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The Green Man: Walt Whitman and the Civil War

In 1918 Carl Sandburg wrote a poem called 'Grass'. It begins:

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo
Shovel them under and let me work --
                                        I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg --

The poem continues, 'Shovel them under and let me work' and Sandburg concludes with:

Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
                                                        What place is this?
                                                        Where are we now?

Writing in the shadow of the Great War and out of that war's bloody futility, Sandburg anticipates, in his roll-call of forgotten battles, a bitter sense of how time will wipe out the memory -- let alone comprehension -- of past horrors, thereby dooming us to an endless cycle of 'wars to end all wars'. Sandburg is especially biting about the human capacity for passivity: with the naturalisation of the will so inevitably we will behave bestially again.[1]

Sandburg's poetry is literarily derivative, sometimes slavishly so, of Walt Whitman. In 'Grass', he recalls and plays off a passage early in *Leaves of Grass* that begins, 'A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands.' Whitman's answer to the child is not conclusive but deliberately open-ended and euphoric in its celebration of an all-embracing, never-ending generative cycle. Whitman guesses 'it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful/green stuff woven' and continues 'Or I guess the grass is itself a child... the produced babe/of the vegetation.' And he concludes with this wonderful death-denying image: 'And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.' Whitman's grass -- the hair -- is the tendrils from which he calls back the voices of the living and the dead: 'The smallest sprout shows there is really no death... All goes onward and outward... and nothing collapses.' It seems probable that Sandburg had Whitman specifically in mind when he composed his short, bitter, endstopped poem and that he was writing against the optimism of his poetic father. It is also likely that Sandburg, consciously or not, was referring to Whitman's post-Civil War career and his famous statement, 'The real war will never get in the books.' Using this hint from Sandburg, I want to argue that one reason why the real war did not get in the books is that Whitman excluded it by an act of naturalisation, both of his poems and of himself. However, while Sandburg's grass is a blunt instrument, reflecting his Social-Darwinian sense of human failure, Whitman's use of nature contributed to keeping the rhetoric of the American landscape and a naturalised sense of American history alive in a way that would be fertile for later modernists such as (begrudgingly) Ezra Pound and Frank O'Hara as well as painters such as John Marin.[2]

As even the most casual of Whitman's readers will know, his poetic line always threatens to overspill from the exuberant presentation of images and ideas: 'all goes onward and outward'. His invention of free verse was a necessary condition to his ability to function as a poet. Yet we know from his manuscripts -- to say nothing of the eight published editions of *Leaves of Grass* -- how carefully Whitman crafted and pruned his seemingly artless growth of words. Autobiographically, Whitman was equally concerned that the picture of the poet match his poetic intentions. Whitman had more than a bit of the huckster or con-man about him, evidenced when he published anonymous reviews of his own works or when he maddened Emerson by publishing the Bostonian's praise of *Leaves of Grass* without permission. Whitman was one of the first public figures to recognise that his persona, including his appearance, could be edited and revised for publication just like the poems. Whitman instantly grasped that lithography and especially the new art of photography not only made it easy to produce multiple likenesses but that the likeness itself could be altered to suit necessity. His contemporaries saw the daguerreotype as producing a fixed documentary 'truth' so that once a likeness was established it would not be changed lest the audience become confused and misidentify them. Whitman took the opposite tack. While he bragged that 'I've been photographed, photographed, and photographed until the cameras themselves are tired of me' he was not a passive 'subject' but actively controlled the image of himself that he had recorded and then disseminated.[3]

Whitman began to shape his public image beginning with the famous 1855 frontispiece to *Leaves of Grass* (figure 1) -- about which he wrote, 'I look so damned flamboyant, as if I was hurling bolts at somebody -- full of mad oaths -- saying defiantly, to hell with you!' Whitman announced himself in this image:

From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and
        imaginary lines,
Going where I list, my own master total and absolute.

