

Walt Whitman, “The Wound-Dresser”

I did not send out a poem for a long time. During the period when I was silent, my mother died. Neither of my parents were readers of poems, though they loved art,— particularly music and, above all, painting. My father would quote lines from Goethe he had learned in his youth, I think largely because he had been taught that Goethe was a great genius. My mother, well, she loved drawing and pastels and painting, and she loved looking at paintings. I think of all poems she would have been particularly drawn to the poem I discuss in what follows, Walt Whitman’s “The Wound-Dresser.”

I began this particular commentary by speaking about Washington, which is not only the nation’s capital but also the repository of much of its official memory. In six years in Washington, I never visited the Lincoln Memorial because its calm majesty resided so deeply in my memory that it needed no reminder, nor the Jefferson Memorial because it had never struck me as much of anything. (Although I should qualify my statement by adding that the pre-inauguration concert for Barack Obama at the Lincoln Memorial, where I and my wife stood along with hundreds of thousands of others, was one of the highlights of my years in Washington, especially its culmination when two great figures of different generations, Pete Seeger and Bruce Springsteen, stood together and celebrated our nation in the populist anthem, “This Land is Your Land.”)

I began this essay, therefore, with three sites that I thought my Washington colleagues might all too easily overlook. The first was one of my few overt calls to my Senate colleagues to engage a larger and more generous politics: FDR had thought large and humanely and so could they, if they chose to nourish the best in American values and dreams. The second was, in a city notable for its marble and built artifacts, a huge garden that is one of the most wonderful biological displays America has to offer. The National Arboretum is a source of ongoing life located (unhappily, this) at the difficult to access periphery of the city of bureaucracy and impenetrable legislative processes.

The third was a Metro station. But one surmounted by a tribute to Walt Whitman and the great poem we are about to read. Tens of thousands pass up or down the escalator each day, almost all of them totally ignoring the lines from Whitman engraved on the marble surround as they pass by.

This commentary is dedicated to my mother, Ruth Mayer Gutman (1918-2011), who always understood, deeply and intuitively, what Whitman has to say to us in this poem.

The Wound-Dresser

Walt Whitman

An old man bending I come among new faces,
Years looking backward resuming in answer to children,
Come tell us old man, as from young men and maidens that love me,
(Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless
war,
But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd and I resign'd myself,
To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead;)
Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these chances,
Of unsurpass'd heroes, (was one side so brave? the other was equally
brave;)
Now be witness again, paint the mightiest armies of earth,
Of those armies so rapid so wondrous what saw you to tell us?
What stays with you latest and deepest? of curious panics,
Of hard-fought engagements or sieges tremendous what deepest
remains?

2

O maidens and young men I love and that love me,
What you ask of my days those the strangest and sudden your talking
recalls,
Soldier alert I arrive after a long march cover'd with sweat and dust,
In the nick of time I come, plunge in the fight, loudly shout in the rush
of successful charge,
Enter the captur'd works--yet lo, like a swift-running river they fade,
Pass and are gone they fade--I dwell not on soldiers' perils or soldiers'
joys,
(Both I remember well--many the hardships, few the joys, yet I was
content.)

But in silence, in dreams' projections,
While the world of gain and appearance and mirth goes on,
So soon what is over forgotten, and waves wash the imprints off the
sand,
With hinged knees returning I enter the doors, (while for you up there,
Whoever you are, follow without noise and be of strong heart.)

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass the ground,
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd hospital,
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss,
An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,
Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again.

I onward go, I stop,
With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,
I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,
One turns to me his appealing eyes--poor boy! I never knew you,
Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would
save you.

3

On, on I go, (open doors of time! open hospital doors!)
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
examine,
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life
struggles hard,
(Come sweet death! be persuaded O beautiful death!
In mercy come quickly.)

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and
blood,
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and side falling
head,
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody
stump,
And has not yet look'd on it.

I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,
But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,
And the yellow-blue countenance see.

