


BLOOD IMAGERY IN WALT WHITMAN'S LEAVES OF GRASS

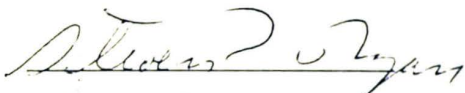

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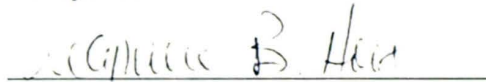
I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Christopher Vaughn Hudson entitled "Blood Imagery in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.


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We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:


Dean of the Graduate School

Blood Imagery in Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Christopher Vaughn Hudson

December 1995

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. James D. Lester, for his guidance and patience. I would also like to thank the other committee members, Dr. Steve Ryan and Dr. Linda Barnes, for their comments and assistance during my graduate career. I would like to express my deepest thanks to my Mom and Dad for their unfailing support, along with the rest of my family and friends--you know who you are.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Like many poets, Walt Whitman maintains a particular selection of images that aid in the formation of his verse. These are images which appear with such regularity that the reader is all but forced to recognize them as occupying a special place in the mind of the author. Among the select group of frequently recurring images that we uncover in *Leaves of Grass*, few (if any) radiate with a more notable brilliance than the image of blood. If we stop to consider the highly provocative nature of blood, either as an image or as a reality, then it becomes readily apparent why blood imagery should become such a prominent feature in Whitman's verse. Blood gives and sustains life among all human beings, yet the sight or image of it can also vividly remind us of our own mortality. It can bring a feeling of relief, as in the case of sick or wounded people getting the precious material that will snatch them firmly or temporarily into survival as they draw closer to the void. It can also bring a sense of joy in times when people are made aware of their own good health, in part, by noticing a change in their color, or it can give us a pleasant sense of mystery through its image as we behold and speak of "blood-red roses," for instance. On the other hand, blood can immediately startle us when we see it in the open, either from ourselves or from those around us, human or animal. Whitman seems to have all of these ideas and more in mind as he sets about employing the image of blood in his poems. It is an image which holds so much power that a writer who uses it must sometimes consider the responsibilities which go along with its evocation. The evidence of the poetry demonstrates that Whitman was aware of the power of the blood imagery, so an examination of the different ways in which the poet applies this imagery will bring us a new and well-focused perspective on the poetry.

Early in his career Whitman found aesthetic and artistic joy in literature but also dipped his hands into the harsh reality of blood. He started as a printer's apprentice. The apprenticeship lasted until Whitman was seventeen, and during these years he became exposed to the colorful adventure novels of Sir Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, and a number of other writers in the genre. Several biographers, such as Allen, Miller, Price, and

others have described these elements of Whitman's early life. The first fires of Whitman's adventurous spirit were kindled by such works, and he read them with great eagerness--thus beginning a voracious love of novels which remained with him throughout his life; it was also during these years that Whitman made his first attempts at writing verse, primarily in the style of Sir Walter Scott. Between the ages of seventeen and nineteen, Whitman worked as a fully qualified journeyman printer and occasionally accepted teaching positions in several country schoolhouses on Long Island. At nineteen, his love of reading and fondness for writing caused him to make a natural progression from the world of printing to the world of journalism, and for the next twelve years Whitman maintained the hectic schedule and heavy workload of a professional journalist, producing editorials, news items, and some largely sentimental poems and fictional pieces for several newspapers. The climax in this steady period of journalistic activity occurred when Whitman took over the duties of editorship for the prestigious *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* between 1846 and 1848. Shortly after the job ended, he made a three-month sojourn to New Orleans, via Chicago and several points in the Midwest, to become an editor of the *Daily Crescent*.

During this journalistic experience, Whitman shifted from conventional methods of observation toward a stance where truth is filtered through an all-encompassing view that embraces the ideals of the individual in concord with social reality and its expediency. More importantly, this all-encompassing view began to color the new poetry which he was composing--poetry that certainly had its genesis in the recordings and recollections of his youth in Brooklyn, but which was further enhanced by the initial impressions of both the vast reaches of America and the rich variety of people that he encountered on the trip. At this time, Whitman was developing a poetic persona with enough malleability to allow him to speak of America by actually becoming America--or the world, or even the universe. Through his own money and resources, Whitman introduced a small portion of the American public to this grand persona with the publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Coming as it did before the jarring brutality of the Civil War, many people considered the imagery (of blood and of sexuality) so shocking that they called it an obscene book--yet there were some who instantly realized the true merit of Whitman's achievement. Among these were the New England

Transcendentalist thinkers, led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott, they knew that the ideas put forth by Whitman in his book were ideas concerning the past, present, and future of America and its people, and told with a blunt language and attitude that they equally admired and deemed necessary for the purpose at hand, which was to shake America out of its complacency and cause its people to realize that to be a great nation involves great responsibilities.

