

WHITMAN
ON THE WAR'S FINALE

BY
EMORY HOLLOWAY



THOUGH he confessed himself deficient in dramatic art, Walt Whitman had the dramatist's acute consciousness of life at work in human destiny. He was, as he said, "both in and out of the game"—sensing its conflicting powers as an actor and yet evaluating them as an artist. If he has, as no other, recorded the incidents, pictures, moods and meaning of the Civil War, this was because it was his war, and the cause of the North, the preservation of the Union, an end for which as editor and poet he had long fought. Nor is it

WHITMAN ON THE WAR'S FINALE

strange that his most highly praised poem is the sublime dirge he composed for the Captain of the storm-tossed but safely guided Ship of State. For Lincoln's attitude toward the causes, conduct and aftermath of the war was not unlike the poet's own. When, on Good Friday, April 14, 1865, Lincoln was assassinated, Walt Whitman, then at his mother's lilac-bordered home in Brooklyn, felt the loss not only as a personal blow but also in his capacity as self-appointed poet of the nation and of its crucial contest in particular. He recognized it for what it was, the climax of the great tragedy; but he saw that such a climax, purging the people's soul with its powerful catharsis, yet demanded an artistic denouement.

On April 26 the assassin, brother of the Edwin Booth whose acting of Richard Whitman had enjoyed so much at the old Bowery Theatre that he could recall the rôle after fifty years, was shot while resisting arrest. Whitman may have returned to Washington by the time he heard of this event, for he was back in that city by May 1. On May 7, as Lincoln's body was being laid to rest in Springfield, he composed another poem on the lost leader—"Hush'd Be the Camps To-Day." Whitman's entire thought at the time would seem to be lost in sorrow. But there was in the people a desire for revenge. Booth himself had been speedily disposed of, yet vengeance was not sated, for the Government had been convinced (by testimony later found to be perjured) that Jefferson Davis had inspired and abetted the assassin conspirators. It was Davis' luck (for he was not being intentionally pursued) to be captured, near Irwinville, Georgia, on May 10, by a force under Colonel Benjamin D. Pritchard, sent out to seize what was supposed to be the Confederate treasure chests. Only then did Davis learn that a reward of \$100,000 had been offered for his arrest, this being twice the sum put upon the head of Booth. The Confederate President was taken to Fortress Monroe and treated with unnecessary harshness, so that he suffered in health in consequence. The worst of his hardships, however, was the law's delay in trying him for treason, the Government being loath to make a martyr of him. The case was finally dismissed after Johnson had made his general amnesty proclamation. His sufferings

WHITMAN ON THE WAR'S FINALE

after his arrest had the effect of restoring Davis to his former popularity in the South.

News of the capture of Davis reached Washington on May 13, Whitman, hearing of it, reacted with the mixed feelings of one closely identified with the spirit of the moment and yet aware of the significance of these events to history. He at once wrote a letter to the *Armory Square Hospital Gazette*, to which he was an occasional contributor.¹ The communication was published in the weekly issue of May 20. As it has never been reprinted or given other circulation than that among the patients of the hospitals, I quote it in full.

For the Gazette

PASSING EVENTS

Mr. Editor:

To-night our city is thrown into a tumult of excitement by news of the capture of Jefferson Davis and his staff.

What a chain of events are linked in the passage of the last few weeks! Following on the glory of military success came bloody crime and a great National sorrow, then Mercy appalled, lent wings to Justice, and the assassin speedily met his fate, and now, as a climax to these startling events, we have intelligence of the capture of the *soi-distant* Southern Confederacy.

Could the few years of bloody war have culminated in the successes of the past four weeks, unshadowed by the terrible crime of that Good Friday night, how gently would the clarion notes of victory, softened by the refrain of lofty

¹ This little sheet was issued by and for the soldiers in the Washington hospitals during the war. That Whitman was a contributor he has told us in "Starting Newspapers," *Complete Prose*, 1914, pp. 187-189. Thomas Donaldson, a close friend of Whitman reproduced in facsimile a page from the *Gazette* in his *Walt Whitman the Man* (Francis P. Harper, 1896, facing p. 140), and identifies the following notice as Whitman's: "The Smithsonian, just opposite Armory, is frequently the medium through which a course of lectures is given to the public. The lectures are free. In the past fortnight the Rev. John Lord has delivered five, full of condensed

learning upon Roman History. It is a good sign of the times when such lectures are popular, and when the audience is most responsive to the most uncompromising moral and religious portions of them.—This Dr. Lord is a more strenuous advocate of Freedom than another Dr. Lord is of Slavery." This, and the letter printed above, are the only Whitman contributions to the *Gazette*, that have been identified: but there is, so far as I know, only one file in existence, and that a very fragmentary one. It is in the Library of Congress. The signature "W.W." was a common one with Whitman, and I find no one else using it in the *Gazette*.

WHITMAN ON THE WAR'S FINALE

magnanimity, have stayed the surging waves of this unholy war and won back a misguided, but awakened people, to the ark of our common safety; the good ship Union, founded on the unchanging keel of the Constitution and sailing under the true colors of our national banner. Alas! that the paeans of victory should be hushed in the National threnody! The assassination of the President was the crowning crime of the Rebellion; the storm reaped from the sown whirlwind of treason, and whatever influences it may have upon the future course of the South, we must own to a feeling of pride that the hand of summary vengeance was stayed under such an ordeal of wrath, and justice allowed to work out her own unfailing purposes. Surely the calm hour of reflection, following on the first heat of passion, marked us preeminently as a self-governing people. As in the past, let our future trust be in Him who alone bringeth good out of evil; light out of darkness; so shall our country emerge from this terrible crisis purified and regenerated; her altars sanctified by hero sacrifice and martyr blood.

