Drum Taps

By

Walt Whitman

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INTRODUCTION

When the first days of August loured over the world, time seemed to stand still. A universal astonishment and confusion fell, as upon a flock of sheep perplexed by strange dogs. But now, though never before was a St. Lucy's Day so black with "absence, darkness, death," Christmas is gone. Spring comes swiftly, the almond trees flourish. Easter will soon be here. Life breaks into beauty again and we realize that man may bring hell itself into the world, but that Nature ever patiently waits to be his natural paradise. Yet still a kind of instinctive blindness blots out the prospect of the future. Until the long horror of the war is gone from our minds, we shall be able to think of nothing that has not for its background a chaotic darkness. Like every obsession, it gnaws at thought, follows us into our dreams and returns with the morning. But there have been other wars. And humanity, after learning as best it may their brutal lesson, has survived them. Just as the young soldier leaves home behind him and accepts hardship and danger as to the manner born, so, when he returns again, life will resume its old quiet wont. Nature is not idle even in the imagination. It is man's salvation to forget no less than it is his salvation to remember. And it is wise even in the midst of the conflict to look back on those that are past and to prepare for the returning problems of the future.

When Whitman wrote his "Democratic Vistas," the long embittered war between the Northern and Southern States of America was a thing only of

yesterday. It is a headlong amorphous production--a tangled meadow of "leaves of grass" in prose. But it is as cogent to-day as it was when it was written:

> To the ostent of the senses and eyes [he writes], the influences which stamp the world's history are wars, uprisings, or downfalls of dynasties.... These, of course, play their part; yet, it may be, a single new thought, imagination, abstract principle ... put in shape by some great literatus, and projected among mankind, may duly cause changes, growths, removals, greater than the longest and bloodiest war, or the most stupendous merely political, dynastic, or commercial overturn.

The literatus who realized this had his own message in mind. And yet, justly. For those who might point to the worldly prosperity and material comforts of his country, and ask, Are not these better indeed than any utterances even of greatest rhapsodic, artist, or literatus? he has his irrefutable answer. He surveys the New York of 1870, "its façades of marble and iron, of original grandeur and elegance of design," etc., in his familiar catalogical jargon, and shutting his eyes to its glow and grandeur, inquires in return, Are there indeed men here worthy the name? Are there perfect women? Is there a pervading atmosphere of beautiful manners? Are there arts worthy freedom and a rich people? Is there a great moral and religious civilization--the only justification of a great material one? We ourselves in good time shall have to face and to answer these questions. They search our keenest hopes of the peace that

is coming. And we may be fortified perhaps by the following queer proof of history repeating itself:

> Never, in the Old World, was thoroughly upholster'd exterior appearance and show, mental and other, built entirely on the idea of caste, and on the sufficiency of mere outside acquisition--never were glibness, verbal intellect, more the test, the emulation--more loftily elevated as head and sample--than they are on the surface of our Republican States this day. The writers of a time hint the mottoes of its gods. The word of the modern, say these voices, is the word Culture.

Whitman had no very tender regard for the Germany of his time. He fancied that the Germans were like the Chinese, only less graceful and refined and more brutish. But neither had he any particular affection for any relic of Europe. "Never again will we trust the moral sense or abstract friendliness of a single Government of the Old World." He accepted selections from its literature for the new American Adam. But even its greatest poets were not America's, and though he might welcome even Juvenal, it was for use and not for worship. We have to learn, he insists, that the best culture will always be that of the manly and courageous instincts and loving perceptions, and of self-respect. In our children rests every hope and promise, and therefore in their mothers. "Disengage yourselves from parties.... These savage and wolfish parties alarm me.... Hold yourself judge and master over all of them." Only faith can save us, the faith in ourselves and in our fellow-men which is of the

true faith in goodness and in God. The idea of the mass of men, so fresh and free, so loving and so proud, filled this poet with a singular awe. Passionately he pleads for the dignity of the common people. It is the average man of a land that is important. To win the people back to a proud belief and confidence in life, to rapture in this wonderful world, to love and admiration--this was his burning desire. I demand races of orbic bards, he rhapsodizes, sweet democratic despots, to dominate and even destroy. The Future! Vistas! The throes of birth are upon us. Allons, camarado!

He could not despair. "Must I indeed learn to chant the cold dirges of the baffled?" he asks himself in "Drum-Taps." But wildest shuttlecock of criticism though he is, he has never yet been charged with looking only on the dark side of things. Once, he says, "Once, before the war (alas! I dare not say how many times the mood has come!), I too, was fill'd with doubt and gloom." His part in it soothed, mellowed, deepened his great nature. He had himself witnessed such misery, cruelty, and abomination as it is best just now, perhaps, not to read about. One fact alone is enough; that over fifty thousand Federal soldiers perished of starvation in Southern prisons. Malarial fever contracted in camps and hospitals had wrecked his health. During 1862-65 he visited, he says, eighty to a hundred thousand sick and wounded soldiers, comprehending all, slighting none. Rebel or compatriot, it made no difference. "I loved the young man," he cries again and again. Pity and fatherliness were in his face, for his heart was full of them. Mr. Gosse has described "the old Gray" as he saw him in 1884, in his bare, littered sun-drenched room in Camden,

shared by kitten and canary:

