

# WEATHERING THE STORM: WHITMAN AND THE CIVIL WAR<sup>1</sup>

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"SOME ARE WEATHER-WISE, some are otherwise," observed Benjamin Franklin playfully in *Poor Richard's Almanac*. A keen keeper of daily weather records himself, Franklin helped inaugurate the great American tradition of weather diarists, amongst whom were Washington, Jefferson—and Walt Whitman. The letters, notes, essays and articles produced by Whitman during the Civil War are studded with observations of, and on, the weather. And the poetry and prose he eventually produced to memorialize that War—*Memoranda*, *Specimen Days*, and *Drum-Taps*—are full of weather-talk; that is, talk about the weather by way of seeking to articulate the unique meaning of an armed struggle that was for Whitman a world-historical event. It is with this particular discourse, this weatherspeak so to speak, that this essay will concern itself, in an attempt to understand Whitman's own brooding interest in what he called "an unprecedented expression of the subtile world of air above and around us" during the war years.<sup>2</sup>

"An unprecedented expression of the subtile world of air": the phrase is a strange one, suggesting as it does that for Whitman the weather was the means by which the air expressed its feelings—just as the poems of *Drum-Taps* were Whitman's own "unprecedented expression" of the unprecedented world of modern, "democratic," war. The expressive phrase is, in other words, a warning that Whitman's "weather" is not simply the same as our own. It differs in at least two fundamental respects. First, what we blithely call "the weather" is in fact a complex socio-scientific construct, and both the science of weather and the sociology of weather have changed radically since the mid-nineteenth century. Secondly, out of this distinctively nineteenth-century discourse of the weather, this period-specific sociolect, Whitman develops his own personalized idiom, his own agonized wartime idiolect. And he typically does so by positioning his writing at the very point where there was a crossover from the real science of his time to older, pre-scientific modes of thinking. Hence his consuming, and by now well-documented, interest in semi-science and pseudo-science—phrenology, hydropathy, homeopathy, etc. The phrase quoted above itself carries the telltale signs of that crossover. "Many an unprecedented expression of the subtile world of air": "expression" is a term that in this context can suggest *both*

that weather is simply a *manifestation* of such complex atmospheric processes as meteorology is interested in, *and* that weather is expressive of the hidden life that air possesses in a much older, pre-scientific and pantheistic sense.

But before we start exploring such subtle issues, there are simple facts to be recorded that will further help us get our bearings. War conditions naturally promoted an intense interest in the weather. Attention was concentrated on the skies, whose changing modes and moods were anxiously scanned for both practical and psychological reasons. The dire circumstances were propitious for a rich interaction, in this weather zone, between fact and fancy, just as Paul Fussell notes happened later, in the First World War, when the ubiquitous mention of sunrise and sunset in the war poetry was in part the result of the peculiar conditions of trench warfare. Huddled as they were at the bottom of a deep slit in the ground, the soldiers had nothing on which to fix their gaze except the sky directly overhead, whose signs they became adept at reading. Their consequently increased sensitivity to changes in light was then further heightened at every dawn and dusk, because these were the danger periods, when the enemy was most likely to launch an attack. Matter-of-fact, and matter for metaphor—the experience of weather in wartime was intensely both.<sup>3</sup>

“Cold, dark, heavy rain the past two days & nights—very bad for Hooker,” reads Whitman’s notebook entry for Wednesday, May 6, 1863.<sup>4</sup> In fact, and unknown to him—a time-lag factor we should seriously note—Hooker was that very day retreating from the battle of Chancellorsville, leaving 17,000 men dead on the field, and prompting Lincoln’s anguished cry: “My God! My God! What will the country say?”<sup>5</sup> Whitman’s brother George was one of Hooker’s men, having escaped, although not quite unhurt, from the carnage of First Fredericksburg five months previously. It was the news of George’s injury in that battle that had of course brought Whitman hurrying from New York in search of him, desperate for accurate information. He finally located George in the Union camp before Fredericksburg, but only after first coming abruptly face to face with a mountainous pile of amputated limbs. Shaken and moved, Whitman adjourned to Washington, where he spent most of the remainder of the war selflessly, if not self-destructively, ministering to the wounded as a hospital visitor.

Shortly after Whitman left Fredericksburg, George, along with the Union troops under Burnside, became literally bogged down in the notorious “Mud March.” Attempting to outflank the Confederates on the left, the army was devastated by icy rain: “The wagons began to turn over,” wrote Elisha Rhodes, “and mules actually drowned in the mud and water.”<sup>6</sup> No wonder Whitman was so worried later about the “cold, dark, heavy rain” of May. In respect of the weather, as in so many other

respects, Whitman had been especially sensitized to its wartime implications by the experiences of his serving brother, George, whose own letters constitute a kind of wartime weather-diary, full as they understandably are of comments—stoical and despairing by turns—on perversely unfavorable weather conditions.<sup>7</sup>

Burnside could not have forecast that heavy rain would ruin his march, because nobody could. Forecasting the weather, we should remind ourselves, is a relatively recent—and still relatively imprecise—science. Although the Civil War produced the rifle, the great ironclads, the military telegraph, land mines, telescopic sights and trench warfare, it failed to produce a single weather forecast, which would have been the most murderously successful invention of all, as Lincoln well realized. “It seems to me,” he wrote tartly in his diary one wartime April day, “that Mr Capen knows nothing about the weather in advance. He told me three days ago that it would not rain again till the 30th of April or the 1st of May. It is raining now and has been for ten hours. I can not spare any more time to Mr Capen.”<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the kind of study of the weather that would in due course produce the weather forecast had been under way since the beginning of the nineteenth century and had made rapid progress, to public acclaim, during the antebellum years, as has been noted in the standard recent study of the subject:

Meteorology in the nineteenth century experienced a rapid and dramatic expansion of its scientific horizons. On many levels—theoretical, empirical, institutional, technological—it encouraged inquiry, demanded discipline, and attracted controversy. Meteorologists were driven by fundamental questions about climatic change, the nature of storms, and the geography of health and disease.<sup>9</sup>

Particularly important was the fledgling development, in the immediate pre-war years, of synoptic meteorology, that is, a building up of a composite picture of weather systems by collating information collected from many geographically scattered sources. To this end a substantial network of meteorological stations was established during the 1850s, partly in response to military demand. The wreck of a British and French fleet in that decade by an unexpected storm helped concentrate naval minds wonderfully. And weather also became a hot popular issue of the day, as evidenced by articles in the *Atlantic Monthly*, where it was noted that weather conditions “have had their part in deciding the destinies of dynasties, the fortunes of race, and the fate of nations. Leave the weather out of history, and it is as if night were left out of the day, and winter out of the year.” The author of this essay on “the Weather in War” had been moved to embark on his survey by his compatriots’ outrage at the “mud march”:

Americans have fretted a little because their "Grand Army" could not advance through mud that came up to the horses' shoulders, and in which even the seven-league boots would have stuck, though they had been worn as deftly as Ariel could have worn them. They talked as if no such thing had ever before been known to stay the march of armies; whereas all military operations have, to a greater or a lesser extent, depended for their issue upon the softening or the hardening of the earth, or upon the clearing or the clouding of the sky.<sup>10</sup>

In response to the new, nineteenth-century interest in the weather, pop meteorologists began to appear, controversial figures like James Pollard Espy, to whom we will return and whose life and work has recently been treated as a case history of "the relation between science, ideology, government funding and the popular imagination."<sup>11</sup> Espy's career is a reminder that at this time meteorology naturally kept company, at least at the popular level, with those other semi-sciences and pseudo-sciences I've already mentioned—phrenology and so on. But whereas their importance for Whitman as sources of trope and paradigms of experience have been brilliantly demonstrated by scholars from Aspiz to Reynolds, the significance of meteorology—along with the cognate subject of climatology—remains to be examined.

