

Poetry and the Mediation of Value:

Whitman on Lincoln

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The Tanner Lectures consider questions of human value. I take as my texts today, as examples of how the art of poetry mediates value, Walt Whitman's four poems on the death of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth, in conspiracy with others, on April 14, 1865, while the Civil War was still ongoing. In the twenty days between the assassination and Lincoln's May 4 burial in Springfield, Illinois, many events occurred. There was first the shocked five-day interim following the assassination; then the thronged April 19 state funeral for Lincoln in Washington; then the seventeen-hundred-mile ceremonial journey of the funeral train bearing Lincoln's coffin through Baltimore, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, New York, Albany, Buffalo, Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, Michigan City, and Chicago. On April 26 Booth had been apprehended and shot, and by April 27 eight conspirators were in jail (awaiting the trial that would end in the hanging of four of them on July 7). All of these events were available to Whitman as he wrote his four poems, as was the fact that the body of Lincoln's son Willie (who had died three years earlier) was exhumed from its grave in Washington and reburied in the Lincoln tomb at Springfield.

Whitman's poems on Lincoln were composed in the following order: the short occasional poem "Hush'd Be the Camps Today" (dated April 19, 1865, the day of Lincoln's funeral service in Washington, and printed in the May 1865 edition of *Drum-Taps*); the formally rhymed poem "O Captain, My Captain" and the free-verse elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (both added to the second edition of *Drum-Taps*, September 1865); and the later epitaph "This Dust Was Once the Man" (1871). The assassination of Lincoln of course provoked a flood of writing—journalistic, biographical, poetic. Of the many poems then written, Whitman's memorials have lasted the best; and in considering what values they select, enact, and perpetuate, I want to ask by what aesthetic means they make those values last beyond the momentary topical excitement of Lincoln's death.

Poetry mediates values differently from prose. In prose, values are usually directly stated, illustrated, clarified, and repeated. One has only to think of the classical form of the oration—and its descendants the sermon, the stump speech, and the university lecture—to see the importance placed, in an oral form, on reduplication of matter. Whitman's

poetry retains many vestiges of the oration; and we can see such vestiges in “Lilacs.” But most lyric poetry, being short, cannot avail itself of the ample terrain of oratory; it has consequently had to find extremely compressed ways by which to convey value. Readers of poetry not only become adept in unfolding the implications of a poetic language; they also learn to see—by exercising historical knowledge—what is being left out that might well have been present. In respect to the conveying of value, what is left out is always as important as what is put in. Let me give one quick example: Lincoln was assassinated on Good Friday, and commentary on his death quickly attached to him—probably for that reason—the word “martyr” with its overtones of Christ’s sacrifice. Whitman offers no word placing Lincoln in the context of Christ’s passion, Good Friday, or Easter Sunday. He does not put Lincoln in a Judeo-Christian frame at all—even though contemporary commentators such as Bishop Matthew Simpson at the Washington funeral compared Lincoln to Moses.

I will come back to what is left out by Whitman, but I want to return now to the main question—how we can examine poetry’s mediation of value. To relate what is left out to what is put in is a task relatively easier with respect to narration than with respect to lyric. One can see that a novelist (say, Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick*) has included no female characters and suggest what effects and values are enabled by, and also prohibited by, this stratagem. But in lyric, there is no such obvious norm. A symphony score employing no violins would be visibly anomalous; but nobody noticed at first when Georges Perec wrote a novel (*The Void*) without the letter *e* because letters—and words—are less visible than women or violins.

It is imagination, then, that is our first recourse in thinking about poetry and value—the imagination of what is left out. This imagination operates not simply on the grosser level of images (such as the Judeo-Christian ones of Moses or Christ that I have mentioned) but also on the level of syntax—in what other manner could this sentence have been framed?—and of diction—what words might have occurred by contrast to the ones we have? The critical imagination must operate even in the realm of sound, especially at crucial poetic moments, asking what alternative phonetic effects might have been used instead of the given ones.

It is generally agreed that images and the semantic content of words mediate value, but syntax and sound are rarely conceded that potential. In prose, syntax and sound are generally less powerful than in poetry; in

poetry they provide a crucial ground to the assertions of value carried by images and words. And, since a short poem is in fact a single complex word in which all individual components are bound together in an inalterable relational syntax, there is, strictly speaking, nothing that does not become a carrier of value in poetry (even such harmless-looking particles as the indefinite and the definite article).