This sense of individual self-containment and autonomy was essential to the Jacksonian political ideal of popular democracy, and Whitman was a fervid Democrat whose celebration of the butcher-boy and other working-class icons helped earn him the disdain of genteel literary society. Yet if man was autonomous, he was not isolated but bound in his individualism to all others; Whitman was careful to conclude the stanza that begins 'I Celebrate myself and sing myself' with the line 'For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.' So at roughly the same time as the Frontispiece which shows him as one of the roughs, Whitman exhibited a contrasting pose in the so-called 'Christ likeness' by Gabriel Harrison (figure 2). This portrait is beguiling in its pose of open receptivity. Visually it evokes Whitman's idea of 'adhesion', the non-rational bond of emotional identification -- similar to the Enlightenment's concept of 'sentiment' -- that linked individuals together for a higher purpose. Whitman had his idolators; William Kennedy called him the 'equal, and in many respects the superior of the much misunderstood Jesus'. Blasphemy aside, the pairing of these two portraits is illustrative of the historian John Higham's interpretation of American history as being pulled between the twin impulses of boundlessness and consolidation. Poetically, Whitman demonstrated these two opposing qualities by marrying his expansive verse forms to his lifelong obsession of rewriting one poetic work; albeit one that had all of America as its subject![4]

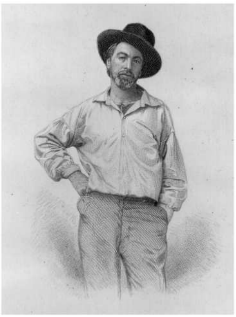

Figure 1. Frontispiece to first edition of Leaves of Grass, *1855, by Samuel Hollyer after daguerrotype by Gabriel Harrison. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.*

Although Whitman came to Washington -- and stayed -- on a mission of mercy to find his wounded brother George, it is not surprising that, as part of his ongoing advertisement for himself, he soon had his photograph taken by Alexander Gardner. He called this 'the best picture of all'. He characterised himself as 'full of initiative, vigor, joy -- not much belly, but grit, fibre, hold, solidity'. Whitman's self-characterisation came because he had discovered a mission that lifted him out of the slough in which he had found himself in New York at the end of the 185 0s, with his book not selling and his creative spirit deadened. Like many Americans, he was caught up in a sublime sense of exhilaration that accompanied the outbreak of war, not least because it would settle the question of the Union. Infused with his personal mission, the idea that through nursing he could practise the ideal of adhesion between camarados, the chance to see the war close-up as both a reporter and a poet, Whitman stayed in Washington to, as the soldiers put it, 'see the elephant'.[5]

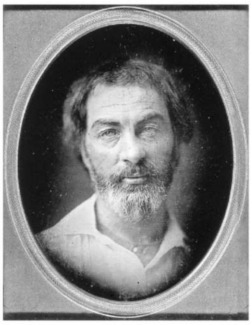

Figure 2. Gabriel Harrison (attributed), Walt Whitman, ca. 1853. Print collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, Astor Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

As did all of American society under the war's impact, Whitman immediately came under intense pressure, not least because of the multiple roles he was playing in Washington. Among other things, as Edmund Wilson has pointed out, the war modernised writing. The crisis required a speed and concision (in the writing of orders and the reliance on the telegraph, for instance) that stripped away the ornate persiflage of Victorian writing. This technical shift overlay a deeper emotional crisis as soldiers and civilians adapted to modern war and its massive casualty lists. For many there was a turning inward to an emotional stoicism at best or a numbness at worst. Obliquely, Whitman addressed this shift in his note 'Bad Wounds, the Young', in which the clipped tone fits the description: 'Amputations are going on -- the attendants are dressing wounds. As you pass by, you must be on your guard where you look.' An unwary visitor stops 'a moment to look at an awful wound they were probing, &c. He turn'd pale and in a moment he had fainted away...' (Notice that Whitman turns himself and the reader away with that 'etc.'.) Turning away was not possible for the soldiers and the wounded or for those who cared for them. Whitman noted how the frenzied efforts to save lives shut down the emotions so that as soon as a case was declared mortal 'the surgeon abandons the patient... There is no fuss made. Not a bit of sentimentalism or whining have I seen about a single death-bed... but generally impassive indifference. All is over... it is useless to expend emotions or labors.'[6]