One of the primary responsibilities which had to be faced was overcoming the state of gross inequality among the American people as a result of slavery, a matter that culminated in the American Civil War of the early 1860s. The war moved Whitman very deeply, as it did all Americans. Whitman's writing and his later editions of *Leaves* made an abrupt change with his entry into the awful carnage of the Civil War. When it commenced, he joined the crowds of people who were caught up in the excitement of it all. However, early in the war his brother George was wounded and sent to a hospital in Washington D.C. When he arrived at the hospital, Whitman found his brother making a steady recovery, but he also saw many soldiers in need of serious care. He opted to stay in Washington D.C., working as a clerk in a number of government offices while also providing assistance in field hospitals both in and around the area. He performed his hospital services in the capacity of what Gay Wilson Allen in *The Solitary Singer* calls "a nurse of the soul" (290), and Allen offers an enlightening glimpse of these services by stating that "Whitman at first merely talked with the soldiers, took messages to send to their relatives, and performed little personal services for them. But gradually he began using his own meager funds to buy stamps, fruit, reading matter, or other inexpensive items that he saw they especially needed or wanted. Although he himself did not use tobacco in any form and most hospital authorities strongly disapproved of its use by their patients, Whitman noticed the solace that it gave to some of the men, and began carrying parcels of tobacco to distribute to anyone who wanted it. In each case he fitted the gift to the recipient. He was careful to overlook no one, not even the Confederate soldiers confined in these Union hospitals" (289-90).

The sections of poetry which he culled from both his experiences during the war and the national grief which followed the assassination of Abraham Lincoln are especially pivotal

in any examination of the imagery in Whitman's work due to the fact that these poems signal the tragic undercurrent which works in poetic concert with his shaken but implacable optimism.

Whitman's critics have indirectly but not thoroughly suggested the role of blood as a central image in *Leaves of Grass*. This study, by examining a neglected image, will build upon the criticism of several major Whitman scholars. Critics who examine matters of Whitman's poetic identity and his role in the community somehow fail to recognize the poet's phallic boasts, his insistence on the rising blood, the heat, and the passion of the individual self. In the article "Eligible to Burst Forth": Whitman and the Art of Reticence," Nancy Sherman uses the popular juxtaposition of the power that Whitman achieves through his style of expansiveness with the power that Emily Dickinson gains through a language of abstraction and constraint. Sherman favors Dickinson's style because she believes that it reflects the struggles of an individual person with greater clarity than the boisterous, all-inclusive style of Whitman's poetry and that the poetic sensibilities of the reader are likely to be more receptive to Dickinson's style for this reason. Still, Sherman does not completely dismiss Whitman on these grounds; she points to the section of love poems from *Leaves of Grass* titled "Calamus" and argues that the imagery of this section is uncharacteristically muted and contains perhaps the only evidence to be found in the entire book of what she calls "the ring of self-definition, of real self-consciousness" (13). In *Walt Whitman: The Poem as Private History*, Graham Clarke finds some common ground with Sherman's observations that, more often than not, Whitman's poetry lacks the feature of a strong personal element, although he argues that the poet allows this element to shine through the imagery when it is essentially important for him to do so. Clarke quite naturally uses the poem "Song of Myself" as a yardstick for his analysis of the image of self that Whitman conveys in his poetry. He claims that what we find in "Song of Myself" and other poems is "a projection of a declared ideal self--voicing an ideal condition which is a reflection of the outer, not the inner man behind the poetry" (79). Furthermore, Clarke feels that instances of uncertainty and reflection which are indicative of "a personal or private self" (80) would damage a poem like "Song of Myself," due to the fact that such a poem depends largely on unbroken momentum for its success. In

The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry, M. Wynn Thomas also uses "Song of Myself" to explore the imagery of self and individualism, and he poses the idea that a dual motive exists within the poet's employment of this imagery in the work. For Thomas, the image of self in the poem is used to impart a rejoicing in the beauty of sheer existence on one hand, while on the other hand (and in a more obscure sense for the audience of today) it comes to represent an argument against the forces of greed that seemingly dominate the American drive for progress which the poet cherishes. This latter view of the image of self in the poem leads Thomas to claim that "Song of Myself" both implicitly and explicitly attacks the contemporary tendency (deriving from as well as expressed in, actual socioeconomic practice) to view the self--in its relations to itself, to others, and to the world at large--overwhelmingly in possessive, proprietorial, and therefore inevitably competitive terms" (42). Put simply, Thomas feels that the image of self in the poem simultaneously represents a celebration of burgeoning materiality and a condemnation of rampant materialism.