The weather at this time was a borderline phenomenon, as was implicitly admitted by Espy when he argued that "Among the innumerable benefits arising from the adoption of a true system of meteorology, will be the *death of superstition*."<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the weather inhabited a limbo region between the inexplicable and unpredictable on the one hand, and the explicable and predictable on the other. "For," wrote the author of an *Atlantic Monthly* essay entitled "Meteorology. A Glance at the Science," "notwithstanding the rapid progress it has made within the last thirty years, it is far from having the authority of an exact science; many of its phenomena are as yet inexplicable, and many differences of opinion among the learned remain unreconciled on points at first sight apparently easy to be settled."<sup>13</sup> As such, it suggestively corresponded to Whitman's own relation to wartime events. Both psychologically and ideologically, he was in constant danger of being overwhelmed and undermined by the arbitrariness of events. His emotional survival depended on maintaining a teleology of conflict, on being credibly able to make the bewildering story of the war, as it actually unfolded, conform to his majestic vision of History, wherein the triumphant ineluctable progress of American democratic society was assured. How, then, account for military defeats and disasters that threatened to be terminal in their effect? The question became almost a desperate one for Whitman once he had reached the Washington hospitals, where only the belief that this previously unimaginable suffering was intensely historically purposeful could save him from psychic and physical collapse. But the question had presented itself to him from the very beginning of

the war and had from the outset elicited a response partly in terms of the weather.

First Bull Run stunned the North, and in recalling that humiliating first defeat Whitman painted it in terms of heat and rain. The defeated troops poured back into Washington on a “day drizzling through all with rain,” whereas the Saturday and Sunday of the battle “had been parched and hot to an extreme—the dust, the grime and smoke, in layers, sweated in, follow’d by other layers again sweated in, absorbed by those excited souls” (*PW* 1:27). In fact, the weather is not incidental to this scene, it is essential to Whitman’s purpose in recording it. He insists on the conditions—“the men with this coating of murk and sweat and rain, now recoiling back, pouring over the Long Bridge,” these “defeated soldiers—queer looking objects, strange eyes and faces, drench’d (the steady drain drizzles on all day) and fearfully worn, hungry, haggard, blister’d in the feet” (*PW* 1:28). This is, of course, an ideologically driven verbal composition—these are poor creatures who have been abandoned to the peltings of a pitiless storm, abandoned by their self-proclaimed “betters,” those Union officers now retreated to the renowned comfort of Willard’s hotel in Washington. This is a bitter betrayal of northern democratic manhood, on the grand, “cosmic” scale; and the weather is eloquently “expressive” of it and of Whitman’s fury at it. “Never tell me of chances of battle,” Whitman snarls at the bleating officers: “I think this is your work, this retreat, after all” (*PW* 1:29). The weather betrays their dirty work. Whitman’s use of it is strikingly strategic—the very vagaries of the weather (so invitingly similar to the sheer chance of battle, which the officers plead as an excuse) are here triumphantly captured for Whitman’s own ideological, teleological, purpose. The defeat at Bull Run is revealed, in retrospect, to have been neither inexplicable nor unpredictable. In fact, it is presented as a paradoxical vindication of Whitman’s belief in the inevitable military and political triumph of democracy, a corollary of which is the belief that anything less than a fully democratic military system is bound to result in some such disaster as Bull Run.

But in composing an account of Bull Run out of the materials of the weather, Whitman was doing more than simply recording the occasion: he was memorializing it. Weather served as a mnemonic device, ensuring that American society would not only recall the occasion but also bear vividly in mind its politico-spiritual meaning, its true, inner, ideological significance. As I’ve argued elsewhere, commemorating the war—that is, making it actively present to the noncombatants in Whitman’s business-mad northern society—was an absolute obsession with him.<sup>14</sup> He had misgivings too deep for words about that society. And if his darkest fears—that northern society was fundamentally indifferent to the bloody sacrifice being made on its behalf—had ever been realized, Whitman’s very sanity might well have collapsed. His wartime

writings were an attempt to treat what was in stark reality a gulf in ideology (between the Yankee business ethic and Whitman's ethic of redemptive sacrifice) as if it were rather a mere breakdown in communications. Whitman knew, from experience, what it was to live in New York, having to rely on the newspapers for tardy and unreliable information about the geographically and psychologically distant war. As is made clear in discussions of the time, part of the appeal of the new art of photography was that it could seemingly annul distance by bringing graphically before the very eyes of anxious friends and relatives the remote "foreign" landscape in which their soldier boys were fighting: Brady's photographic record of the 1864 Virginia Campaign was praised by *Harper's Weekly* in these very terms:

The actuality of these views, the distant detail, and the inflexible veracity, make them invaluable to every student of the campaign; while all who follow the army with their private hearts as well as their public hopes will see with curious satisfaction the roads, the fields, the woods, the fences, the bridges, the camps, and the streams, which are the familiar daily objects to the eyes of their loved soldier boys.<sup>15</sup>

Whitman's writings were likewise attempts to impress his vision of war on "private hearts" rather than merely to address "public hopes." He knew, from Washington experience, what it was like, even there at the very hub, not to know what was going on all around him—not to know, for instance, that Hooker's army was being destroyed at Chancellorsville just as he, Whitman, was needlessly worrying about wind and rain. He also knew, from Washington experience, the terrible difficulty of writing letters on behalf of "his" wounded soldiers, missionary missives that could make parents even half comprehend what their sons were enduring. These gulfs of unknowing were what he set out to bridge in his writings, in an attempt to close the ideological gap between northern society and the community of fighters and sufferers that Whitman served.

