

**Embodying the Book: Mourning for the Masses  
in Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps***

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*I chant this chant of my silent soul, in the name of all dead soldiers.  
Faces so pale, with wondrous eyes, very dear, gather closer yet;  
Draw close, but speak not.  
Phantoms, welcome, divine and tender!*

*-Walt Whitman, "Hymn of Dead Soldiers," 1865*

On March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1863, Lieutenant Nathaniel Bowditch of the First Massachusetts Cavalry, son of famed abolitionist Henry Ingersoll Bowditch, was fatally shot during a charge at Kelly's Ford. His father, receiving the news, "fairly broke down" under the weight of his grief, but nevertheless mustered the emotional strength to scramble to Virginia and procure the body of his son before excessive decay made such a thing impossible. Arriving, he arranged to have his son's body embalmed – then a relatively new mortuary science – "that it may be seen on my return to Boston" (Faust 167). Henry brought the body of his son home, and there the Bowditch family, along with friends and community members, viewed it and held a funeral, mourning as they knew how.

Henry was unquestionably comforted by securing his son's body, but this was just the beginning of his mourning process. Seeking to maintain a sense of connection to his son and to remind himself of the afterlife they would one day enjoy together, Henry, in accordance with common cultural practice of the time, produced a remarkable array of memorial objects. Taking a ring from Nat's finger and a button from his cavalry vest, Henry created an "amulet" which he connected to his watch, saying "There I trust they will remain until I die" (169). For Henry, every act of registering the passage of time now held the potential to remind him that he was nearing that much-anticipated "moment" when he would be reunited with the son represented by the watch's amulet. Perhaps even more remarkably, he then began a "collation of the letters, journals &c

illustrative of his dear young life,” which he had bound and placed in a special cabinet that sat in the parlor (169). Over time he added other relevant artifacts, making it, in essence, a sacred shrine, filled with relics that allowed him to maintain an affective connection to his son. It was just such a connection that made the many years and countless hours necessary to produce the volumes and cabinet worthwhile. As Henry said, “The labor was a sweet one. It took me out of myself” and into the imagined presence of the deceased regularly (170).<sup>1</sup>

Few had the opportunity to mourn as Henry Bowditch did. The nature of death on the Civil War battlefields prevented all but the most fortunate from engaging in these types of practices. The fact that soldiers were “blown to pieces by artillery shells...and hidden by woods or ravines,” “stripped of every identifying object” before being “thrown by the hundreds into burial trenches,” or placed in “hastily dug graves beside military hospitals” meant that roughly “40 percent of deceased Yankees and a far greater proportion of Confederates” died into a kind of radical anonymity that left most nineteenth-century Americans stunned and unsure how to ameliorate their grief (104). During this period, witnessing the moment of death, preparing bodies for burial, commissioning post-mortem portraiture, creating hair weavings, mourning quilts, mourning poems, and even memorial jewelry were all commonplace acts of mourning. All of these required access to the body of the deceased with the exception of mourning poems. Bodies were needed for funerals and burial, bits of hair were needed for weavings and paintings, and clothing was needed for producing memorial quilts and jewelry. Such “traces” functioned to make the dead a vital presence in the life of the living. Indeed, “most of these objects were made...so that the memory of the deceased could be kept alive and in the family,” and “what motivated this seemingly unusual practice was the desire to

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<sup>1</sup> This mourning project did not end here, either, for his father ultimately placed the memorial volumes into a larger memorial “cabinet” that occupied a conspicuous place in the family parlor. Over time Bowditch filled the cabinet with many of Nat’s personal effects, and later began to include objects that served to memorialize other lost members of the family as well. For more information about Bowditch’s memorial cabinet see Tamara Plakins Thornton, “Sacred Relics in the Cause of Liberty: A Civil War Memorial Cabinet and the Victorian Logic of Collecting.” *The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings: New England Collectors and Collections* (Boston: Boston UP, June 2004).

maintain family continuity...the bereaved wished their dead to be restored to them as living presences” (Lloyd 67, 71). In essence, these traces restored what death had threatened to annihilate – the identity of the deceased as an active and important part of the mourner’s life. Thus, failing to witness the death and burial – along with being unable to garner any trace of the individual lost – created significant impediments to the process of mourning. This had very real consequences. As the wife of one Confederate officer remarked, those who suffered such complete loss were far too often left “stunned and stupefied . . . forever, and a few there were who died of grief” (Faust 145). No bodies meant no true rituals of mourning, so it seems, and thus no relief from the pain of grief and loss.

Walt Whitman was unquestionably familiar with the way the Civil War impeded mourning and spawned perpetual grief. He spent much of it ministering to the soldiers in the Washington area hospitals, and had seen first-hand the faces of the bereaved who had come to collect the bodies of those they loved. He certainly understood that for every individual fortunate enough to retrieve the body of a loved one there were many, many more devastated by the fact that they would never have such an opportunity. Seeking to counter the increasing interruption of ritual mourning practices, Whitman, in the spring of 1865, published a small volume of war poetry entitled *Drum-Taps*. In this text, he sought to recover the bodies and preserve the identities of the Civil War’s “Million Dead” in the face of their material annihilation. He worked to mediate grief and foster successful mourning through a book that – like Bowditch’s amulet and memorial volumes – not only represented the deceased, but allowed readers to imagine themselves reconnected to them through its pages. Such work was accomplished through literary images marked by a curious lack of detail, and augmented by a material construction in which binding, typography, and visual ornamentation were crafted to represent any and every lost soldier of the Civil War. Fostering successful mourning, while important in its own right, was not the only benefit Whitman hoped would be

derived from this text. By connecting Northern and Southern readers to their dead soldiers in the presence of the poetic “I” which ministers to those soldiers, Whitman hoped to facilitate a collaborative process of mourning which would create what was, in essence, a community of “readerly” mourners united in spite of geographical, political, or ideological distances. In doing so, he was mirroring for such readers the way in which shared grief and collaborative mourning could affectively anneal a new “Union,” bound together into what one contemporary memorably dubbed a “republic of suffering” (Olmsted 115).

### ***(Re)collecting Soldiers***

Scholars have long noted how Whitman’s Civil War poetry, like *Leaves of Grass*, conducts work that is both intimately personal and broadly political. The rows upon rows of wounded that Whitman observed certainly allowed him to indulge his “penchant for voyeuristic cruising” while also inspiring a poetic exploration of the “erotic significance of the body’s partiality” (Tuggle 146). Still, as Faith Barrett has noted, these soldiers also presented Whitman with the opportunity to forge a “metaphoric link between his speaker and the suffering [and sufferers] he observes,” a link that drew him to revise his understanding of self and nation in light of the devastating effects of war (244). Robert Leigh Davis, perhaps most critically attuned to the political stakes inherent in Whitman’s depictions of “infirm” and “suffering bodies,” claims they represent “the ideal democratic polity,” the compromised body of the soldier existing as the perfect “analogue for the desirable instability of the democratic state” (8). As such work shows, there is a rich vein of interpretation exploring the links forged by Whitman between bodies, text, and the body-politic, but few of these scholars have looked specifically at how Whitman’s work functioned to provide readers with the kind of intimate access to the deceased that would allow them to successfully mourn according to contemporary social custom, and how facilitating such acts of mourning served political ends – the heart of my argument here.

Whitman's attempt to perform such personal and political work required him to find a way to both imaginatively and materially recover the bodies of the Civil War dead because without these the bereaved could not mourn as they knew how, a fact I will return to in more detail shortly. Suffice it to say, that this recovery of the bodies and the identities of the Civil War's "Million Dead" was a project with a long foreground, and to understand how Whitman found himself able to effect such a recovery one must start where he did – in the hospitals where he ministered to the soldiers of the war, and in the notebooks where he first began writing about them. As is well known, when Whitman started visiting the Civil War hospitals he took with him small, ephemeral notebooks upon which he scribbled much of the material from which he would produce *Drum-Taps* as well as the journalism and prose he wrote regarding the War. To the casual observer, these notebooks appear to be little more than a lengthy catalogue of soldiers, including details like names, dates, wounds received, and comforts desired. Whitman certainly used them this way, claiming that "from the first I kept impromptu jottings in pencil to refresh my memory of names and circumstances" ("Memoranda" 3). And yet while references such as "John W. Gaskill, co. E 24<sup>th</sup> N.Y.V. bed 57 W.6. Camp weak and prostrated—pulmonary—sent for his description list bring him some *nice* cake sponge cake" seem rather mundane, to see such "jottings" only as an aid to memory would be to miss the way in which their otherwise "blood stain[ed]" pages seek to recover what Whitman felt the war threatened – the "subtlest, rarest, divinest...Humanity" of those to whom he ministered (NUPM 2:520, "Memoranda" 3).

