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Dickinson, Whitman and the Civil War: How Can Language Deal with Upheaval?

The issue of *Harper's Weekly* for August 22, 1863, told the story of the battle of Gettysburg illustrated with woodcuts made on the basis of some of Timothy O'Sullivan's photographs taken on the battlefield (Horan 45).¹ The battle of Gettysburg, one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War, raged for three days from July 1 to July 3, 1863, and involved 90.000 Northerners confronted by 75.000 Confederates. By the night of July 3 when the fighting was over, the South had suffered 20.000 casualties, the North 17.500. The battle did break the South's invasion of the North, but its effects on the whole war campaign were not immediately visible. The previous year had been an anxious and dreary one for the North, ending with the unsuccessful attempt of the Union Army to cross Rappahannock at Fredericksburg (Dec. 13), where the Union casualties reached 12.000 with the South sustaining losses of 5.500 soldiers; the early part of 1863 amounted to a bloody stalemate in the East, while the victories in the West were too costly (*Family Encyclopedia of American History*). The war had turned into a nightmare. At its outbreak, on April 28, 1861, Reverend Charles Wadsworth had preached a sermon on "American Patriotism," which basically accepted and justified the war, yet in his conclusion Wadsworth feared for the future:

We, perhaps, may not live to witness the end of the conflict. Indeed there are some men who, in view of our present rate of progress, have little hope that we shall. God seems to be treating us as he treated Israel – because of their unbelief and cowardice, keeping them marching backward and forward forty years in a desert, which a band of Bedouin cavalry would have crossed in a month...²

In the first half of 1863 the prospect for peace did not seem brighter.

There is an uncanny correlation between personal and national history in the case of Whitman's and Dickinson's biography. For both poets the Civil War constitutes the

¹ Woodcuts were used since newspaper reproductions did not come until many years later. For unclear reasons *Harper's* credited the photographs to Matthew Brady. Horan mistakenly dates the Gettysburg issue of *Harper's* (vol.7 no.347) for August 27; the correct date is August 22. Both photographs reproduced in the present article come from Horan's book.

² I'd like to thank Dr. Magdalena Zapędowska for sharing this material with me.

critical time of their lives, just as it stands out as critical time in the nation's history. It drastically changed Whitman's life. At the outbreak of the armed conflict, the poet vowed to live a "purged" and "cleansed" life and took to visiting the sick, injured, and wounded at New York Hospital. In December, 1862, having heard that his brother was wounded, he went to Virginia and, after George's return home, remained in Washington as a volunteer visitor and attendant in the capital's military hospitals. By June, 1864, his health deteriorated so that he had to return to Brooklyn on an extended sick leave, but again went to Washington in January, 1865, taking up a clerkship at the Department of the Interior. He continued the self-imposed hospital duty. That summer he wrote the Lincoln elegy and in October published it, together with his other Civil War poems, in *Drum Taps and Sequel (Complete Poetry and Collected Prose, "Chronology")*. Among the *Drum Taps* poems was "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim," which I want to consider here. The idea for the poem was entered in the poet's notebook of 1862-1863: "Sight at daybreak in camp in front of hospital tent Three men lying, each with a blanket spread over him – I lift up one and look at the young man's face, calm and yellow. 'Tis strange! (Young man: I think this face of yours the face of my dead Christ.)" (*Leaves of Grass* 306). In the post-Civil War editions of *Leaves of Grass* "A Sight in Camp" remained in the *Drum Taps* group practically unchanged.

Dickinson was over a decade younger than Whitman, and though in terms of poetic development both were late bloomers, it may be accurately said that the peaking of her poetic powers coincided exactly with the War years. She wrote but a handful of poems relating directly to the War, such as "It feels a shame to be alive" (Fr. 524), "When I was small, a Woman died –" (Fr. 518), and, perhaps most famously, the poem in which she reacted to the death of Frazar Stearns, son of the President of Amherst College and Austin Dickinson's friend (Fr. 384).³ Frazar was killed at Newbern, North Carolina, in the bleak year 1862. Dickinson, of course, never went to the battlefields or visited military hospitals, yet she read about the War in the newspapers and magazines which her family subscribed to, *Harper's* among them. And, first of all, the War was simply all around her. As Daniel Aaron argued long ago, it produced intense emotional experience for an entire nation of people, and Dickinson's poetry fed from this outpouring of intensity (355-356).

