

# WALT WHITMAN'S VISION OF THE INFERNO, OR DANTE IN *DRUM-TAPS*

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Mark, I say, his economy of words—perhaps no other writer ever equal to him.— One simple trail of idea, epical, makes the poem—all else resolutely ignored. ~~It is beautiful:~~ This alone shows the master. In this respect is the most perfect in all literature. A great study for diffuse moderns.—

— Walt Whitman, 1859, from his notes  
on Dante and the *Inferno*<sup>1</sup>

IN DECEMBER 1862, Walt Whitman witnessed Civil War soldier camps and army hospitals for the first time, when he visited a Union camp in Falmouth, Virginia, to look for his wounded brother George. His experiences at Falmouth helped spawn some of his *Drum-Taps* poems and wartime journalism, and several critics have considered this trip to be a turning-point in Whitman's views of the war and in his poetic envisioning of it.<sup>2</sup> Yet Whitman prepared himself mentally and poetically for this trip in a seemingly unusual way for him: he studied Dante's *Inferno*. His copy of John Carlyle's 1849 prose translation of the *Inferno* contains the date "July 1862," which indicates when Whitman purchased and probably read this book.<sup>3</sup> As well, his "1862" notebook, in which he documented his trip to Falmouth and drafted many *Drum-Taps* poems, contains extensive notes on Dante and the publishing history of the *Inferno*. He recorded that he "looked carefully over" Gustave Doré's illustrations of the *Inferno* in September 1862, which were new and popular then on both sides of the Atlantic (LC 187).<sup>4</sup> It seems that Whitman had Dante on his mind in the few months prior to his important trip to Falmouth. Why, then, was Whitman reading and studying Dante at this point during the war, and what might Dante—the medieval Roman Catholic poet so seemingly dissimilar from Whitman—have to do with *Drum-Taps*?<sup>5</sup>

There were many personal and cultural reasons for Whitman's multiple readings of Dante in the early 1860s. For one, Whitman had already studied and admired the *Inferno* in 1859, and thus he was quite familiar with the significance of its contents when he turned to it in 1862. Also, just as Whitman was re-reading the *Inferno* and critically engaged with Doré's illustrations in September 1862, he and his family were enduring a difficult month, as Ted Genoways has shown. In that month the Whitmans grew anxious about George Washington Whit-

man, who was a soldier in the 51<sup>st</sup> New York regiment. During the many weeks in which they waited to hear from George, the Whitmans heard reports of battlefield carnage, read of the Union defeat at Second Bull Run, and mourned the deaths of friends. In the span of two days in September, Whitman learned of the deaths of two of his friends, Bill Giggie and Elanson Fargo, both of whom were in the same regiment as George, their deaths a possible sign of George's own fate.<sup>6</sup> During this personally difficult time, Whitman found it appropriate to study both Dante's career and read the *Inferno*, just as his more famous contemporary, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, found it appropriate to translate the *Divine Comedy* during those very same months.

For Whitman—as the entire *Divine Comedy* was for Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, and other northern intellectuals<sup>7</sup>—the *Inferno* was a poem for the times, an epic that seemed to anticipate the terrible intramural American war. Gradually introduced into the United States in English translations during the early 1800s, the *Comedy* gained much currency there as an epic poem that welded late-medieval theology and imperial politics into a unified cosmos experienced by a pilgrim-poet, a vision that supposedly anticipated the rise of the modern (Protestant) world and the global triumph of republican nationalism. As read by politically-minded critics on both sides of the Atlantic, whose transatlantic exchanges reinforced each other's interpretations, Dante's poem was anti-clerical and proto-republican, and it was definitely in favor of national union. Many transatlantic readers believed that the *Comedy* predicted the Risorgimento's successful revolution to unify Italy as a nation-state in 1860-1861.<sup>8</sup> By that point, in the United States, the *Comedy* had been interpreted for decades in terms of American national politics. For Northerners during the Civil War, Dante favored the cause of Union. God, figured as an "Emperor" and with the militarily-significant title "captain" (both Longfellow's terms), unified the cosmos.<sup>9</sup> Those traitors to God, reminiscent of the political betrayals of the Confederacy, were at the bottom of hell—not only Satan and Judas, but also Brutus and Cassius, the rebel assassins whose murder of Caesar threatened the stability of the Roman Empire.

Whitman was likely well aware of this transatlantic discourse on Dante and on the unification of Italy. He knew Dante's figuration of the cosmic poetic journey as a "war" or warfare to be completed, a metaphor amplified by Dante's frequent autobiographical references to his political exile and to the dysfunctional cities and regions of medieval Italy (Longfellow 1:7, 3:165). In the *Inferno*, cities as political entities are often castigated for the kinds of severe social dysfunction that breed and encourage violence: Pisa, for instance, represents political injustice and civil cannibalism in the Ugolino story; Genoa is condemned as a

city “estranged from all morality, and full of all corruption”; and the City of Dis resembles Dante’s Florence, a city at war with itself, as represented by the shared tomb of the Guelph and Ghibelline leaders in *Inferno* 10 (Carlyle 106-118, 398-405, 410). In short, the *Inferno* offered Whitman a powerful exemplar poem of the historical and sociological interconnections between sociology, theology, civil war, and the politics of union and disunion.

Nineteenth-century readers turned to Dante for what they perceived as his penetrating poetic vision. This word “vision” potently suggested the individualistic ethos of Romantic poetry, focused as it was on emotional subjectivity and poetic genius, which were key features of Dante’s works according to many nineteenth-century interpreters. But “vision” also was and continues to be in Dante criticism an enduring way of describing Dante’s cosmic imagination, which necessarily provokes readers and inspires them to respond in myriad creative ways, from voluminous commentaries to popular tributes and literary homages.<sup>10</sup> The celebrated early nineteenth-century translator Henry Cary suggested all of these aspects of Dante to every English-language reader when he titled his translation of Dante’s epic as *The Vision of Dante Alighieri*.<sup>11</sup>

Exemplifying Cary’s choice of titles and the preference in Dante criticism to foreground Dante’s poetic “vision,” Whitman’s reading and deployment of the *Inferno* in *Drum-Taps* focused on the visionary aspects of Dante’s epic. Indeed, as I will argue, Whitman re-envisioned key aspects of the *Inferno*, altering certain scenes and descriptions in that poem for his own personal poetic statements about the Civil War, as found in *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum-Taps*. Dante, for instance, classifies his journey through hell in canto II of the *Inferno* as a “war”: “I, one alone, was preparing myself to bear the war both of the journey and the pity” (Carlyle 14). This “war,” including the “pity” or pitiful sights, involves the poet’s difficult psychological relation to the horrible aftermath of violent sins, including the punished souls of Italian civil-war participants found throughout the *Inferno*. It is this kind of struggle that Whitman grappled with mid-war. From 1862 onward, Whitman quickly developed and complicated the poetic trope that “war is hell,” connecting it with the discourse of optics by frequently using words such as “sights” and “scenes,” as well as many grammatical variations of the word “light.” Although the phrase “war is hell” is now a cliché, it was fresh enough in the early 1860s and made famous by the postwar dictum attributed to General William Sherman. The “1862” notebook evidences a transition in Whitman’s poetic envisioning of warfare, from war as a glorious fight for democratic national unity (as imagined in the poem “Drum-Taps,” later retitled “First O Songs for a Prelude”), to war as a horrifying experience, in battle and in memory. In the notebook, Whitman presented war as the ultimate “hell,” at the conclusion of a draft tentatively titled “a battle”:

O the hideous ~~horrid~~ <sup>damned</sup> hell of  
war <sup>were the preacher's preaching of hell?</sup>  
O there is no hell, more damned  
than this hell of war (LC 147)<sup>12</sup>

While these lines were never published, in *Memoranda During the War*, over a decade later, Whitman restated their sentiments more eloquently in prose. The immediate context for his now-famous lines about the “real war [that] will never get into the books” is thoroughly Dantean:

Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background of countless minor scenes and interiors, (not the official surface-courteousness of the Generals, not the few great battles) of the Secession war; and it is best they should not—the real war will never get into the books. In the mushy influences of current times, too, the fervid atmosphere and typical events of those years are in danger of being totally forgotten. . . . [The] interior history will not only never be written—its practicality, minutiae of deeds and passions, will never be even suggested. The actual soldier of 1862–’65, North and South, with all his ways, his incredible dauntlessness, habits, practices, tastes, language, his fierce friendship, his appetite, rankness, his superb strength and animality, lawless gait, and a hundred unnamed lights and shades of camp, I say, will never be written—perhaps must not and should not be. . . . Think how much, and of importance, will be—how much, civic and military, has already been—buried in the grave, in eternal darkness.<sup>13</sup>

Whitman’s “real war,” his characterization of battlefield experiences, was a “seething hell” and now (in the 1870s) is a “black infernal background,” which supposedly no one then wanted to depict or discuss. Indeed, all elements in this “infernal background” are and will be “buried . . . in eternal darkness,” which is partly to say that they are left unilluminated by “the books” and therefore unseen by readers. As I will argue, Whitman already had memorialized the battlefield via these Dantean metaphors in several *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum-Taps* poems, and he had begun to do so in the “1862” notebook. As with “The Artilleryman’s Vision,” the war poems that emerge from the notebook—including “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame,” “A Sight in the Camp in the Day-Break Grey and Dim,” and “Quicksand Years That Whirl Me I Know Not Whither”—strive to depict the “seething hell” of the war’s “countless minor scenes and interiors.” This hell is in part based on Whitman’s study of Dante’s *Inferno*, a work that inspired the relationship between the form, content, and tone of much of Whitman’s wartime poetry and prose.