The individual self within a social context brings other insights, such as one by Robert Leigh Davis in the article "Whitman's Tympanum: A Reading of 'Drum Taps,'" which discusses the poet's employment of imagery designed to heighten social harmony after the Civil War. Davis focuses on Whitman's use of the word "tympanum" in the section and how his recognition of its meaning as both a hearing membrane and a printing tool allows him to view the word as an image in which the poetic bond between oral communication and the written word is fortified. The image in turn causes Whitman's images of social unity to gain a substantial amount of power due to the fact that it symbolically places him in the position held by many ancient poets of being a man at the center of society. In *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye*, James Dougherty deals with the poet's use of parades, pageants, and many other public events and activities in his writing as a means of improving social relations among the American people. He maintains that the influence of visual arts, namely painting and photography, allows Whitman to present images of social unity in such a way that a broadening of consciousness and imaginative processes becomes possible for the reader; as a result, according to Dougherty, "the reader is invited to follow the example of the poet; to walk his own city streets with the same sketchbook attentiveness" (70). Chapter 2 of this

thesis will extend the critical commentary to embrace blood imagery that heightens the identity of the persona with the community *en masse*.

Another group of scholars examines the imagery of human sexuality. Images of sexuality in Whitman's poetry will probably always garner large amounts of critical discussion due to the fact that the poet harbored many unconventional thoughts on sexual matters which he often added to his poetry in some way; indeed, one of the primary objectives which governed Whitman's self-assumed role as a poet of America lies in his desire to make sexuality and sexual imagery figure prominently among the canons of literary taste and decency, whose purveyors often viewed him as a barbarian. Needless to say, Whitman's feelings were not injured by such views; they only served to strengthen his conviction to continue on a course toward a day when human sexuality would be celebrated rather than condemned. In *Whitman and Tradition*, Kenneth M. Price discusses the poet's portrayal of female sexuality in the well-known eleventh section of "Song of Myself," where the young independent woman engages imaginatively in the highly questionable activity of bathing with several strange men--a truly shocking image to present to the moral vanguard of Whitman's time. Price uses this section as a means to indicate that Whitman sent out strong messages through his poetry concerning the rights of women and the control which they should have over their own sexuality; however, he also indicates that Whitman speaks of such rights well before it is either safe or advisable for women to do so. Price goes on to mention how Whitman's liberal attitudes toward sex and the institution of marriage influenced many novelists later in the century to break away from stagnant social conventions, stating that "such writers as Garland, Chopin, and Forster, dissatisfied both with the prevailing marital ideology and with the restricted scope of the novel, gained inspiration from Whitman's candor" (99). In *Masculine Landscapes*, Byrne R. S. Fone discusses Whitman's role in bringing homosexuality to a more prominent place in American literature, partly through a use of language in which he treats the subject indirectly by, for instance, using images of "fancy men," "neuters and geldings," and "onanists" to refer to what he calls "effeminate or secretive homosexuals" (22). Fone also mentions the reluctance of many literary scholars to acknowledge Whitman's homosexuality, while implying that a firm understanding of the

sexual imagery in his poetry can only come through an acknowledgment of this fact. Although Fone would most likely agree with the previous observations drawn from the Kenneth M. Price text concerning Whitman's portrayal of female sexuality, he widens the scope of such observations with the statement that "for Whitman the realization of women's free sexuality is only a necessary prelude to what appears to be for him the more important realization of male-male genital activity" (23). Chapter 3 of this thesis will extend the critical discussion of this sexual motif by examining in detail the manner by which Whitman's blood imagery celebrates the life force.

Another set of critics has noticed Whitman's unrelenting emphasis on death. In *My Soul and I*, David Cavitch discusses the dream sequences which make up stanzas 3 through 5 of the poem "The Sleepers" as being remarkably poignant studies of death and dying within the framework of the piece, due to the "feelings of wretched helplessness" (77) evoke in the persona upon being subjected to visions of horrific deaths that are unpreventable. He suggests that Whitman's primary objective behind the depictions of the drowning swimmer, the loss of life in the shipwreck, and the faith placed in General Washington by the parents of his slaughtered troops is to express the danger which can arise from forming "bonds of trust" (78) with people or things (war generals, drifts and eddies of the sea, etc. . .) that are essentially possessed by too much reckless power to allow such bonds to have any permanence.

