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# American Elegy

The Poetry of Mourning  
from the Puritans  
to Whitman

*Max Cavitch*



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Holmes, Lucy Larcom, James Russell Lowell, Herman Melville, John James Piatt, Henrietta Cordelia Ray, Edmund Clarence Stedman, and Walt Whitman, to name but a few. Whitman alone wrote or attempted six elegies for Lincoln,<sup>133</sup> and he continued to lecture on Lincoln until his own death, reaffirming his conviction that there was, or at least could be, “a cement to the whole people . . . the cement of a death identified thoroughly with that people.”<sup>134</sup> The martyred president was of course subject to a wide range of identifications and disidentifications, many of which found expression in the elegies mentioned above—all of them overshadowed, however, by Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” an elegy in which death is as much solvent as cement, in which the body politic is only imperfectly comprehended by its representative figure, and in which the overriding fact of variability among persons is nothing to mourn.

## CHAPTER 6

### Retrievements out of the Night: Whitman and the Future of Elegy

[B]y their very existence, lilacs and nightingales—where the universal net has permitted them to survive—make us believe that life is still alive.

—THEODOR ADORNO

On a November evening in 1888, during one of his innumerable visits to Walt Whitman’s Mickle Street home in Camden, New Jersey, Horace Traubel noticed something he had not seen before. “I stopped at the mantelpiece,” he writes,

to look at a strange little Washington-Lincoln photo. It represents Lincoln as being welcomed into the cloudlands and throwing his arms about Washington, who with a disengaged hand offers to put a wreath on Lincoln’s brow. I spoke of it as “queer.” W[hitman] laughed: “Everybody seems of the same mind—everybody but me: I value it: yet I could hardly tell why: probably because it made a favorable impression on me at the start. When I was in Washington I had it on my desk: the clerks got much frolic out of it: the chief clerk thought it was a cheap thing—the cheapest of things.”<sup>1</sup>

In fact it *was* a cheap thing: a *carte-de-visite* photograph of a lithograph, published shortly after Lincoln’s assassination in 1865 (see Figure 9). So many of these photographs were published and preserved that one can



Figure 9. George Washington welcoming Abraham Lincoln into heaven, ca. 1865. Lithograph. Collection of the author.

inexpensively acquire them to this day. Yet Whitman makes his attachment to it seem anything but common. Indeed, it is a mark of his singularity. When Traubel calls it “queer,” Whitman cheerfully informs him that everybody else thinks so too—“everybody but me.” He recalls, genially, the ridicule of his fellow clerks in the office of the attorney general. Whitman, however, continues to value the photo more than twenty years later, although he says he can “hardly tell why.”

Whitman’s posture of bemused uncertainty or reticence regarding the source of his affection for this image is difficult not to read in relation to the intimate male contact it depicts. His appeal to the phenomenology of the “impression”—along with Traubel’s fascination, the junior clerks’ frolicsomeness, and the chief clerk’s disparagement—marks the limits of expressibility at which nineteenth-century discourses of gender and sexuality had placed eroticized contact between males. Whitman sometimes used the nonce word *adhesiveness* (derived from the popular pseudoscience of phrenology) to characterize the drive for such contact. More often, though, he characterized this drive by the very descriptive inadequacy it highlighted—what, in “The Primer of Words,” he called “words wanted.”<sup>2</sup> The inarticulacy of homoerotic desire has a long history of enforcement by sanction, and the oblique, even defensive, rhetorical posture Whitman frequently adopts registers the long-lived religio-judicial terror of “peccatum illud horribile inter Christianos non nominandum,” as well as the decorous or abstract language of mid-nineteenth-century sexual regimentation. Twenty years after the fact, the chief clerk’s contempt for the Washington-Lincoln photo complicates the jocularly of the scene of recollection with Traubel. For in the assertion that it is “a cheap thing—the cheapest of things,” Whitman ventriloquizes not just the midcentury lickspittle (who implicitly denigrates the photo’s eroticism even as he seeks to demonstrate his own aesthetic connoisseurship) but also the impressionistic figure of his own ongoing struggle to reconcile attachment to the singularity (or queerness) of the mourned object with the reevaluation of loss as a nationalizing, indeed democratizing, force.

Connoisseur of the common that he was, Whitman manifests no anxiety about the lack of aesthetic value emanating from this artifact of presidential kitsch. The strength of the impression made upon

Whitman by the chief clerk's reaction *does* suggest his own troubled alertness to the lack of definitive meaning emanating from the homoeroticism of nationalist iconography. However, the "favorable impression" made by the photo itself—a memento mori saved, cherished, and displayed—speaks to its value to Whitman as an emblem of his own eroticized attachment to both Lincoln and Washington—an attachment unnamed but inescapable in his writings. One journal entry in particular (for October 31, 1863) links Whitman's longing for an adequate affective language to his longing for Lincoln:

Saw Mr. Lincoln standing, talking with a gentleman, apparently a dear friend. His face & manner have an expression & are inexpressibly sweet—one hand on his friend's shoulder, the other holds his hand. I love the President personally.<sup>3</sup>

Washington, too, is figured in scenes of longed-for contact, for example, in "The Sleepers," where Washington is seen bidding farewell to his officers:

He stands in the room of the old tavern, the well-below'd soldiers all pass through,  
The officers speechless and slow draw near in their turns,  
The chief encircles their necks with his arm and kisses them on the cheek,  
He kisses lightly the wet cheeks one after another, he shakes hands and bids good-by to the army.<sup>4</sup>

These and other comparable passages on the two presidents are figuratively united in the Washington-Lincoln photo, which draws on reigning motifs of spiritualism and the religion of civic sentiment to produce the striking visual effect of unobstructed male contact that Whitman sought, albeit with frequent unease, to articulate in his poetry.

In "The Centenarian's Story," for example, the voice of the poet interrupts the exchange between Revolutionary veteran and Brooklyn volunteer in order to insist explicitly upon his role as conjoiner of persons and generations:

Enough, the Centenarian's story ends,  
The two, the past and present, have interchanged,  
I myself as connector, as chansonnier of a great future, am now speaking.  
(*Leaves of Grass*, 2:473)

These lines begin the final section of the poem, titled "*Terminus*" as if further to emphasize the discontinuity within the poem by which the poet's role as facilitator of continuity is marked (note, too, the strong caesura after the speech-canceling "Enough"). To account adequately for this rhetorical and tonal shift, one must first hear the familiar struggle recalled in the previous section's concluding lines. There, as the Centenarian describes his experience under Washington's command at the Battle of Long Island, he remembers, but cannot name, what he sees when he looks at Washington in defeat:

Every one else seem'd fill'd with gloom,  
Many no doubt thought of capitulation.  
But when my General pass'd me,  
As he stood in his boat and look'd toward the coming sun,  
I saw something different from capitulation. (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:473)

At this point the poet breaks in ("Enough"), conscious of ambiguities, though "loath," as Kerry Larson observes, "to pursue them." These ambiguities are insufficiently characterized by Larson as belonging to prophecies of political integration.<sup>5</sup> The remainder, the excess, the "something different" away from which Whitman swerves here is echoed in Whitman's own glancing encounters with Lincoln, such as this one recorded in *Specimen Days*:

I saw the President in the face fully . . . and his look, though abstracted, happen'd to be directed steadily in my eye. He bow'd and smiled, but far beneath his smile I noticed well the expression I have alluded to. None of the artists or pictures has caught the deep, though subtle and indirect expression of this man's face. There is something else there.

There was also *someone* else there, in the carriage with Lincoln, when Whitman locked eyes with him: Mrs. Lincoln, "dress'd," according to Whitman, "in complete black, with a long crape veil."<sup>6</sup> Mary Lincoln was still in deep mourning for their son Willie, who had died from typhoid fever the year before at age eleven.<sup>7</sup> According to her modiste and confidante Elizabeth Keckley, Lincoln himself was both devastated by Willie's death and fearful of what his wife's inconsolable grief would do to her mind. According to Keckley, during one of Mary Lincoln's "paroxysms of grief," Lincoln took her aside, pointed out the window at

the new Government Hospital for the Insane (now St. Elizabeth's), and told her that if she could not control her grief she would end up there.<sup>8</sup> The regimentation of grief, like the regimentation of sexuality, in mid-nineteenth-century America was becoming increasingly medicalized. Excessive mourning was pathological as well as indecorous for the culture within which Whitman was attempting to figure the excess, the "something else," that characterized his own attachment to Lincoln.

Whitman's Civil War mourning has been located at different extremes on the erotic scale: from the almost thoroughly desexualized to the quasi-necrophiliac.<sup>9</sup> Robert Leigh Davis persuasively stakes out a middle ground with the following judicious characterization of Whitman's sexual identity as prompted by his work at Washington hospitals like Armory Square:

What Whitman learned in the homosexual community of the hospitals—the "hospital wisdom" that confirmed his vision of democracy—was how to live a gay life in the midst of misunderstanding and misrepresentation.<sup>10</sup>

Davis is sometimes too quick to assimilate his image of Whitman to a quasi-liberationist, self-conscious, and pragmatically gay sensibility. Yet his fundamental reinterpretation of Whitman's nursing experience—of the uncertainties and delights of his contact with the soldiers in the hospitals—is a sensitive and eloquent account of Whitman's wartime sexuality, of his participation in what Davis calls "the complexity of a homosexual romance never wholly known, named, mastered, or made public."<sup>11</sup> It is, according to Davis, a homosexuality of negative capability, of open-endedness and of social moorings unloosed, of vitality always at risk, and of cherished flickerings of desire amid routine and appalling death. In the poetry of *Drum-Taps* and the prose of *Specimen Days*, Whitman practiced a writing of "remains," that is, a writing not just about unassimilable pieces or fragments of wartime experience, including erotic experience and memorable glances, but writing that is itself characterized by patchwork, discontinuity, and open-endedness. And it is also a writing of the remains of the dead, of corpses whole or damaged, and of possessions or other less palpable traces left behind. All of these "remains" contribute toward Whitman's fashioning of a language of mourning that in valuing the left over and the left out—

the dead soldier whose name no one knows, the unidentified bones on the battlefield, the murdered president whose democratic vision remains unfulfilled—discovers a moral substitute for statistical analyses of the costs of the war and for the forms of mourning—stoic, efficient, authoritative—that derive from such analyses.

Rising numeracy and the bureaucratization of reckoning activities during the antebellum period made the unprecedented losses of the war both more and less difficult to manage. Less difficult, because there was in the precision of numbers and official lists the solace of apparent certitude, the conviction that, vast as the losses were, they went only as far as the numbers indicated and no further. Statistics enabled detachment and psychically rewarded the habit of quantification that had emerged in the course of market revolution as a national characteristic.<sup>12</sup> But the scientific tallying of the dead also dramatized and even enhanced the difficulty of retrieving and conserving their identities for memorialization. Newspaper lists tantalized anxious families with names of soldiers "supposed killed," and battlefield cemeteries teemed with graves of the unknown. Collectivizing "the dead"—whether in trench graves or in published figures—redeemed unidentifiable and unlocatable bodies for a symbolic totality of otherwise immeasurable sacrifice, while at the same time highlighting the pace at which the war was outstripping both the psychic and the material resources of individuated mourning. Dismembered, decaying human flesh littered the country, and before it could be hidden away out of sight, a new generation of photographers rendered it visible even to those who never set foot on a battlefield. Images by Alexander Gardner, Timothy O'Sullivan, and others aroused such popular hunger for these graphic scenes of mayhem and gore that some photographers—alert to their market value—began staging shots by posing corpses for their cameras and by coaxing living soldiers into masquerading as the dead.<sup>13</sup> Gallery exhibitions, lavish albums, *cartes de visite*, and mail-order prints turned the immediacy of death into a marketable commodity and the exposed, anonymous corpse into a pervasive cultural presence (see Figure 10).

