

## Crossing Borders, Poetry and Prose: Walt Whitman on President Lincoln

Walt Whitman said he mourns Abraham Lincoln's death with "ever-returning spring." On April 14-15, 1865 the 16<sup>th</sup> president was shot and died. On Feb. 20 our nation observes Presidents Day. Because our CCTE/TCEA conference is sandwiched between these memorial periods, this talk focuses on Crossing Borders from Whitman's prose to poetry to prose as he writes of President Lincoln. I'll begin with the little known lecture that Whitman delivered several times between April 14, 1879 – 1890, "Death of Abraham Lincoln." From the lecture we'll wander to Whitman's poems on Lincoln, especially "When Lilacs Last by the Dooryard Bloom'd." Then by pulling in Whitman's journal entries from *Specimen Days* dated before and after Lincoln's death, we will cross to prose again. Why? To argue with Whitman that the two rivulets of poetry and prose converge and play to expand our imaginations. And to bring together the two currents of Love and Death that converge in Whitman's poems and lecture.

The memorial lecture begins in rich, Romantic style prose:

How often since that dark and dripping Saturday—that chilly April day,  
now fifteen years bygone—my heart has entertain'd the dream, the wish,  
to give of Abraham Lincoln's death, its own special thought and  
memorial. . . . I feel a desire, apart from any talk, to specify the day, the  
martyrdom. (1036-37)

If Whitman previously had not spoken in a public lecture format, he had written often on Lincoln. The first twelve-line poem after the assassination was written hastily on May 4, 1865 and later published in the first edition of *Drum-Taps*: "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day"

Hush'd be the camps today,  
 And soldiers let us drape our war-worn weapons,  
 And each with musing soul retire to celebrate,  
 Our dear commander's death.

No more for him life's stormy conflicts,  
 Nor victory, nor defeat—no more time's dark events,  
 Charging like ceaseless clouds across the sky.

But sing poet in our name,  
 Sing of the love we bore him—because you, dweller in camps, know it  
 truly.

As they invault the coffin there,  
 Sing—as they close the doors of earth upon him—one verse,  
 For the heavy hearts of soldiers.

“On April 1, eight days before the war ended, Whitman contracted on 500 copies of *Drum-Taps*. On April 17, two days after Lincoln died, Whitman made a stop-press insertion of this short poem of mourning, “*Hush'd Be the Camps To-day*” (Kaplan 300). Justin Kaplan informs that Whitman decided to postpone the printing till a major poem about Lincoln could be added to *Drum-Taps*. (That addition, two years later was “*When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*.”)

Gay Wilson Allen mentions that Whitman “felt deeply [the] wish to reconcile the North and the South through his songs (118). In the lecture Whitman welcomes persons of the South as well as North: his was “No narrow or sectional reminiscence. It belongs to these States in their entirety” (1037). Then Whitman surveys the twenty years of turmoil leading up to the Secession war with especial condemnation of “the Presidentiads of Fillmore and Buchanan . . . the weakness and wickedness of [those] elected rulers” (1037). Coincidentally, a survey of presidential historians published Presidents Day

weekend 2006 has recently voted on the worst presidential errors; James Buchanan tops the list for failing to avert the Civil War<sup>i</sup>(“Scholars”). Whitman observes “in America the volcano, though civic yet, continued to grow more and more convulsive—more and more stormy and threatening” (1038).

Into this chaotic situation, Abraham Lincoln “appears a strange and awkward figure” (1038). Whitman paints a picture of New York City in February, 1861 when Lincoln stopped en route to his inauguration. The writer sat atop an omnibus with a “capital view” of Mr. Lincoln and the 30,000-40,000 silent crowd. He contrasts this solemn scene to exuberant welcomes given to Andrew Jackson, Lafayette, and others. But Lincoln was not popular with most New Yorkers. Whitman describes Lincoln’s humility and “unusual and uncouth height, his dress of complete black, stovepipe hat push’d back on the head, dark-brown complexion, seam’d and wrinkled yet canny-looking face, black, bushy head of hair, disproportionately long neck, and his hands held behind as he stood observing the people” (1039). Then Whitman declares that it would take “four sorts of genius, four mighty and primal hands,” to draw or paint “this man’s future portrait—the eyes and brains and finger-touch of Plutarch and Eschylus and Michel Angelo, assisted by Rabelais” (1039-40).

To join Whitman’s war time chronology, from 1862-65 he continues to look closely at Lincoln during the years in Washington D.C. where he sets up residence after locating his brother George, a wounded Union soldier. The writer sees the President almost every day as he returns to Washington from summer quarters north of the city. He is attended by a company of twenty-five to thirty cavalry. To illustrate, an excerpt from *Specimen Days*: August 12, 1863: entitled “Abraham Lincoln.” “Mr. Lincoln on the

saddle generally rides a good-sized, easy-going gray horse, is dress'd in plain black, somewhat rusty and dusty, wears a black stiff hat, and looks about as ordinary in attire, &c, as the commonest man" (733). The 1863 description mirrors that in the lecture:

ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S dark brown face, with the deep-cut lines, the eyes, always to me with a deep latent sadness in the expression. . . . "but far beneath his smile I noticed well the expression I have alluded to. None of the artists or pictures has caught the deep, though subtle and indirect expression of this man's face. There is something else there. One of the great portrait painters of two or three centuries ago is needed. (733-34).

