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Self-nullification and its Pulverizing Impact on Humankind: A reading of the War Poems of Walt Whitman

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Walt Whitman, in his three transitional poems, *"Cavalry Crossing a Ford," "Bivouac on a Mountain Side,"* and *"An Army Corps on the March,"* concentrates to a great extent on the antithetical elements, such as the hardships of war, individual suffering, and loss of lives. In these poems, he describes vividly the gradual movement of the troops heading toward the battlefield, making the shift in the soldiers' feeling parallel with their movement: the closer they move to the front, the less enthusiasm they show for fighting. The ecstasy and fervor of war are declining, and more realistic images become the focal points here.

The poem *"Cavalry Crossing a Ford"* marks the very first decline of the interest and zeal for fighting. Instead of being active and determined, the soldiers are introduced as partly "negligent" resting on the saddle; an image that draws attention to the fading fervor of war and brings to light the hardship of war.

And as the troops move closer to the battlefield in *"Bivouac on a Mountain Side,"* the negligence which is evident in the first poem turns into hesitation and uncertainty. Whitman describes the army as if it is not sure of its aim: "I see before me now a traveling army halting" (p. 300, 1. 1).

In *"An Army Corps on the March,"* the impression of vacillation and ambiguity is further intensified. Likewise, the adversity of war and its deprivation become unmistakably thematic in this poem. Also, there is no reference whatever to the delight or zeal for fighting and the troops are pictured as moving with some difficulty:

> The swarming ranks press on and on, the dense
> brigades press on,
> Glittering dimly, toiling under the sun--the
> dust-covered men,
> In columns rise and fall to the undulations of the

ground,

With artillery interspersed the wheels rumble,

the horses sweat,

As the army corps advances. (p. 301, 11. 3-7)

In these lines one may see the enhancement in the amount of realistic detail in description of this military action; the movement of the troops is not as spectacular as it was pictured before: "In columns (the troops) rise and fall." The state of the machines and animals is analogous to the state of the soldiers: "the wheels rumble" and "the horses sweat, as the army corps advance."

In brief, the arrangement of the troops in these three poems is an obvious contrast to the presentation of the former march to the sound of the drums at the outbreak of the war *"Beat! Beat! Drums!"*. There the troops were led by a "ruthless force" moving toward the front vigorously with no obstacle that could withstand their demonstration. Now the image of this procession is totally different. The spectacular nature of their march is moribund, replaced by more realistic detail.

Whitman in his next poem, *"By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame,"* appears alone, sitting in a field camp:

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. (p. 301, 11. 1-3)

As he is watching this dimly outlined camp, the sight does not inspire him with any warlike thought; to the contrary, his consciousness is deeply affected by "tender and wondrous thoughts, of life and death, of home and the past and loved, and of those that are far away" (p. 301, 11. 6-7). These lines can express "some of the elementary psychological effects on the individual that accompany life in an active military operation" (p. 44). No doubt, the whole image is melancholy and inspires feelings of "fear and stealthiness" rather than zeal or fervor which are firmly discarded in this poem.

The general suggestion of *"By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame"* and of the other three poems is that the romantic zeal for fighting, or what is called the thesis of war, is on the decline, while all other antithetical elements are increasing rapidly on the scene and preoccupying the consciousness of the poet; this fact indicates that the thesis of war is less worthy of consideration than was previously attached to it. In accordance, one may predict here that the next poems in this grouping will be a presentation of the antithesis of war.

In the very next poem, *"Come Up from the Fields Father,"* which depicts the effect of the tragic news of war on the young recruit's parents, Whitman clearly presents the antithesis as

main and worthy of more serious thought than he has previously given it. The focal point of this poem is the hardship and tragedies of war rather than patriotic fervor and unrestrained eagerness. In accordance with strong emergence of the antithesis, the poet brings to the surface what had been concealed or relegated to the background. Likewise, the mere presumption of the Father to the Child, the symbol of zealous recruit in *"Song of the Banner at Daybreak,"* becomes a concrete reality here. There the Father warns the Child of an imminent fatal ending: "Forward to stand in front of wars--and O, such wars! what have you to do with them? With passions of demons, slaughter, premature death?" (p. 289, 11. 103-104). This prediction turns out to be real in the letter that carries the tragic news to a family of a dying soldier:

