

Stained with Blood: Idealism and Reality in Whitman's *Drum Taps*

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Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!  
 Make no parley—stop for no expostulation,  
 Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer,  
 Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,  
 Let not the child’s voice be heard, nor the mother’s entreaties,  
 Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearses,  
 So strong you thump O terrible drums—so loud you bugles blow. <sup>1</sup>

Thus ended Whitman’s great call to arms in his idealistic 1855 poem, “Beat! Beat! Drums!” Through the various iterations of *Leaves of Grass*, 1855 through the authoritative 1892 publication, Walt Whitman’s poetic voice and style is revised and reformed by the Civil War’s transformative power, from the “poet of democracy...[who] celebrated the mystical, divine potential of the individual” <sup>2</sup> to the poetic witness of war’s realistic horror, and the powerlessness of one. Whitman’s writing mirrors the courageous individuals represented in *Embattled Courage* as Linderman notes the same transformation upon the brave men who filled the battle lines.

Whitman’s poetic goal was to realize for America, for the common man and community, a vision of independent spirit and celebration of “self” that transcended region, ethnicity, or social status, and that identified nationhood. His untitled beginning to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which became his much-celebrated “Song of

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<sup>1</sup>Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965), 238.

<sup>2</sup> Jeanne Campbell Reesman, “Walt Whitman, 1819-1892” in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym (New York: Norton, 2007), C: 17.

Myself,” exemplified that celebration. “I celebrate myself,/And what I assume you shall assume,/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”<sup>3</sup> The poet claimed to not only celebrate himself as an individual but all those “form’d of this soil, this air/born here of parents born here from parents the same” (Whitman, 26). Therefore, we are all one, the same, fellow citizens, humans, and brethren in celebration and origin.

Whitman’s preface reads like a dictionary definition for idealism, and includes a thread of belief in the power of one – not only an idealist, but a patriot and poet.

Peter Coviello in his introduction to Whitman’s *Memoranda During the War* says that “Whitman believed in an ideal of American coherence, and in the larger possibilities for human experience, both collective and individual.”<sup>4</sup> Whitman’s lofty goals for his work, according to Coviello, was to represent not only self but nation in the experimental, imagistic poetry of the day and “through the new form of his poetry, he had endeavored to imagine for the citizens of the nation a mode of belonging that compounded breadth and depth, that was at once intimately experienced . . . and unlimited in its reach into and across the vast expanses of the republic” (xvii). Much like the young nation itself, reaching across the Mississippi to expand its reach, Whitman saw an enlarged vision for his literary voice as he sought to represent the young country and her citizens, both singular and plural. Whitman had claimed that “the function of poetry—his poetry—was not merely to represent the nation to itself, but to facilitate nationality . . . his poetry, Whitman claimed, made nation-ness happen.”

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<sup>3</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Coviello. “Whitman at war.” In *Memoranda During the War*. Whitman, Walt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) xvii-lii.

Coviello discusses the idea that Whitman, “believed his poetry [like no other] would circulate among the masses of anonymous readers and conjure among them flashes like recognition, tenderness, and affection, instilling a sensation of binding intimacy and far-flung mutual belonging. His was an ideal of nationality rooted not in the authority of the state, nor . . . in the racial distinction of one exalted class of Americans, but in the sense of passionate correctness that, with the aid of his poetry, would join together even citizens as dispersed and disparate as America’s” (xiv). Whitman, Coviello argues, and rightly so, is the consummate promoter of his own writing and the power of its text to join together a distinct and diverse people as a newly understood nation. (And in postwar writings, Whitman sought to bind up its wounds through the power of his words.) Coviello notes that Whitman’s literary dream could not have collided with a more formidable event than the Civil War, and states that the war was a “vivid testament to disunity, anatomization, and the indifference of citizen to distant citizen, the war seemed calculated to destroy the . . . optimism of a poet like Whitman. And, to some extent, the war did precisely that: especially in the postwar prose . . . we find a voice vastly more tempered, more shot through with resignation and despair, than in Whitman’s earlier work.”<sup>5</sup> In Coviello’s argument, Whitman strove to represent an impossibility – a unified nation, at a time when that nation was crumbling. Whitman’s work was appropriately informed by the season he wrote in; a season of secession, violence and deconstruction. It should not be surprising that this same deconstruction occurred in Whitman’s means of speaking, his representation of “self” and country, in his poetry and prose.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Coviello, *Ibid.*



