Proximity to—and from—Bodies: The Civil War Poetry of Whitman & Dickinson

As two writers of the Romanticism era, neither Walt Whitman nor Emily Dickinson could ignore the reality of a war taking place on American soil—the same soil of the land either poet sought to represent in their respective works. Both Whitman and Dickinson capture the horrors of war through poetry albeit in radically different measures. In her 2005 article “Addresses to a Divided Nation: Images of War in Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman,” Faith Barrett states the works of both poets highlight their pressing need to build a “rapport” with their readers, especially during the Civil War era (Barrett 89). The ways in which each poet represents war in their work makes this need to develop rapport more apparent. In this paper I aim to show the differences in ways Whitman and Dickinson portray the dead, dying, or wounded of war in their own unique approach: the former in a more obvious manner, with physical, vivid descriptions of wounded bodies, and the latter with a subtler, more removed approach, relying on heavy usage of punctuation in place of human bodies.

The premiere American Poet who sought to collectively represent the American experience, Whitman’s voice remains an integral one to the American literary canon in the historical time frame of the Civil War. Seeking to speak on behalf of all—if not most—Americans, Whitman may have felt torn between a need to serve as the representative American voice, and his personal stance as an abolitionist. Much of this tension appears in Whitman’s poetry. Barrett claims Whitman’s Civil War poetry expresses his “desire to address the nation and to bind it together again through a poetry which represents death as redemptive and meaningful,” in an attempt to heal a divided nation with his words (89).
According to Barrett, Dickinson—a poet who doesn’t wish to publish her work under conventional printing measures—contrasts Whitman’s desire to heal the nation through his poetry (89). Rather than having no interest in having her voice heard, Dickinson’s decision “gives her the freedom not to compromise her own vision” (ibid). Even though she “feels obligated to represent war’s horrors,” she acknowledges poetry’s limits in faithfully and truthfully representing the casualties of war (89-90). In contrast to Whitman’s collective poetic voice, Barrett points out, readers of Dickinson “do not expect to encounter a writer who speaks to or for the nation,” and therefore may not recognize Dickinson’s work as overtly political in nature (67). Despite differences in their approaches to writing poetry, both produce compelling pieces which attempt to fully capture the horrors of war. In addition to stylistic approaches, the close proximity to, and from, the battlefront affects the context of the writers’ poems.

Whitman’s own experience as a Civil War nurse, combined with his heavy focus on the human body, weaves through poems such as “Live Oak, With Moss” and “The Wound-Dresser.” The speaker in “The Wound-Dresser” details an up-close view of the effects of war on the human body, which may stem from Whitman’s personal experiences. Leslie Jamison’s article, “A Thousand Willing Forms: The Evolution of Whitman’s Wounded Bodies” (Studies in American Fiction 2007) discusses Whitman’s need to represent the human body in his poetry: “The physical engagement of the ‘wound-dresser’[‘s] own body registers contact with the wounded bodies around him” in an attempt to physically connect with the wounded, dead or dying in which the “wounds become mediums,” or ways that the speaker can empathize with the injured bodies (Jamison 24).

Jamison further states that attaining empathy through close proximity to bodies and the wounded remains ever-present in Whitman’s Civil War poetry (29). Essentially, Whitman feels a critical need to represent closeness with bodies in his war poetry. Whitman demonstrates this idea in the first stanza of section 3 in “The Wound Dresser”: 
On, on I go, (open doors of time! open hospital doors!)
The crush’d head I dress, (poor crazed hand tear not the bandages away,)
The neck of the calvary-man with the bullet through and through I examine,
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard,
(Whitman 1081)

Here, Whitman tries to convey both the human suffering and sense of urgency to repair these broken bodies. The parenthetical asides, which we can assume are the speaker’s inner thoughts as he goes about his business of attending to the wounded bodies, add a further sense of urgency to the task. The speaker also attempts to “plunge” into the “soldier’s pain” as Jamison states, by including the parenthetical asides in which he sympathizes with the wounded soldier such as acknowledging his patient’s pain and urging his “crazed hand tear not the bandages away” (Jamison 24; Whitman 1081).

An equal sense of urgency appears in Dickinson’s war poetry, although expressed in less obvious ways and heavily reliant on punctuation rather than prose. As a woman, and someone far removed from the Civil War, Dickinson does not have the front row view to the wounded of war the way Whitman does; however, she can still gain a second-hand account through another medium: photography. As one of the first wars ever photographed, the possibility exists that Dickinson viewed many of the widely-circulated images of war captured in this new medium which may have influenced her poetry. Despite not seeing the wounded first-hand, Dickinson still manages to convey the anxieties of war. For an example we can look at “I like a look of agony”:

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it’s true –
Men do not sham Convulsions,
Nor simulate, a Throe –
The eyes glaze once – and that is Death –
Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung. (Dickinson 1199)
The “look of agony” Dickinson describes may stem from many of the widely-circulated Civil War photographs. As a woman who would have had no other access to war, the idea of a photograph may fit in with Barrett’s claim that Dickinson, as a poet, is “an eavesdropper” through which her readers themselves then eavesdrop on the scenes portrayed in her poems (Barrett 72).

Whereas Whitman uses physical descriptions of wounded bodies to emphasize the urgency and horrors of war, Dickinson seems to do so with the use of heavy punctuation and capitalization of particular words such as “Agony” and “Forehead.” The heavy use of dashes, such as “The eyes glaze one – and that is Death –” causes the reader to pause continuously throughout an otherwise short poem. These forced pauses are either moments for the reader to pause and reflect or for conveying a frantic attitude towards the casualties of war. If Dickinson’s intended method, it may demonstrate, as Barrett claims, Dickinson’s stance as a “genteel women poet” writing during a time of battle and bloodshed (72).

