

The Metamorphosis of Whitman’s Poetry in Wartime: From Experimentalism to Realism

Naounou Amédée

Université Jean Lorougnon Guède- Daloa (CI)

ABSTRACT: *Without doubt, the Civil War era marked a sea change in American literature precisely the way the American writers apprehend the role of the poetry, both in the North and South. Many poems of the wartime aimed at figuring out what happened to the Civil War and what happened to American literature. All these poems appear as a chastening, a sense that maybe focus more upon the day-to-day lives of actual living human beings. If the American literature that Emerson had summoned helped galvanize opinion that led to the Civil War, the Civil War in turn changed what that literature would be, and moreover the poems by Whitman who literally became the invigorator and reconciler of the American republic he had wanted to become through his poems that show how to mourn and how to gauge the effects that the war was having on Americans, and also how it came to American poetry which can convey and perhaps alleviates the psychological and physical suffering war entails.*

Keywords: *Civil War, literature, poetry, wartime, chastening*

I. INTRODUCTION

The American Civil War was not only a watershed moment in the history and development of the United States. It also marked a key moment in the nation's literary history, with a surprisingly great output of poems coinciding with the war years.

Civil War-era letters are largely associated with the writings of a few of America's most highly celebrated poets: Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Whitman's writings between 1861 and 1865 reflect personal and cultural experiences of the wartime years. Likewise, his verses in the following years reflect the war's aftermath. In this writing, we intend to talk in somewhat general terms about the overarching idea of American literature in the Civil War. We need to acknowledge up how traumatic, how devastating, how monumental the Civil War would have been in their lives. A scholar, Drew Gilpin Faust, wrote a book about death and the Civil War. One of the things she points out that we think is really worth considering and bringing up is that over six hundred thousand Americans died in the Civil War, which is more than any war in the United States, and which is more than all of the wars combined. But if we were to extrapolate that into today's numbers, if we were to say the United States would have a Civil War right now based upon the population, the equivalent of six million people would die given how much the population has grown. So there is a way in which the Civil War—and it's hard for the American to get their minds around—affected everybody in the nation at the time. It was impossible not to know somebody, at least in the more populated areas from probably Kansas to the East, who was not wounded, maimed, or killed in the war. In many cases that person was also a member of the family. So the first difficulty is just getting Americans' heads around the fact that this war happened on a devastating scale amongst people just like them. The second thing, which is a little more difficult, is to try to convey why literature might have seemed so important to these people. The things we want firstly to focus upon today are how Poetry helped spark the Civil War and secondly point out how the Civil War changed Whitman's poetry.

II. HOW POETRY HELPED SPARK THE CIVIL WAR

It's important to realize how significant American literature was in the first place to the majority of Americans in the antebellum period, in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless that does not prevent Americans sometime to ask how would they feel if that country did not have its own television stations, didn't have an internet presence, didn't have its own movies, that everything it got culturally came from another country. We are guessing that they would in some ways subtly consider that country to be a little inferior, at least culturally. That was the case of America in the nineteenth century. There's a great essay that was published thirty-three years before the Civil War by a writer named Sir Sydney Smith called "Who Reads an American Book?" What Smith wanted to say—he was writing this in an English literary journal at the time, with a lot of cultural snobbism and chauvinism—he said, America's kind of interesting. It's doing something kind of worth remarking in its political system. They're experimenting with this thing called democracy. It may or may not work out, but they have no culture whatsoever. Whenever a writer in America tries to write a novel, he's essentially copying Sir Walter Scott. Whenever a poet in the United States tries to publish a poem, he or she is