Despite the fact that many individuals went off to war in hopes of claiming a new and much valued identity as a soldier, the war, Whitman knew, could just as easily reduce them to expendable cogs, ultimately annihilating them among the grinding wheels of an industrial war machine.<sup>2</sup> It was

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<sup>2</sup> For more information of the way in which the Civil War offered an opportunity for individuals to claim a new social identity see Dora Costa and Matthew Kahn, "Forging a New Identity: The Costs and Benefits of

in his notebooks that Whitman first set out to counter this tendency, seeking to preserve or, more appropriately, reinscribe individual soldiers with the more subtle, rare, and divine identity that he felt the war threatened to elide if not destroy outright – a phenomenon I have previously written about elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> It was a reinscription that also provided Whitman with a means of maintaining a sense of affective connection to these soldiers despite their future material state. The recuperative and affective work Whitman engaged in as he produced his notebooks is easily seen when examining a selection from the books themselves: “Bed 41 Ward G. Armory May 12 William Williams co F 27<sup>th</sup> Indiana wounded seriously in shoulder – he lay naked to the waist on acc’t of the heat - I never saw a more superb development of chest, & limbs, neck &c. a perfect model of manly strength – seemd awful to take such God’s masterpiece & nearest friend” (NUPM 2:632).

Whitman begins this brief entry by acknowledging the way in which the war threatens to annihilate this man’s identity altogether. He is, after all, merely the incapacitated and soon to be deceased occupant of “Bed 41 Armory G [on] May 12” when Whitman finds him. Immediately, however, Whitman begins recuperating whatever aspects of the man’s identity he can. He begins by translating him from the occupant of “Bed 41” into “William Williams Company F Indiana – wounded seriously in the shoulder” – an improvement, certainly, as this articulation of his identity moves him away from a point of virtual anonymity and towards a more defined identity. And while the war-torn shoulder has, in effect, reduced this man’s military identity to little more than the impending casualty who currently occupies “Bed 41,” Whitman ironically uses it, and the exposure it necessitates, to recognize his “superb development of chest and limbs neck etc.” This statement

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Diversity in Civil War Combat Units for Black Slaves and Freemen.” *Journal of Economic History* 66.4 (2006), 936-962; and James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 308-338.

<sup>33</sup> In an early version of the essay that appears here, I charted how Whitman used his notebooks as a space of catalogue and collection in an effort to recuperate the “human value” of these individuals. At the time, however, I did not make the connection between Whitman’s effort to catalogue these individuals and the way in which this allowed him to eliminate the impediment to mourning created by the destruction of the bodies of the Civil War soldiers he wrote about. See Bradford, Adam. “Re-collecting Soldiers: Walt Whitman and the Appreciation of Human Value.” *WWQR* 27.3 (Winter 2010): 127-152. Print.

not only points towards Whitman's seeming erotic attraction to the man, but also appreciates (in the sense of raises) the man into a "perfect model of manly strength." No longer merely the inhabitant of "Bed 41" or even the otherwise anonymous soldier of "Company F Indiana," the man now becomes "God's masterpiece and truest friend" and his loss "seems awful" to contemplate.

The man's identity and value, although largely stripped away by the war, has been redressed here by Whitman. Through his eroticized appreciation of what he sees before him, Whitman re-draws the man as virtually divine. In redressing the man's impaired identity, Whitman protects that identity from what his wounds have made inevitable, namely his impending death and the dissolution of his body. In literarily preserving Williams, Whitman finds a means of preserving and perpetuating a portion of his identity and of maintaining an affective connection to him despite his impending material destruction.

Such descriptions proliferate across the pages of Whitman's notebooks, performing similar work for those he lists there.<sup>4</sup> If the hospitals represent a vast accumulation site for the human detritus churned out by war, then the notebooks represent a re-collection of this detritus into a protective textual space where a recovery of unique identity can be assured – not unlike the memorial volumes Bowditch generated. As such, Whitman's notebooks move beyond being practical aids to memory and form an almost sacred space of re-collection in which he reinscribes the unique identities of thousands of soldiers, using these entries as a means to make the dead into active and available presences. Paralleling the work of contemporary mourning objects, Whitman's

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<sup>4</sup> Other entries function similarly, such as "ward C bed 46 May 64 Wm Hamblin co D 5th Maine wounded 10th lft leg just below knee bone fract came here 26th / wife Louisa M Hamblin Biddeford Maine wrote from Fred'k'g" (NUPM 2:450). Here, Whitman locates the man within the geographical space of the hospital and the ideological confines of his identity as a soldier before broadening out to place him in the social world of Biddeford, Maine, and in his role as a husband and affective partner. Another example, that of "ward C bed 28 May 16 Michael Gilley age 27 Nativity Germany co G 9th N Y Cav. (died) -- sister Mary Gilley Sheldon wyoming co New York g[un] s[hot] w[oun]d in right hip hit on 7th May / brother John is also wounded (young) ask if he wrote & if so what hosp he is in" works similarly (2:448). It rescues the man from being merely another anonymous casualty of war by re-limning the connections between him and the broader locale and affective circle from whence the man was drawn. Despite the fact that the man has died, his inclusion in Whitman's notebook works to preserve a greater sense of his unique identity, and to make him forever available for Whitman to reconnect with when perusing the volume.

inscriptions become a way he can continually safeguard and recall them as unique individuals. As “specimens” of inestimable value, he writes them into his notebooks and reclaims them as both “God’s masterpiece[s]” and “truest friend[s]” (NUPM 2:632).<sup>5</sup>

### ***Debuting the Collection: Journaling a Sympathetic Collaboration***

Whitman’s notebooks were an important personal resource, “divinest volumes of Humanity” that, in his words, “arous’d . . . undream’d-of depths of emotion” when he sat contemplating them.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing the power the notebooks had for enlivening affective connections, Whitman used them to begin producing pieces of journalism that he hoped might do something similar for those on the home front. Translating both the content and methodology of the notebooks into journalistic accounts, Whitman crafted pieces that offered his readers a means of imaginatively accessing the war-time hospitals of Washington, D.C., and of participating with him in countering the deleterious effects that war was having on the bodies and identities of these soldiers. He had taken the work he began in the notebooks public, inviting the general populace to use his journalistic texts as a means of fostering a sense of affective connection to those soldiers made otherwise inaccessible by the violence and disruptiveness of war.

Whitman’s first war-time article written for the *New York Times*, entitled “The Great Army of the Sick,” is an excellent example. Whitman begins by bringing his reader to consider a group of anonymous soldiers seen in the state in which the war has left them. In this case, they appear as nameless “rows of sick, badly wounded and dying soldiers” that have been “crowded close” on “the second story of that noblest of Washington buildings, the Patent Office” (“Great” 1). Whitman’s choice to introduce these soldiers in this context is significant because not only did the Patent Office

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<sup>5</sup> Whitman would engage in “specimenizing” and “collecting” throughout his career. Not only can *Leaves* and the notebooks be seen operating in this way, but texts like *Memoranda During the War* are similarly marked when Whitman states, “to me the main interest of the War, I found, (and still, on recollection, find,) in those *specimens* . . . stricken by wounds or disease at some time in the course of the contest” (“Memoranda” 4-5, emphasis mine). Similarly, his publication of memoirs in 1882, a sizeable portion of which is Whitman’s depiction of his Civil War years, is appropriately titled *Specimen Days and Collect*.



house a museum quality collection of thousands of patent models within its cases, it also served as the nation's first museum of national history -- famed for containing the "most beautiful specimens of the genius and industry of the nation" (Ellsworth).<sup>7</sup> In his article, however, Whitman invited his readers to return to the Patent Office to see a new collection, of sorts. In terms both resonant and markedly different from those used by the commissioner, Whitman described this new collection as "a strange, solemn and, with all its features of suffering and death, a sort of fascinating sight. . . . Two of the immense apartments are filled with...ponderous glass cases, crowded with models...of every kind of utensil, machine or invention, it ever entered into the mind of man to conceive... Between these cases were lateral openings, perhaps eight feet wide, and quite deep, and in these were placed many of the sick. ("Great" 2)

In his vignette, Whitman brings his readership to consider how modern war has in effect transmuted what should be "beautiful" men into "strange" and "solemn" specimens now largely devoid of any function. They are men virtually divested of their unique individual identities. Whitman drove this last point home when we went on to say that "[m]any of them were very bad cases, wounds and amputations" as if what defined them were not their individual natures but the nature of their wounds. He finished this section by claiming that the building's interior was thus "a curious scene at night, when lit up. The glass cases, the beds, the sick, the gallery above and the marble pavement under foot — the suffering, and the fortitude to bear it in various degrees — occasionally, from some, the groan that could not be repressed — sometimes a poor fellow dying, with emaciated face and glassy eye, the nurse by his side, the doctor also there, but no friend, no relative" (2).