I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound,
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so
offensive,
While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail.

I am faithful, I do not give out,
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast a
fire, a burning flame.)

4

Thus in silence in dreams' projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

Visitors to Washington, and many Washington residents, often miss some of the city's treasures, sites not nearly as well known as the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial, the Capitol Dome or the White House.

One of the most moving of the major memorials, the Franklin Roosevelt Memorial, is relatively unvisited. Located on the Tidal Pool beside the Mall, diagonally opposite the Jefferson Memorial across the water, the simplicity of the monument reduces me to silence, wonder, and a sense of loss. Something of Roosevelt's commitment to the people of our nation seems to have seeped away in the intervening seventy years since his death. The monument is extensive yet in no way ornate. It consists of several sculptures, including one of FDR in his wheelchair and a stunningly evocative bread line by one of my favorite American

artists, George Segal, and a series of outdoor ‘rooms’ with falling curtains of water. Huge blocks of granite are incised with words uttered by the president.

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.

No country, however rich, can afford the waste of its human resources.

Demoralization caused by vast unemployment is our greatest extravagance. Morally, it is the greatest menace to our social order.

I never forget that I live in a house owned by all the American people and that I have been given their trust.

Surprisingly, shockingly, you have already read in the four sentences above (and the Whitman poem) more words than the National Park Service has posted on the web about this extraordinary site. So the millions who visit the city, and the hundreds of thousands who live and work in Washington, have little connection with the man who, more than any other, insisted that we Americans are all in this great democratic experiment together.

Through no fault of the Department of Agriculture which manages it, the National Arboretum is not visited as much as it deserves, either. It is located in a section of Northeast Washington that is difficult of access: far from Metro lines or bus stops, hard to find even by car. But visiting it is a wonderful experience: azaleas and lilacs and rhododendrons bloom in season, there are magnificent boxwoods and more conifers than I knew existed. Vistas, long-range and intimate, abound. It is a place for walking, biking, dreaming. In a nondescript part of the city is a natural refuge and bonanza. It is a place that is, to use a word Wallace Stevens invented, *florabundant*.

These two sites are a prologue to another of my favorite places in Washington. Ascending the long escalator at the north end of the Metro station in Dupont Circle, as one emerges into the air and sky, the marble circling the Metro entrance is inscribed with these words:

**Thus in silence in dreams’ projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals;
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all dark night - some are so young;
Some suffer so much - I recall the experience sweet and sad.**

They are the penultimate lines from Walt Whitman's poem, "The Wound-Dresser." Not only eloquent in themselves, they are particularly appropriate to the city in which these words are located. They refer to Whitman's Civil War experiences, the great majority of which took place in the nation's capital.

In 1865, Whitman published *Drum-Taps*, a book of poems about the Civil War. Some years ago, I wrote an article about "Drum-Taps," which later was inserted as sequence in Whitman's ever-changing masterwork, *Leaves of Grass*. Allow me cite the opening of that article to set the stage for our look at "The Wound-Dresser."

"Drum-Taps" is a sequence of 43 poems about the Civil War, and stands as the finest war poetry written by an American. In these poems Whitman presents, often in innovative ways, his emotional experience of the Civil War. The sequence as a whole traces Whitman's varying responses, from initial excitement (and doubt), to direct observation, to a deep compassionate involvement with the casualties of the armed conflict. The mood of the poems varies dramatically, from excitement to woe, from distant observation to engagement, from belief to resignation. Written ten years after "Song of Myself," these poems are more concerned with history than the self, more aware of the precariousness of America's present and future than of its expansive promise. In "Drum-Taps" Whitman projects himself as a mature poet, directly touched by human suffering, in clear distinction to the ecstatic, naive, electric voice which marked the original edition of *Leaves of Grass*....

