

Drum-Taps: *Whitman's Problematic Legacy as a War Poet*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Walt Whitman's Civil War poems in *Drum-Taps* in comparison with the poetry written by British soldier-poets of WWI. These poems present Whitman as a problematic model for future generations of war poets since he hardly ever questions the meaninglessness of bloodshed in the battlefield, a trait which is almost a defining characteristic of WWI poetry. War poetry in this article stands for anti-war poems that question and criticize bloodshed rather than celebrating it. Whitman the war poet encourages people to take part in the war without making it clear what one is supposed to fight for or against. His poems divest individuals of their personality and turn them into parts of the war machine. The poems in *Drum-Taps* depend heavily on the use of visual images, while his British successors opted for a variety of images that implied proximity. Whitman's poetry suggests lack of involvement since he was not a soldier-poet, which to a great extent renders him a questionable role model for future poets. Therefore, though some of his elegiac pieces may serve as models for future poets, Whitman's legacy as a war poet poses a problem for his British antecedents with its, artistic, ethical and political implications.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, war poetry, WWI British poets, tradition

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Introduction

Nineteenth century American literati were concerned with establishing the identity of America through works of art, especially literature. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman believed that the true voice of the new nation could be found by dwelling on the here and the now, rather than imitating the voices of past examples and remote cultures. Whitman treated poetry as a decisive criterion in the definition of a nation, saying “the topmost of a race is its own born poetry”¹ (“Poetry To-Day” p. 1014) and adding that no imitative attempt to concoct poetry would secure America a distinctive voice. He himself became the true voice (“native expresser” p. 1014) born from the bosom of America with an all-embracing attitude; his use of free verse was a revolutionary and liberating move for poets for future generations.

However, his poems about the Civil War in *Drum-Taps* fall short of presenting a complete model for future war poets in terms of their attitude and tone. The poet in these poems is an observer and to a great extent remains so, which is evident in the predominance of visual images in his coverage of the war and his treatment of the Civil War in many cases verges on the journalistic reportage. This visual approach verges on the pictorial, the picturesque and even the pastoral in some poems where the poet adopts the role of a painter or a photographer taking snapshots of the battlefield or troops of soldiers in a mellifluous framing. Such qualities render Whitman as a problematic model for the tradition of war poetry, especially British war poets of the WWI.

War Poetry: A Brief Clarification

War poetry is a vast genre from the Homeric wars to the Gulf War, from Romantics to twentieth-century, from the jingoistic to the protest. The term used in this paper refers to poems dealing with WWI from a critical viewpoint that treat war as something destructive and antagonistic to human nature, rather than presenting it as a celebratory event.

One of the key elements that differentiated WWI poetry was the fact that it was composed mostly by poets who took active part in the war. “Men such as Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke, Isaac Rosenberg, Edward Thomas, David Jones, Ivor Gurney, and Siegfried Sassoon wrote about what they experienced firsthand” (Jensen, 2012, p. 3). This is in a sense one of dividing lines between Whitman, who was not a soldier, and the WWI poets, most of whom fought in the trenches and directly observed and experienced the atrocities of war.

Secondly, with WWI, poets felt a rift between depicting war in an artistic way, as a poetic subject matter and the sense of guilt arising from their belief that they have turned tragedy into esthetics. As Kendall (2007) pithily states war poetry catches the soldier-poet in the double-bind of making an aesthetic product out of an unaesthetic/horrific experience (p. 1). This is far from the way poets in preceding centuries felt.

¹ All Whitman quotations are taken from Whitman, W. (1984). *Poetry and Prose*. New York: The Library of America.

Another significant characteristic of poetry of the Great War is the change of attitude towards war. With the introduction of technology into the battlefield that facilitated mass killings, war ceased to be expressed in heroic or laudatory terms. As Glancy (2002) notes, “An ironic or cynical view of war ... became a central thread of war poetry, especially in the poems written during World War I, when most of the British poems about were written” (p. 258). Despite the fact that early war poetry anthologies sought to highlight courage and glory of Tommies, the idea of fighting as a heroic game or sport faded after the Battle of Somme in 1916 (Hibberd and Onions, 1994, pp. 3,11). Even in the voice of chauvinistic poets one can hear the bitterness of war (see for example “My Boy Jack” by the Victorian poet Rudyard Kipling, a defender of compulsory military service).

