

Dispatches to Henry Raymond's New York Times: Whitman on Trauma in Civil War Washington



1. "President Lincoln on battle-field of Antietam, October, 1862" seen with Dr. Jonathan Letterman. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

In his *History of The New York Times, 1851-1921*, Elmer Davis wrote that the outbreak of the Civil War "effected a great transformation in American journalism."^[1] With the Union in danger of dissolution, readers everywhere demanded "to know what had happened yesterday rather than some man's opinion on what happened last week."^[2] With their superior resources for gathering and transmitting the news, the leading New York papers were well positioned to capitalize on the public's seemingly insatiable demand for the latest information and opinion. Three New York dailies—Henry Raymond's *Times*, James Gordon Bennett Sr.'s *Herald*, and Horace Greeley's *Tribune*—emerged as essential sources of information and opinion for readers throughout the Union. With their power to exploit the latest technologies for gathering, editing, printing, and distributing a wide range of news and opinion, these papers—the only ones to be issued in editions of eight pages—came to exert an outsized influence.

On January 26, 1861, New York-based *Harper's Weekly*, writing with a pronounced dose of New York swagger, claimed that Washington lawmakers "have no opinions at all until they receive the New York papers. People in Washington actually look to the New York papers for the news of their own city. It is New York journalism which does the thinking for the whole community—Washington included. This city is the centre of news, the centre of thought, the centre of all our commercial, intellectual, political, and national activity."^[3] *Harper's* used the excellence of the city's newspapers as dispositive in its argument for moving America's capitol to New York.

This essay explores how Walt Whitman made brilliant use of Raymond's *Times* during the Civil War to reach a national audience with acute, penetrating analyses of the medical catastrophe that had engulfed the nation.^[4] Writing from Washington, where he spent the war years as a devoted hospital visitor or nurse, Whitman deployed his considerable skill as a journalist to introduce readers everywhere to the suffering of the hospitalized soldiers, focusing particularly on syndromes that, he claimed, were not well understood: trauma and its intersection with a wide range of disabilities. In moving, unsparing prose, he invited readers to think with him about just how to respond to the traumatized, the ill, and the dying—those in the hospitals and those who would be returning to their fighting units and to their communities.

Whitman was writing at a time of rapid improvement in military medicine, especially in the North. Credit belongs in the first instance to the “brash new Army surgeon general,” Dr. William Hammond, appointed in 1862 as a result of intense lobbying from the United States Sanitary Commission.^[5] Unafraid of controversy, he “implemented rigorous examinations for all regular Army officers, emphasizing public health, hygiene, and surgery,” thereby improving the quality of care.^[6] Through his famous Circular No. 6 of 1863, he removed such destructive medicines as mercury and calomel from the formulary, since there was no evidence that they improved outcomes. Life-saving progress was being made in such areas as the pavilion-style design of hospitals; use of anesthetics; general cleanliness, hygiene, and sanitation; surgical practice; and increased use of both male and female nurses, who brought their healing presence to the wards.^[7] In a dispatch to the *Times*, Whitman singled out the healing power of “[M]others, full of motherly feeling, and however illiterate, but bringing reminiscences of home, and with the magnetic touch of hands.” Such maternal attention was essential, since “[M]any of the wounded are between 15 and 20 years of age.”^[8]

Under Major Jonathan Letterman, M.D., appointed by Hammond to the position of Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac, the Army developed systems to treat the wounded in facilities positioned as close to the battlefield as possible and then transport them rapidly and safely to hospitals in Washington or elsewhere (fig. 1).^[9] Among other discoveries, the medical community learned that amputations—the sooner performed the better—saved lives by reducing the risk of uncontrollable infections. The work of Dr. Stephen Smith (1823-1922), a pioneering New York surgeon and tireless public health crusader—he became the founder of the American Association for Public Health in 1872—illustrates the way that American medicine developed in response to the catastrophe. Smith assembled an illustrated pocket manual, titled *Handbook of Surgical Operations* (1862), designed for practical use in the field. Smith's manual was circulated widely among Union army surgeons. (The handbook was copied and anonymously reissued among Confederates as well.) Among his contributions, Smith has been credited with developing a more effective method for amputation below the knee, “in which he revised the placing of the incision so that the resulting scar would receive much less pressure from an artificial leg.”^[10]

While it has long been recognized that improvements in military medicine occasioned by the Civil War have had a lasting impact, that has not been the case in the response to trauma and disability. Here cultural amnesia has been the norm. As Judith Herman observed in 1992, "The knowledge of horrible events periodically intrudes into public awareness, but it is rarely retained for long. Denial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as individual level."^[11] It was only in 1980 that post-traumatic stress disorder became an established diagnosis as recognized by the American Psychological Association. In the years since Herman's book appeared in 1992, there has been a growing recognition of the many dimensions of trauma's intersection with disability. For that reason, recovery of the insights of one of America's greatest poets, Walt Whitman, into these subjects—and the way he communicated them to a nation that was itself seized by the multiple traumas of civil war—is all the more important.