*Courage* (1989). Linderman convincingly argues that the soldiers of the Civil War, both North and South, began the war era as courageous and honorable men and that they were transformed by combat from these idealistic innocents to hardened, realistic veterans. Both sides began the war with unrealistic views of how “courage” would win battles and the power of each brave and courageous individual to alter and impact the course of the war. Courage for Linderman meant the whole cultural expectations of the era including manhood, honor, and godliness. He argues that courage was an indicator of classic American individualism, that each man’s own bravery and self-control would be rewarded on the battlefield with victory; most especially if that man was a follower of the Lord, as “godliness bore not only on individual survival but on the outcome of battles.”<sup>8</sup> This mirrored their civilian work ethic: personal self-discipline would be rewarded by God with success.

Whitman’s poetry expressed this same ideal in “Drum Taps” or “First O Songs for a Prelude.” The language Whitman chooses throughout describes men from every walk of life “from the houses then and the workshops, and through all the/ doorways, leapt they tumultuous” (Whitman, 235) as they answer the courageous call to arms. He lists young men, mechanics, smithies, lawyers, judges, wagon drivers, salesmen, bookkeepers, porters, and so on as they each with “common consent” enter the ranks of blue and gray. Linderman’s conclusion is the same as Whitman’s poetic device or litany, “every man” was equal to the courageous task before the soldiers called to arms – with hearts overflowing with bravery and sense of purpose, they stepped forward as idealists acting upon their deep-held convictions. And courage was the battlefield application of this American ideal, the cherished individual effort that would make all the difference to

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<sup>8</sup> Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage*, (New York: The Free Press, 1987) 10.

the conflict at hand.

The experience of Civil War combat collapsed these naïve, idealistic views and changed American literature and culture. Linderman powerfully illustrates this transformation by showing how impersonal forces dominated the battlefield and victory. His best examples are the dominance of courage and honor before the war and the reality of battle being more powerful than individual fortitude which “unraveled [their] convictions.” As Whitman cites the despair and horror of the battles and the grisly aftermath, which denied individual courage and faith as the only means to win the war, he too notes the inability of the individual, courageous or not, to accomplish the purposeful goal. Linderman discusses the “centrality of courage” in the myriad of necessary attributes for the Civil War volunteer. Correspondence from the battle lines spoke of “tests of manhood,” and courage and honor as the “manliest” of virtues. Through the enlistment, training, and first moments of battle, the largest worry for these idealists in blue and gray was acting honorably and courageously. They believed that no signs of cowardice could be shown, even though each soldier feared the moment when they might surface. Linderman also notes the deep felt connection between courage and faith – that somehow the newly enlisted soldiers of the North and South would be infused with courageous hearts because of their honorable behaviors, enlisting for The Cause, and their faith-filled intent to fulfill it. Linderman states that “soldiers on both sides confessed confidence that the benefactions of godliness would manifest themselves on every social level – that the faithful soldier would survive combat; that the army of greatest faith would win the battle at hand; that the cause whose adherents possessed the faith indomitable would prevail in the war” (10). Simply put, with God on their side, the newly minted soldiers believed they could not help but be victorious in

battle. Linderman lists the effect of faith as it was blended with the courage of these fighting men as a central ingredient of their courage. It was their source of spirit and the will to fight, their protection in battle, the Power that would assure their victory in battle and, even as a bargaining chip pre-battle for those who did not stand on a firm foundation of faith. He notes that “one of the first tenets to be discarded was the one holding that exceptional combat courage deserved special protection” (156). Stonewall Jackson’s thoughts on this are well documented. He knew that to “obliterate the most courageous of the foe was to demoralize those whose discipline drew on their example” (157). And the more the conflict raged, the more Jackson’s “method” of striking down the most courageous became military practice. Many would argue that Jackson and Sherman’s military tactics were less than honorable and certainly erased the idealistic thought that any one courageous soldier could make the difference between victory and defeat.