> He sat with a very curious pose of the head thrown backward, as if resting it one vertebra lower down the spinal column than other people do, and thus tilting his face a little upwards. With his head so poised and the whole man fixed in contemplation of the interlocutor he seemed to pass into a state of absolute passivity ... the glassy eyes half closed, the large knotted hands spread out before him. He resembled, in fact, nothing so much as "a great old grey Angora Tom," alert in repose, serenely blinking under his combed waves of hair, with eyes inscrutably dreaming.... As I stood in dull, deserted Mickle Street once more, my heart was full of affection for this beautiful old man ... this old rhapsodist in his empty room, glorified by patience and philosophy.

Whitman was then sixty-five. In a portrait of thirty years before there is just a wraith of that feline dream, perhaps, but it is a face of a rare grace and beauty that looks out at us, of a profound kindness and compassion. And, in the eyes, not so much penetration as visionary absorption. Such was the man to whom nothing was unclean, nothing too trivial (except "pale poetlings lisping cadenzas piano," who then apparently thronged New York) to take to himself. Intensest, indomitablest of individualists, he exulted in all that appertains to that forked radish, Man. This contentious soul of mine, he exclaims ecstatically; Viva: the attack! I have been born the same as the war was

born; I lull nobody, and you will never understand me: maybe I am non-literary and un-decorous.... I have written impromptu, and shall let it all go at that. Let me at least be human! Human, indeed, he was, a tender, all-welcoming host of Everyman, of his idolized (if somewhat overpowering) American democracy. Man in the street, in his swarms, poor crazed faces in the State asylum, prisoners in Sing Sing, prostitute, whose dead body reminded him not of a lost soul, but only of a sad, forlorn, and empty house--it mattered not; he opened his heart to them, one and all. "I see beyond each mark that wonder, a kindred soul. O the bullet could never kill what you really are, dear friend."

The moon gives you light,
And the bugles and drums give you music,
And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans,
My heart gives you love.

"Yours for you," he exclaims, welding in a phrase his unparalleled egotism, his beautiful charity, "yours for you, who ever you are, as mine for me." It is the essence of philosophy and of religion, for all the wonders of heaven and earth are significant "only because of the Me in the centre."

This was the secret of his tender, unassuming ministrations. He had none of that shrinking timidity, that fear of intrusion, that uneasiness in the presence of the tragic and the pitiful, which so often numb and oppress those who would willingly give themselves and their best to the

needy and suffering, but whose intellect misgives them. He was that formidable phenomenon, a dreamer of action. But he possessed a sovran good sense. Food and rest and clean clothes were his scrupulous preparation for his visits. He always assumed as cheerful an appearance as possible. Armed with bright new five-cent and ten-cent bills (the wounded, he found, were often "broke," and the sight of a little money "helped their spirits"), with books and stationery and tobacco, for one a twist of good strong green tea, for another a good home-made rice-pudding, or a jar of sparkling but innocent blackberry and cherry syrup, a small bottle of horse-radish pickle, or a large handsome apple, he would "make friends." "What I have I also give you," he cried from the bottom of his grieved, tempestuous heart. He would talk, or write letters--passionate love-letters, too--or sit silent, in mute and tender kindness. "Long, long, I gazed ... leaning my chin in my hands, passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours, with you, dearest comrade--not a tear, not a word, Vigil of silence, love and death, vigil for you my son and my soldier." And how many a mother must have blessed the stranger who could bring such last news of a son as this: "And now like many other noble and good men, after serving his country as a soldier, he has yielded up his young life at the very outset in her service. Such things are gloomy--yet there is a text, 'God doeth all things well'--the meaning of which, after due time, appears to the soul." It is only love that can comfort the loving.

He forced nothing on these friends of a day, so many of them near their last farewell. A poor wasted young man asks him to read a chapter in the

New Testament, and Whitman chooses that which describes Christ's Crucifixion. He "ask'd me to read the following chapter also, how Christ rose again. I read very slowly, for he was feeble. It pleased him very much, yet the tears were in his eyes. He ask'd me if I enjoy'd religion. I said 'Perhaps not, my dear, in the way you mean, yet maybe, it is the same thing.'" This is only one of many such serene intimacies in Whitman's experiences of the war. Through them we reach to an understanding of a poet who chose not signal and beautiful episodes out of the past, nor the rare moments of existence, for theme, but took all life, within and around him in vast bustling America, for his poetic province. Like a benign barbaric sun he surveys the world, ever at noon. I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there, he cries in the "Song of Myself." I do not despise you priests, all times, the world over.... He could not despise anything, not even his fellow-poets, because he himself was everything. His verse sometimes seems mere verbiage, but it is always a higgledy-piggledy, Santa Claus bagful of things. And he could penetrate to the essential reality. He tells in his "Drum-Taps" how one daybreak he arose in camp, and saw three still forms stretched out in the eastern radiance, how with light fingers he just lifted the blanket from each cold face in turn: the first elderly, gaunt, and grim--Who are you, my dear comrade? The next with cheeks yet blooming--Who are you, sweet boy? The third--Young man, I think I know you. I think this face is the face of the Christ Himself, Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.

