

Inscription  
For the Slain  
At Fredericksburgh.

A glory lights an earnest end;  
In jubilee the patriot ghosts ascend.  
Transfigured at the rapturous height  
Of their passionate feat of arms,  
Death to the hour's a steady night, —  
Strown their vale of death with palms.

Herman Melville

"Inscription for the Slain At Fredericksburgh," by Herman Melville, as the poem appears in *Autograph Leaves of Our Country's Authors* (1864).

**The Battle of Fredericksburg Revised:  
Whitman's and Melville's Poems in Draft and Final Form**

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In late 1862, Walt Whitman rushed to Virginia from his home in Brooklyn, New York, when an early casualty report indicated that his brother George had been wounded in the Battle of Fredericksburg.<sup>1</sup> Once Whitman arrived in Falmouth, Virginia, where the Union army had retreated following its disastrous defeat, he was relieved to find his brother alive and well, recovering smoothly from a gash through the cheek. But the intense suffering Whitman witnessed in field hospitals, the lurid sights he encountered around the Union camp, and the battle accounts he heard from his brother and others profoundly shocked him. In a poem titled "A battle," that he wrote in his journal, he laments, "O the hideous damned hell of war." But the line does not appear in the radically revised version of the poem that Whitman published soon after the Civil War.

Early in 1864, Herman Melville was one of a number of Northern writers solicited to contribute to *Autograph Leaves of Our Country's Authors*, a volume of literary texts intended to raise funds for the United States Sanitary Commission. Obliging, Melville

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<sup>1</sup> On December 16, 1862 the *New York Herald* published a list of casualties that included the name, "First Lieutenant G. W. Whitmore." Acting on the assumption that "Whitmore" was a misprint for "Whitman," Walt Whitman departed the same day to locate his brother. Jerome Loving, ed., *Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1975), 75.

sent in a short poem, “Inscription for the Slain at Fredericksburgh.” But he soon regretted it. He asked the volume’s editor to publish, instead, a revised draft of the poem. If the new draft could not be published, Melville wished the poem to be suppressed entirely. Yet, the changes are seemingly minor, involving a word substitution in the title, a new word added to the first line, the change of the spelling of a word in the final line, and a few alterations of punctuation and indentation.

Both Whitman’s and Melville’s poems about the Battle of Fredericksburg thus exist in draft and final form. What do their revisions – small or large – reveal? How did Whitman and Melville write, and rewrite, the Fredericksburg debacle?

Critical to answering these questions is understanding what transpired at Fredericksburg and what the two writers knew of the battle. As this essay will suggest, the differences between the draft (or “draught,” in Melville’s spelling) versions and final versions of the works reveal how Whitman and Melville wrote both within and without the accepted boundaries of Civil War poetry. In each instance, the writer carefully measured how much of the horror of war to deliver to his readers. And in the Battle of Fredericksburg, there was horror aplenty.

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Our recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have sparked no popular songs or filled our newspapers with verse. But in the age before newspaper-photography, newsreels, radio, television, and internet, the couplet, quatrain, and octet held great sway. Before turning to the Fredericksburg poems, it is helpful to consider the place and popularity of Civil War poetry during the 1860s.

It is hard for modern readers to understand the centrality and importance of Civil War poetry. Who among us has sent an unsolicited poem to *The New York Times* or *Richmond Times Dispatch*? Yet unsolicited poems flooded into the newspapers of the Civil War era. Poetry held a degree of near universal popularity that is hard for modern readers to understand. And popular wartime writers drew on a shared vocabulary of highly sentimentalized and conventionalized expressions of pain, sorrow, and sacrifice.

Soldiers marched gallantly into the fray. They fell as brave heroes. They were buried in tidy graves and remembered as valiant martyrs. In popular war poetry, the conflict was presented in terms that admitted no moral ambiguity, no cynicism, no doubt. Whether written by a Northerner or Southerner, the verse of the era made clear that God was on “our” side. The cause of righteousness was being served.

The poetry of the Civil War served to allay the fears and doubts of those left at home and of those who headed off to battle. Writers painted an image of war that was at once orderly, inspiring, and embellished. They imparted profound meaning to each death, each family’s sacrifice. In popular Civil War poetry, all men are given good deaths and allowed to speak fine final words. No men are disemboweled, shot in the genitals, or otherwise immodestly mangled. No men suffer alone in agony on the battlefield or in the field hospital.

Put simply, poetry helped the Civil War generation to define the meaning of the war, the meaning of sacrifice, and the meaning even of death. It was not simply a cultural indulgence. Poetry was central to the war endeavor in a way that we – more than a dozen years into America’s longest war and still without a battle anthem – can little comprehend.

When Whitman first arrived in Falmouth, even before he located his brother, he encountered “a heap of feet, legs, arms, and human fragments, cut, bloody, black and blue, swelled and sickening” that lay bleakly in front of an improvised field hospital.<sup>2</sup> As he later assessed, the pile would have made “a full load for a one-horse cart.”<sup>3</sup> It is a scene that lays bare the awful consequences of the war. And it is a scene not all that unlike one that appears in the recent Steven Spielberg film *Lincoln*. Home from Harvard and eager to join the army, Robert Lincoln, the president’s oldest son, is aghast to see a wheelbarrow full of severed limbs unceremoniously dumped outside a military hospital.

However, no piles of severed limbs – whether by the cartful or barrowful – appear in the popular poetry of the Civil War. The era’s writers shared a common inclination to spare readers the worst aspects of the conflict. Through a tacit understanding, they avoided depicting scenes of gore and instead presented scenes of determination, resilience, and glory. Indeed, the fact that a barrowful of gore made it into Mr. Spielberg’s film but not into the popular literature of the war era speaks volumes to how the aesthetic sensibility of the Civil War generation differs from our own.

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Given the poetic sensibilities of their day, how did Melville and Whitman write about the Battle of Fredericksburg for a popular audience? How did they translate what transpired on that battlefield – an unmitigated disaster for the Union – into verse?

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<sup>2</sup> From Walt Whitman’s diary entry of December 22, 1862. Charles I. Glicksberg, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War: A Collection of Original Articles and Manuscripts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933), 69-70. Whitman also wrote, in a letter to his mother dated December 29, 1862, “One of the first things that met my eyes in camp, was a heap of feet, arms, legs, &c. under a tree in front of a hospital, the Lacy house.” Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University, 1961), vol 1, 59.

<sup>3</sup> Walt Whitman, *Memoranda During the War* (Camden, NJ: n. p., 1875), 5.

The poem that Melville submitted in early 1864 for the charity volume *Autograph Leaves of Our Country's Authors* is quite brief. Excluding the title – “Inscription for the Slain at Fredericksburgh” – it has fewer than forty words. Only six lines long, it reads in its entirety:

A glory lights an earnest end;  
In jubilee the patriot ghosts ascend.  
Transfigured at the rapturous height  
Of their passionate feat of arms,  
Death to the brave's a starry night, —  
Strown their vale of death with palms.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, Melville was adamant in his wish that this version of the poem not make it into print. As he explained in a letter to the volume's compiler, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Bliss. “In the hurry of despatching my Contribution the other day, I now find that I enclosed to you an uncorrected draught — in fact, the *wrong sheet*.” Melville included a new “right” version of the poem and asked Bliss to publish it instead of the earlier draft. “Or, if that be too late,” Melville wrote, “may I beg of you, by all means, to *suppress* the one you have.”<sup>5</sup>

Whether Melville actually sent a rough draft in error, or simply had second thoughts about his poem and invented an excuse to submit a revised version, he clearly was worried. If the poem could not be published in its “right” form, then he preferred that it not be published at all.

His letter to Bliss, however, was to no avail. The “wrong” draft of Melville's

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Bliss, ed. *Autograph Leaves of Our Country's Authors* (Baltimore: Cushings & Bailey, 1864), 189.