An essential companion to reading "Drum-Taps" is Whitman's autobiographical memoir, *Specimen Days*. The large central portion of that work recounts Whitman's daily experiences and meditations during the Civil War. Consonant with the middle section of "Drum-Taps," it reveals that for the poet the dominating metaphor for the war is a hospital, filled with injured men who must be nursed or, if dying, comforted. Whitman's early enthusiastic response to the war shifted dramatically when his brother George was injured in December 1862 and Whitman went to the front in Virginia to seek him out. From this time forward, Whitman would spend most of his days visiting military hospitals, primarily in the nation's capital, to comfort and nurture the wounded soldiers, Union and Confederate, who were convalescing there.

Whitman did indeed work most of the war as a volunteer nurse in these hospitals, some of which were housed in tents, some of which occupied buildings which are still standing in the nation's capital¹. In *Specimen Days* – over the years it has become one of my favorite American books, although I'd caution readers to skip over, for the most part, all of the entries prior to and posterior to the Civil War – Whitman recounts his experiences in those hospitals².

Whitman gives us, in *Specimen Days*, not only his own 'specimen interior,' but brief and poignant brief views of young men wounded and dying. Those diaries are important for those of us who read "The Wound-Dresser," for they reveal the context from which the poem emerged³. The book itself mirrors its times, being itself "strange, unloosen'd wondrous."

¹ The Old Patent Office, used as a hospital, today houses the American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery. St. Elizabeth's Insane Asylum, in Southeast Washington, was used as a military hospital during the Civil War. In disrepair in the past decade, it is being rebuilt to serve as the headquarters of Homeland Security. Several buildings at Georgetown College, today Georgetown University, were hospitals during the war.

² The first page of *Specimen Days* has an extended footnote, and because I find it relevant to the poem we are going to enter, I will reprint a section of that note here. Clearly, section 3 of the poem before us comes from the "little note-books for impromptu jottings" he mentions below. The "specimen interiors" are mostly his own interior, as he experiences the war. I have put in bold one of my favorite phrases in the whole of the American nineteenth century, an extraordinary – yet informal – summary of the middle of that century. How different was Whitman's view than that the hopelessness of Yeats fifty years later, in his "The Second Coming," part of which I cite here:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Here is part of the long footnote to the first paragraph of *Specimen Days*:

Note 1. The war of attempted secession has, of course, been the distinguishing event of my time. I commenced at the close of 1862, and continued steadily through '63, '64, and '65, to visit the sick and wounded of the army, both on the field and in the hospitals in and around Washington city. From the first I kept little note-books for impromptu jottings in pencil to refresh my memory of names and circumstances, and what was specially wanted, &c. In these I brief'd cases, persons, sights, occurrences in camp, by the bedside, and not seldom by the corpses of the dead. Some were scratch'd down from narratives I heard and itemized while watching, or waiting, or tending somebody amid those scenes. I have dozens of such little note-books left, forming a special history of those years, for myself alone, full of associations never to be possibly said or sung. I wish I could convey to the reader the associations that attach to these soil'd and creas'd livraisons, each composed of a sheet or two of paper, folded small to carry in the pocket, and fasten'd with a pin. I have them just as I threw them by after the war, blotch'd here and there with more than one blood-stain, hurriedly written, sometimes at the clinique, not seldom amid the excitement of uncertainty, or defeat, or of action, or getting ready for it, or a march. Most of the pages from 26 to 81 are verbatim copies of those lurid and blood-smutch'd little note-books....

I suppose I publish and leave the whole gathering, first, from that eternal tendency to perpetuate and preserve which is behind all Nature, authors included; second, to symbolize two or three specimen interiors, personal and other, out of the myriads of my time, **the middle range of the Nineteenth century in the New World; a strange, unloosen'd, wondrous time**. But the book is probably without any definite purpose that can be told in statement.

³ If you want to read *Specimen Days*, the entire text is available at bartleby.com. I suggest you read as you like from sections 20 through 101.

Because I find in its directness and simplicity such eloquence and because by reading these excerpts we will be much better able to understand just what the poet knows as he writes “The Wound-Dresser,” let me cite from the final three sections of the Civil War portion.