Confronted with the war, the men closest to her had to make agonizing moral and life choices. When Austin was drafted, he paid \$500 for a substitute (Sewall 536); the fact must have made Frazar Stearns's death even more shocking for the Dickinsons. Reverend Charles Wadsworth, the man who seems the most likely candidate for the Master,

³ All quotations from Dickinson's poems refer to *The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Reading Edition*, edited by Ralph Franklin, and are identified in the text by the abbreviation Fr. followed by the poem's number.

resigned his position in Philadelphia, reluctant to risk a conflict with the parishioners over his tolerant view of slavery, the official cause of war. Wadsworth found a new congregation, consisting largely of pro-Union Southerners, at the other end of the continent, in San Francisco.⁴ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the writer to whom Dickinson turned for criticism and professional support in April of 1862, accepted, in the fall of the same year, a commission as colonel of the First South Carolina Volunteers, a regiment formed from freed slaves. He was wounded in July, 1863, though Dickinson learned about his injury only early next summer (L. 290). Neighbors' sons were being brought to Amherst to be buried at home. Dickinson's private crisis must have felt almost indistinguishable from the national ordeal.

Shira Wolosky acknowledged the fusion of personal and national misery in Dickinson's experience interpreting the poem "My Triumph lasted till the Drums" (Fr. 1212) as expressive of the way her struggle with the war experience paralleled her struggle with religious doubt. By 1863 several Dickinson's letters indicate that her health had given in under pressure, and in the summer of 1864 – then again in 1865 – she had to be treated in Boston for unidentified eye trouble. In the letters, especially to her Norcross cousins, the poet refers to her "nervous prostration," comments on the bleakness of war time, and on her own shaky condition. In late May of 1863, for example, she entreats the Norcross cousins to come and help her survive the annual Commencement ceremonies, describing her unstable condition:

The nights turned hot when Vinnie had gone, and I must keep no window raised for fear of prowling 'booger,' and I must shut my door for fear front door slide open on me at 'the dead of night,' and I must keep 'gas' burning to light the danger up, so I could distinguish it – these gave me a snarl in the brain which don't unravel yet, and that old nail in my breast pricked me; these, dear, were my cause. Truth is so best of all I wanted you to know. (L. 281)

⁴ Benjamin Lease correlates the evidence of poems and letters for Dickinson's personal crisis in the early 1860s and the circumstances leading to Charles Wadsworth's resignation from the Arch Street Church in Philadelphia demonstrating that "the spring and summer of 1861 brought crisis for both the minister and the poet" (see also "Wadsworth, Charles" entry by Lease in *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*). Wadsworth was a Union supporter but believed that slavery was not in itself a sin and denounced "the wicked and hypocritical attacks on our Christian brethren of the South." Rather than risk an open conflict with his parishioners or compromise his integrity, he resigned, and after protracted negotiations accepted a call to Calvary Church in San Francisco. Its founder, William Anderson Scott was a close friend of his and may have been instrumental in securing the invitation for Wadsworth. Scott, too, resigned because his congregants did not share his secessionist sympathies. Eventually, Wadsworth sailed for San Francisco on May 1, 1862. The whole complicated story, seen against the emotional misery of Dickinson's second and third Master letters, more than implies an intimate interweaving of personal and public issues in that critical period of Dickinson's life.