<sup>5</sup> The letter is dated March 22, 1864. Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth, vol. 14 of *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 389-390.

poem was published.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the poem appears in *Autograph Leaves of Our Country's Authors* in Melville's own handwriting, with his autograph beneath it. This is because the key selling point of *Autograph Leaves* was that it is a "fac-simile" volume. As the book's preface explains, "Here will be found pleasant specimens of Our Country's Authors generously and carefully furnished by themselves in the autograph manuscript of each."<sup>7</sup> In other words, each contribution – including Abraham Lincoln's "Address delivered at the dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg" – appears in a clear facsimile of the author's handwritten draft. Suffice it to say that, for sheer legibility, Lincoln's lines far surpass those of almost all other contributors.

Melville's own contribution, honoring the soldiers killed during the Battle of Fredericksburg, appears in his steady, certain script, centered on a single page toward the back of the volume. The title is underlined and divided across three lines. Otherwise, the work is compact. [INSERT IMAGE HERE]

What about this version of the poem did Melville find so "wrong" that he wished it suppressed? The changes between this "uncorrected draught" and the "right" draft involve only a couple of words and a few details of punctuation and indentation. Why did Melville attach such great importance to these changes? Perhaps, the key is to understand what transpired at Fredericksburg and what Melville – and Whitman, too – know of the awful Union defeat.

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Indisputably, the Battle of Fredericksburg was a terrible, and terribly

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<sup>6</sup> The poem was published as it appeared in the "uncorrected draught," although the title listed in the table of contents reflects one of Melville's changes. Melville, *Correspondence*, 390.

<sup>7</sup> Bliss, v.

demoralizing, defeat for the North. Lives were recklessly lost, and nothing was gained. Describing the battle in *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac* (1882), a former war correspondent for the *New York Times* recalled it as “a slaughter[,] the most bloody and the most useless of the war.”<sup>8</sup>

Fought in December, when temperatures dipped below freezing at night and soldiers on both sides longed to be in winter quarters, the battle was misguided from the start. President Lincoln had recently replaced General George B. McClellan with General Ambrose E. Burnside as the commander of the Army of the Potomac because of McClellan’s perceived over-cautiousness and failure to launch a fall campaign. Once at the head of the army, the self-doubting Burnside felt pressured to act. His plan was to catch General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia off-guard at Fredericksburg. But due to delays in the arrival of necessary pontoon bridges, which Burnside’s forces would use to cross the Rappahannock River from Falmouth to Fredericksburg, the Union fighters lost the element of surprise. Burnside decided to proceed anyway.

It took several days for the Army of the Potomac to cross the river and prepare for battle. On the morning of December 10<sup>th</sup>, the Union artillery bombarded the town of Fredericksburg. (George Whitman described it as “the most terrible Artillery firing [he] had ever heard.”)<sup>9</sup> Then, on December 11<sup>th</sup>, despite steady enemy fire, the army engineers finally built the pontoon bridges across the river, allowing Union forces to cross the Rappahannock and occupy the town of Fredericksburg. The fateful Battle of

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<sup>8</sup> William Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882), 255.

<sup>9</sup> Loving, 151

Fredericksburg was fought on December 13th.<sup>10</sup>

Burnside's plan, put simply, was to attack and break through Lee's forces, which were positioned behind the town of Fredericksburg, then to gain control of a new military road and march to Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy. However, the plan hinged on the Union forces successfully seizing the hills behind town, and on those heights Lee's forces had a formidably strong position. As the historian George C. Rable observes in his study of the battle, "Burnside seemed hell-bent on attacking the strongest defensive position Lee's army had ever held."<sup>11</sup>

The battle went disastrously for the Army of the Potomac. To the south of town, the Union fighters nearly exploited a weak spot in the Confederate lines, but they were eventually repulsed, due to a lack of reinforcements and a powerful counterattack. On the main battlefield, behind town, the Union fighters repeatedly made frontal assaults against the well entrenched Confederate position on the ridge of hills known as Marye's Heights, but none of the assaults succeeded even in reaching the stone wall that ran along the foot of the heights. Wave after wave of regiments marched forward across the open plain, and each was stopped by an intense combination of artillery and rifle fire.

The Battle of Fredericksburg demonstrated all too clearly that a massed, frontal attack across an open plain against a well-protected infantry and concentrated artillery was suicidal, due to the improved small arms and artillery of the Civil War era. It was a lesson, however, that Civil War generals both North and South were slow to learn.

Before the war ended, frontal assaults would be attempted and fail miserably at Malvern

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<sup>10</sup> The Second Battle of Fredericksburg was fought on May 3, 1863 but is not pertinent here.

<sup>11</sup> George C. Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!* (Chapel Hill: University Press of North Carolina, 2002), 171-172.

Hill, Gettysburg, Cold Harbor, Kennesaw Mountain, and elsewhere.

At Fredericksburg, certainly, the failure of one frontal assault did not prevent the attempt of another assault and another after that. As one Confederate colonel explained in his official report on the battle, “Six different times during the day did the enemy advance his heavily-reinforced columns, and each time was driven back with immense loss.”<sup>12</sup> Other participants offered more graphic accounts of the carnage. Confederate General James Longstreet, whose men played a key role in defending Marye’s Heights, later recollected, “The [Union] dead were piled sometimes three deep, and when morning broke, the spectacle that we saw upon the battle-field was one of the most distressing I ever witnessed.”<sup>13</sup>

Casualties in the attacking Union army outnumbered Confederate casualties by more than two to one. Over 12,500 Union fighters were killed, wounded, or captured. Many died outright during the attacks. Some were decapitated, dismembered, or blown to pieces by Confederate shells. Others were struck dead by bullets. Still others lay wounded on the battlefield and bled, froze, or were burned to death. For example, in *Four Years with the Army of the Potomac*, Régis de Trobriand describes a blaze that swept over the battlefield to the south of the town, as the fighting ended there. “[A] horrible thing happened on the very field of battle, where there were already horrors enough. The cannonade had set the high grass on fire at several points, and the flame, quickened by light currents of air, extended rapidly on all sides. Despairing cries were heard. They were the unfortunate wounded left lying on the ground and caught by the

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<sup>12</sup> The officer quoted is Colonel E. D. Hall. *Reports of the Operations of the Army of Northern Virginia* (Richmond: R. M Smith, 1864), vol. 1, 497.

<sup>13</sup> James Longstreet, “The Battle of Fredericksburg,” *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, vol. 32 (1886), 621.

flames.”<sup>14</sup> And then there were the men who made it off the Fredericksburg battlefield alive but who died of their wounds in hospitals during the days, weeks, and months that followed.

In the Northern lexicon, “Fredericksburg” quickly became synonymous with disaster. The battle led to a sense of defeatism in the North. Thousands of lives had been destroyed, and what had been gained? Tellingly, the entry for the battle in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Civil War* begins, “The battle of Fredericksburg on December 13, 1862, was a depressing defeat for the Union and one of the easiest victories ever won by General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia.”<sup>15</sup> Contemporary observers were even more blunt in their assessment. Barely a month after the Union failure at Fredericksburg, Walt Whitman scathingly described it as the “most complete piece of mismanagement perhaps ever yet known in the earth’s wars.”<sup>16</sup>

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Walt Whitman arrived at Falmouth, Virginia on December 19<sup>th</sup> and remained with the Army of the Potomac until December 28<sup>th</sup>, when he accompanied a trainload of wounded men being transferred to hospitals in Washington. During his time at the front, he explored the Union encampment, visited the improvised field hospitals around

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<sup>14</sup> Régis de Trobriand, *Four Years with the Army of the Potomac* (Boston: Ticknor and Co. 1889), 371.

<sup>15</sup> William L. Barney, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 134.

<sup>16</sup> From a letter to Thomas Jefferson Whitman, dated January 16, 1863. Whitman, *The Correspondence*, 68.

Falmouth, and shared a tent with his brother George and other officers of the 51<sup>st</sup> New York Infantry.<sup>17</sup>

Whitman saw for himself the aftermath of the battle. He saw men who had been shot, mangled, and maimed. He saw the bodies of men who had died in field hospitals. However, he did not see the battle itself or even a battlefield.