Every lyric belongs to one or more anterior theoretical paradigms of genre. The paradigm may be a formal verse-whole, such as the sonnet, which brings with it certain values—those of courtly life—and general expectations (that it might concern, for instance, love or politics). Or the paradigm may be a formal stanza, such as *terza rima*, which brings with it overtones of Dante, the afterlife, and the value of spiritual self-scrutiny. Or the paradigm may be that of a genre that has no formal shape: the English elegy, for instance, can take any verse shape, but must reflect the death of one or more persons and must meditate on the value of a given sort of human life. Or the paradigm may be that of a genre which, while having no prescribed shape, does have a prescribed length and tone: an epitaph, for instance, must be short and impersonally phrased, and it must assert a final judgment. Or the anterior paradigm may prescribe only one part of the stanza: the presence of a refrain at the end of each stanza, for instance, suggests the value of folk-motifs and of incremental intensification of emotion. A poem can ally itself with the first-person singular paradigm (which is the most common lyric self-presentation, valuing individual experience), or it may depart from that norm by choosing a first-person plural paradigm, in order to claim collective utterance and, with it, collective value.

A poem is expected not only to inscribe itself within the subject-matter and values implied by its paradigms, but also to extend, reverse, or otherwise be original in respect to those very paradigms. It is in the use and critique of its own antecedent paradigms that a poem most fully reveals its own value-system. It is this that I hope to show in reflecting on Whitman's poems concerning Lincoln. The value-system of an original poet—and therefore of his or her poems—will be in part consonant with, in part in dispute with, the contemporary values of the society from which he, and they, issue. Were the poetry not intelligible with respect to those social values, it could not be read; were it not at a distance from them in some way, it would not be original. The most disturbing lyrics are those, such as Whitman's, in which so many shared social values appear that one is surprised when interior divergence manifests

itself. Whitman's memorials of Lincoln are patriotic ones, devoted to the image of Lincoln, voiced in solidarity with the Union army, sharing the nation's grief at Lincoln's death and at the carnage of the Civil War, and (in "Lilacs") proud of the much-celebrated beauty of the American landscape. What is it, then, that makes them original? And what values does that originality consecrate? And why is "Lilacs"—the longest of Whitman's poems about Lincoln—also the best? What does it allow that the others do not?

"To have great poems, there must be great audiences, too," Whitman had declared in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*. His poetic depended on a close connection, even an erotic one, with his imagined listeners: he not only wished to be their spokesman, he wanted *them* to call out to *him* to be their spokesman, thereby legitimating his writing. It is not surprising, then, that Whitman's first literary response to Lincoln's death—after the wordless silence that followed the shocking news of the assassination—was to speak in the collective voice of the Union army, as soldiers call on the poet to "sing . . . in our name . . . one verse." They ask that the subject-matter of this verse should be "the love we bore him." What the soldiers want is not a eulogy of Lincoln's personal life and actions, of the sort pronounced from the pulpit in Washington, but rather an articulation of their mourning. It is the soldiers themselves, as the poem opens, who devise the liturgy appropriate to the death of their commander-in-chief: "Let the camps be hushed, let the weapons be draped, and let us each retire"—to do what? to mourn, to muse, yes, but above all to "celebrate"—in the liturgical, not the festive sense—"our dear commander's death." Any human being can perform these personal acts of silence, weapon-draping, and musing, just as any human being can voice the consolation of the second stanza, as the soldiers say that Lincoln has escaped "time's dark events, / Charging like ceaseless clouds across the sky."

Only after they have invented a collective ritual, and offered a collective consolation, do the soldiers feel the absence of something necessary to their ceremony—an elevated, that is, sung form of utterance offered in their name. It is significant to them that it should be sung by one who, because he has been a "dweller in camps," knows the particular heaviness of soldiers' hearts. This short poem values collectivity—in the voice it adopts, in the rituals it devises. It not only values—more than all pomp-filled state memorials—the love borne by the common soldiers, but it also views poetry as merely one ingredient in an indigenous

ritual, devised by the people for the people. Why, then, do the soldiers need a verse at all? The poem answers by showing the omnimobility of words. The soldiers remain bound in their camps, but the poet's invisible verse, as the syntax shows, can insert itself into the very circumstance and moment of far-off burial: "As they invault the coffin there, / Sing—as they close the doors of earth upon him—one verse." Lincoln is valued in this collectively voiced poem less as president of a country than as beloved commander of a brave army, themselves accustomed to "time's dark events, / Charging" at them. Yet the view of Lincoln is still a hierarchical one—not in a feudal, but in a military, sense. He is not king or president, but he is the commander. It is not surprising that the democratic Whitman will eventually turn to valuing Lincoln outside a military hierarchy.