Two years later in *Specimen Days*, March 4, 1865 Whitman provides another description.

—"The Inauguration" The President very quietly rode down to the capitol in his own carriage, by himself, on a sharp trot, about noon . . . I saw him on his return, at three o'clock, after the performance was over. . . . look'd every much worn and tired; the lines, indeed, of vast responsibilities, intricate questions, and demands of life and death, cut deeper than ever upon his dark brown face; yet all the old goodness, tenderness, sadness, and canny shrewdness, underneath the furrow. (I never see that man without feeling that he is one to become personally attach'd to, for his combination of purest, heartiest tenderness, and native western form of manliness.) (757)

Of the president's appearance, Whitman writes two days following the assassination April 16, '65, "No Good Portrait of Lincoln," another often quoted passage.

Probably the reader has seen physiognomies (often old farmers, sea-captains, and such) that, behind their homeliness, or even ugliness, held superior points so subtle, yet so palpable, making the real life of their faces almost as impossible to depict as a wild perfume or fruit-taste, or a passionate tone of the living voice—and such was Lincoln’s face, the peculiar color, the lines of it, the eyes, mouth, expression. Of technical beauty it had nothing—but to the eye of a great artist it furnished a rare study, a feast and fascination. The current portraits are all failures—most of them caricatures. (765)

In the four elegiac poems grouped under “Memories of President Lincoln,” none describes Abraham Lincoln’s face or form. However the brief 1871 “This Dust Was Once the Man” depicts his character. By tradition, Lincoln’s name is not used.

This dust was once the man,  
Gentle, plain, just and resolute, under whose cautious hand,  
Against the foulest crime in history known in any land or age,  
Was saved the Union of these States.

Lincoln embodies the common person revered and celebrated by Whitman throughout *Leaves of Grass*. In the lecture Whitman asks: “why should I not say that thence his manliest traits—his universality—his canny, easy ways and words upon the surface—his inflexible determination and courage at heart?” (1037). The speaker points to Lincoln’s Southern and Western ancestry; he is President of the people.

### Common Man

As the lecture reports Lincoln's arrival at the Astor House hotel in "two or three shabby hack barouches," Lincoln leisurely pauses on the entrance steps to stretch his arms and legs, and looks "slowly and good-humoredly" at the "vast and silent crowds." No pomp and ceremony here. This President-elect had arrived from the West. "The tall figure gave another relieving stretch or two of arms and legs; then with moderate pace, and accompanied by a few unknown looking persons, ascended the portico-steps of the Astor House, disappear'd through its broad entrance—and the dumb-show ended" (1039).

But by mid April, 1865 the simple individual of simple background had saved the Union, had been killed by an assassin's bullet, and was being carried in state across the land. Contrast the pomp of the funeral cortege with Lincoln's unadorned personage in Sec. 6 of *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*.

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 flambeaus of the night,  
 With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn,  
 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. Sec. 6.33-45

## The Star

In death Abraham Lincoln becomes “the great star early droop’d in the western sky in the night” (l.2), the “drooping star in the west” (l.5).

O powerful western fallen star!

O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!

O great star disappear’d—O the black murk that hides the star (ll.7-9)

*When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d* was composed in the weeks immediately following Lincoln’s assassination. This great song of mourning is considered by many to be the ultimate poem in American literature.

Images of the night sky, the moon and stars, cross from the poem to prose.

*Specimen Days* records one particular night, October 20<sup>th</sup> 1863: “A Silent Night Ramble”

–To-night after leaving the hospital at 1- o’clock . . . I wander’d a long time around Washington. The night was sweet, very clear, sufficiently cool, a voluptuous half-moon, slightly golden, the space near it of a transparent blue-gray tinge. I walk’d up Pennsylvania avenue, and then to Seventh street . . .The sky, the planets, the constellations all so bright, so calm, so expressively silent, so soothing, after those hospital scenes. I wander’d to and fro till the moist moon set, long after midnight. (739)

Another entry—Whitman’s famous observation of the night sky in early spring 1865,

“The Weather.—Does it Sympathize with These Times?”:

Indeed, the heavens, the elements, all the meteorological influences, have run riot for weeks past. Such caprices, abruptest alternation of frowns and beauty, I never knew. . . . Nor earth nor sky ever know spectacles of

superber beauty than some of the nights lately here. The western star, Venus, in the earlier hours of evening, has never been so large, so clear; it seems as if it told something, as if it held rapport indulgent with humanity, with us Americans. Five or six nights since, it hung close by the moon, then a little past its first quarter. The star was wonderful, the moon like a young mother. . . . “the miracle of that great star, and the young and swelling moon swimming in the west, suffused the soul.