essentially copying favorite British poet. The idea was, Americans do not have their own culture. They are a people devoid of literary culture. Therefore, they are really not quite up to the standards of civilization as understood by English and European folks. So but why is that important? Well, it was enormously important to Americans who read and felt a sense of cultural inferiority, who themselves felt it is true, they are not really producing a culture in the same way of England that has Shakespeare or in the way of Italy that has Dante. Americans do not have that yet. People like Ralph Waldo Emerson articulated what an American literature might look like. He said in a series of essays and in his first book, *Nature*, published in 1836: American literature does not need to even look across the Atlantic, at Sir Walter Scott. We have a completely different experience. We have a different political environment. We are much more self-determined. Obviously these things may be debatable, but this is Emerson's take on things. As a result, Americans are going to create something unlike Europe, which is distinctly theirs. In his essay called "The Poet," Ralph Waldo Emerson said the poet in America is not going to be a European poet who's bound by metrical regularity. The poet in the U.S. does not have to write in iambic pentameter. The poet in America does not have to rhyme. Why should Americans be hung up with those European conventions that are really kind of imprisoning and constricting? The American poet will, Emerson says, not worry about making meters, but will create "metre-making arguments." What he means by that is, the American poet will simply describe the world as he sees it or she sees it, and that will become a new kind of poetry.

Emerson's abstraction of American literature is important because it sparked a wave of disciples and imitators and people who tried to live up to his ideals. Talking about people, we refer to people like Harriet Beecher Stowe or Emily Dickinson or Nathaniel Hawthorne. All of them were influenced by Emerson to varying degrees. The most interesting one, we think, who is inspired by Emerson and whose career takes a radical turn in the Civil War is Walt Whitman, whose poetry does not look like any other poetry we are aware of. It's conversational. There is not a kind of rhythmic meter going on. In fact, Whitman writes some extraordinarily long poetic lines. They seem to go off the page. They just go on and on and on. They catalog endless activities and objects in the American world. Where that is coming from is Emerson. Whitman said famously, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil." (Callow, 153) What he meant is: he knew he wanted to do something with poetry; he considered himself a kind of artistic figure, but it was when he read Emerson's "The Poet" and other essays that he began to see what he might be able to do. What he wants to do, following Emerson's advice in "The Poet," he wants to become the poet of America. Alas, poetry is ranked below fiction, and the Americans are aware of that, and when the literate meet in smaller books reading groups, they will focus on fiction. The reason our study is looking at poetry is so much because in a very compact way, it can also like fiction show how the Civil War changed the language. We confess we can do that really nicely with the example of Whitman's language. So that is why our study is going to look at his poetry relevant to the war.

Confronted by a contemporary audience that was indifferent and at times downright hostile to his poems, Whitman was somewhat compelled to abandon the experimentalism and exuberance of his antebellum poetry to embrace wartime poems that were less personal, and more conventional than the poetry he wrote before the war began.

With the nation now locked in an extended war, all of Whitman's deepest concerns and beliefs were under attack. *Leaves of Grass* had been built on a faith in union, wholeness, the ability of a self and a nation to contain contradictions and absorb diversity; now the United States had come apart, and Whitman's very project was now in danger of becoming an anachronism as the Southern states sought to divide the country in two. *Leaves* had been built, too, on a belief in the power of affection to overcome division and competition; his *Calamus* vision was of a "*continent indissoluble*" with "*inseparable cities*" all joined by "the life-long love of comrades." But now the young men of America were killing each other in bloody battles; fathers were killing sons, sons fathers, and brothers brothers. Whitman's previous poems that would bind a nation, build an affectionate democracy, and guide a citizenry to celebrate its unified diversity, were shattered in the fratricidal conflict that engulfed America.

Now a generation of young American males, the very males on which he had staked the future of democracy, were literally being disarmed, amputated, and killed. It was this amputation, this fragmenting of the Union—in both a literal and figurative sense—that Whitman would address for the next few years, as he devoted himself to becoming the arms and legs of the wounded and maimed soldiers in the Civil War hospitals. It was only at that very moment, encountering the horrifying aftereffects of a real battle, that the powerful Civil War poems began to emerge.

