

"A brave and beautiful act of witness by America's greatest poet —  
and one of her greatest souls."

— Roy Morris, Jr.,

author of *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War*

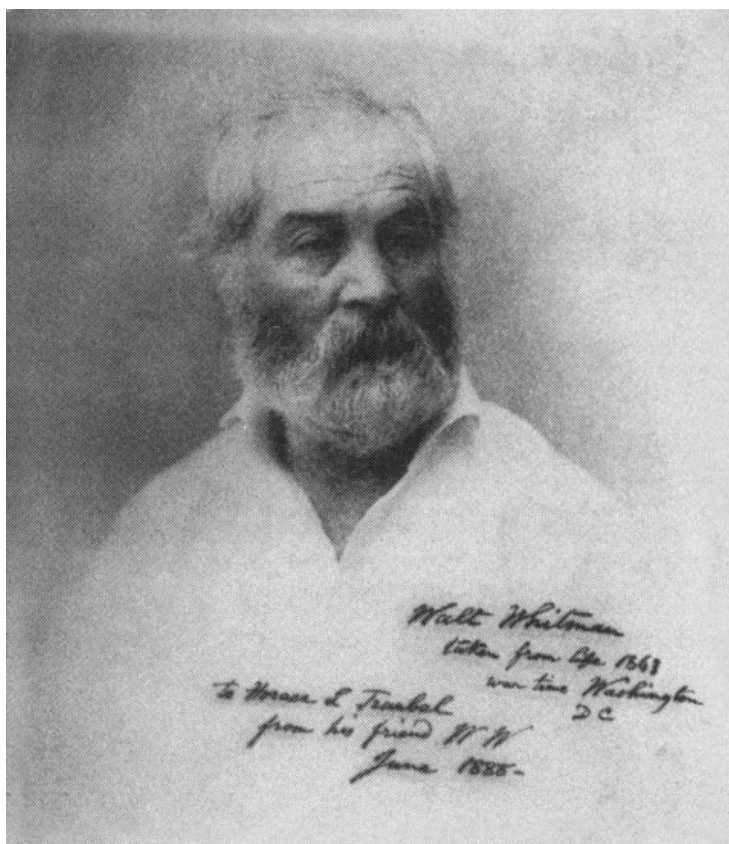
WALT  
WHITMAN'S  
MEMORANDA  
DURING THE WAR

Written on the Spot  
in 1863-'65.

A testament to the heroism and horror of the Civil War  
by one of America's most revered writers

EDITED BY  
PETER COVIELLO

## MEMORANDA DURING THE WAR



*The famous Matthew Brady photograph of Whitman,  
taken in Washington, D.C., in 1863.*

*Memoranda  
During the War*



WALT WHITMAN

*Edited by* Peter Coviello

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## INTRODUCTION



### *Whitman at War*

Our story begins with Henry James, and with one of his more notorious digressions. In 1879, in his critical biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne, James paused amid his recitations of Hawthorne's life and trials to give shape to a particular worry that, as an American novelist, he felt himself to share with the already-famed author of *The Scarlet Letter*: a worry over the airlessness, confinement, and general aridity of American national life. Describing what was for him the peculiar sensation of reading over Hawthorne's diaries of the early 1830s, James suggests that these pages have, for the fellow American, a special poignancy. "I think I am not guilty of any gross injustice in saying that the picture [the American reader] constructs from Hawthorne's American diaries, though by no means without charms of its own, is not, on the whole, an interesting one. It is characterised by an extraordinary blankness—a curious paleness

of color and paucity of detail." Expanding on the notion of an American blankness, James writes himself into a veritable trance of negation. His famous catalogue of American "denudation" follows:

The negative side of the spectacle on which Hawthorne looked out, in his contemplative saunterings and reveries, might, indeed, with a little ingenuity, be made almost ludicrous; one might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, no abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot! Some such list as that might be drawn up of the absent things in American life—especially in the American life of forty years ago, the effect of which, upon an English or a French imagination, would probably as a general thing be appalling. The natural remark, in the almost lurid light of such an indictment, would be that if these things are left out, everything is left out. The American knows that a

good deal remains; what it is that remains—that is his secret, his joke, one may say.