Now that he has written the collective call beckoning him to sing, Whitman can compose the verse that will show, from the inside, the army's love and their heavy hearts. "O Captain, My Captain" is sung in the voice of a Union recruit. He is a young boy; he has sailed on the ship of state with his captain, whom he calls, Oedipally, "dear father"; the tide of war has now turned and victory is in sight, as cheering crowds welcome the victorious ship. At this very moment the captain is shot, and dies. The moving turn of the poem comes two-thirds of the way through the poem. In the first two stanzas the boy addresses the captain as someone still living, a "you" who, cradled in the boy's arm, can hear the words directed to him. But in the third stanza the young sailor unwillingly resorts to third-person reference, marking his captain as dead: "My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still." The hierarchy of commander—remote from his troops—has been lessened to the hierarchy of captain—sharing a ship with his men—and then lessened to the familial hierarchy of father and son, as Lincoln's relation to others becomes ever more democratic, even intimate.

Two stylistic features—its meter and its use of refrain—mark "O Captain" as a designedly democratic and populist poem. In each stanza, four seven-beat lines (each the equivalent of two standard ballad lines of tetrameter and trimeter) are followed by a slightly changing ballad refrain. The refrain—after two trimeters—returns to the tetrameter/trimeter ballad beat. The poem, by its form, implies that soldiers and sailors have a right to verse written for them in the sort of regularly rhyming stanzas that they like best. And because Whitman has chosen to speak now as a sailor-boy, the diction of the poem offers the clichés of

victory that such a boy might use: "Our fearful trip is done, / The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won, / The port is near." Everything on shore adheres to the expected conventions of popular celebration—"For you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills, / For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths." Even "the bleeding drops of red," the "mournful tread" of the sailor, and the captain "fallen cold and dead" come from the clichés of war-journalism.

Whitman was not, I think, hypocritical in writing such a poem; he was answering his first poem with the second poem that he thought the first had called for. But in adopting the voice of the young boy mourning his "father," Whitman had sacrificed his own voice entirely. Because he valued, and validated, the claim of his audience that he represent their heavy hearts, Whitman thought to do so by becoming one of them. Wanting to value democracy, he thought he had to exemplify it by submitting to the rhythms and rhymes and clichés of the popular verse prized by the soldiers, rather than inventing a democratic form of his own. Because he was bent on registering individual response as well as the collective wish expressed in "Hush'd Be the Camps," he took on the voice of a single representative sailor, silencing his own idiosyncratic voice. And wanting to show the sailor and his father-captain as participants in a national endeavor, he adopted the allegorical cliché of the Ship of State as the ruling metaphor of his poem.

Though we do not know, factually, that "O Captain" was composed before "Lilacs," it seems to me that the sailor-boy's dirge must have been the direct response to the call in "Hush'd Be the Camps." "Lilacs" is, by contrast, the outburst of individual voice following on Whitman's attempt to honor collectivity by writing in the voice of the heavy-hearted soldiers and to defend representativeness in verse by writing in the voice of the mourning sailor. He was valuing Lincoln as commander in the one and captain-father in the other; he was valuing poetry as a contributor to collective ritual in the one and as a form of populist expression in the other. When we come to "Lilacs," all the values change.

"Lilacs" is written not collectively, and not representatively, but in Whitman's own original lyric voice. In it, Lincoln is not placed in a vertical social hierarchy as president, commander-in-chief, captain, or even father, but is rather placed horizontally, as a fellow-man, even if one distinguished by superlative wisdom and sweetness. There is ritual in the poem—even received ritual, carried out by other mourners but even by the poet, as he lays conventional bouquets of lilies and roses on the

coffins of the dead; but there are also strange new rituals, to which I will come, outnumbering the conventional ones. And—most striking of all—there is a suppression of the coincidence of the day of the assassination with Good Friday, as well as a refusal to echo the Christian rituals of services and sermons and hymns that pervaded the twenty days preceding Lincoln's burial.