It was primarily through his brother, ten years his junior, and the other men of the 51<sup>st</sup> New York that Walt Whitman learned about the Battle of Fredericksburg. So, it is instructive to consider the experience of George Whitman and the 51<sup>st</sup> at Fredericksburg. The regiment's experience, on what the younger Whitman called "the front line of battle," well reflects the deadly and disastrous course of the fighting at Fredericksburg.<sup>18</sup>

In early December 1862, as winter weather set in and the soldiers struggled to keep warm, George Washington Whitman did not expect there would be a battle at all. A letter that he wrote to his mother less than a week before the Battle of Fredericksburg begins with the statement, "All is quiet along the Rappahannock."<sup>19</sup> No doubt, the line was intended to echo the title of the popular wartime song, "All Quiet on the Potomac Tonight." Although the song tells of a picket's lone death, George clearly meant his letter to be reassuring and to convey to his family his belief that no battle was imminent.

The Confederates held Fredericksburg on one side of the Rappahannock River. The Unionists occupied Falmouth on the other side. Even so, George Whitman did not

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<sup>17</sup> There are a number of scholarly studies that focus on Whitman during the war years, including Charles Glicksberg, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War* (1933), Walter Lowenfels, *Walt Whitman's Civil War* (1960), Roy Morris, *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War* (2001), and Ted Genoways, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War: America's Poet during the Lost Years of 1860-1862* (2009).

<sup>18</sup> Loving, 151

<sup>19</sup> From a letter dated December 8, 1862. Ibid, 73.

anticipate an armed confrontation. He wrote home, “[W]e are still lying here in Camp. The weather has been Cold here, for the last day or two, and this morning the ground is covered with snow. . . . I hardly think there will be a fight here at Fredericksburg, as we have orders to fix up our tents as though we were expected to stay here some time.” Moreover, he predicted that, even if a battle did take place, the Union soldiers would win it handily. “The rebels seem to be buisy, building breastworks, and prepareing for us, but I should think it would not be much trouble for us to drive them out of Fredericksburg if we went about it.”<sup>20</sup>

Instead, what George Whitman experienced, and what Walt Whitman surely heard about in great detail when he arrived in Falmouth less than a week after the battle, was a terrible Union defeat. George Whitman’s very next letter home, dated December 16<sup>th</sup>, sets forth the stark facts:

We have had another battle and I have come out safe and sound, although I had the side of my jaw slightly scraped with a peice of shell which burst at my feet. . . . The enemy were posted in an almost impregnable position on a raange of hills which they have covered with breastworks for Artillery and Rifle pitts for Infantry while between them and the Town from which we had to advance is an open plain swept on all parts by their guns and at the foot of the hills is a narrow creek, with a steep muddy bank on each side, over which it would be impossible to charge and as *they* were almost entirely protected by their breastworks you can imagine what an advantage they had over us. About 9 O clock in the morning our Regt was ordered to support a Battery. but it was in such an exposed position that they could not work the guns, and after looseing several men they were forced to haul off and we laid still until about 3 Oclock when we were ordered up to the front. Our whole Brigade formed in line and advanced beautifully over the plain and up to the bank of the creek, under a most terrible fire of Rifle balls, Cannister, and Shell, after getting to the edge of the creek we lay down and blazed away untill night[.] Other Brigades and Divissions followed us in and lay down behind us but we could get no further, and after dark the firing ceased and we all fell back to the Town . . .<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 73-74.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 75-76.

The letter well describes the Battle of Fredericksburg, as experienced by an infantryman who participated in one of the failed attacks on Marye's Heights. George Whitman's regiment "advanced beautifully over the plain," but the Confederate forces had an unbeatable "advantage."

George Whitman had volunteered at the start of the war, in April 1861, and had already weathered six battles and more than a dozen skirmishes with the 51<sup>st</sup> New York by December 1862.<sup>22</sup> Yet, what he experienced at Fredericksburg was uniquely awful. The exposed plain in front of Marye's Heights over which his regiment advanced "was entirely swept by the enemys guns." As he recorded in his diary, "[W]e received the most terrific fire of grape, cannister, percussion Shell musketry and everything else, that I ever saw."<sup>23</sup>

Although the barrage exceeded anything he had previously experienced, George Whitman acquitted himself honorably. Despite being wounded, when a percussion shell burst at his feet and a fragment cut a hole through his cheek, he remained on the battlefield until night fell and the attacks ended. In a report dated December 16th, the regiment's commanding officer, Colonel Robert B. Potter, wrote, "First Lieutenants Buckley and Whitman and Second Lieutenants Butler, Schoonmaker, and Keen were all wounded, and deserve mention for their excellent conduct."<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, George Whitman clearly found the battle harrowing, and he counted

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<sup>22</sup> Walt Whitman lists the battles, including Fredericksburg, in his notebook and concludes, "The 51<sup>st</sup> has been in *seven general engagements*, and *sixteen skirmishes*." Glicksberg, 64-67.

<sup>23</sup> Loving, 151-152.

<sup>24</sup> *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1888), series 1, vol. 21, 330.

himself “pretty lucky” to have survived it. In early January 1863, he admitted in a letter to his younger brother Thomas, “I had several pretty narrow chances that day.” As he further elaborated, “It was a mighty warm place we were into when I was hit, as the Rebs had a battery planted right in front of us and not more than 1000 yards distance, and they poured grape and cannister into us like the very devil. You see we had to advance over a level plane and their batteries being on high ground and they being behind breastworks we had no chance at them, while they could take as deliberate aim as a fellow would at a chicken.”<sup>25</sup>

After the major engagement ended on December 13<sup>th</sup>, Whitman and the other members of the 51<sup>st</sup> New York had used the cover of darkness to withdraw, but they had not seen the last of the battlefield. On the night of December 14<sup>th</sup>, the regiment was ordered to hold an extreme advance point on the line of attack that placed them, in George Whitman’s calculation, “within 200 ft of the enemys breastworks.”<sup>26</sup>

For thirty hours all the men remained thus, without anything to eat or drink and not allowed to sleep. Nor could they sit, stand, or even speak loudly. As Colonel Potter recounted in a letter to his wife, “We had to lie perfectly flat, as the enemy could depress their artillery sufficiently to rake every thing eighteen inches above the surface of the ground, and to raise a head or hand was sure to bring a pop from a concealed sharp-shooter.”<sup>27</sup> In more colorful language, George Whitman confided in his diary, “(I)t was devilish aggravating to a fellow to be obliged to lay there flat on the ground and hear the rebs moveing about behind their works talking and whistling and apparently enjoying

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<sup>25</sup> The letter is dated January 8, 1863. Loving, 78-79.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Moore, ed. *The Rebellion Record* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1863), vol. 6, 103.

themselves first rate, during the afternoon they amused themselves by firing at us with Artillery.”<sup>28</sup> As long as they lay flat against the ground, George Whitman and the others were safe from the solid shot, percussion shell, fuse shell, and charge of grape that the Confederates aimed at them, but the experience was emotionally and physically exhausting. Colonel Potter confided to his wife, “[A]fter three days and four nights continually under arms, and almost without sleep, [it] used up what little strength we had.”<sup>29</sup>

Fortunately for the men of George Whitman’s regiment, General Burnside was dissuaded on December 15<sup>th</sup> from renewing the assault upon Marye’s Heights. If Burnside had ordered the attack that day, the 51<sup>st</sup> New York, still holding its point at the extreme front of the line of attack, would certainly have been further decimated.

As it was, the 51<sup>st</sup> regiment sustained at least sixty-nine casualties at Fredericksburg. George Whitman explains in his diary, “We found that our loss was 63 men killed and wounded and 6 officers wounded.”<sup>30</sup> And Colonel Potter, elaborates in his official report of December 16<sup>th</sup>, “I took into action 16 officers and 280 enlisted men; 6 officers were wounded, 10 privates were killed, and 53 non-commissioned officers and privates wounded; 5 are missing, most of whom I fear should be reported among the list of casualties, as some of them were seen to fall.”<sup>31</sup> In total, of 296 men who marched into battle, only 222 walked out unscathed. As Potter calculated in the letter he wrote to his wife, “I thus lost exactly one quarter of my men.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Loving, 152.