2. Walt Whitman, "Great Army of the Sick." *New York Times* (February 26, 1863), p. 2. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Whitman did not hesitate to identify deficiencies in the medical treatment of soldiers. His major contribution, however, came from his recognition of trauma as a disabling syndrome and his search for ways to mitigate it. In a dispatch to the *Times* published on December 11, 1864, he went so far as to claim that a "magnetic flood of sympathy and friendship" from a medical professional or dedicated hospital visitor is capable of accomplishing "more good than all the medicine in the world." This was not hyperbole. An assistant surgeon in the Union Army observed that the distress caused by such conditions as homesickness and the constant pressures of military life, as well as illness and injury, had become "the most pitiless monster(s) that ever hung about a human heart," killing "as many in our army as did bullets of the enemy."^[12] Whitman wrote with great urgency, since, to use the title of his first essay for the *Times*, published on February 26, 1863, the entire country now comprised one "Great

Army of the Sick" (fig. 2).

"By God, You Shall Not Go Down"

As a poet, Whitman had long dreamed of reaching a national audience. However, successive editions of *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855, 1856, and 1860, had limited circulation. Through the *Times*, however, he now had a fair chance of coming before that large national readership as a compassionate healer, a role he had claimed for himself in his poetry. In "Song of Myself" the Whitman persona boasts of his life-saving powers:

To any one dying—thither I speed, and twist the knob of the door,
Turn the bed-clothes toward the foot of the bed,
Let the physician and the priest go home.

I seize the descending man and raise him with resistless will.

O despairer, here is my neck,
By God! you shall not go down! Hang your whole weight upon me...

I am he bringing help for the sick as they pant on their backs,
And for strong upright men I bring yet more needed help. ¹¹³¹

Now, as a regular visitor in the Washington hospitals, Whitman accepted the challenge of devising ways to save lives and alleviate suffering, and to communicate his insights to a broken nation.

These goals required the development of a new style of journalism, one that would be both factual and experiential, one that, drawing from the techniques of fiction, would enable readers to cross a mental barrier so as to enter into the realm of disease, suffering, and death. In these signed dispatches, Whitman is both a reporter informing the nation about the facts of medical catastrophe and a participant incorporating his own story. He warns in "Great Army of the Sick" that the wartime hospital is a place where "the mere sight of some of [the severe wounds has] been known to make a tolerably hardy visitor faint away." But in reporting the deeply affecting stories of representative patients, Whitman serves as a reassuring, compassionate, and even loving guide, tutor, and interpreter: "Upon a few of these hospitals I have been almost daily calling as a missionary, on my own account, for the sustenance and consolation of some of the most needy cases of sick and dying men, for the last two months." Such a narrative presence is essential since "One has much to learn in order to do good in these places. Great tact is required. These are not like other hospitals."

Whitman's war dispatches for the *Times*, then, represent an extraordinary coming together of writer and medium at a moment of national crisis. Under Henry Raymond's astute, energetic leadership, the *Times* had emerged as perhaps the

most influential newspaper in the country—much as it is today. A giant in American journalism, Raymond was also a leader in the Republican Party, a staunch supporter and confidante of Abraham Lincoln. To aid in the president's reelection campaign, in 1864 Raymond published *History of the Administration of President Lincoln*. And as chairman of the Committee on Resolutions of the 1864 Republican Convention, he astutely shaped the party platform, developing its key planks.^[14] Praising the *Times* for always being "true to the Union," Lincoln considered Raymond to be his "Lieutenant-General in politics."^[15] But of course, as Harold Holzer demonstrates, the press-savvy Lincoln had long known how to make excellent use of editors and reporters in pursuing his objectives.

On April 22, 1861, less than two weeks after the Union surrender at Fort Sumter in South Carolina signified that a bloody war between the states was inevitable, Raymond placed a [notice](#) in the *Times* urging women in New York to join his wife at a gathering at their home "for the purpose of preparing bandages, lint, and other articles of indispensable necessity for the wounded." As the war ground on, Raymond came to know of Lincoln's deep concern for the wounded, whom he and his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, visited in the hospitals. It should not surprise us, then, that Whitman would seek out the *Times* as the most effective medium to bring his insights on the needs of the wounded to a wide and influential readership, which might well include Lincoln, other members of the administration, legislators, and military leaders.

In addition to numerous essays about the war in several Brooklyn papers, Whitman published some ten pieces in the *Times*; all of these are available online in the essential [Walt Whitman Archive](#). Many—but not all—of the essays for the Brooklyn papers take on a "local interest" flavor. Here Whitman is avowedly writing as a Brooklynite for his fellow Brooklynites. For instance, "Our Brooklyn Boys in the War" appeared in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on January 5, 1863. But in the *Times* he addressed a national readership on subjects of the most fundamental importance. I will focus on two of these essays, "The Great Army of the Sick" and the comprehensive "Our Wounded and Sick Soldiers," published on December 11, 1864. Perhaps better than any other contemporary, Whitman brought to his fellow citizens a deep understanding of trauma and disability—along with some well-considered and prescient suggestions on how to respond to what we now know as PTSD and the despair of wartime injury.