Whitman’s “Eighteen Sixty-One” espouses the heroic and honorable attributes of the men in blue that Linderman describes in his first chapters. The brave soldier is “as a strong man erect . . . advancing, carrying a rifle . . . with a well-gristled body and sunburnt face and hands, with a knife in the belt . . . your masculine voice . . . heard your determin’d voice launch’d forth again and again.”<sup>9</sup> Whitman’s language choices were deliberate as his poetic prose told the story of capable, honorable men from every walk of life taking up their arms to defend the Cause they believed in and were courageous enough to lay down their lives for – this was the “self” that the poet infused his pre and early war poetry with and here is where we see the largest change in tone and language.

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<sup>9</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 237

Lybeer states that Whitman, “faced with the bloodiest strife in the history of the nation, the self-appointed singer of democratic America was forced to re-evaluate his . . . conception of poetry.”<sup>10</sup> He further argues that the violence of the “first total war did challenge conventional modes of representation pushing Whitman towards unprecedented levels of formal experimentation.” This experimentation included poetry conventions that contemporary poets now consider as traditional craft elements. Litany, list, blank verse, informal language, realistic (versus romantic) first person persona, imperative use of the line and stanza – all these are explored and amended in Whitman’s experiment in war poetry. Sychterz, in his article on *Drum Taps*, concludes that Whitman’s collection “chart[s] a now familiar trajectory of a modern war poetic testimony: the poet begins as an idealistic patriot unquestioned faith in the nations’ cause, but the horrors of warfare soon trouble the epistemological *status quo* and confound him into a disillusioned silence . . . but as the whole of *Drum Taps* attests, the poet does not fall silent as he watched the dead. Instead his attempts to incorporate the corpses and wounded bodies into his democratic vision, although troubled, are profoundly loquacious.”<sup>11</sup> In Sychterz’s article on the disillusioned war poetry, he debates the merits of the modernist’s theory that Whitman’s poetic voice was silenced by his war experiences and vigorously argues that Whitman was merely disillusioned and that while he did fall silent briefly, the poet then changed his style and persona and in some ways even returned to his former battle herald role, exhibited in “Beat! Beat! Drum!” Sychterz explains that “the individual material reality of the war . . . seriously tested the limits of Whitman’s . . . visionary poetic” and that Whitman “as a result of his

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<sup>10</sup> Edward Lybeer, “Whitman’s war and the status of literature,” *Arizona Quarterly* 67.2: 23-40.

<sup>11</sup> Jeff Sychterz, “Silently watching the dead’: The modern disillusioned war poet and the crisis of representation in Whitman’s *Drum Taps*,” *Discourse* 25.3: 9-29.

experiences in the dressing stations and hospitals of the Civil War . . . reconsolidated a renewed vision of Democracy as a wounded body in need of compassionate healing and a poetic identity.”<sup>12</sup> And finally, Sychterz observes that “to find the clearest statement of poetic voice shifting from idealistic nationalism to realistic horror one must look not to the poets of the Great War, but to the poet who first fashioned himself explicitly as a war poet, Walt Whitman.”<sup>13</sup>

Whitman’s “The Centenarian’s Story” is a strong example of this new-found poetic style and representation. It is 112 lines long, somewhat an epic length. It is broken into three individual sections labeled for the young volunteer soldier, who represents the courageous and eager idealist, the old veteran, who represents the reality of war, and the battle or “terminus” as the foregone conclusion and end in such bloody events. The stanzas vary in line length from 14 down to one. The poem contains no rhyme scheme or meter. It is simplistic in language choice and styled as a conversation between a young recruit in 1861 and an old gentleman soldier. As the young soldier describes the encampment at Washington Heights in Brooklyn, he tells of the smiling troops as they drill on the hillside. The old man, a Revolutionary veteran, recalls this same patch of ground from the days of the Declaration. The text is filled with dark images of the hillside “re-peopled from the graves” with mounted guns and the soldier’s camps. The old man recalls the battle on the heights and says “It sickens me yet, that slaughter!” and later speaks of the “two thousand strong/few return’d nearly all remain in Brooklyn.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sychterz. ““Silently Watch(ing) the Dead”,13.