By conflating men and machines, and by making the glass cases and patent models meld almost seamlessly into the "bad cases" and "emaciated face[s]" of the suffering soldiers, Whitman

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<sup>7</sup> At times it had housed such articles as the original *Declaration of Independence*, Benjamin Franklin's printing press, portraits of Native American Indians, Egyptian mummies, and a notable mosaic of Pompeii.

not only provocatively drew his readership to recognize the rather unsettling way the war was imperiling these men's identities, he made it obvious that there was an imperative need for such a threat to be countered. Whitman set about doing so almost immediately after making readers aware of its existence. In the ensuing section of the piece, he urged his readers to participate with him in redressing this situation by bringing forward the "Case of J.A.H." Whitman claimed this case could serve to "illustrate the average of [all] these young men and their experiences," an idea he reinforces by referring to the man only by his initials, thus suggesting him as less a distinct individual than a representative man (2).<sup>8</sup> In an important articulation that should not be overlooked, Whitman went on to give his readers responsibility for this soldier, saying, "Take this case in Ward 6, Campbell Hospital"(2). In making the imperative statement "Take this case" (one which essentially represents or "illustrates" all of "these young men and their experiences"), Whitman linguistically makes the reader into an agent just as responsible for rehabilitating him as Whitman himself is. Given that the remainder of the piece is written in the first person, Whitman's imperative to readers to "Take this case" also becomes an invitation to inhabit – or in the words of *Leaves of Grass*, "assume" – the "I" that narrates the events of the remainder of the piece. The reader is imaginatively present with Whitman when that "I," "as luck would have it," passes "down Ward No. 6 one day, about dusk (4<sup>th</sup> of January, I think,)" and finds the young man "with a look of despair and hopelessness, sunk low in his thin pallid-brown young face." Readers feel that they are present to hear the story of how the young soldier was wounded but received "little or no attention" before being hauled away and sent to the Washington hospitals "in an open platform car; (such as

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<sup>8</sup> Whitman may have gotten the idea that he could use a lack of specificity as a way to make specific cases "illustrate the average" from reading war-time hospital newspapers such as *The Armory Square Hospital Gazette*, which frequently referred to specific soldiers' narratives in such a way. Whitman was a regular visitor to Armory Square Hospital and was undoubtedly familiar with the paper. One representative example is found in the article, "A Surgeons [sic] Story," in which a one of the hospital's surgeons narrates the story of placing a feeding tube into a soldier shot through the esophagus and unable to eat. Although the article describes the man's wound in detail and his gratitude when finally able to eat, the piece never mentions the wounded man's rank, name, or affiliation, calling him only "the poor fellow" (4). Several other similar examples exist; for more, see the archive of the *Armory Square Hospital Gazette* available online at <http://segonku.unl.edu/test/civilwardc/>.

hogs are transported upon north),” treatment which “nearly cost him his life.” They are invited to recoil in indignation as they hear that the man was callously forced to his feet and, like a hog, scrubbed down with “cold water” by hospital attendants. They cringe when he collapses, his “half-frozen and lifeless body [falling] limpsy” into the attendants’ hands, “plainly insensible, perhaps dying.” Along with Whitman, readers are also capable of finding a certain sense of joy in ministering to this soldier – writing “a letter for him to his folks in Massachusetts,” soothing him when “he was getting a little too much agitated, and tears in his eyes,” giving him “some small gifts,” and then hearing from the man that “this little visit, at that hour, just saved him” (“Great” 2).

In opening up a literary space in which readers can sympathetically collaborate with him in the rehabilitation of a soldier, Whitman sought to provide his readership with the means to do vicariously what he had done personally. Readers can connect with this soldier, acknowledge his unique identity, and in the process aid in virtually repairing the physical and ideological damage of war. Moreover, in propositioning readers with the idea that this case is capable of illustrating all the wounded, sick, and dying men found in the hospitals, Whitman invites them to see through the particularities of *this* soldier and imagine him as representative of any soldier with whom such readers might be more intimately concerned.<sup>9</sup>

In providing his readership with a literary avenue for collaboratively and sympathetically ministering to the soldiers of the Civil War, Whitman was actively seeking to provide a means of

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<sup>9</sup> Whitman provided similar opportunities in many other pieces of his Civil War journalism. Over and over again in such pieces, he broadened out his journalistic “I” so that it allowed readers to see themselves as essentially with Whitman, co-habiting the narrative voice and action as they ministered to the wounded, dying, and demoralized soldiers of the war. In Whitman’s “Washington in the Hot Season,” for example, he invites readers to see themselves as present with him by beginning prose sections with statements such as, “I must give you a scene from one of the great Government Hospitals here,” as if placing all that happens within the hospital scene in “your” care (“Washington”). He reinforced this sense of readerly involvement and co-habitation when making statements such as “Soldiers you meet everywhere about the city”(“Washington”). Throughout the piece, Whitman reverts back and forth, employing a journalistic “I” but only after having invited “you” onto the scene, having “given” it to you and asserted that “you” are essentially “meet[ing]” these soldiers yourself. Charges and assertions such as “Take this case,” “I must give you a scene,” and “Soldiers you meet” thus become an important means through which Whitman grants readers personal and meaningful access to the wounded and dying of the war – access through which readers can, even if only sympathetically, help repair war’s damage. For further examples see the *New York Times* articles “Our Soldiers” (6 March 1865), and “The Last Hours of Congress” (12 March 1865).

overcoming those impediments such as geography, age, gender, conflict, etc., which prohibited access to absent loved ones. While readers may not have had the ability to rush to a soldier's side, through their joint sympathetic ministering to the average soldiers presented in Whitman's journalism, they found themselves affectively connected to the war-time sphere of the hospital. Feeling connected through such journalism, they were able to engage in a kind of literary rehabilitation of soldiers' bodies and identities that pushed back, if only imaginatively, against the destructive processes of war. By connecting readers to soldiers through his co-habited journalistic "I," Whitman not only provided them access to the soldiers sent off to war, he essentially established what is in essence an "imagined community" of sympathetic individuals (Anderson 34). This community includes not only Whitman and the reader reading this particular account, but all of the other readers that can be imagined reading and responding similarly. Thus, this collaborative work simultaneously becomes a project of building a sense of community for a group of readers whose sympathetic affections function as a badge of citizenry, all during a time when war was efficaciously tearing communities, large and small, apart. Ultimately, then, Whitman's journalism and the notebooks which lent that journalism much of its power represent the keelson of creation from which Whitman's poetry, with its dual aspirations of healing both bereaved individuals and a broken nation, would steer its course.

### ***Bringing the War Home – Problems Pro(po)sing Recovery***

Whitman's journalism presented an average specimen through which a reader might imagine not only the experiences of their own wounded soldier, but the existence of an affective community seeking to care for that soldier as well. However, the generic conventions, the broader content, and the format of the magazines Whitman published these pieces in threatened to subvert the very goals he was trying to accomplish. The eclectic character of the antebellum newspaper page inevitably overlaid Whitman's accounts with inferences that he would likely have balked at, and the very

stylistic conventions that Whitman was forced to adhere to in order to produce his journalism impeded the kind of access that was needed to counter the increasing destructiveness of the war.