Given Whitman’s reading and use of it, the *Inferno* is an important intertext for *Drum-Taps* and a notable book that impacted Whitman’s wartime life and poetry. His “1862” notebook contains a collage-like assemblage of observations, notes, and poem drafts of his visit to Fal-

mouth, almost all of which were written just after his readings of the *Inferno* and his page of notes on Dante and his works (LC 187). Given this timeline and Whitman's allusions to Dante in *Drum-Taps*, his reading of the *Inferno* helped color his journey to Falmouth and many of his subsequent poetic visions of Civil War battlefield action and soldier life. In other words, the *Inferno* was a potent predecessor poem for Whitman, offering him an exemplary, theologically-charged poetic vision that dramatized the social chaos of civil war and the suffering it causes, a vision that Whitman cleverly adapted and radically revised for Civil-War circumstances. Whitman found in the *Inferno* a measure of poetic inspiration that helped him describe his December 1862 trip and even his subsequent visits to Civil War hospitals. Whitman transformed some of the *Inferno*'s key poetic tropes into representations of on-the-ground battlefield experiences of Civil War soldiers, which are described in *Drum-Taps* as a sort of ongoing, harrowing, ever-present hell. Thus, not only were Whitman's wartime writings generated from his engagement with contemporary newspapers and his caretaking in hospitals, as many critics have demonstrated,<sup>14</sup> but they were also shaped in part by classic literature, in this case by medieval Italian epic poetry. As Whitman understood, Dante foregrounded concerns with how individuals represent sin and trauma through memory, and how history characterizes (and sometimes wrongly justifies) violence and its social effects. These concerns were very similar to Whitman's in 1862. In short, Whitman used the *Inferno* to think through and poetically represent the "real war," the hellish experiences of ordinary soldiers, military staff, and medical personnel, people so often forgotten, buried in the "eternal darkness" of history and left out of "the books."



Whitman's personal understanding of the idea of hell, and his regard for contemporary cultural uses for the term "hell," changed between 1855 and 1863, the same period in which he read the *Inferno* multiple times.<sup>15</sup> His draft of the line from the "1862" notebook, "O the hideous ~~horrid~~ <sup>damned</sup> hell of war," was a positive use of the term, an acceptance of some kind of "hell," psychological if not spiritual. The line is an indicator of a turn in Whitman's thinking, for in the antebellum period, he repeatedly discredited "hell" and its cultural meanings, particularly those tied to Christian theology. On his first known reading of Dante's *Inferno*, one he wrote about in an 1859 notebook, Whitman questioned the *Inferno*'s acceptance of hell as a theological reality. The *Inferno*, Whitman opined, "signifies . . . that melancholy and imperious part of humanity . . . out of which the whole . . . Jehovahn theology has arisen—from the times of

the primitive Jews down—vengeance, gloating in the agony of sinners, bad men, enemies to be punished, and the usual distinctions of good and evil” (*NUPM* 5:1862).<sup>16</sup> What Whitman calls “vengeance” and “gloating” here is a common objection to Dante’s concept of “Divine Justice,” which, as Virgil tells Dante in canto 3, is a perfect judgment dispensed to sinners who choose rebellion and thus “die under God’s wrath” (Carlyle 34). Clearly, Whitman had serious disagreements with Dante’s theology and theodicy.

Whitman had already dismissed wholesale the cosmic justice of “Jehovahn theology” in the 1855, 1856, and 1860 editions of *Leaves of Grass*, making his mid-war use of the *Inferno* all the more intriguing. The 1855 *Leaves* at its outset explicitly and purposely attacks the orthodox Christian doctrine of hell. In its Preface, Whitman declares that the poet of the United States shall be the “common referee” and the “equable man” of the masses, and as such, the great poet denies the possibility of eternal suffering in hell to the average man and instead champions an earthly existence that shall demean or condemn no one: “The presence of the greatest poet conquers [. . .] Now he has passed that way see after him! there is not left any vestige of despair or misanthropy [. . .] or delusion of hell or the necessity of hell . . . . and no man thenceforward shall be degraded for ignorance or weakness or sin.”<sup>17</sup> These lines are the antithesis of Dante’s famous inscription over the gates of hell, which announces that all hope must be abandoned therein, making hell a region of eternal despair. Moreover, the opening lines of “Song of Myself” declare the immanence of earthly reality while denying the existence of an afterlife of punishment:

There was never any more inception than there is now,  
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;  
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,  
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now. (*LG* 1855, 14)

Later in the poem, Whitman declares himself the poet of body and soul, who comprehends the range of all sensations: “The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the pains of hell are with me, / The first I graft and increase upon myself . . . the latter I translate into a new tongue” (26). These “pains of hell” are, exclusively, earthly injustices such as chattel slavery, of which Whitman, as the poet in *Leaves of Grass*, will be the sole voice and “translator.”<sup>18</sup>

Here, in antebellum editions of *Leaves*, Whitman reacted against mainstream American Christian theology. Just as in Dante’s doctrinally-Catholic *Inferno*, hell—for Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists, and many other Protestant groups in nineteenth-century America—was the place in the afterlife in which unrepentant sinners suffered eternal pun-



ishment for their sin and rebellion against God. This punishment was commonly associated with fire. One Union soldier, for example, wrote that during battle he had experienced “heat enough to make a fellow contemplate the place prepared for the ungodly.”<sup>19</sup> Yet most American theologians were aware that the Bible is vague about the precise details of the afterlife’s place of punishment. One example of this is found in the Gospel of Mark 9:45, when Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah describing hell as a state of being in which “the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” This kind of poetic proclamation about the reality of hell allowed creative Christian writers like Dante to invent specific punishments, as in the *Inferno*, where torments range from those endured by the slothful, who are gurgling in mud, to those inflicted upon the treasonous, who are frozen in a lake of ice. But there was one commonly accepted truth about hell that was clear from the Bible’s prophetic language: “hell” guarantees that punishments in the afterlife are everlasting. The American Calvinist theologian Charles Hodge, Whitman’s contemporary, emphasized that the Bible teaches about the everlasting punishment for sin, which even begins existentially during earthly life (an idea Dante employs in *Inferno* 33).<sup>20</sup> The then-famous Protestant preacher Henry Ward Beecher in 1860 agonized over this concept of an eternal punishment but accepted it nonetheless: “The thought of the future punishment for the wicked, which the Bible reveals, is enough to make an earthquake of terror in every man’s soul. . . . Nor does it help me to take the word ‘everlasting,’ and put it into a rack like an inquisitor, until I make it shriek out some other meaning; I cannot alter the stern fact.”<sup>21</sup>

During the Civil War, as the drafted line about the “the hideous ~~horrid~~ <sup>damned</sup> hell of war” demonstrates, Whitman began to use positively the concept of “hell” and connect it to battlefield experience, deploying it as a complex signifier of psychological, spiritual, and national suffering. Though Whitman was far from accepting Dante’s belief in eternal punishment for sins, Dante’s *Inferno* perhaps helped alter Whitman’s poetic use of “hell.” In his wartime poetry, Whitman began to link “hell” to psychological and spiritual trauma caused by the battlefield and recurring personal memories thereof. For Whitman, soldiers’ wartime experiences were “hell” because they contained at times unfathomable horrors, which seemed everlasting to those who endured them. These personal, individual experiences (past and present, real and in the mind) could be best memorialized by poetry, not by histories of the war or by, more generally, “the books” that Whitman derided. In fact, for Whitman and his contemporaries (especially Longfellow), Dante exemplified a poetic vision that charges poetry with the grand task of encompassing and revising history, while dramatically representing the

subjective memories of history's participants, including common soldiers and citizens. At the same time, for Dante and Whitman, poetry should offer readers a proper, transformative moral pathos that reflectively criticizes nostalgia for war.

The evolution of Whitman's use of "hell" is evidenced in the "1862" notebook and, as I will argue, was linked to Whitman's mid-war concerns with the philosophy of progressivist, Whig history. Three months after recording brief notes on his study of Doré's illustrations of the *Inferno*, upon his arrival at Falmouth Camp, Whitman witnessed the kind of carnage depicted in *Inferno* 28, in which Dante sees piles of bones, limbs, and other body parts and asks "Who . . . could ever fully tell . . . the blood and wounds that I now saw?" (Carlyle 332). Outside a mansion-turned-hospital, Whitman saw a mound of human body parts that he described as "human fragments cast, bloody, black and blue, swelled, and sickening" (LC 113). On December 26, while he watched soldiers digging graves in the morning, he noted how others reacted to such sights:

There was a row of graves there already, each with a slat of board, generally a piece of barrel-head on which was inscribed the name of the soldier. Death is nothing here; as you step out in the morning from your tent you see on the stretcher a shapeless extended object, the corpse of some wounded or sick soldier of the reg't died in the hospital tent during the night. Perhaps there is a row of three or four of these corpses lying covered over. No one makes an ado.<sup>22</sup>

These scenes prompted Whitman to begin drafting poems in the "1862" notebook. One such draft is simply titled "sights," a potent word that indicates the literal recognition of poetic vision and that was later transferred into the title of "A Sight in the Camp in the Day-Break Grey and Dim." As well, the notebook served as a drafting board for some of Whitman's journalistic efforts, such as his regimental history of the 51<sup>st</sup> New York published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on January 5, 1863.

The "1862" notebook displays all of the conflicting and varying moods Whitman experienced while observing the sights and conversing with people at Falmouth. While Whitman's tone about the body parts and corpses outside the makeshift hospital is somber, it contrasts sharply with his excited observations of a military reconnaissance balloon and of a "picturesque scene" of an artillery drill (LC 110, 116). These displays of military power only momentarily cheered him, though. The general mood on the Union side during the Christmas season of 1862 was bleak.<sup>23</sup> The Union had just suffered heavy casualties in the Battle of Fredericksburg, during which Ambrose Burnside became yet another example of the incompetence of Union generalship. Of this battle Whitman wrote that it was "the most complete piece of mis-



management perhaps ever yet known in the earth's wars."<sup>24</sup> Abraham Lincoln himself remarked of his mental state in December 1862 that "if there is a place worse than Hell, then I am in it."<sup>25</sup>

It was in this uncertain mood that Whitman questioned his assumptions about historical progress. The "1862" notebook shows that Whitman, mid-war, seriously considered the idea that American civilization was in the process of regressing, returning to its pre-Revolution state of a continent made up of fragmented societies instead of a unified, independent nation. This consideration meant a potential abandonment of two of his core poetic ideas found throughout the antebellum editions of *Leaves of Grass*: that human history is progressing, with the United States both signaling and enabling this progress, and that nineteenth-century progress (moral, social, political, and technological) is inexorably positive and beneficial. This temporary consideration of an alternate view, as we shall see, helped Whitman incorporate Dante's *Inferno* more poignantly into his wartime writings. For Whitman correctly recognized the *Inferno* as a poem deeply concerned with what "progress" and "history" really mean. This concern is embedded throughout not just the *Inferno*, but the *Divine Comedy* itself, and is evident in the *Inferno*'s explicitly political passages: in, for example, Ciacco's prophecy of Florence's violent future, which claims that "[a]fter long contention, they shall come to blood, and the savage party shall expel the other with much offense" (Carlyle 64-65). Part of the *Inferno*'s profound sociopolitical vision is its sophisticated representations of war's degenerative effects on ordinary individuals, society, and the future, representations couched in a cosmic, spiritual setting.