<sup>29</sup> Moore, 103.

<sup>30</sup> Loving, 152.

<sup>31</sup> *The War of the Rebellion*, 330.

<sup>32</sup> Moore, 103.

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Walt Whitman learned in great detail about the Battle of Fredericksburg from his brother and the other officers and soldiers of the 51<sup>st</sup> New York, and he took notes in his journal. In fact, soon after he left Falmouth, he used his detailed notes to craft an article about the history of the regiment, “Our Brooklyn Boys in the War,” that appeared in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on January 5, 1863.<sup>33</sup>

Tellingly, Walt Whitman’s journal jottings about the Battle of Fredericksburg often closely echo the accounts of George Whitman and Colonel Potter. Describing the plight of the 51<sup>st</sup> when it was ordered back on to the battlefield on the night of December 14<sup>th</sup>, Walt Whitman records:

Any member of the regiment will recollect till his dying day the circumstances of this night and the following day . . . the regiment being on continuous duty in a most dangerous position about 27 hours. During the whole of that time, every one from the Colonel down was compelled to lie at full length on his back or belly in the mud, which was deep and tenacious. . . . [T]he moment the men raised their heads or limbs, even if only a few inches, snap & o-o-st went the weapons of Secesh.<sup>34</sup>

The words are Walt Whitman’s, but the details are all borrowed.

Whitman also made observations of his own during his nine days spent in the vicinity of Falmouth. Although he did not have access to the Fredericksburg battlefields, where most of the Union dead had been hastily buried during temporary burial truces on December 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, he was free to roam throughout the Union encampment on the opposite side of the river. There he encountered the horrors of the battle’s aftermath. He saw, soon after his arrival, the pile of amputated body parts outside a temporary hospital. He also saw corpses. One morning, he came across a burial detail digging

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<sup>33</sup> Loving, 81, fn. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Glicksberg, 72.

graves. He wrote in his diary, “Death is nothing here. As you step out in the morning from your tent to wash your face you see before you on a stretcher a shapeless extended object, and over it is thrown a dark grey blanket—it is the corpse of some wounded or sick soldier of the reg’t who died in the hospital tent during the night—perhaps there is a row of three or four of these corpses lying covered over.”<sup>35</sup> Another day, Whitman visited men from the 51<sup>st</sup> in a makeshift tent hospital. He recorded a couple of their names, along with a few details, in his notebook.

John Lowerie—Co G. 51<sup>st</sup> N. Y.—arm amputated—plucky—(trade machinist).

Amos H. Vliet—feet frozen—Hospital tent—51<sup>st</sup> N.Y.<sup>36</sup>

Although Walt Whitman did not see the battle or even the battlefield, he did see some of what he later called the “results of the battle.”

In *Memoranda During the War*, published in 1875, Whitman recalls his time at the front. He writes, using the raw immediacy of the present tense:

The results of the late battles are exhibited everywhere about here in thousands of cases, (hundreds die every day,) in the Camp, Brigade, and Division Hospitals. There are merely tents, and sometimes very poor ones, the wounded lying on the ground, lucky if their blankets are spread on layers of pine or hemlock twigs or small leaves. No cots; seldom even a mattress. It is pretty cold. The ground is frozen hard, and there is occasional snow.<sup>37</sup>

Though these sentences were crafted after the fact, they well summarize the sights Whitman encountered – and the intense suffering he witnessed – while near Falmouth.

Although the dead men that Whitman saw were not those who fell on the battlefield, they were, nonetheless, among the casualties of Fredericksburg. He departed

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 73-74.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>37</sup> Whitman, *Memoranda*, 6.

Falmouth with a far fuller comprehension of war, and the sad “results” it wrought, than he had when he arrived. He also left the front with the draft of a new poem in his journal. The title was “A battle.”

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The poem “A battle” fills four pages in the notebook that Whitman carried with him to Falmouth. It is an uncensored work filled with images and sentiments that would have been repugnant to contemporary readers. Rather than offer decorous descriptions of soldiers mortally wounded, deeply mourned, and tidily buried, Whitman writes of the shouts and curses of men in combat, of soldiers’ death spasms, and of the black and swollen bodies of the dead. What is more, he even dares to question the fundamental morality of the war.

Whitman’s lines offer an astonishingly graphic and gripping sensory tour of combat. On the first page of the poem, just below where he wrote the poem’s title, Whitman added “(Scenes, sounds, &c.)” In the course of the work that follows, Whitman masterfully evokes the sounds, sights, and smells of a battlefield and field hospital. The poem opens with an acoustic introduction to the weaponry of war.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The poem “A battle” appears in Whitman’s journal after his entry for December 26, 1862. However, the order in which Whitman meant the lines to be read is not entirely clear. He left notes such as “Tr. to beginning” and “tr. to back” in the margins, and some lines and words appear squeezed between, or to the side of, other lines. The poem is presented here in the order that my own study of the handwritten journal leads me to believe most accurately reflects Whitman’s intentions. Walt Whitman Papers, Thomas Biggs Harned Collection of the Papers of Walt Whitman, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. A printed version of the text, noting Whitman’s emendations, appears in Glicksberg, 121-123.

The opening of the fight, when the skirmishers begin, the irregular  
snap, snap  
The varied sounds of the different missiles—the short s-s-st of the  
rifled ball  
Of the shells exploding, leaving a small white cloud,  
The hum and buzz of the great shells,  
The hurtled grape, like the rushing whirr of the wind through the trees,  
burst like a fan  
The rattle of musketry from your own side never intermitted from the  
other side, the short th-h-t, th-h-t, th-h-t, which with irregular  
intervals between,  
The peculiar shriek of certain shells, — the thud of the round ball falling  
in the soft earth

Next, the focus shifts from the sounds of the musketry and artillery shells to the sounds of the men. Whitman catalogs a range of human noises, ecstatic to agonized, made by the soldiers and officers.

The shouts and curses of men—the orders from the officers, —  
The wild cry of a regiment charging—(the colonel leads with his  
unsheathed sword)  
The gaps cut by the enemy's batteries, (quickly fill'ed up, no delay,)  
The groans of the wounded, the sight of blood,  
Sometimes the curious lull for a few seconds, an awful quiet as firing on  
either side  
Then resumed again, the noise worse than ever,  
All of a sudden from one part of the line, a cheer for a fine movement[,]  
spirited attack or charge . . .

Then in the following section, Whitman continues his sensory tour of combat and focuses on the sights and scenes of the battle.

The wild excitement and delight infernal,  
The scene at the batteries—what crashing and smoking ! (how proud the  
men are at their pieces!)  
The chief gunner ranges and sights his piece, and selects a fuse of the  
right time,  
(After a shot see how he leans aside and looks eagerly off, to see the  
effect!)  
Then after the battle, what a scene!  
The wounded—the surgeons and ambulances—

Whitman also describes the appearance of the battlefield dead, and he uses none of the

lofty language so commonly found in Civil War verse.

The positions of the dead, some with arms raised, poised in the air,  
Some lying curl'd on the ground—the dead in every position  
One reach'd forward, with finger extended, pointing  
—one in the position of firing  
(Some of the dead, how soon they turn black in the face and swollen!)

Lastly, Whitman describes the smells and odors, as well as the sights and sounds, of a field hospital.

Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the  
odor of blood,  
The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms of soldiers! — the yard  
outside also fill'd,  
Some on the bare ground—some on planks or stretchers—some in the  
death-spasm,  
An occasional scream or cry—the doctor's shouted orders or calls.  
The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the flash of the  
torches,  
These I resume as here I chant—I see again the shadowy forms—I smell  
the odor.<sup>39</sup>

With these lines, the poem draws to a close. The sensory tour of the sounds, sights, and smells of the battle is complete.