In the article "Final Gestures," Tim Armstrong comments on the idea that Whitman's growing uneasiness concerning his own impending death, coupled with his desire to forestall giving a definitive "last word" in the book, leads him to develop the first and second annexes to *Leaves of Grass*. Both of the annexes contain closing pieces that address the matter of his death and the thought of bring the entire work to an end in term that Armstrong considers to be more representative of the poet's mind-set in his last years than the views expressed in "So Long!"--to poem which he used to end the primary text from 1860 onward. While Whitman displays a buoyantly confident outlook in "So Long!" regarding both death and the sustainment of his presence in the mind of the reader, Armstrong suggests that the poet's confidence about these matters gives way to feelings of uncertainty in the piece which ends

with first annex, "After the Supper and Talk," causing him to exhibit far more reluctance to part from the reader in this poem than in "So Long!" The critic also intimates that the uncertainty which the poet experiences as he stands on the threshold of death also affects the ending poem of the second annex, "Good-by My Fancy," causing him in this instance to deliberate over "whether in fact his creative faculty will not go with him to the grave" (369).

Ivan Marki in *The Trial of the Poet* remarks on the multitude of tragic episodes depicted in section 33 through 36 of "Song of Myself," observing that Whitman's persona in the poem faces the threat of becoming severely limited over the course of these section as the breadth of human experience with which he assumes identification is gradually reduced to suffering and total, "irretrievable" loss. Marki argues that the poet displays a curiosity about suffering and death in these episodes which borders on obsession; in addition, he notes that the particularly gruesome manner in which the final two episodes concerning the Texas massacre and the naval battle are portrayed allows them to transcend the hackneyed quality of the "sentimentally conceived human interest stories" (167) that Whitman used as their foundation and eventually come "fully rounded narratives of pain and destruction" (168).

Chapter 4 of this thesis will expand the thinking in this area, for Whitman's application of death imagery sometimes borders upon exploitation. However, the cruelty of bloody death as conveyed by a key set of images are intended by Whitman to touch mankind both on an individual basis and on a collective basis, namely, the nation in mourning for dead soldiers and a dead commander-in-chief.

For a fifth set of critics, the role of spiritual imagery in Whitman's poetry is also a frequent topic of analysis. In *Walt Whitman's Language Experiment*, James Perrin Warren uses the poem "Starting from Paumanok" as a touchstone for his argument that Whitman is attempting to put forth a new religious faith in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* by using imagery which adds a spiritual gloss to his vision of America. Warren maintains that the poet's new faith differs greatly from Christianity due to the fact that "in Whitman's conception of both religion and literature, the material is as important as the spiritual" (152); thus, throughout the argument we are given examples of how Whitman places material images into a spiritual context, such as in his equation of the transient "material" body with the

condition of the soul, which is eternal. In the article "Whitman's 'Song of Myself,'" Edward H. Bodie Jr. discusses the poet's use of Christian imagery in Section 38 of the piece as a means of communication with which he can remind people of the spiritual perfection that lies within themselves, waiting to be acknowledged. Bodie feels that Whitman is exhibiting the influence of Emerson in this light because he sees a connection between what Whitman accomplishes with his use of Christian imagery and Emerson's view of Christ as "the one figure in history to perceive and appreciate the full potential--the divinity--of all humanity" (150). David Kuebrich in *Minor Prophecy* maintains that Whitman employs spiritual imagery in an effort to inform readers that the world which surrounds them is spiritually active, and he feels that the poet relies on the concept of millennialism to aid him in imparting a tone of urgency to this message. Kuebrich notes that most of Whitman's primary underlying themes and symbols reflect this message, but he also implies that the necessity of the reader's receptiveness to such spiritual content is the most crucial factor governing the success of the poet's venture. Chapter 5 of this thesis will examine the spiritual dimensions of Whitman's blood imagery.