Whitman's concern with historical progress is evident in the only newspaper or magazine quotation in the "1862" notebook. While in other notebooks Whitman often quoted or even cut out and pasted selections from print media, the "1862" notebook's only quotation discusses seriously the topic of historical regression (or the devolution of civilization). Next to a page that lists the names of hospitalized soldiers, Whitman recorded the following passage from the British periodical *Once a Week*:

from once a week Nov. 1 1862

reminiscence of a conversation with Hallam the English historian

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"When I listened to him as the younger generation delighted to listen to a man who knew so much, and who took such care to preserve a dispassionate habit of mind, he told me he could admit nothing that was grounded on the assumption that the human race or its work of human society are progressive. He believed it probable that there were periods of progress now and then, here and there; but it seemed plain to him

that affairs recurred to their old position and there were men as wise and good in the most ancient and the most modern times. Whether en masse, or in regard to the best specimens of each age, it was to him very doubtful whether we got on; and indeed he considered the evidence tended to another conclusion."

XXXXXXXXXXXXX (LC 105)

Given its position in the notebook, Whitman likely read this November 1862 issue of *Once a Week* in December 1862 at Falmouth Camp, where periodicals like this one were widely available as the "principal reading fare" of Civil War soldiers.<sup>26</sup> The quotation comes from an article titled "The Season of Unreason," and it refers to a conversation between the British historian Henry Hallam and the article's anonymous writer. From the writer's point of view, Hallam espouses a cyclical theory of history. Whitman's selection of quotation is curious because the article in full does not accept Hallam's point of view but, instead, refutes Hallam after quoting him and argues for historical progress. Immediately after this quotation ends, the writer counters Hallam's theory: "I was a good deal surprised . . . at a doctrine which I, for one, had not been in the way of hearing; and I do not . . . agree in it."<sup>27</sup> Yet Whitman focused on Hallam's point of view and omitted the article's main argument. He underlined the word "plain," as if the possible truth of the view that "affairs recur to their old position" was obvious to him. At Falmouth, then, Whitman was at least thinking about, if not momentarily subscribing to, a non-progressive, cyclical theory of history, one in which any progress is ephemeral and temporary, the future inevitably returning back to the past.

While Hallam's theory of cyclical history is not necessarily pessimistic, especially if one is on the upswing rather than the downswing of historical trends,<sup>28</sup> Whitman's consideration of cyclical history in December 1862 was entirely pessimistic. Should the Confederacy win the war, the United States would break apart, dividing the Union. This would destroy Whitman's antebellum dream of a future glorious America, politically united by homosocial comradeship—a dream denied completely in Dante's hell, since part of the infamous "hope" that must be abandoned once one passes through hell's gates is the hope of a civil peace that guarantees political and brotherly unity (for Dante, either the unity of particular Italian cities or of the Holy Roman Empire). Just prior to the Civil War, Whitman had declared himself the poet-prophet of American comradeship in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*. In the prefatory poem for that edition, "Proto-Leaf," Whitman promises to poetically declare the necessity of the Union of States in *Leaves'* subsequent poems:

I will make a song for These States that no one State may under any  
 circumstances be subjected to another State,  
 And I will make a song that there shall be comity by day and by night  
 between all The States, and between any two of them,  
 And I will make a song of the organic bargains of These States—and a shrill  
 song of curses on him who would dissever the Union; . . . .<sup>29</sup>

In the “Apostroph” to “Chants Democratic,” a poem that Whitman removed from *Leaves of Grass* after the Civil War for its errant political statements, Whitman waxes rapturous about the glories of the coming centuries, during which the Union will bestow its blessings:

O haughtiest growth of time! O free and extactic!  
 O what I, here, preparing, warble for!  
 O you hastening light! O the sun of the world will ascend, dazzling, and take  
 his height—and you too will ascend;  
 O so amazing and so broad! up there resplendent, darting and burning;  
 O prophetic! O vision staggered with weight of light! with pouring glories!  
 O copious! O hitherto unequalled!  
 O Libertad! O compact! O union impossible to dissever!  
 O my Soul! O lips becoming tremulous, powerless!  
 O centuries, centuries yet ahead! (*LG* 1860, 107)

Historical progress, figured in the ascent of the sun, is intimately tied to “Libertad” and the “union impossible to dissever.” The poet is nearly overpowered by this future political glory. His lips become “powerless,” as if the glory of the future is too stunning to allow him to speak his prophetic utterances.

For Whitman in 1860, union was achieved through civil “comradeship,” which perpetually affirms the promises of the Constitution and renews the sociopolitical “Compact” between the states. In “Calamus,” Whitman’s narrator proclaims himself as the “poet of comrades”:

There shall from me be a new friendship—It shall be called after my name,  
 It shall circulate through The States, indifferent of place,  
 It shall twist and intertwist them through and around each other—Compact  
 shall they be, showing new signs,  
 Affection shall solve every one of the problems of freedom,  
 Those who love each other shall be invincible,  
 They shall finally make America completely victorious, in my name.  
 One from Massachusetts shall be comrade to a Missourian,  
 One from Maine or Vermont, and a Carolinian and an Oregonese, shall be  
 friends triune, more precious to each other than all the riches of the  
 earth. (349-350)<sup>30</sup>

For Whitman, the social bonds of “affection” unite all citizens into the American geographical trinity of North, South, and West, creating friendship and unity everywhere. Whitman attached the idea of historical progress to social bonding on a nationwide scale, assuming that increased comradeship results in the inevitable progression of civilization. He also poetically champions a worldwide comradeship, an idea faintly similar to Dante’s vision of peace through global imperial unity, as argued for in his political treatise *Monarchia*. Whitman’s praise for new technologies that shortened travel times and improved long-distance communication—including railroads and telegraphs—was wrapped up in his optimism for social progress. Yet war, especially civil war, was antithetical to Whitman’s notion of American comradeship—an idea confirmed to Whitman in *Inferno* 6 by Ciacco, a representative gluttonous Florentine politician, who claims that Florence is divided because of “Pride, Envy, and Avarice . . . which have set the hearts of *all* on fire” (Carlyle 65-66). By December 1862, dreams of national comradeship and the social unification of the North American continent had vanished. The best Whitman could hope for was a Union victory to restore the promises of these dreams, but in that month, Union defeat seemed likely. Under these conditions, Whitman’s outlook changed radically from 1855 to 1862; while the mid-1850s offered hope and optimism, the early 1860s threatened to overturn all social progress that Whitman believed had been made in the United States. Thus Whitman contemplated Hallam’s view of cyclical history, which would explain and perhaps justify to Whitman the possible coming collapse of the Union, an inevitable collapse anyway given Hallam’s theoretical assumptions about the course of history.

Whitman’s unsettling doubts about historical progress in late 1862 manifest themselves in the despondent uncertainty about the future expressed in many *Drum-Taps* poems that also reference or allude to Dante’s *Inferno*. In “Quicksand Years that Whirl Me I Know Not Whither,” first drafted in the “1862” notebook, the poem’s speaker attempts to find something that is certain, concluding that “One’s-self, must never give way—that is the final substance—that out of all is sure.” The speaker falls back on trust in “One’s-Self” in recognition that “schemes” and “politics” are completely unreliable. Some critics have suggested that the poem is optimistic about the future, especially about death,<sup>31</sup> but the poem ends with two lines that question the seemingly hopeful assertions of the speaker: “Out of politics, triumphs, battles, death—what at last finally remains? / When shows break up, what but One’s-Self is sure?” (Miller, *Drum-Taps* 30). As questions, these lines can be read grammatically or rhetorically—as questions to which the speaker doubts the possibility of a firm answer, or as rhetorical questions

that imply the speaker's certainty. Is the speaker content or discontent with total reliance on the self? Neither reading allows the other to be simultaneously true, but both are present as possible interpretations, signaling the speaker's (and Whitman's) doubts about historical progress and the fate of the Union.<sup>32</sup>

The images in the title of this poem, as the "1862" notebook helps us understand, are directly connected to Dante's *Inferno*. The page on which the draft is written is only a few pages from Whitman's notes on Dante's *Inferno*, indicating that he probably wrote them in the same short period of time (LC 200-201). The draft shows Whitman considering his options for the word "whirl." "Engulf" and "engulfing" are written above "whirl" as looming possibilities for what the quicksand years will do to the poem's speaker. At the top of the second draft page, Whitman wrote the word "descending," as if the poet caught in quicksand years might descend and be engulfed (LC 201). These possibilities, and the poem's title itself, suggest that time and history make up the quicksand that has a firm hold on the poet. The poet is therefore powerless to control any part of the future, and is uncertain about his or the nation's future destiny: "Quicksand years that whirl me *I know not* whither" (my emphasis). The action of whirling suggests the vortices of time as active agents, as if the poem's speaker is being spun or swirled by these vortices in endless circles. Where and when will the quicksand of time whirl us? Backwards or forwards, resulting either in regress or progress, but the speaker simply cannot know the end result.

