

“Sing Poet in Our Name”: The Arc of National Emotion Portrayed and Preserved in the Poetry of the Civil War¹

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Every generation experiences tragedy, upheaval and catastrophe. Often times these episodes are defined and depicted by an art form, be it music, painting or prose. In the era of the American Civil War, it was poetry. In reading various secondary sources on the Civil War, I became engrossed in and enamored of the poetry. Its proliferation before, during and after the war provide an accurate chronology of the events as well as the emotions that accompanied them. Reading the poetry one can find vivid descriptions of a battle and a corresponding verse by a mother who lost her son in that same confrontation. The poetry renders heart wrenching insight into the conflict as a whole, its sheer devastation, as well as its impact on a deeply personal level. Poetry was the art form that mirrored and channeled national and private sentiment during the American Civil War.

The unique nature of the war, taking place on American soil, American against American, was perhaps a reason for so much emotional writing. The loss of life touched everyone. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow articulated this eloquently in his poem, “Killed at the Ford”

That fatal bullet went speeding forth
 Till it reached a town in the distant north
 Till it reached a house in a sunny street
 Till it reached a heart that ceased to beat
 Without a murmur, without a cry

 And the neighbors wondered that she should die.²

¹ Walt Whitman, *Civil War Poetry and Prose*, edit. S. Applebaum and C. Ward (New York: Dover Press, 1995), 35.

² Drew Gilpin Faust. *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. (New York: Random House, 2008), 143.

Drew Gilpin Faust observes in her book that the Civil War marked a new relationship with death for Americans.³ The evolving American concept of death and valuation of human life play a role in the desire to document feelings, reactions and experiences using a dramatic and beautiful form. More than merely journaling, poetry is art and, with its creation, may have provided some solace.

Poetry was authored by all manner of individuals, regardless of education, economic status, race, creed or gender.⁴ It served many purposes, to communicate, mourn, comfort, and rebel among them. Was poetry a byproduct of the events as they unfolded? Did poetry serve as means to expound on what was happening? Or was it an impetus for action? The abolitionist's poetry by both blacks and whites drew attention to their cause before Lincoln's unleashing of the Emancipation Proclamation. The poetry of the Confederacy stimulated a patriotism and unity of purpose, prior to and during the years of battle. The question is, did the vast supply and variety of poetry fuel the fire, fan the flames or simply describe them? Do the volumes of Civil War poetry still being read today, enhance the legacy of the war?

Much of the work was personal in nature and has remained private. However volumes of work were published in locally and nationally circulated periodicals, newspapers and magazines. In this venue, poetry was shared.⁵ The Atlantic magazine commenced publication in 1857, with a determined abolitionist bent.⁶ Its pages were rife with articles, prose, poetry

³ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 271.

⁴ Library of Congress. Poetry Resources, Accessed June 12, 2012, <http://www.loc/rr/program/bib/lcpoetry/cwcv.html>

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⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Edmund Quincy. "Where Will it End?" *The Atlantic: Special Commemorative Issue* (2012): 12-13.

and photography drawing attention to the scourge of slavery and calling for its immediate end.

In its pages, James Russell Lowell, the Atlantic's first editor wrote in 1860 "The discussion of slavery is dangerous.....But dangerous to what?....In a democracy it is the duty of every citizen to think."⁷ The circulation of the magazine, bearing poetry of a like opinion was influential to all who read it. The use of this early form of media to convey opinions in an effort to convince was only as successful as its readership. Yet as with all printed material, the mere fact that it was printed validated it to a degree. Therefore, it stands to reason that the more printed material in circulation, the more citizens would be influenced by its content.

The buildup to the Civil War began with a call to prohibit the spread of slavery in states newly joining the Union. The defensive and bellicose nature of Southern poetry in the antebellum period was evidence of vulnerability in the southern economy. The assumed dependency on slavery to perpetuate the southern lifestyle of an elite few was vigorously defended with a "bring it" attitude apparent in the poetry. James Ryder Randall wrote *My Maryland* in May 1861. He was not above name calling and threats

The despots heel is on the shore,
Maryland!
His torch is at thy temple door,
Maryland
Avenge the patriotic gore
That flecked the streets of Baltimore
And be the battle queen of yore,
Maryland, my Maryland!⁸

Randall went on to refer to Unionists as vandals and tyrants.