Dickinson further employs this method in “After great pain, a formal feeling comes,” where the presence of dashes represent wounded body: “This is the Hour of Lead/ Remembered, if outlived/ As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow/ First – Chill – then Stupor -- then letting go” (Dickinson 1204). Here Dickinson uses the dashes to separate the various phases of death: first comes the “Chill,” representing the first stage of death; the shock/cold of dying, leading into the “Stupor,” or the bafflement of one accepting their death; and the “letting go” when they finally pass on. Seen in this way, the dashes serve as the physical bodies Whitman describes in such detail in his poetry--which Dickinson would only have access to through photographs. At the same time, the dashes may constitute Dickinson’s physical proximity from the bodies in comparison to Whitman’s proximity to them.

In using dashes to represent bodies, or the space separating her from war, Dickinson uses a method far removed from Whitman’s first-hand accounts of death and dying. Examples of
Whitman’s first-hand accounts occur in the final stanzas of “The Wound-Dresser”: “Poor boy! I never knew you/ Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you”; “I dress the perforated shoulder…the bullet wound/ Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene”; “The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand/ I sit by the restless all the dark night…Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad” (Whitman 1081-2). The speaker the poem states: “Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these chances/ Of unsurpass’d heroes, (which one side so brave? the other was equally brave),” further emphasizing the importance of bodies via distancing the poem’s speaker from having loyalty to any one side of the war (1080).

The speaker views the bodies of the wounded soldiers, regardless of their loyalties, as equally deserving of representation and healing. Surely Walt Whitman the abolitionist would have sided with the Union, but Walt Whitman the humanist, and collective speaker of the American experience, would feel the need to remove the Union and Confederacy from the picture and focus solely on the human bodies maimed in war. In this sense, as Jamison points out, Whitman recognizes “his faith in the human potential for empathy,” particularly in times of war and violence, experimenting with various forms that empathy could take (Jamison 41).

The speaker in “The Wound-Dresser” less concerned with which side the bodies he tends to belongs to, wishing to focus more on the damage war has inflicted on said bodies. The speaker resigns himself “to sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead,” putting the focus on the bodies themselves, presenting himself as having neutrality in a war that has divided the nation, thus emphasizing the need to heal collectively from trauma (Whitman 1080).

Whitman can garner sympathy and outrage towards the war, helping to move a divided nation towards healing, with graphic descriptions of gangrenous bodies which include “the amputated hand” or “the crush’d head” (1081). As Jamison implies, this focus on bodies and
wounds serves as “apertures rather than spectacles…that demand he travel…into another injured
body” and that his sense of empathy cannot come from being far removed from the bodies, but via
proximity to them (Jamison 23). Whitman’s insistence on vividly describing these wounds is his
way of forcing the reader to see the casualties of war up close in an attempt to get them to empathize
with the horrors of the battlefield.

While Whitman offers a compelling and effective view on war through physical descriptions
of wounded bodies, Dickinson produces work equally effective by utilizing the space between
herself and the war. Although her poems are shorter, and devoid of the depictions of the wounded
displayed by Whitman, Dickinson still manages to generate empathy for the dead and dying. The
reader can very well imagine how the “look of agony” spreads across an injured soldier’s face, or
envision the “Convulsions” and “eyes glaze[d]” over that represent the “Death” and “homely
Anguish” of war (Dickinson 1199).

Barrett believes that the pressing need for both Whitman and Dickinson to address the
nation is “inseparable” from witnessing the horror of war, and its aftermath, first-hand (Barrett
68). For Whitman, his accounts of tending to the soldiers is instrumental to addressing the nation;
for Dickinson, on the outer realms of the battlefield, it’s what isn’t there in her poems that appears
to make a statement. The use of unconventional punctuation repeatedly forces the reader to pause,
determining how a sentence should read and where to place emphasis.

In addition to the unusual punctuation in poems like “After great pain, a formal feeling
comes,” the use of homographs offers dual meanings. The final stanza begins “This is the Hour of
Lead,” offering two possible meanings: the hour of leading, as in being led towards death; or the
hour of lead, as in lead bullets ushering one towards death (Dickinson 1204). The capitalization
makes it a proper noun, further complicating meaning. Dickinson’s intentional ambiguity expresses
bewilderment of a violent battle, which calls back to Barrett’s focus on Dickinson’s possible
uneasiness toward poetry’s effectiveness in portraying war. If so, Dickinson’s usage of unconventional poetic methods demonstrate how traditional conventions are perhaps too formulaic and orderly for conveying the unnatural disorder of war.

Despite not having the same first-hand encounter that Whitman had, Dickinson manages to convey human suffering of war in reminding us of her distance from the battlefield. Unlike Whitman’s graphic depictions, Dickinson’s dashes separate her from the war yet make her Civil War poetry no less convincing than Whitman’s. Her status as a woman poet makes her no less worthy of documenting its horrors than someone like Whitman. Barrett suggests that Whitman, in his war poetry, addresses the nation with “enthusiasm,” while Dickinson, somewhat reluctantly, is “invariably skeptical about the address to the nation,” and “her work illuminates changes in the stances of the lyric self,” which Barrett attributes to the anxiety of a divided nation (Barrett 68).

Both writers successfully document war through “the range of stances available to all American poets” during the time of the Civil War (69). Through veritable opposites of contextual and stylistic approaches, Whitman and Dickinson—two key voices in both the Romantic and Civil War eras—successfully present poems, designed as addresses to the nation, that fully encapsulate the tragedy and insurmountable loss of war, impacting the reader today as much as they would have in the midst of the 19th century.
Works Cited