Whitman intended his nursing to fill the gap between the indifference of the mass and the sensibility of the individual soldier. But here again the emphasis is on physical and emotional control. Whitman concisely expressed the stoicism in his verbal tableaux of the wounded and dying. The case of John Mahay, shot through the bladder at Second Manassas, is not untypical of repressed suffering: 'The water ran out of his eyes from the intense pain, and the muscles of his face were distorted, but he utter'd nothing except a low groan now and then... He had a quiet funeral ceremony.' What is missing from Whitman's documentary memoranda is nearly all mention of sound in what must have been one of the noisiest environments of the century. For someone as voluble as Whitman the contrast was striking; about combat veterans he wrote, 'there hangs something majestic about a man who has borne his part in battles, especially if he is very quiet regarding it when you desire him to unbosom. I am continually lost at the absence of blowing and blowers among these old-young American militaires.' Whitman will occasionally mention the tromping of marching feet and the jangle of passing cavalry but a sense of hush hangs over all his camps.[7]

To take Whitman at his word, he was 'lost', not least because he realised that the victory of the Union meant the death of the individual, both literally and figuratively. So his writings on the war took the reticence and understatement that he found throughout Washington. This tendency is especially noticeable when he abstracts a wider scene or landscape; the omnipresent 'I' that marks his verse disappears. Here is his description of the disembarking of the wounded after Chancellorsville:

You ought to see the scene of the wounded arriving at the landing here foot of Sixth street, at night. Two boat loads came about half-past seven last night. A little after eight it rain'd a long and violent shower. The poor, pale, helpless soldiers had been debark'd, and lay around on the wharf and neighborhood anywhere. The rain was, probably, grateful to them; at any event they were exposed to it.

And on to the conclusion: 'The men generally make little or no ado, whatever their sufferings. A few groans that cannot be suppress'd, and occasionally a scream of pain, as they lift a man into the ambulance... To day, as I write, hundreds more are expected, and tomorrow and the next day more, and so on for many days.' Passages like this look forward to the lapidary modernism of a writer such as Hemingway. For instance, here is Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms* on a similar hospital scene:

There were not enough stretchers. Some of the wounded were noisy but most were quiet. The wind blew the leaves in the bower over the door of the dressing station and the night was getting cold. Stretcher-bearers came in all the time, put their stretchers down, unloaded them, and went away.

And Whitman could be as unflinching as Hemingway in looking at the horrors. He writes of Union troops executing some of Mosby's Raiders, a vicious band of southern irregulars: 'The next morning the two officers were taken in the town, separate places, put in the centre of the street, and shot. The seventeen men were taken to an open ground, a little to one side. They were placed in a hollow square, encompass'd by two of our cavalry regiments, one of which regiments had three days before found the bloody corpses of three of their men hamstrung and hung up by the heels to the limbs of trees...' The prisoners are shot down and 'there was no exultation, very little said; almost nothing, yet every man there contributed his shot'.[8]

These hints at a modernism yet to come are only tendrils that Whitman is shooting out under the compressive pressure of life in wartime. He could also easily fall into the worst excesses of Victorian bombast when describing the Civil War. He follows his prose poem to the wounded at Chancellorsville with a rendition of the battle that rings false in every aspect: 'a thousand deeds are done worth to write newer greater poems on -- and still the woods are on fire... Such, amid the woods, that scene of flitting souls... the impalpable perfume of the woods...' and so on. In the shifts of tone that mark his war writings, Whitman is wobbling between something new and the safety of familiar diction. Emblematic of this uncertainty is the contrast between the bathetic and popular 'O Captain, My Captain' -- which Whitman grew to detest -- and the tallying of the dead in 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd'. Much of 'Drum-Taps' combines traditional sentiment -- 'Come up from the fields father, here's a letter from our Pete' or 'Pour down your unstinted nimbus sacred moon' -- and entirely new ways of seeing. In 'Cavalry Crossing a Ford', he anticipates the imagism of a writer such as Pound: 'A line in long array where they wind betwixt green islands,/They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in the sun -- ' The absence of a point of view is startling coming from a poet whose 'I' is omnipresent; the poem following 'Cavalry...' reverts to custom: 'I see before me now...'[9]