To live amid so many unassimilable deaths challenged ontological, as well as memorial, resourcefulness. Beginning in 1862, spirit photographers like William Mumler along with their unscrupulous battlefield

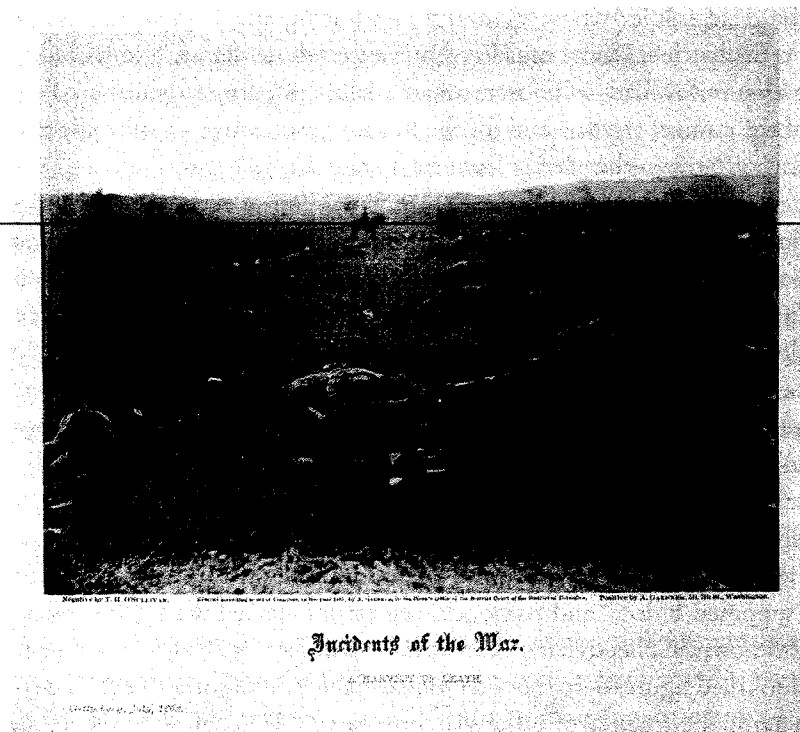


Figure 10. Timothy O'Sullivan, "A Harvest of Death," Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 1863. *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the War* (Washington, D.C.: Philip & Solomons, 1865–66). Courtesy of Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

counterparts exploited the new technology's apparent grounding in the real to capitalize upon heightened uncertainty and fear. Grief-stricken clients gazed longingly at doctored images, and exhibit-goers searched the faces of repositioned and even disinterred corpses and of amateur actors playing possum for answers to their profoundest questions about the nature of death and their links to the dead. The uncanny impact of exhibits like Matthew Brady's "The Dead of Antietam" was captured (or was it invented?) by a visitor to Brady's gallery writing for the *New York Times* in the fall of 1862:

You will see hushed, reverend groups standing around these weird copies of carnage, bending down to look in the pale faces of the dead, chained by

the strange spell that dwells in dead men's eyes. It seems somewhat singular that the same sun that looked down on the faces of the slain, blistering them, blotting out from the body all semblance to humanity, and hastening corruption, should have thus caught their features upon canvas, and given them perpetuity for ever. But so it is.

The redundancy of the phrase "perpetuity for ever" seems to betray the writer's uncertainty as to the future of the dead—whether the body's lost "semblance to humanity" bespeaks a humanity absolutely lost at the moment of death. These men no longer exist, except as "a confused mass of names," as a "jumble of type" in the morning newspaper, and, in a Broadway gallery, as "weird copies of carnage."<sup>14</sup> That last vivid phrase seems in some sense livelier, truer than the photographs themselves, given that many were falsified and that even the legitimate ones only fostered the illusion of presence.

Whitman, however, believed not only in the truth of photography—its ability to hold rather than merely mimic reality—but also in the perpetual existence of the dead:

I do not think seventy years is the time of a man or woman,  
Nor that seventy millions of years is the time of a man or woman,  
Nor that years will ever stop the existence of me, or any one else. (*Leaves of Grass*, 1:153)

Whitmanian ontology affirms that what is *possible*—the intuition of what could be—is a feature of the actual world and gives it value. His response to the statistical imagination of the antebellum period was to boast, in "Song of Myself," that he "was never measured, and never will be measured" (*Leaves of Grass*, 1:74). And his response to the devastating statistics of the war was just as confident, if less boisterous: first, to acknowledge the rationalism and numeracy of "specimen days"—"went thoroughly through ward 6, observ'd every case in the ward, without, I think, missing one" (*Prose Works*, 1:35); "To-day, as I write, hundreds more are expected, and to-morrow and the next day more, and so on for many days. Quite often they arrive at the rate of 1000 a day" (1:45); "when these army hospitals are all fill'd, (as they have been already several times,) they contain a population more numerous in itself than the whole of the Washington of ten or fifteen years ago. Within sight of the capitol, as I write, are some thirty or forty such collections, at

times holding from fifty to seventy thousand men" (1:66); "probably three-fourths of the losses, men, lives, &c., have been sheer superfluity, extravagance, waste" (1:75)—and then to turn from them to claim his place beside sick and wounded fellow immortals like Thomas Haley, shot through the lung and certain to die:

I often come and sit by him in perfect silence; he will breathe for ten minutes as softly and evenly as a young babe asleep. Poor youth, so handsome, athletic, with profuse beautiful shining hair. One time as I sat looking at him while he lay asleep, he suddenly, without the least start, awaken'd, open'd his eyes, gave me a long steady look, turning his face very slightly to gaze easier—one long, clear, silent look—a slight sigh—then turn'd back and went into his doze again. Little he knew, poor death-stricken boy, the heart of the stranger that hover'd near. (*Prose Works*, 1:49–50)

To Robert Leigh Davis's valuable reading of this scene—of "an extravagance exceeding the reparative terms of the text," of "a realm of meaning only partly disclosed by the paragraph's dominant voice," of "an apprehensive, gently skeptical sympathy restrained by a recognition of secrecy, hiddenness, and erotic depth," of the "sudden 'turn,' that Whitman seems most to cherish as the countersign to an imminent death"<sup>15</sup>—there is little to add, except perhaps to note the slightly spectral quality Whitman affords himself, as if he were the authentic counterpart ("hover[ing] near") of the sham spirit of a Mumler photograph, surprised by the impression of being seen by someone who should not have been able to see him. In Whitman's telling, Haley seems to know he is there before he opens his eyes—seems to know where to look and ("without the least start") what to expect to see. Whitman has been a frequent visitor to Haley's bedside ("I often come and sit by him"), yet he refers to himself as a "stranger," a word paradoxically charged for Whitman with accumulated imaginings of a world of improved intimacies.<sup>16</sup>

The Calamus poem, "To a Stranger," speaks most magnificently, of all the short pre-war lyrics, to Whitman's universalist ontology of love:

Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you,  
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to me as of  
a dream.)  
I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,

All is recall'd as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste, matured,  
You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me,  
I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not yours only  
nor left my body mine only,  
You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass, you take of  
my beard, breast, hands, in return,  
I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone or wake at  
night alone,  
I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again,  
I am to see to it that I do not lose you. (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:392)

The valedictory charge is thrilling in the certainty with which it anticipates the fulfillment of an instant obligation—an obligation originating in nothing more than a fantasy of recognition and offered to the reader in an eroticized social spirit of generative mutuality. If we experience a sensation of confidence in this mutuality, it is because we, like Whitman, assume—and behave according to the assumption—that a great deal of psychic life and functioning is held in common. I understand, with what I believe to be similar excitement, the poet's exhilarating feeling of being bound not to lose the "passing stranger" he has projected onto me and that I, in turn, project onto this one or that one, leaving my ghostly trace in them as a creature of their reminiscence.

More than anyone else, Lincoln was Whitman's creature of reminiscence: the object of his cruising glance, the star of his national dramaturgy, the father of his family romance, and, to the end, his persistently ineffable loss. "The fit tribute I dream'd of," he told his last public audiences, "waits unprepared as ever" (*Prose Works*, 2:497). To our ears, this statement—coming from the author of one of the greatest elegies in the language—may at first sound merely disingenuous. But there is doctrine here as well as modesty. Indeed, there is the highly immodest doctrine of preparation that characterizes Whitman's wonderful, outrageous ontology in "Song of Myself":

Immense have been the preparations for me,  
Faithful and friendly the arms that have help'd me.  
Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen,  
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,  
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.  
Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me,

My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could overlay it.  
 For it the nebula cohered to an orb,  
 The long slow strata piled to rest it on,  
 Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,  
 Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and deposited it with  
 care. (*Leaves of Grass*, 1:72)

The image of the Whitmanian embryo being carried gently toward the future between the crushing jaws of giant Mesozoic lizards is hard to resist, in part because it is proffered so sweetly to the rest of us as the image of our individual histories as well. "Preparations," for Whitman, are the intelligible workings of a universal temporality of becoming, in which death amounts to nothing: "I keep no account with lamentation, / (What have I to do with lamentation?)" (*Leaves of Grass*, 1:71). Relax, Whitman says, time is a conservator, not a thief.

Yet here, as is so often the case in Whitman's poetry, a strongly expressed conviction or wish ("I keep no account with lamentation") is qualified by a parenthetical remark that antagonizes or subverts the preceding sentiment rather than simply reinforcing it. "I keep no account with lamentation" is actually a very good, if overly pithy, characterization of Whitman's elegism. In "Lilacs," for example, he eschews the narrative "account" of the object of mourning one finds in many traditional elegies. He "makes no reference," as his friend John Burroughs observed in an early review of *Drum-Taps*, "to the mere facts of Lincoln's death—neither describes it, or laments it, or dwells upon its unprovoked atrocity, or its political aspects." And he also dismisses as irrelevant the numerical accountancy of his era's more unimaginative and officious mourners. "Hence the piece," wrote Burroughs, "has little or none of the character of the usual productions on such occasions."<sup>17</sup> As Burroughs recognized, Whitman sought in "Lilacs" (as in many of his other elegiac poems) to find a way to distinguish the unrealized possibilities of American elegy from their cruder approximations and popular distortions. Better still, he sought to make preparation for unrealized possibilities a more-than-consolatory elegiac aim. He wants to be open to the dissonance of loss and to be prepared for the creative possibilities it affords.

The musical theory of counterpoint thus provides a useful gloss on

preparation in Whitman. It would be esoteric were it not for Whitman's devotion to Beethoven, Verdi, and other composers who boldly experimented with dissonance configurations. In part-writing, preparation means anticipating and softening the impact of dissonance by letting the dissonant note be heard as consonant in the preceding chord. In poetry, dissonance may be generated through counterpoint between meter and rhythm, as in the final two lines of Jones Very's elegy for John Woolman:

And countless reapers, with their sickles stand,  
 Reaping what thou didst sow with single hand.<sup>18</sup>

The trochaic substitution at the beginning of the final line is dissonant in that it generates a sensation of roughness or tension between the rhythm of the word "reaping" and the iambic meter of the poem. The impact of this dissonance is anticipated and softened by the consonance of the similar word, "reapers," which, in the previous line, comports with, instead of resisting, the iambic meter. This effect is particularly lovely in an elegy for the Quaker abolitionist Woolman in that it preserves a sense of the ambiguousness of the figure of the reaper: an image of both prosaic (agricultural) and appalling violence (Death wielding his sickle; the suggestion of castration) transmuted into an image of spiritual in-gathering and transcendence.

Whitman's so-called free verse does not preclude counterpoint. On the contrary, counterpoint in the absence of conventional meter is one of his virtuoso effects, audible in many places throughout "Lilacs," including its first couple of lines. The poem immediately alerts us to one of its central themes: the fecundity of liminal spaces. "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd" is a hypometric line of iambic pentameter with a single pyrrhic substitution and a masculine ending on the stressed syllable, "bloom'd," establishing the long "o" sound as a conjunct of ideas of vigor and efflorescence. The second line departs dramatically from the relatively sonorous, conventional rhythm of line 1 with an opening pyrrhic followed by three consecutive stressed syllables. The "drooping" of the second syllable of "early" phonically anticipates the meaning of the next word, "droop'd," in which the long "o" sound is brought into a thematically discordant relation with the "bloom" of the



previous line. The rhythm of line 2 is fitful; it struggles audibly to lift itself above the level of the drooping star in its final eight syllables (“in the western sky in the night”), which may be characterized metrically as the sequence anapest-iamb-anapest. The “preparation” in line 1 for the dissonance effect of line 2 tensely associates (rather than merely opposing) the word-pair “bloom’d” and “droop’d”—an antithetical pairing further recuperated for harmonic effect within line 5 and linked explicitly in line 6 for the first time with the object of mourning:

Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,  
And thought of him I love. (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:529)

Every elegy is a love poem. The conjunction of death and love is where Western poetry begins, and the conjunction of mourning and sexuality is one of the enduring, demanding features of psychic life. In the early twentieth century, Karl Abraham and Sigmund Freud both began to investigate what they observed to be one of the most unsettling, but also very commonly experienced, sequelae of grief: an increase in libido and a heightened sexual need. To speak of grief as unambiguously an erotic is a poor way of speaking. Thus, even so erudite and sophisticated a treatment of elegy as that of Peter Sacks, with its stipulation of deflection of desire in mourning, seems at once brilliant and unsatisfactory. Deflection (and sublimation) of the drives is endemic to mourning, of course. But to read such deflections as both normative and uncontested is to miss the staggering pathos of erotic liberation that the elegiac tradition has made available to us through aesthetic experience. This is a recognition that Whitman brought to “Lilacs,” though it has been misrecognized or defensively denied in virtually all of the published criticism.