⁷ James Bennet, "Editor's Note," *The Atlantic: Special Commemorative Issue* (2012): 6-7.

⁸ Paul Negri, *Civil Poetry* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1997), 12.

The Cambridge History of British and American literature claims that the explanation for such a limited quantity of Southern Civil War poetry was most likely secondary to Confederate absorption in politics, the pre-eminence of the spoken word as compared with the written, as well as the absence of centers of thought and life. The far flung residential configuration of the southern states limited daily contact and circulation of periodicals, apparently. These priorities and circumstances took precedence over sentiment conveyed in the written word. Most southern poets were perceived amateurs prone to a quick jotting of a poem, yet not committed to a life of literature. Poetry was considered a past time and many anthologies were collections of jottings over a life time rather than a concentrated effort.⁹ Research for this paper does indeed draw the conclusion that there is far less Southern poetry than was produced in the North. The prolific nature of northern writers in general indicates there was greater support for and readership of northern authors and poets. Comparing the quantity of poetry between the two factions allows me to conclude that southerners were much less likely to act in response to poetry, as there was simply much less of it. Also, literacy rates in the south were far lower among adult white males than the same demographic in the north. Literacy census taking in the mid nineteenth century revealed a literacy rate among adult white males in the south to be approximately 66%, the northeast boasted a relatively high (in some polls 99%) literacy rate. Reports reveal a skyrocketing volume of newspapers, books and mailed letters, affirming the demand for printed material and implying its massive influence.¹⁰

⁹ A.W.Ward and W.P. Trent, eds., *Poetry of the Civil War II; The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Vols.* (New York: G.P.Putnam's Sons, 1907-21), accessed June 2, 2012, <http://Bartlesby.com/226/1801.html>.

¹⁰ "Literacy." Accessed July 2, 2012, <http://www.enotes/literacy-reference/literacy>.

Abolitionist poetry abounded and was produced by blacks and whites, literate slaves and free blacks, men, women and children. The powerful emotions evoked by the poetry sparked outrage. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a free black woman born in Maryland in 1828, first published her poetry in 1845, at the age of 17. Her writing was widely circulated in newspapers and then published under the title "Autumn Leaves" later renamed "Forest Leaves". She wrote in excruciating detail of the wrenching of child from mother in "The Slave Auction":

The sale began-young girls were there,
Defenseless in their wretchedness,
Whose stifled sobs of deep despair
Revealed their anguish and distress

And mothers stood with streaming eyes,
And saw their dearest children sold;
Unheeded rose their bitter cries,
While tyrants bartered them for gold.¹¹

Reading this verse, one could not help experiencing a deep emotional connection to the mother and her child.

The Atlantic Monthly published Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's popular poems, "Paul Revere's Ride", on December 20, 1860, the exact day that South Carolina seceded. Long perceived an anthem of the American Revolution, referencing the ride that woke the states to the British invasion, it is rather a plea to galvanize the Union once again to fight for the nation's founding principles.

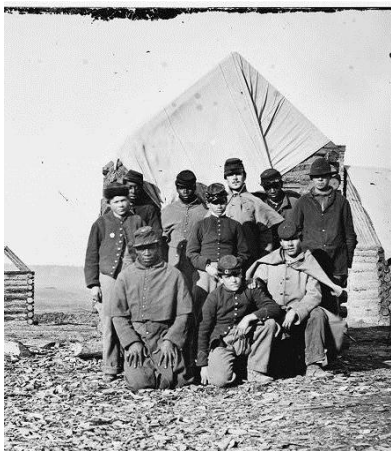
That was all! And yet through the gloom and the light
The fate of a nation was riding that night;
And the spark struck out by the steed, in his flight,

¹¹ Janeen Grohsmeyer, "Frances Harper," *Unitarian Universalist Historical Society*, Accessed Mar. 7, 2013, <http://www25-temp.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/francesharper.html>.

Kindled the land into flame with its heat.¹²

Recalling that America had so recently unified to endure together a war on its homeland, Longfellow called for raising awareness of what it meant to be an American, the ideals the nation, north and south, fought to protect. A fierce abolitionist, he was not opposed to blood being shed in the fight to end slavery. He clearly felt the cause worthy of the sacrifice. Again, this piece speaks to the ultimate Northern purpose of the war, preservation of the Union, without slavery.