The Whitman-Swinton Connection

Whitman sent "The Great Army of the Sick" to John Swinton (1829-1901), who worked during the war as the chief of the *Times*' editorial staff. Swinton and Whitman were well-acquainted from their days as fellow denizens of Pfaff's café in New York. Born in Scotland, Swinton had taken courses at New York Medical College in 1857, and so had more than passing familiarity with questions of etiology and therapeutics.^[16] In accepting "The Great Army of the Sick" for the Sunday edition of the paper, he reported to Whitman on February 25, 1863, that "I have crowded out a great many things to get it in, and it has taken the

precedence of army correspondence and articles which have been waiting a month for insertion. It is excellent—the first part and the closing part of it especially. I am glad to see you are engaged in such good work at Washington. It must be even more refreshing than to sit by Pfaff's privy and eat sweet-breads and drink coffee, and listen to the intolerable wit of the crack-brains."^[171] Swinton must have known that he would have Raymond's support in thus including Whitman's essay. But then, too, Raymond and Whitman may also have been acquainted; in a letter written from Washington on September 5, 1863, to Nathaniel Bloom, Whitman fondly recalled his association in the pre-war days with a number of individuals, including "our friend Raymond."^[181] That friend may or may not have been Henry Jarvis Raymond. However, as we will see, Raymond was quite willing to open the *Times* to Whitman and his advocates.

Swinton, who "read the first edition [of *Leaves of Grass*] right after publication," had become a passionate admirer of Whitman's poetry.^[191] He is almost certainly the author of a penetrating review of the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* that appeared in the *Times* on November 13, 1856. "As we read it again and again," Swinton wrote, "and we will confess that we have returned to it often, a singular order seems to rise out of its chaotic verses." Surprisingly, Swinton charged that Whitman was himself the author of three anonymous reviews of the 1855 edition. One scholar, C. Carroll Hollis, has plausibly suggested that Whitman himself alerted his friend Swinton to his own duplicitous acts of self-promotion as a way of generating notoriety, controversy, and then attention.^[201] But what matters for Swinton in his review is the unfolding of poetic power: "Since the greater portion of this review was written, we confess to having been attracted again and again to *Leaves of Grass*. It has a singular electric attraction. Its manly vigor, its brawny health, seem to incite and satisfy. We look forward with curious anticipation to MR. WALT WHITMAN'S future works."^[211] Echoing Emerson's famous letter of July 1855 greeting Whitman at the "beginning of a great career," Swinton concluded by predicting that Whitman was sure to "contribute something to American literature which shall awaken wonder."^[221]

Over the course of his prolific career, Swinton, a great champion of the cause of labor, remained a staunch Whitman champion, doing "what he could to bring the poet's work to the attention of the public," as Thomas Winter succinctly put it.^[231] Now, in the midst of the national crisis, Swinton served both as friend of the poet and his adopted nation by making room in the *Times* for Whitman's hospital dispatches.

A First Responder Sounds the Alarm



3. "Armory Hospital," Charles Magnus, hand-colored lithograph, image and text 8 x 13 cm., on sheet 21 x 13 cm. (New York, between 1860 and 1869). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In opening "Great Army of the Sick," Whitman claimed that most Americans "have little or no idea of the great and prominent feature which these military hospitals and convalescent camps make in and around Washington" (figs. 3-4). There are "some fifty of them, of different degrees of capacity. Some have a thousand or more patients." Whitman assumes the role of guide to the mangled bodies lying in row after row of beds in those hospitals. In challenging readers somehow to embrace those bodies and to accept the reality of death, Whitman is limning a new America.

As I have written elsewhere, Whitman's Civil War writings marked a shift away from earlier writings such as "The Eighteenth Presidency!" (1856) which promoted a proto-eugenic program for the nation.^[24] Also, in a series of thirteen essays published in the *New York Atlas* from September 12, 1858, through December 26 of that year on "Manly Health and Training," Whitman expanded these eugenic ideas by providing detailed instruction on how men—young and older alike—could "attain," as he wrote in the first essay, "a perfect body, perfect blood—no morbid humors, no weakness, no impotency or deficiency or bad stuff in him, but all running over with animation and ardor." Using the pen name of Mose Velsor, Whitman wrote on the assumption that good health is a normative expectation for everyone; failure to achieve that status signals a defect of character and so poses a threat to the body politic. In short, Whitman makes no room in his America for disability.^[25] But the war changed him. Now, writing from the vast Washington hospitals, Whitman's task as journalist was no longer to inspire and instruct Americans in the search for perfect health, but to embrace a wounded nation and heal broken spirits.



4. "Campbell U.S. Genl. Hospital, Washington, D.C.," Charles Magnus, hand-colored lithograph, image and text 30 x 43 cm., on sheet 36 x 55 cm. (Washington, D.C., c. 1864). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Of the Washington hospitals Whitman visited and documented during the Civil War, Armory Hospital received the greatest attention. The hospital was proximate to the Seventh Street steamboat landing, as well as the Washington and Alexandria Railroad station, and, as Martin B. Murray notes, "took the most severely injured—and suffered the highest death rate of any area facility." A letter Whitman wrote to his mother, Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, on June 30, 1863, reads: "I devote myself much to Armory Square Hospital because it contains by far the worst cases, most repulsive wounds, has the most suffering & most need of consolation—I go every day without fail, & often at night—sometimes stay very late—no one interferes with me, guards, doctors, nurses, nor any one—I am let to take my own course." In contrast to Armory, a "model" hospital built for the purpose it served, Campbell U.S. General (another hospital Whitman visited) had originally served as cavalry barracks. Situated at Florida Avenue and Sixth Street, the barracks were later adapted to serve as a makeshift hospital. Following the war, as Murray notes, the barracks "housed Freedmen's Hospital, forerunner to the Howard University Hospital."