The “misunderstanding and misrepresentation” of Whitman’s poetics, yet sustained in some quarters by generations of sexually normativistic interpretation, have been strongly and persuasively confronted most extensively by Michael Moon in *Disseminating Whitman*. Yet Moon, like Sacks before him (whose de-eroticizing interpretation of the poem Moon ventures to critique), refrains, as he acknowledges, from “mounting a full-scale reading of ‘Lilacs.’” In his book as in Sacks’s—despite its analysis of Whitman’s crucial revaluation of sexuality and loss in

*Leaves of Grass* and its 1867 edition specifically—“Lilacs” serves as a kind of threshold. It is where Sacks and Moon both stand as they pause on their way out—out of analysis, out of comprehensive narrative, out of difficulties. For Moon, the difficulties are largely avowed. He seeks chiefly to assimilate “Lilacs” to the “ongoing erotic program” of the first four editions of *Leaves*, thereby overriding interpretations of the poem that emphasize what Sacks calls its “castrative work of mourning.”<sup>19</sup> Highlighting the elegy’s numerous erotic evocations, Moon asserts that rather than renouncing sexuality, Whitman “relaunches a self through a poetic congeries of defiles of signified desire through which he has launched his earlier models of the self in the earlier editions of his book.”<sup>20</sup> The launching pad, so to speak, is the infant’s experience of the holding environment of the mother, the rupture of which initiates the subject into sexuality, the release from which enables the subject to “loose” or disseminate its affectionate presence in the world. But the maternal figure also reasserts itself, in Moon’s reading, as terminal destination. It is where death is finally lodged, foreclosing, as Moon puts it in his concluding remarks, “possibilities of further lines of critique—for example, into the misogynistic implications of ‘lodging’ death with maternity and femininity.” Thus Moon’s book ends not only by discontinuing his reading of “Lilacs” but also by suspending the animation of the relaunched, libidinous figure of the poet: “Rather than seeing Whitman as simply abandoning his radical project at this point in his career, as some critics have done, I would argue that he had in a sense completed that project. . . . [H]e felt in the aftermath of the Civil War that newly emergent political realities demanded quite different strategies and practices.”<sup>21</sup>

I would like to urge on readers of “Lilacs” a keener interest both in projects yet to be accomplished, such as the retrospect on Lincoln that continues to occupy such a prominent place in his later writings, and also in Whitman’s projections of himself into the objects that help shape his experience of mourning. These objects include the lilac, evening star, and hermit thrush most clearly consecrated by Whitman with his own subjectivity. But they extend beyond this highly symbolic trinity to a whole range of objects that arrive in the poem, by design or by chance, to constitute the experience of mourning and the character

of the mourner. In the opening lines of an earlier poem, "There was a Child Went Forth" (1855), Whitman describes the beginnings of a relation to the world that embraces the mutual articulation of the subject and its multiplying array of invested objects:

There was a child went forth every day,  
~~And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,~~  
 And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,  
 Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.  
 The early lilacs became part of this child . . .

Lilacs come first in the long catalog of objects that comprises the rest of the poem—before the "grass," before "the song of the phoebe bird," before the "mire of the pond-side" and "the light-yellow corn," before the schoolmistress and the boys and girls, before even "[h]is own parents," his mother's "mild words," his father's "blows," and the "family usages" that the poet carries with him to the "horizon's edge," wondering "if after all it should prove unreal" (*Leaves of Grass*, 1:149–52). The "early lilacs" stand in this poem as a kind of threshold through which the child passes into the day, into the world. They are a symbol of the child's taking up what D. W. Winnicott calls "the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated."<sup>22</sup> The child's range of interest expands, but along with that expansion come doubts—"the doubts of day-time and the doubts of night-time"—as to the reality of the world to which he is adapting himself. He asks, "is it all flashes and specks?" (*Leaves of Grass*, 1:151). The child goes forth every day to discover not the truth of the world but the deepening mystery of his own experience.

To "go forth" in Whitman's idiom is to encounter, as freely as possible, those objects both internal and external that facilitate his provision for the future. The child goes forth, "and will go forth every day," in order to place himself in the world, so that he can be placed by it later on—so that he may call upon the world, as it were, to evoke him. The potential enrichment from such mutual evocations—the sense of a world abounding in significance and, moreover, available for reciprocal transformations—is the reason the child goes forth. At first he does so unapprehensively; later, with a growing awareness that easy faith in

an established reality is the cost of these everyday ventures ("the sense of what is real, the thought if after all it should prove unreal" [*Leaves of Grass*, 1:151]). Not the progressive establishment of meaning but a promiscuous letting loose, a rich unraveling, is the epistemology of Whitman's poetics, which patently reveals itself in the series of rich unravelings that, through its successive editions, constitutes *Leaves of Grass*.

Of course, Whitman was perennially anxious about the coherence and integrity of *Leaves*. He revealed some of his wartime anxieties in a letter to William O'Connor in January 1865, a letter in which he offers his high opinion of the recently completed *Drum-Taps*, in part, by favoring it over *Leaves*. Whitman tells O'Connor that the new book is "superior to *Leaves of Grass*" and that, unlike the earlier work, it is free of "perturbations" and "verbal superfluity." *Drum-Taps*, Whitman insists, is "certainly more perfect as a work of art, being adjusted in all its proportions, & its passion having the indispensable merit that though to the ordinary reader let loose with wildest abandon, the true artist can see it is yet under control."<sup>23</sup> Whitman's splitting of his genially figured lumpen-reader (the "you whoever you are" so frequently addressed, from the 1855 poem that would be called "A Song for Occupations," to "The Eighteenth Presidency" of 1856, to "Proto-Leaf" and the *Calamus* and *Enfans d'Adam* clusters of 1860, to "The Dresser" in *Drum-Taps* itself, to the postwar *Democratic Vistas* and the 1872 and 1876 prefaces) into "ordinary reader" and "true artist" suggests his own discomfort with the sensations of self-division brought on by the war and with his ambivalence regarding the book's appeal, through the more conventional versification of some of its poems, to a wider "ordinary" readership.

Whitman wanted the book to succeed commercially, but he resisted O'Connor's advice to turn it over to an established publisher. On April 1, 1865, he contracted with New York printer Peter Eckler to stereotype five hundred copies.<sup>24</sup> Lincoln was assassinated before the sheets could all be printed and delivered to the binder, and Whitman took advantage of the opportunity to compose and insert his first Lincoln elegy, "Hush'd be the Camps To-Day." But that short poem was not enough on its own to satisfy his sense of what the book should now encompass. The assassination not only created a new occasion for the poetry of the

war, to which Whitman wanted to respond more fully, but it also meant that *Drum-Taps* was not yet ready, as he had boasted to O'Connor, to "go to the world verbatim & punctuation." Now, to "go forth," the book had further to adapt itself to the latest disorienting loss. By the end of the year, the original sheets were bound together with their own testament of doubtful completion, the appended *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, which included two more Lincoln elegies: "O Captain! My Captain" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

Among the notebook jottings Whitman made in the aftermath of the assassination—many of them eventually contributing to the composition of "Lilacs"—are descriptions of Brooklyn and Manhattan shortly after the news of Lincoln's death reached New York. He notes the blackness of the sky, "long broad black like great serpents slowly undulating in every direction"; the houses "festooned with black"; the "black clothed men"; the "horror, fever, uncertainty, alarm in the public"; the weather "sulky, leaden, & dripping continual[l]y moist tears" (*Notebooks*, 2:762–64). At one point in his passage up Broadway he observes, among all the closed shops and offices, a "large & fashionable picture store, all shuttered up close, except a broad square plate glass, in which hung a small grinning picture frame, vacuous of a picture" (*Notebooks*, 2:765). The impression is uncanny—Whitman seems to register this with the adjective "grinning"—as if the negative space, framed and seen through the second, larger frame of the window, were the rictus of a death's-head. "Vacuous" conjures an empty head as well as the empty frame. A death's-head would be literally empty, devoid of matter. Whitman may be feeling that his head, too, is, in the immediate aftermath of immeasurable loss, a space of idleness, devoid of meaningful thought and expression. One thinks of the plaint that opens section 11 of "Lilacs": "O what shall I hang on the chamber walls? / And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls, / To adorn the burial-house of him I love?" (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:533). That empty frame on Broadway seems to have struck Whitman, and stuck with him, as an emblem of ineffable grief. The scene at the window seems a powerful emblem, too, of the reflexive position of the elegist, setting out to fill the emptiness of the memorial frame with an adequate image not only of the departed but also of the mourner himself. Whitman may be

catching his own reflection in the glass, superimposed over the space within the frame, though he does not say so.

Michael Moon has identified a fascination with frames as a hallmark of Whitman's poetics. Beginning with a reading of the early short story "The Child's Champion," Moon develops a theory of Whitmanian substitution:

Inventing a story which incorporates one's self/body into a compelling "picture" bears obvious resemblances to the process I have described as being fundamental to the *Leaves of Grass* project, that of attempting to provide actual (male) physical presence in a text—while actually being able only to produce metonymic substitutes for such presence. A desire for phantasmatic passage into the liminal space of a picture, and a concern with the means by which one's body might be "translated" or incorporated into the medium of a (visual or literary) text, is central to both "The Child's Champion" and *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>25</sup>

The "liminal space" of the text doubles the limens to which Whitman keeps returning: the window, the mirror, the door frame, the surface of the body, the shoreline, the river's embouchure, sunrise or the close of day, the moment of parting, a grave, mouths, this minute. Each limen of each poem is a space in which there may be an opportunity to audition substitutes in what Joseph Roach calls "the doomed search for originals."<sup>26</sup> These "originals," from a psychoanalytic perspective, include the parental object choices that remain the unconscious goal of erotic pursuits, and behind them, so to speak, at their origin, the unconscious remembrance of the holding space of the maternal world and the "primary, archaic forms of the libido" that Jacques Lacan maintains always remain to be dreamed.<sup>27</sup> I take the limens in Whitman's poetics of substitution to be sites of longing for a referentiality that would somehow restore the subject to these points of departure. That is, they are sites both for regression and for creativity, for conservation and for protest.

If one learns anything from studying elegy, it is that the genre is laced with rage—that is, with the more or less distorted echo, turned toward the world's ear, of what is in the history of the mourning subject an ancient grievance over unfulfilled aspirations of erotic life. I have found no direct indication that Lacan ever read "When Lilacs Last in

the Dooryard Bloom'd." But when, in his seminar, he comes to the topic of sublimation, he makes room for a very fine description of Whitman's pastoralism of the erogenous zones. Whitman, as what we might call the elegist of erotic life, becomes for Lacan an opportunity to

imagine what as a man one might desire of one's own body. One might dream of a total, complete, epidermic contact between one's body and a world that was itself open and quivering; dream of a contact and, in the distance, of a way of life that the poet points out to us; hope for a revelation of harmony following the disappearance of the perpetual, insinuating presence of the oppressive feeling of some original curse.<sup>28</sup>

Emblematic of this "oppressive feeling" in Whitman's Civil War writings, from his notebook scrawls to "Lilacs" itself, is the "insinuating presence" of blackness, a presence such as that of the great black serpents he sees "undulating in every direction" in the sky above New York. Serpents are archetypal creatures of an "original curse," and their movement "in every direction" places their point of origin, the origin of their blackness, at the center of things. There, at the center of things—for Freud the source of instinctual life and thus the basis for Winnicott's "perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated"—is a profound antagonism. It is the antagonism between the energy of a binding instinct (which Freud called "Eros") and that of an undoing instinct (which Freud called "destructiveness" but which has come fittingly to be called "Thanatos"), living on and expressing itself in the instinctual history of the subject, its longings and frustrations, devotions and reprisals.

Mourning is the inevitable consequence of instinctual life. We are built to grieve. But griefs are not equal among us, just as we are so frequently unequal to our griefs. Mourning is a particular form of striving, and elegy is a very specialized form of mourning. Whitman's regard for this specialization—his acknowledgement of its traditionality, his participation in its received conventions—is to some extent the source of the strength of his ambition to bestow himself, as well as Lincoln, upon the genre's future. In referring to the future of elegy, I mean to evoke not only a prospect, from Whitman's time, of its continuing cultural transmission as a genre, but also the concepts of futurity that

elegy, as a specialized form of striving within Whitman's culture, itself sustains. For many of Whitman's antecedents in the genre—that is, for the largely Protestant cohort of American elegists in whose historical company this book places him—the future was to be anticipated with religious patience. The future existed as a temporal mode of understanding the completion of divine intention. In the interim, the question, "What should the world be like?" mattered as the key to a differential technique of spiritual resolution. As the Calvinist eloquence promoting this technique faded from the world, the task of articulating the future through alternative narratives of becoming fell to more secular voices. To the question, "What should the world be like" was added the question, "How, in a post-Christian era, is the cultural burden of signifying the future to be borne?"

