create institutional structures that both honoured democratic practice and minimized violence. Most of all, though, Melville asked his readers to make a sacrifice adequate to those made by the fallen soldiers he memorialized towards the end of his volume. He asked them to sacrifice partisanship and a sense of moral superiority. In the prose ‘Supplement’ appended to his book and written after Appomattox, he laboured to minimize the North’s smug triumphalism. Describing himself as ‘one who never was a blind adherent’, he asked his fellow authors to practise more charity and magnanimity than they had before the war. What ‘Northern writer’, he asked, ‘however patriotic, but must revolt from acting on paper a part any way akin to that of the live dog to the dead lion’. While he supported the Union cause, even rejoiced ‘for our triumph’, he also believed ‘the mourners who this summer bear flowers to the mounds of the Virginian and Georgian dead are, in their domestic bereavement and proud affection as are those who go with similar offerings of tender grief and love into the cemeteries of our Northern martyrs’.²³

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Reminding his audience that ‘those unfraternal denunciations, continued through years, and which at last inflamed deeds that ended in bloodshed, were reciprocal’, Melville also argued that Southerners who had inherited the slave system were ‘less fortun[ate], not less righteous than we’. Reconciliation was particularly important in 1866, the year *Battle-Pieces* was published. ‘It is more than a year since the memorable surrender,’ Melville observed, ‘but events have not yet rounded themselves into completion’.²⁴ Hostilities might resume at any time if the Republican congress enacted their punitive legislation toward the south. To prevent this, he asked his countrymen to put themselves in the place of others, imaginatively to experience the Southerners’ feelings, and to appreciate their hardships and desires. And he predicted dire consequences for the nation if it did not shed its self-righteous innocence.

Ultimately, this sacrifice would prove too much, at least in the literary marketplace. *Battle-Pieces* would sell less than 200 copies and receive a handful of negative reviews. Americans were simply not interested in a message that emphasized ambiguity, sympathy, and a profound interrogation of the discourse of sacrifice.

Of the three major American poets examined in this chapter, only Walt Whitman achieved a comparatively widespread audience for his war writings. Whitman sought to embody the sacrifice of soldiers through a poetry he hoped would heal the body politic and at the same time render sensible the meaning of the war dead—but this project did not come easily at first. The self-proclaimed national poet was stunned by the onset of war and wrote almost nothing about the conflict until the fall of 1861, when the debacle at Bull Run prompted him to contribute a patriotic broadside that appeared simultaneously in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, the *New York Leader*, and *Harper’s Weekly*:

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Through the windows—through doors—burst like a ruthless force,

Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
Into the school where the scholar is studying ...²⁵

Whitman's first significant war poem commands its readers to sweep away schools, work, even weddings. As with much patriotic verse of the era, 'Beat! Beat! Drums!' not only celebrates the drums and bugles of war but attempts to *become* those drums and bugles—to embody the martial music that would lead an army to victory.

p. 74 Yet anxiety permeates almost every line. Behind the call to abolish everyday life is a palpable longing for all that will soon be destroyed. The sound of war bursts 'like a ruthless force, | Into the solemn church', but instead of uniting the worshippers in communion it merely 'scatter[s] the congregation'. Moreover, the sacrifice of the bridegroom, literally enacted throughout the nation as tens of thousands of men answered Lincoln's call for a volunteer army, erodes the most basic unit of social life: 'no happiness must he now have with his bride.'²⁶ Faith and domesticity, Whitman suggests, are the first casualties of the war.

It would be another year before Whitman began to write the war poetry for which he is still known. Occasioning this transformation was the battle of Fredericksburgh (1862), where his younger brother was wounded. Whitman travelled to Virginia to find George Washington Whitman and stumbled into the chaos of defeat. The wounded lay in makeshift clusters, awaiting treatment, their heads bandaged, clothes caked with dirt and blood. In this huge makeshift infirmary, Whitman soon found George, whose injury turned out to be slight. Walking through the defeated Union camp, Whitman took notes in a small notebook, recording a sombre row of 'several dead bodies ... each cover'd with its brown woolen blanket'.²⁷

These bodies would become the source for one of his most moving war poems, 'A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim'. The poem opens with its speaker emerging from 'near the hospital tent' and discovering 'Three forms ... untended lying':

Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woolen blanket,
Gray and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.

Curious I halt and silent stand,
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest the first just lift the blanket;
Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-gray'd hair, and
flesh all sunken about the eyes?
Who are you my dear comrade?

Then to the second I step—and who are you my child and darling?
Who are you 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 is the face of the Christ himself,
Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.²⁸

This poem, so utterly unlike the simplistic boosterism of 'Beat! Beat! Drums!' is also radically different from the earlier poetry of *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Gone are the expansive catalogues, the claims of an imperial self, the insistence on union and harmony. The speaker of 'A Sight in Camp' is instead more concerned with the sacrificial costs of a disastrous battle. When its narrator lifts the coarse blankets draping the dead, he has no idea who or what he will find; he no longer assumes, as had the earlier Whitman, that his experience will coincide with his wishes. Only after peering at the 'gaunt and grim' face of a stranger does the speaker recognize the common humanity shared by dead and living alike—a commonality that is meant to render

fraternal warfare in tragic terms. This idea reaches summation, of course, in the last Christlike figure, whose sacrifice stands for that made by tens of thousands of anonymous soldiers and, at the same time, conveys a redemptive narrative that has nothing to do with political ideology or national identity.

