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Review

NURSE LAUREATE

Walt Whitman was the spirit of human sympathy'

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McElroy, John Harmon *The Sacrificial Years: A Chronicle of Walt Whitman's Experiences in the Civil War*. David R. Godine, ISBN 1567920799

Excluding his poetic record of the war years in *Drum Taps* and elsewhere, John Harmon McElroy in **The Sacrificial Years: A Chronicle of Walt Whitman's Experiences in the Civil War** offers a larger selection than has heretofore been made of Whitman's prose record of his life, thoughts, and emotions as recorded in his war and postwar "memoranda," "wartime letters," newspaper pieces, memoirs, and notebooks.

In contrast to his younger brother George -- who, before ending the final months of the war as a "Secesh" prisoner, had seen action from Second Bull Run to Cold Harbor and Petersburg with the 51st New York Volunteers and had been promoted through the ranks to the rank of lieutenant colonel -- the self-published and as yet relatively obscure author of *Leaves of Grass* (first edition, 1855), still held the unofficial civilian rank of "Army Hospital Visitor." He had conferred this rank on himself in 1863 shortly after he had volunteered his services in the Union military hospitals in the Washington, D.C., area in January of that year.

It has usually been assumed that Whitman considered his role in the hospitals equivalent to that of a "volunteer nurse." In his excellent editorial introduction to **The Sacrificial Years**, McElroy is following convention when he says that impressive in physical appearance, "gregarious and generous," possessing "an in-stinctive knack for how another person's stress might be relieved," Whitman had the qualifications that make a good practical nurse, and "was trusted and liked by the doctors and regular nurses in the wards he visited."

But in his own account of his wartime activities Whitman appears to have been a nurse more nearly in the metaphorical than in the literal sense. In fact,

when he characterized the kind of dedicated attention he gave to wounded and sick soldiers as being "a trade, an art" that demanded "experience and natural gifts, and the greatest judgment," he had in mind not his skill in meeting the practical medical needs of patients, but the distinction between himself and the generality of visitors. They went "from curiosity -- as to a show of animals."

The patients (to whom Whitman often brought "improper things") failed to realize what Whitman believed he himself was uniquely capable of understanding -- namely, that it is not the mere giving of gifts that does good. Instead, it is the capacity to make the "proper adaptation" to the situation of each patient, nothing being "of any avail" among the sick and wounded soldiers except the conscientious personal investigation of each case "with sharp critical faculties," yet "in the fullest spirit of human sympathy and boundless love."

Four years in military hospitals

Abandoning the literary life he had led in New York, Whitman supported himself in Washington chiefly by a succession of part-time jobs in the Office of the Army Paymaster, the Indian Bureau, and the Office of the Attorney General. Spending as much time as he possibly could for four years, day and night, in the military hospitals, he attempted to fulfill the overwhelming task of dealing with the individual situations of "his thousands" of "dear boys." Black or white, Union or "Secesh" (i.e., hospitalized prisoners of war), he talked to them, read to them, wrote letters for them, or simply sat in silence, sometimes touching them, while they suffered, and not infrequently, died.

Whenever he could, he brought them little gifts of sweets, fruit, tobacco, etc. he had purchased with his own meager funds. "I get very much attached to some of them," he wrote, "and many of them have come to depend on seeing me . . . as if for their lives." He even on occasion took up "his quarters in the hospital, slept or watch'd there several nights in succession."

Whitman tried to hide from himself, as well as the soldiers to whom he ministered, the terrible strain his experience in the hospitals placed on him, but at times he acknowledged it in his memoranda. "It is curious," he confided to himself in 1863, "when I am present at the most appalling things -- deaths, operations, sickening wounds (perhaps full of maggots) -- I do not fail, although my sympathies are very much excited, but keep singularly cool; but often hours afterward, perhaps when I am at home or out walking alone, I feel sick and

actually tremble when I recall the thing and have it in my mind again."

Psychic, physical costs led to stroke

The psychic and physical cost of the hospital years was "hospital malaria" and a breakdown in Whitman's robust health that led eventually, it would seem, to the partially incapacitating stroke he suffered in 1873. A primary merit of **The Sacrificial Years** is that it makes possible a more exhaustive examination of Whitman's motives in dedicating himself to four difficult years as an Army Hospital Visitor than any prior collection affords.

A somewhat questionable merit of McElroy's collection is the placing of documentary materials not specifically dated in a month-by-month, year-by-year time sequence. This, the editor says, makes for a "diary-like narrative," or, as the subtitle of the collection indicates, with somewhat more precision, a journal-like narrative.

Yet if the mingling of accounts of events that may clearly be seen to have been set down at the time they occurred and accounts obviously drawn from recollection is a violation of strict scholarly propriety, we may well feel that the editorial license taken in **The Sacrificial Years** is justified by its enhancement of the drama of Whitman's profound involvement in the crisis of the American Civil War.

"I now doubt," Whitman wrote after he had begun his service in the military hospitals, "whether one can get a fair idea of what this war practically is, or what genuine America is, and her character, without some such experience as this I am having."

Transcendent confirmation of poems' assertions

His Civil War service as an Army Hospital Visitor involved not only the experience of discovering the war to be the unfolding of the "genuine" identity of the American Republic; it also involved the experience of discovering his war service afforded transcendent confirmation of the equation between national identity and self-identity that, as the self-proclaimed poet-prophet of the American Republic, he had asserted in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

Before he saw the war, Whitman said in retrospect, "I had hours of doubt about These States; but not since." To him it seemed that most of his boys "develop'd, transcended, in personal qualities -- and, radically, in moral ones -- all that the most enthusiastic Democratic-Republican ever fancied, idealized, in loftiest dreams." And "curious as it may seem," he added, "the War, to me, proved Humanity, and proved America and the Modern."

Whitman was fully aware that it might seem ironic -- "curious" was the word he used -- to project such a vision of the meaning of the Civil War when he was "perfectly well aware of the corruption and wickedness" in America he condemned so memorably in *Democratic Vistas*. But we detect a greater irony in Whitman's failure to imagine the unfolding of the national and world historical implications of a war that, in joining for the first time political power and the novel power of modern industrial technology, created the complex motives and horrors of "the great slaughterhouse" of the Civil War.

Did Whitman altogether fail to realize the implication that the conflict which has been called the first modern war was an anticipation of the great slaughterhouses of the twentieth century? Or did he simply choose not to say so? In one graphic moment, to be sure, in his postwar reflections (not included in McElroy's edition) Whitman, it would seem, did say so indirectly. In a sense betraying his vocation to imagine the world in words, he declared that "the real war will never get in the books."

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