Whitman was right when he wrote that the 'real war would never get in the books' in the obvious sense that no literary document can be anything more than a refraction of the real thing. But wartime was an implacable fact for Whitman, one that inevitably did shape his work even when as he tried to control the consequences of its impact. Whitman's resistance was mighty and, as Harold Bloom comments, Whitman declined tragedy, let alone capitulation. In his tableaux of the wounded, Whitman as nurse/ poet sought to sustain the individual against the pressing weight of the mass society that the war was creating; Whitman waged a quiet war against the necessary indifference of the surgeons.[10]

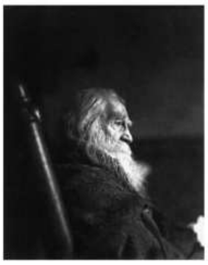

Figure 3. Photograph by Thomas Eakins, from 1891 negative. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

But that necessary indifference took its toll and the changes it imposed on Whitman can be charted in his portraits. Notably, Whitman's image began to change from the bravado troubadour of the open road or the open-faced seeker of the 'Christ image'. Whitman's new pose is now one of stasis instead of movement as he usually is shown seated, slouching backwards in a recline that became dramatically pronounced when his portrait, both in photographs and oils, was taken in the 1880s by the artist Thomas Eakins.[11]

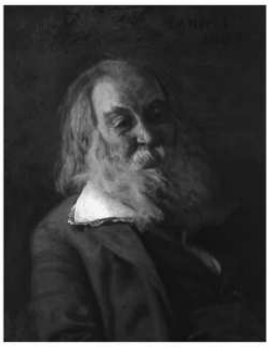

Figure 4. Portrait of Whitman by Thomas Eakins, 1888. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. General Fund Purchase.

Eakins's series of portraits show Whitman's body over time, as he aged and his health worsened (figure 3). But Whitman fitted himself to his circumstances and the evolution to the Eakins pose was an indication of changes in Whitman's consciousness as he internalised the impact of the war on himself and the nation. As in his poetry, Whitman is naturalising himself, subsuming himself into the physical world around him so that he seems to become part of the landscape. In Eakins' oil portrait (figure 4), the details of the poet's beard abstract themselves into a waterfall and the increasingly faint outlining of the hair etherealises the image, making it seem to sink into the background itself. What Whitman was doing, in collaboration with the artist, was modelling his body to re-create himself as the 'Green Man' of Anglo-Saxon neo-pagan mythology. The 'Green Man' was depicted by a figure whose head and other features have become interchangeable and inseparable from the tree or bush that is his home; most notably, the head and face are covered with a huge profusion of vegetation such as leaves or grass. Physically analogising himself with the 'Green Man' myth would have appealed to Whitman's sense of poetic mission because of his identification of himself with nature. Secularly, the 'Green Man' is a symbol of fecundity and all-encompassing artistic genius. But more deeply, the 'Green Man', whose mythic genealogy goes back to the Egyptian god Osiris, is a symbol of the cycle of death, decay, and rebirth; subjects much on the mind of Americans from 1861 onward.[12]