Curiously I encountered a void of poetry directed solely at maintaining the Union, although at the outset, it was the defining purpose of the Union effort. There is much in the



“Soldier Group,” Library of Congress.

correspondence of Union soldiers and their families that describes the inspiration for their initial enthusiasm to be preservation of the Union.¹³ The poetry emanating from the Union, in the Antebellum period anticipated the Emancipation Proclamation. It spoke to the ultimate purpose of the conflict and its only possible resolution. While the initial effort was couched in preservation of the Union, the poetry reveals a

grass roots movement that allowed for the declaration of war and endorsed its perpetuation until slavery was rooted out. Early victory for the Union would perhaps not have achieved this goal.¹⁴ Even the justification for the sin of killing was deemed acceptable in the effort to overturn the wrong of slavery.¹⁵ The Union poetry of the pre and early war period gives voice

¹² “Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,” *The Atlantic: Special Commemorative Issue*, 2012: 26-27.

¹³ James M. McPherson. *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 16-17.

¹⁴ Charles Elliot Norton. *The Atlantic: Special Commemorative Issue*, 2012: 52-53.

¹⁵ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 34.

to the eventual goal of the war. While not perhaps directly influencing the change in purpose during the battles leading up to the Emancipation Proclamation, the poetry allows insight into the hearts and minds of those who sacrificed much.

Poetry written prior to and during the initial phase of the American Civil War provides inspiration for both sides. Vilifying the institution of slavery in the north, and support of states rights in the south, became the purpose of writing poetry as well as a means to communicate the message. In that way it helped to stir up an infectious and communal enthusiasm for war.

Following the firing on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, the poetry became concurrent with the events of the war. Poetic descriptions of the horror of the battles abounded. Scraps of paper found on battlefields contained verse by the combatants, some described the battle, in this last letter home.¹⁶ Esteemed poets and journalists on the battlefield were inspired to document events in poetry.¹⁷ Edmund Clarence Stedman's "Sumter" anticipated a short conflict ending in punishment exacted for the sin of Southerners:

Not too long the brave shall wait:
On their own head be their fate,
Who against the hallowed State
Dare begin;
Flag defied and compact riven!
In the record of high Heaven
How shall Southern men be shriven
For the sin!¹⁸

This call to arms is for preservation of the Union and retribution for secession. The blame for starting the war is placed squarely on the heads of the Southerners and the

¹⁶ Ibid., 23-24.

¹⁷ Negri, *Civil Poetry*, iii.

¹⁸ Ibid., 52.

militaristic response of northern men revealed they were itching for a fight and this cause was enough.¹⁹ Union volunteers wrote home of their sense of duty to fight for “freedom and right as opposed to slavery and wrong.”²⁰ The motivation coalesced around joined purposes and the poetry reflects that. Its content not only describes what should be done, but what is happening. The events are unfolding and poets become not only narrators but instigators as well.

Three million men enlisted in and saw combat during the four long years of the Civil War. Walt Whitman wrote retrospectively of his pride in the people of his hometown, New York, in *Leaves of Grass*, the section “Drum Taps” his “First O Songs for a Prelude”:

To the drum-taps prompt
 The young men falling in and arming
 The mechanics arming, (the trowel, the jack-plane, the blacksmith’s hammer,
 tost aside with precipitation,)
 The lawyer leaving his office and arming, the judge leaving the court
 The driver deserting his wagon in the street, jumping down, throwing
 the reins abruptly down the horses’ backs
 The salesman leaving the store, the boss, book-keeper, porter, all leaving
 Squads gather everywhere by common consent and arm²¹

All manner of men from all walks of life signed on eager to face uncertain and violent circumstances. The war was expected to be short, a quick undertaking with Northerners convinced of a sure Union victory, Southerners equally as certain of Southern triumph. This confidence was contagious and prompted many to suit up and bear arms. James McPherson categorizes the statistics of the soldiers in both armies and these figures bear out the diversity of the troops, married, single youthful, middle-aged, educated, laborer, alike were “spoiling for