In terms that recall his Continental precursor Alexis de Tocqueville, James is delivered to the brink of a real despair, in *Hawthorne*, over the essentially leveling quality of American national life—a national life at once unsupported by the inheritance of centuries' worth of accumulated ritual and structure and belief, and tending, as Tocqueville observed, to valorize the blandness of equality over the glories of exceptional achievement. (As Tocqueville put it in his book *Democracy in America* [1835], "There is nothing more petty, insipid, crowded with paltry interests—in a word, antipoetic—than the daily life of an American.") Like Tocqueville, James sees in America a worrying absence of those forms of order that produce in a society not only inequality and division, but also, he suggests, grandeur, magnificence, a texture of life from which human achievements of splendor and glory are likely to emerge. What worries him is an absence, in America, of all that would be liable to produce monuments to the immensity of human striving. (For James, such monuments might have been exemplified by the gardens at Versailles, the cathedrals of Venice, the ruined palaces of a now vanished aristocracy.) The implied argument here is that hierarchy in national life, while it may indeed sponsor inequality and division and their attendant social problems, also allows for the flourishing of the truly exceptional; as such, it is a form of life whose absence James cannot help but mourn, because to him it makes unique provision for the grandeur and exaltation that are supposed to define art.

But James's sardonic look at American "society" and its prospects, eloquent and influential though it may have been, is only half right. To be sure, America was not, and could not be, Europe. For its transplanted inhabitants at least, it possessed none of the accumulated grandeur and amassed prestige of the Old World. Born as it was as a nation in a moment of decisive break from its ancestry, and unable to draw upon what one scholar calls the "massive and dense structures of inherited customary practices" that would define European nationalisms, America, and American national life, would necessarily appear blank and denuded when viewed, as in James's account, from the perspective of the looming immensity of European history and tradition. For several centuries, the comparative impoverishment of New World cultural institutions was a major theme in virtually all considerations of American national character.

Still, James's portrait of New World denudation tells an undeniably partial story of American self-understanding. There were, and there are, other stories. Had James looked back over the American experiment at an only slightly different angle, he might have seen that one of the essential elements of the American project, from the very moment of its inception, had been to seek grandeur elsewhere, and to define it otherwise. That the New World was in irreparable ways severed from the old, and located at too great a remove from its institutions and practices to be definitively stamped by them, was for many people a fact not to be mourned but, after a fashion, celebrated. For many, this great severance from the models of the past was the very key to the titanic quality of *promise* they believed to define the new American world—the very thing that made America an espe-

cially congenial environment in which to pursue dreams of renovation and rebirth and self-re-creation on a scale previously unimaginable. These dreams of a new heaven and a new earth, of a new covenant with God, did not aspire to European structure or monumentality. Instead, they tended to make a virtue of the comparative equality that resulted from a social order not overly constrained by inherited hierarchy and aristocratic division. (Tocqueville begins *Democracy in America* with a note he will return to repeatedly: "No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly during my stay there than the equality of conditions.") And the issue of that democratic order was, if not anything that could properly be called political or even social "equality," then a different but equally revolutionary ideal: the ideal, in short, of indivisibility, of an unprecedented kind of unity of purpose and direction among peoples distant to and wildly disparate from one another.

Had his ear been tuned to this note, James might have gone back as far as John Winthrop, who as he endeavored to imagine the Puritan settlement in New England in his 1630 sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," as "a Citty vpon a Hill," reminded his congregation that they would be distinguished as much by their civic unanimity as by their piety. Of the "Covenant and sealed... Commission" given by the Lord to the Puritans, Winthrop says,

wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge our selues of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities, we must vphold a

familiar Commerce together in all meeknes, gentlenes, patience and liberallity, wee must delight in eache other, make others Conditions our owne reioyce together, mourne together, labour, and suffer together, allwayes haueing before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body, soe shall wee keepe the vnitic of the spirit in the bond of peace.

For Winthrop, as for many following him, the singularity of American destiny was to be secured, perhaps above all else, by the unity of feeling and of purpose that could only be accomplished on this new frontier, at a saving distance from all the divisive institutions of the Old World. Here as elsewhere, the American (or in this case proto-American) claim to distinction and exalted singularity does not rest in the splendor of its institutions or in the glory of its finest citizens. But this did not mean, as James rather ruefully implied, that America was without an ideal of magnificence or exaltation. American grandeur would instead be conceived as a function of its miraculous coherence, of the deeply felt sensation of mutual belonging that, at least in the ideal, would traverse the whole of the scattered citizenry, and be available to each individual as a feeling of far-reaching connectedness, of strangely intimate attachment to the strangers who made up one's nation.