Whitman had vicariously experienced the Battle of Fredericksburg through stories told by the men of the 51<sup>st</sup> New York, and on the pages of his journal, he put the battle into verse. His lines describe the confused, sensory-overwhelming reality of the battle, particularly as experienced by his brother and the other men of his regiment. Although, he does not name the fight as Fredericksburg, Whitman clearly modeled it on that contest and drew upon what he learned about the battle from his brother and others. The poem closely matches the experience of the 51<sup>st</sup> New York in its details. There is the regiment charging in an attack, led by the valiant colonel, and the “gaps cut” into their lines by the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

enemy's artillery. Also, there is the barrage of artillery that George Whitman described in his journal as a "terrific fire of grape, cannister, percussion Shell musketry and everything else."

In his poem, Whitman also passes moral judgment upon the battle, and more broadly, the Civil War. Significantly, there are six lines that appear midway through the work in which Whitman expands his description of a battle into a meditation on the immorality of the entire war.

O the hell, the hideous damned hell of war  
Were the preachers preaching of hell?  
O there is no hell more damned than this hell of war,  
O what is here? O my beautiful young men! O the beautiful hair, clotted!  
the faces!  
O my sick soul how the dead lie,  
Some lie on their backs with faces up & arms extended!

According to Whitman, the war is a "damned hell," but preachers sermonize otherwise. Revealingly, on the page of his journal, Whitman originally wrote the first line of this section as, "O the hell, the hideous horrid hell of war." Then, sacrificing the alliteration, he crossed out "horrid" and replaced it with "damned."<sup>40</sup>

There could be no more disturbing assertion that a Civil War poet could make than that the contest went against the ways and will of God. Men enlisted and fought, with the blessing of their clergy, and all trusted God to carry their troops to victory. Each side believed that it was fighting a righteous war and that God was on its side, and popular Civil War verse and song routinely assured the faithful that the war was divinely ordained. For example, Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* at the start of 1862 and fast became the unofficial

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Union anthem, proclaimed, “God is marching on.” And “The Battle Hymn” was sung with the memorable refrain,

Glory, glory, hallelujah!  
Glory, glory, hallelujah!  
Glory, glory, hallelujah!<sup>41</sup>

Going against this broad faith in God’s will, Whitman suggests in his poem that the soldiers and officers at Fredericksburg and elsewhere were not marching with God at their side.

In the original poem, Whitman’s message is unmistakable. He uses the war “hell” five times, and the word “damned” twice, in just three lines. Writing long before William Tecumseh Sherman became famous for stating, “War is hell,” Whitman had come to the same conclusion: “O the hell, the hideous damned hell of war.” It is a reading of the moral dimensions of the Civil War that would have been repugnant to contemporary readers.<sup>42</sup> But Whitman wrote “A battle” within the assured privacy of his journal. The version of the poem that he set before the reading public a few years later was quite different.

In late October 1865, Whitman self-published a revised version of the poem, along with fifty-odd other war poems, in a volume he titled *Drum-Taps*.<sup>43</sup> Included in the collection are upbeat recruiting poems – such as “Beat! Beat! Drums!” – and poems that express Whitman’s hope that the war would prove to be an ennobling and democratizing

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<sup>41</sup> Julia Ward Howe’s hymn was first published, minus its famous refrain, on the cover of *The Atlantic Monthly* in February 1862. Julia Ward Howe, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. IX (February 1862), no. LII, 10.

<sup>42</sup> In a speech delivered to Union veterans in August 1880, William Tecumseh Sherman said, “There is many a boy here today who looks on war as all glory, but boys, it is all hell.” His words became popularized as, “War is hell.”

<sup>43</sup> The first known announcement for *Drum-Taps* appeared in the *New York Tribune* on October 28, 1865.

experience. In “Rise O Days From Your Fathomless Deeps,” for example, Whitman describes the war as a fiery crucible forging American manhood,

I waited the bursting forth of the pent fire—on the water and air  
I waited long; □  
—But now I no longer wait—I am fully satisfied—I am glutted; □  
I have witness'd the true lighting—I have witness'd my cities electric; □  
I have lived to behold man burst forth, and warlike America rise.<sup>44</sup>

Not all poems in the volume presented as optimistic a reading of the Civil War.

Also included in *Drum-Taps* are works that present a grimmer, and occasionally far more graphic, view of the four years of battle. Whitman visited thousands of wounded and ill combatants, as a volunteer in Washington’s wartime hospitals, and in “The Dresser” he lays bare their suffering. The poem is set in a distant future in which an old man is asked about his war days. The veteran does not offer a classic account of “soldiers’ □perils or soldiers’ joys.” Instead, he recalls the anguish of the men whose wounds he dressed with “bandages, water and sponge,” and he describes them to his young listeners, as if he were nursing the suffering soldiers still.

□ The crush'd head I dress, (poor crazed hand, tear not the □bandage away;)  
The neck of the cavalry-man, with the bullet through and through, I  
examine; □  
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, □yet life struggles  
hard . . .

Likewise, the man attends to “the amputated hand,” “the perforated shoulder,” “the foot with the bullet wound” and the wound “with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive.”<sup>45</sup> This is the unseemly side of war, and the “The Dresser” reflects the extent to which the poems collected in *Drum-Taps* can be boldly realistic.

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<sup>44</sup> Walt Whitman, *Drum-Taps* (New York: n. p., 1865), 37.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-33.

However, there is nothing in *Drum-Taps* as raw and angry as the unrevised “A battle.”

Significantly, when Whitman revised “A battle” for publication, he completely excised the graphic lines about the war dead. So too, he cut the lines about the “hideous damned hell of war.” The version of the poem that appeared in *Drum-Taps* under the new title “The Veteran’s Vision” – and in postwar editions of *Leaves of Grass* as “The Artilleryman’s Vision” – conveys a sanitized image of combat.

The published poem is set, like “The Dresser,” long after the war’s end and is told from the perspective of a war veteran. In this case, the man is a veteran artilleryman. The opening lines of the poem place him in the cushioned comfort and assured safety of his matrimonial bed.

While my wife at my side lies slumbering, and the wars are over long,  
And my head on the pillow rests at home, and the mystic midnight passes,  
And through the stillness, through the dark, I hear, just hear, the breath of  
my infant,  
There in the room, as I wake from sleep, this vision presses upon me . . . <sup>46</sup>

The veteran sleeps with his a head on a pillow, instead of on the frozen ground. Yet, he is still haunted by the war. In the middle of the night, as his wife and child continue to sleep, he awakens and experiences a flashback.

Many of the sounds and sights of his “vision” are familiar from Whitman’s original version of “A battle,” although in the revised poem the visual and the auditory are more intermixed. The engagement commences, and the veteran plays the role of narrator.

The skirmishers begin—they crawl cautiously ahead— I hear the irregular  
snap! snap!

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<sup>46</sup> The version here is that of “The Veteran’s Vision,” as published in *Drum-Taps* (1865). Whitman later made small changes to the poem, including changing its title to “The Artilleryman’s Vision.” Ibid, 55.