The first, from “Three Years Summ’d Up” sets the stage for the poem we are reading. I find it amazing each time I read it, both the numbers he cites in the first sentence, and the sentence I have put in bold type.

DURING those three years in hospital, camp or field, I made over six hundred visits or tours, and went, as I estimate, counting all, among from eighty thousand to a hundred thousand of the wounded and sick, as sustainer of spirit and body in some degree, in time of need. These visits varied from an hour or two, to all day or night; for with dear or critical cases I generally watch’d all night. Sometimes I took up my quarters in the hospital, and slept or watch’d there several nights in succession. **Those three years I consider the greatest privilege and satisfaction, (with all their feverish excitements and physical deprivations and lamentable sights,) and, of course, the most profound lesson of my life.** I can say that in my ministerings I comprehended all, whoever came in my way, northern or southern, and slighted none. It arous’d and brought out and decided undream’d-of depths of emotion. It has given me my most fervent views of the true *ensemble* and extent of the States.

His next chapter is entitled “The Million Dead, Too, Summ’d Up.” I excerpt it. It needs no commentary⁴.

THE DEAD in this war—there they lie, strewing the fields and woods and valleys and battle-fields of the south—Virginia, the Peninsula—Malvern hill and Fair Oaks—the banks of the Chickahominy—the terraces of Fredericksburgh—Antietam bridge—the grisly ravines of Manassas....the dead, the dead, the dead—our dead—or South or North, ours all, (all, all, all, finally dear to me).

⁴ Seventy years after Whitman wrote this passage the character Frederic Henry in Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* would think:

I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.

His final war entry is “The Real War Will Never Get In the Books.”

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 preceding notes may furnish a few stray glimpses into that life, and into those lurid interiors, never to be fully convey'd to the future... **The marrow of the tragedy [was] concentrated in those Army Hospitals—(it seem'd sometimes as if the whole interest of the land, North and South, was one vast central hospital, and all the rest of the affair but flanges)**—those forming the untold and unwritten history of the war.

“The Wound-Dresser” is, then, a poem of the Civil War, a poem of our nation’s history, a poem of the poet’s “specimen interior,” a poem based in Washington D.C., and a poem that examines “the marrow of the tragedy” that is war.

It is a poem of retrospection, of memory, of memory revisited through dream. And, through the dream, the poem becomes a poem of witness. But the dream will not take over the poem until the third stanza of section two.

Let’s start at the beginning of “The Wound-Dresser.” Here are its opening lines:

An old man bending I come among new faces,
Years looking backward resuming in answer to children,
Come tell us old man, as from young men and maidens that love me,

The situation is set: the narrator of the poem is old, and he is beset by the “new faces” of children who ask him questions which make their interest quite clear. There are two parentheses in this first stanza. The first I will return to in a minute. The second contains questions the young people ask. The scene that the first-person narrator, an old man, recounts is not difficult to envision: Imagine an elderly veteran of the Second World War visiting a high school today where the students have been studying that war in history class. ‘What was the war like?’ they clamor. ‘You were there, tell us what you remember the best? Was it heroic actions? Was it how large our forces were when they massed for D-Day, or was it your fears when you went into combat, or was it the fighting spirit of your division?’

Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these chances,
Of unsurpass'd heroes....

Now be witness again, paint the mightiest armies of earth,
Of those armies so rapid so wondrous what saw you to tell us?
What stays with you latest and deepest? of curious panics,
Of hard-fought engagements or sieges tremendous what deepest
remains?