Perhaps the most important thing to consider when conducting an image study on a work of literature is the truth that insight is obtainable through analysis of the interactions and effects of one type of imagery in a work, yet no one image can be relied upon to arrive at every existing truth in a text. In the case of *Leaves of Grass*, however, the image of blood comes closest to fulfilling this ideal. Matters of self and individualism, social unity, sexuality, death, and spirituality are all addressed in some degree through Whitman's employment of the image, as are many, many others. The image may be mentioned in passing by some critics, but no literary critic or scholar (as far as is evident) has ever made it the subject of an in-depth critical analysis. Thus, the primary objective behind the following image study is to stimulate some degree of critical discourse regarding this element in Whitman's poetry, one that has been treated too narrowly without appreciation of how blood imagery permits communication at several thematic levels.

Chapter 2

The Symbolic Bloodstream: The Poetic Identity Connecting with the Community

The blood imagery of Whitman's poetry serves to enliven the poetic persona in its identity with the community--the *en masse*. Upon methodically examining the final edition of *Leaves of Grass* in an effort to locate passages where Whitman employs blood imagery, the reader might be initially surprised by the fact that our first encounter with such imagery occurs in the opening poem of the entire volume, "One's-Self I Sing." In the line of "Of life immense in passion, pulse, and power," (5), Whitman displays one of the primary modes by which he intimates the blood image without using any form of the word "blood" itself. This is accomplished by his use of the word "pulse," a word which appears frequently throughout the volume and, more often than not, is used by the poet to either modify or convey a blood image. However, there are two other applications of the word in this poem which are quite plausible: 1.) "Pulse" meaning to beat, throb, etc..., and 2.) "Pulse" meaning overriding sentiments or attitudes, as in the public-at-large. The idea that "pulse" as a blood image is an antecedent of these two meanings is hardly disputable; moreover, we may find it equally difficult to dispute the shrewdness of the poet's choice and arrangement of the other words in this piece which allow him to represent each of these meanings beneath the umbrella of this single word. On one hand, we are given the general beat or throb of "Life immense," the bustling, ever-burgeoning democracy of the America he cherishes primarily, yet including any nation which values such a life. On the other hand, we are given the overriding sentiments of the public "En-Masse"--the sentiments which ignite a democratic nation's "bustling" characteristics while also signifying its present and possible future directions.

Above all, it is our interpretation of "pulse" as a blood image which provides us with the richest results as we study this poem. While the other two meanings are indeed vital within the context of the work, they are also restricted by the fact that neither of them can truly move beyond Whitman's grand view of society into the voice of Whitman the individual, the singer who is greeting us at the beginning of his life's work, to paraphrase Emerson. The word "pulse" as a blood image can be used to connect with both the individual singer and the society of which he sings. In order to gain a clear understanding of the blood image at work

here, we must first take into account the special placement of the poem as the book's opening piece. The intention of nearly every writer upon constructing an introductory piece is to "hook" an audience with its contents so they will be drawn further into the entire work; Whitman is certainly no exception to this standard. There are a number of instances in the volume where the poet either states or suggests that his poetry is his "life's blood." It is this spirit in which the poet begins "One's-Self I Sing." He is buoyantly optimistic in his desire to have his "life's blood" accepted by society, but how does the blood image connect to the teeming democratic masses which the poet is hoping to reach? The answer to this question lies primarily in the decision made by his audience, then and now, to either embrace or reject what Whitman is putting forth. Through an interpretation of this poem where the image of blood is central, we come to realize that while the poet is singing about a variety of conditions, the song itself is the pulse. Whitman would seem to think that the public "En-Masse" of his poem contains a sort of kindred pulse that lies dormant yet can hopefully be awakened by his song. His blood is being presented for the public to view by way of his creative process; moreover, it is also seeking our blood. We could make this remark about virtually any of his poems, but there are several particular instances where Whitman will employ blood imagery to represent the life of his own creative process as well as a desire to build an emotional connection between himself and the audience.

In the third section of the poem "Starting from Paumanok," Whitman declares his basic intent in the first stanza with the lines "Americanos! conquerors! marches humanitarian! / Foremost! century marches! Libertad! masses! / For you a programme of chants" (16). This stanza comprises half of a rather stirring passage in a poem which some scholars consider to be the introduction proper of the book, since it appears to foreshadow some of his later works. As we move on through the rest of the passage, we find Whitman mapping out the lengths to which he desires his verse to travel, a design to encompass the "Life immense" discussed earlier. Indeed, this section shares much in common with "One's-Self I Sing" as an address of one man to the democratic masses, and upon reaching the end of the section we also find the poet again suggesting blood imagery through the word "pulse." The image may be modified differently in this poem, but the end which we arrive at is similar. In the earlier