¹⁹ McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

²¹ Whitman, *Civil War Poetry and Prose*, 1.

a fight”.²² The poetry describing this massive enlistment defines an extraordinary sense of purpose, willingness and even enthusiasm cutting across a broad swath of the population. In abolitionist James Sloan Gibbons’ “Three Hundred Thousand More” Lincolns call for 300,000 Union volunteers in July, 1862 was answered in unison by men of many ilk:

We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more,
From Mississippi’s winding stream and from New England’s shore
We leave our ploughs and workshops, our wives and children dear,
With hearts to full for utterance, with but a silent tear;
We dare not look behind us, but steadfastly before;
We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more!²³

The major lyric poet of the prewar South, Henry Timrod, was called the Poet Laureate of the South. He wrote a number of Civil War poems calling to his countrymen to unify and fight. His poem “A Cry to Arms” rallies southern citizens to battle:

Ho, woodsman of the mountainside!
Ho, dwellers of the vales!
Ho, ye who by the chafing tide
Have roughened in the gales!
Leave barn and byre, kin and cot,
Lay by the bloodless spade;
Let desk and case and counter rot,
And burn your books of trade!
.....
Come, flocking, gayly to the fight,
From forests, hill or lake;
We battle for our country’s right,
And for the lily’s sake!²⁴

²² McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 10.

²³ Negri, *Civil Poetry*, 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

Like Pa in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, those who were too old or unable, found work in the hospitals, stables and kitchens servicing the soldiers. Most men had a singular zeal



James Gardiner, "Wounded soldiers from the battles in the "Wilderness" at Fredericksburg, Va., May 20, 1864," Library of Congress

to serve. Much of the poetry of both the north and the south, describing the response to the call, was written after the events. The fervor of the multitude is palpable in the words, they respect and honor the memory of those who gave so willingly, no matter what they sacrificed, professionally or personally, to serve.

A majority of the poetry describing the battles was written by correspondents who were moved by what they witnessed. Journalists documented events not only as news but also in verse, perhaps to convey the emotional devastation. The pieces themselves are populated with the now mythic figures of the war, from Stonewall Jackson and Lee to Grant and Sherman. The battles of Fredericksburg, Shiloh, Bull Run and Gettysburg, as well as many other major battles are written of.²⁵ These poems are written by Americans as eyewitnesses to momentous events in U. S. History. Many are written at the time of the battle or shortly thereafter. Herman Melville wrote many poems compiled into an anthology entitled *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War*, published in 1866. The March into Virginia, Ball's Bluff, Shiloh and Malverne Hill among others offer graphic detail of the struggle. Agonizing emotion is figured into flawless verse. Melville's "Rebel Color-bearers at Shiloh" concludes with:

Sunday at Shiloh, and the day
When Stonewall charged-McClellan's crimson May

²⁵ Ibid., iii.

And Chickamauga's wave of death,
 And of the Wilderness the cypress wreath-
 All these have passed away
 The life in the veins of Treason lags,
 Her daring color bearers drop their flags,
 And yield. Now shall we fire?
 Can poor spite be?
 Shall nobleness in victory less aspire
 Than in reverse? Spare Spleen her ire,
 And think how Grant met Lee.²⁶

Bravery, honor, valor, righteousness and Godliness are claimed by both sides with an ardor evidenced in the poetry. The battle poetry is fraught with emotion and charged with veneration. Was this verbiage a true reflection of the spirit of the troops? One would have to believe that the actual events inspired these words rather than vice versa. The poets recorded observations and accompanying emotions in real time, not considering how to inspire troops to carry on but rather remarking on their resolution despite, the grueling and gruesome circumstances. Madison Cawein, writes in "Mosby at Hamilton" of the willingness to further sacrifice the sons of the south following a failed raid on Union lines by Captain John S. Mosby:

While Yankee cheers still stunned our ears,
 Of troops at Harpers Ferry,
 While Sheridan led on his Huns,
 And Richmond rocked to roaring guns,
 We felt the South still had some sons

She would not scorn to bury.²⁷

This poem in particular speaks to human characteristics evident in the war, bravery in combat as well as the



James Gibson, "Brandy Station, Va. Officers and a lady at headquarters of 1st Brigade, Horse Artillery," Library of Congress.