In the poems of this period she intensely investigates the process by which one learns to live with pain. A central element of such learning is seeking emotional balance in language adequate for a clear-sighted, disciplined but truthful rendering of one's plight. The use of formal or conventional language, like her school Latin, seems to help in distancing pain:

It don't sound so terrible – quite – as it did –
I run it over – 'Dead,' Brain – 'Dead'
Put it in Latin – left of my school –
Seems it don't shriek so – under rule. (Fr. 384)

I want to put together two Civil War poems – one by Whitman and one by Dickinson – against the background of two Civil War photographs by Timothy O'Sullivan. The photographs serve, as they were originally meant to serve, as visual documentation, not as examples of period art (anyway, the 1860s were yet too early for photography to be conscious of itself as an artistic medium). Neither was reproduced in the above mentioned issue of the *Harper's Magazine*, where illustrations clearly avoided drastic scenes,⁵ but both come from the same series of battlefield photographs, and they show well the uncensored, shocking reality of war to which the poets respond. As Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* for July, 1863, about a series of photographs made after the battle of Antietam (September, 1862):

Let him who wishes to know what the war is look at this series of illustrations. These wrecks of manhood thrown together in careless heaps or ranged in ghastly rows for burial were alive but yesterday.... It was so nearly like visiting the battlefield to look over these views, that all the emotions excited by the actual sight of the stained and sordid scene, strewn with rags and wrecks came back to us... (quoted in Orvell, 62-63)

The poems selected for discussion here similarly exemplify the two poets' reaction to the upheaval which undermined the very foundations of their culture; O'Sullivan's photographs bring into focus the essence of that upheaval – the loss of meaning of indi-

⁵ Actually only one of the illustrations in *Harper's* shows dead bodies in the distant right foreground. The magazine wrote about the Battle of Gettysburg in several successive issues, starting on July 11, 1863. The issue for July 22, 1865, featured an article "The Gettysburg Monument. Consecrated July 4, 1865" and an illustration by unknown engraver which is a composite of borrowings from several prints by Timothy O'Sullivan and Alexander Gardner. Echoing the title of O'Sullivan's widely known photograph, the picture was captioned "The Harvest of Death." Possibly in response to the occasion, the author of the engraving retrospectively sought to intensify the drama of the original photographs (see also Orvell 62-67).



Timothy O'Sullivan, *The Devil's Den at Gettysburg*

vidual life. The shot of a single, fallen soldier (*The Devil's Den at Gettysburg*) showing the corpse's face attempts, despite the lonely anonymity of this young death, to rescue individuality from oblivion, affirming that tragedy or at least pathos is still possible. However, the other photograph (*The Slaughter Pen*), a panoramic view of landscape of massive destruction, cruelly depicts death's casualness as human bodies merge into earth ploughed over by artillery shells. There is no hierarchy of values in this stark, naturalistic view, and no ethical space opens for tragedy. The two photographs, thus, may be taken as visual equivalents of the directions in which Whitman and Dickinson respectively move in the poems under discussion.

Here is the poem by Whitman:

A sight in camp in the daybreak gray and dim,
As from my tent I emerge so early sleepless,
As slow I walk in the cool fresh air the path near by the hospital tent,
Three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought out there untended lying,
Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woolen blanket,
Gray and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.

Cautious I halt and silent stand,
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest the first just lift the blanket;
Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-gray'd hair,
and flesh all sunken about the eyes?
Who are you my dear comrade?

Then to the second I step – and who are you my child and darling?
Who are you sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming?

Then to the third – a face nor child nor old, very calm, as of beautiful
yellow-white ivory;
Young man I think I know you – I think this face is the face of the Christ himself,
Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.

(Leaves of Grass 306-307)