Lightly, it would seem, to the Whitman of "Chants Democratic" (1860), whose chipper response, in the poem that would come to be called "Song at Sunset," is to "sing to the last":

I sing the endless finales of things,  
I say Nature continues—Glory continues,  
I praise with electric voice,  
For I do not see one imperfection in the universe,  
And I do not see one cause or result lamentable at last in the universe.  
(*Leaves of Grass*, 2:304)

Here is no utopian vision of completed intention (heaven on earth), no assertion of a moral imperative (an obligation to generations to come), but rather a revelry of optimism. William James gently mocked this passage as indicative of a temperament "incapable of believing that anything seriously evil can exist."<sup>29</sup> Yet Whitman's apparent insistence upon the perpetuity of the good, here and in many other such moments of lyric exuberance, is not a statement of timeless ethical principles but the inscription of a mood. And that mood has less to do with a predisposition to ignore evil than with the anxious projection of contemporaneity. To see the future as an endless continuation of the present good is to postpone endlessly the reckoning of that good—to refuse the question, "What should the world be like, *now*?" But this is hardly Whitman's most characteristic mood. Submitting himself to a stance

of openness as to what might come next, Whitman passes through various states of receptivity and defensiveness with unprecedented self-consciousness. He was not waiting to discover evil the day Lincoln was killed.

The morning after the assassination, Whitman and his mother, along with his brothers and their families, did their best to assimilate the news, reading the papers and extras as they came in. According to Whitman, little was eaten and little was said (*Prose Works*, 1:31). Later in the day, Whitman ventured forth from family life into civic space, crossing the East River and walking up Broadway in the rain, observing lower Manhattan's somber transformation:

I had so often seen Broadway on great gala days, tumultuous overwhelming shows of pride & oceanic profusion of ornament[at]ion & deck'd with rich colors jubilant show crowds, & the music of a hundred bands with marches & opera airs—or at night with processions bearing countless torches & transparencies & gas lanterns covering the houses.

The stores were shut, & no business transacted, no pleasure vehicles, & hardly a cart—only the rumbling base of the heavy Broadway stages incessantly rolling. (*Notebooks*, 2:764)

The journey from the Whitman home on North Portland Avenue in Brooklyn to the pleasures of Broadway recollected in this passage had been a frequent one for Whitman in the late 1850s and early 1860s. In the months leading up to the war—dispirited, strapped for cash, and wearied by the vexations of life in the Brooklyn household—he began spending time at Pfaff's, a Broadway beer cellar and rendezvous for bohemians like Henry Clapp, Fitz Hugh Ludlow, Adah Isaacs Menken, and Artemus Ward. He also continued to cruise the streets, parks, docks, and lumberyards of New York, and to spend countless hours (“forenoons and afternoons—how many exhilarating night-times”) riding up and down Broadway with the “strange, natural, quick-eyed and wondrous race” of his beloved stage drivers (*Prose Works*, 1:18). By the early 1860s, Whitman was spending many hours, as well, at the bedsides of sick and injured drivers at the Broadway Hospital, where he first developed the medical expertise and rapport with the ill with which he would serve so many so well—first the drivers and, later, in the same hospital, sick soldiers passing through New York. By December 16, 1862—the day he set

out for Washington to search for his brother George, who had appeared on the casualty lists—Whitman was well prepared to resume his nursing activities in the hospitals and hospital tents of the war, where he began more intensely to imagine what Robert Leigh Davis calls “the homosexual democracy of [his] postwar career.”<sup>30</sup> Whitman looks ahead, in other words, from the reparative and affectional achievements of the hospitals to a future of new forms of solidarity.

Whitman's wartime experience found him moving, literally and figuratively, among the relativized solidarities of the Whitman household, of Pfaff's, of the streets and omnibuses, and of the hospitals. Going forth from the Whitmans' Brooklyn home, he trailed skeins of dependence that contrasted sharply with new urban modes of elective intimacy and also with the very different relations of dependence established between Whitman and the men of the hospitals. In these relations, and in the writing they helped to shape, Whitman significantly revised the nationalist, republican faith in paternal power he inherited from his own paternal line, the North American roots of which could be traced back to the early seventeenth century. His grandfather had fought in the American Revolution, and his father was born on the very day the French Revolution began. Walter Whitman Sr. named three of Walt's brothers for national patriarchs—Andrew Jackson Whitman, George Washington Whitman, and Thomas Jefferson Whitman—and he trained them all up to revere his hero, Tom Paine (who, like the Whitmans, was proud of his Quaker antecedents).

It was, ironically, a generations-long patrimony of democracy, dissent, and heresy from which Whitman, as he later put it, “radiated” (*Prose Works*, 1:5). But his father's alcoholism, financial failure, and early death (only days after the publication of the 1855 *Leaves*) heaped a burdensome load upon him as well, including a large, now fatherless family to support. It was partly to escape from the privations of that household setting that he so assiduously cultivated, first in New York and then in Washington, alternative identities of belonging. But in going forth Whitman also brought the psychic life of his family into civic space, where it remained in touch with his expanding and accumulating allegiances. Roy Morris Jr. suggests that in the wards of the Broadway Hospital, Whitman, “the son of an alcoholic,” was

particularly upset by the patients suffering from delirium tremens.<sup>31</sup> And in one of his many letters from Washington home to his mother, he told her of a young soldier from Tennessee named John Barker—"one of the most genuine union men & real patriots I have ever met"—who had impressed Whitman deeply and "somehow made me think often of father" (*Correspondence*, 1:147). For months prior to his transportation to Washington, Barker had clung fiercely to his patriotic principles as a prisoner in Georgia and Virginia, refusing to join the Confederacy, even though "his little property [was] destroyed, his wife & child turned out." The sacrifice that Barker had made—not only of his health and freedom, but also of his property and even the well-being of his family—may have reminded Whitman of his father's own sacrifices of health, property, and family in a very different context of patriotism.

Whitman was also absorbed, of course, by the figure of another sacrificer of sons, Abraham Lincoln—Father Abraham as he was commonly called, both out of respect for the political symbol of paternal power and in fear of the sacrifices he was willing to make to preserve the patriarchal order of a unified nation. Lincoln's terrible burden was to lead millions of Isaacs to the war's Mount Moriah. Prepared to sacrifice the sons he had improbably acquired, devoting them to a future so many of them would not live to possess, Lincoln's conduct signified for Whitman the utmost possibilities and trials of secular faith. How that faith would be defined, and how sustained, were for Whitman questions indissolubly bound to his own improbable acquisition of sons and lovers—to his own experience of the torment of a passionate father's suffering, in the absence of any overriding illusions about the consolatory power of stringently anerotic Christian frameworks of mourning. He brought to the composition of "Lilacs" an Isaac-like wonder at the father's fear and trembling and an Abraham-like tenacity for that which he was at the same time only too ready to relinquish—not simply his son but his own ineluctably worldly prospect on the reanimation of desire.

"Lilacs" is the story of a secret culture of desire. But the aim of its secrecy is the release, rather than the evasion, of an unmastered expressivity. My aim in the reading that follows is to anatomize that secret

culture and to interpret the carefully plotted story of its creative elaboration in a way that will not reinscribe the defeat of the erotic subject of mourning—a defeat commemorated in so many other readings of the poem. Helen Vendler, for example, in what is perhaps the most inflexibly anerotic reading of "Lilacs," insists that the "'plot' of the elegy is a long resistance on Whitman's part to the experience of the swamp."<sup>32</sup>

But without the normative presumption of progressive deeroticization in mourning, what looks like resistance or evasion can be recognized more clearly as a practice of generative engagement. Whitman lingers upon the experiential threshold of the swamp not as the thrall of traumatic repetition but in order to equip himself for a more creative dreamlike movement. Vendler herself eloquently observes that "nothing is more touching in the poem than the reprise in it of Whitman's earlier work."<sup>33</sup> But I take this to mean, in a way that Vendler does not intend, something other than the mere recurrence of symbolic elements from earlier poems, such as the "early lilacs" from "There was a Child Went Forth." Instead, Whitman's poetics of reprise resembles more closely what Christopher Bollas describes as the "evasion of organized consciousness" that enables unconscious symbolic elaboration through a structure he names "psychic genera."<sup>34</sup> Genera, like trauma (its opposite), begins with the ego's acquired disposition toward the actual world. We learn from our early experiences how to fashion a psychic reality:

trauma-developed psychic processes will be conservative, fundamentally aiming to control the psychic damage, desensitizing the self to further toxic events. . . . The child who internalizes fundamentally generative parents—who contribute to the evolution of his personal idiom—aims to develop such inner processes and to seek excitation and novelty as means of triggering personal growth. As such, genera link up with the life instincts which aggressively seek the procreative combinings of self with object.<sup>35</sup>

We need not be, like Bollas, psychoanalysts with our patients to experience our own unconscious associations elaborating the discourse of another. And we need not be, as readers, overly concerned with pinpointing our early experiences, or the poet's, as authentic sources of our discoveries about a poem. No descent into the psychology of the creative individual is recommended here. Instead, I am concerned with how

in Whitman's elegy the mediation of intersubjective fantasies occurs in and through the object of mourning. I want to stipulate, with the clarifying assistance Bolla provides, that the experience of mourning as figured in "Lilacs" is a genera-developed as well as trauma-developed psychic process, neither exclusively conservative nor purely creative. Thus, the elegy involves both a submission of grief to a transformation by decorum and an apprehension of grief as an incentive to promiscuous achievements of combination.

I have already observed that the opening of "Lilacs" establishes liminal spaces as generative, while also submitting, initially, to the rhythmic decorum of the iambic pentameter line. The rhythm breaks loose in line 2 and initiates the counterpoint through which the vigor of blooming and the impotence of drooping are conjoined as symbolic adjuncts to the objectivizing trope of "thought":

1

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,  
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,  
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,  
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,  
And thought of him I love.

2

O powerful western fallen star!  
O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!  
O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!  
O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!  
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.  
(*Leaves of Grass*, 2:529)

Eschewing the familiar metrical composure of the English poetic line, "indelibly stained," in Allen Grossman's vivid formulation, "by the feudal contexts of its most prestigious instances,"<sup>36</sup> Whitman nevertheless predicts a future of mourning that will be heroic in its faithfulness: "I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring." Yet the tonal balance of retrospect and prospect in section 1 is short-lived, yielding, in section 2, to a performance of the agonizing and constrained vigilance of sleepless, unending nights of mourning. The histrionic grief of

section 2 is converted, behind night's "black murk," into a life sentence: "O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me! / O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul." The exaggerated emotionality of this section of the poem stages a common dynamic in Whitman's poetry: he becomes overwhelmed by the very stimulation he seeks. While he welcomes, in section 1, the reappearance of the beloved in the recurrent springtime trinity of mourning, the poet finds, in section 2, that the "thought of him I love" is the source of a distress that accompanies but is not equivalent to grief. His fear of the "black murk" and the "harsh surrounding cloud" is, in part, a displaced fear of the beloved's specifically sexualized power. All of the critical giggling that has gone on in reaction to Harold Bloom's perfectly reasonable suggestion that, in section 2, "a failed masturbation is the concealed reference" is just so much unreasonable embarrassment at the unspoken inference that Lincoln may be the object of, rather than the obstacle to, the poet's erotic fantasy.<sup>37</sup>

The other fearful dimension in section 2 has to do with the impression of a more general alarm at the possibility that fantasies taken for memories might—in the manner of the "black murk that hides the star"—occlude, rather than sustain, their treasured objects. Thus, section 3 begins by cleansing this image of what Whitman refers to elsewhere in *Sequel to Drum-Taps* as a "soil'd world" (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:556), reverting (it would not be inappropriate to say regressing) to the pastoralized landscape of childhood (viz. "There was a Child Went Forth"), circumscribed not by "black murk" but by "whitewash'd palings," and animated by one of the chief symbolic conventions of pastoral elegy, the plucking of a flower:

3

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd  
palings,  
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,  
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong  
I love,  
With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard,  
With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of green,  
A sprig with its flower I break. (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:529–30)

Hyphenated compound words are one of Whitman's linguistic fortes, commonly found throughout his poetry. But the fact that this scene of rupture contains more of them than any other section of "Lilacs" except section 14 (which is nine times as long) seems specially intended to announce the choreography of division and union that will characterize the rest of the poem as well. Michael Moon has demonstrated, through his interpretive collation of editions one through four of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's "intensified awareness . . . of the insuperable difficulty of simply overruling division and difference."<sup>38</sup> Here, at the opening of his elegy, Whitman asserts the reparative aspiration of his poetics—his need to dress the wounds and visibly heal the breaches to which elegiac tradition helps alert him.