A key image here is that of Whitman himself receiving the news about the attack on Fort Sumter that triggered the Secession War. He was on his way home, at midnight, from the opera, when he heard the cries of newsboys. He bought a paper and crossed the street to the brightly lit Metropolitan Hotel. There he and others read the fearful report aloud to a rapidly swelling crowd, that was struck dumb by the news. "I can almost see them now," Whitman recalled in *Specimen Days*, "under the lamps at midnight again" (*PW* 1:24). His writings from the front and from the hospitals during the war were a compulsive re-enactment of that moment, that scene—an attempt to gather the whole nation "under the lamps at midnight again," to make the indifferent crowd listen and understand and remember and redeem the suffering by working to produce that new democratic society for which the Union troops were fighting, or so Whitman fondly believed. And the weather was for him a

fixative of memory, defining and highlighting an occasion, just like those lamps at midnight. Or, to change the metaphor, the weather could be a means of conveying to a civilian audience not the bare facts of an event or occasion but its atmosphere, its climate, its inner ideological meaning. This use of weather is characteristic not only of prose passages such as that describing Bull Run but also of the *Drum-Taps* poems; and it reaches its apotheosis, as we shall see, in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”—a poem that could, after all, be provocatively described as a kind of weather report and weather forecast rolled into one!

On Burnside’s march after Fredericksburg, Northern soldiers became veritable connoisseurs of mud. “Virginia mud,” a Union officer explained later, “is a clay of reddish color and sticky consistency which does not appear to soak water, or mingle with it, but simply to hold it, becoming softer and softer.”<sup>16</sup> The mud here becomes a synecdoche for the hostile and elemental foreignness of the South, that social, cultural and political foreignness which had long found symbolic expression in climatic terms. Whitman himself registered his move from New York to Washington partly as a change of climate—the enervating heat of the Washington summer became an understandable subject for complaint. In old age, he could even explain the war in terms of “The hot passions of the South; the strange mixture at the North of inertia, incredulity, and conscious power” (*PW* 2:498). These terms belong, of course, to primitive climatology—a proto-science that claimed to be able to classify cultures according to climate. This practice, as old as Aristotle, was vigorously developed in eighteenth-century thinking.<sup>17</sup> And in mid-nineteenth-century America, the supposed correlation between social character and climate was investigated in a skeptical and sophisticated way by an Emerson who was interested in “the influences of climate and soil in political history” precisely because during the antebellum years this topic gave rise to crude racial and political propaganda, allowing North to caricature South, and South North.<sup>18</sup>

But Whitman, in fact, invoked such socio-climatic stereotypes only in order to undermine their popular political signification. And he did so because during the War, as both before and after it, he held to a vision of a single, reintegrated America in which Northern characteristics were complemented and redeemed by Southern characteristics, and vice versa, in a dialectical process that would in due course produce a single, augmented, diversified and matured democratic society. Indeed, during the war he could even single out one aspect of the climate of Washington itself—that capital city set in border country—as prefiguring the blending of North and South.

Whitman’s lengthy letter from Washington, published by the *New York Times* in October, 1863, is an extraordinarily complex ideological structure, a deliberate exercise in propaganda, designed to counter the prevailing hostile popular view of Washington as the center of political

bureaucracy and corruption. Whitman's praise of the city's architecture, and in particular the unfinished dome of the Capitol, is couched in terms that represent Washington as the truly "national city," a synthesis of North, and West—and South. Some of its distinctive attraction, wrote Whitman, "is in the spot, soil, air" (*PW* 1:29), and he amplified on this by noting "something peculiarly intense and beautiful here in the quality of the daylight . . . I know the effects of atmosphere and sky very well at New-York and Long Island, but there is something here that outvies them. It is very pure and very gorgeous. Somehow richer, more liberal, more copious of strength than in the North" (*PW* 1:34).

This praise of a southerly climate is consistent with Whitman's pre-war celebration of thoroughly southern climes in "Longings for Home," the 1860 poem later entitled "O Magnet-South." A poem in which Whitman impersonates a native of the South, it provides a striking example of that Rhetoric of Conciliation I have elsewhere argued Whitman developed in 1860 in an attempt to reduce the intra-national animosity that was already then conspicuously threatening to rend the Union asunder.<sup>19</sup> When that rending moment came, with the firing on Fort Sumter, Whitman was himself fierce for war. But by the time he had settled in Washington, his earlier conciliatory impulses were reasserting themselves in drastically modified form—this time expressed as a sympathy for the Southern people, in tandem with an implacable hostility to the Secession cause and an almost fanatical commitment to the democratic Unionist struggle. And the more I study the wartime Whitman, the more I feel that this southerly aspect of Whitman's wartime outlook has hitherto received insufficient attention from scholars, including myself.

The war was far less the fault of the Southern people—particularly the poor whites—than of their leaders: thus Whitman rationalized it. Indeed, he held to his pre-war belief that a true American democracy was already latent and potential in the Southern character, as it so evidently was in the supposedly more highly developed Northern character. Again, the border state of Virginia allowed Whitman, in *Specimen Days*, to give symbolical expression to this vision. Visiting Culpepper in 1864, he first hymns the heroism of the Union troops—"I never before so realized the majesty and reality of the American people *en masse*. It fell upon me like a great awe. The strong ranks moved neither fast nor slow. They had march'd seven or eight miles already through the slipping unctuous mud" (*PW* 1:70). But a couple of entries later, the politico-meteorological focus has shifted. There has been a change in the weather. The emphasis is now on the fact that "the soil is yet far above the average of any of the Northern states. And how full of breadth the scenery, everywhere distant mountains, everywhere convenient rivers. Even yet prodigal in forest woods, and surely eligible for all the fruits, orchards, and flowers. The skies and atmosphere most luscious,

as I feel certain, from more than a year's residence in the state, and movements hither and yon. I should say very healthy, as a general thing. Then a rich and elastic quality, by night and by day. The sun rejoices in his strength, dazzling and burning, and yet, to me, never unpleasantly weakening. It is not the panting tropical heat, but invigorates. The north tempers it" (*PW* 1:72). And then the passage rises to its climax, as—over the dilapidated, fenceless, war-ravaged Virginian landscape—the moon rises: "the first of the new moon, the outlined old moon clear along with it; the sky and air so clear, such transparent hues of color, it seem'd to me I had never really seen the new moon before. It was the thinnest cut crescent possible. It hung delicate just above the sulky shadow of the Blue mountains. Ah, if it might prove an omen and good prophecy for this unhappy state" (*PW* 1:72). It is, I feel, a passage hauntingly consonant with passages in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." And such echoes are not, I suspect, purely coincidental. This wartime rhetoric of sympathy with the South helps me, at least, to hear in "When Lilacs" the related, and developed, tones of reconciliation with which Whitman greeted the ending of the war. And thus emboldened I shall, later, be venturing to suggest that "When Lilacs" may perhaps be read as a poem for and from the South, as much as the North and West.