In the parenthesis I have skipped over, lines four and five of the poem, the narrator – very clearly Whitman -- reflects silently (he is not saying this to the “young men and maidens”) on his own first response to the war and the inadequacy of that response. Whitman, as earlier poems in “Drum Taps” indicate, at first welcomed the war. One of the early poems is called, “Beat, Beat Drums” and in that poem he urges a war to preserve the union that is the United States of America. The narrator of “The Wound-Dresser” meditates on his own history:

(Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless
war,
But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd and I resign'd myself,
To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead;)

As we know from his biography, as we know from the whole sequence of “Drum-Taps,” as we will learn from the poem that follows, as this parenthesis tells us, his early arousal and anger gave way to a far different posture. The anger which impelled his fingers to beat the drums of war have, over time, “fail’d” him: they will henceforth soothe the brows of the wounded. His patriotism gives way to resignation that, as we saw in the final sections of *Specimen Days*, war is “one vast central hospital, and all the rest of the affair but flanges.”

Let’s return to the situation in the poem. The young men and women ask him of his memories of the war, “what deepest remains?” In the first stanza of section 2, as he thinks of how to answer their questions, he casts aside the life he has assumed since the Civil War for their “talking” pushes him to recall his memories of being a soldier⁵.

⁵ We are into a bit of fiction here, since Whitman himself never served in the army. But we recall those tens of thousands of soldiers he ministered to in the hospitals, many of whom recounted to him their own powerful experiences: the “I” who is recounting long marches, infantry charges, sudden military success is an “I” so powerfully shaped by empathy that he has taken to himself the experience of others.

O maidens and young men I love and that love me,
What you ask of my days those the strangest and sudden your talking
recalls,
Soldier alert I arrive after a long march cover'd with sweat and dust,
In the nick of time I come, plunge in the fight, loudly shout in the rush
of successful charge,
Enter the captur'd works--yet lo, like a swift-running river they fade,
Pass and are gone they fade--I dwell not on soldiers' perils or soldiers'
joys,
(Both I remember well--many the hardships, few the joys, yet I was
content.)

We live in an ongoing river of time, and things fade away – “Where are the
snows of yesteryear?” asked Francois Villon before Shakespeare was born or
Columbus discovered America – and the memories of harsh military life, of
combat, fade away, even as the narrator recalls them in response to the questions
the young people are asking him.

But in silence, in dreams' projections,
While the world of gain and appearance and mirth goes on,
So soon what is over forgotten, and waves wash the imprints off the
sand,
With hinged knees returning I enter the doors, (while for you up there,
Whoever you are, follow without noise and be of strong heart.)

In everyday life the memories fade away. But faced with the questions of
the “young men and maidens” the narrator enters deep into the heart of memory so
that he is in something like a trance state. I had never before realized that this is
what is happening, but how else explain the “silence” in which he enmeshed, a
silence in which he enters a world of dream in which his past is “projected” before
him.

Whitman had a great interest in eastern religions, especially Hinduism (so
did his contemporaries Emerson and Thoreau) and it may well be that what he
learned about ‘maya,’ illusion, shapes the next lines, “while the world of gain and
appearance and mirth goes on,/ So soon what is over forgotten, and waves wash
the imprints off the sand...” We live in appearance, and it is quickly not just
forgotten, but erased, as of no importance, by the tides of time.

The poem turns – it is no pun to say it ‘hinges’ – on the next two lines. We move from a present, in which an old narrator is asked questions by young men and women, questions which call forth memories, to a descent, through silence, through “dreams’ projections,” into an utterly different present: a past that seemed gone, but is now totally present for the poet. He tells us this: he says “I enter the doors.” The doors are from the present into the past, which now arises around him stronger than any present. The doors are also, of course, the doors of the hospitals in which he worked.

In an extraordinary phrase, evocatively rich, Whitman says “*With hinged knees* returning I enter the doors.” His knees are hinged because he is in a position very like prayer as he comes to confront the most significant moments in his life. They are also hinged because the position he will occupy, in the remainder of the poem, is that of the caregiver bending down to care for the wounded in their hospital beds and cots.

Perhaps he is also bending low because the door to the deeply significant past is not capacious and wide, but strait and difficult of entry, requiring “strength” as his emotionally supportive⁶ parenthesis of exhortation makes clear: “(while for you up there,/ Whoever you are, follow without noise and be of strong heart.)”