And most importantly, WWI poetry is a poetry of protest. In the words of Das (2013) “War poetry, as represented by a small group of ‘anti-war’ soldier-poets, has come to dominate First World War memory” (p. 4). Wilfred Owen was one of those poets realizing that “killing was wrong” (Silkin, 1981, p. 21). In the “Preface” written in 1918 to his collected poems which he hoped to see published, Owen succinctly summarizes his views on war poetry:

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.
Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might,
majesty, dominion, or power, except War.
Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity.
Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be
to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must
be truthful. (p. 31)

Campbell (2003) similarly observes Owen’s centrality in war poetry literature:

“The poetry from Britain and Ireland which was written about the wars in which those countries engaged – imperial and civil wars as well as the world wars – is a poetry which no longer feels that it can sing in celebration of arms and the man, but rather must turn to Wilfred Owen’s theme, the ‘pity of war’ or its absurdity” (p. 65).

Therefore, Wilfred Owen, among others, can be treated as a war poet par excellence, taking issue with patriotic discourses that endorsed heroic action in war.

WWI poets searched for models, which tended more to be their Romantic precursors such as Keats and Shelley, as in the case of Owen. To what extent WWI poets read Whitman is difficult to conjecture. Bearing in mind that Whitman was the practitioner of free verse and that WWI poets did not discard poetic conventions, relying on, if not totally depending on, forms (for example the sonnet) and rhyme, Whitman as a role model sounds outlandish. However, Longley (2005) in her article “The Great War, History, and the English Lyric” quotes Isaac Rosenberg, who saw Whitman as a considerably significant poetic precursor: “The Homer for this war has yet to be found – Whitman got very near the mark 50 years ago with ‘Drum Taps’” (p. 65). This suggests that Whitman was among the poetic models that British soldier-poets read if

not emulated. Therefore, a comparison of Whitman with poets of WWI can contribute to the elucidation of the continuities, rifts, influences and inspirations between canons of war poetry in 19th-century America and 20th-century England.

Whitman's War Poems

The poems in *Drum-Taps* and those in the *Sequel* were written during the Civil War but printed in 1865 in New York. The original title of the book was *Walt Whitman's Drum-Taps* (Olivier, 2006, p.18).

After the outbreak of the Civil War, when hundreds of injured and dying soldiers were being shipped to the New York hospitals on a contract basis with the army, [Whitman] visited many of them and listened to their accounts of the military actions in which they had participated. And, in at least a couple of instances, he wove elements of their stories into the poems he incorporated into the seventy-two-page collection of war poems that he published in 1865 as *Drum-Taps*. For more than two critical years, during the war and after, Whitman served as a volunteer visitor in Washington's military hospitals, where he befriended ailing and dying soldiers, comforting them, bringing them the small gifts and items they requested, writing letters for them, sometimes nursing them, and even intervening on their behalf with the medical staff (Aspiz 2004, pp. 161-162).

Drum-Taps, which differed from his previous poems with their shocking implications of sexuality and homo-eroticism, was welcome by readers who supported the Union; however, Whitman's artistic execution met disapproval from certain critics. For example, both Henry James (2008) and William Dean Howells (2008) wrote disparagingly about Whitman's war poetry on the grounds that they were expression of artless, prosaic pathos.

1. Euphoria Verging on Jingoism

The opening poem in *Drum-Taps* called "First O Songs for a Prelude" is a highly apostrophic poem describing Manhattan as the venue of a spontaneous upsurge of recruitment and preparation for war. According to Aspiz (2004), the poem "displays a patriotic zeal bordering on jingoism for the fevered spirit of war preparations and expresses [Whitman's] desire to become the war's poet" (p. 165). This wave of exuberance in the poem seems to be fuelled by the speaker's encouragement, thanks to which the atmosphere changes from the artistic and peaceful to the belligerent:

How you sprang—how you threw off the costumes of peace with indifferent hand,
How your soft opera-music changed, and the drum and fife were heard in their stead (P. 416)

Reminiscent of his cataloguing technique encapsulating people from all walks of life in his *Song of Myself*, the poem lists people following the drum beats: young men, mechanics, blacksmiths, drivers, salesmen, and others embrace the war. At the same time, however, the poem erases people's individual traits, turning them into anonymous automata produced in the same assembly-line of the war machine.