The placement of “The Great Army of the Sick” within the pages of the *Times* points towards some of these problems. The piece is sandwiched between an account that details the financial losses incurred when a fire destroyed Michigan Southern Railroad’s grain elevators, and an appeal by the Ladies Union Aid society to donate funds to help freed slaves in St. Louis. Framed by entries that detail monetary loss and ask for charitable contributions, Whitman’s comment in his own piece that “A benevolent person of the right qualities and tact, cannot perhaps make a better *investment* of himself, at present...than in these same military hospitals” is given a decidedly economic coloring (“Great” 2). His invitation for readers to join him in taking up the cases of the soldiers therefore begins to become more of an imperative call for them to invest financially in *his* endeavor, muting his call for them to invest themselves sympathetically in the cause of these men.<sup>10</sup>

Whitman’s reticence to leave his Civil War writings in the newspapers is explained by the fact that such writings inevitably had meanings superimposed upon them that were beyond his control and counter to his intentions. But even more importantly, as the war dragged on and casualties grew from hundreds to hundreds of thousands, the public’s desire to connect with their lost soldiers grew into a painfully frenzied search that demanded a type of amelioration that his journalism could not supply. Nowhere was this desire for amelioration more publically evident than in the throngs who queued up outside Matthew Brady’s studios following Antietam. After the battle, Brady and his men had photographed the field, and his pictures of the battle’s dead elicited a

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<sup>10</sup> These same strange dynamics marked some of Whitman’s early Civil War poetry as well, as the publication of his first Civil War poem “Beat! Beat! Drums” makes clear. This piece was published repeatedly in late September and early October of 1861, and its placement was frequently unfortunate. Its appearance in *The Circular* on October 3<sup>rd</sup> serves as a representative example. Here, it was sandwiched between an article praising the city for its remarkable number of churches and its morally attuned opera house, and an article that presents some excerpts from Emerson’s essay “Manners.” The editor’s introduction of the poem completes the unfortunate placement with the trite phrase, “The following poem is finely descriptive of one of the phases of today’s life” (139). In this context, the poem loses much of its patriotic fervor and unquestionably does not stand as the resounding call to arms that it might otherwise be.

rather remarkable public reaction. A *New York Times* review of Brady's photographs illuminates this. According to the reviewer, "Crowds of people are constantly going up the stairs [to Brady's gallery]; follow them, and you find them bending over photographic views of that fearful battle-field, taken immediately after the action." These individuals, the reviewer went on, consisted of "hushed, reverend [sic] groups" that too often represent the "one side of the picture that the sun did not catch...widows and orphans, torn from the bosom of their natural protectors by the remorseless hand of Battle." Such groups of bereaved individuals, the reviewer remarks, were "by the aid of the magnifying-glass, [able to discern] the very features of the slain" leading that reviewer to fear being "in the gallery, when one of the women bending over [these pictures] should recognize ... the boy whose slumbers she has cradled, and whose head her bosom pillowed until the rolling drum called him forth – whose poor, pale face, could she reach it, should find the same pillow again ... [now lying in] a shadowed trench" ("Brady's"). The reviewer's palpable unease at being in the gallery with such individuals notwithstanding, the most remarkable thing about the review is the way it documents the widespread social anxiety of a public desperate for some means of locating, if not in some way recovering, the loved ones they had sent off to war. Nowhere is this admission more striking than in the surprising disclosure regarding individuals who brought magnifying glasses to the gallery in hopes of "finding" those they had lost. Nevertheless, the fact that all who came searching for their dead did *not* find them was precisely the problem that limited Whitman's journalism from becoming the profoundly recuperative text that the populace needed. Although it certainly invited readers to connect with actual Civil War soldiers and participate sympathetically in reinscribing these soldiers' identities and value, the very journalistic conventions followed in reporting on these soldiers required a level of specificity that could itself be problematic.

Consider that in journalistic prose names, dates, regimental assignments, and other such personal markers were necessary for demonstrating authenticity, but would have served as

impediments for many readers desperate to reconnect with *their* lost soldiers. Surely when Whitman mentions “D. F. Russell, Company E, Sixtieth New York” or “Charles Miller, bed No. 19, Company D, Fifty-third Pennsylvania” these names signify more powerfully to those family, friends, and acquaintances who can perceive the individual behind the name than to an anonymous reader, however interested or sympathetic (NUPM 2:738). Therefore only a very few could truly have the experience of the widow/mother viewing Brady’s photographs.<sup>11</sup> In order to remedy this, Whitman worked to create what are essentially “thin” descriptions of the deceased -- descriptions so generic that they essentially allowed readers an opportunity to write in a more concrete identity of their choosing. It was a choice that not only effectively moved to erase any of the reader’s impediments to “seeing” on the page the “poor, pale face” of that reader’s beloved soldier, but it primed the text to become an almost universal means of reconnecting with, if not in some sense recovering, the “Million Dead” of the Civil War.

### ***The “Million Dead Summ’d Up” and Recovered***

As the actions of an individual such as Henry Bowditch and the queues of anxious and bereaved gallery-goers suggest, the need to recover the dead from the battlefields of the Civil War was both very personal and, as death tolls mounted, increasingly widespread. Millions of individuals on the home front found it difficult to grapple with their losses because “[n]early half the dead remained unknown, the fact of their deaths supposed but undocumented, the circumstances of their passage from life entirely unrecorded.” Unable to collect, preserve and parlay material traces of the dead into the mourning objects they needed, the bereaved were left in a state of “anxiety and even ‘phrensy’” that could not be ameliorated (Faust 104). Whitman understood that if he could provide an increasingly desperate public readership with both the endings of their soldiers’ “life

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Cushman makes a similar point when he says that although Whitman “is urging his readers to accept a given sample as emblematic or typical” his suppression of “certain samples” of blacks, foreign fighters, etc., complicates the text’s ability to actually *be* “emblematic or typical” for many readers (Cushman 151).

narratives” as well as some physical trace of them, then he could not only help rescue the “Million Dead” from some portion of their regrettable anonymity but he might also go a long way towards mediating the deep grief of a nation.

Whitman sought to provide a material trace and an end of life narrative for such mourners through his production of *Drum-Taps*, a poetic text littered with images of Civil War soldiers. But unlike the many newspaper articles and notebook descriptions in which Whitman included details such as names, units, ranks, and hometowns, the poetic images in *Drum-Taps* are marked by a lack of identifying features. This fact is made all the more remarkable given that many of the descriptions of soldiers in *Drum-Taps* can be traced back to individuals represented in Whitman’s notebooks. In “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest and the Road Unknown,” “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night,” and “A Sight in the Camp at Daybreak Gray and Dim,” Whitman made use of the experiences of individuals recorded in his notebooks to provide his readership with several experiences thought to be crucial to successful mourning. These include the receiving of the dying’s “last look,” knowledge that the deceased was blessed with a “Good Death,” presence at (or first-hand knowledge of) burial, and the depiction of the dead as inheritor of divine glory.<sup>12</sup> Throughout these poems and many others in *Drum-Taps*, markers of specific individuality are largely absent. Soldier images generally appear stripped not only of personal characteristics like name and race, but also of basic war-time distinctions, such as whether they fought for the Union or the Confederacy. Leaving these soldiers in such anonymity required readers to do the writerly work

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<sup>12</sup> Encounters with anonymous soldiers also appear in poems like “The Wound Dresser,” “Drum-Taps,” “Calvary Crossing a Ford,” “O Tan Faced Prairie Boy,” “As Toilsome I Wandered Virginia’s Woods,” “Hymn of Dead Soldiers,” “I Saw Old General At Bay,” “Look Down Fair Moon,” “How Solemn as One by One,” “Dirge For Two Veterans” and “Reconciliation.” Indeed, in all of *Drum-Taps* only one soldier is represented by name – and that is the soldier “Pete” in “Come Up From the Fields Father” – an important divergence in Whitman’s practice in this text which I will return to shortly.



of imaginatively supplying an identity of their choosing – “the text,” as Whitman said, “furnishing [only] the hints, the clue, the start or framework” (“Democratic” 76).<sup>13</sup>

An examination of a few of the more poignant representations gives a view of Whitman at work constructing such images from his notebooks. In his poem “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown” Whitman relies upon an account of the battle of White Oaks Swamp, as “told me by Milton Roberts,” one of the men he ministered to in the hospitals. Whitman records Roberts’ tale of a “silent stealthy march through the woods, at times stumbling over the bodies of dead men in the road” until he reaches a church converted into a hospital, “dimly lit with candles, lamps, and torches” it is now “filled, [with] all varieties [of wounded], horrible beyond description. . . crowds of wounded, bloated and pale. . . the yards outside also filled – they lay on the ground, some on blankets, some on stray planks” (NUPM 2:651). Using Roberts’s story, Whitman crafted a poem in which a soldier, with the reader in tow, finds himself first on Roberts’s “march” and then in the presence of one of the “crowds of wounded” encountered there.