Following this ‘hinge’ of the poem we leave behind of the present in which the poet is narrating and move deeply and thoroughly into the past which he has entered through “dreams’ projections.” Thus, the narrator and we as readers occupy a different ‘present’⁷ than the present in which his narration began.

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass the ground,
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd hospital,
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss,
An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,
Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again.

⁶ In “Song of Myself,” written ten years earlier, Whitman, just before urging self-reliance on his reader and telling his readers they will have to strike out on his own, says in a line no other poet writing to adults could have written: “Sit a while dear son,/ Here are biscuits to eat and here is milk to drink.” “Be of strong heart,” he counsels here in a similarly supportive statement, as we prepare to accompany him on his journey into “what deepest remains.”

⁷ All the verbs from this point on, even though Whitman is revisiting the past, are in the present tense: go, reddens, return, and so forth,

I cited in an earlier commentary the wonderful comment of Randall Jarrell in his “Some Lines from Whitman:” “Whitman has reached – as great writers always reach – a point at which criticism seems not only unnecessary but absurd: these lines are so good that even admiration feels like insolence, and one is ashamed of anything that one can find to say about them.” There is not much one can say about the lines above, other than to point out how deeply attached he is to the injured soldiers (“*my wounded*”) and to note his generous inclusiveness (“*not one do I miss*”). The “refuse pail,” “soon to be fill’d with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill’d again” will return again, to be filled again, near the end of section three.

I onward go, I stop,
With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,
I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,
One turns to me his appealing eyes--poor boy! I never knew you,
Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would
save you.

Despite what is before him as he relives the Civil War in these “dreams’ projections” – the wounded on the ground or in row upon row on cots in hospital tents – Whitman himself is of strong heart: “I onward go.” With no hint of bravado, with great humility, he nonetheless evinces a deep heroism. “I onward go, I stop” is a line brilliantly shaped by an internal opposition in what is the shortest line in the poem. Of course he stops: going onward among the wounded, he stops to minister to each one of them. The onward mission consists, precisely, of stopping to attend to each injured soldier, “with steady hand to dress wounds.” Once again, his knees are hinged as he bends or kneels to tend to the wounded. “I am firm with each,” each and every wounded soldier, none of whom are abandoned or passed by. The heroism is evident here as the narrator/poet goes onward even though he is pierced by empathy and sympathy: “the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable.”

Let me turn slightly aside, before we get to the final two lines of section two, and say that although I think “Song of Myself” is the greatest poem ever written by an American, there are times in its later sections when the younger Whitman’s attempt to become a super-hero or a sort of pre-Nietzschean *Übermensch* always strikes me as little too rhetorical: at moments he too easily takes on the lineaments of Christ without fully earning them. Nothing of the sort occurs here, just the profoundest sort of human compassion, a true *imitatio dei* which is clearly responsive to the human suffering he encounters:

One turns to me his appealing eyes--poor boy! I never knew you,
Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would
save you.

Section three provides us with details of his “onward.” We see, in close-up, what the more general view of the preceding lines showed us more broadly. The poet’s onward going is revealed as a going into that Civil War past which has to some extent receded with the passage of time, a past recalled to him by the children’s questions. Simultaneously the poet goes onward down the lines of hospital beds, going onward to dress the wounds of the casualties of that war. The narrator makes us see the wounds, the pain, the peril:

On, on I go, (open doors of time! Open hospital doors!)
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
examine,
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life
struggles hard,
(Come sweet death! be persuaded O beautiful death!
In mercy come quickly.)

The last two lines, once again a parenthesis, are intensely moving⁸.