Whitman, in adopting the visage and pose of the 'Green Man', is offering himself up as the healer, the interlocutor who will make the broken world whole again. This role was an aspect of his ministry to the wounded that went beyond physical and moral succour. It was an act of witness and a laying on of hands in a sacrament of mourning and rebirth. Whitman's notebook lists and description of the wounded soldiers' last days are part of his poetic task of 'tallying', a word that occurs repeatedly in *Leaves of Grass*. In 'Chanting the Square Deific', Whitman writes: 'All sorrow, labor, suffering, I, tallying it, absorb in myself...' Not just absorptive, but regenerative; in 'Song of Myself' Whitman talks about speech as buried, enfolded and organic as a bud brought to life -- 'The dirt receding before my prophetical screams' -- and ordered by the poet's consciousness: 'My knowledge my live parts, it keeping tally with the meaning of all things.' In popular usage, tallying means to keep count and keeping a record is a particularly modern function. But as Harold Bloom has pointed out, 'tally' derives from the Latin 'talea' meaning a sprig or cutting. In his tallying, Whitman marries two opposites: the account book and the mystical connection between the living and the dead. Whitman's most sustained use of 'tallying' is in his great mourning poem, 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' when he breaks the lilac sprig and tallies Lincoln's passing: 'Here, coffin that slowly passes,/I give you my sprig of lilac' and crucially generalises with 'Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring' and concludes 'Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,/With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,/For you and the coffins all of you O death.' Here Whitman takes on the image of the 'Green Man' where he is shown disgorging blossoms and foliage from out of his fount-like mouth.[13]

The original 'Green Man' myth arose out of popular resistance to the spreading influence of the early Christian church. As the church universalised and centralised its cosmological message, localised opposition fought back to keep alive pre-Christian patterns of belief centred on traditional folkways and magic derived from the mysteries of the natural world. For Whitman, reversion to the 'Green Man' myth was a way of sidestepping and managing the fractious-ness and ugliness that the poet found in post-war American politics and culture. In particular, Whitman's commitment to a religious sense of the Union, a union made up of democratic individuals, was not restored with the defeat of the slave South but festered on in the sectionalised politics of Reconstruction. Socially, Whitman, like Carlyle, saw the emerging mass industrial society as a bane and a corruption of man's true nature, manifested throughout by the declension of civil society in everything from the ugliness of the cities to a toleration of dishonesty in public and private dealings. Faced with the manifold corruptions of America during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, Whitman's spleen was unregulated and at odds with the control he tried to exercise over both his verse and his writings about the war itself. Whitman's dismay was savagely expressed in the ironically entitled *Democratic Vistas:* 'Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness of heart than at present... We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout... The great cities reek with respectable as much as nonrespectable robbery and scoundrelism.' Finally, he damned New World democracy, 'an almost complete failure' in all but its material successes. The sacrifices of war had been forgotten, grassed over by time, like Sandburg's battlefields. Yet in becoming both literarily and figuratively the 'Green Man' Whitman practised a more audacious form of erasure: by naturalising the broken world he vaults us backwards out of time to the garden that existed before history.[14]

Notes

1. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry.* Second edition (New York and London, 1988), p. 271. It is a mark in the change in American democracy from the Civil War to the turn of the century that Whitman unifies America as the sum of its individuals while Sandburg reifies the country as *an* individual: from 'Chicago': 'Hog Butcher for the World... City of the Big Shoulders'. *Norton Anthology,* p. 270.

2. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass. The Library of America Edition,* with an introduction by John Hollander (New York, 1992), p. 31 (1855 edition), pp. 192--3 (1891--2 edition).

Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days* (1892; reprint ed., Boston, 1971), p. 60. This edition contains a comprehensive selection of Whitman portraits and scenes from the mid-nineteenth century.

3. *Leaves of Grass,* p. 32 (1855 edition).

Whitman's editing and rewriting can be conveniently assessed in the New York Public Library's facsimile of its 1860--1 edition of *Leaves of Grass: Walt Whitman's Blue Book: The 1860--61 Leaves of Grass Containing his Manuscript Editions and Revisions,* 2 vols. (New York, 1968).

Ralph Waldo Emerson's effusive praise of Whitman ('I greet you at the beginning of a great career...') launched the poet's literary reputation. Whitman's appearance fulfilled Emerson's wish that America have a poet commensurate to its subject; in his essay 'The Poet', Emerson wrote, 'I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not... address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstances.' Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First and Second Series. The Library of America Edition,* edited by Douglas Crase (New York, 1990), p. 235.