"No more for him life's stormy conflicts, / Nor victory, nor defeat—no more time's dark events, / Charging like ceaseless clouds across the sky"<sup>20</sup>: so wrote Whitman in another of his Lincoln elegies, "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day." Clichéd the storm may be as an image for the Civil War, but we ignore Whitman's use of it at our peril. The image is, after all, given the full treatment in the *Drum-Taps* poem, "Rise O Days from your Fathomless Deeps." The first stanza depicts the pre-war Whitman as exulting in an ocean storm, excited by the irresistible power of self-assertion that is absent from business-enfeebled northern society, reluctant to assert itself decisively against an increasingly mutinous South which is threatening to defect from the democratic Union. But by the second stanza the North's unanimous, tumultuous, commitment to war has more than satisfied a Whitman who now revels in a political sight that excels even that of an aroused and enraged natural world: "How the true thunder bellows after the lightning—how bright the flashes of lightning! / How Democracy with desperate vengeful port strides on, shown through the dark by those flashes of lightning!" (*LG* 292).

Whitman's rhodomontade is less than convincing, its bluster betraying an underlying nagging disquiet, his old chronic mistrust of northern society. But the poem anticipates his war-long attempt to understand, and to speak, the language of storms. And the deep structure of Whitman's interest is laid bare in a crucial passage he wrote in 1865 and later included in *Specimen Days*. It is entitled "The Weather—Does It Sympathize with These Times?":

Whether the rains, the heat and cold, and what underlies them all, are affected with what affects man in masses, and follow his play of passionate actions, strain'd stronger than usual, and on a larger scale than usual—whether this, or no,—it is certain that there is now, and has been for twenty months or more, on this American continent north, many a remarkable, many an unprecedented expression of the subtle world of air above us and around us. There, since this war, and the wide and deep national agitation, strange analogies, different combinations, a different sunlight, or absence of it; different products even out of the ground. After every great battle, a great storm. Even civic events the same. (*PW* 1:94)

It is a suggestive passage, and brings us back to the semiscience of meteorology in Whitman's day, a "science" uneasily (but fruitfully, for a poet) suspended between a new materialist and an old spiritual-animist view of the world. Of course, the word "sympathy," in the title question—"The Weather—Does It Sympathize with These Times?"—is a bridging term, equivocally situated between these two kinds of discourse. A term beloved by pseudoscientific phrenologists as well as by the devotees of the new semiscientific cult of electromagnetics, it always appealed immensely to Whitman.

James Pollard Espy, the controversial popular meteorologist we have met before, exulted in the title "The Storm-King," as he had been dubbed by the popular press following the success of his polemical 1841 volume, *The Philosophy of Storms*. That book was part of Espy's contribution to the great "American Storm Controversy":

In the 1830s an international controversy developed among meteorologists over the nature and causes of storms. The American component of the controversy centered on competing theoretical positions advanced by three prominent scientists: William C. Redfield, James Pollard Espy, and Robert Hare. The dispute between Espy and Redfield held center stage between 1834 and 1841, then Hare entered the controversy with a vengeance and attacked both Espy and Redfield. American theorists argued over the *primum mobile* of storms: was it gravity, caloric, or electricity? They argued over methodology: were they searching for the *quo modo* or the *causa verum*? And they argued over basic definitions of the phenomena under investigation: were they looking at hurricanes, thunderstorms, tornadoes, winter storms, or some other "meteor"?<sup>21</sup>

*The Philosophy of Storms* exemplified the ambiguous status of meteorology as a science at that time. On the one hand, Espy made an original contribution to the understanding of the convective principle at work in the creation and movement of storms. On the other hand, he was wildly misled into advancing a theory of artificial rainmaking, based on the belief that the smoke produced by the factories of Manchester, England, generated rainclouds. He therefore proposed that in order to alleviate the Pennsylvanian drought vast areas of forest should be burnt to precipitate rainfall. Twenty years later, like theories still existed. In the 1860s promoters claimed that the arid climate of the Plains had been changed for good. "The increase of railroads," said one Colorado newspaper, 'and also the increase of activity on the roads has the . . . effect of pro-

ducing more showers. . . . The concussion of the air and rapid movements produced by railroad trains and engines affects the electrical conditions of the atmosphere.”<sup>22</sup>

These theories provide a graphic illustration of the interest of the period in ways in which developments on the ground might influence events in the air. As Harold Aspiz has brilliantly demonstrated, ideas about electricity followed a like trajectory. “[E]lectricity was a mysterious power grounded in the earthly, material world and yet a part of the celestial ambience; . . . it seemed to be the link between the physical, mental, and spiritual worlds; . . . it seemed to constitute the very psychic essence.”<sup>23</sup> Imagine, therefore, Franklin’s famous kite experiment reversed. Instead of using a kite to demonstrate how electricity could be safely conducted down to earth, imagine instead using some device to demonstrate how the electricity abroad in the earth and all its creatures could be communicated to the very heavens. That is the kind of model Whitman has in mind in the passage about the Weather Sympathizing with the Times. Aspiz has already memorably shown how semi-scientific theories of electro-magnetism could give rise, in “Song of Myself,” to metaphors of human and celestial coupling. In that poem, “the electrical and spermatic ‘threads’ connecting the stars seem to be a projection of the persona’s sexual and visionary powers. Just as the ‘father-stuff’ represents the electrical sources of human life, so the stars represent the electrical sources of universal life.” (140) It remains, however, to apply Aspiz’s insight to Whitman’s talk of the heavens and its weather in *Drum-Taps*; to his use of the moon, and stars, and storms in order now to suggest the electric and electrifying power not of an individual self but of a whole nation. “Convulsiveness” was the quality Whitman associated with the war years, a term suggestive of how his society had been electro-spiritually galvanized into action.

And key to Whitman’s wartime reading of the semiotics of storms, of his fascination with “strange analogies” between politics and the weather, was his belief in a conflict whose wholly unprecedented character naturally produced wholly unprecedented results. The Civil War, like no other war in history, demonstrated “what affects man in masses”—by which Whitman meant not just the size of the armies involved but what that size signified; that here, in the Northern states, was a whole society mobilized for the first time in history, because when a democratic society went to war it did so by turning itself into one huge citizen army. The levé-en-masse that had saved the French Revolution was as nothing in the eyes of a Whitman rendered willingly ignorant by prejudice. In the North, for the very first time in history in his impassioned opinion, a whole society had been electrifyingly aroused to fight. So what wonder this had resulted in spectacular storms? After all, in a section of *The Philosophy of Storms* entitled “Artificial Rain,” James Espy had specifically concluded (on the basis of evidence taken from Scott’s

*Napoleon*) that military activity at the battle of Valenciennes (1793) had been intense enough to cause precipitation: "The allies employed two hundred heavy ordnance, and the besieged had above one hundred, and they were frequently all in action at one time. The rain, in the opinion of the combatants, was caused by the shaking of the clouds."<sup>24</sup>

If great battles produced such great storms, then so did "civic events the same" claimed Whitman. This he struggled with himself to demonstrate in two powerful but contrasting passages of wartime prose. The first, recorded in his notebooks, concerns the last meeting of the 37th Congress, in March, 1863. He there scornfully observed "the little mannikins, shrewd, gabby, drest in black, hopping about, making motions, amendments"; while all about the building broke a massive storm: "whither are we drifting? Who knows? It seems as if these electric and terrible days were enough to put life in a paving stone,—as if there must needs form, on the representative men that have to do with them, faces of grandeur, actions of awe, vestments of majesty—the day goes on, a strange, wild, smiling, promising, lowering, spitting, day—full of threats and contradictions—black at times as murkyest eve—then snowing in great flakes, obscuring the air, with fits of furious driving, and of whirls and eddies around and around as you look up—then a sharp short shower of rain" (*NUPM* 2:567-568).