A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown;  
A route through a heavy wood, with muffled steps in the darkness;  
Our army foil’d with loss severe, and the sullen remnant retreating;  
Till after midnight glimmer upon us, the lights of a dim-lighted building;  
We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by the dim-lighted  
building; (“Drum-Taps” 44)

This opening is of interest for the way in which Whitman both personifies and generalizes this experience through its use of the collective pronouns “we” and “our,” both of which makes the poem’s experiences ones that “we” seemingly share – the lights of the church glimmer upon “us,” speaker, reader, and “ranks” alike, and it is “our” army that comes dejectedly upon the “dim-

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<sup>13</sup> Gregory Eiselein has noticed a similar method present in “When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom’d,” which he characterized as operating via “poetic polyvalency and the imagination of readers in a democratic society” (Eiselein 73).

lighted” building. Mirroring his folding of Roberts’s narrative into the poem, Whitman’s use of collective pronouns in this moment seamlessly merges the speaker’s experience in the poem with the reader’s experience of the poem so that the speaker’s identity appears almost collective. In a state of curious conflation encouraged by the progression of the poem, the reader is allowed to move into the building itself where together the speaker and the reader see “crowds, groups of forms...on the floor, some in the pews laid down,” before they finally encounter the following:

[A] soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death, (he is shot in the abdomen;)

I staunch the blood temporarily, (the youngster’s face is white as a lily;)[. . .]

Then hear outside the orders given, *Fall in, my men, fall in;*

But first I bend to the dying lad, his eyes open, a half-smile gives he me,

Then the eyes close, calmly close, and I speed forth to the darkness [...] (44-45)

By inviting readers into close proximity to a soldier represented so completely generically (a lad dying from a gun-shot wound to the abdomen references thousands of actual Civil War soldiers), Whitman works to ensure that as many as possible can impress this image with the identity of a beloved soldier. Using Roberts’s unique individual experience, Whitman crafts a poem in which the reader sees his or her lost soldier in the face of the dying man Roberts encountered. In doing so, the reader is capable of receiving the “last look” of not just any lad, but rather the lad that reader sent off to war but never saw return.

By arriving with the speaker at the moment of death, readers are thus able to witness the final moments of life and gain an accounting of an event which would otherwise have been lost to them. In general, successful mourning required that someone, preferably family members, “needed to witness a death...for these critical last moments of life would epitomize a soul’s spiritual condition....Kin would then use their observations...to evaluate the family’s chances for a reunion in heaven. A life was a narrative that could only be incomplete without this final chapter” (Faust

10). By giving readers the opportunity to witness a beloved soldier's last "half-smile," Whitman was providing them with a crucial sign that indexed the state of that soldier's soul. If a reader could see his or her own lost soldier in the text, then that reader could rest assured that this soldier had died a "Good Death," that he was now at peace, and that hopes for continued association and reunion were not in vain.

Such imagined access provided other opportunities to readers as well. Through the actions of Whitman's cohabited poetic "I," readers were not only allowed to witness this death, but comfort and even minister to the soldier they loved. Whitman's poetic persona assists them in this regard, as not only "a surrogate...who took it on himself to do what the relatives could not do," but as a kind of literary conduit through which a reader is actively able to identify, minister to, remember, and ultimately mourn a soldier (Thomas 35). Rather than standing in for, or replacing, the otherwise absent family member, Whitman's persona becomes the conduit through which the reader, himself or herself, becomes the principle player in the exchange. Through the descriptions and the "I" they now cohabit, readers are invited to imaginatively reach out and "staunch" the wound; they are able to "bend to the dying lad" and ensure that his last living look is at a true friend, and to testify to themselves and even to "him" that he is an individual greatly "valued" by both narrator and reader alike ("Drum-Taps" 44). In one brief poem, readers found themselves able to imaginatively recuperate the disorder and chaos of death on the Civil War battlefield in profoundly powerful ways: acknowledging the unique individuality and worth of their soldier as they minister to him, constructing an end of life narrative that they can find comfort in, and gathering at the deathbed where they can receive that last look which would reassure them that their beloved deceased waited in the beyond (Faust 10).

"A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest and the Road Unknown" is only one example of Whitman's commitment to producing a text through which readers can access their lost loved ones

and productively mourn. Whitman used the experiences of another soldier, William Giggee, in order to perform very similar work in “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night.” In the notebook scholars have called “Return My Book,” Whitman recorded: ““William Giggee, Sept 18<sup>th</sup> ‘62. I heard of poor Bill’s death – he was shot on Pope’s retreat – Arthur took him in his arms, and he died in about an hour and a half – Arthur buried him himself—he dug his grave” (NUPM 2:493). Historical evidence indicates that William and Arthur were brothers, friends, or perhaps even lovers, and that while fighting together at the Second Battle of Bull Run, Bill was shot. He died as Arthur and a comrade tried to rush him to the hospital tent.<sup>14</sup> Whitman apparently knew Bill well and could have chosen to represent his death in great detail, given that it had been related to him by Arthur. Nevertheless, in spite of the availability of such detail, Whitman still chose to represent the deceased generically, and to do so through a speaker whose relationship to the deceased may or may not be familial.

Vigil strange I kept on the field one night,

When you, my son and my comrade, dropt at my side that day,

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<sup>14</sup> William Saley Giggee, born March 10<sup>th</sup> 1844 in Luzerne, Pennsylvania, died (according to official records) August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1862 at Manassas – the site of Pope’s Retreat from the Second Battle of Bull Run (also called the second Manassas). As Whitman indicates in his notebook, William Giggie (Whitman spells “Giggee”) was a member of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Co E, New York Volunteers, but Arthur’s identity has remained a mystery. Given the resonances between the recording of the event in the notebook and the poem, critics such as Charles Glicksberg, seeing this notebook entry as the “germinal seed” for “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night,” have taken the poem largely at face value and assumed (incorrectly, it appears) that Arthur was William’s father (Glicksburg, *Whitman and the Civil War*, 142). More recently, Martin Murray has provided a provocative possible reading of the two as a homosexual couple serving together in the war (See Murray’s “Responding Kisses,” 193). The story may be more complex than either of these two readings imply. Civil War Rosters for the 1st Regiment, New York Volunteers list three men with the last name of Giggie – Arthur and William, both privates, and Ira, a wagoner. The 1850 census shows Ira as the father of a family that contained two sons, William and Andrew – but no mention of an “Arthur.” There is no question that “Arthur” was not William’s father (as Glicksburg assumes) and that the poem’s representation of a son being buried by his father does not correspond with actual events. Ira was, in fact, discharged from service due to disability the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1862 – a full three months before William’s death. However, (and as another alternative to Murray’s formulation) the possibility exists that “Arthur” was in fact Andrew – and that the census taker merely misrecorded the name. Andrew was born in 1849 and would only have been 13 years old at the time – young to be a private in the Volunteers, but not unheard of. If “Andrew Giggee” and “Arthur Giggee” are indeed the same person then the poem represents an almost complete reversal of the actual historical record – a 13 year old boy burying his 18 year old brother as opposed to an older father burying his son - it is compelling evidence of Whitman’s re-writing and erasure of historical facts as he translated events from the notebooks to the poetry to provide himself with the opportunity to mediate the reader’s experience of approaching and accessing a lost soldier.