The poem is ordered by physical movement in space, as Whitman's poems so often are... by a version, if we may say so, of his characteristic road motif supported by the magical and liturgical number of three encounters with an unknown dead soldier, in which the question about his identity is asked three times. In this sequence of encounters, the natural progression from childhood to maturity, from birth to death, so typical of early Whitman, has been abandoned and supernatural order is asserted. We move with the speaker from the naturalistic, camera view of blanketed, "untended" corpses left for the night outside the hospital tent to the revelation of the radiant, divine identity of the third soldier. Although we recognize in the poem some of the characteristics of Whitman's early poetic technique – the structuring by movement in space, the vignette encounters with successive realistic but also symbolizing figures (as e.g. in the first paragraph of section 8 of "Song of Myself") – the final identification with Christ as a meaning-giving authority is new and thoroughly uncharacteristic. As in early Whitman, the speaking "I" moves from the vision of the eye to spiritual vision, yet here the spiritual vision is not of the eye's own making but achieved by superimposing the orthodoxy of the Christian myth on what the senses perceive. Similarly, on the aesthetic level the speaker moves from the "gray and dim" photographic view of unidentified, dead bodies covered with "heavy," "brownish," "gray" blankets to the transforming vision of formal clarity and aesthetic beauty of religious art. The dead body of Christ – the third soldier – and the speaker tenderly stooping over him form a *pieta* group. The "very calm, as of beautiful yellow-white ivory" face of the soldier recalls sculpted heads of crucified Christ. The final revelation of the dead soldier's identity is thus not only a revelation of divine presence but also of the power of language and art to lift the sordid and horrible into the sphere of the sacred. To achieve this, the transformative power of heroic imagination alone is no longer sufficient. It needs the support of both traditional cultural mythology and traditional aesthetic forms.⁶ Art and ritual, art and liturgy work together to order and transform the horror of reality.

Now, here is the Dickinson poem dated by Franklin for the poet's most prolific year 1863:⁷

They dropped like Flakes –
 They dropped like stars –
 Like Petals from a Rose –
 When suddenly across the June
 A Wind with fingers – goes –

⁶ On Whitman's relation to tradition see Kenneth M. Price, *Whitman and Tradition. The Poet in His Century*; also Agnieszka Salska, "The Growth of the Past in *Leaves of Grass*."

⁷ Johnson's dating (J.409) is 1862.

They perished in the seamless Grass –
No eye could find the place –
But God can summon every face
On his Repealless – List (Fr. 545)

It is interesting to compare Dickinson's poem, certainly not one of her best known or most impressive creations, with a specimen of popular War verse published in contemporary newspapers. The following fragment comes from a poem called "Roses," which appeared on July 4, 1862, in the *Springfield Republican*, a newspaper the Dickinsons subscribed to. It was signed with initials F.H.C. and its earlier sections address white and yellow roses:

Ah, here is a crimson rose,
As red as blood can be,
And the turf is blushing where it grows
With leaves from the fading tree;
They are falling every day, like those
Who are dying for you and me.⁸

We tend to think of Dickinson as a poet of intimately personal voice and, despite the impact of many recent studies contextualizing her work,⁹ as an intensely private poet. Nevertheless, the quoted poem, especially when placed next to one like "Roses," strikes the reader with its matter-of-fact, reporting tone. Like Whitman, Dickinson does not appeal to compassion for the fighting soldiers. Employing generalizing nature imagery

⁸ Shira Wolosky argues that in Dickinson's poems images of nature appear in war poems, and images of war appear in nature poems as, for example, in her verbal paintings of sunsets (37). However, it should be remembered that nature imagery applied to the war situation was common in contemporary writings about the War. The *Springfield Republican* for Saturday, June 1, 1861, referring to the English "War of the Roses", called the American conflict "the war of the trees" (pine and palmetto for the North and South respectively). Over a decade later, Helen Hunt Jackson, Dickinson's girlhood friend and then literary correspondent, applied a similar image of falling leaves to epidemic civilian deaths: "It was a terrible winter for old people. They dropped on all sides, like leaves swept off trees in autumn gales" (214; I am indebted to Dr. Magdalena Zapędowska for the quoted examples). Thus, in the poem under discussion, Dickinson seems to draw deliberately on language in popular circulation.