Whitman focuses on the ordeal of a certain J. A. H. of Company C. of the Twenty-ninth Massachusetts. His story reveals that the life-threatening trauma faced by this representative soldier can be understood both as a function of a complex, seemingly intractable organic illness and callous—even cruel—treatment by his caregivers.^[26] This soldier participated in the first Fredericksburg battle, December 11-15, 1862, a battle that revealed the shocking incompetence of the Union generals and the failure of the medical system to prepare adequately for such devastation. Growing progressively weaker and suffering from a fever from his intestinal illness, J. A. H., after being told by a physician at Fredericksburg that "nothing could be done for him here," was sent on to Washington. But along the way, he was mishandled, even though he was "very much enfeebled." Unceremoniously "dumped with a crowd of others on the boat at Aquia Creek," he fell "down like a rag...too weak and sick to sit up or help himself at all. No one spoke to him, or assisted him." Sadly, the Massachusetts soldier was treated "either with perfect indifference, or, as in two or three instances, with heartless brutality."

Whitman charges that this representative soldier's life was endangered by such callousness. After being denied assistance in securing blankets on the boat trip to Washington, he was deposited on the wharf "without any nourishment." Even after arriving at the hospital, he was so harshly treated that his "half-frozen and lifeless body fell limpsy" into the hands of the attendants. The result: he lapsed into the deep state of "despair and hopelessness" in which Whitman found him. Whitman now took it upon himself to rescue a young man, someone whose "heart was broken," one who "felt that the struggle to keep up any longer was useless." His mode of therapy included pleasant, cheering conversation, writing letters home for him, the provision of small favors, such as securing the fresh milk that he craved, and, above all, emotional encouragement and support. Whitman claims that he helped bring a despairing soldier back to life. To quote "Song of Myself," he had "seize(d) a descending man and raise(d) him with resistless will."

J. A. H.'s case would seem to fit the definition of the condition we now understand as dissociation, a syndrome of wide concern among professionals. Herman explains that "Traumatic reactions occur when action is of no avail. When neither resistance nor escape is possible, the human system of self-defense becomes overwhelmed and disorganized. Each component of the ordinary response to danger, having lost its utility, tends to persist in an altered state long after the actual danger is over."¹²⁷¹

As a result of his worsening intestinal illness, the trauma of the horrific Fredericksburg battle, and the callous treatment he endured, J. A. H. had faced grave threats to the structure of his very being, his sense of self, and connection with his past. Ominously, he had given up on a future. But with supportive care and the sort of personal connection that Whitman in his role of hospital visitor forges with him, he "will not die, but will recover." Through such stories, Whitman argues for the development of therapeutics fully responsive to the emotional condition of the wounded and ill. In "Intersection of Disability Studies and Critical Trauma Studies," Daniel R. Morrison and Monica J. Casper write that "the body itself provides a link between disability studies and critical trauma studies, arguing both for the significance of representations as well as a materialist understanding of breach, for a notion of the organic, fleshy body as it is damaged, sometimes profoundly, in its operations of life."¹²⁸¹ Whitman's dispatches from the hospitals—including from the elegant, grand Patent Office building, which, incongruously, had been used as a hospital at the beginning of the war—helps us address a lacuna of current disability scholarship.

Morrison and Casper claim that "disability studies and its 'cultural locations' have been remarkably silent on matters of the traumatic origins of many disabilities, and on the ongoing relationship between shocking events, their abrupt and chronic impacts, and experiences of disability."¹²⁹¹ What is required, they argue, is the development of a "shared conceptual vocabulary" of trauma studies and disability studies.¹³⁰¹ In his dispatches to the *Times*, Whitman combines an acute analysis of physical malady with a deep understanding of

trauma and disability, conditions complicated by the failure to address the soldiers' psychosocial needs.

Two short sections, "The Field is Large, The Reapers Few" and "Official Airs and Harshness," conclude this dispatch. The first urges Americans to devote themselves to hospital service, since a "benevolent person" could not possibly "make a better investment of himself...anywhere upon the varied surface of the whole of this big world, than in these same military hospitals." It's a direct, emotional appeal: "Reader, how can I describe to you the mute appealing look that rolls and moves from many a manly eye, from many a sick cot, following you as you walk slowly down one of these wards? To see these, and to be incapable of responding to them, except in a few cases...is enough to make one's heart crack." And "Official Airs and Harshness" argues that systemic reform throughout the medical corps is essential. Certain of the ward doctors are "careless, rude, capricious, needlessly strict."

Whitman had good reason to expect that through such dispatches he would reach Lincoln and others in positions of authority. We can see that Swinton was right to push aside other material, even important military intelligence, from the *Times* in favor of "The Great Army of the Sick." A new approach to treating all those who suffer from "[E]very form of wound...every kind of malady, like a long procession, with typhoid fever and diarrhea at the head as leaders" is mandatory. Further, Whitman's prose takes on something of the cadence, the rhythmic structure, of his poetry, particularly through the use of parallelism: "The soldier's hospital! how many sleepless nights how many woman's tears, how many long and aching hours and days of suspense, from every one of the Middle, Eastern and Western States, have concentrated here!" His plea for generous, supportive treatment of the wounded takes on particular force: "Of all the places in the world, the hospitals of American young men and soldiers, wounded in the volunteer service of their country, ought to be exempt from mere conventional military airs and etiquette of shoulder-straps. But they are not exempt."