Perhaps no other writer in the American cannon better exemplifies precisely this ideal, or brings it to a higher state of articulation, than Walt Whitman. And there is, quite certainly, no single event that tests that ideal, or Whitman's ability to imagine its ful-

fillment, as dramatically as the Civil War. From the moment of Whitman's appearance on July 4, 1855, in his groundbreaking volume *Leaves of Grass*—Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote from Concord to say, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career"—through the publication of expanded versions of the text in 1856 and 1860, he had made it his priority and, more accurately, his mission to secure for America an undreamt-of unanimity and coherence. As he puts it in the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, speaking of "the United States with veins full of poetical stuff": "Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall." Poetry, Whitman believed—*his* poetry—would circulate among the masses of anonymous readers and conjure among them flashes of 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 (as was increasingly common) in the racial distinction of one exalted class of Americans, but in the sense of passionate connectedness that, with the aid of his poetry, would join together even citizens as dispersed and as disparate as America's.

Whatever else it was, the Civil War marked a terrific crisis in this dream of expansive indivisibility, and not only for Whitman. One of the very finest documents of that crisis, and still one of the lesser known, is Whitman's bracing and incisive little volume *Memoranda During the War*, a book published privately, in an edition of roughly 100, in 1876, and later amended, transposed, and folded into another volume of Whitman's prose, *Specimen Days & Collect*. (Large portions of the book first appeared in a series of newspaper articles Whitman published about the war in

1874, called "'Tis But Ten Years Since.") Whitman's war experiences have long been studied and commented upon, but his brief book of prose sketches of the war has only recently begun to attract a more sustained scholarly attention, in Mark Maslan's *Whitman Possessed*, Roy Morris, Jr.'s indispensable biography of Whitman's war years, *The Better Angel*, and most especially in Robert Leigh Davis's insightful study, *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine*. (This newer work follows the lead of suggestive scholarship on Whitman and the war by such writers as Betsy Erkkila, Michael Moon, Charley Shivley, and Timothy Sweet.) Before all this, though, *Memoranda* tended to be read chiefly as a supplement, in prose, to the war poetry of *Drum-Taps* and *Memories of President Lincoln*, and one can see why. Like *Drum-Taps* and *Memories*, *Memoranda* is not a historical survey of the war, its principal players, or its great and terrible moments. One can infer the results of the bloody battles at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, but only because Whitman is tending to men wounded there. The finer points of strategy, the details of battle, and portraits of the most crucial military personalities, such as we find in much contemporary history, are absent here; so too are the wranglings over the political philosophy and constitutional origins of Confederate and Union claims to authority, such as we find in biographies of Lincoln or Webster or Calhoun, or in the more esoteric tomes of a contemporary of Whitman's like Confederate Vice-President Alexander Stephens. *Memoranda* is more commonly taken up, when it has been, as a revealing biographical addendum to Whitman's poetry; as a telling glimpse of the routines and culture of convalescence, in the Civil War hospitals through which so many

thousands of soldiers passed; or as an intriguing, semi-private, journal-like document maintained by one of the most gifted poets of his own or any era, as he passed through a moment of profound historical upheaval.

*Memoranda During the War* is all these things. But it is also a story of the simultaneous deformation, and painstaking reassembly, of an idea of America. With a fervor few before him had matched, Whitman believed in an ideal of American coherence, and in the larger possibilities for human experience, both collective and individual, such an expansive mutuality would surely allow. 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—was in fact shaking in its palpable, physical intensity—and unlimited in its reach into and across the vast expanses of the republic. For such a vision of the nation, one could scarcely have imagined a more complete rebuke than the Civil War. A vivid testament to disunity, anatomization, and the indifference of citizen to distant citizen, the war seemed calculated to destroy the bluff, Emersonian optimism of a poet like Whitman. And, to some extent, the war did precisely that: especially in the postwar prose, not only of *Memoranda* but of *Democratic Vistas* as well, we find a voice vastly more tempered, more shot through with resignation and despair, than in any of Whitman's earlier work.

But *Memoranda During the War* is also a testament to the tenacity of Whitman's faith in his ideal of American coherence. The little book, with all its idiosyncrasies of form and exposition, records some of Whitman's most searching quarrels with

that ideal—but not, amazingly, his abandonment of it. It is not that Whitman emerges from the war unaltered. Roy Morris Jr. reminds us that by the time the war “had claimed Lincoln,” it “had also taken away a fundamental part of the poet himself, the part that believed in the blissful love of comrades as a working model for the American republic.” And yet Betsy Erkkila argues that as he “tramp[ed] up and down the aisles of the hospital wards, Whitman came closer to achieving his dream of reaching the democratic masses than he would ever come through his written work.” Both of them, I think, are correct. And it is precisely Whitman’s often anguished ambivalence around these questions—his refusal to settle for merely comforting or merely horrifying accounts of the war—that makes *Memoranda* as fascinating, and as wrenching, as it is.