True poetry focuses experience, not merely transmits it. It must redeem

it for ever from transitoriness and evanescence. Whitman incontinently pours experience out in a Niagara-like cataract. But in spite of his habitual publicity he was at heart of a "shy, brooding, impassioned devotional type"; in spite of his self-conscious, arrogant virility, he was to the end of his life an entranced child. He came into the world, saw and babbled. His deliberate method of writing could have had no other issue. A subject would occur to him, a kind of tag. He would scribble it down on a scrap of paper and drop it into a drawer. Day by day this first impulse would evoke fresh "poemets," until at length the accumulation was exhaustive. Then he merely gutted his treasury and the ode was complete. It was only when sense and feeling attained a sort of ecstasy that he succeeded in distilling the true essence that is poetry and in enstopping it in a crystal phial of form.

The prose of his "Specimen Days," indeed, is often nearer to poetry than his verse:

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

heart of the stranger that hover'd near.

The western star, Venus, in the earlier hours of evening has never been so large, so clear; it seems as if it told something, as if it held rapport indulgent with humanity, with us Americans. The sky dark blue, the transparent night, the planets, the moderate west wind, the elastic temperature, the miracle of that great star, and the young and swelling moon swimming in the west, suffused the soul. Then I heard slow and clear the deliberate notes of a bugle come up out of the silence ... firm and faithful, floating along, rising, falling leisurely, with here and there a long-drawn note.... sounding tattoo.

"A steady rain, dark and thick and warm," he writes again, two days after Gettysburg. "The cavalry camp is a ceaseless field of observation to me. This forenoon there stood the horses, tether'd together, dripping, steaming, chewing their hay. The men emerge from their tents, dripping also. The fires are half-quench'd." There is a poetic poise in this brief, vivid statement, apart from its bare economy of means. It is the lump awaiting the leaven no less than is "Cavalry Crossing a Ford." To this supreme spectator an apple orchard in May, even the White House in moonlight, no more and no less than these battle-scenes, rendered up their dignity, life, and beauty, their true human significance. But in "Drum-Taps" the witness is not always so satisfactory. The secret has evaporated in the effort to make poetry, or half-consciously to inject a moral, to play the Universal Bard. There creeps into the words a tinge

of the raw and the grotesque. The poet has the look of a cowboy off the stage, tanned with grease-paint. But again and again the secret creeps back and some lovely emanation of poetry is added to it:

Look down fair moon and bathe this scene,
Pour softly down night's nimbus floods on faces ghastly, swollen,
purple,
On the dead on their backs with arms toss'd wide,
Pour down your unstinted nimbus sacred moon.

Or this, called "Reconciliation":

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,
Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be
utterly lost,
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash
again, and ever again, this soil'd world;
For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,
I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin--I draw
near,
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the
coffin.

The bonds of rhyme shackled him, deprived him of more than freedom. He is like a wild bird that suddenly perceives the bars of its small cage across the blue of the sky. And yet the finer his poems are, the nearer

they approach to definite rhythmical design. One has only to compare "O Captain! my Captain!" with "Hushed be the Camps To-day" to perceive this curious paradox. They are both of them memories of his beloved Lincoln, whom he had many times seen, with that peculiarly close and transatlantic curiosity of his, riding at a jog-trot, on a good-sized, easy-going grey horse, with his escort of yellow-striped cavalry behind him, through the streets of Washington--dressed in black, somewhat rusty and dusty, with a black, stiff hat, almost as ordinary in attire as the commonest man. That heroic face, too, he had pierced; and caught from it the deep, subtle, indirect expression, that only the long-gone master-painters of the Old World could have seized and immortalized. And in yet another memory of this great American Whitman attains to his best and highest, "When Lilacs Last in the Doorway Bloom'd." It is one of the most beautiful of poems, of the purest intuition, of a consummate, if unconscious, artistry. Whose voice is it that rings and echoes, now low and tender, now solemn and desolate, now clear, full, victorious, out of its cloistral solitude--that of the mourner himself, of all-heedfull, heedless Nature, of the immortal soul of man, or just a bird, the shy and hidden, sweet, small hermit thrush? The last division of his life's work--his fond Epic, his cosmic "inventory"--as Whitman planned it, was to be devoted to the chaunting of songs of death and immortality. The soldier to whom he read of Christ's Resurrection talked of death to him, and said he did not fear it. He talked to a man who did not enjoy religion in the way a Christian means, to whom the mystery of Easter is an all-sufficing "reliance." But Whitman not only did not fear death. The thought of it was to him the strangest of raptures, the reverie of a child dreaming of a distant

mother, soon to come again. Death and immortality were but two aspects of the same blessed hope to this man, who poured out his life in a turgid fount of ecstatic joy in living:

… And I saw askant the armies,
I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,
Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with missiles I
saw them,
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and bloody,
And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs (and all in silence),
And the staffs all splintered and broken.

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,
But I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,
The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
And the wives and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.…

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

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

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