Rather than celebrating an easy and wholly subjective relationship between self and world, Whitman's wartime poems labor to express the "realities" of war, even though he was intensively ambivalent about the violence of war. Whitman lamented the suffering and death of Civil War soldiers on both sides of the conflict. At the same time, he believed that war produced national literary identity, and that the United States would be unified and strengthened by the ordeal. All this ordeal real or whole imagined would share his reverence for

bodily experience, strong emotion, and poetic excess whose definite aim is to develop an idiosyncratic style of wartime poems.

The poems of the Civil War era are gripping and powerful. They shaped American literature, in particular, about how the war, in the need for orders to be terse, concise and clear, had an impact on the writing style that would characterize American modernism, and also how the violence of the war sloughed off all the over wrought, emotionally dramatic Victorian proprieties that evaded the immediate impact of the thing itself. As Americans recoiled from the reality of war, there was a sense of taking stock that in their literature and poetry would result in a more chastened and realistic language, one better suited to assess and describe the world that the war had created. From the secession of South Carolina and the opening battle at Fort Sumter to Lee's surrender at Appomattox and Lincoln's assassination, this wealth of literature records a remarkable period in American history from an urgent, contemporary perspective.

Moved by the currents of the divergent principles and needs that tore the nation in half, northern and southern authors alike their horror at the bloodshed and sacrificed lives. In these patriotic and sentimental works, they tell tales of heroes and daring deeds, find solace in memory, and commemorate their dead. After the bitter end of the war, they assume the burdens of the peace and begin to reconstruct the nation. In the voices of these poems-speaking, writing, lies the full spectrum of the history and emotions of the Civil War.

III. HOW THE CIVIL WAR CHANGED WHITMAN'S POETRY

Before we do, we would like to suggest that another difference between United States literature and a lot of literature that was in was that American writers felt like they wanted to change their readers. They wanted a moral revolution to happen inside the readers. They did not just want people to read one of their books and to be entertained by it—although every author wants to entertain a reader to some extent—they wanted people to read their work—whether it was Emerson, whether it was Thoreau's *Walden*, whether it was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—they wanted people to read those things and have a conversion themselves that would make them behave in a different way when you had finished. At the end of "The American Scholar," Emerson in fact says that the role of the American scholar, and by that he just meant anyone who thinks or writes, the role of that person is to convert the world. That desire to convert the world fit very nicely into a pressing ethical, moral dilemma that the United States was confronted with: the problem of slavery.

Harriet Beecher Stowe says, I didn't really write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. God wrote through me. God wrote it, and what God wants to do is to get everybody stirred up about the problem of slavery and to want to abolish slavery. I believe very strongly that in many ways, the Civil War would not have happened in quite the way it did if there had not been this group of New England authors who were writing very passionately about the problem of slavery and the need for abolition, and who expressed a willingness, if the South wouldn't change their ways, for New England to just secede. We always think about the South seceding, but Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, sometimes Nathaniel Hawthorne, and a variety of other folks said, you know what would be best is if New England seceded, because then we wouldn't have to deal with this problem of slavery, of this moral taint that is ruining the country.

James Russell Lowell, a poet of the time and the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* said, as an editor, "I am going to do everything I can to try to abolish slavery, to try to influence public opinion through my magazine in such a way that people will say: slavery is wrong, let's end it." In the very second issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* he published an article called "*Where Will it End?*" and that article simply said, the United States has lost its ideals and can only be saved by the abolition of slavery. Yet, people may say: So what? What's the big deal? It's just an article. Articles cannot do anything. Lowell said that the war before the firing on Fort Sumter was a war of words and the pen. What he meant was, what had to happen before the North and the South clashed together in that epic battle that lasted four years was that public opinion had to be mobilized and energized in such a way that one group of people—and it was a minority; a very small percentage of people said, slavery is wrong; let's fight over it. Another group of people, the South, disagreed.