poem, the song serves as a pulse; here, the song (chant) is moving in “pulses”--i.e. it is moving as blood. If we observe the entire line: “Shooting in pulses of fire ceaseless to vivify all” (16), we are able to note the powerful language that Whitman uses to modify the image. Just as the word “pulse” carries two extra meanings besides the blood image in “One’s-Self I Sing,” so it also possesses another meaning in the context of this poem--“pulse” as the sequenced emission of energy (fire, light, electricity, etc...). However, unlike the componential nature of the extra meanings in the previous poem where the blood image rises above the meanings in a hierarchial fashion, the image of blood which we derive from the word appears to be more intertwined with its alternate meaning in this poem. The blood image becomes fortified in this way, especially considering the fact that the pulses are not only moving--they are “shooting.” The combination of the blood image with the image of fire is both very intriguing and highly significant in this context. The image of fire can evoke a number of different meanings, but its meaning within this passage is unmistakably clear: Whitman is speaking of fire as a purifying agent--a refining, revitalizing force. Therefore, up to this point we can determine that the life’s blood of his chants will move as blood and will contain a force for purification and renewal. It is with the introduction of the fire image in this passage that we move from the blood image as a representation of his poetic identity to a representation of his desire to connect with the masses. We can mark this movement by first observing these qualities which the image of fire lends to the blood image, and then by observing that the union of the purifying aspects of fire with Whitman’s changes will “vivify all.” The end which the poet reaches here is indeed similar to that of “One’s-Self I Sing”; however, Whitman displays much more vigor in his desire to connect with the masses here, especially when we consider his claim that the chants will be “ceaseless” to “vivify all.”

If the poet’s basic intent is declared in the third section of “Starting from Paumanok,” then we can definitely see this intent clarified as we begin the following section with its opening line, “Take my leaves America, take them South and take them North,” (16)--and so on throughout the first stanza. As we know, when the poet speaks of “leaves” in this fashion, he is referring to the prose, chants, and songs, which comprise his life’s work--*Leaves of Grass*. In the third section he outlines what these works, the works which constitute his life’s

blood, can do for the reader; as we begin the fourth section, he asks us to embrace and circulate them while further imparting that they circulate within us. In the next-to-last stanza of "Song of Myself," we are given these lines: "You will hardly know who I am or what I mean, / But I shall be good health to you nevertheless, / And filter and fibre your blood" (68). With this and the previous two lines at hand: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (68), we can see another instance of the grass motif as it represents Whitman's work as well as the same kind of positive conviction found in the third section of "Starting from Paumanok" regarding how that work can connect to the reader. The poet's creative process is represented by the blood image which we derive from the idea that his life's work, the grass motif, must also be his life's blood. The poet will bequeath himself to the dirt to grow from the grass. This bequeathal is an expression of the life of Whitman's creative process by the idea that his work is ultimately generated by nature, as he is also. The bonus that we gain at this point comes from the observation that the poet will "grow from the grass." This suggestion of his own growth in light of our knowledge concerning the grass motif allows us to see that the poet is maintaining not only the betterment which the reader may derive from his work (that it will "filter and fibre" the blood), but also the elevation which he may attain for himself through that work, that "grass." What arises from these lines is a sort of symbolic bloodstream which travels from the writer into the work, and Whitman hopes that in many cases this bloodstream will travel further past all superficial glances into the bloodstream of the reader, where the two streams may intermingle and bring "good health" to both sides of the equation. These bloodstreams meet upon the foundation of the work; it is up to us to accept the interchange between the life's blood extending from his poetic identity to our own.

There are four poems from the "Calamus" section which contain blood imagery, and all of these instances fall under the domain of the primary blood image characteristics which are being outlined in this chapter. Of these, we shall discuss two of the poems which appear to contain the most powerful uses of blood imagery for the support of what we term the symbolic bloodstream between the poet and his audience. In "Not Heaving from my Ribb'd Breast Only," we are once again offered the blood image through the "pulse," yet with a