In its employment of images of circular or swirling movement, symbolizing the unknown trajectory of human history, "Quicksand Years" calls upon the imagery of the *Inferno* (via Carlyle's English translation), which in numerous places combines metaphors of circling or whirling with images of sand and eternal existence in hell's depths. Throughout the *Inferno*, Dante descends down the circles of hell, following a leftward circular path, uncertain as to exactly where and when his journey will end. Sand is one of the conspicuous topographical features of certain circles of hell. The Seventh Circle of hell is the "naked plain of burning Sand," where "the violent" against man, nature, and God—including the murders of war—suffer eternal punishment (Carlyle 157). In *Inferno* 3, Dante witnesses the indifferent angels just inside the gates of hell. Their "horrible outcries" and lamentations result in a constant "tumult," a sound which Dante describes metaphorically as "sand when the whirlwind breathes," swirling perpetually in the air (27-28). Likewise, every sinner in hell has been "whirled" at some point. In *Inferno* 5, where Dante sees each sinner judged by Minos and sent to his appropriate place in hell, Minos "with his tail makes as many circles round himself" as the judged sinner will have to descend. Then, after the sinner confesses, Minos "whirls" each one down with his tail (48-

49). Similarly, in *Inferno* 26, Ulysses provides Dante with a memorable image of a devastating whirlwind in his grandiloquent speech. As a figure of the unceasing desire for all knowledge, with human progress and exploration as a means to new knowledge, Ulysses and his crew sail beyond the point where any human being has traveled. When the crew reaches the other side of the world, spotting Mount Purgatory, a terrible storm arises and devastates the ship. The storm makes the ship “whirl round with all the waves” until the ship and crew perish at sea (317-318).

All of these images of whirling in the *Inferno* concur with some notion of doomed destiny and deny the possibility of human progress. In the *Inferno*, for a sinner to be “whirled” by Minos or for Ulysses to be “whirled” to his death implies descent and then stasis; the sinner who has been whirled ends up permanently in a far worse position than he was in. Dante, at times, worries about what his own future is and whether he will be stuck forever in hell; in *Inferno* 8-9, the citizens of the City of Dis halt him outside the city gates and nearly keep him from moving forward. This kind of threat to Dante’s forward progress even occurs in *Inferno* 1. In that opening canto, Dante is lost and therefore fearful, his path to the light of the sun blocked by three beasts, and so his only other path requires a descent into the Earth (2-12). As is the case for Whitman’s narrator in “Quicksand Years,” in *Inferno* 1 Dante the pilgrim is uncertain about his future course and at a crisis point where time and experience have made him unsure of everything, leading to his spiraling descent into hell.

Whitman not only re-envisioned Dante’s images of “whirling” and circling in “Quicksand Years,” but he also embedded the concept of circling into the forms of several *Drum-Taps* poems, linking circular motion and form to the possibility of historical regression and the cyclical theory of history. Several soldier poems in *Drum-Taps* have a quasi-chiastic structure, in which each poem’s beginning and ending are the same. As self-contained entities, these poems simply repeat themselves in the end, returning back to where they began, circling back to their beginnings, even though some of their content may imply historical progress. “An Army on the March” provides an example. The poem begins with an army pressing forward, its “cloud of skirmishers in advance” (Miller, *Sequel* 20). The poem describes the army’s “swarming ranks” and “dense brigades” on the move. The “columns” and “wheels” and “horses” all imply progressive movement, building up to the poem’s final line: “As the army resistless advances.” But where does the army advance to? The end of the poem simply repeats the beginning of the poem, confirming that the army is on the advance, but offers no destination or outcome. Some of the poem’s language signifies progress—“pressing on” and



“advancing”—yet its structure is circular, implying that the action in the poem is cyclical and recurring. In this poem, Whitman uses the imagery of army movement to dramatize the historical problem of “Quicksand Years,” whether history will whirl us forward or backwards, putting us on a course of progression or regression.

A similar kind of problem is dramatized in the poem “O Me! O Life!” Here Whitman gives a Dantean assessment of the individual in the midst of civil war:

O Me! O life! . . . of the questions of these recurring;  
Of the endless trains of the faithless—of cities fill’d with the foolish;  
Of myself ever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more  
faithless?)  
Of eyes that vainly crave the light—of the objects mean—of the struggle ever  
renew’d;  
Of the poor results of all—of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me;  
Of the empty and useless years of the rest—with the rest me intertwined;  
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?  
(Miller, *Sequel* 18)

The despair of the poem is reinforced by its circular structure. The first and last lines repeat that there are unknown “questions” which are “recurring,” and the poem begins and ends with the lament “O me! O life!” The phrase “endless trains of the faithless” references Carlyle’s translation of *Inferno* 3, where Dante encounters a “long train of people” who eternally follow a “whirling” flag just outside of hell, because in life they were cowards who refused to choose sides (29-30). The tone and structure are almost too depressing for Whitman, who appended two more lines to the poem, in the guise of another voice:

*Answer.*

That you are here—that life exists, and identity;  
That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse. (18)

Who the voice of this sage-like “Answer” is—whether it is the same voice moaning “O Me! O life” or another’s—is unclear, but the poet is encouraged to continue practicing the art of poetry. This exchange strongly resembles many of the conversations between Dante and Virgil in the *Inferno*, two poets, one of whom often fears his journey while encountering the “endless trains of the faithless” and the “cities fill’d with the foolish,” while the other (Virgil) plays the encourager and the guide. As with the speaker in “O Me! O Life!,” Virgil is ambiguously two voices in the *Inferno*: the character of Virgil speaking to Dante the pilgrim, and Dante’s fictional, poetic voice speaking to itself. When, for example, Virgil leaves Dante briefly in *Inferno* 8, Dante worries that he

will die and asks Virgil if they can go back to the entrance of hell—“let us retrace our steps together rapidly” (89). Reassuringly, Virgil tells Dante to “fear not” and to “comfort and feed thy wearied spirit with good hope” (90).

While Whitman’s anxiety about the course of American history and civilization is dramatized in many *Drum-Taps* poems, his postwar, non-fiction writings display other concerns with the philosophy of history and with historiography. In these retrospective accounts, Whitman worries, sometimes angrily, about the ways in which the Civil War will be remembered and memorialized. His primary concern in the postwar years was with the historical fate of the common man and woman—the ordinary soldiers, workers, and nurses—who made the Union victory possible. In the context of the passage about the “real war [that] will never get into the books,” Whitman subtly mocks nostalgic treatments of the war and indicates that the “actual soldier of 1862-’65, North and South” must be honored and properly memorialized through a factually and stylistically accurate rendering of the war’s “countless minor scenes and interiors.” As we have seen, Whitman uses chthonic metaphors to describe these scenes: “the seething hell” and the “black infernal background,” the majority of the war’s interior history “buried in the grave, in eternal darkness.” These metaphors were deliberately Dantean on Whitman’s part since, starting with his experience at Falmouth, he adapted scenes from Dante’s *Inferno* and re-envisioned them in terms of descriptions of Civil War battles. In March 1863, writing to Nathaniel Bloom and John Gray from Washington, D.C., Whitman compared the army hospitals to scenes from Homer and the *Inferno*:

To these, what are your dramas and poems, even the oldest and the tearfulest? Not old Greek mighty ones, where man contends with fate, (and always yields)—not Virgil showing Dante on and on among the agonized & damned, approach what here I see and take a part in. For here I see, not at intervals, but quite always, how certain, man, our American man—how he holds himself cool and unquestioned master above all pains and bloody mutilations. . . .<sup>33</sup>

Here Whitman evokes Homer and Dante—two of the world’s three greatest poets, according to contemporary criticism (Shakespeare was the other)—as the major poets who approach but do not exceed his own wartime experiences, while comparing the average wounded soldier’s pain and suffering to Dante’s descriptions of the damned. Whitman made the same kind of comparison over a decade later in *Memoranda During the War*:

The dead in this war—there they lie, strewing the fields and woods and valleys and battle-fields of the south—Virginia, the Peninsula—Malvern hill and Fair Oaks—the

banks of the Chickahominy—the terraces of Fredericksburgh—Antietam bridge—the grisly ravines of Manassas—the bloody promenade of the Wilderness—the varieties of the *strayed* dead, [. . .] the numberless battles, camps, hospitals everywhere—the crop reap'd by the mighty reapers, typhoid, dysentery, inflammations—and blackest and loathesomest of all, the dead and living burial-pits, the prison-pens of Andersonville, Salisbury, Belle-Isle, &c., (not Dante's pictured hell and all its woes, its degradations, filthy torments, excell'd those prisons) [. . .] (*PP* 800-801)

This choppy, fragmented sentence continues for another two hundred words, trying but failing to exhaust what can be said about the Civil War dead. This sentence, the center of which compares Dante's *Inferno* to Confederate prison camps, appears in the section titled "The Million Dead, Too, Summ'd Up." As Ed Folsom has pointed out, the word "Summ'd" ambiguously signifies both the word "summed" and "summoned."<sup>34</sup> Just as Whitman's texts about the war summarize the war of the past, so they also *summon up the past*, including and especially the millions dead, who in *Drum-Taps* come alive textually. Importantly, it was during wartime, beginning with his trip to Falmouth, when Whitman associated the "interior history" of the war—the experiences of common soldiers in battle, in the bivouac, on the march, in the hospital—with his descriptors "seething hell" and "eternal darkness."

Whitman's inclusion of some version of *Drum-Taps* in all postwar editions of *Leaves of Grass* allowed him to counter the romanticized histories of the war that he disliked so much. Many *Drum-Taps* poems describe the interior history of the war from a soldier's perspective, and relate soldiers' stories either as memories or as present-tense events, most of which are "hellish." In effect, Whitman encapsulated particular wartime experiences and presented many of them in his poems as eternally recurring for their respective narrators.<sup>35</sup> Several battlefield scenes in *Drum-Taps*, such as in "An Army on the March," take place, as the text states, "now." "With now the sound of a single shot, snapping like a whip, and now an irregular volley, / The swarming ranks press on and on, the dense brigades press on" (Miller, *Sequel* 20). For Whitman, the "hell" of Civil War battle needed to be represented for readers as anguish occurring in an eternal *now*. In *Drum-Taps*' chiastic, formally circular poems, Whitman's anonymous soldiers experience something similar to the sinners depicted in Dante's *Inferno*—Dante describes nearly every figure in the *Inferno* as one doomed to eternally repeat his/her punishment, stuck in the same place forever, and (in some cases) traveling incessantly in a circle (e.g., the lustful in *Inferno* 5, the hypocrites in *Inferno* 23). The poems about the war's interior history in *Drum-Taps* are also deliberately haunting; they call the dead back from the region of memory and present them as suffering in battle now, in the present tense. As M. Wynn Thomas observes of *Drum-Taps*, Whitman

was “trying to admit the dead into the community of the living; trying to stare the ghastly faces of the dead back into answerable, human shape, by recognizing their sacrifice.”<sup>36</sup> Part of the “hell” of *Drum-Taps* is the collection’s present-tense representation of the horrors of the war, which textually “summons up” the figures of dead soldiers, who are eternally experiencing the war.