Section 8 of *Lilacs* parallels the journal entry:

O western orb sailing the heaven,  
 Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk'd,  
 As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,  
 As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all look'd  
     on,)  
 As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me from  
     sleep,)  
 As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe,  
 As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night,  
 As 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. (ll 55-65)

And again in Section 9 “But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me,  
 The star my departing comrade holds and detains me.” ll. 69-70.

Twelve years after the assassination and death of Lincoln, Whitman records in *Specimen Days* several night skys. May 21, 1877—“Full-Starr’d Nights” “I went down to the Delaware, and cross’d and cross’d. Venus like blazing silver well up in the west. The large pale thin crescent of the new moon, half an hour high, sinking languidly under a bar-sinister of cloud, and then emerging” (803). And *Aug. 26, 1877*. —“. . . Venus lingers in the west with a voluptuous dazzle unshown hitherto this summer” (804). So the movement from prose to poetry to prose continues through Whitman’s life.

### **Love and Death**

In Classical literature, in Medieval romance, in Renaissance’s *Romeo and Juliet*, in poetry and prose, love and death merge.

Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology* speaks of beginnings, of how the world was created. “Before the gods appeared . . . Erebus, which is the unfathomable depth where death dwells” (63). “From the darkness and death Love was born” (64). So the two are not separated in human consciousness.

With the assassination of Lincoln, Whitman’s love for the President fuses into one of the most powerful elegies in the English language. D. H. Lawrence’s essay “Whitman” concludes his 1923 *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Lawrence scoffs at Whitman’s concept that the “body of you gravitates to all you meet or know”. . .”The mainspring is broken, Walt Whitman” he jabs (244). Lawrence speaks to Walter saying “You have killed your isolate Moby Dick. You have mentalized your deep sensual body, and that’s the death of it” (244-45). Lawrence excoriates then praises Whitman as “This post mortem poet” (246).

When Lawrence speaks of the *Calamus* and *Drum Taps* poems, he observes that Whitman “doesn’t shout and thump and exult any more. He begins to hesitate, reluctant, wistful” (250). “Comradeship, Comrades, the new Democracy: of Comrades . . . is the cohering principle of true soldiery” (250), and the Civil War’s terrible fighting brings with it manly love.

Whitman’s distant love and respect for the President merge with death; one example from *Lilacs* Section 10 illustrates: “O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved? / And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?” (ll.71-72). Lawrence writes: “Merging! And Death! Which is the final merge. . . . So the next step is the merging of man-for-man love. And this is on the brink of death. It slides over into death” (251). Then Lawrence concedes: “Whitman is a very great poet, of the end of life” (252).

So too the lecture given near the end of Whitman’s life fuses death and love. The middle section presents the day, April 14, 1865, when The President and Mrs. Lincoln attended Ford Theater to leave behind the cares of the day. During the popular drama, *Our American Cousin*, Lincoln is murdered by John Wilkes Booth. Whitman describes the audience stampede, the confusion of soldiers, the shock and craze of the crowds inside and out. Then this paragraph:

And in the midst of that pandemonium, infuriated soldiers, the audience and the crowd, the stage, and all its actors and actresses, its paint-pots, spangles, and gas-lights—the life blood from those veins, the best and sweetest of the land, drips slowly down, and death’s ooze already begins its little bubbles on the lips. (1044)

Whitman calls this “the highest poetic, single, central, pictorial denouement” for the entire history of the United States. His repetition in the lecture mirrors his poetry: “For not in all great deaths, nor far or near—not Caesar in the Roman senate-house, or Napoleon passing away in the wild night-storm at St. Helena-- . . . not calm old Socrates, drinking the hemlock—outvies that terminus of the secession war, in one man’s life, here in our midst, in our own time” (1045). The quoted sentences are isocolons, “a succession of phrases of equal length and corresponding structure” (Lanham 253). The lecture slowly has built to this bold assertion. Then Whitman proclaims that Lincoln’s life and his death, will indirectly filter into the nation and the race to cement a Nation. The grand “deaths of every nationality” will become the stories, the poems, the epics of the future. Future “historians will seek in vain for any point to serve more thoroughly their purpose, than Abraham Lincoln’s death. Dear to the Muse—thrice dear to Nationality—to the whole human race—precious to this Union—precious to Democracy—unspeakable and forever precious—their first great Martyr Chief” (1047).

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<sup>i</sup> The Worst Errors survey was the work of the University of Louisville’s McConnell Center. The top 10 presidential blunders were announced Saturday, February 18, 2006 during a Presidents Day weekend conference called “Presidential Moments.” Scholars who participated said Buchanan didn’t do enough to oppose efforts by Southern States to secede from the Union before the Civil War (“Scholars”).