<sup>13</sup> Sychterz, Silently Watch(ing) the Dead”,10.

<sup>14</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 249-250.

Whitman's poem is not only changed in style, to a more modern and imagistic structure, but also is given the weight of the nation's history, a re-telling of a battle from the previous war over the same ground, the very war that proclaimed their independence and sovereignty as a nation. Whitman represents the soldier's experience, both new and old, and claims it as not just the history of the new nation forged but the now despairing reality that it must be sustained, at any cost; the poet recognizing that the cost is dear "baptized that day in many a young man's bloody wounds" (251).

Lybeer explores the idea that even though the "import of his verses may have changed: songs of triumphs have become mourning laments; enthusiasm has turned into disillusionment, but the poems are still chants . . . the vanguard position of the creator has remained intact [and] "through the act of writing, the poet is still the one who leads the way, providing the illusion of formal redemption and the sense of historical continuity" (31). Whitman, perhaps disoriented and stumbling himself as he mentally digested all he has seen and heard, still managed to capture the voice of the soldier; the brave perhaps turned bitter sentinels, or at the very least, the now more realistic, war-weary men in tattered uniforms and scarred psyche.

Whitman, himself, did not courageously enlist. He did not answer the bugler's call to join or even go to war in search of poetic inspiration; he went in search of his brother, George. In late 1862, he traveled from New York through Washington and on to Virginia in search of his wounded brother, a member of the 51<sup>st</sup> New York. This began his season of correspondence from the hospitals and sick rooms of the Civil War soldiers. In a letter to Emerson he said,

"I find deep things unrecked by current print or speech. I now make fuller notes,

or a sort of journal . . . of the memoranda of names, items &c . . . this thing I will record—it belongs to the time, and to all the States—(and perhaps it belongs to me).”

Many literary theorists posit that it was this time in Whitman’s life, “his experience as a nurse in the improvised hospitals of America”<sup>i</sup> that would, unknown to the poet, forever change how he and the world would view such a catastrophic event. Lybeer argues that it was this “violent event that created Whitman’s poetic persona as we know it today . . . with the publication of *Leaves of Grass* (1871), the author emphasized the centrality of this moment by re-arranging the war cluster *Drum Taps* and placing it at the center of the volume, where it would remain for all future editions” (24). Whitman’s change of heart is easy to imagine when reading his postwar prose; for it is in this work that we hear and fully grasp the change of vocal resonance from joyous recruiter to despondent witness. In a journal excerpt later published in *Specimen Days*, Whitman says of war’s reality:

Such was the war. It was not a quadrille in a ball-room. Its interior history will not only never be written—its practicality, minutiae of deeds and passions, will never be even suggested. The actual soldier of 1862–’65, North and South, with all his ways, his incredible dauntlessness, habits, practices, tastes, language, his fierce friendship, his appetite, rankness, his superb strength and animality, lawless gait, and a hundred unnamed lights and shades of camp, I say, will never be written—perhaps must not and should not be.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Walt Whitman. “The real war will never get in the books.” Bartleby.com. <http://www.bartleby.com/229/1101.html> (accessed July 5, 2014).

Here Whitman captured the unique argument and perspective on the “power of one,” as he repeatedly used the intimate, possessive and personal pronoun, “his.” “He” was dauntless, friendly, and strong. “He” was one brave soldier, who overcame great obstacles, upheld the right, and bravely marched into the face of an equally righteous opponent – “his” bravery, courage and steadfast heart was not only insufficient to the task, but, sadly and in spite of all this, as Whitman claimed, will inevitably be forgotten.