These conventional wounds are displayed vividly and with rich allusiveness in section 4, where Whitman nods once again to the strict metrical tradition he disavows through an oblique reference to Philomela in his description of the singing thrush—Whitman's emanation of the lyric figure of the elegist:

4

In the swamp in secluded recesses,  
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary the thrush,  
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,  
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,  
Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know,  
If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.)  
(*Leaves of Grass*, 5:530)

This self-reflexive observation ("well dear brother I know") on intense expressive urgency implies that for the poet, as well as for the thrush, survival requires not just a voice but also a way of using that voice, a way of singing that can transmute the danger of suppressed grief into structured performance. Yet these lines hide the agency of that transmutation. Who or what "grants" the thrush to sing? The passive construction ("If thou wast not granted") seems to confirm an innate capacity (the thrush is a songbird, it is in its nature to sing) in which

the poet recognizes his own vocation. But it is the poet's interpellation by poetic tradition that enables that recognition in the first place. The poet knows the thrush needs to sing because he has been trained by other poets to hear in the voice of the North American songbird an indigenous version of the ostensibly melancholy utterance of its European counterpart, the nightingale, which substitutes for the unutterable grief of the mutilated Philomela. Whitman was probably familiar with Coleridge's rejection of this culturally transmitted figure of natural melancholy in his poem "The Nightingale":

A melancholy Bird? O idle thought!  
In nature there is nothing melancholy.  
—But some night-wandering Man, whose heart was pierc'd  
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,  
Or slow distemper of neglected love,  
(And so, poor Wretch! fill'd all things with himself  
And made all gentle sound tell back the tale  
Of his own sorrows) he and such as he  
First nam'd these notes a melancholy strain:  
And many a poet echoes the conceit.<sup>39</sup>

Whitman neither merely "echoes the conceit" nor fully renounces his resemblance to the "night-wandering Man." Instead, he parenthetically (which in Whitman almost always means aggressively) asserts his knowledge of an authentic melancholy in nature even as he announces his effort to account as fully as possible for his own melancholy—and possibly "profane," in Coleridge's sense—acquiescence in the formal elegiac tradition he has chosen to engage. Moreover, as he will demonstrate later in the poem, the benediction that Coleridge bestows upon his infant son Hartley at the end of "The Nightingale"—"that with the night / He may associate Joy!"—has, as it were, descended upon Whitman as well.<sup>40</sup>

The poem's internal account of Whitman's relation to elegiac tradition continues in section 5 with an impressively hieratic interruption or postponement of the thrush's song—a postponement effected by a shift of focus to the American landscape and, by section 6, to a new articulation of the dynamics of voice. In the single, long, periodic sentence that constitutes section 5, the landscape's salient feature—the coffin that



moves through it—seems buoyed by the poet's voice, positively lifted syntactically by the lovely descriptive periods that precede its appearance. When it does at length appear, at the very end of the sentence, it does so as something whose movements are as unencumbered as those of the "violets" and "yellow-spear'd wheat" that are its heralds. As the coffin continues, in section 6, to pass "through lanes and streets, / Through day and night," the murk and darkness of section 2 seem to reassert themselves weakly in the conventional trappings of mourning custom: "the cities draped in black" and "the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd women standing."

5

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,  
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from  
the ground, spotting the gray debris,  
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless  
grass,  
Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-  
brown fields uprisen,  
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,  
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,  
Night and day journeys a coffin.

6

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,  
Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land,  
With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with their cities draped in black,  
With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd women standing,  
With procession long and winding and the flambeaus of the night,  
With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the unbarred  
heads,  
With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the somber faces,  
With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and  
solemn,  
With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin,  
The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—where amid these you  
journey,  
With the tolling bells' perpetual clang,  
Here, coffin that slowly passes,  
I give you my sprig of lilac. (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:530–31)

Amid the blackness that descends—descends now into the specifically ritual elements of the poem's occasion—the poet's terrible private protest of pain in section 2 is displaced by the collective voices of the mourners who line the route of the journeying coffin: "the thousand voices rising strong and solemn . . . the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin." The ebb and flow of mourning voices, "rising" and "pouring" like powerful tides, are Whitman's naturalistic image of the nationalization of individual mourners in these compounded scenes of local mourning. Amid this ebb and flow, the poet signals his presence in the scene not as a voice but as a gesture: "I give you my sprig of lilac."

Section 7 exposes the tension between objectification and occultation in Whitman's relation to Lincoln's coffin, his object of address, as its function shifts from that of a metonymy for Lincoln, at the end of section 6, to that of a synecdoche for "coffins all." For with this shift in the object of mourning comes a reassertion of the poet's voice, wresting itself away from the rising and pouring voices of the massed mourners of section 6, and supplementing the silent or phatic gesture of giving the sprig of lilac—itself a symbol of violence transmogrified into a traditional and consoling aesthetic. The parenthetical enclosure of section 7 marks grammatically as digression what is also a passage of compounded aggression:

7

(Not for you, for one alone,  
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,  
For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O sane and  
sacred death.

All over bouquets of roses,  
O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,  
But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,  
Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,  
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,  
For you and the coffins all of you O death.) (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:531–32)

First, the poet rescinds the offering to Lincoln ("Not for you") made in the concluding line of section 6. In its generalization of the object of

mourning—from “one alone” to “coffins all”—the passage turns from paying tribute to the slain president to an aggrandizement of the poet as the agent or emissary of all mourning—performer of “copious” and continuous breakings of the symbolic bloom, loading not “coffins” nor even “death” so much as himself with the broken sprigs as tokens of his own expressive power. In its more than generalizing abstraction of the object of attention and praise from Lincoln to death itself, the passage also wills a generic break from elegy to ode. “I am no longer content with my role,” the poet seems to say. “Not only will I forgo the role of the moribund memorialist, who subordinates himself to the sham vivacity of the dead, but I’ll also refuse to channel social sympathy among my fellow mourners along conventional lines. I admire not the dead, but Death, so that’s what I’ll trope into life!”

Yet even before section 7 concludes, we start to see signs of just how difficult such aspirations will be to sustain for a poet who desires so strongly to experience in solitude the triumph of eroticized communion. “With loaded arms I come,” he announces, “pouring for you, / For you and the coffins all of you O death.” “Pouring” takes no definitive object here; it could be the “sprigs from the bushes” or the poet himself if “pouring” is to be read intransitively. But it does take an object in the previous section of the poem: the “dirges pour’d around the coffin” by the pooled, nationalized voices of Whitman’s fellow mourners. Whitman, as it were, pours himself back, syntactically, into that pool of voices—of voices figured as dirges or even as tears—from which he has just seemed to enact his differentiation.<sup>41</sup>

Through the poem’s many voicings, Whitman projects his fantasy of a collective aspiration to share a singular experience of mourning so as to tame and unify the wild, riven subjectivities of the traumatized, the suspicious, the detached, and the resigned. But he also remains alert to the possibility that a superabundance of conviction in the ability to speak for others might actually weaken his power to do so. This alertness is one of the things that helps inform his choice of a “participation without belonging” in the tradition of pastoral elegy. It also keeps before us the image of a desiring personality, tense and exhausted with longing, as in the hypomanic self-assertiveness of section 7 and in the lover’s wistful retrospect in section 8:

8

O western orb sailing the heaven,  
Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk’d,  
As I walk’d in silence the transparent shadowy night,  
As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,  
As you droop’d from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other  
stars all look’d on,)

As we wander’d together the solemn night, (for something I know not  
what kept me from sleep,)  
As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you  
were of woe,  
As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night,  
As I watch’d where you pass’d and was lost in the netherward black of the  
night,  
As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb,  
Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone. (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:532)

The intimate colloquy recalled here is reminiscent of some of Whitman’s oblique encounters with Lincoln, as recorded in *Specimen Days* and elsewhere—encounters of vividly remembered glances and cherished wishes. One thinks not only of those savored, occasional glimpses of Lincoln himself but also of Whitman’s moodier sketch of “The White House by Moonlight,” dated February 24, 1864. No orb, not even the “western orb” of Venus in “Lilacs,” ever received from him such dazzling treatment as does the moon here in its splendid diffusion:

A spell of fine soft weather. I wander about a good deal, sometimes at night under the moon. To-night take a long look at the President’s house. The white portico—the palace-like, tall, round columns, spotless as snow—the walls also—the tender and soft moonlight, flooding the pale marble, and making peculiar faint languishing shades, not shadows—everywhere a soft transparent hazy, thin, blue moon-lace, hanging in the air—the brilliant and extra-plentiful clusters of gas, on and around the façade, columns, portico, &c.—everything so white, so marbly pure and dazzling, yet soft—the White House of future poems, and of dreams and dramas, there in the soft and copious moon—the gorgeous front, in the trees, under the lustrous flooding moon, full of reality, full of illusion—the forms of the trees, leafless, silent, in trunk and myriad-angles of branches, under the stars and sky—the White House of the land, and of beauty and night—sentries at the gates, and by the portico, silent, pacing there in blue overcoats—stopping you not at all, but eyeing you with sharp eyes, whichever way you move. (*Prose Works*, 1:40–41)

It is as if the White House itself were an effect of moonlight, made of moonlight—not the newly repainted and respectable White House of Matthew Brady's 1861 photograph but an otherworldly White House "of future poems, and of dreams and dramas." It is a trysting place for sublunar romance, where Whitman goes to think about the president and the aura that surrounds him, a place of possibility where even the uniformed armed guards evoke the cruising glances of "To a Stranger."

In section 8 of "Lilacs," Whitman revisits his earlier nightwalking self and a scene of missed understanding not only in self-recrimination for wrongly interpreting a portentous sign but also in an effort to preserve the sense of lost erotic opportunity: the signal not picked up on ("Now I know what you must have meant"), the singular companionship of the bright planet that "droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side," the troubled premonition doubling as unrecognized erotic excitation ("something I know not what kept me from sleep"), and, finally, the dissatisfactions and identifications associated with departure ("As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb, / Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone").

"Concluded," as a term for the sad orb's departure, suggests at once rhetorical alignment (the orb concludes like the poet's single sentence comprising section 8) and consensus (they have reached an understanding). It further suggests the encompassing figure of planetary orbit. The orb drops off the horizon, to return again and again in its orderly revolutions. Its orbit describes a kind of hortus conclusus, a cosmic pastoral enclosure of the world, in which the poet's thoughts now naturally return, in section 9, to the tryst that awaits him in the swamp:

9

Sing on there in the swamp,  
O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call,  
I hear, I come presently, I understand you,  
But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me,  
The star my departing comrade holds and detains me. (*Leaves of Grass*,  
2:532)

The poet returns in this section to detailing his protracted approach to the swamp, the lyric center of the poem, not as a series of eruptions of

phobic resistance but as the appreciative pauses of a cultivated temperament slowly relinquishing itself to a more refined and therefore uncertain knowledge of his relation to the world. On the way, epistemological apprehensiveness keeps pace with the domestication of wildness. "Bring your sills up to the very edge of the swamp," Thoreau exhorts in his essay on "Walking," published just a few years before "Lilacs."<sup>42</sup>

Whitman complies, starting at the farmhouse dooryard in section 1 and pushing its threshold slowly and self-consciously toward the edge of the swamp. In sections 9 and 13, he performs the spells or interludes of detainment—allowing himself to be held back by the "lustrous star" (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:532) and the "mastering odor" of the lilac (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:534)—that enable the further enrichment of his secret culture of desire. Loss—the legacy of uncertainty so lavishly bestowed upon us by loss—is, paradoxically, the source of this enrichment. "What we come to know," writes Bollas,

as we mature into more sophisticated creatures is that we add new psychic structures that make us more complex, increase our capacity for the dream work of life, and therefore problematize the sense we have of an established reality, a world of psychically meaningful convention, available to us for our adaptation. As we age we know that our destiny is a rather paradoxical psychobiological unraveling.<sup>43</sup>

This unraveling process helps to unshroud and to challenge the cognitive and representational powers exercised with increasing confidence in the second half of the poem. Cognitive power takes the form of psychological tropes of mastery: understanding, thought, knowledge. Representational power takes the form, in sections 10 through 12, of a self-colloquy on how to write an elegy and on how to reevaluate the poet's status as one mourner among many:

10

O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?  
And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?  
And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love?

Sea-winds blown from east and west,  
Blown from the Eastern sea and blown from the Western sea, till there on  
the prairies meeting,

These and with these and the breath of my chant,  
I'll perfume the grave of him I love.

## II

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?  
And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,  
To adorn the burial-house of him I love?

Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,  
With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid and  
bright,  
With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun,  
burning, expanding the air,  
With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of the  
trees prolific,  
In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-  
dapple here and there,  
With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky, and  
shadows,  
And the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of chimneys,  
And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen homeward  
returning.

## 12

Lo, body and soul—this land,  
My own Manhattan with spires, and the sparkling and hurrying tides,  
and the ships,  
The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light, Ohio's  
shores and flashing Missouri,  
And ever the far-spreading prairies cover'd with grass and corn.

Lo, the most excellent sun so calm and haughty,  
The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes,  
The gentle soft-born measureless light,  
The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill'd noon,  
The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the stars,  
Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land. (*Leaves of Grass*,  
2:533-34)

Beginning with the question, "How shall I warble myself for the dead  
one there I loved?" Whitman suggests that he will continue to identify  
with the thrush through poetic competition. "Warble," for instance, is

not only an image of voice that emphasizes artifice and stylized per-  
formance. It is also, of course, a distinctly avian image of voice—and  
the warbler, it could be argued, is a far more characteristically North  
American family of birds than the thrush.<sup>44</sup> The placement of the pro-  
noun "myself" speaks to the reflexiveness of mourning song, for it im-  
plies both the poet's subjective voice as an elegist ("How shall I do  
my warbling?") and his characteristic role as self-warbler ("How shall I  
warble myself, as well as Lincoln, into my song?").