Whitman did not go to the war in search of inspiration; he went looking for his brother. In December of 1862, having read his brother’s name in a casualty list from Fredericksburg, Whitman made the journey from his home in Brooklyn to Washington, D.C., from there by boat to Aquia Landing, and finally to Falmouth, Virginia, in search of any sign of George Whitman, a soldier in the 51st New York, who by the war’s end had seen an immense amount of fighting, and lived to tell of it. Fearing the worst, Whitman found George alive and well and nursing an only slightly wounded cheek. (He wrote home to his mother on December 29: “When I found dear brother George, and found that he was alive and well, O you may imagine how trifling all my little cares and difficulties seemed.”) There at the winter

camp of the massive Army of the Potomac, he also found an entirely “new world,” dense with horror and revelation: “I find deep things,” he wrote to Emerson (January 17, 1863), “unrecked by current print or speech.” “I now make fuller notes, or a sort of journal,” he went on to say, of the “memoranda of names, items, &c” he had begun to keep at the hospitals. “This thing I will record—it belongs to the time, and to all the States—(and perhaps it belongs to me).”

Whitman had come somewhat late to the war. The first twenty months of the conflict found the poet home in New York, often in the heady bohemian company of the artists, editors, sex-radicals, and assorted intellectuals gathered in Pfaff’s beer cellar, on Broadway. Out of this intoxicating milieu Whitman had written some of his most daring poetry, including the “Children of Adam” and “Calamus” clusters of *Leaves of Grass*, in the latter of which he sang “songs of manly affection” with unembarrassed openness, and preached of the politically revolutionary force of “comradeship.” The impromptu field hospital set up at Lacy Mansion, looking across the Rappahannock River into Fredericksburg, was of course a radically new environment for the roustabout urban poet, and what Whitman found there rattled him out of what he called his “New York stagnation.” One can, I think, exaggerate how unfamiliar and disorienting this “new world” was to Whitman, who by 1862 was in fact no stranger to horror, or for that matter to hospitals. Because of his ardent affection for the stage drivers of Manhattan—young men who enjoyed one of mid-century New York’s more physically hazardous professions—Whitman had spent significant time, before the war, visiting the bedsides of injured drivers, making

tours of the hospital wards, and writing of what he saw there. Still, the carnage of the Civil War hospitals was of an entirely different order. "One of the first things that met my eyes in camp," he wrote to his mother (December 29, 1862), in a passage later incorporated into *Memoranda*, "was a heap of feet, arms, legs, &c. under a tree in front of a hospital, the Lacy house."

Whitman was thus as well prepared as he could be—which is to say, only very partially prepared—for the new and august office to which he appointed himself soon after arriving in Washington. "Walt Whitman, Soldier's Missionary" he scrawled on the front cover of one of his first war notebooks. Though fanciful, this is a more accurate description of Whitman's work in the hospitals than many of those more familiarly attached to him. He was, in fact, neither nurse nor wound-dresser (though he was perfectly capable of being of assistance during any number of procedures); nor, despite an early and unsurprisingly short-lived affiliation with the Christian Commission, was Whitman in the wards to proselytize and convert, like so many of the other hospital volunteers. These were not his employments. What income he got came from working a few hours a day in the Corcoran Building as a copyist in the office of the army paymaster, Major Lyman Hapgood. (Whitman got the job through his connection to Charles W. Eldridge, a clerk in the office and a devoted friend who, along with W. W. Thayer, had published the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and gone bankrupt doing so.) He saved on expenses—the better to pay for the gifts he distributed among the wounded—by living for much of his time in the city with the family of William D. O'Connor, a polemical novelist and abolitionist (on this point he and Whit-

man differed) who in a few years would defend Whitman against charges of immorality in his hagiographic work, *The Good Gray Poet*. But whatever Whitman's other involvements, his life in Washington was given structure by the hospitals and their ranks of wounded men. "I am now in and around Washington," he writes early on in *Memoranda*, "daily visiting the hospitals." There he would distribute small gifts (candies, fruit, the occasional brandy), make notes on others' needs, talk with the men, and regularly write letters home for and about them. Often he would sit in watchful silence beside soldiers too ill to speak, or nearing death. To these, too, he gave what he could: a comforting presence, promises to write to distant relatives, a hand to hold, a last kiss in this life.