"Our Wounded and Sick Soldiers"

"Our Wounded and Sick Soldiers," published in the *Times* on December 11, 1864, maintains the clipped quality of the diary entries on which it is based. Many of the essential observations and incidents from those notebooks would be explored brilliantly in Whitman's unconventional autobiography *Specimen Days, and Collect* (1882). There Whitman would bring into completion a powerful new style, one capable, as the poet and memoirist Stephen Kuusisto has observed, of providing readers with a "wholly conscious rendering of altered physicality in prose."^[31] From this perspective, *Specimen Days* may be seen as the "progenitor of the disability memoir."^[32] Such prose makes palpable the crisis of "extremities of subjectivity" and the "outer circumstances" of disability, "which often includes pain, suffering, poverty, and violence."^[33]

The comprehensive "Our Wounded and Sick Soldiers" seeks to plumb the depths of

that complex truth. Opening with Whitman's visit to Fredericksburg in December 1862, the account comes "down to the present hour," some two years later. The narrative tension in the essay derives from the fact that Whitman recognizes that while the subjects of trauma and disability defy representation, nevertheless they must be explored so that as wide a readership as possible will comprehend the depth of the medical catastrophe and learn how to respond productively.

Whitman includes the sort of grim statistics that are essential if the reader is to comprehend the extent of the slaughter. On the number of "cases under treatment" in government hospitals so far, "there have been, as I estimate, near 400,000." Some 200,000 individuals are "currently on the doctors' lists." It is essential to realize that no one has been unaffected: "Every family has directly or indirectly some representative among this vast army of the wounded and sick."

In the section on "Camp Hospitals, Fredericksburgh [sic], Near Falmouth," Whitman returns to his first encounter with the scenes of battle. Entering a makeshift hospital, he confronts unparalleled devastation: "I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c....Several dead bodies lie near, each covered with its brown woolen blanket." He quickly sees that "all the wounds pretty bad, some frightful, the men in their old clothes, unclean and bloody." There is little that Whitman, who had gone to Fredericksburg in search of his wounded brother George, can do to help the wounded. Nevertheless, "I cannot leave them. Once in a while some youngster holds on to me convulsively, and I do what I can for him; at any rate, stop with him and sit near him for hours, if he wishes it." Here is the moment that Whitman discovers his calling in embracing the disabled and comforting the dying. This young soldier holds him "convulsively," signifying that combat trauma has possessed him. Incapacitated by his own involuntary muscular movements, he is not a malingerer, but someone who is simply incapable of returning to the fight. We know that the younger the soldier, the more severe battle trauma is likely to be; also, the longer the individual is subjected to battle, the more likely it is that he will experience trauma.^[34] This is a war, Whitman reminds his readers, that is being fought in large part by youths and young men.

One of the most important interventions in disability studies has been to revise a medical model of disability with a social model: one that acknowledges how disability operates as a socially constructed category defined by one's access to resources, the adaptability of one's built environment to a diversity of needs, and ideological divisions that mark some bodies as normal and others as abnormal.^[35] Yet scholars have also emphasized that disability scholarship has made and continues to make transformative changes in the nature of medical care. As Tobin Siebers observes in a reconsideration of the social model, "the disabled body" holds the potential to radically transform "the process of representation itself."^[36] This potential extends to histories of disability and medicine too. In an essay that aims to put these fields in dialogue, Beth Linker proposes, "We should work to make these connections rather than throwing

up dividers between medical and disability history.”^[37]

It is in precisely this context that Whitman’s Civil War writings take on new salience. For Whitman reveals the essential importance of combining the best possible medical care with full attention to the experience of trauma and disability, as in the case of the Massachusetts soldier who was treated so callously during the trip from Fredericksburg to Washington. At times, as in the cases of the young soldiers suffering from disabling homesickness, clinical medicine is actually powerless, and only an expanded understanding of the experience of disability will be of service. In these and other ways, then, Whitman’s Civil War writings—first in these newspaper dispatches and then in the full realization in *Specimen Days*—alert us to the continuing challenge of expanding comprehension of the experience of trauma, both in the hospitals and then as soldiers returned to their communities.



5. “Columbia [i.e., Columbian] College & Carver Barracks Hospital,” Charles Magnus, hand-colored lithograph, image and text 8 x 13 cm., on sheet 21 x 13 cm. (New York, between 1860 and 1869). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Recognizing the journalistic challenge of conveying the enormous scope of the medical catastrophe while also bringing home the human dimension of the suffering, Whitman develops the concept of “specimens,” a term that will serve as the organizing principle of *Specimen Days*.^[38] Under the subtitle “Specimens of Hospital Visits,” he recounts his interactions with individual patients, mentioning, for instance, the traumatized D. F. Russell of Malone, New York, who was “downhearted and feeble; a long-time before he would take any interest; soothed and cheered him gently; wrote a letter home to his mother...gave him some fruit and other gifts.” The need for such seemingly small but still essential gifts for the wounded had been overlooked. These gifts include possessing even a small amount of money; access to reading materials; help with letter writing;

and the provision of such treats as fruit, cookies, ice cream, and tobacco (figs. 5-6). Lifting the spirits of the hospitalized, these gestures remind the wounded that they are part of ongoing human society. Even the once “downhearted and feeble” D. F. Russell is “remarkably changed for the better; up and dressed, (quite a triumph; he afterward got well and went back to his regiment.)”



6. “Ward in the Carver General Hospital,” Washington, D.C. 111-B-173. National Archives Identifier 524592, National Archives Civil War Photos.