Pausing as a Nation by the open grave of our patriot President, let us ask could there have been for him a grander death? Apostle of Freedom, martyr to Truth and the cause of Liberty, thine earthly star set in the very zenith of its glory, but shines forever resplendent in the diadem of our Republic! History will keep the name of Lincoln second only to Washington, and his living monument will be in the hearts of the American people.

W. W.

The letter has in it something of the flambuoyant oratory of the period, but it also is vibrant with the feeling of Whitman's Lincoln poems and the lecture he delivered on successive anniversaries of the assassination. It has interest in that it includes two of the images, the ship and the star, shortly to be used in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." It shows that Whitman at once recognized the great place Lincoln would have in history, that "now he belongs to the ages." If Whitman rates him second to Washington, it must be remembered that he had been brought up to think of the Father of his Country as a demigod. But in his Lincoln lecture fourteen years later he reversed this rating:

WHITMAN ON THE WAR'S FINALE

“Thus ended the attempted secession of these States; thus the four years’ war. But the main things come subtly and invisibly afterward, perhaps long afterward—neither military, political, nor (great as those are), historical. I say, certain secondary and indirect results, out of the tragedy of this death, are, in my opinion, greatest. Not the event of the murder itself. Not that Mr. Lincoln strings the principal points and personages of the period, like beads, upon the single string of his career. Not that his idiosyncrasy, in its sudden appearance and disappearance, stamps this Republic with a stamp more mark’d and enduring than any yet given by any one man—(more even than Washington’s;)—but joined with these, the immeasurable value and meaning of that whole tragedy lies, to me, in senses finally dearest to a nation, (and here all our own)—the imaginative and artistic senses—the literary and dramatic ones. Not in any common or low meaning of those terms, but a meaning precious to the race, and to every age. A long and varied series of contradictory events arrives at last at its highest poetic, single, central, pictorial denouement. The whole involved, baffling, multiform whirl of the secession period comes to a head, and is gather’d in one brief flash of lightning-illumination—one simple, fierce deed. Its sharp culmination, and as it were solution, of so many bloody and angry problems, illustrates those climax-moments on the stage of universal Time, where the historic Muse at one entrance, and the tragic Muse at the other, suddenly ring down the curtain, close an immense act in the long drama of creative thought, and give it radiation, tableau, stranger than fiction. Fit radiation—fit close! How the imagination—how the student loves these things! America, too, is to have them. For not in all great deaths, nor far or near—not Caesar in the Roman senate-house, or Napoleon passing away in the wild night-storm at St. Helena—not Paleologus, falling, desperately fighting, piled over dozens deep with Graecian corpses—not calm old Socrates, drinking the hemlock—outvies the terminus of the secession war, in one man’s life, here in our midst, in our own time—that seal of the emancipation of three million slaves—that parturition and delivery of our last really free Republic, born again, henceforth to com-

WHITMAN ON THE WAR'S FINALE

mence its career of genuine homogeneous Union, compact, consistent with itself."¹

As to Jefferson Davis, I know of no reference that Whitman ever made to him in print. But Horace Traubel records a few conversations in which the Southern leader's name is introduced. Whitman recognized the fact that there must be a Davis side to the controversy and went so far as to express the hope that Davis would set it down as a part of the record—which indeed had been done, though Whitman did not know of it when he made his remark. Yet I think he never really forgave Davis. He not only blamed the Southern leaders for the sort of prison treatment which his brother George had suffered, but he thought it was Davis and leaders like him, rather than the common man in the South, who had precipitated secession and the war. It is said that Lincoln did not want Davis arrested. And Whitman did not want to see him hanged; but it was for the same reason that caused him to disapprove of capital punishment in the case of the Chicago anarchists, and in all cases.² Anti-capital punishment had been a holy cause to him as a young writer. But he spoke of Davis with more indignation than he often displayed. "Davis was representative: he must bear the brunt of that. Besides, Davis is alive: he has perfect freedom: he goes where he will: every now and then we read accounts of new speeches by him: he is everywhere down South warmly received—applauded to the echo—the echo itself echoed. What more could he have? This has been paralleled nowhere else in the world: in any other country of the globe the whole batch of the Confederate leaders would have had their heads cut off."³

This conversation took place nearly a score of years after the war, and shows how hard it was for him to be charitable and philosophical in a case that had touched his own emotions so deeply. But it is to be remembered that at the time he was enduring as best he could an invalidism which he attributed to the war.

¹ *Complete Prose*, pp. 307-8.

² *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, II, p. 486.

³ *Ibidem*, III, pp. 543-4.

WHITMAN ON THE WAR'S FINALE

At the risk of anticlimax, I shall add a brief editorial note which I find immediately following Whitman's letter in the *Hospital Gazette*—one of the strange ironies which the research student often encounters, with a shock or a smile, as the case may be.

HON. JAMES HARLAN

This gentleman who has just assumed the responsibilities of the interior department, is a man of irreproachable character, a member (and we believe a minister) of the Methodist Episcopal Church. We are glad to see such men in high places; we would be glad if there were more of them. This is an appointment eminently fit to be made."

It wants only that someone prove that Whitman wrote also this praise of the man who was so shortly to dismiss him for being the author of "Leaves of Grass" to make the irony complete.

7

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