fortitude to continue the fight. In terms of the first aspect, McPherson writes, in *Cause and Comrades*, of those who could not face battle and hid or ran, although they had enlisted and the punishment for skulking was severe.²⁸ I could not find poetry that addressed this. Honor and heroism are the stuff of Civil War poetry. Given the dearth of verse regarding the shirker's response to battle, despite the fact that it was widespread, the conclusion can be drawn that the poetry is not a complete account. Rather it focuses on the valor of those who willingly served. In this way poetic license was taken to provide a myopic image of the actual events, excluding those perceived cowardly or dishonorable. The massive body of poetry may not be accurate to the boots on the ground experience. It is not meant to be. Its purpose is emotionally charged and not held to the standard of truth in journalism.

To stay the course in the presence of such carnage required a sense of purpose, duty and pride that is inconceivable. Day after day soldiers witness death and destruction while facing their own mortality. Fellow citizens and families experienced unimaginable loss. Poets of all manner recorded fear, exhaustion and grief. Yet the nations carried on. Death was preferable to cowardice and at the depths of despair, it offered relief. But the cause inspired endurance to continue. Longfellow wrote:

Thou, too, sail on, O ship of State!
Sail on, O Union, strong and great!
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!²⁹

²⁸ McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 48-49.

²⁹ Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle Class Identity in Nineteenth Century America* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2000), 121-122.

As the war continued far longer than was initially anticipated, the collapse of morale among the troops and the weariness of the nation could have been expected. Yet poetry speaks to a continued inspiration even as the circumstances, on many levels, grew increasingly dire, the destruction more costly and the violence more fatal. The consequences of defeat by either side were cataclysmic and neither would relinquish their ideals to preserve lives. John Greenleaf Whittier, a Quaker abolitionist, used his poetry to endorse and solidify patriotism in the fight against slavery. "A Word for the Hour" gently encourages perseverance:

....Give us Grace to keep
 Our faith and patience; wherefore we should leap
 On one hand into the fratricidal fight
 Or, on the other, yield eternal right,

 In closer union, and, if numbering less,
 Brighter shall shine the stars which still remain.³⁰

In Whittier's ode to Barbara Frietchie, a plucky older woman who hangs the Stars and Stripes out her window despite the oncoming confederates demanding its removal;

She leaned far out on the window sill,
 And shook it forth with royal will

 "Shoot if you must, this old gray head,
 But spare your country's flag," she said.

 A shade of sadness, a blush of shame
 Over the face of the leader came;

 The nobler nature within him stirred
 To life over that woman's deed and word;³¹

This poem was written to tell a true story of an act of bravery by an old woman, as Stonewall Jackson led his troops down a main thoroughfare on his way to Fredericksburg. The

³⁰ Negri, *Civil Poetry*, 17.

³¹ John Greenleaf Whittier, "Barbara Frietchie," *The Atlantic: Special Commemorative Issue*, 2012: 63.

poet was a contributor to the *Atlantic* and the periodical published the poem. While reporting an incident revealing bravery and patriotism, the poet alludes to a retained sense of compassion and respect for humanity on the part of Stonewall Jackson, thereby revealing members from both sides to share qualities of goodness. The poem endorses understanding and respect, no matter the configuration of your flag. This reader feels this poem is unique in its understated method of making this point, by incorporating the message into the story. It reveals sensitivity and hope on the part of the poet, without hammering the point home.

More than at any other time in the war, the poetry written during the years of battle appear to speak directly to those who were serving and all who were suffering. By reiterating the motivational purpose of the conflict from both perspectives, poets inspired those who gave so much, to carry on the fight. The war was everywhere; the poetry reflected and respected that fact. Reverential recording of honorable death and sacrifice on the battlefield incited others to follow in their path. Defining the suffering of those on the home front validated their sorrow and fortified them to endure.

The dichotomy in the poetry is one of mourning and yet inspiring further battle. No poem stirs up more passion than Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" with its homage to a deity and claiming it for the Union cause. This poem was set to music which still today sets a tone of honor and patriotism. The allegiance to a God who willingly "loosed the fateful lightening his terrible swift sword"³² for the cause, signals forgiveness for the sin of killing. Lines such as "As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free," added religious righteousness to the mission.