Further, not only must the visitor be attuned to the needs of individuals, but also he or she is to be responsive to the mood of an entire ward. All too frequently, “there is a heavy weight of listlessness prevailing, and the whole ward wants cheering up.” One way to accomplish that “cheering up” is by reading to the entire group. Since the work of the hospital visitor may make the difference between life and death, it is essential, Whitman makes clear, that it be incorporated into the practice of military medicine.

One of the most important means of addressing the pathology of isolation, depression, and despair is through “Writing Letters at the Bedside,” to use one of Whitman’s subtitles. The traumatized, Whitman discovered, must begin the process of reconnecting with the significant people in their lives. The insights of Pierre Janet (1859-1947), the pioneering French investigator of split personality, dissociation, and trauma, are illuminating on this point. Janet, as Herman has summarized his achievements, demonstrated “that the traumatic memories were preserved in an abnormal state, set apart from ordinary consciousness.”^[39] The severing of “the normal connection of memory, knowledge, and emotion resulted from intense emotional reactions to traumatic events. He wrote of the ‘dissolving’ effects of intense emotion, which incapacitated the ‘synthesizing’ function of the mind.”^[40] All those who care for the hospitalized must be alert, able to recognize that incapacitating syndrome, and then deploy techniques that help to rebuild those severed connections. The complex feelings of despair and grief for all that one has lost must be acknowledged and explored.

In the section titled “Writing Letters by the Bedside,” Whitman explores the processes of mourning and reconnection, noting:



7. "The Letter for Home," Winslow Homer, Campaign Sketches, lithograph, image and text 31 x 23 cm., on sheet 36 x 28 cm. (Boston, Mass., 1863). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

I do a good deal of this, of course, writing all kinds, including love-letters. Many sick and wounded soldiers have not written home to parents, brothers, sisters, and even wives, for one reason or another, for a long, long time. Some are poor writers, some cannot get paper and envelopes; many have an aversion to writing because they dread to worry the folks at home—the facts about them are so sad to tell. I always encourage the men to write, and promptly write for them. (figs. 7-8)

Herman recognizes that "Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community."[\[41\]](#) In the face of the profound physical and psychological wounding of its youth, the entire community has been traumatized, and so must find ways to reestablish the vital human connections. In writing about "Our Wounded and Sick Soldiers" in the *Times*, Whitman contributes to this purpose. Further, as these dispatches make clear, the community must begin thinking beyond the hospital—to prepare, that is, for a lifetime of disability that many veterans will face. Whitman returns frequently to the subject of amputations, since a "large majority of the wounds are in the arms and legs." But then too the war is responsible for injuries of "every kind of wound in every part of the body." Speaking of the "arrivals" to the hospitals from the battle of Chancellorsville, he documents "all sorts of wounds. Some of the men are fearfully burnt from the explosion of artillery caissons." The previous day had been particularly horrific, with numerous amputations "going on—the attendants are dressing wounds."



8. "The Farewell Message," Albert Dubois, hand-colored lithograph, image and text 30 x 23 cm., on sheet 41 x 27 cm. (Fall River, Mass., between 1862 and 1865). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. As Whitman indicates, writing letters by the bedside of the injured and dying became one of the most important kinds of attention a hospital visitor could provide. The need took different forms. Perhaps the soldier had not written to family or friends for some time and could not write now due to injury. There were soldiers who were not literate and who needed a scribe to write on their behalf. As figure 8 illustrates, in the most severe cases, letters represented a final opportunity to say goodbye. It is worth noting that the letter writer in figure 8 is a male Union soldier, thus revising the more common gender dynamic we find in Winslow Homer's "The Letter for Home." Thus, Dubois's image frames the scene of vicarious letter writing less as an instance of domestic surrogacy and more as an allegory of national futurity—the precarious form of the dying soldier's last words finding through Union fraternity the promise of remaining part of that legacy after he is gone.

In his poetry Whitman famously addresses his reader directly, asserting at the outset of "Song of Myself" that "what I assume you shall assume." In "Our Wounded and Sick Soldiers," he also speaks directly to his readers, inviting them, for instance, to join him in wandering about Washington, in search of some high ground from which to observe "these white clusters of barracks in almost every direction. They make a great show in the landscape, and I often use them as landmarks." But their whiteness is deceptive, since these "clusters are very full of inmates. Counting the whole, with the convalescent camps, (whose inmates are often worse off than the sick in the hospitals,) they have numbered, in this quarter and just down the Potomac, as high as fifty thousand invalid, disabled, or sick and dying men."

Even while encouraging readers to take up the work of the hospital visitor, Whitman seeks to educate potential volunteers on its emotional burden and the complexity of such work. He emphasizes in "Our Wounded and Sick Soldiers" that

the visitor must possess "both experience and natural gifts, and the greatest judgment." Caring for the hospitalized is both an "art" and a "trade." The use of the word "trade" would suggest that Whitman recognized that hospital visiting might well become a profession. The challenge is to develop a therapeutic relationship with the patient, one in which the wounded individual is able to share his deepest fears and concerns with a sympathetic individual. The work demands the "conscientious personal investigations of cases...in the fullest spirit of human sympathy and boundless love. The men feel such love, always, more than anything else...I have met very few persons who realize the importance of humoring the yearnings for love and friendship of these American young men, prostrated by sickness and wounds."