So, based upon Emerson's writings and then a whole cohort of other American literary figures, we have got a very heightened rhetorical situation in the United States, where both sides are fired up and are basically writing articles in support of or against each other and fairly large audiences are reading those. That's the backdrop for Walt Whitman, who before the war, was somewhat lost in New York, searching for a greater sense of purpose. Through his ministrations of wounded soldiers, he found that purpose and a new inspiration for his art. This ambition made him nourished this incredibly ambitious idea that he wants to be the national poet. We shall just say for instance that this side of the room is the South and leans towards Southern sympathies and say this side of the room is the North. The North is incredibly complex with some Americans wanting secession from the Union but also some other Americans wanting all kinds of different accommodations with the South. What Whitman wanted to do as a poet in the 1850s was to throw his arms rhetorically around all of these Americans and far beyond. He wanted to say, that all these distinctness Americans are the nation. He also is the nation. This conviction appears vividly in his words:

"I am the national poet. I'm going to try to describe all of us. I'm going to say what it's like to be a Southerner, what it's like to be a Northerner, what it's like to be an escaped slave, what it's like to be a Native American who's married to a trapper. I'm going to try to encompass everything that is going on in this incredibly dynamic and chaotic place called the United States. I'm going to do that because I want to be the poet of America. I want to be our nation's Dante, or I want to be our nation's preeminent poet and the way I know I have succeeded is if all of you read my book and agree more or less that I have captured what it is like to live in this place, and what it is like to be an American. It's a very ambitious goal." (Kaplan, 245)

People love the ambition of Whitman when he says: "I'm going to be the poet of America. I'm going to embrace you, and you're going to embrace me." (Kaplan, 246) Well, it didn't work out quite that way for a while. Not everyone embraced Whitman as much as he had hoped, but that is the project that he had.

The reason we mention it is because, imagine if you are the person who wants to be the poet of America and who wants to create a poem about America and imagine if America no longer exists. What we are talking about, of course, is the firing of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, which officially begins the Civil War. The United States is no longer the United States. They are the divided states. The Americans were embarked on an incredibly bloody four-year war that nobody could anticipate the cost of. Before such a bloody fratricidal war, what could Whitman do as he has proclaimed himself the poet of America? His whole project seems to have fallen apart because now his audience is divided and fractious.

What Whitman did at first—and this is conjectural—he actually considered enlisting in the Union Army. He's got this really interesting journal entry about a week after the fighting begins where he says, "I hereby swear off meat, alcohol, and will only eat vegetable foods, and will take better care of my body." It doesn't say, "I'm going to enlist in the army," (Miller, 115) and maybe he didn't mean that, but we have always had this suspicion that one of the things he is thinking about is, maybe "I'm going to get geared up and I'm going to enlist." (Miller, 118) But he doesn't. The person that he knows who does is his younger brother, George Washington Whitman, who is a carpenter in Brooklyn and within a week of the firing on Fort Sumter, Walt Whitman's younger brother George Whitman signs up and begins a four-year career in the Union Army that will take him from one major battle to the other, and that will have him wounded multiple times and will have him finishing up the war in a Confederate prison. In fact, when he gets home, he suffers from what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder and what at the time was known as soldier's heart. He sleeps with a gun down in the parlor. He cannot sleep at night very comfortably. He is agitated a lot of the time. He is a part of a unit that began with 160 men. By the end of the war, there are only twenty-some left, and he is one of them. One of his friends said, "George, you're the luckiest man I ever knew," (Kaplan, 321) because he gets shot, he gets captured, but he just keeps going.