In "Lilacs," the coffin-train indeed makes its long and mournful journey—in a funereal ritual unprecedented in American history, and therefore attractive to Whitman as an original event—but aside from the mentions of the mourning ceremonies attending the train at each of its stops, nothing in the poem depends on historical fact. The poem never mentions the assassination, the assassin, or the jailed and executed conspirators; the Emancipation Proclamation and other acts of Lincoln's presidency are passed over in silence. Even the startling fact of the reburial of Lincoln's son is omitted. We are given, instead of facts, three symbols—the lilac of this earth, the star of the evening sky, and the hermit-thrush of the dark swamp. By apportioning his poem among the classic three realms of upper-world, middle-world, and underworld, Whitman gives cosmic importance—rather than the political importance ascribed to it by historians—to Lincoln's death. The poem does not value facts: it does not value politics; it does not value Christianity; it does not value speaking in a voice other than one's own. It is written in free verse of the most original sort; it does not value debased popular taste in poetry. Has Whitman repudiated "Hush'd Be the Camps" and "O Captain"? Or does something of them linger in "Lilacs"?

What does "Lilacs" value? And how are its valuings enacted? And what aesthetic value do they exhibit? These questions have answers too complex to be fully enunciated here, but let me give some brief observations. "Lilacs" is a sequence constructed of sixteen cantos ranging in length from five to fifty-three lines. It builds up to its longest and most lyrical moment in canto 14, achieves its moral climax in canto 15, and ends with a coda of "retrievements out of the night" in canto 16. The nonreligious "trinity" that opens the poem (perennial lilac, Lincoln-star, and the "thought of him I love") will become, by the end, the trinity of "lilac and star and bird": that is, the bird and its carol become the equivalent of the opening "thought" of the poet. It is unusual for Whitman to establish such a firm symbolic constellation; his secular trinity is set as a memorable elegiac emblem of the formality that is one of the poem's values. This is not an intimate elegy: Lincoln is named a

“friend,” but he is also the “powerful western fallen star” who is due formal honor as a symbol of the ideal. That honor is given character in the symbolic trinity dedicated to his memory.

The first act of the speaker—after he has initially lamented his helplessness in the grasp of the “harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul”—is to break off (in line 17) a sprig of lilac from the lilac-bush growing in the dooryard. No explanation is given for this act; it is not until line 45 that we learn why he took the sprig. It is to have a flower to lay on Lincoln’s coffin: “Here, coffin that slowly passes, / I give you my sprig of lilac.” This is not the conventional sort of floral offering; it has passed through no florist’s hands. The speaker knows the conventions of arranged “bouquets” made of the rarer “roses and early lilies” and indeed later observes these conventions, as his mourning becomes generalized to “the coffins all of you.” Still, he prefers his roughly torn and unarranged lilacs:

All over bouquets of roses,
O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,
But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
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.

The poem dismisses the idea of personal immortality; when the star sinks, it is gone forever:

. . . I watch’d where you pass’d and was lost in the netherward black
of the night,
As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb,
Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone.

What the poet can confirm, as a principle of hope, is the natural vegetative resurrection from which Christ took the metaphor of the risen wheat: the funeral train, he says, passes “the yellow-spear’d wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen.” And in the old woods, “lately violets peep’d from the ground, spotting the gray debris.”

The chief stylistic trait of this first part of the poem is the long-withheld subject of its sentences. The run of sentences with postponed subjects begins in the one-sentence, six-lined canto 3: “In the dooryard . . . / Stands the lilac-bush . . . / With many a pointed blossom . . . / With

every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard . . . / With delicate-color'd blossoms . . . / A sprig with its flower I break." In canto 5, with its seven-line sentence, the continuo is carried by a series of adverbs and participial adjectives—"Over . . . / Amid . . . / Amid . . . / Passing . . . / Passing . . . / Carrying . . . / Night and day journeys a coffin." We can see that this sentence-form imitates the long passage of the train across the eastern third of the North American continent. It is important to Whitman to ally his single tributary sprig of lilac with all the preceding civil and religious ceremonies honoring the dead man; and canto 6 is the poem's chief concession to factual reporting; but this canto is staged so that the public observances lead up to the poet's anomalous, solitary, and unarranged sprig:

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,
 Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land,
 With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with the cities draped in black,
 With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd women
 standing,
 With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night,
 With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the
 unbared heads,
 With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,
 With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising
 strong and solemn,
 With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin,
 The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—where amid
 these you journey,
 With the tolling tolling bells' perpetual clang,
 Here, coffin that slowly passes,
 I give you my sprig of lilac.