I hear the sounds of the different missiles—the short *t-h-t! t-h-t!* of the  
 rifle balls;  
 I see the shells exploding, leaving small white clouds—I hear the great  
 shells shrieking as they pass;  
 The grape, like the hum and whirr of wind through the trees, (quick,  
 tumultuous, now the contest rages!)  
 All the scenes at the batteries themselves rise in detail before me again;  
 The crashing and smoking—the pride of the men in their pieces;  
 The chief gunner ranges and sights his piece, and selects a fuse of the right  
 time;  
 After firing, I see him lean aside, and look eagerly off to note the effect;  
 —Elsewhere I hear the cry of a regiment charging— (the young colonel  
 leads himself this time, with brandish'd sword;)  
 I see the gaps cut by the enemy's volleys, (quickly fill'd up—no delay;)  
 I breathe the suffocating smoke—then the flat clouds hover low,  
 concealing all;  
 Now a strange lull comes for a few seconds, not a shot fired on either side;  
 Then resumed, the chaos louder than ever, with eager calls, and orders of  
 officers;  
 While from some distant part of the field the wind wafts to my ears a  
 shout of applause, (some special success;)  
 And ever the sound of the cannon, far or near, (rousing, even in dreams, a  
 devilish exultation, and all the old mad joy, in the depths of my  
 soul;)  
 And ever the hastening of infantry shifting positions—batteries, cavalry,  
 moving hither and thither;  
 (The falling, dying, I heed not—the wounded, dripping and red, I heed  
 not—some to the rear are hobbling;)  
 Grime, heat, rush—aid-de-camps galloping by, or on a full run;  
 With the patter of small arms, the warning *s-s-t* of the rifles, (these in my  
 vision I hear or see,)  
 And bombs bursting in air, and at night the vari-color'd rockets.<sup>47</sup>

In this version of the poem, the Civil War battle has been assigned to the distant past.

The veteran is still haunted by the war, but he can no longer be harmed by it. But that is not all that has changed from the original work.

Whitman has rewritten the battle and rendered it less graphically disturbing.

Gone are the graphic lines about the corpses “black in the face and swollen.” Gone are the surgeons and ambulances and all mention of the field hospital, with its odors of blood

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 55-56.

and ether. Indeed, the veteran pointedly ignores the dead and the dying. Placing the suffering of the wounded and dying men in a parenthetical aside, Whitman writes, “(The falling, dying, I heed not – the wounded, dripping, and red, I heed not—some to the rear are hobbling;).”

Whitman also tones down his language in the published poem. Strikingly, the words “hell” and “damned” do not appear even once in the poem. Indeed, the block of six lines in which Whitman harshly condemns the immorality of the war is completely gone. The poem has been changed in other ways, too. The veteran hears “the cry of a regiment charging,” but gone are the “shouts and curses” of the original version.

By excising the most shocking words and lines from the original work, Whitman presented a more publicly acceptable image of combat. The published poem conforms far more nearly to the decorous boundaries of conventional Civil War poetry than does the original. But the specific experience of the 51<sup>st</sup> New York at the Battle of Fredericksburg is lost in the retelling. Most notably, the published poem focuses upon an artilleryman, not an infantryman like George Whitman.

The last line of the revised work deserves particular attention. To understand it is to understand the totality of the poem’s transformation. The line reads, “And bombs bursting in air, and at night the vari-color'd rockets.” With this line, Whitman adds two new items – bombs and rocket – to the long list of things seen and heard on the battlefield. But he also does much more.

The line directly echoes “The Star Spangled Banner,” which in Whitman’s day was a well-known, patriotic song. Francis Scott Key’s famous work, inspired by a battle of the War of 1812, tells us,

And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,  
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.<sup>48</sup>

By referencing the rockets and bombs of Key's song, Whitman implicitly ends his poem on a celebratory note: "Our flag was still there." Just as America won the War of 1812, the North won the Civil War.

In the poem that Whitman set before the public in October 1865 – six months after the war's conclusion – the disastrous defeat at Fredericksburg is rewritten as part of a larger narrative of patriotism and victory. The Union triumphed, if not at Fredericksburg then in the end. The star spangled banner yet waved.

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Herman Melville was far more removed from the Battle of Fredericksburg than Whitman. He never visited Fredericksburg or even Falmouth. In fact, he made his sole visit to the front in April 1864, the very same month that *Autograph Leaves of Our Country's Authors* went on sale at the Baltimore Sanitary Fair. Even so, by the time he drafted – and redrafted – his Fredericksburg poem, Melville must have been well informed about the fight.

At the time of the battle, Melville was living with his family in Pittsfield, Massachusetts and recovering from a recent accident. In early November, he had been forcefully thrown onto the street, when a horse hitched to his wagon spooked. As the local paper reported, he "was very seriously injured, having his shoulder blade broken and several ribs injured, and his whole system badly jarred." It was more than a month

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<sup>48</sup> Francis Scott Key's poem – originally titled "Defence of Fort McHenry" – had been set to music in the early nineteenth century and was made America's national anthem by an act of Congress in 1931. David Lehman, ed. *Oxford Book of American Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 19.

before he was able to walk or remove his left arm from a sling. At the time of the far off battle, Melville was still recovering, unable to dress himself and in pain.<sup>49</sup>

Despite his incapacitated state and distance from the battlefield, Melville would have soon heard about the Fredericksburg fiasco. Certainly, there were those among his neighbors who had an immediate interest in the battle. The local soldiers in the Tenth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, after all, were present at Fredericksburg.

Ultimately, over a hundred men from Pittsfield died in the Civil War, but the soldiers in the 10<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts were spared from grievous harm at the Battle of Fredericksburg.<sup>50</sup> The regiment – made up of recruits from Western Massachusetts, who were originally commanded by Colonel Henry Shaw Briggs of Pittsfield – was kept in reserve during the battle. As a regimental history later recorded, “A merciful fate decreed that the Tenth should have only a minor part in the terrible struggle.” Nonetheless, the men of the regiment were well aware of what transpired on the battlefield. In the words of the regimental history, “[T]he Tenth saw and heard, was ever ready, yet was not called in [on December 13<sup>th</sup>].” So, too, a haunting passage in 10<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts’ regimental history points to the futility of the battle, as well as the nobility of the Union fighters’ sacrifice.

Were our province the description of the battle in detail, pages would be devoted to . . . the immortal place won in American history on Marye’s Heights, up whose slopes brave men charged to certain death.

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<sup>49</sup> The accident is described in both Stanton Garner, *The Civil War World of Herman Melville* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 204-205 and Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), vol. 2, 522-524. The later of these works includes the quotation from *The Berkshire Eagle*. Melville’s recovery can also be chartered in his and his wife’s correspondence from the period. Melville, *Correspondence*, 380-383.

<sup>50</sup> Pittsfield’s Civil War monument, dedicated in 1872, lists 108 city residents who died in the war.

Although the men from Western Massachusetts were not in the fray, they were witnesses to it and conveyed information to those at home.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to local sources, Melville had access to accounts of the Battle of Fredericksburg that appeared in wartime publications. Among the periodicals and books Melville is known to have read during the war are *Harper's Weekly* and *The Rebellion Record*, a multivolume compendium of official reports, newspaper articles, poems, and other materials that documented the ongoing war. In fact, Melville eventually drew upon the newspaper articles gathered in *The Rebellion Record* for many of his Civil War poems.<sup>52</sup>

The volume of *The Rebellion Record* covering the Battle of Fredericksburg appeared in 1863 and includes assorted official reports, letters, and other texts about the battle, as well as four newspaper articles. Collectively, these four articles give a good sense of the public narrative that quickly took shape about the battle. As the articles makes clear, the Battle of Fredericksburg was described, right from the start, as a tragically doomed fight that entailed a reckless loss of life. For example, a lengthy

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<sup>51</sup> The men of the 10<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts were twice spared at Fredericksburg. When General Burnside planned to make a renewed attack on December 15th, they were “marched up to the front and were placed in the first line of battle.” But, ultimately, Burnside was dissuaded from making the suicidal assault, and the regiment served as the rear guard for the left wing of the retreating Union army, as the defeated Northerners fled Fredericksburg and re-crossed the Rappahannock River. Alfred S. Roe, *The Tenth Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1864: A Western Massachusetts Regiment* (Springfield, MA: Tenth Regiment Veteran Association, 1909), 22, 155, 157-159.

<sup>52</sup> Hershel Parker writes, “Melville had access all through the war to *Harper's Weekly*” and notes that “the volumes of the *Rebellion Record* . . . became Melville's source for many newspaper reports of battles.” Hershel Parker, *Published Poems: The Writings of Herman Melville* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 507.

account of the battle that ran in the Cincinnati *Commercial* with the dateline Falmouth, Dec. 17, 1862, describes the contest as follows.