⁹ Such as Barton St. Armand's *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*, Shira Wolosky's *Emily Dickinson. A Voice of War*, Betsy Erkkila's "Emily Dickinson and Class," Nina Baym's "Emily Dickinson and Scientific Scepticism" in Baym, *American Women of Letters and the Nineteenth Century Sciences*, which show Dickinson's awareness of changes in the culture undermining traditional religious and social order. Unlike Whitman, she belonged to the class of old privilege, conscious of both its prestige and its responsibility. There is a recognizable streak of conservatism in Dickinson's social attitudes, even more importantly a recognizable streak of conservatism in her religious attitudes, and in her, sometimes difficult to accept, submissiveness to authority, or better, her need for authority that counterbalances her rebelliousness.

akin to that used by the author of “Roses,” she clips her syntax,¹⁰ foregrounds dynamic verbs and invests the poem with a very different emotional intention so that, in the first place, it confronts the outrageous anonymity of mass death. The opening triple comparison shows no revelatory progression. Instead, hurriedly, almost perfunctorily, it equates humans falling in the war with seasonal “fallings” in nature. Also, only seemingly, like Whitman, at the end of her poem Dickinson invokes divine authority to infuse meaning into the war carnage. Her speaker treats the horror of mass killing as an elemental, wholly naturalistic and natural phenomenon: a snowstorm, a summer night’s shower of shooting stars, a sudden gust of wind on a fine June day – a temporary disruption of nature’s order. Those falling in the battlefields are never identified, their death is not mythicized, and it is not sacrificial or even particular; they do not “fall” but casually “drop,” they do not “die” but “perish” with the suggestion of rotting in the verb, and they vanish from sight in “the seamless grass” sinking into the soil rather than ascending to heaven. The familiar, we might even say stock, imagery of romantic nature poetry applied to the reality of the bloody battlefield may lull the superficial reader with its clichéd associations but to someone more attentive, it demonstrates how the conventional language suppresses horror by turning it into spectacle. The poem’s concluding quatrain juxtaposes the end of the show, when the dead disappear “in the seamless Grass” so effectively that they also disappear from collective human memory, with the wishful? conventional? ironic? statement proclaiming God to be the only guardian of the memory of their faces. It is God’s task to continue to see them as individuals. Art’s aestheticizing vision falsifies or, even more cruelly, seems uninterested in preventing their individual “perishing.”

Although in this poem Dickinson’s images may appear blandly conventional, her anger is conveyed through her choice of words and through the music of her verse. Her characteristic metrical standard – some variation of the hymn or ballad stanza – is clearly disrupted.¹¹ The first section of the poem has five lines lengthening from two to three stresses in a line, with accents irregularly distributed. A pattern closer to the ballad stanza seems about to emerge in the second section, a quatrain with a full rime linking the perfectly regular, three and four stress middle lines to accompany the suggestion of resurrection in the third verse. The emergent order is, however, totally disrupted by the aggressive, ugly: “On his Repealless – List.” Returning to the two-stress brevity of the opening lines, the end line wrecks their natural, iambic smoothness. Thus, the sound

¹⁰ Following Dickinson’s concentrated sentence structures the whole line “As red as blood can be” may be rewritten simply as “red as blood” or even “blood red,” thus lose the lilting, iambic regularity of the original.

¹¹ Significantly, the poem was “regularized” in its first published version (*Poems*, 1891). It was printed as two quatrains and the two last lines were rearranged to achieve a regular rhyme pattern: “But God on his repealless list / Can summon every face” (editor’s note *The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Variorum Edition*). Franklin dates the poem “about spring 1863.”

pattern of the poem makes the innocuous nature imagery an instrument of active attack on the prettifying falsity of conventional language and belief.

As Cristanne Miller has argued, in its alliance with the Puritan tradition of plain style Dickinson's language says less rather than more, it tends to hide and even obscure meanings:

Her very disguise of defiance, however, may also stem from inherent characteristics of the plain style, which demands simplicity reflected in its name but paradoxically also a kind of reticence that may prevent its complete message from being articulated.... [P]artly as a consequence, writers in the plain style leave much unsaid, and they claim that their discourse says even less than it does. Using words sparingly leaves much to implication, and making modest claims for the text may disguise the authority its author in fact feels. (144)

It is perhaps too easy to read "They dropped like Flakes –" as a conventional nineteenth-century consolation poem and overlook its implied denouncement of language in popular use for hiding facts, for preventing the recognition that mass death has become a spectacle of some intensity but no durable impact or meaning. Neither can art lift this kind of death into the sphere of *sacrum*. Only God knows the "repealless" list of persons irrevocably banished from this life.¹² But God's province of exiled meaning is a territory no longer accessible for the living.