⁸ In 1860, before the Civil War began and before the deeply humbling experiences he recounts in “The Wound-Dresser,” Whitman wrote one of the greatest of American lyrics, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” Near its conclusion he wrote a line which has always troubled me. It is a beautiful, beautiful line; I cannot think of another line in American poetry where a word is repeated (and five times at that!) with as great effect as at the end of this passage:

Whereto answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper’d me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak
Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word death,
And again death, death, death, death
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous’d child’s heart,
But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,
Death, death, death, death, death.

But although I have written an article about the poem and the significance of this passage (which I in a kind of Freudian way saw as locating the birth of the poet’s voice in the death of his sexual urges...oh, we literary critics with our deep readings!), the death in that passage has always seemed to me a symbolic embrace. The death in this parenthesis in “The Wound Dresser” is neither symbolic nor ‘literary’: it is the poet’s deep and empathic response to a soldier struggling for a life which is already ebbing away:

More close-ups, so concrete and detailed that we feel ourselves standing beside the poet as he nurses these men:

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and
blood,
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and side falling
head,
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody
stump,
And has not yet look'd on it.

I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,
But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,
And the yellow-blue countenance see.

I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound,
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so
offensive,
While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail.

And then the extraordinary line, a line of courage and love and deep
commitment, as strong an expression of what is best about human beings as
anyone has ever written:

I am faithful, I do not give out,
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast a
fire, a burning flame.)

Let us look closely at these lines⁹, which to me resonate so powerfully. I
think I know why the poet's hand is "impassive," because were it not, he would

⁹ When I wrote this essay, I included what I called "a small view of inside-the Beltway Washington." *Last week a senior figure in the Obama administration came to talk to a group of senior staff, I amongst them. Without comment he passed right by an element of the president's deficit reduction plan, and when asked about it, said, 'Oh, everyone knows what that means. It is self-explanatory.'* I responded, saying that when I was a teacher I would tell my students to listen carefully to whatever lines their teacher – including, of course, me – skipped over. 'Ask about those lines – they are sure to be of importance, and not easily explainable.' Well, the administration official was not happy to be called on what he had skipped over, and did a tap dance around it – it

never get past the first injured soldier and on the next. He has to rein in his emotion if he is to dress the wounds, if he is to nurse the men who lie in the row upon row of hospital cots. Yet in reading this poem I have always skipped over, a little too quickly, that parenthesis, the second to last in a poem full of parentheses: “(yet deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame.)” Just what is that fire, that flame: what is burning, what is the passion and heat that Whitman is referring to? No more skipping for me: I will try to answer those questions when we come to the final lines of the next, brief, final section of the poem.

The final section is the shortest of the poem’s six parts. It summarizes what has come before, that movement through silence into a dream that is more ‘real’ than the present moment with which the poem begins, the old man confronted with children pressing questions about what he remembers about the Civil War. The conclusion reminds readers that the aged ‘old man’ with whom the poem begins connects deeply to an earlier time.

Thus in silence in dreams' projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,

The lines are clear. He pacifies the restless, whose tragedy is presented without elaboration: “some are so young, some suffer so much.” It is not hard to understand his recollection of the experience would be tinged with sadness. But why is it “sweet”?

The answer lies, I think, in the parenthesis I skipped over, “(yet deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame)” and in the parenthesis which concludes the poem:

(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

Within the poem we see that the experience Whitman recounts, the experience he relives in the poem, is one of bravery, of bravery already noted when the old man recalls of his younger self in the hospitals: he “does not give out....on, on I go.” That bravery parallels the bravery of the soldiers who fought for something larger than themselves and their self-interest, who gave what Lincoln

turned out it was important, and he didn't want to be specific....My point was, of course, that we should never skip over things that appear 'obvious.'

would so eloquently call “the last full measure of devotion. “Was one side so brave?” Whitman asks. “The other was equally brave.”

The hospitals elicit from Whitman the compassion which for a Christian – Whitman was raised by a Quaker mother – is the highest of all virtues. The fire which burns in him, that “burning flame,” is his love and compassion, his the deepest feeling of the brotherhood of man.