The poem here gives what all the contemporary photographs of the journey cannot: movement, silence, sound, tonality, atmosphere. While other poems about Lincoln's death mostly contented themselves with abstractions of praise and grief, Whitman renders the very scenes of mourning in present-participial form, making them unroll before our eyes in what seems real time. The journey comes to a telling climax—after all the elaborate tributes of the cities—in the single lilac-sprig. The poem, it is evident, values showing over telling, and the senses over abstraction; it emphasizes the contribution of each individual act to the tally of mourning gestures. It also values drama—not only in the changing chiaroscuro tableaux of homage presented here, but also in the

narrative syntactic drama of the sentence that presses toward the gift of the dooryard lilac.

One could think that the poem could end here. The poet has contributed his flower: is that not enough? We soon learn that it is not: he puts aside the summons of the bird heard in canto 9 to ask the three questions of canto 10: "How shall I warble? . . . / how shall I deck my song? . . . / what shall my perfume be for the grave?" The last problem is easily solved: the perfume will be the sea-winds and the breath of the poet's chant. But the first two are less rapidly answered. In fact, the first—"How shall I warble?"—is not at this point replied to at all, while "How shall I deck my song?" mutates into the specific question, "What shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls, / To adorn the burial-house of him I love?" This question originates from Whitman's knowledge of Egyptian tombs, decorated on the interior with idyllic pictures of daily life. He will renew this convention in canto 11, making resonant pictures of American landscapes and action: "Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes . . . / And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen homeward returning." He includes no religious iconography on the walls of the tomb; he employs only the iconography of the land, catalogued in terms redolent of aesthetic bliss: "With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding the air . . . / In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-dapple here and there." The praise of the beauty of America and its "gentle soft-born measureless light" almost distracts the poet from the still-unanswered question "How shall I warble?"; and though he once again turns toward the chant of the bird, "limitless out of the dusk," and calls it, unexpectedly, a "Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe," he represents himself as still held back from "the swamps, the recesses," by the star above, and the lilac beside him.

He is really held back by his prolonged cataloguing of beauty, which spills over into the beginning of canto 14, as the poet glosses "the large unconscious scenery of my land." Whitman values very highly, as a poetic structure, the accumulation of sentences of inventory. Beyond the formal triad of his symbols, beyond the conferring of cosmic significance on Lincoln's death by showing its consequence to upper and lower and middle worlds, beyond the drama of the periodic sentence pressing toward its climax, beyond the rendition of theatrically lit atmospheres, he valued the multiplicity and beauty of the world's objects, landscapes, and inhabitants, even in the moment of mourning. Inventories fill most

of the poems of *Leaves of Grass* (and all parodies of Whitman begin with a swell of egotism followed by unbridled lists of categories).

But the beautiful categories of canto 13, though they overflow into canto 14, continue under a shadow. While the poet, ravished by the “heavenly aerial beauty . . . / and the summer approaching with richness,” watches the ample scene, “—lo, then and there, Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest, / Appear’d the cloud.” The poet finds “the knowledge of death” walking on one side of him and “the thought of death” walking on the other side, “and I in the middle as with companions, and holding the hands of companions.” He finally flees to the swamp, which is then revealed as an underworld of “shores of . . . water” and “solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.” This is not the Christian afterlife, but the underworld of shades and ghosts in the midst of the waters of Lethe and the Styx that we know from Greek myth. By annexing the afterworld of classical Greece to the tomb-decorations of Egypt, Whitman tells us that he prefers these ways of knowing and encountering death to those offered by the Christianity in which he had been raised. In 1891, the last year of his life, after he had suffered strokes and other disabling illnesses, he wrote: “The philosophy of Greece taught normality and the beauty of life. Christianity teaches how to endure illness and death. I have wonder’d whether a third philosophy fusing both, and doing full justice to both, might not be outlined” (*Collected Writings II, Collect and Other Prose*, ed. Floyd Stovall [New York: NYU Press, 1964], p. 708). But when he was writing “Lilacs,” it was the “normality” of Egypt and Greece, rather than Christian patience, that Whitman valued.