Through the end of the poem the militarization of the inhabitants of Manhattan is almost complete: the civilians are transformed into soldiers, women into nurses. Whitman's exaltation focuses more on their dusty garments, knapsacks and the weapons they use rather than the would-be soldiers themselves: "And the sturdy artillery,/ The guns bright as gold, the work for giants, to serve well the guns" (p. 418).² The poem is in heroic mode, eulogizing war without even justifying it and identifying the threat or the enemy. In another poem³ in this book Whitman almost explicitly adopts an apolitical attitude without taking sides with any of the fighting forces, as he desires to "sing the idea of all" (p. 420), flying like a bird and observing all the states regardless of whether they are abolitionist or defender of slavery. His aim is to foreground the idea of unity and oneness: "The idea of all, of the Western world one and inseparable" (p. 420). In 20th century terms "First O Songs for a Prelude" could be defined as jingoistic or propaganda poem zealously supporting and advertising the necessity of war.

"Song of the Banner at Daybreak" is written from the viewpoint of Poet, Pennant, Child and Father, each singing their individual songs. Despite this quadripartite structure though, the poem does not harbor a pluralistic outlook; on the contrary it aims at presenting the univocal message of grandeur and nobility of the war. The poem opens with the words of the poet "O a new song, a free song, / "Flapping, flapping, flapping, flapping, by sounds, by voices clearer" (p. 420). The song is so pervasive with its booming plosive sound that it rivals the drums; given a voice, the song becomes a human-like entity, a producer of signs and discourse rather than a mere sound. The same attitude is applied to the wind, the drums and the banner, each voicing words to the same effect; thus, the militaristic message becomes obvious. The poet defines himself as a man of action rather than words, which he defiantly belittles:

Words! book-words! what are you?
Words no more, for hearken and see,
My song is there in the open air, and I must sing,
With the banner and pennant a-flapping. (p. 421)

His preference for such a declaration is not accidental at all since he invites everyone in a dionysiac frenzy to rejoice the glamour of the war: "I'll pour the verse with streams of blood, full of volition, full of joy, / Then loosen, launch forth, to go and compete./ With the banner and pennant a-flapping" (p. 421).⁴ The sagacious child in *Song of Myself* with his question "What is grass?" is transformed into someone that endorses the belligerent situation. He is indoctrinated about or at least made to believe in the sublime meaning of the banner, the war and its all-encompassing value: "It is so broad it covers the whole sky" (p. 422). Thus, the child comes to believe in the all-pervasive existence of war which he accepts as natural and right.

² Such treatment of weapons, machinery and guns heralds, in a sense, the Futurism of Marinetti, who praised machines, war and the individual. When the poem is treated on its own and without any reference to its historical context would read as a Futuristic poem, though it does not dwell on the individual but a mass of people in which the singularities of soldiers are deliberately silenced.

³ "From Paumanok Starting I Fly like a Bird"

⁴ Once again Whitman sounds like the futurist Marinetti who celebrated technology, machines and war.

Such treatment of war is far from the poetry of WWI poets, who questioned, resisted and protested the butchery they witnessed and the jingoism that fed the war. Siegfried Sassoon's (2013) "They", for instance, plainly expresses the meaninglessness of the cause of fighting for cause no matter how high it sounds since it involves devastating outcomes:

'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change. (64)

One should, however, bear in mind that they fought against foreigners in distant lands, while Whitman the civilian poet found himself in the middle of a civil war. In other words, it was not as easy as it was for poets of the Great War to talk about the bloodshed in unfavorable terms or to openly support one side since both parties in the Civil War belonged to the same nation.

2. Visual Imagery as a Means of Distancing

One of the hallmarks of Whitman's war poems is his tendency to present war in picturesque terms; these poems I shall call tableaux poems. In "Cavalry Crossing a Ford", "Bivouac on a Mountain Side" and a couple of other poems Whitman relies on the descriptive mode, taking a series of snapshots of army forces, depicting them moving peacefully rather than engaged in battle. Especially "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" paints a pastoral picture of a mounted troop without any reference to warfare. Edna Longley (2007) observes that pastoral is a genre replete with opposites and that war poetry can contain pastoral and vice versa (p. 461, 462). Indeed, WWI poets employed pastoral elements but when they did so they did it with a reference to war. For instance "As the team's head brass" by Edward Thomas opens with a rural setting highly suggestive of pastoral. Plowing animals, lovers enjoying themselves, trees and other details implies a tranquil atmosphere:

As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn
The lovers disappeared into the wood.
I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm
That strewed an angle of the fallow, and
Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square
Of charlock. (p.52)

However, the tone of the poem gains an overcast from this point onwards as the speaker begins conversing about the ongoing war. The pastoral serves only as a means to talk about the destructive aspects of the war rather than evading or effacing its disastrous aspects.