Dante’s *Inferno* helped Whitman represent the eternal “now” for his imagined Civil War soldiers by providing a consistent vision of this kind of dramatically poetic act of “summoning up” the dead. The *Inferno* memorializes the sinners it presents to its readers, bringing many of the dead back by letting them speak whenever Dante the pilgrim passes near them. The *Inferno* conjures up historical figure after historical figure, presenting their names and sometimes representing their voices. In *Inferno* 6, the gluttonous are represented as empty bodies, as “shadows” pounded by a “heavy rain.” They are as they would be if left unwritten: anonymous, empty, voiceless spirits. Yet Dante’s presence brings one of those spirits back, to speak to him (and, by extension, to all readers). When Dante passes by, the spirit says, “O thou, who through this Hell art led . . . recognize me if thou mayest,” eventually naming himself as Ciacco, a former Florentine (Carlyle 62). Here the pilgrim’s journey into hell symbolizes the poet’s act of writing. Just as the close contact of Dante the pilgrim brings the shadow to life by passing close by him, Dante the poet conjures up and represents the historical figure, who in an instant transforms from a forgotten or unknown person (in the mind of the reader) to the textually alive construction of Ciacco. While many representations of the dead in the *Inferno* are unflattering, they are all nevertheless textual memorials, allowing any reader to remember or become personally familiar with the famous or forgotten dead. Not only did Whitman employ Dante’s poetic strategies for summoning, he also revised them. Unlike Dante, Whitman left the dead soldiers in *Drum-Taps* as anonymous figures instead of naming them. As Adam Bradford has shown, these dead soldiers are presented as mere “shadows” or “phantoms” in *Drum-Taps*, without names and often without voices.<sup>37</sup> It is as if *Drum-Taps*’ “hideous hell of war” is less personal and thus even more haunting than Dante’s hell.

A good example of a poem that depicts one of Whitman’s “hell-scenes,” one that includes an anonymous soldier-narrator who sees a number of other nameless figures, is “A March in the Ranks Hard-pressed, and the Road Unknown.” This poem is also one of the chiasmic poems in *Drum-Taps*, ending where it begins. This poem originated from a story that a Maine soldier told Whitman in a hospital in 1863, which describes the Battle of White Oaks Church; Whitman recorded extensive notes on the battle in a notebook now called “scene in the woods on,”

which he used to compose the poem (*NUPM* 2:651-652). Whitman not only poetically dramatized the soldier's story, but he also fused it with an apt scene from *Inferno* 14, the circle of the Violent. "A March in the Ranks" begins with a soldier marching, his army retreating from battle, taking a "route through a heavy wood," an image that echoes both *Inferno* 1, in which Dante is lost in a dark forest, and *Inferno* 13, featuring the infamous Wood of the Suicides. The army comes to an "open space in the woods" that is illuminated by a "dim-lighted building." Here the soldier sees an old church-turned-hospital and describes the scene in macabre terms:

'Tis a large old church, at the crossing roads—'tis now an impromptu hospital;  
 —Entering but for a minute, I see a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever  
 made:  
 Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps,  
 And by one great pitchy torch, stationary, with wild red flame, and clouds of smoke;  
 By these, crowds, groups of forms, vaguely I see, on the floor, some in the pews laid  
 down;  
 At my feet more distinctly, a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death,  
 (he is shot in the abdomen;)  
 I staunch the blood temporarily, (the youngster's face is white as a lily;)  
 Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o'er the scene, fain to absorb it all;  
 Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity, some of them  
 dead;  
 Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood;  
 The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms of soldiers—the yard outside also  
 fill'd;  
 Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm  
 sweating. . . . (Miller, *Drum-Taps* 44-45)

The army's emergence from a wood onto an "open space," in which an indistinct crowd is illuminated by a "wild red flame" that emits clouds of smoke, strongly suggests Dante's emergence from the Wood of Suicides in *Inferno* 13 onto the "burning plain" of the Violent in canto 14. Significantly, the Violent are being punished with fiery rain repeatedly falling on them, an image resembling a Civil-War battlefield and a reminder of the ways that the bloody soldiers described in "A March in the Ranks" were wounded. In this circle of hell, Dante witnesses "many herds of naked souls," some "lying supine upon the ground; some sitting all crouched up; and others roaming incessantly" (Carlyle 159). The narrator's vision in "A March in the Ranks" is very similar to Dante's. He sees the "sight" of anonymous figures and bloody forms suffering inside and just outside the hospital, where soldiers' bodies sit or lie while suffering: "some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating." As well, the narrator

witnesses a soldier bleeding to death in the hospital. The dying soldier's abdomen emanates a steady flow of blood that the narrator cannot stop, a moment that Whitman added to the Maine soldier's original story, coloring it with a scene from the *Inferno*. This kind of eternal bloodflow caused by violence is what Dante witnesses in *Inferno* 14, in which a "little rivulet" of blood constantly runs from the Wood of the Suicides through the burning plain of the Violent (163).

The striking correspondences between *Inferno* 14 and "A March in the Ranks" are not limited to mere descriptions of death and suffering. *Inferno* 14 is also deeply concerned with the intersections between violence and the course of human history, which Whitman surely recognized, since he incorporated the same issues into his own poem. In this canto, Virgil tells Dante about the origin of the four rivers of hell, which all begin their flow at a statue in a mountain on the island of Crete. The description of this statue is of a "great Old Man" whose head is gold, breast silver, abdomen brass, legs iron, and feet clay. Each part of the statue, except the golden head, is "broken with a fissure that drops tears," which collect at the bottom of the statue and form the four rivers of hell (165-166). Allegorically, as mentioned previously, the statue describes the decay or decline of civilization.<sup>38</sup> Dante connects civilization's decline to violence; the description of the statue is an aesthetic representation of the reason why the violent sinners in *Inferno* 14 suffer as they do. Similarly, and as with other *Drum-Taps* poems, "A March in the Ranks" troubles the notion of historical progress by questioning whether the violence of war can ever be a means to such progress. The poem is a chiasm that suggests progress is being made—the army is marching, marching, ever marching—while formally denying that progress is at all possible. The opening and closing lines demonstrate this formal denial of progress:

A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown;  
 A route through a heavy wood, with muffled steps in the darkness;  
 [...]  
 Resuming, marching, as ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks,  
 The unknown road still marching. (Miller, *Drum-Taps* 44-45)

The first and last lines focus on the "march," while employing the mirror phrases "road unknown" and "unknown road." The second and penultimate lines qualify the marching as an advance into "darkness." The poem simply returns to the point at which it began, circling back upon itself, signaling the uncertainty of the end of marching. Do we march forwards, backwards, or in circles? Whichever the case, the march takes place "ever in darkness" on an "unknown road." The marching in the final line is characterized as "still." This is a loaded word here,



paradoxically indicating the eternal stasis or stillness of the moment, the perpetuity of marching forever (i.e., it is “still” happening for the speaker), and the textual summoning up of soldiers who are *always* (“still”) in that moment, as if the marching occurs anytime any reader scans the line. As a poem that heavily incorporates Dante’s vision, “A March in the Ranks” exemplifies Whitman’s mid-war uncertainty about the future of civilization. The poem describes the hellish “interior history” of the war, from a soldier’s perspective, while allying with the *Inferno*’s concern with the use of violence and war as a means to some kind of progress.

Perhaps the *Drum-Taps* poem that best represents Whitman’s use of the *Inferno* to describe the Civil War’s interior history is “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame,” one generally underrated by Whitman critics. The poem is similar to “A March in the Ranks” in that a wild or fitful “flame” illuminates the scene of the action and offers proper vision (poetic as well as visual) to the poem’s narrator:

By the bivouac’s fitful flame,  
 A procession winding around me, solemn and sweet and slow;—but first I note,  
 The tents of the sleeping army, the fields’ and woods’ dim outline,  
 The darkness, lit by spots of kindled fire, the silence,  
 Like a phantom far or near an occasional figure moving,  
 The shrubs and trees, (as I lift my eyes they seem to be stealthily watching me,)  
 While wind in procession thoughts, O tender and wondrous thoughts,  
 Of life and death, of home and the past and loved, and of those that are far away;  
 A solemn and slow procession there as I sit on the ground,  
 By the bivouac’s fitful flame. (Miller, *Drum-Taps* 16)

The structure, again, is chiasitic, suggesting the circularity and eternality of the experience. Except for end-punctuation, the first and final lines are identical. The “fitful flame” illuminates the whole world of the speaker, both internal and external, and allows him to witness the solemn and slow “procession,” which is named in the second and penultimate lines.

“By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame” began in the “1862” notebook, where Whitman only attempted to compose the framing line of the poem. “By the bivouac’s fitful fires <sup>light flame</sup>,” he wrote, trying to find the right final word for the opening and closing lines (LC 89). “Fires,” “light,” and “flame” are each left as possibilities, but Whitman ultimately chose “flame” for potent reasons. In the 1848 Webster’s Dictionary—Whitman’s preferred lexicon—the word “flame” is denotatively similar to “fire.” They both suggest the burning of objects, the “heat of passion,” and the “warmth of affection,” but “flame” has a linguistic advantage over “fire” in that it suggests “violence.” The example that

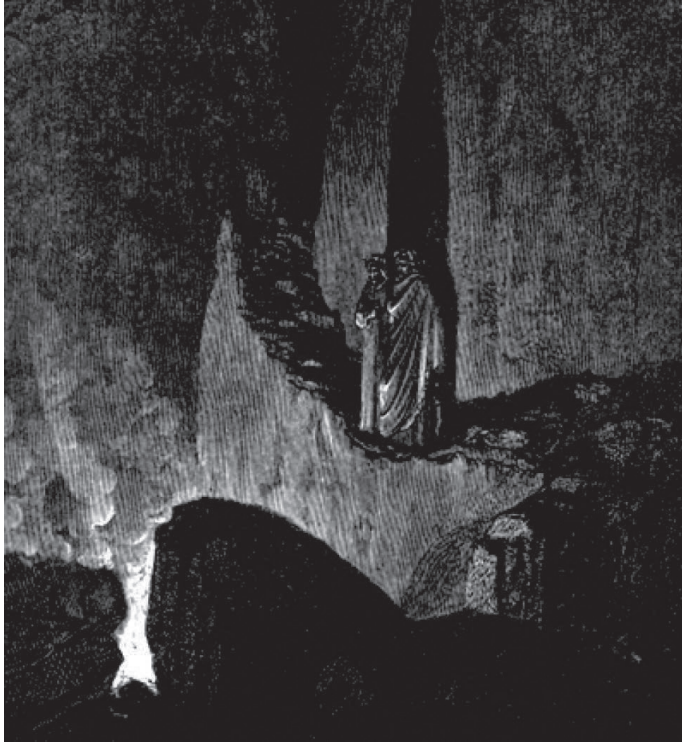


Figure 1. Gustave Doré's illustration of *Inferno* 26.