twist; we receive the image through the word “pulse” and through terminology surrounding the word. With the lines, “Not in this beating and pounding at my temples and wrists, / Not in the curious systole and diastole which will one day cease” (88), Whitman is addressing the matter of his work being his life’s blood by indicating that just as blood courses through his body, so it also courses through his body of work. This is made fully evident when we reach the final two lines: “O pulse of my life! / Need I that you exist and show yourself any more than in these songs” (88). The blood image in the seventh and eighth lines of the poem, along with the “pulse” toward the end, are obviously more literal than the previous instances which we have discussed. The image in lines seven and eight takes the form of blood pressure, and it operates by powering the life signs of the poet which are detailed in this particular work, thus serving as the central motivating image of the piece. Whitman’s elaboration on the initial, more technical form of the image by his addition of the words “within which will one day cease” seems to show us that the poet is not only concerned about his own inevitable demise; he is also concerned that the life pulse of his work might not continue. His desire to connect with both contemporary and future audiences becomes apparent in these words and their context, along with what we could detect as a slight fear of his work being lost in the shuffle. Overall, as with the previous blood image noted in “Song of Myself,” Whitman desires not only to connect with the audience but for the audience to gain as much enrichment from his writings as he does.

When we observe “Trickle Drops,” we are encountering a poem that contains blood images in every line: “From my breast, from within where I was once conceal’d, press forth red drops, confession drops, / Stain every page, stain every song I sing, every word I say, bloody drops. . .” (92). These two lines are merely a sample, but in them (as in the rest of the poem) we can see that the enrichment gained by Whitman through his creative process may be of an anguishing confessional nature where his life blood does not issue forth in a stream so much as in slow, trickling drops. The trickling of blood drops seems to suggest that even though much of himself may be coming out to the reader through the bloodstream of his life’s work, there are moments when his essential self, the self which he might sometimes be hesitant to reveal, will present one of its many facets through a single “blushing drop.”

Whitman's life blood is once again seeking our bloodstream, and once again it is up to us to accept the transfusion; in this case, however, we are also being asked to carefully consider each drop of his symbolic bloodstream as we let it enter our lives, presumably so there will be no misunderstandings between Whitman and ourselves.

There are a number of poems in the book which most assuredly exhibit the blood image playing an integral role in passages where the poet's attitude toward his creative process and his desire to affect the audience are each colored by a more aggressive stance. This aggression seems to arise from the fact that Whitman is attempting in these poems to arrive at a more specific, tangible end through the symbolic bloodstream beyond the hope of enacting a general betterment among the masses who might peruse his work. What we may witness in such poems is a more vigorous use of poetic identity as Whitman channels the life blood of his work for a specific purpose in order to affect an audience in a particular way. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that some of the brightest examples of Whitman's aggressive intimations of the symbolic bloodstream occur in poems and passages which relate to war. In "Song of the Banner at Daybreak," we are given these lines at the end of the first section, designated by the heading "Poet": "I'll pour the verse with streams of blood, full of volition, full of joy, / Then loosen, launch forth, to go and compete, / With the banner and pennant a-flapping" (205). It is the aim of the poetic persona (presumably Whitman himself) to discourage the child from following the alluring banner and pennant of war. Toward this end, Whitman not only suggests that he will send forth the life blood of his work to aid in the cause; he gives us the vivid, determined language of "I'll pour the verse with streams of blood"--language which can certainly force one to sit up and take notice. He then proposes to "loosen, launch forth," and "to go and compete," which provides us with a view of the lengths of aggression that the poet must go to in extending the symbolic bloodstream to the child, who is singularly the audience that he wishes to reach. To affect the child in the way that he sees fit, the poet knows that both his message and the means of conveyance will need to be aggressive, due to the fact that he must use his verse to "compete" against a moving, multicolored symbol, which is no easy feat; nevertheless, he knows that he must prevail in order to save the child's life.

In the ninth and tenth sections of "By Blue Ontario's Shore," Whitman offers passages where he is again using blood imagery to convey an aggressive position concerning the life of his creative process and his desire to make a connection with the masses. The aggression which he is exhibiting in these sections is attributable to the fact that he is taking a stand for both his creative process as well as his ability to affect the reader, although the aggression is also slightly tempered by the fact that he is speaking primarily in a third person voice. In the ninth section, we receive blood imagery in the line, "Of all races and eras these States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets, and are to have the greatest, and use them the greatest" (245). With the portion regarding "these States with veins full of poetical stuff," the poet is presenting a symbol of his life's work, since the largest part of that work is made up of the "poetical stuff" from America; moreover, the blood image of "veins" allows the total symbol to come alive. From here, the aggressive stance comes to the fore with the next portion of the line as Whitman maintains that the States "most need poets, and are to have the greatest, and use them the greatest." Along with the preceding symbolism carried by the blood image in this line that emphasizes the life blood of his work comes what may be interpreted as a declaration of defense regarding the necessity of his own work's existence. As we know, it is certainly neither uncharacteristic for Whitman to make grand claims concerning the importance of his work, nor to count himself among the greatest poets of his States.