The whole piece obviously turns on the ludicrous discrepancy between the pathetic antics of those toy figures, the agitated congressmen, and the great public events they have been charged with the responsibility of controlling: "These then are the men who do as they do, in the midst of the greatest historic chaos and gigantic tussle of the greatest of ages" (*NUPM* 2:567). All of Whitman's seasoned prejudices against centralized government can be felt informing the passage. His description of the pigmy congressmen as "representative men" is tragically ironic. Whereas the fighting, suffering soldiers were truly for Whitman "representative men," these politicians are so only in the diminished sense of being officially elected political representatives. And whereas Whitman found in the hospitals a grand theater of suffering profoundly expressive of what the war was really about, here in Congress he found only the theatre of political farce. Implicit in this whole scene is that recurrent anguish of his that the civilian world—here "represented" by its politicians—would never truly realize, let alone practically register, the inner justifying significance of this war's carnage. The description is fraught with the suggestion that this is one occasion when the storm, expressive of nature's sympathy with the suffering soldiers, vents only its contemptuous anger on the wretched politicians in their final congressional session.

Two years later, in March, 1865, Whitman again made a meeting of Congress the subject of special comment, and once more freak weather conditions featured prominently in his verbal sketch, which was this

time destined for publication in *Specimen Days*. There is even the same central pattern to the episode, as Whitman sets the nervous, exhausted and sleepy representatives against the dramatic eruption of powerful forces in the natural world outside the eerily gaslit chamber. As the sudden storm batters the Capitol, startling the dozey speakers and dozing listeners into a momentary terror for their lives, Whitman strikingly makes of their sudden transition from torpor into jitteriness an image of the whole uncertain mood of this particular late phase of the conflict. But then the congressmen recover and compose themselves, prompting Whitman to a note of confidence in their courage and resolve, as he represents them as potentially equivalent in quality to the soldiers themselves: "One is not without impression, after all, amid these members of Congress, of both the Houses, that if the flat routine of their duties should ever be broken upon by some great emergency involving real danger, and calling for first-class personal qualities, those qualities would be found generally forthcoming, and from men not now credited with them" (*PW* 1:96). It is as if Whitman were desperately seeking to convince himself, as the war drew to its close, that the great yawning gulfs could be bridged: the gulfs between the hospitals and the Capitol, between the front-line and the cities frantically in pursuit of wealth, between his own dreams for postwar society and the probably inimical future reality.

Whitman's greatest attempt to bridge these gulfs took shape as the poetry of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," a poem that is the product both of Whitman's long-term pondering of the strange analogies between weather and war and of the meteorological portents that had accompanied the 1865 inauguration of Lincoln. Indeed, "the heavens, the elements, all the meteorological influences have run riot for weeks past," wrote Whitman of that period. He recalled the astonishing brilliance at evening of "the western star, Venus," "as if it told something, as if it held rapport indulgent with humanity, with us Americans" (*PW* 1:94). Remembering the wonder of that star, closely accompanied by "the moon, like a young mother," Whitman also remembered how the "miracle" of the scene had somehow been completed by the "slow . . . clear . . . deliberate notes of a bugle come up out of the silence," floating out from one of the army hospitals nearby, where all the many wounded "from Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, and the rest" were lying (*PW* 1:95).

If space allowed, it would be revealing to track the search for portents undertaken by Whitman, as by virtually all combatants and non-combatants, North and South, during the Civil War. Think, for example, of the aftermath of the battle of First Fredericksburg, when Northern officers buried their dead by what they believed to be the cosmically comforting light of the northern lights, even as the Confederate soldiers, on their part, were simultaneously regarding that aurora borealis

as celestial fireworks in celebration of their own victory. Which side owned the weather? The battle for the skies was a psychological and ideological reality in the Civil War many decades before airplanes turned it into a reality of a different kind. An amusing example of it is afforded by an incident recorded long after the event by one who had been a boy in New York during the Civil War:

one day when a brisk west wind was blowing, we went to the top of our house on 12th street, taking with us a 3-foot kite. We flew it, letting out the cord till the kite was out of sight, and then we attached an American flag about 3 feet long to the string and let out another 200 feet of the kite string, thus suspending the flag over Fifth Avenue. There it hung, without any visible means of support. This caused a crowd to gather, and we tied the string to the chimney on the roof and went down to the street. We were in great glee at the remarks made: such as "A sign from heaven!" "We are sure to win the war now!" "Oh—it is only a reflection of a flag elsewhere, an optical delusion"—and many other remarks.<sup>25</sup>

This happened over a decade after Hawthorne had wryly reflected, in *The Scarlet Letter*, on the Puritans' fascination with supernatural omens:

It was, indeed, a majestic idea that the destiny of nations should be revealed, in these awful hieroglyphics, on the cope of heaven. A scroll so wide might not be deemed too expansive for Providence to write a people's doom upon. The belief was a favorite one with our forefathers, as betokening that their infant commonwealth was under a celestial guardianship of peculiar intimacy and strictness.<sup>26</sup>

Through his omnipresent irony, Hawthorne asks leave to doubt, of course, whether mankind has indeed outgrown the habit of looking to nature for supernatural omens; and subsequent history was amply to justify his misgivings on this score. For instance, the soldiers of the First World War inhabited, according to Paul Fussell, a "myth-ridden world" which had taken shape in the very midst "of a war representing a triumph of modern industrialism, materialism, and mechanism." Out of these circumstances came, most unexpectedly, "a plethora of very unmodern superstitions, talismans, wonders, miracles, relics, legends and rumors."<sup>27</sup>

It was the very antiquity of such superstitions that appealed to a Herman Melville who, in his marvelous Civil War collection *Battle-Pieces*, wanted to emphasize that, far from being unique among the nations of the earth, the United States was simply exhibiting, in its fratricidal conflict, the savagery inherent in human nature. Hence his framing his collection along the lines of Shakespearean tragedy, complete with many of the conventions of the genre, including "A Portent" in the form of the swaying body of the executed John Brown, "The meteor of the war."<sup>28</sup> Hence, too, Melville's distinctive treatment of the trope of weather. In "Misgivings" the war becomes a storm "bursting from the waste of Time," in which Nature shows its "dark side" and arouses the atavistic

energies of precariously civilized human nature: "The hemlock shakes in the rafter, the oak in the driving keel" (37). By contrast, Whitman clung throughout the war to his salvific belief in American exceptionalism, and thus even while borrowing traditional tropes, such as those of "portents," he attempted to imply that they were of an entirely different order, or character, from anything precedence might have to offer. So, after invoking 1859-1860 as "Year of Meteors," he was careful to embed mention of that ancient omen of disaster in a passage that stressed human progress:

Nor forget I to sing of the wonder, the ship as she swam up my bay,  
Well-shaped and stately the Great Eastern swam up my bay, she was 600 feet long,  
Her moving swiftly surrounded by myriads of small craft I forget not to sing;  
Nor the comet that came unannounced out of the north flaring in heaven,  
Nor the strange huge meteor-procession dazzling and clear shooting over our heads,  
(A moment, a moment long it sail'd its balls of unearthly light over our heads,  
Then departed, dropt in the night, and was gone;). . . . (LG 239)

By the time of Lincoln's assassination in 1865, the North was already victorious, and so Whitman was in one sense left, when writing "When Lilacs," in undisputed possession of the heavens and all their meteorological portents. By then, history itself seemed to have endorsed his rhetoric of the weather, at long last underpinning metaphor with fact, even if, in the case of the assassination of Lincoln, it had done so to devastatingly unexpected and tragic effect. But shocked and saddened though he was by that catastrophe, Whitman was far from dismayed. Indeed, in a sense he could even be said to have welcomed the assassination, as his late lecture in commemoration of Lincoln makes arrestingly clear. What he appreciated was that Lincoln had been killed at a memorable time, under memorable circumstances, and in a memorable way; and that in being thus killed, Lincoln had become the means of rendering memorably visible both the vast suffering the war had entailed, and the meaning and purpose of that suffering. Here, wrote the aged and crippled Whitman, "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" (*PW* 2:508).

And here my own essay, too, finally doubles back on itself at the close, to pick up several threads that were dropped earlier. The weather as a mnemonic device, designed to fix the inner meaning of an event in national memory; the weather employed as a symbolic means of creating a climate of sympathy in the civilian world for the conditions of living and dying at the front as in the hospitals; the weather as somehow mysteriously sympathizing with the Union cause, and signifying, in its own terms, the uniqueness of a democratic society; the weather as symbolically legitimizing and consecrating the Northern effort through portents; the weather as a means of turning a socio-political struggle into a

cosmically significant conflict, and in the process “naturalizing” Northern, democratic society. These features that we have discovered to be important constituents of the discourse of weather in Whitman’s wartime writings are all again prominently apparent, though raised to an altogether higher level of significance, in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.”

The weather, one might say, rose magnificently to the occasion when Lincoln died, and thereby satisfied one of the needs we have already identified, namely Whitman’s need for a sufficiently imposing outward sign of the inner meaning of the war. He was thus provided with adequate symbolical means of representing the significance of an assassination with which other writers could deal only by resorting to the trope of tropelessness; by speaking of a crisis of representation, since violence had been done to the very logic of symbolic discourse. This was the burden of the Funeral Ode published in *Harper’s Weekly* on May 6, 1865. It began by explaining that when natural disaster, such as an earthquake, devastated towns, then:

The world may fitting emblems find  
To speak the horrors of its heart  
In cities craped, in banners furled  
And all the solemn show of art.

But when a Human Hand was turned  
Into a ruthless demon-power  
And smites a nation in its Chief,  
Even at his triumph’s crowning hour,

What emblems shall Man fitting find,  
What types sad, grand enough to show  
The horror shaking continents  
And their infinity of woe?<sup>29</sup>

Whitman had, however, been providentially supplied with appropriately expressive “types.” Nor was it only the Washington weather that proved equal to the occasion. “When Lilacs” is as much a New York poem as it is a Washington poem, since Whitman was in New York when Lincoln was actually assassinated. He then made a hurried journey to Washington just in time to miss the train carrying Lincoln’s body, as it left Baltimore on its long journey to Illinois. It was therefore Whitman’s ironic fate to fail to participate in any of the impressive public ceremonies that attended Lincoln’s funeral. Instead, he was in the city whose commitment to the Union had been as uncertain as its support for Lincoln had been notoriously unreliable—Whitman had had regular arguments on the subject, even with his own brother Jeff. To see Manhattan and Brooklyn sunk in mourning was therefore to be able, at least briefly and per-

haps quaveringly, to be convinced that a remarkable transformation had indeed occurred in the national temper.

Whitman's eager imagination seized upon every detail of the vast impromptu street-theatre of sorrow. He noticed "one large & fashionable picture store, all shuttered up close, except a broad square plate glass, in which hung a small grinning picture frame, vacant of a picture" (*NUPM* 2:765). Then, for the word "vacant," which simply denoted a space devoid of matter, he substituted the subtler word "vacuous," thus implying that President Lincoln's death had deprived even New York of a presiding image of its own character and destiny. Ever a connoisseur of mass spectacle, Whitman swept a discerning eye over the great panorama of a grieving city, and duly recorded the impressive semiotics of sorrow in his notebook. He was also recording, in the process, the temporary subduing, or tempering, of New York's recklessly entrepreneurial spirit: "All Broadway is black with mourning—the facades of the houses are festooned with black—great flags with wide & heavy fringes of dead black, give a pensive effect—towards noon the sky darkened & it began to rain. Drip, drip, & heavy moist black weather—the stores area all closed—the rain sent the women from the street & black clothed men only remained" (*NUPM* 2:763). For four years Whitman had, as we have seen, repeatedly attempted to find in the weather an appropriate symbolic expression of the war. Now, at last, even the ideologically fickle northern weather seemed to be sympathizing with the times. The "words," Whitman suggested in his notebook, "to describe the weather" for Lincoln's funeral, were "sulky, leaden, & dripping continually moist tears . . . black clouds driving overhead" (*NUPM* 2:763, 764).

The descriptions of the weather both in these prose passages and in "When Lilacs" could be regarded as Whitman's moving attempt to superimpose an image of its better self upon the business-driven civic society to which the future was now to be entrusted—a society the spiritual fitness of which Whitman much doubted. Correspondence is, for me, the key word for understanding Whitman's Civil War experience. The correspondence he sent from Washington—his own letters, prose writings, and poems, as well as the letters he wrote for his soldiers—was an attempt to make correspondents of his civilian readers; that is, to make them respondent to the war's meaningful suffering and thus to make them co-respondent, with the soldiers, to the redemptive anguish involved. But if, in superimposing grief on business, "When Lilacs" becomes a palimpsest of a poem, it is also so in another sense. Twinned with a portrait in *Specimen Days* of Lincoln as the embodiment of the Northern people is a portrait of John C. Calhoun, represented as one who had bequeathed the legacy of a shattered South to a people he had not so much led as misled. Purporting to report the words of an embittered Confederate soldier, "Calhoun's Real Monument" speaks of "the desolated, ruined south; nearly the whole generation of young men be-

tween seventeen and thirty destroyed or maim'd" (*PW* 1:109). It is worth remembering that Southern wasteland when reading great, familiar passages like this:

Now while I sat in the day and look'd forth,  
In the close of the day with its light and the fields of spring, and the farmers preparing  
their crops,  
In the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and forests, . . .  
And the streets how their throbbings throb'd, and the cities pent[.] (*LG* 333-334)

More or less consciously composed of the populist images of Lincoln's own campaign rhetoric for a free soil, and implicitly representing Lincoln as "the conservator of [the Union] to the future," this passage is also a poignant reverse image of a Southern landscape and a Southern people supposedly shattered by *un*representative leaders such as Lincoln's polar opposite, Calhoun.