The penultimate section of this dispatch, "Human Magnetism as a Medical Agent," expands on this insight. Recovery occurs when the patient is able both to love and to accept the love and concern of others. Caretakers must recognize that these wounded are "laid up with painful wounds or illness, far away from home, among strangers" and respond accordingly. This is not mere "sentimentalism," but "the most solid of facts." The goal for the visitor is to become "a hearty, healthy, clean, strong generous souled-person...sending out invisible, constant currents" of love and magnetism, which "does immense good to the sick and wounded."

Whitman finds a balance between telling the stories of those individual soldiers who do survive and those, like Oscar F. Wilber, Company G, One Hundred and Fifty-fourth New York, described in the section titled "Death of a New-York Soldier," who succumb. Deeply religious, Wilber asks Whitman to read to him from the New Testament, especially stories of "how Christ rose again." Prostrated as he is from an intestinal disorder and wounds that would not heal, Oscar is aware of his approaching death. The role of the visitor includes being responsive to the emotional and spiritual needs of the dying,

Reflecting the way that such work exacts a heavy toll on the hospital visitor, in May 1864, Whitman too became one of the disabled. The precipitating factor seems to have been the arrival in Washington of the wounded from the horrific battles of the Wilderness and Spottsylvania. The "severity of the wounds, outvied anything that we had seen before," he writes in a section titled, "Wounded from Wilderness, Spottsylvania, etc." Further, the Army's transportation systems, carefully designed by Dr. Letterman as they were, became overwhelmed, and the weather was unusually hot, so that many of the "wounds had worms in them." Now, "for the first time in my life," Whitman confesses, his health has broken: "I began to be prostrated with real sickness, and was, before the close of the Summer, imperatively ordered North by the physicians, to recuperate and have an entire change of air." Here is another marker on the human toll of the war: the experience of what is known as secondary or vicarious trauma.

Still, in the final section of "Our Wounded and Sick Soldiers," he makes a profession of unwavering service, claiming that he has always "tried to do

justice to all the suffering that fell in my way.” This dispatch serves as a powerful charge to the readers of the *Times* and to us as well to be present for those debilitated by trauma. It concludes with a catalogue of all the states and regions represented in those hospitals. For one and all, both for whites and blacks, he “did what I could for them.”

The Good Gray Poet in the Times

As is well-known, Whitman was discharged by Secretary of the Interior James Harlan on June 30, 1865, on suspicion of immorality. Rushing to Whitman’s defense was his friend William Douglas O’Connor, who published a stirring pamphlet, *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication*, in 1866. Raymond gave O’Connor a four-column platform on the Sunday editorial page on December 2, 1866, for the purpose of reviewing the newest edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Raymond introduced the article with a calculated half-column endorsement of the value of the article. The charge of “indecent” in Whitman’s poetry may be warranted, he admits. But he insists, “We do certainly recognize in some of WHITMAN’S poems, especially in those written since and upon the war, and notably in that noble almost unrivalled hymn on the funeral procession of LINCOLN, beginning ‘When lilacs last in the door-yard bloomed,’ some of the loftiest and most beautifully majestic strains ever sounded by human meditation.”^[42]

O’Connor concludes *The Good Gray Poet* with an extended encomium to Whitman’s “immense and divine labors in the hospitals of Washington, among the wounded of the war, to which he voluntarily devoted himself as the best service he could render to his struggling country.” Also recognizing Whitman’s hospital service was Whitman’s friend John Burroughs, who, in an article published in *The Galaxy* on December 1, 1866, explained that Whitman’s “theory seems to have been that what the soldiers—many of them becoming worse and even dying of sheer home-sickness—most needed, was a fresh, cheerful countenance, a strong, helpful voice and the atmosphere and presence of a loving and healthy friend.” Burroughs notes that Whitman went “among the [wounded] purely in the spirit of love, distributing small gifts.” And he claims that “Many soldiers can be found who aver that he saved their lives out and out.”^[43] Burroughs identified the essential purpose of Whitman’s hospital visits: the pressing need for decisive, compassionate interventions aimed at helping the soldiers recover from trauma in its many and frequently baffling manifestations. Making use of the leading newspaper of the time, Henry Raymond’s *Times*, Whitman wrote compellingly, fervently, persuasively, and informatively to urge his fellow citizens to join him in that life-saving work.

^[1] Elmer Davis, *History of The New York Times, 1851-1921*. (New York: New York Times, 1921), p. 53.

^[2] Davis, 53.

^[3] “Wanted—A Capitol.” *Harper’s Weekly* (26 Jan. 1861), p. 50.

[4] All of these essays are available online in the essential Walt Whitman Archive, whitmanarchive.org.

[5] Jeffrey S. Reznick and Kenneth M. Koyle, "Combat and the Medical Mindset—The Enduring Effect of Civil War Medical Innovation." *New England Journal of Medicine* (June 18, 2015), p. 2378.; See also: Bonnie Ellen Blustein, "Hammond, William Alexander, 1828-1900," *American National Biography*.

[6] Reznick and Koyle, 2378.

[7] F.W. Blaisdell, "Medical Advances during the Civil War," *Archives of Surgery*, Sept. 1988: 1045-50.

[8] "Our Wounded and Sick Soldiers," *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 1864, WhitmanArchive.org.

[9] Jonathan Liebig, et. al., "[Major Jonathan Letterman: Unsung War Hero and Father of Modern Battlefield Medicine](#)," *American College of Surgeons*, 2016. FACS.org.