Metrically, the poem moves from the hurried two stress lines of the opening to quieter, three stress verses ending the first stanza, then to the near regularity of the common meter in the final quatrain. As always in the best of Dickinson, her rhythm, the melody of her verse is telling; in this poem it tells us that order is being made as the poem develops, that upheaval is being put "under rule." But the poem's order is made in irony and outrage. The appearance of God as the keeper of images of individual faces at the end of the poem comes as the climactic element in the compulsive attempt to restore meaning after disaster. The two spheres: this-worldly and other-worldly, put next to each other in the final stanza, are opposed in their functions: "seamless grass" is where the dead soldiers "perish," while God keeps "every face." Significantly, they are also separated by the characteristic Dickinsonian dash. They remain stitched together only by a strategically located full rhyme, "place/face," joining the middle lines of the quatrain, not typical for the common meter stanza but emphasizing the imposed character of the poem's order.

My reason for reading the two poems by Whitman and Dickinson next to each other is that I see both as poems by romantic authors for whom the sacredness and power of the

¹² The now obsolete meaning of "repeal" that Dickinson was certainly conscious of is "to summon back or recall, especially from exile" (*The American Heritage Dictionary. Second College Edition.*)

individual self was a foundational truth. Here they are attempting to find language capable of ordering the upheaval, which both recognize as negating, more, as invalidating the cornerstone principle of their worldview and of their art. If Whitman dedicated his whole poetic project to creating a model heroic self of “an American – this new man,” one might say that in “A Sight in Camp” we look at the new man killed in the prime of his manhood. The meaning of his death and so the continuing centrality of his self is, however, insisted on even if it has to be authorized by traditional Christian mythology and set motifs of religious art. After the Civil War Whitman was able to return to his expansive poetic mode only briefly in the Lincoln elegy, where death is once more viewed as the seed of new life without recourse to orthodox Christianity. But, being an elegy, the poem is programmatically a consolation poem and we might say that Whitman again fell back upon the authority of the traditionally sanctioned poetic convention,¹³ much as in “A Sight in Camp in Daybreak Gray and Dim” he resorted to other cultural conventions: the orthodox Christian myth and the canonical motifs of religious art.

Dickinson’s poem, on the other hand, investigates the failure of language in contemporary use to deal truthfully with the landscape of mass carnage; it also at least implies the poet’s anger at that condition. On the level of personal experience, her response was summed up in conclusion of the letter she wrote in March, 1862, to the Norcross sisters to tell them of the death of Frazar Stearns: “Austin is stunned completely. Let us love better, children, it’s most that’s left to do” (L. 255). In the poems of the war period, however, we find the poet Dickinson again and again turning the appalling insight this way and that in an effort, not so much to construct her own order against the experienced destruction of meaning – that will be the modernist artist’s task – but to try on, for herself as well as her reader, ways of linguistically “wearing murder” of the imperial, meaning-making self:

I suppose it will interrupt me some
Till I get accustomed – but then the Tomb
Like other new Things – shows largest – then –
And smaller by Habit –

It’s shrewder then
Put the Thought in advance – a Year –
How like “a fit” – then –
Murder – wear! (Fr. 384)

¹³ Agata Preis-Smith, for example, claims that “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” may be Whitman’s “only conscious approach to the traditional genre” and, referring to Richard P. Adams’ “‘Lilacs’ as Pastoral Elegy,” she goes on to point out “at least seven traditionally pastoral/elegiac ingredients in ‘Lilacs’ that are found also in classical elegies from Moschus and Bion to Matthew Arnold” (73-75).

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