³² Negri, *Civil Poetry*, 1.

Six hundred and twenty thousand died embroiled in the violence of the Civil War, on home soil.³³ This number represents a huge percentage of the population. Drew Gilpin Faust speaks to the transformation of the concept of death as a result of the magnitude of this loss. It would be incomprehensible today to imagine a catastrophe that would result in such a mortality rate. And yet from 1861-1865, it was tolerated, permitted and praised. The loss of so many lives caused indescribable grief.

Poems about the experience of the individual soldier began appearing in the middle of the war. These poems were written by average citizens and esteemed poets.³⁴ Ethel Lynn Beers wrote of "The Picket Guard" also entitled "All quiet along the Potomac" in 1861. The tragedy of the loss of a father and husband on guard, not in a battle, but while walking the picket;

"All quiet along the Potomac," they say,
 "Except now and then a stray picket
 Is shot as he walks his beat to and fro
 'T is nothing: a private or two, now and then,
 Will not count in the news of the men,
 Moaning out, all alone, the death rattle"

.....
 There's only the sound of the lone sentry's tread
 As he tramps from the rock to the fountain,
 And thinks of the two in the low trundle-bed
 Far away in the cot on the mountain
 His musket grows slack; his face, dark and grim,
 Grows gentle with memories tender,
 As he mutters a prayer for the children asleep-
 For their mother-may Heaven defend her!³⁵

³³ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xi.

³⁴ Library of Congress, "To Light us to Freedom and Glory Again," *The Role of Civil War Poetry*, accessed June 12, 2012, <http://www.loc/rr/program/bib/lcpoetry/cwcv.html>.

³⁵ Negri, *Civil Poetry*, 34.

Then he is shot, in a moment of quiet reflection. He is but one life, yet so vital to those he has left at home. This poem alludes to the shifting value of a single human life. The number of dead in the Civil War was massive; a single life risked becoming anonymous in such quantity. Much of the poetry in the years of battle gave voice to the individual, their loss and its impact on their survivors. Many poets paid respect to the soldier as a person, George Henry Boker, in his “Dirge for a Soldier” a staunch Unionist, his poetry laments individual losses on both sides.³⁶

Mourning became an inevitable national past time. People took to their pens to commemorate, reflect and heal. Poetry appears to have served as a catharsis for grief. This private realm of sorrow was not given to publication but rather for personal consumption. If taken out of context, much of this work may be considered melodramatic. Read with knowledge of the circumstances, it is rich and moving. Mary Louise Kete writes of mourning in the 19th century and its association with the development of sentimentality. She quotes extensively from Harriet Gould’s Book, explaining that the poems in this book “trace the way that hardscrabble farmers deployed poetry in an economy of sentimental artifacts through which they were able to define and claim the center of cultural power as they defined and laid claim to a revolutionary, new sense of self.”³⁷ It was in this era that sentiment became part of Americanism and the voluminous quantity of Civil War poetry validates Kete’s point. The American expression of grief heretofore dismissed as “sentimental” and inconsequential became what Kete states Emerson considered the urgent work of “reattaching even artificial things and violation of nature, to nature” and thereby healing the “dislocation and

³⁶ Ibid., 77.

³⁷ Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations*, 3.

detachment" of man from God.³⁸ This connection between man and God, of which Kete writes, is perhaps the major impetus of the civilian poet. The solace provided by poetry is akin to prayer. Prayer for the religious is the conduit to God. The sentimental quality of the poetry allows for highly personal prayer.

Before Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Walt Whitman wrote of reconciliation, of grief for the bilateral loss, and hope for a unified future. A study of Civil War Poetry would be remiss if it did not recognize the literary contribution of this revered American poet. Randall Fuller writes in his article "Daybreak Gray and Dim" of the arc of Walt Whitman's poetry as the war was waged. He wrote defining poetry during every chapter of the conflict. Fuller claims Whitman writes with much celebration and eagerness for all to leave their lives and loved ones, to sign on. It is not without anxiety that he became the music to which they marched. Within a year of the firing on Fort Sumter, after the first battle of Bull Run, Whitman's poetry takes a distinctly different tone. Whitman referred to Bull Run as a "crucifixion" he will "never forget."³⁹ In "Beat! Beat! Drums!", Whitman tries to illustrate the chaos and social cost of war.