We have reached, in the second half of canto 14, the lyric center of “Lilacs,” the song of the hermit-thrush, where one supreme aesthetic value of the poem—the value of free musical language—resides. Though this is the poetic center of the elegy, it is not its moral climax, which will come in canto 15, when the poet fully accedes to vision. However, we must ask ourselves first about this lyric center. “And the charm of the carol rapt me,” says the poet: what is that charm? The “carol” is a hymn to a female deity, Death, and is therefore allied to the earliest lyrics we have, the Orphic hymns to abstractions such as Death and the Homeric hymns to the gods and goddesses such as the maternal goddess Demeter, mother of the lost Persephone in Hades. The song of the thrush, beginning in invocation (“Come lovely and soothing death”), and becoming a song of praise (“praise! praise! praise! / For the

sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death”), invents a celebratory ritual (“Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee”) to replace the mourning ritual of somber dirges and tolling bells and shuddering organs invented by Christianity. Yet the repudiation of Christian melancholy, forceful as it is, is less memorable than the seductive oceanic rhythms of lyric loosed to be itself. Whitman “overwrites,” with this rhythm, the dragging journey of the train. As the train moved across the land, we heard it go “Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities”: now we hear the carol float above the train, over the same landscape:

Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the
prairies wide,
Over the dense-pack’d cities all and the teeming wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.

As the song of blissful death “overwrites” the journey of melancholy death, lyric claims its right to the joy that resides in art, even in art of tragic import.

As the bird sings the acceptance of death, the poet, tallying the song in his soul, finds that as he lets go of his former fear and denial, his vision awakes: “My sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed, / As to long panoramas of visions.” The painful silent moral visions, gifts of memory, replace, with a wrench, the aesthetic sights of the earth seen earlier by the eye of sense. Whitman first admits to a “screen vision” of mutilated battle-flags (“pierc’d with missiles / . . . and torn and bloody, . . . And the staffs all splinter’d and broken”). As he persists in his resolve to remember all, the splintered flags of the “screen vision” give way to the greater mutilations of flesh they were hiding:

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.

At this point the elegy for Lincoln resumes in an explicit way its earlier guarded gesture (“For you and the coffins all of you O death”) toward all those ordinary soldiers who have died in the war. This is the moment of highest moral value in the poem, as the poet allows himself to see all that the war has cost. At the same time, by resurrecting a word used earlier, apparently casually, in the mention of the violets that peeped from the ground, “spotting the gray debris,” Whitman reminds us that de-

bris is the compost of new growth. It was the Union that was to grow strong from the battle-corpses.

The drama of canto 15 is enacted in the style of a chronicler of apocalypse:

And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book . . .
 And I saw a strong angel proclaiming . . . And I beheld, and lo . . .
 And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals . . . And I saw,
 and behold a white horse. (Revelation 5, 6)

And I saw askant the armies,
 I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags . . .
 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.

This style boldly claims, if implicitly, that Whitman expects his vision to be granted the same credence as that granted the book of Revelation; the passage is his most blasphemous transvaluation of Christian value.

In the coda of canto 16, the poet resumes his earlier themes, and finds his trinity complete—"Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul"—but unexpectedly is not permitted to leave, in memory, the underworld. Though in real life the lilac is "there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring," the poet finds "Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul, / There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim." Because the underworld is "there," the poet is by implication "here" in the normal world—but the poem cannot enact the "here" in which he finds himself. The living part of his soul is still there in the dusk and the dimness of Hades, twined with his trinity.

If we seek out the originality of "Lilacs"—beginning with its refusal to name Lincoln and its suppression of his civic and military roles—we can see that though it indeed obeys many paradigms of its genre, the English elegy, it wears its rue with a difference, subduing Christian symbols to those of Egypt and Greece, celebrating the natural beauty of life rather than the prospective beauties of heaven, finding its consolation in new joyous rituals of death, and asserting that its revelation of corpses and skeletons is as prophetically binding as St. John's revelation of heaven. Its style asserts the value of showing rather than telling, the value of the idiosyncratic voice over the collective or representative voice, and—in its journeying sentences that climax in a definite halt—

the value of acceptance, rather than denial, of the full stop of death. Its other striking sentences, phrased not in the progressive pressure to end, but rather in arias ebbing and flowing without resolution, assert the fluctuating harmonies and contrasts of the expansive but inconclusive rhythms of experience:

Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song,
As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding
the night,
Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again
bursting with joy,
Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven.