Whitman's "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" is a pastoral poem written in the second year of the Civil War (1862); however, in the poem there is no reference to the war setting at all. The soldiers who are nearing and slowly crossing a ford are observed from a distance, with a bird's eye view. They move slowly and gracefully, their serpentine course giving them a naturalistic and reptilian ease. The poem is interwoven with visual images, drawing less on other sensory impressions:

A LINE in long array where they wind betwixt green islands,
 They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in the sun—hark to the
 musical clank,
 Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses loitering stop to
 drink,
 Behold the brown-faced men, each group, each person a
 picture, the negligent rest on the saddles,
 Some emerge on the opposite bank, others are just entering the ford—
 while,
 Scarlet and blue and snowy white,
 The guidon flags flutter gayly in the wind. (p. 435)

The detailed presentation of the scene depends primarily on visual description through the use of colours (green, silvery, brown, scarlet, blue, white), metaphors (serpentine course) verbs pertaining to movement (wind, take, flash, emerge, enter, flutter) and two auditory images (“musical clang” and horses splashing). The verbs denoting movement should not lead one to think that this is like a movie scene, because the observer-poet is in fact describing different actions performed by different agents in different parts of the scene. They are in a sense motionless as Whitman himself says “each person a picture, the negligent rest on the saddles”. There is an atmosphere of tranquility and serenity in the way the troop is described. One gets the impression that this is not army but a band of hunters enjoying themselves in an idle outing, immortalized by the brush strokes of a painter. The third but last line ends in enjambment and highlights the final image of the flags fluttering happily in the wind. Whitman’s stance is ambivalent since it is difficult to decide whether he presents war in positive words or he wishes to highlight his desire for times of peace.

Trench experience of WWI poets left no room for poems relying on the visual impressions, which were filled in by other sensory impressions. Das (2013) argues that “... visual topography of everyday life was replaced by the tactile geography of the trenches: in the dark, subterranean world of the Western Front, men navigated space not through reassuring distance of the gaze but through the tactile geography of the tactile immediacy of their bodies” (p. 10). For example, “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen (1965, p. 55) employs a wide variety of images, rather than depending on visual images only:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori. (p.55)

The poem harbours almost all the sensory impressions and foregrounds the nightmarish details of the dying soldier in a gas attack. Such employment of various senses creates a feel of immediacy and effectiveness. In short, Whitman's voyeuristic and distanced gaze was not adopted by his British fellow poets.

Likewise, "Bivouac on a Mountain Side" presents an army encampment in a quasi-pastoral manner. The poem compares camp-fires to "eternal stars" (p. 435), implying how sacred fighting for these soldiers is or that they will attain a superhuman standing when they die. WWI poets take recourse to the pastoral; however, when they do so there is a accompanying sense of irony, tension and foreboding. In Rosenberg's "Returning, we hear the Larks", written in 1917, for instance, the song of the larks acts as a brief and out-of-place interlude on the soldiers' walk to death (2013, p.87).

3. Lack of Involvement

Unlike soldier-poets such as Sassoon or Owen, Whitman worked as a nurse upon finding out that his brother was wounded in battle during the Civil War. Some of his poems are based on his observations and experiences in the hospitals. Naturally as an outsider, Whitman the poet has the uninvolved and relatively distanced outlook of an onlooker. In the narrative poem "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown", formulated like the impressions of a museum visitor, the speaker relates his experience of seeing soldiers treated in a church serving as a hospital. The wounded, delineated as "these, crowds, groups of forms vaguely I see on the floor" attest to Whitman's tendency to see things *en masse*, rather than individually. Only when a wounded soldier becomes the focus of attention does he temporarily gain the aspect of an individual:

At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death,
(he is shot in the abdomen,)
I stanch the blood temporarily (the youngest's face is white as a lily,)
Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o'er the scene fain to absorb it all (p.
440)

These lines are an example of Whitman's unwavering tendency in *Leaves of Grass* to observe multitudes without getting involved in what they are doing. Whatever he observes he never fails to praise the people or things he confronts; in the same poem Whitman compares another soldier who has just died to Christ: "Dead and divine brother of all, and here again he lies" (p. 441). This leads one to think that Whitman treats the fallen soldiers as Christ-like figures who sacrifice themselves for the salvation of the new America nation. The war provides, therefore, the locus of a recurrent and mythical theme of self-sacrifice. Whitman in a sense celebrates the idea of martyrdom of individuals for the sake of a cause.