"All the old families used up," continues the Confederate veteran in Whitman's account:

the rich impoverished, the plantations cover'd with weeds, the slaves unloos'd and become the masters, and the name of Southerner blacken'd with every shame—all that is Calhoun's real monument. (*PW* 1:109)

The words are, it must be scrupulously noted, attributed to a Southerner. But they do seem to be endorsed, to some degree, by Whitman's sympathy. Which leads us back to the vexed, and complex, question, of Whitman's attitudes towards blacks.<sup>30</sup> To read "When Lilacs" in the light of the veteran's remarks is to at least be troubled by the shadow of the possibility cast across the text that Whitman is so anxious to return his strife-torn America to "normality" after the Civil War that he prefers not to factor into his picture such troublesome unknown quantities as "unloosed slaves." Certainly the human landscape of his poem in no way substantially anticipates that of a racially inclusive "reconstruction." Profoundly regrettable though such an attitude must seem to us to be today, it does not, however, centrally affect my feelings about "When Lilacs." Rather, it simply highlights the particular, limited, and therefore all the more movingly human, conditions under which the poem was historically produced. For clarification of those conditions, it might be worth recalling Melville's words in the Supplement to *Battle-Pieces*:

Those of us who always abhorred slavery as an atheistical iniquity, gladly we join in the exulting chorus of humanity over its downfall. But we should remember that emancipation was accomplished not by deliberate legislation; only through agonized violence could so mighty a result be effected. In our natural solicitude to confirm the benefit of liberty to the blacks, let us forbear from measures of dubious constitutional rightfulness towards our white countrymen—measures of a nature to provoke, among other of the last evils, exterminating hatred of race toward race. In imagination let us place ourselves

in the unprecedented position of the Southerners—their position as regards the millions of ignorant manumitted slaves in their midst, for whom some of us now claim the suffrage. Let us be Christian toward our fellow-whites, as well as philanthropists toward the blacks, our fellow-men.<sup>31</sup>

It is not necessary to endorse Melville's every word (he elsewhere mentions "the blacks, in their infant pupilage to freedom" and recommends "paternal guardianship" of them [199]) to feel the power of his decency in this passage, which seems to me to offer a salient gloss on Whitman's feelings at the end of a war in which he himself, after all, had been tortured witness primarily to the suffering of whites.

And to begin to readmit the South, in this way, to the postwar Union which is being celebrated in "When Lilacs," is to begin to read that poem with different eyes. I, for one, feel I have for too long regarded it as exclusively a poem of the North-East and of the West, hypnotized, perhaps, by such invocations as those of Whitman to "sea-winds blown from east and west" (*LG* 332). Other critics, it seems to me, have mostly responded in similarly limited terms. I notice, for instance, that in his recent brilliant book on *Walt Whitman's America*, David Reynolds suggests that the hermit thrush singing of death in the swamp derives from Whitman's memories of early life on Long Island.<sup>32</sup> But does it? Is it that simple? I had always supposed that those passages about the bird are redolent of Whitman's experiences in the hospitals in a Washington whose rural hinterland his close friend, John Burroughs, was to emphasize and to celebrate in his first book, *Wake-Robin*:

One need but pass the boundary of Washington city to be fairly in the country, and ten minutes' walk in the country brings one to real primitive woods. The town has not yet overflowed its limits like the great Northern commercial capitals, and Nature, wild and unkempt, comes up to its very threshold, and even in many places crosses it.<sup>33</sup>

Burroughs it was, of course, who first interested Whitman in the hermit thrush, which he characterized in *Wake-Robin* as follows:

It is quite a rare bird, of very shy and secluded habits, being found in the Middle and Eastern States, during the period of song, only in the deepest and most remote forests, usually in damp and swampy localities. On this account the people in the Adirondack region call it the "Swamp Angel." Its being so much of a recluse accounts for the comparative ignorance that prevails in regard to it.<sup>34</sup>

In pointing out elsewhere that even the great ornithologists Wilson and Audubon had "little or nothing to say of the song" of the hermit thrush, Burroughs gives the impression that he himself is one of the chosen discriminating few to have become intimately familiar with this particular bird. And this is surely also the impression given by Whitman in "When Lilacs." The song of the "Swamp Angel" is represented as being for his ears alone, that is, for the ears of one uniquely attuned by hospi-

tal experience to what Burroughs called "the pure, serene, hymn-like strain of the hermit."

Such, indeed, are the strains Whitman eventually reproduces, or rather translates, towards the conclusion of "When Lilacs," but only after repeated, protracted postponements of that moment of naked, vulnerable exposure to the hermit's song. It is as if Whitman had read the words of an anonymous author whose mention of the hermit-thrush in an *Atlantic Monthly* article (December, 1858) was noted by Burroughs in *Wake-Robin*. "It is certain that any one who stops to listen to this bird," wrote the anonymous essayist, "will become spellbound, and deaf to almost every other sound in the grove, as if his ears were enchained to the song of the Sirens."<sup>35</sup> Whitman protects himself from that song, half-stopping his ears against it until he is psychically ready to listen. This rhythm of deferred listening enacted in the poem ("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") also corresponds to the actual rhythm of the hermit's song as described in the *Atlantic Monthly* essay: "The song of the wood-thrush [sic] consists of about 8 or 10 different strains, each of considerable length. After each strain the bird makes a pause of about 3 or 4 seconds." Whitman finally "receives" the song at the psychological juncture when he has worked his way through the emotional turmoil that had threatened to disintegrate his core psychic being. The hermit's chant is therefore heard not as a dangerously depressive dirge but rather as calm, healing affirmations signifying the beginning of a process of psychic reintegration.