This perspective by Whitman, at his postwar writer’s desk, of being forgotten in both name and deed, could not be imagined by the hopeful soldiers as they embarked at the dawn of the war’s hostilities. The soldiers, who believed in their Cause, in themselves as faithful and true; these men “sought to comprehend the war—and ultimately to endure its bloodshed” because of that courage, and felt they could do no other (Linderman, 80). Their belief in self, the affirmation of their loved ones, and the nation they rose to defend, asked them to rely on their own strength of heart, their bravery and honor, to answer the call. But as the war raged on, it “revealed by degrees that bravery was no guarantor of victory [and] that rifled muskets and defensive works could thwart the most spirited charge, soldiers sensed the insufficiency of courage and began to move away from many of their initial convictions” (156) and as that reality grew, their idealism shrank.

This concept of bravery or courage was intrinsically bound up in the idea of “self,” in the individual’s singularity and importance to the whole, to the righteous Cause. It is difficult to imagine the Union soldiers aligning their purpose on an individual basis, or as not seeing themselves as a necessary cog in the greater wheel of the war machine that was the Union Army since so many of their campaigns were waged with larger brigades

than the Confederates. Burn's *Civil War* notes many instances when the "sea of blue" soldiers poured over battlements amidst the fighting. While they could certainly have believed their cause to be the more righteous, especially after the Emancipation Proclamation, these Northern soldiers needed to understand and embrace the idea of being part of a greater good; of not being *singular* but part of the *plural*; the plurality that Whitman speaks of in "An Army Corps on the March." He speaks of "clouds of skirmishers," "swarming ranks," "dense brigades," and "columns [that] rise and fall." (252). Whitman struggles to separate "one" from the masses in several of his pieces from this section of *Drum Taps*. Note the text of "Cavalry Crossing a Ford."

A line in long array where they wind betwixt green islands,

They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in the sun—

Hark to the musical clank,

Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses loitering stop to drink,

Behold the brown-faced men, each group, each persona

Picture, the negligent rest on the saddles,

Some emerge on the opposite bank, others are just entering

The ford—while,

Scarlet and blue and snowy white,

The guidon flags flutter gayly in the wind. <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 251-252.

The plural pronoun “they” and “their” is a constant sound in the short piece. Assigning the image of a serpent, the individual men have become a long uninterrupted creature. And above all - the restive horses and men struggling through the creek waters - the red, white, and blue of the nation flies, undeterred by their passing – men, not one individual, all exist beneath the overarching banner of “nation,” which unites and is so valuable, “they” will give their last “measure of devotion” to secure its enduring existence. Lybeer would suggest that “the bodies that animate these poems are never individualized, but only mentioned as a part of a homogeneous mass” and that “dislocated bodies are sacrificed in the name of the national body” (28). Is Whitman making a statement on the inevitability of the nation to withstand the creature of war and the passing of so many courageous souls to preserve it?

Whitman, Lybeer argues, assuming his given role and chosen responsibility as a writer, “leads the way.” In the iconic poem “The Wound Dresser” Whitman is “force[d] to reconsider his previous persona. The assertive leader becomes a “Wound Dresser.” He now gives attention . . . to the dying ones, but this tonal change hardly affects his support for the war, or his heroic vision of poetry” (29). The poem, “The Wound Dresser,” is broken into four sections. In the first the speaker defines himself as a “watcher” of the dead and assumes the role of reporter. The second section begins in direct address to the “maidens and young men” and moves to the halls and blood-soaked floors of the hospital. The speaker describes his actions “bearing bandages, water and sponge.” The third section gains even more graphic descriptions of “crush’d head,” the “breathing rattles” from a cavalry man and the very real “stump of the arm” on which the poor wretch being ministered to will not look. The speaker states that “I am

faithful, I do not give out”<sup>17</sup> and then moves to the fourth section and a swift conclusive statement of “dream’s projections” and the awful reality that is the hospital ward. The new style of poetry that Whitman created celebrates the sacrificed limbs and lives of the courageous soldiers, regardless of the uniform they wore and while it is colored with a sense of grieving over the injury and loss, the fight to preserve the Union is never placed at the center. Whitman keeps the soldiers in the spotlight, no matter how morbid, and never assumes to tear down or preach, only to observe with a heavy heart, the reality he has witnessed and experienced first-hand. His verse “leads the way” to understanding this courageous conflict through language.