Come up from the fields' father, here's a letter
from our Pete,
And come to the front door mother, here's a letter
from thy dear son. (p. 302, 11. 1-2)

And even if the letter indicates "gunshot wound in the breast, cavalry scuffle, taken to hospital, at present low, but will be better" (p. 303, 11. 20-21). Pete, the young recruit, meets his fate almost exactly as it has been predicted by the Father. Pete "will never be better . . . While they stand at home at the door he is dead already, The only son is dead" (p. 303, 11. 29-31), leaving to his mother only the hardship and difficulty of midnight:

In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with
one deep longing,
0 that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from
life escape and withdraw,
To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son (p. 303, 11. 35-37).

With such intensity of emotion upon the tragic loss of a young Pete, the poem ends.

In probing the images and the theme of *"Come Up from the Fields Father,"* one may observe that the tragic reality of Pete's premature death completely dismisses from consciousness the ecstasy and fervor of war which used to be predominant in the poems. The poem has a sober and tragic tone, and all the details contribute systematically to the horror and misery of war. There is no expression of bravery or boldness of the victimized soul, nor any mention of the other romantic ideals of war. Those formerly dominant ideals have been abandoned and excluded from consideration.

In the poem "*Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night,"* the impression of the tragedy of war is intensified. As Whitman focuses on the effect of war on the parents in the previous poem, he focuses here on its devastation of the young recruits in the battlefield, much worse than of the father and mother. Whitman's purpose is to legitimatize his negation of the theory of war, and then to shake up its very foundations. He presents in this poem a battlefield image of another

unlucky comrade, who like Pete, symbolic of young recruits faces his ultimate fortune in this tragic war.

The accusation of war is further reinforced as the poet depicts the final state of the comrade who has been "dropt" by his side-- apparently with no real care; his dead body became a useless and mistreated object. This object is then "wrapped in his blanket" and "deposited" in a "rude-dug grave." With these images of the miserable ending of a dead comrade, Whitman marks clearly his denunciation of war which undermines the divinity of the human body. The poet always believes that a human body is divine and an incarnation of God (p.83). And this may shed light on the pain that the Civil War inflicted on him.

The presentation of the soldiers' death here contrasts sharply with the prior explanation of the recruits as marching to the beat of drums in *"First 0 Songs for a Prelude."* There Whitman emphasized the loveliness and physical excellence of all the young soldiers. Joyfully, the poet describes:

(How good they look as they tramp down to the
river, sweaty, with their guns on their
shoulders!
How I love them! how I could hug them, with their
brown faces,
And their clothes and knapsacks cover'd with
dust!) (p. 281, 11. 32-33)

The enjoyable image, which prevailed before the real altercation between the troops of the two forces, is changing entirely from now on, no more glamour or ecstasy will be sensed, and the state of the young soldiers inspires pity and sympathy rather than delight or enthusiastic approval.

In his next poem, *"A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown,"* Whitman describes further the tragic aspects of war. Here in his illustrative images, the war becomes terribly distressing in its effects on human beings; its tragedies are "beyond all description." In the battleground he sees a "sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made"; there he sees "groups of forms vaguely . . . on the floor" and "Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity, some of them dead" (p. 305, 11. 7, 10,14). Because of the war, the young recruits who were pictured as appealing and exulting in Manhattan become now a "crowd of bloody forms." Clearly this agonizing image of war is designed to lead the reader gradually to conform to the poet's convictions, which become a strong negation of the war.

After describing these horrible images of war in his next descriptive poem, *"A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim,"* Whitman meditates upon another tragic scene of three dead soldiers. All the details of this poem are designed to carry the same impact that the previous poems made; the human pain, suffering, and loss of lives. Yet in his solemn images the poet

reaches a climactic point in terms of his attitude against war. The scenes of human death lead him to regard war as "crucifixion of Christ." While facing one of his dead comrades, Whitman says:

Then to the third-- a face nor child nor old,
very calm, as of beautiful yellow-white
ivory;
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. (p. 307, 11. 13-15)

Unmistakably the reason of the poet is to denounce the spirit of war as a valid one. Therefore, he stresses the fact that his comrade is as divine as Christ and should not be subject to such a tragic war. And the fallen buddy is not only divine, but "brother of all." Whitman's emphasis on the loss of divinity of man and brotherhood because of the war may symbolize an obvious denial of the thesis of war, and then form a real threat to its validity. Evidently, the comradeship and divinity of man will become the major themes in the synthesis poems, taking the place of acrimony and revenge -- the dominant traits of the thesis.