p. 75 After years of feeling unappreciated by a national audience, Whitman would soon discover the communion he sought as a volunteer at military hospitals in Washington. Confident that he might help individual soldiers (by writing letters for them, reading to them, distributing candy and preserves), he was no longer so certain about the role of poetry in healing national disunity. His earlier hymns to the body gave way now to graphic accounts of the stricken human form:

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood ...
.
I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,
But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,
And the yellow-blue countenance see.²⁹

The narrator of 'The Wound-Dresser' recalls how at the start of the war he had been 'Arous'd and angry ... I'd thought to beat the alarm, and urge relentless war'. But, much like the Whitman who had written 'Beat! Beat! Drums!', this speaker is soon worn out by war's relentless suffering. 'I resign'd myself', he confesses, 'To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead'.³⁰

In many ways Whitman's war poems themselves seem wounded. His verse, populated by 'Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights', who leave behind 'the smell of ether, the smell of blood', are profoundly anguished: strewn with 'bloody forms', 'some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating'.³¹ If Whitman hoped these poems might help restore the country to peace and wholeness by offering a candid look at suffering, they came at an enormous personal price. Within five months of visiting the hospitals, Whitman began to complain of 'sore throat & distress in my head'. Friends warned him that 'I hover too much over the beds of the hospitals, with fever & putrid wounds, etc.'.³² His head ached; his joints throbbed; there was a humming in his ears. Ultimately his work in the hospitals permanently affected his health.

Many years later he would ask himself if the experience had been worth it:

What did I get? Well—I got the [soldier] boys, for one thing: the boys: thousands of them: they were, they are, they will be mine ... then I got *Leaves of Grass*: but for this I would never have had *Leaves of Grass*—the consummated book (the last confirming word) ... You look on me now with the ravages of that experience finally reducing me to a powder. Still I say: I only gave myself: I got the boys, I got the *Leaves of Grass*. My body? Yes—it had to be given—it had to be sacrificed: who knows better than I do what that means?³³

p. 76 Like that of Dickinson, whom he never met nor read, Whitman's poetic productivity decreased sharply after the war. More and more he found himself tending his fame, revising an ever-expanding *Leaves of Grass*, which now included *Drum-Taps* (first published 1865), and railing against the loss of individuality and tolerance that had once defined his America. Never did he forget, however, the fundamental experience that had made him who he was. 'There were years in my life—', he recalled, 'years there in New York—when I wondered if all was not going to the bad with America—the tendency downwards—but the war saved me: what I saw in the war set me up for all time—the days in the hospitals'.³⁴

As he had with the soldiers in 'A Sight at Camp', Whitman viewed the Civil War in terms of sacrifice—not the sacrifice encouraged by political rhetoric or regional identification, but a sacrifice that was intimate,

personal, and unexpected. In the years immediately following the war, Whitman increasingly understood his task as poet as one of bearing witness to suffering that seemed both timeless and new, bound to historical antecedents and yet in its scope requiring new expressive modes. By performing this function, he came close to honouring wartime sacrifice in terms that would be deployed by veterans groups in the years and decades following the war. While public leaders embarked on a policy of reconciliation that ignored both the racial component of the war as well as its personal costs, veterans in the North and South lobbied for veteran pensions, rest homes, and respect for the sacrifices they had been called upon to make in their youth. These efforts were ultimately made in the hopes of avoiding another sacrifice—that of the ideals of patriotism, brotherhood, and freedom that had inspired them to enlist in the first place.

Notes

- 1 John Greenleaf Whittier to Lucy Larcom (27 April 1861), in *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, ed. John B. Pickard (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), iii. 18.
- 2 Cited in John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd, *The Tribunal: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 55.
- 3 Brian Matthew Jordan, *Marching Home: Union Veterans and their Unending Civil War* (New York: Liveright, 2014), 86.
- 4 *Ibid.* 4.
- 5 Lawrence Buell, 'Melville as Poet,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 139.
- 6 Shira Wolofsky, *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 3.
- 7 Faith Barrett, *To Fight Aloud Is Very Brave: American Poetry and the Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 15.
- 8 Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1958), no. 298. Letters are cited by number.
- 9 Emily Dickinson, 'It feels a Shame to be Alive—', in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1998), no. 524. Poems are cited by number.
- 10 *Ibid.*, no. 704.
- 11 *Ibid.*, no. 384.
- 12 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Collected Poems and Translations* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 138.
- 13 Dickinson, *Poems*, no. 243.
- 14 *Ibid.*, no. 343.
- 15 Herman Melville, *The Battle-Pieces of Herman Melville*, ed. Hennig Cohen (New York: Yoseloff, 1964), 71–2.
- 16 *Ibid.* 45.
- 17 *Ibid.* 44.
- 18 On the religious practice of self-sacrifice as foundational to the Protestant work ethic, see Jan-Melissa Schramm, Chapter 2, p. 39 and pp. 44–6, this volume.
- 19 Melville, *Battle-Pieces*, 113–14.
- 20 *Ibid.* 55, 77, 101.
- 21 *Ibid.* 37, 89.
- 22 *Ibid.* 41, 95.
- 23 *Ibid.* 197–8.
- 24 *Ibid.* 199.
- 25 In Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 419.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 'Memoranda', in *ibid.* 712.
- 28 *Ibid.* 441.
- 29 'The Wound-Dresser', in *ibid.* 444–5.
- 30 *Ibid.* 442–3.
- 31 'A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown', in *ibid.* 439.
- 32 Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence, i. 1842–1867*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 170–1.
- 33 Quoted in Horace Traubel, *Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), iii. 582.