One look I but gave, which your dear eyes return'd, with a look I shall never  
forget;

One touch of your hand to mine, O boy, reach'd up as you lay on the ground;

Then onward I sped in the battle, the even-contested battle;

Till late in the night reliev'd, to the place at last again I made my way;

Found you in death so cold, dear comrade – found your body, son of responding

kisses, (never again on earth responding;) (42)

Once again, the poem provides the reader with a kind of “last look.” Here, however, that look is so thinly described (as a “look I shall never forget”) that the face which imparts it and the character of the look itself are totally up to the reader to assign. Thus, once again, the reader is granted a kind of access to the final moments of life in which he or she is allowed to see that the dying soldier died willingly and well. Perhaps as important, if not more so, is what the reader is allowed to witness as the poem draws to its close. Here, the speaker, with the reader once again in imaginative tow, returns to the body of the deceased and enacts the burial:

[A]t latest lingering of the night, indeed just as the dawn appear'd,

My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop'd well his form [...]

And there and then, and bathed by the rising sun, my son in his grave, in his rude

dug grave I deposited[....]

[B]uried him where he fell. (42)

In this final section, the poem not only provides readers with the opportunity to see that a loved one died a “Good Death,” it offers them the consolation of being virtual witnesses to the funeral. By inviting such access, the poem is primed to effectively provide the bereaved with information and accounts that can console them and arguably foster successful mourning.

Whitman's invitation to use his text as a window through which to approach a soldier of intimate concern is perhaps most overtly and easily seen in his poem "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim." It is also here that he invites readers to see their soldiers as the "divine" individuals that, in death, they have apparently become. This poem is drawn directly from Whitman's own experience when visiting his brother George in Virginia. In his notebook he records, "Sight at daybreak (in camp in front of the hospital tent) on a stretcher, three dead men lying, each with a blanket spread over him – I lift up one and look at the young man's face, calm and yellow. 'tis strange! (Young man: I think this face of yours the face of my dead Christ!)" (NUPM 2:513). In the poem, unlike the notebook, Whitman depicts his speaker examining the bodies of all three men, which he describes in turn as "elderly...so gaunt and grim, with well-gray'd hair," a "sweet boy, with cheeks yet blooming," and finally "the third – a face nor child, nor old, very calm, as of beautiful yellow-white ivory." Speaking of this last soldier specifically, Whitman goes on to say, "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" (46). Whitman's notebooks indicate that he only looked at one of the individuals, but in the poem he represents three – each of these drawing from a different age group while remaining largely vague as to other markers of individuality. In this one image Whitman presents a trio of soldiers capable of representing almost any common soldier who fought in the Civil War – attempting to pen a visual synecdoche of the "rank and file" itself.

Having cast his net almost as widely as he can and made room for readers to identify at least one of these men as *their* soldier, he moves from one to another lifting their blankets to gaze upon them, asking the question "Who are you?" In doing so, he prompts his readers to supply the information – the identity – that the speaker cannot. In accepting such an invitation, the reader finds himself or herself imaginatively in the presence of a loved one once again. But it is at this point that

Whitman translates the deceased soldiers into (or at the very least associates them with) the “dead Christ,” the most powerful and widely understood embodiment of the ideas of resurrection, eternal life, and continued existence available to nineteenth-century American readers. Through his use of Christic imagery, Whitman thus suggests to his readers that the death of their loved ones is a moment of transition at best, and that eternal life and perpetual association is assured. Such imagery by virtue of its visual and ideological characteristics was primed to help readers find consolation – ameliorating their grief through the suggestions that their loved one now enjoyed a divine, immortal existence not unlike Christ himself.

As these poems suggest, Whitman was working diligently to translate his notebook’s representations of actual soldiers into soldier images that could stand in for virtually any soldier lost in the war.<sup>15</sup> In each of these scenes and many others like them, the collaboration of the author’s poetic persona, the generally ambiguous descriptions employed, and the readers’ imaginations allow such readers to experience those things they would otherwise have no access to. They “see” the wounds, “share” the last smile, “witness” the death and burial, and are led to “envision” a loved one’s perpetual worth and existence. Through this interaction, loss is acknowledged, and the desire

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<sup>15</sup> Both “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim” and “March in the Ranks Hard Press’d and the Road Unknown,” are in some ways even more remarkable because, despite my broader claims here, they are two poems in which Whitman actually limits the ability of a reader to assign an identity to the primary soldier depicted therein by giving him a characteristic that is generally absent in other poems. In both of these poems, Whitman makes mention of the dying or dead soldier’s race. In “March in the Ranks Hard Press’d and the Road Unknown” Whitman describes the soldier as “a lad” with a face as “white as a lily,” marking him as Caucasian. And in “A Sight in the Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim” he describes the face of the slain Christ-soldier as resembling “yellow-white ivory” – perhaps olive-skinned, perhaps lighter. Still, many of his other poems such as “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night,” “The Wound Dresser,” and “Dirge for Two Veterans,” generally refrain from making mention of race. There are a few exceptions to this. Of the approximately six soldiers Whitman depicts in “The Wound Dresser,” only one is described as having a “pale” face (one dying boy is also described as being “yellow-blue” in hue, and the rest have no racial qualities assigned). There are also a few poems where Whitman makes passing mention of soldiers having “brown” faces, as well – a fascinating characterization that could easily signify either the tanned face of a white individual or the skin tone of an African-American soldier. In “Cavalry Crossing a Ford,” Whitman describes “brown-faced men” that “rest on the saddles,” and in the poem “Drum Taps” he claims to “love” a group of soldiers with “brown faces” that he sees marching by. Despite these mentions, most of which are brief and passing, Whitman’s general practice was to refrain from mentioning the race of the soldiers he depicted in *Drum-Taps*. This may have been a conscious choice on Whitman’s part or perhaps the ironic result of a racial imagination in which virtually all soldiers were white and therefore skin color was generally taken for granted. Either way, Whitman’s project of allowing readers to assign identity to those soldiers inhabiting the poems was generally broadened by the exclusion of this detail.

to touch, hold, and recover the dead is imaginatively realized. As such, this text became a talisman of sorts, providing the bereaved with an opportunity to mourn as they knew how.

### ***The Body of the Book***

Whitman did not limit his attempts to reconnect a bereaved public with its lost loved ones to poetic images alone. Rather, he designed a book that materially suggests itself as the much longed for physical trace of a soldier whose body might otherwise have been annihilated in the chaos of war. Whitman himself had experienced firsthand the power of such traces. According to Whitman, it was as much the physical traces of the soldiers he ministered to, the “blood-stain[s]” he said marked the notebooks’ pages, as it was the words jotted down, that turned these notebooks into “a special history...full of associations never to be possibly said or sung” – a history of associations which evoked “undreamed of depths of emotion” (“Memoranda” 3).

Recognizing the power that a soldier’s war-drawn blood had to re-limn such associations, Whitman sought to translate these “blood-stain[s]” into his poetic text just as he had the soldiers’ experiences. It was an effort Whitman openly testified to in “Lo! Victress on the Peaks!” where he claimed that in *Drum-Taps* it was not only “poem[s] proud I, chanting, bring to thee” but “a little book, containing...blood-dripping wounds” (23). Certainly the physical book *Drum-Taps*, which was designed by Whitman personally, seems just as “blood-stain[ed]” if not more so than Whitman’s notebooks were. The first binding of *Drum-Taps*, for example, was brownish-red, approximating the color of dried blood. Furthermore, it was circumscribed on the front and back covers with long rectangular double rules. In its proportions, double-ruled as it was, the volume resembles the rectangular-shaped plain-deal coffins in which soldiers were buried. And with its poetic contents constituting a whole host of images which could stand in for the reader’s lost soldier, the book’s binding suggests Whitman attempting to give the blood-soaked body of the soldier back to a loving reader in a container customarily reserved for the dead. Whitman only had a few copies



bound with this cover, changing it in the larger second run to a dark, blood red, and then gilding the edges of its pages in a deep crimson, as if to make holding the book suggestive of holding the body of a Civil War soldier, marked by “blood-dripping wounds” (fig. 1).

Like the binding, the visual ornaments and typography in the book’s interior evoke a sense that this book is offered as a stand-in for the material body of a soldier otherwise lost to the sphere of war. Throughout his initial printing of *Drum-Taps*, Whitman employed a set of typographical ornaments that, like the rank insignias and uniform decorations of the time period, are a curious mixture between sharp-lined spear-like ornaments and wavy, vine-like ivies (fig. 2). Resembling chevrons of rank, as well as the striping and ivy clusters that might adorn the vests and caps of the volunteers and enlisted men, these ornaments again suggest that in its typographical construction, Whitman was seeking to make the material text evoke or represent physical attributes associated with the Civil War’s soldiers.