The tenacity with which our troops maintained their hopeless attitude of an aggressive movement in the centre, in the face of a fire that seemed not only insupportable by flesh and blood, but positively annihilating, was worthy the deepest admiration, and can never be thought of by those who witnessed it, and knew how pitifully the precious lives and inestimable valor of our braves were squandered, without regrets as passionate as perhaps they are vain.<sup>53</sup>

As the same article makes clear, the selfless sacrifice of the Union troops had not achieved any larger goal. “The extent of the disaster is not yet fully known. It is known that we gained nothing—that all that we lost was thrown away. We did not take a battery or silence a gun. We did not reach the crest of the heights held by the enemy in a single place.”<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, two of the other articles reprinted in the *Rebellion Record* convey not only the facts but also the tragic dimensions of the fight. The London *Times*, while not generally sympathetic to the Northern cause, applauded the valiant sacrifice of the Northern fighters, while deploring the futile attacks in which their lives were lost.

That any mortal men could have carried the position before which they were wantonly sacrificed, defended as it was, it seems to me idle for a moment to believe. But the bodies which lie in dense masses within forty yards of the muzzles of Col. Walton’s guns are the best evidence [of] what manner of men they were who pressed on to death with the dauntlessness of a race which has gained glory on a thousand battlefields, and never more richly deserved it than at the foot of Marye’s Heights on the thirteenth day of December, 1862.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Moore, 100.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 100-101.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

Even the Southern press readily acknowledged the hopeless situation into which the Union fighters had been thrust. In the words of the Richmond *Enquirer*, reprinted in *The Rebellion Record*, “The Yankees had essayed a task which no army ever marshaled, or that ever will be organized, could have accomplished.”<sup>56</sup>

The fourth newspaper article in *The Rebellion Record*, from the Detroit *Free Press*, focuses on the Seventh Michigan Infantry Volunteers and concludes with a long list of the regiment’s casualties. The names of the thirty-four men who were killed, wounded, or missing in the battle appear, and for each of the wounded infantrymen, the article also includes a succinct description: “foot, badly,” “hand and arm,” “head slight,” “limb amputated,” “side, badly,” “abdomen” “lost a hand,” and so forth.<sup>57</sup> The list constitutes a grim reckoning of the lives lost, bodies damaged, and men missing in the battle.

Also among the other documents about the Battle of Fredericksburg gathered in *The Rebellion Record* is a report from the Sanitary Commission, the same charitable organization that Melville would contribute his poem to support. According to the report, the Sanitary Commission provided blankets, clothing, and other supplies to the wounded and sick men of the Army of the Potomac, following the battle. However, the report also acknowledges that the Sanitary Commission’s stock of stoves arrived at Falmouth minus stove-pipes, so the wounded and ill men suffered in unheated hospital tents.<sup>58</sup>

Coincidentally, among the materials reprinted in the *Rebellion Record* is also a letter about the Battle of Fredericksburg that Colonel Potter, the commanding officer of

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 91.

the 51<sup>st</sup> New York, had sent to his wife. Melville, thus, had access to a detailed description of the experience of the very same regiment in which Walt Whitman's brother served. Conceivably, Melville might even have had the 51<sup>st</sup> in mind, when writing his tribute to the dead of Fredericksburg. Perhaps, he was haunted by Colonel Potter's description of the regiment crossing an open plain "exposed to a plunging fire for near a quarter of a mile," during which every enemy gun seemed to be turned on them "in a perfect storm." Or, maybe, Melville recalled Potter's terse statement, "We left the dead on the field."<sup>59</sup> It certainly is intriguing to contemplate the possibility that both Whitman and Melville drew upon battle accounts from the very same regiment, when shaping their respective Fredericksburg poems.

In any case, for Northern readers of *The Rebellion Record*, there was no escaping the hard truths of the Battle of Fredericksburg. As a chaplain in the Army of the Potomac summed things up in a letter that appeared in the volume, "Our men made several desperate charges at an immense sacrifice, without success."<sup>60</sup>

Clearly, Melville had ample time and opportunity to learn from *The Rebellion Record* and elsewhere about what took place at Fredericksburg before he submitted his poem for publication in early 1864. But why did Melville write about the Battle of Fredericksburg at all?

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Why did Herman Melville submit for a fund-raising volume a poem about a disastrous Union defeat? To flip the question, why did he write about the Battle of Fredericksburg instead of a Union victory? He could, for example, have written about

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 102-103.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 93.

the Union triumphs at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, which both took place in the summer of 1863. They were more recent than the Battle of Fredericksburg, and on a visit to New York City, Melville even had witnessed a grand, public celebration of these twin victories.<sup>61</sup> Instead, Melville chose to remind readers of a demoralizing rout. Although it is impossible to know *why* Melville chose to write about Fredericksburg, on clear display in the rough and final drafts of his poem is *how* he chose to write about the battle.

Melville surely was well versed in the facts of Fredericksburg, as were his wartime readers, but the poem he crafted gives very little hint of what actually transpired on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1862. The lines do not rehearse any details of the battle. There are no waves of attack, no battlefield landmarks, or any individual officers or soldiers named. Melville's work is an "inscription" – such as would appear on a monument – for the men who killed at Fredericksburg. It is no chronicle of the contest in which the men died. Indeed, without the title, there would be no way to identify the specific battle.

Melville took the well-known facts of Fredericksburg and crafted an elegiac poem that makes no mention of them, and then he made a few small changes. The first change reflected in the revised draft of his poem appears in the title. The "uncorrected" version of the poem bears the title, "Inscription for the Slain at Fredericksburgh." In the revised version, the word "Slain" is replaced with "Dead." The second change appears in the poem's first line, where a single word is added. "A glory lights an earnest end," becomes, "A dreadful glory lights an earnest end." In addition to these two changes, Melville replaces "strown" with "strewn" at the start of the final line, favoring the more common variation of the word, and he makes a few alterations of punctuation and

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<sup>61</sup> Parker, *Published Poems*, 502.

indentation.<sup>62</sup> The revised poem reads:

Inscription  
For the Dead  
At Fredericksburgh.

A dreadful glory lights an earnest end;  
In jubilee the patriot ghosts ascend;  
Transfigured at the rapturous height  
Of their passionate feat of arms,  
Death to the brave's a starry night, —  
Strewn their vale of death with palms.<sup>63</sup>

Why did Melville attach such tremendous importance to these revisions? Why did he plead with the editor of *Autograph Leaves of Our Country's Authors* to suppress the poem entirely, rather than publish it in the original version?

Intriguingly, Melville's poem, in its original and revised drafts, overlaps significantly with Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in its use of Christian imagery and eschatology. First, there is the shared use of the word "glory." The word is frequently repeated in the hymn's refrain and also appears in Melville's first line. In both works, the word alludes to martial as well as heavenly glory. The single word melds the two concepts and reinforces the popular belief that, by fighting for battlefield glory, soldiers also were fighting for God's greater glory.

The imagery of transfiguration is also similar in the two works. Howe writes, "In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, / With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me."<sup>64</sup> Melville, in turn, presents the casualties of Fredericksburg as

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<sup>62</sup> In the sixth volume of the *Rebellion Record* (1863), for example, the word "strewn" appears ten times, whereas the word "strown" does not appear even once.

<sup>63</sup> Melville, *Correspondence*, 390.

<sup>64</sup> Howe, 10.

“transfigured” by glory. He writes they are, “Transfigured at the rapturous height / Of their passionate feat of arms.” Likewise, Melville’s use of the word “passionate” is interesting, as it evokes the Passion of Christ. In “Battle-Hymn” there appears the line, “As [Christ] died to make men holy, Let us die to make men free.” Melville seems to suggest that the soldiers who died at Fredericksburg are also martyrs. And continuing with his wordplay, Melville’s use of “rapturous” suggests “Rapture” and the Second Coming of Christ.