What differentiates Whitman from his future fellow poets is his penchant for treating life and death, war and peace, funeral march and joyful tune as equally pleasing. In "To a Certain Civilian" he makes his point clear, by advising a critic of his poetry to "lull" himself with "piano tunes" since "I have been born of the same as the war was born,/ The drum-corps' rattle is ever to me sweet music, I love well the martial dirge" (p. 455). This is to some extent not surprising since Whitman extols himself as a poet encompassing all, embracing all aspects of existence. In Chant 51 of his *Song of*

Myself, he defiantly declares: “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” (p. 246). In *Drum-Taps* The Civil War is transformed into a casual event in Whitman’s all inclusive democratic outlook; it becomes another scene he savors, whether it be twenty-eight naked men bathing in the water, a child asking what is grass, fugitive slave looking for shelter, a woman waiting, or people working.

However, Whitman is not always an implicit advocate of war machinery or de-individualized soldiers. He is also skillful at adopting an elegiac mode in such poems as “Come Up from the Fields Father” and “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night”. Both poems deal with the anguish of death of a son, the former is related by the messenger, the latter by a father. Both are rare in Whitman’s poetry in that they are narrative poems. In “Come Up from the Fields Father” the dead soldier’s family members are delivered the devastating message. Ironically, the time of the year is autumn, the harvest time when apple trees are laden with fruit to be picked in contrast to the grim harvest of the young soldier’s life:

Lo, ’tis autumn,
Lo, where the trees, deeper green, yellower and redder,
Cool and sweeten Ohio’s villages with leaves fluttering in the moderate
wind,
Where apples ripe in the orchards hang and grapes on the trellis’d
vines,
(Smell you the smell of the grapes on the vines?
Smell you the buckwheat where the bees were lately buzzing?) (p. 436)

It is interesting to note that in this poem Whitman distances himself from the distance created by his dependence on visual images. The poem is stylistically rich and uses lyric as well as dramatic and novelistic techniques; it swerves from direct address to observation to narrative and finally to a projection about the mother’s future condition. Whitman’s elegy is a forerunner of Wilfred Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed Youth” though lacking its compactness and directly bitter treatment of the subject. However, the number of such poems in *Drum-Taps* is meager and does not salvage Whitman from being a dubious model for later poets.

Whitman’s contemporary Herman Melville (2000) also wrote poems about war in his *Battle-Pieces*. Melville, unlike Whitman, approached the Civil War with a critical eye, expressing his conviction about destructive aspects of the war in such poems as “The March into Virginia” (p. 58) and “Ball’s Bluff” (p.61). Whitman did not dwell on such issues. He emotionally dealt with death of soldiers in the battlefield; however, he does not tackle with the war itself, nor did he analyze its underlying causes.

Conclusion

As a follower of Transcendentalism, he believed in the power of the individual but his conception of the individual was like that of the grass: existing in multitudes, having hardly any features to distinguish him in the democratic crowd, which is a mass of people and entities with equal traits. His reaction to life and death was likewise democratic, equalizing, divesting them of their differences, making them cohere as components of a cosmic cycle, each following and complementing another.

Whitman wrote about war yet unlike WWI poets he did not antagonize the enemy. The way Yeats (1996) treated the Irish problem roughly half a century later in 1916 (“a terrible beauty is born”) (p.180) is missing in Whitman’s treatment of the domestic crisis either. This is to a great extent because of his all-embracing attitude. In the words of D. H. Lawrence, who jocularly impersonates Whitman’s poetic ego, “I am everything and everything is me and so we’re all One Identity, like the Mundane Egg, which has been addled quite a while” (p. 173). In Whitman’s poetry the particular is incorporated into the general, the plurality is boiled down and distilled into unity and singleness. “Different voices are lost in or drowned out by *the* voice, awkward plurality is subsumed into singleness” (Simpson, 2013, p. 184). And here lies one of the major problems that Whitman’s poetry creates for war poets in the 20th century, who did not readily treated war with the eyes of a Transcendentalist.

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