Make no parley-stop for no expostulation,
Mind not the timid-mind to the weeper or prayer,
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,
Let not the child voice be heard, nor the mothers entreaties,
Make even the trestles to shake the dead why they lie awaiting the hearses,
So strong you thump O terrible drums-so loud you bugles blow.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid., 2.

³⁹ Randall Fuller, "Daybreak Gray and Dim: How the Civil War Changed Wlt Whitman's Poetry," *National Endowment for the Humanities*, accessed June 16, 2012, <http://www.neh.gov>.

⁴⁰ Whitman, *Civil War Poetry*, 4.

Whitman echoes the morale of the nation in this piece. As unbelievably awful as this situation was, for everyone, they must carry on. This was no time to think too much, inner voices were stilled, the noise of the cause propelled them.

Whitman's brother, George was injured in the Battle of Fredericksburg, Walt left New York to find and care for him. This journey led Whitman to a theatre of war he could never have imagined. He sought work in an army hospital and traveled interviewing, observing and recording as he went. His concern for the wounded and the dead knew no prejudice, and he writes, in a number of his pieces, of his concern for the human toll. Fuller argues that this changes the character of his poetry altogether, to one Whitman previously felt was unworthy of describing this epic war. Avoiding sentiment apparently became impossible once Whitman bore personal witness to the mutilation and murder of thousands. Fuller writes that the poet whose career began with heroic and noble descriptions of the human form, who had praised "the body electric", now turned his voice to describe and console those who suffered and died, regardless of the color of their uniform. His sympathy for all involved is the seed for reconciliation. In "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim" he describes finding dead bodies covered on a battlefield:

Young man I think I know you-I think this face is the face of Christ himself,
Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.⁴¹

Whitman's poetry takes a sentimental turn, which he had previously disdained. In doing so, he reaches into the hearts of every man and makes a case for reconciliation.⁴²

⁴¹ Randall Fuller, "Daybreak Gray and Dim: How the Civil War changed Walt Whitman's Poetry," National Endowment for the Humanities, Accessed June 16, 2012, <http://www.neh.gov>.

⁴² Ibid.

“The Blue and the Gray”, by Francis Miles Finch tells of a woman from Mississippi decorating the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers.

Love and tears for the Blue
Tears and love for the gray.⁴³

The poetry of reconciliation recognized that only by mourning and honoring the dead collectively could the spirit of recovery develop.

As with almost all recoveries, this one was not instantaneous. Poetry did not have the power to assuage all wounds, yet its message was one of mercy and forgiveness. The forcibly reunified United States adopted the goal of rapprochement, individually enacting this concept was a harder road to hoe and some poetry reflected that.



Timothy O'Sullivan, "Dead Confederate soldier," Library of Congress.

My knowledge of Civil War poetry is new, my reading of it just beginning and my understanding of it evolving through study. The fact that the poetry was not only available to large portions of the population, but also written by it, makes it singularly informative of the Civil War period. Research has borne out that the concept of death in America, until this time, had been remote and depersonalized. The Civil War delivered death to every doorstep. The poetry generated not only provides a chronology of the events, it also articulates humanity in

⁴³ Negri, *Civil Poetry*, 78.

all its agony. As mentioned in the preceding sections, poetry shifted focus as the harsh reality of war set in. Walt Whitman's poetic arc deftly exemplifies this. The journey from enthusiasm to despair took less than a year. Poetry written by soldiers begging for death to gain relief opened a door on incomprehensible suffering. Work written retrospectively honors and grieves. Continued study of the poetry perpetuates the legacy of this apocalyptic chapter in American History.

Kate Putnam Osgood writes in her poem "Driving Home the Cows":

For news had come to the lonely farm
 That three were lying where two had lain;
 And the old man's tremulous palsied arm
 Could never lean on a son again.

 The great tears sprang to their meeting eyes;
 For the heart must speak when the lips are dumb;
 And under the silent evening skies,
 Together they followed the cattle home.⁴⁴

Despite tremendous suffering and loss, life went on. Broken, bent and bereft, survivors went home. Work and families were reconfigured and restored. Life in the United States went on, the nation as a whole survived, as this poem illustrates.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 116,