The drama of death and human suffering ends in this volume in his poem *"As Toilsome I Wander'd Virginia's Woods,"* which may be considered as an epilogue to this section of tragedies. Here the youthful soldier becomes a mere memory on a plain tombstone placed at the side of his "rude-dug grave". "Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade" (p. 307, 1. 7) are words written in the memory of the fallen soldier who lies now "unknown" in the realm of the dead as an innocent victim of this off-putting war.

The eloquent poems in which the poet exhibits fully the hardship of war and human suffering represent elements obviously antithetical to the former thesis of war. Now these elements are all-important and occupy the poet's thought to the point of excluding the idea of war from deliberation. His profound and true involvement in picturing the aspects of the converse prohibits him from emphasizing the soldiers' bravery or valor, or any other romantic ideals for which the young soldiers died. The war and its romantic ideals as a thesis are now unimportant in the poet's ego, and what is rising at their expense is the contrast, the reality of the horror and anguish of war.

Positively with the vision of Christ in the face of a dead soldier and all other painful aspects of war "comes the realization that war is not 'a manly life in the camp' but a life of human suffering and agony as terrible as it is senseless, as personally tragic for the foe as for the friend" (p. 233). As an individual, the poet matures in his reflection, and he therefore feels the necessity to revise his old concepts and refine them in accordance with his new awareness. In other words, as he becomes fully aware of the realities of war, he reaches a stage of conscious

self examination which results in his discarding his old concepts. However, his self-examination and self-negation are not optional decisions. They are dialectical and they must happen. In accordance with such logic, self-negation could become the central theme in his next poems.

In *"Not the Pilot,"* Whitman explicitly repudiates his own nature. Regretfully, he explains, ". . . I have charged myself, heeded or unheeded, to compose a march for these States, For a battle-call, rousing to arms if need be, years, centuries hence" (p. 308, 11. 4-5). This self negation is more logical when viewed from the standpoint of the dialectic in respect to the growth of an individual's consciousness:

> One comes to a relative degree of certitude about certain objects, then in the light of further experience comes to revise these preliminary notions, and in this way gradually approximates to concepts of reality which are so satisfactory as to require less and less revision. (p. 23)

In *"Year that Trembled and Reel'd Beneath Me,"* Whitman emphasizes that his own self-negation is induced by a dialectical necessity in hopes that the reversal in his theme might not be considered as inconsistency or illogicality; he says here:

> Must I change my triumphant songs? Said I to
>
> myself,
>
> Must I indeed learn to chant the cold dirges
>
> of the baffled?
>
> And sullen hymns of defeat? (p. 308, 11. 4-6)

The use of the verb "must" is to suggest that there is a requirement that dictates the reversal of theme and tone in his songs. Though, in this poem the poet appears to be merely dwelling upon the thought, yet he is not yet fully adopting it or compliant to it, rather.

In *"The Wound-Dresser,"* Whitman explicitly pictures the new reversal in theme and the changing feeling and mood in his song. Here he adopts a new role and emphasizes that he is fully aware that a transition is taking place within his own self:

> (Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the
>
> alarum, and urge relentless war,
>
> But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd
>
> and I resign'd myself,
>
> To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently
>
> watch the dead.) (p. 309, 11. 4-6)

In brief, what the poet exhibits and intensifies in the poems of the antithesis are the hardship, horror, human suffering, and anguish of war. And the more tragedies he witnesses, the deeper the idea of denouncing and debunking war is established in his consciousness. As a result

of his tragic experiences among the dead and wounded, a theme of self-negation becomes dominant in his songs. He negates his old patriotic songs that he had composed for war in the first movement. His songs in the poems of the antithesis counterbalance his former songs of the thesis, and in these two groupings of poems a great number of polarities are purposefully cultivated by the poet in such a manner that in the third group, or the synthesis poems, he will resolve the paradoxes and synthesize the contradictions he has initiated in his first two movements.

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