[10] Gert H. Brieger, "Smith, Stephen," *American National Biography*.

[11] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*. (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 2.

[12] Carrington Macfarlane, *Reminiscences of an Army Surgeon*. (Oswego, NY: Lake City Print Shop, 1912), p. 73.

[13] Variations on these lines date from the 1855 edition. Here I have quoted the third edition of 1860. Whitman would not give the poem the title "Song of Myself" until the 1881 edition. I use the title here due to its widespread familiarity today.

[14] Augustus Maverick, *Henry Raymond and the New York Press*, (Hartford, CT: A.S. Hale, 1870), 168.

[15] Harold Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 306.

[16] Thomas Winter, "Swinton, John," *American National Biography*.

[17] John Swinton, "Letter to Walt Whitman, February 25, 1863." *The Correspondence*. Ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961-1977), 1: 141-143.

[18] *Correspondence*, 1: 141-143.

[19] Donald Yanella, "Swinton, John (1829-1901)." Eds. J.R. LeMaster and Donald K. Kummings. *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*. (New York: Garland, 1988), 698-99.

[20] "Whitman and John Swinton: A Co-operative Friendship," *American*

Literature, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Jan.,1959), 425-449.

[21] "New York *Daily Times*, 13 November 1856, p. 2." Ed. Kenneth M. Price. *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, (Cambridge UP, 1996), p. 66.

[22] *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, p. 66.

[23] Thomas Winter, "Swinton, John," *Dictionary American Biography*, accessed March 31, 2019.

[24] "'How Dare a Sick Man or an Obedient Man Write Poems?': Whitman and the Dis-ease of the Perfect Body" in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. Eds. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: Modern Language Association, 2002), 248-259.

[25] For more on the "Manly Health and Training" series, see Jess Libow, "Song of My Self-Help: Whitman's Rehabilitative Reading." *Common-place: The Journal of Early American Life*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2019). With regard to the aspects of these articles noted above, Libow observes, "Whitman's proto-eugenic language for those lacking idealized health (as well as manliness) denotes his concerns about disability. By offering reading as a means of training the ubiquitous 'feeble' male body, Whitman escalates middle-class ideals about masculine self-help into a comprehensive rehabilitative project."

[26] I have discussed this incident in an earlier essay, "Trauma's Interior History: Walt Whitman's Civil War and Sequelae" in *Still Here: Memoirs of Trauma, Illness and Loss*. Eds. Buntly Avieson, Fiona Giles, and Sue Joseph. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 98-111.

[27] Herman, 34. The growing scientific recognition of the importance of these issues today is reflected in the work of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation, which publishes the highly regarded *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation*. Among 164 scholarly journals in clinical psychology, in 2016 this journal was ranked 64th in citations, the editors report (Vol. 20, 2019).

[28] Daniel R. Morrison and Monica J. Casper, "[Intersection of Disability Studies and Cultural Studies: A Provocation](#)." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2012)

[29] Morrison and Casper, Web.

[30] Morrison and Casper, Web.

[31] Stephen Kuusisto, "Walt Whitman's 'Specimen Days' and the Discovery of the Disability Narrative." *Prose Studies*, Vol. 27 (2005), p. 158.

[32] Kuusisto, 158.

[33] Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press,

2002), 4. (Quoted in Kuusisto, 159).

[34] Herman, 22-28.

[35] See Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. (New York: New York University, 1998).

[36] Tobin Siebers, "Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body." *American Literary History*, vol. 13, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 737-54.

[37] Beth Linker, "On the Borderland of Medical and Disability History: A Survey of the Fields." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 87, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 499-535.

[38] See Lindsay Tuggle, *The Afterlives of Specimens* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017).

[39] Herman, 33-34.

[40] Herman, 33-34.

[41] Herman, 51.

[42] See Gay Wilson Allen, *Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman*. (New York: New York University Press, 1955), p. 376.

[43] John Burroughs, "Walt Whitman and His 'Drum Taps.'" *Galaxy*, Vol. 2 (1 December 1866): 606-615. On the *Galaxy*, see my "*The Galaxy and American Democratic Culture, 1866-1878*," *Journal of American Studies*, 16:1 (April 1982): 69-80.

Further Reading

For more on the serious effects of homesickness during the Civil War, see David Anderson's "Dying of Nostalgia: Homesickness in the Union Army During the Civil War," *Civil War History* 56:3 (Sept. 2010): 247-282. For an excellent resource on Pfaff's café, see Lehigh University's "[The Vault at Pfaff's: An Archive of Art and Literature by the Bohemians of Antebellum New York](#)," edited by Edward Whitley. See also the essay collection *Whitman among the Bohemians*, eds. Joanna Levin and Edward Whitley (Iowa City, 2014). For an important exploration of Whitman's poetics of mourning during and in the wake of the Civil War, see Max Cavitch's *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis, 2006).

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About the Author

Professor of English and American Studies at the College of William and Mary, Robert J. Scholnick recently published *Poe's Eureka, Erasmus Darwin, and Discourses of Radical Sciences in Britain and America, 1770-1850*. Founding president of the Research Society for American Periodicals, he has published extensively on British and American periodicals, transnationalism, and the work of Walt Whitman. The focus of his teaching in recent years has been on the medical humanities, including a course in Trauma and Recovery in American Literature, which provided the stimulus for the current project.