Webster's gives for this connotation is "the *flames* of war," and indeed "flame" is a favored word for wartime violence in Carlyle's translation of the *Inferno*. This particular choice of words also suggests that Whitman in his war poetry was not always making the literary turn from romance to realism and acting as "poet-historian," as several Whitman critics have argued.<sup>39</sup> Calling the campfire a "fitful flame" gives an emotional and spiritual charge to the poem, which romanticizes the scene and points to the narrator's own (subjective and inward-turned) vision of "thoughts."

Whitman also incorporated *Inferno* 26-27, cantos about flames, war, and deception, into "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame." What prompted him to do this was not only the text of these cantos, but an illustration of them. As I've mentioned, Whitman looked at a quarto volume of Gustave Doré's illustrations of the *Inferno* in September 1862 and admired it. One of the illustrations Whitman saw was Doré's depiction of *Inferno* 26 (fig. 1), which shows Dante and Virgil standing on a dark hill looking into a fire. Here the two poets listen to Ulysses, who

as an evil counselor bears the punishment of being all-consumed in a flame, which he shares with Diomedes. As the description of this canto in the Carlyle translation announces, demonstrating the psychological significance of the word “flame,” the punishment is that the spirits are “wrapt in the Flame of [their] own Consciousness” (Carlyle 307). In the beginning of the canto, Dante mocks Florence for being famous in hell as a city divided by civil strife. He then looks upon the entire bolge. The chasm he sees is aglow “with flames”—much like the speaker’s description in “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame” of “the darkness lit by spots of kindled fire.”

For Dante, it is impossible to see the punished sinners’ figures in the flames, which completely consume them (310–311). When Virgil points out the flame that contains Ulysses, Dante desires to talk to him. Ulysses is obviously a figure of war and duplicity in war, and the poem references his Trojan Horse deception, stating that for both Ulysses and Diomedes, “in their flame they groan for the ambush of the horse” (312–313). Dante’s description of Ulysses’s appearance is that of a “fitful flame”: as Ulysses attempts to talk to Dante, the “ancient flame began to shake itself, murmuring, just like a flame that struggles with the wind. Then carrying to and fro the top, as if it were the tongue that spake, threw forth a voice” (314–315).

This description is repeated in the following canto, *Inferno* 27, when Dante in the same valley of “Evil Counsellors” speaks to Guido de Montefeltro. Guido is a flame who, at first, is unable to speak clearly. A “confused sound” issues forth from him and he cannot articulate his “dismal words” in Dante’s language, until the flame vibrates long enough. As Guido speaks, his flame is actively fitful—Dante describes the “sharp point” of his fire as incessantly moving “to and fro.” Like Ulysses, Guido is associated with war. He was “a man of arms,” he says, until he became a monk, but he gave evil counsel to Pope Boniface VIII, who was “waging war” against his fellow Christians (325–327). Guido asks Dante whether war is raging in Romagna—wondering whether his own counsel has perpetuated civil war between Italian Christians—to which Dante replies that, while there is no war there currently, “[t]hy Romagna is not, and never was, without war in the hearts of her tyrants” (322). Thus *Inferno* 26 and 27 use “fitful flames” to associate deceptive and belligerent speech with war, and the flames are former soldiers punished eternally deep in hell, summoned up and able to speak only when Dante passes by them.

Whitman also drew upon other parts of the *Inferno* in “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame.” Doré’s illustration of *Inferno* 1 (fig. 2), in which Dante is lost in a “dark wood,” highlights the terror of the lone poet, who is surrounded by the foreboding forest. Both the tree root hover-



Figure 2. Gustave Doré's illustration of *Inferno* 1.

ing above the poet and the vines on the ground threaten to ensnare or grab Dante. The various shades of black suggest gothic terrors and perhaps unknown figures looming in the woods. Whitman's description of the external world in "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame" offers a similarly macabre view of nature as *Inferno* 1. The speaker's gaze at his surroundings moves from the army's tents, to the dim outline of the woods, to the darkness pocked by fire, to unknown, phantom-like figures, to the shrubs and trees. The vegetation, the speaker says, seems to be "stealthily watching." The poem romanticizes the real scenes of Civil War camps, like the kind that Whitman witnessed at Falmouth Camp. In the "1862" notebook, Whitman wrote that army tents are called "shebangs" and were made from the nearby plants and woods; the tents were "the little huts of green boughs, pine or what not, put up for the . . . impromptu shelters of soldiers" (LC 104). This means that in "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame," the "tents of the sleeping army" are actually made from the surrounding natural environment (according to Whitman's understanding of the term). At night, this

environment—tents and woods and all—blends together so that the entire scene combines and returns the speaker's gaze.

Because of the eerie world, the speaker turns to a "procession of thoughts," which the "fitful flame" also seems to illuminate. Like Ulysses in *Inferno* 26, the flame in "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame" offers the speaker a heightened vision of the *Inferno*-like landscape, including the "thoughts" not only of the speaker but of the soldiers surrounding him. Yet the flame, as in *Inferno* 26, is an image of deception. It offers "tender and wondrous thoughts . . . of home and the past"—a nostalgic glance backward—but keeps the speaker focused on memories and not on war itself and the threatening night-time environment. The word "procession" implies a kind of progress, but it is a progress that the circular structure of the poem denies. The moving procession of thoughts heightens our awareness of the speaker's eternal, stationary existence by the campfire.

This use of "procession" is unusual for Whitman, who ties the idea of "procession" throughout the rest of *Leaves of Grass* to jubilant diversity, historical progress, and even bacchanalian celebration. Whitman's seemingly never-ending, poetic catalogues—a sort of procession that the poet parades in front of his readers—is a key example of this kind of generative flow. Whitman also, elsewhere in *Leaves*, associates "procession" with the progress of natural and social history. In "I Sing the Body Electric" Whitman writes that "All is a procession / The universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion," which relates directly to the poem "Roaming in Thought [After Reading Hegel]" in which Whitman claims that the "Good" in the universe progresses toward eternity, while the "Evil" becomes "lost and dead."<sup>40</sup> The notebook that contains rough outlines for his historically progressive poem, "Passage to India," is titled "The Soul's Procession," where Whitman proposes to "[m]ake a succession of splendid gorgeous stately pageants or moving panoramas."<sup>41</sup> Yet the flame in "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame" offers a far different kind of procession, a "sweet" retreat into visions of the past that erase the present war. The poem suggests that romanticized memories, offered by the deceptive flame, result in eternal stagnation, the condition in which the speaker of the poem always remains (and one in which pitiable sinners in the *Inferno* remain—for instance, the doomed lovers Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno* 5).

As these *Drum-Taps* poems demonstrate, Whitman wanted the interior history of the war to be remembered as a modern-day *Inferno*, a re-envisioning of the Civil War as an eternal hell where even the dead still speak to the contemporary reader after the war, through the narratorial voices in Whitman's poetry. Whitman presented this intention clearly in the section of *Memoranda During the War* entitled



“A Glimpse of War’s Hell-Scenes,” a title that, via the words “glimpse” and “hell-scenes,” reminds us of the visionary aspect of his project. In this section, Whitman writes retrospectively of a Confederate ambush of a Union cavalry convoy that escorted “ambulances” of dozens of wounded soldiers and officers. Whitman claims that after the convoy surrendered, the Confederates began “robbing the train and murdering their prisoners, even the wounded” (*PP* 772). The Confederates were a “demoniac crowd,” repeatedly stabbing their victims. “The wounded had all been dragg’d (to give a better chance also for plunder,) out of their wagons,” Whitman writes; “some had been effectually dispatch’d, and their bodies were lying there lifeless and bloody. Others, not yet dead, but horribly mutilated, were moaning and groaning. Of our men who surrender’d, most had been thus maim’d or slaughter’d.” But the Confederates were overtaken by more Union cavalry, which captured, tried, and shot them in a town square the following day. This “hell-scene,” Whitman says, was typical of the war:

Multiply the [scene] by scores, ay hundreds—verify it in all the forms that different circumstances, individuals, places, could afford—light it with every lurid passion, the wolf’s, the lion’s lapping thirst for blood—the passionate, boiling volcanoes of human revenge for comrades, brothers slain—with the light of burning farms, and heaps of smutting, smouldering black embers—and in the human heart everywhere black, worse embers—and you have an inkling of this war. (*PP* 773)

This passage is as dark and despairing of the average “human heart” as the usually optimistic Whitman ever gets. Tellingly, he directly references *Inferno* 1. The figures of the wolf and the lion, which have a “lapping thirst for blood,” are two of the three animals that block Dante’s journey before he meets Virgil and descends into hell. The Wolf, according to a footnote in the Carlyle translation, is the figure of avarice. The Lion is the figure of murderous “Ambition or Pride,” a political reference to a tyrant, the “King of France, who shewed these qualities most, maintaining tyranny, bloodshed, and discord all over Italy” (Carlyle 5). Whitman’s description of these beasts, as symbolizing “lurid passion” and a “lapping thirst for blood,” describes the same concern that Virgil has in *Inferno* 1 about the Wolf’s endless desire for killing. As he says, the Wolf “lets not men pass her way, but so entangles that she slays them; and has a nature so perverse and vicious, that she never satiates her craving appetite” (9). Both the wolf and the lion, as violent figures of slaughter, are appropriate figures for Whitman’s story of Civil War robbery and murder.