After "Lilacs," Whitman wrote one other poem concerning Lincoln—the only one left to write, Lincoln's epitaph. It was published in 1871, six years after Lincoln's death. Lincoln is no longer friend or wise and sweet soul; he is reduced to dust. The poet grasps the dust to himself: "This dust," he says. He does not point to the grave, saying "That dust." This is not a poem gesturing outward toward the "there" of the lilac or the "there" of the underworld. The poem is massively imbalanced: the four words "This dust was once" make up the left half of the copula, while the right half requires thirty words. The proportion is therefore appropriate to the light dust versus the complex description of the consequential man. Lincoln, in becoming dust, becomes historical, "the man who guided the preservation of the Union." The initial adjectives are themselves complex, as the initial personal "gentle" is played off against the final official "resolute," while in between we see the "plain" of Lincoln's upbringing set against the "just" character of his legal profession. I hear the line with the emphasis on "and": "Gentle, plain, just—*and*—[when the hour came] resolute." The next adjective, applied not to Lincoln but to his guiding hand, is "cautious"—this speaks to his wisdom. What is most surprising about the epitaph is that it, unlike most such honorific inscriptions, gives no active verb to its subject. Lincoln is not said to be "the man . . . Who saved the Union of these states." That would give him the power of a monarch. It was the thousands of soldiers, alive and dead, who saved the Union; the president, *primus inter pares*, was merely their supervising fellow-participant. But the soldiers are left unmentioned as such: they exist only subsumed within the passive verb. Yet they are the saviors, and as such they are the ultimate repository of individual value, even in an epitaph praising

their leader. The very peculiar syntax of this epitaph reserves the main subject and verb of the subsidiary adjective clause—"The Union of these States was saved"—to the very end and inverts the normal word order to "Was saved the Union of these States," thereby putting the Union in the climactic syntactic position of national value, placed even above the actions taken to save it. Tucked in between the presiding cautious hand and its salvific agents is the averted horror: the continuation of slavery. Slavery is here named by euphemism, as though its proper name should never again be uttered in human hearing. It becomes, superlatively, "the foulest crime," and it is placed in a cosmic spatio-temporal field: it is "the foulest crime known in any land or age."

What makes this epitaph a poem? Above all, its tortured syntax, which tries to tuck into thirty words the personal, professional, ethical, and prudential qualities of a single historical personage; his relation to the Union Army; the soldiers' relation to the winning of the war; the chief result of that victory; and a description of the ancient, widespread, and evil crime against which both president and soldiers opposed their lives. Syntax, when tortured, becomes a sign of a complexity too great to be naturally contained within a single sentence and yet bent on being thus contained because all the elements of that given complexity are inextricable one from another and must therefore be named in the same breath. Whitman's last word on Lincoln emphasizes his historical greatness, based on greatness of character, while reserving to him merely a guiding role in the ultimate value, the salvation of the Union. This is a poem of Roman succinctness and taciturnity, betraying its depth of feeling chiefly in the implicit figure of the scales—in which a handful of dust is equal in weight to the salvation of the Union, with the copula serving as the needle of equilibrium. In it the poet speaks not collectively, not representatively, and not idiosyncratically and lyrically; he speaks impersonally, as the recording angel. This poem places value on the voice of history in final judgment. Walt Whitman, the man, is sublimed away; this poem is—to use Elizabeth Bishop's words—one of those "admirable scriptures of stone on stone." One can see its words chased on a tablet: it is itself a tombstone. But did any tombstone ever carry such an epitaph?

There is more to say about the values imaged and implied by these four poems. In attempting the subject of Lincoln from four different perspectives, Whitman (who had often seen Lincoln and had described him in prose of a journalistic and mimetic nature) turns away from

personal and historic mimesis of the man and president to symbolic mimesis, framed for the conveying of value. In each case the aesthetic vehicle—the collective voice of the soldiers in the camps, the single voice of the grieving novice-sailor, the idiosyncratic voice of the poet coming to know death, and the impersonal voice of historic judgment—offers a different possibility of expression. The shorter poems show us, by contrast, how and why “Lilacs” reaches its heights and its amplitudes. All of the poems show us Whitman debating what stance the American poet should adopt when speaking of important national events. If each stance—collective, representative, idiosyncratic, impersonal—has something to be said for it, then we are shown that value can be mediated by poetry in any number of ways and that both the poet and his audience are modeled differently in each. We are warned, by the greater success of the most original of the four poems, of the dangers to the poet in attempting to speak collectively or within the bounds of popular taste—or even with the impersonal voice of historiography. It is chiefly when a public crisis evokes some crisis in the soul of the poet—here, Whitman’s crisis in judging what could be truly said of human mortality—that a public poem takes on lasting aesthetic value.