The circumstances of Emerson's letter and Whitman's subsequent use of it are discussed in Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman. A Life* (New York, 1980), pp. 202--4, which reprints Emerson's letter in full, and pp. 211--12. Whitman's remark to Horace Traubel about how often he was photographed is quoted in Kaplan, *Walt Whitman,* p. 38. It is worth noting that Whitman was repeatedly photographed even though he was never a popular success!

I owe much of my interpretation of Whitman and the culture of photography to Mary Panzer, past curator of photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; I am indebted to her for her advice and criticism. For a survey of photographs of Whitman see Ed Folsom, '"This Heart's Geography's Map": The Photographs of Walt Whitman', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 4 (Fall--Winter, 1986--7), pp. 1--76.

4. Whitman quoted in Kaplan, *Walt Whitman,* p. 40; Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* p. 299 ('Song of the Open Road'), p. 188 ('Song of Myself'). The 'Christ likeness' and the Kennedy quotation are in Kaplan, *Walt Whitman,* p. 35.

The history of the rise of American democracy and the American working classes is admirably surveyed in Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic. New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788--1850* (New York, 1984). See also John Higham, *From Boundlessness to Consolidation. The Transformation of American Culture, 1848--1860* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1969).

5. Whitman's move to Washington is covered in Kaplan, *Walt Whitman,* pp. 268--92. Whitman on the Gardner photograph, quoted in Folsom, 'The Photographs of Walt Whitman', p. 45.

6. Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore. Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York, 1962), especially chapter 15 (pp. 635--742), 'The Chastening of American Prose Style; John W. DeForest'). For the pressures on Whitman, and especially on his poetry, during war ime see the brief but illuminating remarks by Fiona Green in her review, 'Miles and Miles Away', *The Times Literary Supplement* (7 October 2005), p. 13. Walt Whitman, *Memoranda During the War,* edited by Peter Coviello (1875--6; reprint ed., New York, 2004), p. 31 ('Bad Wounds, The Young), p. 45 ('Death of a Wisconsin Officer').

7. Whitman, *Memoranda,* p. 66 ('A Case from Second Bull Run'), p. 42 ('Soldiers and Talks').

8. Whitman, *Memoranda,* p. 22 ('The Wounded from Chancellorsville'); Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929; reprint ed., New York, 1986), p. 57; Whitman, *Memoranda,* p. 63 ('A Glimpse of War's Hell-Scenes').

9. Whitman, *Memoranda,* p. 24 ('May 12 -- Night Battle, over a week since'). The poems mentioned in this paragraph are in Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* pp. 467--8, 459--67, 436--8, p. 453; the poem that follows 'Cavalry Crossing a Ford' is 'Bivouac on a Mountain Side', p. 435.

10. Harold Bloom, 'Introduction', *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane* (New York, 2000), p. xxiv.

11. The personal and artistic collaboration between Whitman and Thomas Eakins is documented and illustrated in Lloyd Goodrich, *Thomas Eakins,* 2 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1982), 2:28--38.

12. See William Anderson, *The Green Man: The Archetype of Our Oneness with the Earth* (San Francisco, 1990); also, Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1975) for a survey of the conflict in early modern history between the rise of the church and its silencing of local pre-Christian traditions and cosmology, a conflict that was a necessary precondition to modernisation.

I have not found a reference by Whitman to the 'Green Man'. However, he was steeped, like Emerson, in both Asian and western European myths and legends of the natural world.

13. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* p. 559, 213, 460--1. Bloom, 'Introduction', *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane,* pp. xxi--xxii.

14. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas,* quoted in Kaplan, *Walt Whitman,* pp. 336--7. Whitman's strategy here is what the art historian T. J. Clark has called the naturalisation of social processes: T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (New York, 1985), p. 8. Also, importantly, Timothy Sweet, *Traces of War. Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of Union* (Baltimore and London, 1990), esp. pp. 46--77.