The extended answer to the question, in sections 10 through 12,  
is redolent with conviction in the consolatory power of a specifically  
American landscape and with confidence, enabled by the reprise of ear-  
lier works, in the poet's ability to picture scenes of farm and forest, ship  
and workshop, prairie and ocean. Transcontinental gusts are literally  
his inspiration, and images of western prairies, of the commerce and  
industry of cities, and of the amplitude of states and rivers that give  
each other their names suggest to Whitman a comprehensive response  
to loss that he is more than capable of figuring. The fluency of cadences  
of memory also enables the newly energized solicitation of the thrush  
in section 13:

## 13

Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird,  
Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the bushes,  
Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines.

Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song,  
Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe.

O liquid and free and tender!  
O wild and loose to my soul—O wondrous singer!  
You only I hear—yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart),  
Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me. (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:534)

The beautiful dalliance of unloosed impulse here—the pull exerted on  
the solitary thrush to "pour" forth his song, the pleasure of identifica-  
tion ("dearest brother"), the paradoxical rhythmic enthusiasm of the  
"voice of uttermost woe," indeed the transformation of histrionic "woe"  
into the exclamatory and delighted "O"s of praise, the flirtations and

devotions—anticipates the consolidation of the poet's secret culture of desire in the final three sections of the elegy, beginning with the prelude to the thrush's song in section 14:

14

Now while I sat in the day and look'd forth,  
 In the close of the day with its lights and the fields of spring, and the  
 farmers preparing their crops,  
 In the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and forests,  
 In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds and the storms,)  
 Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the voices  
 of children and women,  
 The many-moving sea-tides, and I saw the ships how they sail'd,  
 And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy with  
 labor,  
 And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each with its  
 meals and minutia of daily usages,  
 And the streets how their throbblings throb'd, and the cities pent—lo,  
 then and there,  
 Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest,  
 Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,  
 And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death.

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,  
 And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,  
 And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of  
 companions,  
 I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,  
 Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness,  
 To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me,  
 The gray-brown bird I know receiv'd us comrades three,  
 And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love.

From the deep secluded recesses,  
 From the fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still,  
 Came the carol of the bird.

And the charm of the carol rapt me,  
 As I held as if by their hands my comrades in the night,  
 And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird. (*Leaves of Grass*,  
 2:535-36)

The envelopment of loss, which descends once again in the form of a black cloud, now seems to bear a sense of social force, the reassurance of an available experience of commonality that the poet figures as a loving companionship of three.

When commentators inquire into the nature of these companions, they generally engage in a slightly irritating appeal to the flatly conceptual: for example, thought of death is "loss," knowledge of death is "process";<sup>45</sup> or the division of thought and knowledge is the antagonism of "experience" and "understanding";<sup>46</sup> or the poet mediates "between the general knowledge and the particular thought, the point at which Aristotle speculates that poetry originates."<sup>47</sup> But none of these is Whitman's "thought" or Whitman's "knowledge." Indeed, *knowledge* is a relatively rare word in Whitman, and when it does appear, it tends to be expressive of organic sensation ("My knowledge my live parts" [*Leaves of Grass*, 1:36]), satisfaction with immediacy ("knowledge, not in another place but this place, not for another hour but this hour" [1:97]) and with the embodied self ("The full-spread pride of man is calming and excellent to the soul, / Knowledge becomes him, he likes it always, he brings everything to the test of himself" [1:127]). The claim to "know" most frequently operates as a kind of epistemological come-on ("Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they discuss I am silent, and go bathe and admire myself" [1:4]) or sly flirtation with the reader ("I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself, / (They do not know how immortal, but I know)" [1:8]). Thoughtfulness, too, typically characterizes the opportunism of desire ("This moment yearning and thoughtful sitting alone, / It seems to me there are other men in other lands yearning and thoughtful" [2:393]) and the dream of contact ("And that my soul embraces you this hour, and we affect each other without ever seeing each other, and never perhaps to see each other, is every bit as wonderful. / And that I can think such thoughts as these is just as wonderful, / And that I can remind you, and you think them and know them to be true, is just as wonderful" [1:154]). In "Lilacs," the figure of the poet hastening into the swamp is a figure for whom the generative possibilities of loss have taken fresh hold of his imagination.

Of course, the oxymoronic quality of "fled forth" is a sign that

apprehensiveness has been freshly accommodated rather than overruled. Nevertheless, his new companionship with the “thought of death” and the “knowledge of death” precipitates his entrance into the swamp, where the shyness of the thrush (a figure of inhibited desire) is overcome, finally, to the point of audibility and intelligibility in the poet’s tallying voice. To tally is to mark as well as to correspond, and the material sense of marking is reinforced by Whitman’s later decision to italicize the words of the thrush’s song, which were not italicized in its initial publication in *Sequel to Drum-Taps*. Yet, rather than showcasing the thrush’s song as the chief distillation of the poet’s elegiac ambitions, the italicization helps us to see it as the least essential, most decorative part of the poem, a floated carol truly:

*Come lovely and soothing death,  
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,  
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,  
Sooner or later delicate death.*

*Prais’d be the fathomless universe,  
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,  
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!  
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.*

*Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,  
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?  
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,  
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly.*

*Approach strong deliveress,  
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead,  
Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,  
Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.*

*From me to thee glad serenades,  
Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee,  
And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are fitting,  
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.*

*The night in silence under many a star,  
The ocean wave and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,  
And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil’d death,  
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.*

*Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,  
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies  
wide,  
Over the dense-pack’d cities all and the teeming wharves and ways,  
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death. (Leaves of Grass,  
2:536–37)*

With so much left to say, is it reasonable to think that the poet would content himself with the passing chirp of a bird? Kerry Larson is right to observe that in itself “the song of the hermit thrush is largely unremarkable, being for the most part a reworking of material handled with more dramatic urgency in the *Sea-Drift* cycle.”<sup>48</sup> It is the same urgency that Michael Moon suggests is resolved in “Lilacs” at the expense of a misogynistic lodging of death “with maternity and femininity”—with the “dark mother” and “strong deliveress.” But this is not where maternal influence ends in the poem. It ends, not with death, but with dreaming.

Whitman does not fall asleep in the concluding sections of “Lilacs.” Indeed, he is at pains to differentiate his visionary state from actual dreaming through the assertion of analogy (“I saw as in noiseless dreams”). Why is it that the recollection and interpretation of the experience of loss are figured finally as being akin to the experience of dreaming? Part of the answer lies in those “primary, archaic forms of the libido” that always remain to be dreamed, in the unconscious remembrance of the holding space of the maternal world. “To be in a dream,” Bollas writes,

is thus a continuous reminiscence of being inside the maternal world when one was partly a receptive figure within a comprehending environment. Indeed, the productive intentionality that determines the dream we are in and that never reveals itself (i.e. “where is the dreamer that dreams the dream?”) uncannily re-creates, in my view, the infant’s relation to the mother’s unconscious, which although it does not “show itself,” nonetheless produces the process of maternal care. In this respect the dream seems to be a structural memory of the infant’s unconscious, an object relation of person inside the other’s unconscious processing, revived in the continuous representation of the infantile moment every night.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, we all flee forth to “the hiding receiving night,” which is Whitman’s image for the holding environment of the dream, compassionately

encompassing, protectively absorbing. But if indeed the dream is “a structural memory of the infant’s unconscious,” then it is also a return to the site of the first appearance of the matricidal drive, of the first sensation of the need to lose the mother, of the consequent eroticization of that loss, and thus of the self’s dissemination as an affectionate, creative presence in the world. To flee forth to “the hiding receiving night” is to relinquish oneself to a fundamental ambivalence regarding the achievement of that presence and the perpetual rediscovery of that presence in the world’s multiplying array of invested objects—objects, all of them, subject to loss. The figure of the dream in “Lilacs” is the sign of that willing relinquishment, transformed through the experience of loss into the acceptance of new love, the anticipation of new power.

Dreams open outward as well as inward; they reveal social as well as psychological imperatives. In Whitman, dream motifs are redolent of privacy, the isolation of sleep, and the inscrutability of unconscious knowledge. Yet they are also charged with the expressive power of what, in “The Wound-Dresser,” he twice calls “dreams’ projections,” that is, projects of the waking mind as well as retrievable artifacts of the psyche (“retrievements out of the night,” in “Lilacs”) that can be shared and that may in fact help facilitate new kinds of intersubjective relationships. Sleeping and dreaming are pervasive motifs in Whitman in part because they are universally experienced states that help him limn the contours of an ideal world in which social and even somatic differences (such as race and gender) continue to exist and to signify, but in which they no longer threaten survival (for example, in the forms of misogyny and racism). “The diverse shall be no less diverse,” he maintains in “The Sleepers,” but

The laughter and weeper, the dancer, the midnight widow, the red squaw,  
The consumptive, the erysipalite, the idiot, he that is wrong’d,  
The antipodes, and every one between this and then in the dark,  
I swear they are averaged now—one is no better than the other,  
The night and sleep have liken’d them and restored them. (*Leaves of  
Grass*, 1:118)

Whitman’s paring away of somatic difference in his portraits of the sleepers suggests a break or discontinuity with the confinements and

privations of social life, even as he evokes the confinement of the tomb: “A shroud I see and I am the shroud, I wrap the body and lie in the coffin, / It is dark here under ground, it is not evil or pain here, it is blank here, for reasons” (*Leaves of Grass*, 1:113). “The Sleepers” bases its analogizing between sleep and death on irrepressible surmise: because sleep mimics or presages death, its obvious continuities with waking states also reinforce contemporary philosophical and scientific uncertainties regarding the temporality of death and dying and the nature of death’s disruptions to sensation and consciousness. Whitman not only leaves this existential dilemma unresolved (“it is blank here, for reasons”) but also foregrounds it in a representation of dream work, in which manifestations of contrary concepts, like “particular” and “general,” are not experienced as contradictory.

For the speaker of the poem, as well as for the sleepers he visits, adjacency becomes identity through the mechanism of dreaming: “I dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers, / And I become the other dreamers (*Leaves of Grass*, 1:110). The hypnotic ease with which this sympathetic crossing occurs—figured in the condensed and effortless-seeming lexical transformations from “dream” (verb) to “dream” (noun) to “dreams” to “dreamers”—anticipates the aspiration, in “Lilacs,” toward further promiscuous achievements of combination, such as the triune figure of eroticized companionship and the trio’s appreciation of the reinvigorated song of the thrush in section 15:

15

To the tally of my soul,  
Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird,  
With pure deliberate notes spreading filling the night.

Loud in the pines and cedars dim,  
Clear in the freshness moist and the swamp-perfume,  
And I with my comrades there in the night.  
While my sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed,  
As to long panoramas of visions.

And I saw askant the armies,  
I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,  
Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc’d with missiles I saw them,  
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and bloody,

And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,  
And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.

I saw the battle-corpses, myriads of them,  
And the white skeletons of the young men, I saw them,  
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,  
But I saw they were not as was thought,  
~~They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,~~  
The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,  
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,  
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd. (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:537-38)

The silent pictures of the war and its aftermath, screened, so to speak, to the accompaniment of the thrush's song, suggest not only the achievement of memorial piety but also the improved sociability that begins with the recognition of the grievances of the living.

Yet this vision is also scored with the traces of isolation and aggression. To see "askant," for instance, is not only to see obliquely but also potentially to register distrust and disapproval—much as a soldier might view his enemy from an imperiled vantage of momentary safety and composure. The vision of battle recalls figural as well as literal violence. For example, the staffs of the battle-flags (the flags themselves emblems of bodies "pierc'd," "torn," and "bloody") are "splinter'd and broken" in a way that evokes the sprigs of lilac that the poet himself has so copiously broken. The word *suffer'd* becomes a kind of refrain, chanting the persistence of disruption, even as the poet anticipates his withdrawal from this scene of vigilant mourning.

The poem's final section announces its already accomplished revision of the thrush's song and the poet's readiness to leave behind this emblematic text of mourning in order to depart from the world of the poem:

16  
Passing the visions, passing the night,  
Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades' hands,  
Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my soul,  
Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song,  
As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding the  
night,  
Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again  
bursting with joy,

Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven,  
As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses,  
Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves,  
I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring.

I cease from my song for thee,  
From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with  
thee,  
O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night.

Yet each to keep and all, retrievments out of the night,  
The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird,  
And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,  
With the lustrous and drooping star with the countenance full of woe,  
With the holders holding my hand nearing the call of the bird,  
Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to keep, for  
the dead I loved so well,  
For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands—and this for his  
dear sake,  
Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,  
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim. (*Leaves of Grass*,  
2:538-39)

Whitman figures here a now attenuated sense of his own implication in the ongoing urgency of grief's "warning and warning" and its paradoxical, concomitant "bursting with joy." To "pass," to "leave," to "cease"—to find, in other words, a sufficient culmination for grieving at the threshold of grievance is the final aspiration that Whitman bequeaths to the reader of his poem.