These were, perhaps, humble ministrations. But they required of Whitman a great deal of emotional fortitude—a peculiar compound of tenderness and stolidity—and no small degree of physical courage. Beyond the toll taken by such proximity to the daily heartbreak of painful and untimely death, the risk of falling grievously ill through submersion in such horrifically unsanitary environments was very real. We should recall that nearly two-thirds of Civil War deaths were the result of infection and disease, and that hospitals, as well as camps, were accordingly immensely hazardous places. (Part of the tragedy of Civil War hospitals, as has often been observed, is that they operated in the last remaining years before discoveries about germs, disinfection, and sanitation revolutionized medical knowledge.) One measure of the risk to Whitman is the sharp decline of his health in the summer of 1864, requiring his removal from Washington back to Brooklyn, where he recuper-

ated until January 1865. (“[T]his place & the hospitals seem to have got the better of me,” he wrote to his mother (June 17, 1864). “I have bad nights & bad days too, some of the spells are pretty bad... the doctors have told me I must leave, that I need an entire change of air.”) By early February, though, he was “back in Washington... around among the hospitals as formerly—I find quite a good many bad old lingering wounds, & also a good many down with sickness of one sort or another.” Though much had changed for Whitman—most notably, his job (he now worked in the Patent Office, formerly a hospital, in the Bureau of Indian Affairs) and his health (“since I was prostrated last July, I have not had that unconscious and perfect health I formerly had”)—his labors among the sick and wounded had not. Still he found himself at the bedsides of the infirm, writing letters to family on their behalf, distracting them with his gentleness and charm, doing what he could to ease and cheer them. (He would remain in Washington until 1873, when a severe stroke at last brought him back to Camden, New Jersey.) “It makes me feel quite proud,” he would write to his mother (February 2, 1864), “I can do with the men what no one else at all can.”

Such are some of the biographical and historical contexts, sketched in brief, of Whitman’s Civil War, and one can read much of this story in the pages of *Memoranda*, which acquires more than occasionally the offhand and unstructured feel of an intermittent diary. But to read the book too credulously, to take on faith Whitman’s claim that these are simply “*verbatim* renderings” of his war journals and notebooks, is to miss what we might call the achieved form of *Memoranda*, and the contest of

ideas that plays out across its textual patterns and modulations. Whitman surely wished to use the work of *Memoranda* to memorialize the young men who suffered and perished in his sight, and to record as well the extraordinary life of the many hospitals he toured. But when we look more closely at its details, its rhetoric, and its figures, we see that Whitman also used the book to carry on a conversation that he had begun years before the war, and that would preoccupy him until his death.

Though they are finally volumes intended to accomplish very different kinds of memorializing work, the prose of *Memoranda* and the poetry of *Drum-Taps* do echo each other in at least one crucial respect: in both, we find a pronounced transformation in the basic rhetorical tactics Whitman had for some years been employing. These changes in Whitman's method are fascinating, in part because of how often we find them nested within several of the poet's more familiar figures and gestures. We might consider a piece from *Drum-Taps* such as "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night," a poem whose subject seems perfectly typical of Whitman, but whose treatment is in many ways a remarkable departure for him (see p. 158). In the poem, a narrator tells of his evening spent beside a wounded and dying comrade, of his tender ministrations, and of burying the boy at dawn. But this narrative emerges only rather torturously from the poem: almost every line hesitates the progression of the narrative by returning with an accretion of new modifiers to the action of a previous line. (Indeed, very little "action" happens in the poem after the first six lines.) The substance of the poem's narrative,

we soon come to discover, is actually the suspension or retardation of narrative:

Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed just as the dawn  
 appear'd,  
 My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop'd well his form,  
 Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head and  
 carefully under feet,  
 And there and then and bathed by the rising sun, my son in  
 his grave, in his rude-dug grave I deposited.

One of the things that's startling about the poem is this adamant refusal, in its very form, to hurry the plot, to exercise any haste in the depositing of the soldier into the earth; and the extreme formal restraint, which unfolds even at the level of the line, itself mimes the poet's vigil and his refusal to abandon or immediately to bury his beloved boy. Nowhere in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* would we find a sentence as grammatically strained as the line, "And there and then and bathed by the rising sun, my son in his grave, in his rude-dug grave I deposited." The syntactic reversals, and the inclusion of one, and then another, and then another, and still finally another modifying clause whose subject and verb have yet to appear, repeat at the level of the line the reticence with which the poet approaches the task of burying the boy. Everything here must be excruciatingly delayed in its unfolding. Not by tears or words will the poet's devotion to his comrade be measured—"But not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh, long, long I gazed"—but by this reluctance to be parted from him, a reluctance which the poem exercises all of its narrative