Significantly, in this passage Whitman invites his reader to “multiply” the scene and “light” it with “lurid passions.” This notion of “lighting” has a double meaning. For Whitman, as we have seen, various



“flames” illuminate the scenes surrounding the speakers of many of his *Drum-Taps* poems, so that they can see and interpret their scenes. While the flames provide light, they tend to illumine that which is ghastly—disturbing scenes of the war—and create eerie shadows or “phantoms.” But “lighting” also signifies inspiration. The scenes of the Civil War, such as the Confederate robbery, need to be tinted and framed, presented with some kind of moral charge. For inspiration, Whitman turned to the *Inferno* to help color his poetic presentation of the war. The *Inferno* provided Whitman with a medieval example of a theological-poetic vision of horror and civil-war violence: it offered strategies to represent the war as “hell” and to complicate the relationships of civil war to historical memory (both social and psychological). Whitman’s soldier poems in *Drum-Taps* appropriated and revised Dante’s theologically-charged poetic vision of eternal suffering. They offer dark, spiritualized visions of modern battle and military life for mid-nineteenth century America, the bleak interior history of which Whitman associated mid-war with his tentative idea that American civilization and world history would regress if the Union lost the war—precisely the kind of massive political and historical problem that Whitman found so eloquently depicted in scenes throughout the *Inferno*. As Whitman knew, thanks in part to his reading of Dante, the Civil War was hell.

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## NOTES

1 Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 6 vols., ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 5:1861. Hereafter *NUPM*.

2 Harold Aspiz, for example, states that the “poet’s life changed dramatically” after his visit to Falmouth Camp. See Aspiz, *So Long! Walt Whitman’s Poetry of Death* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 167. Hereafter *SL*.

3 See Peter Van Egmond, “Bryn Mawr College Library Holdings of Whitman Books,” *Walt Whitman Review* 20:2 (1974), 41-42. Whitman’s copy of Carlyle’s translation was donated to Bryn Mawr College by Herbert G. Harned, the son of Whitman disciple Thomas Harned. For Carlyle’s translation itself, see Dante Alighieri, *Dante’s Divine Comedy: The Inferno*, trans. John A. Carlyle (London: Chapman and Hall, 1849).

Because Whitman owned and read this translation before and during the war, I use and quote this translation throughout the essay. It is unknown if Whitman read the 1849 London edition or the 1849 New York edition. I have used the London edition for the practical reason that it can be found more easily online. Except for different paginations, the London and New York editions are identical in text and layout.

Whitman did read other translations of the *Comedy* after the war and throughout his life. According to Richard Maurice Bucke in 1883, Whitman kept Carlyle’s translation of the *Inferno* “by him for many years,” read in it “often,” and “learned much from it.” Horace Traubel recorded that Whitman constantly kept near him Longfellow’s translation of the *Divine Comedy* (first published in 1867), one of the few books that he

“still reads lingeringly and never tires of.” See Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Volume 8, ed. Jeanne Chapman and Robert MacIsaac (Oregon House, California: W.L. Bentley, 1996), 376. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([whitmanarchive.org](http://whitmanarchive.org)). Traubel also records a lengthy conversation between Whitman, Traubel, and Tom Davidson in which, as they all discuss the place of Dante in world literature, Whitman boasts of his thorough knowledge of English translations of Dante:

[Traubel] [r]eferred to Tom Davidson’s seeming belief that Dante was “the greatest poet that ever lived.” W. considered: “I know that is sometimes believed, sometimes said, but to me the statement is not conclusive.” And reinforcing himself with Carlyle, Davidson said again that Dante’s was “the serenest”—“the most earnest” book ever written. W. again: “This I do not believe at all.” Then [Whitman] acknowledged Dante’s high place. “The translations have been many, and, curiously, all good ones—remarkably good ones, too. I know them all—Longfellow’s well. But it seems to me that greatest among them—indisputably so—is John Carlyle’s, Thomas Carlyle’s Doctor brother’s.”

See Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Volume 5, ed. Gertrude Traubel (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 74.

4 Throughout this article, I refer to Whitman’s notebook as the “1862” notebook, which is readily available on the Internet at the Library of Congress’ website at [memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/whitman/index.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/whitman/index.html). The notebook is so named because of the cover, which reads simply “Walt Whitman, 1862.” When referring to the notebook, I cite page images from the Library of Congress’ website, using the notation “LC image #.” For example, the notebook page on which Whitman recorded his notes on the *Inferno* is “LC 187.” The “1862” notebook is also available in print, titled “Return My Book,” in *NUPM* 2:478-524. However, Edward F. Grier’s editing procedures end up presenting the notebook’s pages out of order, so it is not as precise or as useful to my arguments as the Library of Congress’ more revealing online scan.

5 Given Whitman’s references to and writings on Dante in his poetry and notebooks, this question could be applied not just to *Drum-Taps*, but to *Leaves of Grass* and Whitman’s conception of his own poetic project, especially from the publication of *Drum-Taps* through the deathbed edition of *Leaves*. Nevertheless, for many critics, Whitman and Dante seem too dissimilar, or the question of Whitman’s use of Dante has seemed irrelevant. Glauco Cambon exemplifies this view by arguing that Whitman’s politics and aesthetics are radically different from Dante’s:

“[. . .] the fact remains that the two major American poets of the [nineteenth] century, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, were unaffected in their creative practice by whatever knowledge of Dante they had. It is surprising to learn that Whitman admired Dante’s sparseness (along with his directness), for nothing in Whitman’s verse could be called Dantean, and of course his avowed intent was to get away from the strict formal traditions of European literature (which he identified with the class-bound heritage of feudal dogmatism), the better to sing the regenerating all-inclusiveness of fledgling democracy in a very un-Dantesquely effusive chant.

See Cambon, “Dante’s Presence in American Literature,” *Dante Studies* 118 (2000), 217-218.

In agreement with Cambon’s assessment, Edward F. Grier believed that Whitman’s interest in Dante was “moderate at best,” even though Grier edited thirteen different Whitman notebooks that either mention Dante or discuss him at length. Corresponding with this point is the testimony of *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*. Even though this work has hundreds of entries, including those on Homer and Lucretius, and though it

mentions Dante ten times, it has no entry on Dante in Whitman. See *NUPM* 5:1861; and *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).

J. Chelsey Mathews has offered the only substantial criticism of Dante's influence on Whitman. See Mathews, "Walt Whitman's Reading of Dante," *Studies in English* 19 (1939), 178; hereafter, WWRD. In this essay, Mathews characterizes Whitman as something of an admirer of Dante, but also as a befuddled reader of the *Divine Comedy*, partly ignorant and partly blind to the complexities of medieval poetry. Whitman, for example, overlooked Dante's "wonderful sense of justice and a heart full of tenderness" (Mathews 178-179). Still, Mathews does not analyze how Whitman's poetry uses Dante, and so Cambon's comment (quoted above in this endnote) that Whitman was "unaffected in [his] creative practice by whatever knowledge of Dante [he] had" has stood as our de facto understanding of Whitman's relationship to Dante.

Also, a number of critics have noted in passing that Whitman read and carried with him a copy of Dante while he was visiting Falmouth Camp and various hospitals during the war, but the comparisons between the two poets have never been given a thorough treatment. See, for example, Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989,) 212, hereafter WPP; and George B. Hutchinson, *The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism & the Crisis of Union* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), 138, 145.

6 Ted Genoways, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War: America's Poet During the Lost Years of 1860-1862* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 162-169.

7 For an analysis of the *Divine Comedy* interpretations in the United States, especially during the Civil War, see my essay "The *Divine Comedy* as a Civil War Epic," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1 (September 2013): 315-338. As well, K.P. Van Anglen has shown how and why New England literati read Dante in the generation before Longfellow, while Kathleen Verduin, in an essay focused on the materiality of texts, argues that northern Calvinists ignored Dante's Catholicism while embracing his defense of doctrines with which they agreed. See Van Anglen, "Before Longfellow: Dante and the Polarization of New England," *Dante Studies* 119 (2001), 155-186; and Verduin, "Dante in America: The First Hundred Years," *Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America*, ed. Michele Moylan and Lanes Stiles (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

Two older studies, by Theodore Koch and Angelina La Piana, still have value for their historical documentation of individual author interest in Dante. See Koch, *Dante in America: A Historical and Bibliographical Study* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1896); and La Piana, *Dante's American Pilgrimage: A Historical Survey of Dante Studies in the United States, 1800-1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948).

8 The English and Italian nexus of Dante criticism, and its intense interest in revolutionary nationalist politics, as spearheaded by Giuseppe Mazzini in the 1840s, is well-documented. Early nineteenth-century Americans themselves were highly aware of this criticism and participated in it. See for example Alison Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998); Michael Caesar, "Introduction," *Dante: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Michael Caesar (London: Routledge Press), 1-88; Werner P. Friedrich, *Dante's Fame Abroad: 1350-1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950); and Edoardo Crisafulli, *The Vision of Dante: Cary's Translation of the Divine Comedy* (Market Harborough, England: Troubadour Press, 2003). Crisafulli's book in particular shows how nineteenth-century translations politicized the *Comedy*, especially Henry Cary's dominant translation, which contained an influential biographical essay titled "Life of Dante."

9 See *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, vols. 1-3, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867). The terms “Emperor” and “captain,” as descriptions for God, can be found in vol. 3, pp. 76, 164, and 166. Longfellow also translated *Paradiso* 23-25 for the January 1864 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, a section in which both terms appear. See “Three Cantos of Dante’s ‘Paradiso,’” *Atlantic Monthly* 13 (January 1864), 47-55.

10 A sampling of book titles from the last fifty years of Dante criticism indicates the persistence of this idea of “vision”: *The Ladder of Vision: A Study of Dante’s Comedy*; *Dante’s Vision and the Artist: Four Modern Illustrators of the Commedia*; *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante*; *The Circle of Our Vision: Dante’s Presence in English Romantic Poetry*. I’d especially like to mention two books of criticism that are especially relevant to the argument of my essay. Both of them discuss the confluence of aesthetics, history, and politics in the *Comedy*, and discuss at length Dante’s poetic characterization of war and civil war. These are Joan M. Ferrante, *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); and Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante’s Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

11 Cary’s was the dominant English-language translation of the *Comedy*, from 1819 until the Longfellow translation was published in 1867. Cary produced three editions of his translation, but there were multiple versions of each edition issued by different publishers. The Americans who read Dante via the Cary translation included Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Emily Dickinson. Melville read this edition of Cary: *The Vision, or Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Henry Francis Cary (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1847). It’s unknown why Whitman read or trusted John Carlyle’s translation—perhaps he preferred Carlyle’s prose to Cary’s Miltonic blank-verse, as Ralph Waldo Emerson did—but he was probably aware of the Cary translation when he bought Carlyle’s.