However, even more significant than these ornaments is what Whitman selects to follow them in the book’s second section where he binds in the *Sequel to Drum-Taps* poems. In a kind of visual narrative played out through the type itself, Whitman replaces his militaristic ornaments with ones resembling sawn logs and elegantly spiraling twigs. These twigs, not insignificantly, appear to be uncurling, a motion which suggests emerging life (fig. 3). The shift from ornaments that are militaristic to ones that resemble trees and tendrils visually reminds readers that the bodies of their soldiers are the “leaven” – to invoke a term Whitman favored – that enriches the earth and results in the growth of new life and in particular new plants. Such plants would have included the trees or cotton bushes which grew from the woods and fields where the Civil War was fought and from which pulp and paper would have been made – the very paper upon which such as book as his might

be printed.<sup>16</sup> Thus, through its ornamentation, its binding, and in the substance of the very paper itself, Whitman suggests the radical possibility that the reader might finally hold the much desired material “trace” of a loved one otherwise lost to war.

Whitman’s desire to leave his readers with such a trace was urgently felt in the moments immediately following the Civil War, and the editions of *Drum-Taps* produced in 1865 and 1866 testify to this both poetically and physically. But even as the immediate aftermath of the war waned and Whitman began the work of folding *Drum-Taps* into *Leaves of Grass*, a practice he would repeat with virtually all of his poetry, he still sought ways to perpetuate the sense that these poems were a means for readers to access their dead. In the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman bound *Drum-Taps* into the volume after the conclusion of the *Leaves of Grass* poems, sacrificing the original cover, blood-red and double-ruled, for a rather unremarkable (but arguably more affordable) one. However, the textual ornamentations and suggestive typefaces in *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum-Taps* remained the same.<sup>17</sup> Fittingly, he also “introduced” the *Drum-Taps* cluster of this volume with “Now Lift Me Close” – a haunting lyric that also serves as the coda to the *Leaves of Grass* poems. It is a poem which once again primes the reader to think of the book they hold in their hands as a trace of the dead when it claims “Now lift me close to your face till I whisper, / What you are holding is in reality no book, nor part of a book; / It is a man, flush’d and full-blooded—it is I.../ take from my lips this kiss; / ...I give it especially to you; / ....And I hope we shall meet again” (338). “Now Lift Me Close” serves as a parting farewell to the reader of the

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<sup>16</sup> It is a process he overtly invites them to think about in another of the *Drum-Taps* poems, “Pensive on her Dead Gazing I heard the Mother of All,” where the Earth is charged to “absorb” the “young men’s beautiful bodies,” turning them into the “essences of soil and growth” with their “blood, trickling, redden’d;” soaking the “grass” and “trees, down in your roots.” As their bodies are translated into the natural flora of the war’s battlefields, these young men are essentially “[held] in trust...[and] faithfully back again give[n]” as the plants grow to fruition and become the resources that constitute the material of the book itself (“*Drum-Taps*” 71). Thus, not only in its images, but in its material construction, this text sought to mediate a sense of connectedness by inviting readers to imagine that their dead soldiers had, in some sense, been returned to them, translated into the poetry and the paper of the volume itself.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, Whitman was inserting the copies of *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum-Taps* that he had produced in 1865-66 but had not had bound into separate volumes.

*Leaves of Grass* poems, but it also serves to perpetuate Whitman's original design for *Drum-Taps*, inviting readers to see the book as a physical talisman imbued with the power to foster intimate interpersonal interaction between the reader and the deceased.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Reading Recovery***

Whitman's desire to produce a book whose images and physical construction provided nineteenth-century mourners with the trace and the end of life narrative that they needed in order to mourn effectively was, in part, driven by the fact that he knew that collaborative mourning held the power to anneal individuals across geographic, ideological, and partisan lines. Whitman recognized that if he could help individuals mourn, he might help move them along the "path to a new political order" (111). Whitman testifies to as much when he claims in his *Drum-Taps* poem "Over the Carnage Rose a Prophetic Voice," that by sharing an affective sympathy for each other a nation of readers could cohere into a group of "friends triune, / More precious to each other than all the riches of the earth" (49). Whitman questioned what the source of such an affective annealment would be in this poem, asking his reader, "Were you looking to be held together by the lawyers? / Or by an agreement on paper? Or by arms?," and supplies an answer in the last line where he denotes that which has the power to catalyze such an annealment will be none of these, "Nay – nor the world, nor any living thing, will so cohere" (50). If coherence is to materialize, he implies, it will come through the carnage that we mutually survey – on the battlefield or in the pages of his book – losses we mutually mourn as well.

Whitman, while working to aid his readers to effectively mourn, therefore also sought to bring them to a greater awareness of way their grief annealed them into a new affective U/union. His hope was that his readers would discover that "in [their] shared grief a personal and national bond" had emerged (Pollack 158). Whitman spoke overtly of this grief-inspired bond in postwar

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<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that not all copies of the 1867 contain *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum-Taps*. Ed Folsom has noted that copies exist that contain only one or the other, as well as copies that do not contain either (Folsom 28).

editions of *Leaves of Grass* where *Drum-Taps* is followed by “As I Sat Alone By Blue Ontario’s Shores” – a poem which reminds readers that a unified “America” is now “the offspring following the armies” and soldiers sacrificed ((1867) 5).<sup>19</sup> However, he urged this realization upon his readers even more powerfully and intimately in *Drum-Taps* poems like “Come Up From the Fields Father,” “Old Ireland,” and “Year that Trembled and Reeled Beneath Me.” In these poems, Whitman sought to make a reader aware that he or she was not alone in experiencing such profound grief. He showed them that others – an Ohio family, a Irish widow, and even Whitman himself – experienced war-born despair so intense as to drive them towards isolation and threaten to leave them, as so many had been left, inconsolable. Ironically, it was the expression of this state of inconsolability that nevertheless laid the groundwork for a sense of communion that held profound political import.

“Come Up From the Fields Father” serves as a good example. In the poem, a “just-grown” Ohio farm girl with “little sisters huddle[d] round” calls to her mother and father to come “to the front door” as she has just received “a letter from our Pete.” In a scene whose essentials were undoubtedly replayed countless times on doorsteps throughout the North and South, the “trembling” mother, fearing “something ominous,” seizes the letter, “open[s] the envelope quickly,” and while “all swims before her eyes” reads news in “a strange hand” – “*gun-shot wound in the breast, calvary skirmish, taken to hospital, / At present low, but will be better soon.*” Unfortunately, the letter is not written in Pete’s characteristic hand writing, and so the letter suggests the reality she later learns, which is that her “poor boy” will never be better, that “the only son is dead” (40). This

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<sup>19</sup> Whitman’s Civil War work, whether the *Drum-Taps* poems, poems like “As I Sat on Blue Ontario’s Shores,” or later prose work like *Memoranda During the War*, almost always served to remind readers of the political significance of these soldiers’ deaths. *Memoranda During the War* -- once again marked by the blood-red color and double rules of *Drum-Taps* --conceptualizes the loss of these soldiers as ensuring the “launch [of] The United States fairly forth...[now] leading the fleet of the Modern and Democratic, on the seas and voyages of the Future” (68). By way of note, *Memoranda During the War* would essentially be reprinted in *Specimen Days and Collect* – a volume which maintains a focus on the personal and political import of these soldiers’ sacrifices. *Specimen Days* doesn’t make use of the same suggestive binding style of *Drum-Taps* or *Memoranda During the War*, but it does feature an engraving on its spine of a butterfly sitting on Whitman’s finger – an image of metamorphosis and the interconnectedness between the natural world and the human individual that is not without resonance when thinking about how the soldiers are still present and accessible in the world around us.

scene itself would certainly have encouraged any reader who learned of the wounding or death of a loved soldier in a similar manner to recognize that his or her experience had been mirrored in the experiences of countless others. However, Whitman goes even further in his attempts to lead readers to understand that their grief actually forms the basis for a sense of community when he describes the mother's feelings of inconsolable sorrow and loss at the poem's end. The final stanza depicts the mother in deep mourning – “drest in black,” “her meals untouch'd,” “at night fitfully sleeping” – a bereaved mourner “longing with one deep longing” to “withdraw unnoticed – silent from life, escape and withdraw, / To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son” (40). Whitman's depiction of a grief so intense as to spur the one feeling it to withdraw and isolate herself from society nevertheless ironically creates the conditions for the emergence of a broader sense of community and connectedness, for it suggests to readers currently experiencing a similar grief that they share a kind of affective kinship with another who feels as they do. In short, such a poem effectively testifies to readers that they are not alone in this experience, the feelings of despair and sorrow that have accompanied their loss affectively unite them with others who feel similarly and form the basis for a sense of community among the otherwise inconsolable.