But the fire has, I have come to think, another source, one deeply personal to Whitman. I’ve read a lot of books about Whitman, but none with more excitement and illumination than a critical autobiography by Paul Zweig, *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet*. I no longer know where Zweig’s ideas stop and mine begin.

We both believe that Whitman, in his actual life, felt awkward about his sexual leanings toward men. We both believe his earlier and very great poetry sprang from his attempts to resolve in verse some of the sexual feelings he had difficulty resolving in life. And we both believe that the Civil War and Whitman’s commitment to working in hospitals¹⁰ enabled him to leap over the awkwardness which his sexual leanings aroused in him. He ministered to these men because they needed him. In return, they embraced him because he cared.

(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

These embraces, these kisses, are beyond and beneath the sexual¹¹. They are the physical manifestation of brotherly love. We are all brothers, all part of the human family, and in our deepest need we hold and caress each other because that is what our humanity most needs and what our humanity can most freely give.

I’ve never been in a war. But those who have endured battle conditions know what Whitman is speaking of: a shared experience, a commitment to one’s fellows that is one of the deepest of all human feelings.

¹⁰ A commitment, we recall, which led him to visit wards containing “eighty thousand to a hundred thousand” wounded soldiers and minister to them and their needs

¹¹ But though they are ‘beyond’ the sexual, they involve the touching and embracing about which Whitman had formerly been so ambivalent. Here, in the military hospitals, he can embrace and kiss men without shame or embarrassment. His response to sexual urges that are, to him, deeply troubling is surmounted by the compassion and brotherly love that he evinces and the caring they respond in turn. Sexuality is overleaped, yet in the surpassing of bodily desires the physicality he desires is easily accepted.

And it was in the hospital, where human extremity and need were at their deepest and most open, that Whitman found the “greatest...satisfaction...of my life.” Let me repeat that wonderful passage from *Specimen Days*:

Those three years I consider the greatest privilege and satisfaction, (with all their feverish excitements and physical deprivations and lamentable sights,) and, of course, the most profound lesson of my life.

Lest we romanticize the experience, strip away from it the horrors which accompanied it, we must recall the two central sections of the poem with the “refuse pails, soon to be filled with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill’d again,” “the stump of the arm, the amputated hand.”

It is the triumph of this poem that it conveys *both* the compassion that binds us together and elevates us to our best moments, and the butchery that lies deeper than any celebration of war. Neither is subsumed to the other.

Poems speak to us from the mouths of people who are like, or at times unlike, ourselves. They also speak to us of the lives we live and the situations and conditions we encounter. Great poets are true to the often complex emotional life that runs deep in all of us.

Some great poets go farther. They speak to us about truths – truths about life and not just the emotions we have – that we need to hear. Those truths about ourselves are useful and even necessary as we attempt to encounter, with justice and compassion and human decency, the times we live in. Whitman tells such truths in “The Wound-Dresser.”

As I write¹² there are varying estimates of the casualties in Iraq. At the higher end, from reputable sources, the number approaches 1.5 million. Casualty numbers in Afghanistan are almost impossible to come by. As occasional photographs in the *New York Times* show us, hospitals in both nations, as well as Libya (and of course Syria at this present moment, and in the past decade Zaire and other nations) are filled with patients not unlike the ones Whitman nursed, although a large preponderance of the patients are civilian.

¹² The date has changed but there are still casualties in Iraq, in Libya, in central Africa. Whether the forces are Shiites or Sunnis, Boko Haram or ISIS, U.S. drones or Taliban militants, the casualties do not abate. So I have left the topical reference intact.

Whitman's poems teaches us this: the true story of war is to be found in its hospitals. The rest – the victories, the defeats, the objectives gained or lost, are but flanges.

The marrow of the tragedy [was] concentrated in those Army Hospitals—(it seem'd sometimes as if the whole interest of the land, North and South, was one vast central hospital, and all the rest of the affair but flanges)—those forming the untold and unwritten history of the war.