In December of 1863, right in the middle of the war, Whitman, who had written some really propagandistic poems about the war to date, is sitting at breakfast with his mother. He opens up a New York newspaper, and at the time newspapers would have a black border around them to list those who were wounded and killed in battle. He is reading that and he sees the name George Whitman, Fredericksburg. He gets up from the table and immediately catches a train down to Washington, DC, where there are numerous hospitals that have been set up in tents and bars and the U.S. Patent Office. There are so many wounded from the war at that point that they are just converting every building that it makes sense to into a hospital. He goes from hospital to hospital saying, have you seen my brother George Whitman? Nobody has. Being flighty like a poet, he is almost immediately pick-pocketed, and he has no money and he is in Washington. He borrows money from somebody, and he takes the train from Washington, DC, over to Fredericksburg—not a very far journey. He shows up at the aftermath of a battle where George was wounded, and he begins taking notes in a little notebook that he had made for himself. He describes the trees that have just been mown down like with chainsaws, except instead of chainsaws it is with artillery and bullets. There are dead horses lying all over the place, mules and horses, pack animals, the ground has been churned up by artillery, and in clusters all over the place are little groups of men who have been wounded but not wounded so badly they need to go to the hospital immediately. Whitman almost immediately discovers his younger brother, who has been wounded in a minor way with a shot in his cheek. They have a reunion, and they hug. Whitman is very glad that his brother has survived, but his brother then takes him around and introduces him to all of his friends, the people that he has gotten to know in the Union Army. Again, in his notebook Whitman writes down the stories of these men. That night, he goes to sleep, and in the morning he wakes up and takes a walk outside of his tent, and he sees three bodies that are lying on the ground and that have been covered with a blanket. At that moment, he once again writes in his notebook what will be his first Civil War poem that is based on the experience of the Civil War. It is called "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Grey and Dim", some will follow such as "As from my tent I emerge so early, sleepless", "As slow I walk in the cool fresh air the path near by the hospital tent", "Three forms I see on stretchers lying", "brought out there untended lying", "Over each the blanket spread", "ample brownish woolen blanket", "Gray and heavy blanket". All that kind of poetry was impossible for Whitman before he actually had the experience of going to Fredericksburg. This literature that would emerge out of the Civil War

was impossible before he experiences a shock at the horrors of the War when he was looking for his injured brother. What happens with Whitman is he is so moved by this experience that the poet corrects in part his famous assertion that the “real war will never get in the books.” Whitman did try to bring the real war into his poems. An anti-slavery Democrat, who dressed the wounds of both Northern and Southern soldiers, he wrote poems that describe the circumstances of war—from the exuberant optimism of 1861 to the blood-soaked exhaustion of 1865. These poems bear traces of the violated human body which cannot be represented and thus must fail to become part of the public record of the war; their reality thwarts textualization.

Whitman's poetry is a poetry of sequence without sedimentation, a poetry that sallies forth, its syntactic possibilities unmarked and undiminished by what it has been through. It is a poetry that dwells ever in the present, not because it refuses to look back, but because past events are so strangely foreshortened, so devoid of any weight of time, that they have the effect of being contemporaneous with all events subsequent to them. The operative process here is something like the transposition of seriality into simultaneity—the constitution of memory as a field of spatial latitude rather than temporal extension—a process that makes for the perpetual openness of the poem, its boundless horizons of experience.

IV. CONCLUSION

Without doubt, the Civil War era marked a sea change in American literature precisely the way the American writers apprehend the role of the poetry, both in the North and South. These societal shifts and the effects of such a bloody war also manifested in the literary culture of the country. Also, many poems of the war years seemed simply to extol the battle cry or the cause of each side, and the works are still studied both for formal and structural qualities and as historical artifacts. What happened to the Civil War, what happened to American literature, is a kind of chastening, a sense that maybe we should focus less on our ideals and more upon the day-to-day lives of actual living human beings. If the American literature that Emerson had summoned into being in the 1830's and '40s helped galvanize opinion that led to the Civil War, the Civil War in turn changed what that literature would be, and the poems by Whitman are just examples of that.

Ministering to a cross section of the democratic nation, North and South, black and white, Whitman literally became the invigorator, comrade, fuser, and reconciler of the American republic he had wanted to become through his writing. Whitman shows us two ways of working through the problem of how to mourn and how to gauge the effect that the war was having on Americans. Whitman's poems reflect how the war came to American poetry and he believes poetry can convey, and perhaps alleviates, the psychological and physical suffering war entails.

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