For Whitman and his contemporaries, it was difficult to be sure what the grievance was that survived and outlasted Lincoln's power to adjudicate, or that survived beyond his unsatisfactory adjudication. It is terrible to experience loss as the condition of being trapped in grief on the verge of articulation, as Herman Melville dramatized most forcibly in his Lincoln elegy "The Martyr" (1866). "The Martyr" is manifestly a threat, a prologue to vengeance that augurs further violence in every pulse of its refrain:

There is a sobbing of the strong,  
And a pall upon the land;  
But the people in their weeping  
Bare the iron hand:



Beware the People weeping  
When they bare the iron hand.<sup>50</sup>

Yet with each pulse, or beat, the poem's lines—here in the refrain and throughout the elegy—insist audibly upon a complex but quite regular rhythm. Precise metrical and stanzaic arrangements, end-rhymes, and other formal elements of repetition order the dispersive "Passion of the People" of which the poem, in its subtitle, claims to be "Indicative." Indeed, the very presence of a refrain (literally, the repetition of a breaking-off) figures the regimentation of disruptive energy. Melville's elegy is about the marshaling of unexpended force and thus hearkens back to rallying, militaristic verses from earlier in the war—poems such as Whitman's "Beat! Beat! Drums!" in which the beating of the drums is fully antagonistic to mourning decorum (Whitman there directs the drums to "Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearses" [*Leaves of Grass*, 2:487]). In "The Martyr," however, the threatening force announced in the rhythmic beating of its lines turns out to be something more like the "pall" of melancholy, the "harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul" in section 2 of "Lilacs." "The Martyr" threatens revenge but crucially equivocates the object of address. Who must "beware"? Who, after all, is the focus of the "People's" vengeful passion? And why is the form of the threat presented as an efficacious conjunction of sorrow and rage—not the conversion of grief into anger but rather their convergence?

As an occasional poem, "The Martyr," like "Lilacs," depends for its intelligibility upon its embeddedness in the historical present. The Christological analogizing (Lincoln is identified as "Martyr," "redeemer," "Forgiver") challenges the reader's interpretation of historical context rather than displacing it. Nor is the agency of the martyrdom, the "crime" of Lincoln's assassination, delinked from the history of sectional conflict. Nevertheless, Melville alters and pluralizes the killer in the frequently repeated phrase "they killed him," occulting most obviously Booth's individual agency as Lincoln's assassin. Less obvious tensions between objectification and occultation occur in relation to the object of address. For the audience being called upon to "Beware the People" is at once the audience of killers and the audience aligned with the poet, speaking for "the People," from whom the killers ("they") are

seemingly distinct. Formally, the poem's stanza-refrain structure suggests the polyvocal performance of singer and chorus; goaded by the singer of the stanzas, "the People" are heard in the refrain, responding, as it were, *in* as well as *to* their own voice. The warning thus voiced rebounds upon the structurally implied controlling voice of the poet in what reads as an inwardly as well as outwardly directed threat.

Melville's passional fusion of voices in the militancy of "the People" never fully commands a poem that is also about how mourning overmasters expression—about how mourning may canalize and frustrate psychic articulation into an orgy of recrimination.

The terrible vigilance of a people desperate for but unable to find a language of amnesty that would correspond less damagingly to the voice of mourning is also the subject of an astonishing elegy written just days after the assassination by the young Emma Lazarus—an elegy not about Lincoln but about Booth, his killer, as he seeks to elude, "all the sleepless night," his vengeful pursuers:

"To sleep! What is sleep now but haunting dreams?  
Chased off, every time, by the flashing gleams  
Of the light o'er the stream in yonder town,  
Where all are searching and hunting me down!  
Oh, the wearisome pain, the dread suspense  
And the horror each instant more intense!  
I yearn for rest from my pain and for sleep,—  
Bright stars, do ye mock, or, quivering, weep?"<sup>51</sup>

Booth never mentions killing Lincoln. Indeed, Lazarus's elegy ends up seeming less like a poem about a killer on the run than a meditative drama about the struggle to relinquish the burden of vigilance one's own aggressions and their objects enforce. He is dogged by the imperative of alertness to a degree that overturns elegiac convention: even the stars—conventional emblems of the immortalization of the deceased, as in "Lilacs" itself—become pursuers, possible avengers of the mourned.

Lazarus's Booth is also pursued by a choral voice—"all Nature's voices"—that punctuates his lamentations with the following refrain:

Go forth! Thou shalt have here no rest again,  
For thy brow is marked with the brand of Cain.<sup>52</sup>

Here is the familiar elegiac regimentation of aggression through form. Yet Lazarus's elegy for Booth makes a startling (and, as far as I have seen, anomalous) appearance among Northern, abolitionist, and pro-Union responses to Lincoln's death because it makes explicit the identification between elegist and assassin that so many other Lincoln elegies suggest obliquely. In addition to rendering Booth audible through ventriloquization, the poem's narrative voice is sympathetic and sentimental, figuring Booth as a victim, as a kind of hunted stag, ultimately released by death from the suffering inflicted by, not on, his pursuers:

All sorrow has gone with life's fitful breath.  
Rest at last! For thy brow bears the seal of Death.<sup>53</sup>

Yet these final lines also challenge the poem's own appeal to sympathy for individual suffering. Is it merely Booth's "sorrow" that ends with his death? Or does the poem also envision the end of a shared, collective sorrow, soothed and dissipated by knowledge of the assassin's death? Is mourning over, and the need for vigilance passed, because Booth is free from his own subjection to extreme vigilance? Is the force of Lazarus's unexpected and provocative sympathy for Booth extinguished with his life? Or do the poem's final lines recall the reader to his or her own ongoing, burdensome task of vigilance, ensuring the final displacement of Booth as an object of mourning in order that the proper object—Lincoln—may be restored to view?

Much has been made of Lincoln's absence from view in "Lilacs" as a symptom of historical evasiveness. Mutlu Blasing, for example, insists that the elegy's opening stanza is a "grand evasion" in which "the particular, historical present is unspoken for."<sup>54</sup> But to what extent was it necessary to speak for it, in the detailed, realistic manner whose absence from the poem Blasing treats as evidence of a kind of counterreferential pathology of mourning? As an occasional genre, elegy signals—indeed, it depends for its intelligibility upon—its embeddedness in the historical present, even as it troubles (rather than defensively "evading") the historical present by combining temporalities of tradition (e.g., reliance on elegiac conventions) and futurity (e.g., asseverations of perpetual mourning, which are themselves, of course, conventional to the genre). Timothy Sweet goes even further than Blasing, reading "Lilacs" as

Whitman's recovery of a fundamentally counterhistorical pastoralism, "a poem that is minimally about Lincoln's death as a historical event, and is scarcely at all about the Civil War."<sup>55</sup> Such assessments speak with some value to Whitman's relatively light reliance on historicizing detail in "Lilacs," as compared to many other contemporary Lincoln elegies. Yet Sweet's own language of approximation—"minimally about," "scarcely at all about"—gestures toward a more accurate characterization of "Lilacs" as an occasional poem that opts to see askance what is already in plain view—not Lincoln merely, nor the war in general, but also the feature of the conflict that was its most fundamental representational problem.

In section 15, the dreamlike vision evokes the reality of black suffering as another element of the historical present—an element evoked chiefly by the trope of whiteness. In the history of mourning arts, white is commonly a classicizing, funerary color—dramatically voiding flesh, pain, decay, and blood. It also suggests peace after death and is linked to the lunar light of Whitman's "comrade lustrous." But it would be a mistake to conclude that the trope of whiteness has a firmly settled relation of distance from the materiality of death and of the human body in particular. The image of the "white skeletons of young men" in section 15 of "Lilacs," for example, shares with the large number of similar images throughout Whitman's Civil War writings a metonymic relation to contemporary, anxious fantasies of death's complexion.

As Whitman knew from his firsthand experience with the war dead, the ability to sustain the illusion of a lifelike corpse was significantly enhanced during the war by the development of effective embalming techniques. Yet while embalming mitigated the effects of putrefaction, it did not prevent them. As Lincoln's own embalmed corpse wended its way west, it began to show signs of decay, including darkening of the face—a "blackening" that had to be covered up by crude cosmetics during the journey so that the body could continue to be displayed. In his oration at Oak Ridge Cemetery, Matthew Simpson spoke of the almost talismanic effect of Lincoln's corpse during its transcontinental viewing: it obliterated pernicious personal distinctions and promoted unity among mourners.<sup>56</sup> Yet it also provoked underarticulated anxieties about racial confusion and, ultimately, about the reality of integral distinctions

among persons. Occasionally, these anxieties erupted in contemporary war reporting, as in the following passage from a *Harper's Weekly* article in the aftermath of Antietam:

The faces of those who had fallen in the battle were, after more than a day's exposure, so black that no one would ever suspect that they had been white. All looked like negroes, and as they lay in piles where they had fallen, one upon another, they filled the by-standers with a sense of horror.<sup>57</sup>

The easy conflation here of the twin horrors of mass death and racial instability reflects a widespread tendency to conflate death, blackness, and national instability.<sup>58</sup>

In this light, Whitman's paling of death is difficult not to read, in "Lilacs" and elsewhere, as a reaction in part to the "horror" of the on-lookers at Antietam. Whitman rewrites contemporary tensions over racial and existential categories in his poems and, in this way, on the bodies of the dead. He moves among the dead in many of his poems not like the nurse of the hospital but like a version of the newly professionalized American undertaker, perfuming and blanching. He marks the faces of the dead soldiers: "faces so pale" (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:511), faces of "beautiful yellow-white ivory" (2:496), faces "white as a lily" (2:494). He insists upon the marmoreal impress of death as he insists upon the impress of his kisses:

For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,  
I look down where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw near,  
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

If in these lines the synecdoche of the white face seems to fall in some dehistoricized realm between Christology and fetishism, the poem in which they appear is itself an elegy for the times, lamenting that the "war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost." Furthermore, it makes its lament under the aegis of the title-theme of "Reconciliation"—a reconciliation to be effected by death's cleansing of "this soil'd world" (*Leaves of Grass*, 2:555–56). The poem's linked motifs of cleansing, whiteness, and reconciliation once again evoke what seems to be the specter of Whitman's Civil War poetry: the "dark" figure—the corpse, the mother—lying beyond the salient, neatly mor-

ally differentiated categories of its culture. The transfigured corpse, like the "transfigured scene" of the war to which Henry James referred "every sort of intensity," functions most crucially as a figure not for racism but for the ambivalent goal of self-differentiation through mourning.<sup>59</sup>

Henry James begins his 1865 review of *Drum-Taps* by stressing that reading and writing about Whitman's book has been for him a "melancholy task," inviting the reader to ask: What, then, is the unspoken, ungrievable thing on which James's review turns? In a frequently exasperated tone, James characterizes Whitman as a self-absorbed seducer who writes elegies about the scenery of war that are preoccupied with his own sexuality. "For a lover," James complains, "you talk entirely too much about yourself." This charge seems motivated by James's ambivalence over masculinity and its centrality to the ambition he shares with Whitman to be "possessed" by the "idea of your country's greatness."<sup>60</sup> James's use here of the trope of possession, with its many cultural as well as psychological associations in the postbellum United States, speaks more precisely to James's own lifelong conflict over whether or not to try to limn the contours of his masculine identity. Yet, as James recognized, Whitman too was constantly doing battle with his own urge both to obscure and to specify the limits of variability in sexual terms. In a much later review of Bucke's edition of Whitman's "Calamus" letters to Peter Doyle, James writes of the "beauty of the particular nature" revealed in Whitman's "illiterate colloquy":

To call the whole thing vividly American is to challenge, doubtless, plenty of dissent—on the ground, presumably, that the figure in evidence was no less queer a feature of Camden, New Jersey, than it would have been of South Kensington. That may perfectly be; but a thousand images of patient, homely, American life, else indistinguishable, are what its queerness—however startling—happened to express.

In the uncompromised and inaccessible singularity of Whitman and Doyle's relationship ("the whole thing"), James discovers—and delights in discovering—a combination of the "queer" and the "homely" that makes Americanness seem a kind of erotic consolation for what, to James at least, are the otherwise "indistinguishable" and therefore otherwise ungrievable privations of his own American life:

Whitman wrote to his friend of what they both saw and touched, enormities of the common, sordid occupations, dreary amusements, undesirable food; and the record remains, by a mysterious marvel, a thing positively delightful. If we ever find out why, it must be another time. The riddle meanwhile is a neat one for the sphinx of democracy to offer.<sup>61</sup>

The real “enormities”—the assassination, which Doyle witnessed, and the love for Doyle that Whitman so famously, so pitifully renounced in his 1870 notebook (*Notebooks*, 2:887–89)—remain unspoken. But their ephemeral traces, the letters, have escaped abandonment. This is what James takes pleasure in, just as the “cheapness” of the surviving token of libidinal investment was an affluent source of Whitman’s pleasure in the “little Washington-Lincoln photo.”