While many of Whitman's poems employed anonymous soldier-images in order to suggest to readers that this book can stand in as a “trace” of the beloved deceased and grant imagined access to them, the level of specificity in a poem like “Come Up From the Fields Father” nevertheless furthers the emotional and political work of the volume by encouraging a reader to recognize that his experience of loss and despair ties him to a broader community. It is a community truly national in scope, stretching from the reader's site of reading to the farming communities of the Ohio valley – or, if reading “Old Ireland,” to the Irish enclaves of either the North or the South where some “ancient sorrowful mother” mourns “the heir, the son you love,” or if reading “Year That Trembled and Reel'd Beneath Me” to the streets of Washington where “a thick gloom” apparently falls over

the bereaved poet himself, drawing him to “chant...cold dirges” or funeral songs, and “sullen hymns” of sorrow and “defeat” (66, 54). At the same time that the text worked to provide readers with the very “traces” that they needed in order to tie themselves to their dead, it also secured a sense of affective community for the bereaved. In doing so, this book held to potential to both assist in the process of mourning, and to suggest to readers, Northerners and Southerners alike, that they were now bound together in a social body of shared grief.

While actual readers responses to *Drum-Taps* are rather scarce, there are responses that indicate that the larger text functioned as a means to assist the bereaved – aiding them in their process of mourning and, at least in one compelling instance, uniting individuals across the partisan lines drawn by the Civil War. A reviewer writing in *The Radical* in April 1866 picked up on the idea that the text allows readers a kind of physical proximity to the soldiers of the war while affording them a sympathetic friend, as through the “the soft and sweet strains of sublime tenderness” found in the poem, they “walk with him through some of the hospitals” (“Walt” 311). William Dean Howells, writing in *The Round Table* for November 11th, 1865, forewarned readers that the volume would engage them emotionally, and that they should be prepared for “Woman’s tears [to] creep unconsciously to the eyes” (Howells 10). Finally, a review by John Burroughs appearing in *The Galaxy* in 1866 claimed that in *Drum-Taps* a reader is “not drawn to the army as a unit – as a tremendous power wielded by a single will, but to the private soldier, the man in the ranks, from the farm, the shop, the mill, the mine.” For him, “[T]he end contemplated by the poet...[is to raise] that exalted condition of the sentiments at the presence of death. . . [where] the mere facts or statistics of the matter are lost sight of” (Burroughs 612). For Burroughs, and arguably for Howells and the reviewer in *The Radical* as well, the volume countered the war’s tendency to reduce these men to mere casualties, engendering a kind of redemptive communion between the reader, the text, the author and the lost soldier. In each of these reviews, the poetry is

represented as making recuperative connections, bringing readers into mental proximity with otherwise inaccessible soldiers. They point collectively towards the book's potential to mediate the type of frenzied grief and pain experienced at the complete loss of loved ones – the access to the dead working to inspire, in Burroughs words, that more “exalted condition of the sentiments” reached when the reader is, perhaps, with a loved one “at the presence of death.”

Similarly, a piece of correspondence Whitman received demonstrates his poetry's ability to unite individuals across partisan lines. For the writer of this letter, “Theresa Brown” of “Waco, Texas,” Whitman's volume of Civil War poetry fostered not only a strong sense of connection to her husband, a Confederate soldier who died fighting in the war, but to Whitman as well. At first glance, the letter reads rather strangely, as Brown spends a significant amount of time talking about the poem that she has sent him. However, understanding this gesture in light of nineteenth-century conventions of mourning makes her actions and preoccupation far more understandable. She says:

“I have written sometimes what seemed poetry to me but when I tried to put it in regular harmonious order hoop it round like a barrel, as it were, the poetry was all chocked [sic] out and it fell flat and insipid from my hands. [My poem] is only a harmless conceit of a working woman . . . . My husband was a Southern soldier and is dead; it seems as if it would be a sort of satisfaction to me if I could think in my mind, ‘Walt Whitman has read my attempt at poetry.’ I do not believe you will misunderstand my sentiment. (Ceniza 238).

As this observation points out, what prompted Brown to write to Whitman was the fact that as a widow who had read his poetry and seemingly benefitted from the experience, she might satisfy herself – and perhaps her sense of obligation to him – by gifting him with a poem in return. As her early characterization of the poem and her final statement point out, Brown labored under no suspicions that she was indeed a talented poetess hoping for an established literary persona's notice;

rather, she envisioned herself in an economy of sentimental exchange which she felt sure Whitman would “understand” because it was one he had commenced.

This sentimental economy, revolving around the exchange of poetry and thoughts of the dead, was a staple practice of nineteenth-century mourning, and the “give and take, the circulation of affections” concretized in the gifting of mourning poems was a common means of “structur[ing] a collaboration through which individuals join together in solving the seemingly local problem of grief in the face of death” (Kete 3). Moreover, such exchange results in “the conversion [of an individual] from the isolated, dysfunctional ‘one’ or ‘I’ [who mourns], into a ‘we’ able to act on and promote communal interests” (Kete 54). In other words, the exchange of poetry constitutes not only an acknowledgement of the ability of Whitman’s poetry to aid Brown in the process of coping with grief, but it points to the promise such poetry had for sympathetically uniting individuals across political divides. As such, their affective union models the potential that Whitman’s text had for invoking a shared sense of suffering, and for engendering a collaborative mourning of the dead which itself held the potential to heal individuals *and* the national social body. By mourning together, Whitman seemed to promise, we can find ourselves not only reconnected to the dead we have lost, but we can see ourselves as part of a larger collective whose citizenry is now affectively annealed through the shared pain of grief.

### ***Conclusion***

The extravagant death-toll and thwarting of mourning conventions caused by the Civil War left many Americans desperate for a way to reconnect with their dead. Whitman actively sought to provide a grieving Civil War public with the means to do so. By lacing his text with a vast array of anonymous soldier images, Whitman invited his readers to invest those images with the identities of the soldiers they had lost. These anonymous soldier images haunt the poetic landscape of *Drum-Taps* – always drawing close or being drawn close to, but never given a voice with which to tell



their story or assert their identity. They are, in this sense, the “phantoms” that Whitman speaks of in “Hymn of Dead Soldiers,” where he writes, “I chant this chant of my silent soul, in the name of all dead soldiers. / Faces so pale, with wondrous eyes, very dear, gather closer yet; / *Draw close, but speak not.* / Phantoms, welcome, divine and tender!” (59). By embodying his text with such phantom images Whitman provided his readership with an opportunity to see their own soldiers within a text that provided them with both end of life narratives and a sense of ongoing intimate communion. It was a sense aided by the text’s physical construction – it’s binding, typography, and visual ornamentation – all of which suggested the text be seen as that all-important physical trace so crucial for successful mourning.

Like Bowditch’s memorial volume, which sought to represent the life and identity of his beloved Civil War soldier, Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* thus represents an important poetic intervention in the damage caused by civil war – an intervention in which Whitman sought to provide a means through which individual mourners could access the deceased that mattered most to them, and in the process gain respite from their grief. Carried in a jacket pocket, “beneath your clothing” next to the “throbs of your heart,” or resting in a parlor near the mourning portraits, samplers, and quilts representing other deceased family members, this little volume was meant to be a material means of fostering a sense of perpetual connection with a soldier sent off to but never returned from war (*Leaves* 346). Undoubtedly, Whitman hoped such recuperative connections might be multiplied as readers were drawn to consider that their sense of grief was shared by countless other individuals in a bereaved U/union. Like the rest of the mourning objects that proliferated during the time period, this book was, as Whitman said, “unprecedentedly sad,” but at the same time “truly also...[it] has clear notes of faith and triumph,” for it was designed in hopes of re-lin[ing] important bonds. Bonds affectively reuniting not only the living and the dead, but the grief-stricken and otherwise shattered body-politic of the very nation itself (Miller 109).

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