12 Whitman revised “a battle” for the 1865 *Drum-Taps*, retitling it “The Artilleryman’s Vision.” He deleted the melodramatic lines about the “hell of war” and left in the sights that the artilleryman experiences in memory:

And ever the hastening of infantry shifting positions — batteries, cavalry,  
moving hither and thither;  
(The falling, dying, I heed not — the wounded, dripping and red, I heed not  
—some to the rear are hobbling;)  
Grime, heat, rush — aid-de-camps galloping by, or on a full run;  
With the patter of small arms, the warning *s-s-t* of the rifles [. . .]  
And bombs bursting in air, and at night the vari-color’d rockets.

See Walt Whitman, *Drum-Taps and Sequel to Drum-Taps*, ed. F. DeWolfe Miller (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1959), 56. Hereafter, Miller *Drum-Taps* or Miller *Sequel*.

13 Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996), 802-803. Hereafter *PP*.

14 To offer just two examples, Jerome Loving says that “the poignant *Drum-Taps* poems were born at Fredericksburg [in December 1862], where [Whitman] first saw ‘war-life, the real article.’ The scenes along the Rappahannock and subsequently in military hospitals . . . opened up new horizons for him” (Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 19). Interestingly, Loving quotes from a letter in which Whitman compares Civil War hospitals to Dante’s *Inferno*. Also, M. Wynn Thomas argues that “it was at least partly through

George [Washington Whitman] that Whitman was led to an intimate understanding of the real, hidden nature of the war,” and that George’s experiences in the Union Army influenced Whitman’s war poetry (“Fratricide and Brotherly Love: Whitman and the Civil War,” *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Ezra Greenspan [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 27).

15 I say that Whitman read the *Inferno* “multiple times” for a couple of reasons. He clearly read it in 1859, as his notes indicate—see Grier, *NUPM* 2:1861. He also bought a copy that he almost certainly read in or around July 1862. We also know that he carried a copy with him to Falmouth—see endnote 5 above. Given these facts and Whitman’s testimony, recorded by Traubel, that he was very familiar with all Dante translations and yet preferred John Carlyle’s, it seems reasonable to assume that he read at least parts of the *Inferno* several times between 1859 and 1863.

16 These notes on Dante offer the kind of rich, extensive commentary that Whitman gave few authors. They are, as far as we know, his first comments on Dante, though he might have read the *Inferno* earlier than 1859. While Whitman discredits Dante’s theology, he expresses great admiration for his poetry: “Mark, the simplicity of Dante—like the Bible’s—different from the tangled and florid Shakespeare. — Some of his idioms must be charming in Italian cut like a knife.— He narrates like some short-worded superb illiterate, an old farmer, or some New England blue-light minister, or common person interested in telling his or her story yet is not garrulous—makes the impression of believing bona-fide in all that he says, as if it were certainly so.— I do not wonder that the middle ages thought he indeed had really descended into Hell and seen what he described.— (How much is Milton indebted to Dante? How much is Swedenborg indebted?) Mark, I say, his economy of words—perhaps no other writer ever equal to him.— One simple trail of idea, epical, makes the poem—all else resolutely ignored. It is beautiful. This alone shows the master. In this respect is the most perfect in all literature. A great study for diffuse moderns.—” (*NUPM* 5:1862).

Of special interest for this essay is Whitman’s characterization of Dante as a “New England blue-light minister.” This term was applied to pastors and other people who publically opposed the War of 1812, specifically because of their federalist politics. Thus Whitman hints here—amidst his comments on Dante’s linguistic efficiency—at Dante as a political poet.

17 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn, New York: 1855), v. Hereafter *LG* 1855. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([whitmanarchive.org](http://whitmanarchive.org)).

18 In the 1855 *Leaves*, Whitman derides social injustices as hellish, as in the depiction of the “hounded slave,” who, as he is being whipped, cries “hell and despair are upon me” (39). This is one of the only moments in his antebellum works when Whitman aligns “hell” with some kind of punishment or agony, and in this case he used it to further the social cause of abolitionism. Hell is never outside the natural realm in his antebellum poems, then, but rather is only a suggestive word for the torments of corporeal life, not the torments of an afterlife or a spiritual realm.

19 Quoted in Steven E. Woodworth, *Where God is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001), 47. Woodworth finds that such talk of hell by Civil War soldiers was relatively rare, meaning that “most Civil War soldiers thought of hell as something that, if mentioned at all, was no joking matter.”

20 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1940), 3:875. Hodge’s work was originally published in 1872.

21 Henry Ward Beecher, *Life Thoughts, Gathered from the Extemporaneous Discourse of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1860), 196.

22 See LC 122. I have edited the passage for readability. The original has a number of deletions.

23 Whitman was at Falmouth Camp from December 19, 1862, to January 2, 1863, from there traveling to Washington, D.C. See LC 182.

24 Whitman wrote this in a letter to his brother, Thomas Jefferson Whitman, on January 16, 1863. See Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Volume 1: 1842-1867, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 68. Hereafter *Correspondence*.

25 Quoted in Roy Morris, *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 57.

26 David Kaser, *Books and Libraries in Camp and Battle: The Civil War Experience* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 34. Also, the Hallam quotation appears in the midst of all of Whitman's observations at the camp, making it unlikely that he recorded the quote at any point in his life other than during his Falmouth trip.

27 "A Season of Unreason," *Once a Week* (November 1, 1862), 508.

28 I label this philosophy "cyclical" because this seems to closely approximate the *Once a Week* writer's description of Henry Hallam's view, which states that as time passes, progress is made every "now and then" but that "affairs recurred to their old position" eventually. Of course, the cyclical theory that Hallam espouses resembles numerous similar views of history expressed worldwide, past and present. Because time moves only in a forward direction for us, the actual shape of this theory is better described (if we are going to use mathematical terms) as a sine wave in two dimensions, or a spiral in three dimensions. However, throughout the essay, I stick to "circle" and "cycle" to describe Whitman's poetic imagery and structures that implicitly speak to the question of historical progress from 1862-1865. These are the terms that the Carlyle translation and the article on Hallam use, and of course Dante's hell is well known for its "circles" of hell, even though it is not a two-dimensional space.

29 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860-1861), 10. Hereafter *LG 1860*. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([whitmanarchive.org](http://whitmanarchive.org)).

30 This passage was reworked into the *Drum-Taps* poem "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice."

31 William Scheick, for example, argues that the poem "embraces death" by "defin[ing] death in terms of an underlying unitary life-force that integrates all perceived opposites." See Scheick, "Death and the Afterlife," *A Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Donald D. Kummings (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 334. He also makes the observation that the "quick" in quicksand implies both death and life, an ambivalence that corresponds with the uncertain historical stance of the poem, as discussed below.

32 Another *Drum-Taps* poem that questions the possibility of historical change, less ambiguously than "Quicksand Years," is "Year that Trembled and Reel'd Beneath Me." The poem ends with the poet asking, "Must I indeed learn to chant the cold dirges of the baffled? / And sullen hymns of defeat?" See Miller, *Drum-Taps*, 54.



33 Whitman, *Correspondence*, 80-82. Whitman actually drafted this passage in a notebook entry titled "These Hospitals," with no apparent audience in mind, earlier in 1863. See *NUPM* 2: 594.

34 See Ed Folsom, "Walt Whitman and the Civil War: Making Poetry Out of Pain, Grief, and Mass Death," *Abaton* 2 (Fall 2008), 12-26.

35 Tangential to this point is Maire Mullins' observation that *Drum-Taps* features many moments of "stopped and frozen" time. For Mullins, these moments of frozen time display Whitman's stories of "comradeship and homoerotic desire." See Mullins, "Stopping History in Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 17 (Summer 1999), 4.

36 M. Wynn Thomas, *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 217. Whitman's summoning of the dead is part of what Thomas calls the "ritualistic and liturgical character" of *Drum-Taps* (Thomas, *Fratricide* 36). In that sense *Drum-Taps* has a certain sense of religiosity to it. Michael Warner has called Whitman's posture in *Drum-Taps* one of "devotional observation." While Whitman "reject[ed] the theodicy of Christianity," he "shows a delicate instinct for negotiating the dialectical distortions of religion and secularism in late Christian culture" (90). See Warner, "Civil War Religion and Whitman's *Drum-Taps*," *Walt Whitman, Where the Future Becomes Present*, ed. David Haven Blake and Michael Robertson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 81-90.

37 For Bradford, Whitman's reason for keeping his fictional soldiers anonymous was so that a reading public could imagine their friends or relatives, or anyone else, as the soldier-figures described in the poems. See Bradford, "Re-collecting Soldiers: Walt Whitman and the Appreciation of Human Value," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 27 (Winter 2010), 127-152.

38 As many commentators for centuries have noted, the statue's head represents the mythical "Golden Age," or the first age of human history, and the statue's body represents the successive eras of history that, as represented by lesser material goods (silver, brass, clay), depict the moral degeneracy of civilization. Dante was familiar with the myth of the decline of civilization from an ancient "Golden Age" through classical Greek and Roman literature—it is used to great effect in Hesiod and Ovid. But the myth is embedded in a prophecy from the Book of Daniel as well.

39 For a fuller explanation of the argument for Whitman as a realist "poet-historian," see Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet*, 205. Certainly, there is much truth to this critical view, but there is also much romantically charged language in *Drum-Taps*. Another example of such charged language would be "Bivouac on a Mountain Side," in which the speaker ends by looking at the sky "studded with the eternal stars" (Miller, *Drum-Taps*, 70). This poem and "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" both conclude with the same visionary experience as Dante has at the end of the *Inferno*, with the poet looking up to see the stars.

40 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891-1892), 85, 216. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([whitmanarchive.org](http://whitmanarchive.org)).

41 *NUPM*, 4:1392.