The image of Lincoln, both queer and homely, helped bring Whitman, as Lawrence Buell puts it, “to the threshold of canonicity” in his own time.<sup>62</sup> It was not “Lilacs,” however, but “O Captain! My Captain” that enjoyed overwhelming popularity in the decades following the war. That elegy’s weak capitulation to contemporary prosodic standards and mourning styles itself became a source of lamentation for Whitman later on. He told Traubel that although the poem had its “reasons for being,” he was “almost sorry” he had ever written it.<sup>63</sup> His “almost sorry” may sound a bit cagey in light of his numerous recitations of the poem in tandem with his famous and lucrative lecture “The Death of Abraham Lincoln,” in which he appropriated and embellished Doyle’s eyewitness account. These performances, given in New York and Philadelphia between 1879 and 1890, were themselves a kind of consolation for Whitman, ill and financially dependent in his last years. Yet Whitman was not the only one who felt ambivalent about the popular success of this other artifact of presidential kitsch. Stuart Merrill, who attended one of the anniversary lectures in New York, heard Whitman recite (“sob” rather than “chant”) “O Captain! My Captain!” and was appalled at the audience’s applause, “which appeared to me an outrage to the grief of the poet.” In relation to the tedious poem, Merrill assumes the farcical role (“I was in the presence of the sublime and I could only weep”) of the late-Victorian aesthete—uncomprehending enemy of the very “noise of the crowd,” “the impatient clanging of the tramcars,” “the great roaring of steamboats” that

had ignited Whitman’s imagination and his desire.<sup>64</sup> Merrill colludes but semiconsciously with the sentimental valediction that was the substance of the final years of Whitman’s public life. That long good-bye echoes in the schoolrooms where “Captain” is memorized and recited to this day. What those echoes yet sustain may be the still largely unexamined requirement for civic life of a certain ignorance as to the prodigality of pleasure in the experience of loss and the literatures of mourning.

110. Howe, "Death," 5.
111. Ibid.
112. Julia Ward Howe, "Slave Suicide," in *Words for the Hour* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1857), 32–34.
113. Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 25.
114. Abraham Lincoln, "The Suicide's Soliloquy," *Sangamo Journal*, 25 August 1838; rpt. in Richard Lawrence Miller, "What Is Hell to One Like Me?" *American Heritage* 55, no. 4 (2004): 50–54.
115. Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1832–1858*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), 29.
116. *Diary of Gideon Welles*, 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 2:290.
117. Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 809.
118. Campbell, "Abraham Lincoln," in *Poems*, 52.
119. Thomas Reed Turner, *Beware the People Weeping: Public Opinion and the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 52.
120. Ibid., 23.
121. "The Negro and the War," *Valley Spirit* (Chambersburg, PA), 27 January 1864, 4.
122. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 220.
123. Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 139.
124. Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 7 July 1863, in *The Correspondence*, vol. 1, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 115.
125. Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 917–18.
126. Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 248, 250, 252.
127. Sherman, introduction to *Black Bard*, 29–30.
128. Sandra M. Gilbert, "Widow," *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001), 564.
129. Ibid., 577.
130. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 217–22, 245.
131. "I Got a Home in-a Dat Rock," in Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, 98.
132. Matthew Simpson, *Funeral Address Delivered at the Burial of President Lincoln at Springfield, Illinois, May 4, 1865* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1865), 5.
133. Whitman published four elegies for Lincoln: "Hush'd be the Camps To-day" (1865), "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865), "O Captain! My Captain!" (1865), and "This Dust was Once the Man" (1871). His unfinished manuscript elegies "Unveil Thy Bosom, Faithful Tomb" (1865) and "Thou West that gave'st Him to Us" (1865) appear in facsimile in *Walt Whitman's Drum-Taps (1865) and Sequel to Drum-Taps (1865–66): A Facsimile Reproduction*, ed. F. DeWolfe Miller (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1959), xxiv, xlii.
134. Walt Whitman, "Death of Abraham Lincoln," in *Prose Works*, 2 vols., ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963–64), 2:508.

## 6. Retrievements out of the Night

The epigraph at the chapter opening is from Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature: Volume One*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 11.

1. Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 3 (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 134–35.
2. Walt Whitman, "The Primer of Words," in *Daybooks and Notebooks*, 3 vols., ed. William White (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 3:745. Traubel edited these manuscript materials and published them after Whitman's death as *An American Primer* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1904).
3. Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 6 vols., ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 2:539. Further references to this edition, designated *Notebooks*, occur parenthetically within the text.
4. Walt Whitman, "The Sleepers," in *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, 3 vols., ed. Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 1:115. Further references to this edition, designated *Leaves of Grass*, occur parenthetically within the text.
5. Kerry C. Larson, *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 215.
6. Walt Whitman, *Prose Works*, 2 vols., ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963–64), 1:61. Further references to this edition, designated *Prose Works*, occur parenthetically within the text.
7. For William Wallace Lincoln, as for the younger memorialists of George Washington discussed in chapter 2, elegy writing was part of youth's tuition in sentimental citizenship. Four months before his own death, Willie sent to the *Daily National Republican* an elegy he had composed for Lincoln family friend Edward Baker, killed at the Battle of Ball's Bluff. Willie's poem is reproduced in Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1868), ed. Frances Smith Foster (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1998), 82–83.
8. Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 88.
9. Representing the former extreme, Jerome Loving suggests that with the war Whitman's "'Calamus' feeling was becoming sweetly solemnized (if never completely anesthetized) by death" (*Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 19); representing the latter extreme, Michael Moon suggests, in an essay on *Drum-Taps*, that "we may find in fetishes a broadly conceived means of extending our own bodies, as well as the bodies of our beloved dead, and in fetishistic practices further means of exploring and extending our relationships, including our sexual relationships, with the dead" ("Memorial Rags," in *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman [New York: Modern Language Association, 1995], 237).
10. Robert Leigh Davis, *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 40–41.
11. Ibid., 14.
12. See Patricia Cline Cohen, *A Calculating People: The Spread of Numeracy in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
13. On the manipulation of such images, see Timothy Sweet, *Traces of War: Poetry*,

*Photography, and the Crisis of Union* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 107–37.

14. “Brady’s Photographs. Pictures of the Dead at Antietam,” *New York Times*, October 20, 1862, 5.

15. Davis, *Whitman*, 91–93.

16. Few critics besides Davis have written as eloquently of these imaginings as Peter Coviello in *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 127–55. See also Michael Warner, “Whitman Drunk,” in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30–43.

17. John Burroughs, “Walt Whitman and His ‘Drum Taps,’” *The Galaxy* 2 (1866): 612–13.

18. Jones Very, “John Woolman” (1852), in *Jones Very: The Complete Poems* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 274.

19. Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 217; Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 317.

20. Moon, *Disseminating Whitman*, 219.

21. *Ibid.*, 221.

22. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (1971) (East Sussex: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 2.

23. Walt Whitman, letter to William D. O’Connor, January 6, 1865, in *The Correspondence, Volume 1: 1842–1867*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 246–47. Further references to this edition, designated *Correspondence*, occur parenthetically within the text.

24. F. DeWolfe Miller, introduction to *Walt Whitman’s Drum-Taps (1865) and Sequel to Drum-Taps (1865–6)* (Gainesville, FL: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1959), xxxiv.

25. Moon, *Disseminating Whitman*, 63.

26. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 3.

27. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 93–94.

28. *Ibid.*, 93.

29. William James, “Is Life Worth Living?” in *Writings, 1878–1899*, ed. Gerald E. Myers (New York: Library of America, 1992), 480.

30. Davis, *Whitman*, 39.

31. Roy Morris Jr., *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 34.

32. Helen Vendler, “Whitman’s ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,’” in *Textual Analysis: Some Readers Reading*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1986), 139.

33. *Ibid.*, 133.

34. Christopher Bollas, *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self-Experience* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 100.

35. *Ibid.*, 71.

36. Allen Grossman, “The Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln: An Inquiry toward the Relationship of Art and Policy,” in *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 64.

37. Harold Bloom, “Whitman’s Image of Voice,” in *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 189.

38. Moon, *Disseminating Whitman*, 89.

39. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Nightingale,” in William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads and Related Writings*, ed. William Richey and Daniel Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 47–48.

40. *Ibid.*, 50.

41. These shifting enactments of voice in “Lilacs” have been parsed, or “tallied,” by a number of the poem’s readers, including Harold Bloom and Mitchell Breitwieser. Despite their very different conclusions about the poem, both favor the synesthetic term “image of voice” to describe its dynamic. For Bloom, Whitman’s “image of voice” is an “interlocking” of the antithetical drives toward love and death, Eros and Thanatos, represented by the “bird’s tallying chant” and its counterpart, the “broken lilac sprig” (Bloom, *Agon*, 190–91). Breitwieser, on the other hand, insists upon the incommensurateness of voices—upon the existence of two separate entities in the poem, each of which uses the pronoun “I.” Rhetorically as well as linguistically, identity and even intimacy are illusions. For Breitwieser, Whitman’s “image of voice” is deixis in writing: the “here” and “now” that haunt Whitman’s efforts to designate what is ultimately an impossible condition of self-presence (“Who Speaks in Whitman’s Poems?” in *The American Renaissance: New Dimensions*, ed. Harry R. Gravin [Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1983], 128, 133–35). Kerry Larson goes even further in his remarks on the first half of the poem and its “tenuous narrative voice,” perceived as a static collection of “utterances . . . issuing from a splintered, centerless point of view.” Yet for Larson this fragmentation is merely “a prelude to the triumphant fusion to be achieved in the final section” (*Whitman’s Drama of Consensus*, 234–35).

42. Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” *Atlantic Monthly* 9, no. 56 (June 1862): 666.

43. Bollas, *Being a Character*, 61.

44. John James Audubon, for example, records more than four times as many species of warblers as species of thrushes in *Ornithological Biography, or an Account of the Habits of the Birds of the United States of America* (Edinburgh: Adam Black, 1831).

45. Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman: The Political Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 234.

46. Larson, *Whitman’s Drama of Consensus*, 240.

47. Mark Edmundson, “‘Lilacs’: Walt Whitman’s American Elegy,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 44 (1990): 485.

48. Larson, *Whitman’s Drama of Consensus*, 240.

49. Bollas, *Being a Character*, 14.

50. Herman Melville, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1866), 141–42. On the contested valuations of violence and redemption in Melville’s Civil War poetry, see Michael Warner, “What Like a Bullet Can Undeceive?” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 41–54.

51. Emma Lazarus, "April 27th, 1865," in *Poems and Translations* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1867), 38.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*, 39.
54. Murlu Konuk Blasing, "Whitman's 'Lilacs' and the Grammars of Time," *PMLA* 97 (1982): 32–33.
55. Timothy Sweet, *Traces of War: Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of Union* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 71.
56. See Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799–1883* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 160.
57. "The Battle of Antietam," *Harper's Weekly* 6, no. 302 (October 11, 1862): 655. Quoted in Laderman, *Sacred Remains*, 102.
58. See Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2–3.
59. Henry James, *Autobiography*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (New York: Criterion, 1956), 415–16.
60. Henry James, "Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*," in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Library of America, 1984), 629, 633, 635.
61. Henry James, untitled review (April 16, 1898), in *Literary Criticism*, 662.
62. Lawrence Buell, "American Civil War Poetry and the Meaning of Literary Commodification: Whitman, Melville, and Others," in *Reciprocal Influences: Literary Production, Distribution, and Consumption in America*, ed. Steven Fink and Susan S. Williams (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 131.
63. Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 2 (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1915), 304.
64. Stuart Merrill, *The White Tomb: Selected Writings*, ed. Edward Foster (Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 1999), 158–59.

### Afterword

The epigraphs at the chapter opening are from the following: Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 9, ed. Jeanne Chapman and Robert Macisaac (Oregon House, CA: W. L. Bentley, 1996), 614; Robert G. Ingersoll, untitled eulogy, in *In Re Walt Whitman*, ed. Horace L. Traubel, Richard Maurice Bucke, and Thomas B. Harned (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1893), 452; and Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9:622.

1. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9:616–17.
2. *Ibid.*, 9:619–22.
3. Horace Traubel, "At the Graveside of Walt Whitman," in *In Re Walt Whitman*, 438.
4. *Ibid.*, 437.
5. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9:602, 609.
6. *Ibid.*, 9:613.
7. Horace L. Traubel, "Succession," *The Conservator* 5, no. 4 (June 1894): 57.

8. Guillaume Apollinaire, "Funérailles de Walt Whitman racontées par un témoin," *Mercure de France*, 1 April 1913, 658.
9. Allen Ginsberg, *Kaddish and Other Poems, 1958–1960* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1961), 13, 15, 16, 24, 29, 35.
10. *Ibid.*, 33, 36.
11. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Morituri Salutamus," in *Poems and Other Writings*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (New York: Library of America, 2000), 621.
12. D. A. Miller, "Anal Rope," *Representations* 32 (Fall 1990): 131.
13. Walt Whitman, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," in *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, 3 vols., ed. Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 2:535.
14. Paul de Man, "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 262.