Whitman’s journals stand as a testimony to his perspective of an event not easily captured on the page or casually recalled in memory even though this is the same man, who a few years earlier, had said of literature that “It is the medium that shall well-nigh express the inexpressible”(Coviello, xxx). And war, this war in particular, was certainly an inexpressible reality. In turning to the pages of Whitman’s journals, we note some entries read like a diary of the day – I did this, I saw that, I went here, I went there. Other journal entries begin in simple language but they can barely contain the images, sounds, and smells of his experiences. He states that “some were scratch’d down from narratives I heard and itemized while watching, or waiting, or tending somebody amid those scenes” and that he “could never turn their tiny leaves, or even take one in [his] hand, without the actual army sights and hot emotions of the time rushing like a river in full tide through me. Each line, each scrawl, each memorandum, has its history. Some pang of anguish—some tragedy, profounder than ever poet wrote. Out of them arise

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<sup>17</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 259-261.

active and breathing forms.”<sup>18</sup> Whitman’s writing here is personal and yet corporate as he narrates in elegant language, war’s reality and his own. The recollection of lives forever changed by the conflict in the running narrative that breathes in the pages of the many journals he composed – all still very much alive in his memory. In an excerpt from *Civil War*, he notes a section called “The Old Flag of the 51<sup>st</sup>.”

“Old Flag all shot through with fragments of shell, bullets, etc., its staff shattered, carried sternly into seven engagements and into the thickest of the fight, and safely brought out again—all full of shreds, fringed as with the sword, the silk stained with blood.”<sup>19</sup>

This is the prose of Walt Whitman in his personal journals and while it is difficult to discern a marked difference between this entry and several of the poems in *Drum Taps*, the writer’s descriptive language choices, “flag all shot through” “staff shattered” “full of shreds” and “stained with blood” quicken the pace and make the prose immediate, intimate--more urgent, more real.

The poems of *Drum Taps* stand in tension with Whitman’s personal writing in several journals that were created in the same timeframe and environment. The poet worried that the historians would “overlook the common man” and that “in the nation’s eagerness to make sense of the war, an unambiguous version of events had been written into history to the exclusion of what he called ‘that many-threaded drama.’”<sup>20</sup> It is this concern for the common man, the individual soldier, which drove Whitman to write, to

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<sup>18</sup> Whitman, *Memoranda*, 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> Walt Whitman, *Walt Whitman’s Civil War*, (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1960), 38.

<sup>20</sup> Ted Genoways, *Walt Whitman’s and the Civil War*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009) 1-2.

report, to journal - in an effort to capture the real story—the real story of an idealistic country torn in two by conflict, a nation where the reality of death had harvested too many from the fields of battle; a story of disillusioned men, grappling with not only the challenge of personal deprivation and the constant strain of battle, but also the loss and grief over fallen comrades, and by the indefinable loss of self, their pre-war self.

Linderman discusses this aspect as the death of Civil War idealism in the face of “the shocks of battle . . . combat behavior . . . abandon[ment] of many of the war’s initial tenets . . . rationalization of a war of destruction, and com[ing] to terms with changes in their relationships . . . soldiers suffered a disillusionment more profound than historians have acknowledged.” Linderman claims that this was the catalyst for “the intensification of ties with comrades and the maintenance of respect for enemy combatants.”<sup>21</sup> And it is this hardening of the once eager recruits that the writers of the age, Whitman in particular, in his “self-fashioned” role as “the nation’s Wound-Dresser, a persona that he not only continued to perform through the rest of his poetic life, but also remains a major component of the Whitman legend,”<sup>22</sup> sought to help and heal; for the soldiers, the nation, and himself, from this transformative and blood-stained event.

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<sup>21</sup> Linderman, *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Sychterz, *Ibid.*

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