Appropriately enough, the *Atlantic Monthly* essay explains that the hermit thrush "delights in a dusky retreat, and is evidently inspired by solitude, singing no less in gloomy weather than in sunshine." And just as its song is suited to all weather, so, through its migrations, does the bird span and connect different climes. Hence John Burroughs's observation on hearing it sing in the Adirondacks in late summer: "Here also I met my beautiful singer, the hermit thrush, but with no song in his throat now. A week or two later and he was on his journey southward."<sup>36</sup> With this in mind, it is worth reconsidering Whitman's "swamp angel," with particular reference to the extensive and complex antebellum tradition, highlighted by David C. Miller in his recent groundbreaking study, that treated the swamp as signifying the whole climate of Southern culture.<sup>37</sup>

Miller strikingly explores the political iconography of the swamp, its use, by antebellum Northern writers and painters, to signify a whole nexus of negative values. The swamp is the location of foetid sensuality and lush, lascivious, fertility; it is the malarial, miasma-ridden kingdom of stifling death; it is the refuge of the desperate fugitive slave. Hence such verse as "The Swamp Angel," published in a wartime number of *Harper's Weekly*:

And many a mother has the angel blessed  
Of the dark swamp, as, with convulsive strain,  
She clasps her wandering infant to her breast,  
While baffled blood-hounds lick their chops in vain.<sup>38</sup>

“The piney odor and the gloom,” wrote Whitman in the pre-war “O Magnet-South,” “the awful natural stillness, (here in these dense swamps the freebooter carries his gun, and the fugitive has his conceal’d hut)” (LG 473). Taken out of context, this image could be read as anti-slavery propaganda along the lines of the portrait of the swamp-slave Dred, in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s celebrated abolitionist novel. But in context, the image is deliberately merged into an indiscriminate paean of praise for the Southern landscape, a striking example of what I have already called Whitman’s pre-war Rhetoric of Conciliation.

The Whitman of “When Lilacs” is also, I believe, using the image of the swamp to construct another rhetoric—a Rhetoric of Reconciliation—and very significantly so bearing in mind, of course, that Lincoln had been assassinated as an act of Southern vengeance. Whitman’s line, at war’s end, was that soldiers North and South had been united in death and by suffering; and that furthermore the suffering of the South had not really been by the people’s volition, but had rather been the fault of its leaders, who had eventually resorted to antidemocratic policy of enforced conscription. This had been the revelation that had come to Whitman through the deathly hospitals, in swamp-surrounded Washington, where “some of my best friends were probably Southern boys.”<sup>39</sup> The hermit thrush’s hymn of praise to the kindly death that ends all suffering is therefore a song that reunites North and South. It readmits the South to the Union. It reclaims the swamp from sectional propaganda, and implicitly proclaims that the Southern climate is as naturally part of an all-American biodiverse democracy as are the climates of the North and the West. Hence surely the significance of the fact that the hermit thrush breeds across northern North America in mixed woodlands, but winters in the Gulf States.

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” is a moving demonstration that Whitman and his democratic vision had indeed weathered the storm, in more than one sense. And so, in the very last lines of his concluding *Drum-Taps* poem, “To the Leaven’d Soil They Trod,” Whitman not surprisingly turned, but now for the last time, to the weather, in the settled form of climatology rather than the unpredictable wartime form of meteorology:

The prairie draws me close, as the father to bosom broad the son,  
The Northern ice and rain that began me nourish me to the end,  
But the hot sun of the South is to fully ripen my songs. (LG 327)

## NOTES

- 1 This is an expanded version of a Joseph S. Schick lecture delivered at Indiana State University, Terre Haute. I am very grateful for permission to reproduce it here and for comments on the original text when further presented at The University of Iowa.
- 2 *Prose Works 1892*, 2 vols., ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963, 1964), 1:94. Hereafter cited as *PW*.
- 3 Paul Fussell, "Sunrise and Sunset," *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 51-63.
- 4 Edward F. Grier, ed., *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 6 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 2:534. Hereafter *NUPM*.
- 5 Geoffrey C. Ward, with Ric Burns and Ken Burns, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History of the War between the States* (London: the Bodley Head, 1991), 210.
- 6 Ward and Burns, 184.
- 7 Jerome M. Loving, ed., *Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1975). For the importance of Whitman's association with his brother, see M. Wynn Thomas, "Fratricide and Brotherly Love," in Ezra Greenspan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 27-44.
- 8 Ward and Burns, 130.
- 9 James Rodgers Fleming, *Meteorology in America, 1800-1870* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), xvii. I am grateful to Professor Lawrence Buell, Harvard University, for making this study available to me.
- 10 "Weather in War," *Atlantic Monthly* 7 (May, 1862), 593.
- 11 Andrew Ross, "The Work of Nature in the Age of Electronic Emission," *Social Text: Theory, Culture, Ideology* 63 (Winter, 1987/1988), 116.
- 12 James P. Espy, *The Philosophy of Storms* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1841), vi-vii.
- 13 "Meteorology. A Glance at the Science," *Atlantic Monthly* 6 (July, 1860), 1.
- 14 M. Wynn Thomas, *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- 15 *Harper's Weekly* 8 (June 8, 1864), 499.
- 16 Ward and Burns, 184.
- 17 See J. W. Johnson, "Of Differing Ages and Climes," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21 (October-December, 1960), 465-480.
- 18 See the important study by Eduardo Cadava, *Emerson and the Climates History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
- 19 M. Wynn Thomas, "Whitman and the Dreams of Labor," in Ed Folsom, ed., *Whitman: The Centennial Essays* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 133-152.
- 20 Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds., *Leaves of Grass, Comprehensive Reader's Edition* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 339. Hereafter *LG*.
- 21 Fleming, 23.

- 22 Geoffrey C. Ward, *The West: An Illustrated History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), 265.
- 23 Harold Aspiz, *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 150.
- 24 Espy, 516.
- 25 Frederick Van Wyck, *Recollections of an Old New Yorker* (1933; rpt. New York: Liveright, 1982), 33.
- 26 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Norton, 1988), 106.
- 27 Fussell, 115.
- 28 Hennig Cohen, ed., *The Battle-Pieces of Herman Melville* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1964), 35.
- 29 *Harper's Weekly* 9 (May 6, 1865), 274.
- 30 The fullest treatment of the subject is Martin Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery and the Emergence of "Leaves of Grass"* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).
- 31 Melville, 200.
- 32 David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 445.
- 33 *Wake-Robin, Writings of John Burroughs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 1:141-142.
- 34 Burroughs, 1:26. Burroughs discusses Whitman's use of the hermit thrush in *Writings: Birds and Poets*, volume 3 of the Riverside Press series, 46-47.
- 35 "The Birds of the Pasture and Forest," *Atlantic Monthly* 2 (December, 1858), 867. Burroughs admired the article, particularly the description of the hermit thrush's song, but scathingly noted that the author had confused the bird with the wood-thrush (Burroughs, 1:51-53).
- 36 Burroughs, 1:93.
- 37 David C. Miller, *The Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). He notes that "Walt Whitman, perhaps the most original mind in all of America, was indeed a lonely example of favorable response to the charms of the Southern swamps before the war"; and he also devotes pp. 209-210 to a specific consideration of the role of the swamp in Whitman's poetry.
- 38 *Harper's Weekly* 7 (December 12, 1863), 796.
- 39 Quoted in Walter Lowenfels, *Walt Whitman's Civil War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), 235.