Other key words in Melville’s poem also seem to echo those in Howe’s work. There is, for example, his use of the word “jubilee,” which matches up with Howe’s “jubilant.” Melville writes, “In jubilee the patriot ghosts ascend.” Howe rhymes a line about God sitting in “His judgment-seat,” with the line, “Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!” Jubilee – with its connotation of emancipation and the freeing of Hebrew slaves – is thus referenced in both works and points to Northern abolitionism as a factor in the Civil War. The phrase “the brave” also appears in both works with only a slight difference. Howe writes that God is “Succor to the brave.” Melville writes, “Death to the brave’s a starry night.”

Given these overlaps, it seems that Melville intended to write an inspirational work, in the vein of Howe’s hymn. He presents the men who were slain in the battle as patriots who fought honorably and as good Christian soldiers and implicitly promises them a heavenly reward for their brave and “passionate feat of arms.”

However, the seemingly small revisions Melville made to the poem seem to reflect a shift in his intent. The substitution of “dead” for “slain” in the title ever so subtly changes the poem’s tone and meaning. “Slain” is borrowed from the flowery

lexicon of popular Civil War writers “Dead,” by contrast, is stark and factual. “Slain” also depends for its meaning on an enemy. In order for a soldier to be slain, there must be a slayer, a particular person who does the slaying. In opting for “dead” instead of “slain,” Melville seems to acknowledge a particular reality of the Battle of Fredericksburg. For the most part, there was no hand-to-hand combat. Rather, an anonymous hail of artillery and rifle fire killed most of the dead. It was, in this sense, a battle absent slayers.

Melville’s insertion of “dreadful” to modify “glory,” like the substitution of “dead” for “slain,” subtly alters the work and its representation of the Battle of Fredericksburg. With the added word, Melville further acknowledges what transpired during the fight. Although he introduces no specific details of the Union defeat, he reminds his readers that the battle was “dreadful.” The Union fighters won glory, but it was “a dreadful glory” because the battle was misguided and the men’s lives lost in vain.

Additionally, the phrase “dreadful glory” suggests God’s awesome and inscrutable power over human affairs. It is a pairing of words that can be found in numerous religious texts, hymns, and poems of the nineteenth century, as well as in assorted secular works. Like the phrase “terrible majesty,” also popular in the nineteenth century, “dreadful glory” is a reminder of the unknowable ways of God. Possibly, Melville invoked the phrase to offer his readers a measure of consolation for the tragic defeat. Only God in his “dreadful glory” comprehends the whys and wherefores of the universe.

The two versions of the poem show Melville caught in the act of editing his work. More precisely, the two drafts reveal him caught in the process of editing the Battle of Fredericksburg. Though seemingly minor, the changes he made to the poem’s title and

first line present a more realistic representation of the battle as well as a reminder of God's omnipotence and inscrutability.

Contrary to Melville's wishes, the "wrong" version of the poem was published in *Autograph Leaves of Our Country's Authors*, yet Melville did not rectify the error by publishing the "right" version when he had the opportunity to do so a few years later. In 1866, less than a year and half after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Melville published *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, a collection of seventy-one of his original Civil War poems, most of which he had written after the war's end. But he did not include in the volume either "Inscription for the Dead at Fredericksburgh" or "Inscription for the Slain at Fredericksburgh."<sup>65</sup> In fact, the work is the only one of his existent Civil War poems that does not appear in *Battle-Pieces*.

Instead, Melville included in *Battle-Pieces* a new "Inscription" about the Battle of Fredericksburg. That work, "Inscription for Marye's Heights, Fredericksburg," reads in its entirety:

To them who crossed the flood  
And climbed the hill, with eyes  
Upon the heavenly flag intent,  
And through the deathful tumult went  
Even unto death: to them this Stone—  
Erect, where they were overthrown—  
Of more than victory the monument.<sup>66</sup>

It is an interesting work, but it is very different from his first Fredericksburg poem. It focuses upon the men's actions in battle, rather than envisioning the ascension of their

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<sup>65</sup> Melville did, though, rework a line from the poem – "Death to the brave's a starry night" – and use it at the end of another poem, "Chattanooga," that appears in *Battle-Pieces*. There it appears as, "Life was to these a dream fulfilled, / And death a starry night." Herman Melville, *Battle-Pieces and Other Aspects of the War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1866), 92.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

ghosts to heaven, and it largely lacks the first poem's religious dimensions.

The new poem also takes liberties with the facts of Fredericksburg, by implying that the Union soldiers "climbed the hill" to Marye's Heights. In reality, the Union troops were cut down while attempting to reach the stone wall that ran along the base of the hills. Melville imagines his inscription for the Union dead erected on Marye's Heights, "where they were overthrown." But it was on the level plain, not the high ground of Marye's Heights held by entrenched Confederate forces, that the Union fighters died. Poetic license here trumps historical fact.

However, in other poems published in *Battle-Pieces*, Melville boldly writes about facts most Civil War poets preferred to ignore. Notably, he describes the corporality of the war dead. In a poem titled "Donelson," he describes "ice-glazed corpses, each a stone." In "The Armies of the Wilderness," Union soldiers encounter the remains of men who died the previous year. "In glades they meet skull after skull / Where pine-cones lay—the rusted gun, / Green shoes full of bones, the mouldering coat / And cuddled-up skeleton; / And scores of such." In another section of "The Armies of the Wilderness," Melville writes of a "Pillar of Smoke" that rose from the battlefield "ashy and red" and "brand-like with ghosts." These are not the patriot ghosts ascending to heaven "in jubilee" of his original Fredericksburg poem. Instead, these are the ghosts of men burned alive.<sup>67</sup>

Death by fire was not the stuff of popular war poetry, but it was a battlefield reality. Men had been burned alive at Fredericksburg, too. In *Battle-Pieces*, Melville exposed the unpleasant realities of war deaths, but he did not do so in "Inscription for

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 43, 101, 103.

Marye's Heights, Fredericksburg." That poem is even less suggestive of the battle's horrors – and more of a work of imaginative fantasy, with the Union troops summing Marye's Heights – than his original Fredericksburg poem.

Why did Melville substitute one set of verses about the Battle of Fredericksburg for another? "Inscription for the Slain at Fredericksburgh" is the only one of Melville's Civil War poems to have been published during the war years. So, too, the poem – in draft and revised versions – is the only one of his Civil War poems that can definitively be dated to the war years.<sup>68</sup> Why did Melville decide against including it in *Battle-Pieces*? His reasons for doing so are as unknowable as his reasons for writing, in the first place, about Fredericksburg for *Autograph Leaves of Our Country's Authors*.

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Whitman and Melville were separated by geography, personal experience, and poetic style. Whitman wrote the first version of his poem while visiting the Union army encampment near Falmouth, soon after the battle and soon before he took up residence in Washington, DC and the self-designated role of "wound-dresser." Melville wrote and revised his first Fredericksburg poem before he made his sole visit to the war front. Whitman's handwritten poem in his wartime journal stretches across multiple pages, all filled with his signature long-lined free verse. Melville's handwritten poem in *Autograph Leaves* is composed of just six lines of succinct, rhymed couplets, below which appears his signature in facsimile. Nonetheless, the two poets struggled with the same question. How to write about the disastrous Battle of Fredericksburg, given the conventions of

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<sup>68</sup> Stanton Garner states that "Inscription for the Slain at Fredericksburgh" is "the only one of [Melville's] war poems that was certainly composed in the midst of the long struggle." Garner, 215.

popular Civil War poetry?

In the end, they chose opposite courses. Writing in the privacy of his journal, Whitman recorded scenes of graphic horror and harshly condemned the entire war. Writing for a public audience in *Drum-Taps*, he was far more guarded. By contrast, Melville added to the revised draft of his poem, which he intended for publication, key words that draw attention to the tragic dimensions of the Union defeat.

On December 13, 1862 all was not quiet on the Rappahannock. Walt Whitman and Herman Melville both knew the key facts of Fredericksburg, but the poems they wrote and rewrote quite differently revised the battle.