Whitman seems to resume the business of standing up for the validity of his work in the tenth section with his assertion that "Of these States the poet is the equable man" (245). Among his comments regarding the equable nature of "the poet" comes this passage, juxtaposed with that nature as it operates during peacetime: "In war he is the best backer of war, he fetches artillery as good as the engineer's, he can make every word he speaks draw blood. . ." (246). He is seeking to prove the services which a poet with his peculiar balance of inner calm and outer brazenness can provide, and with this passage Whitman is professing the aggressive lengths that he can reach with a confrontational modification of the blood image ("draw blood"). Taken as a whole, the blood imagery from the ninth section to the tenth may be connected to provide us with a reading where Whitman suggests the life blood

of his work and proceeds to intimate the symbolic bloodstream through discussions of equability, such discussions being an excellent channel for reaching the public. He then proves how aggressively the symbolic bloodstream of an “equable nature” may be used, indicating that through it the poet may even “draw blood.” With these sections, as with “Song of the Banner at Daybreak,” Whitman displays a desire to move an audience in a particular direction with blood imagery; in this case, he is attempting to convince a contemporary audience about how important the services of a “poet of action” such as himself can be to America.

As we close this chapter, it seems only appropriate to mention “Now Precedent Songs, Farewell,” a retrospective piece which Whitman wrote near the end of his life. After counting off many of his previous works in farewell, he tells us that they are “From fibre heart of mine--from throat and tongue--(My life’s hot pulsing blood, / The personal urge and form for me--not merely paper, automatic type and ink. . .)” (368). In these lines, we find Whitman using the image of blood to convey a majority of the primary characteristics outlined in this chapter through a poem which he considered to be “an end and close of all” (368). The suggestions which we receive in our examinations of earlier poems about his work being his life’s blood are described with precision here, along with a passionate modification of the image in the words “hot” and “pulsing.” The symbolic bloodstream appears again--beginning with the passionate modifier “pulsing,” but continuing through “The personal urge and form for me,” which suggests both the bloodstream channel (“form”) as well as the life blood issuing forth (“urge”). What does not seem to be conveyed here is the desire to build an emotional connection between himself and the audience. The desire seems to be an unspoken one here, possibly because the poet feels that if he has not succeeded in making this connection to at least a substantial portion of the audience by this point, then what is the use? More likely, however, is the idea that Whitman’s sights are set more upon connecting with audiences of future generations by the time this poem is written, with the hope that his connection to these audiences will become stronger than in his own time. Fortunately, such has become the case--perhaps moreso than the poet ever surmised.

Chapter 3

Celebrating the Life Force: The Physical, Sexual Dimensions of Blood Imagery

The blood imagery serves to heighten the motif of human sexuality in *Leaves of Grass*. In section 21 of "Song of Myself," Whitman begins with the line, "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul" (39). There are a number of instances throughout the poem where we are treated to statements which might seem too grandiose, even after our considerations of Whitman's motives behind the piece. If we measure the poet's canon against this single line, however, it becomes apparent that the statement contains a great deal of truth. In fact, one senses that Whitman's desired position as a "poet of the Body" serves as a primary factor in the nourishment of his own soul, thus allowing him to be a poet of the latter condition as well. It is in his role as a "poet of the Body" that Whitman provides us with vivid uses of blood imagery to celebrate the life and good health of the human body and human sexuality. This celebration of body and soul often appears alongside what appears to be the poet's desire to further celebrate connections between the human body (his own and others) and various aspects of nature. In the first section of "Song of Myself," we find these lines:

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death. (25)

The vibrancy with which this passage resonates as a celebration of life is extremely potent, and we can readily note that blood imagery is the central means of conveying that message here. The image is modified in such a way as to permit the poet to express thoroughly the joy which he obtains from simply being alive. The passage begins with a symbol that indicates a primitive way of experiencing life--through the "tongue." It is by this image of life being tasted that Whitman sets a tone of release for both the passage and the rest of the poem. The obvious dual symbolism of the tongue as his instrument for relating the joys of living blends well with its primitive complement; moreover, the relationship of both to life outside of the body finds its appropriate counterpart through the modification of "blood" in the next

segment of the line. With “every atom of my blood,” the poet moves to a closer expression of the wonders contained by the internal processes of his body than he can achieve through his mention of the tongue, although he will need the tongue to express this as well! Whitman goes beyond simply representing his body’s internal processes with the blood image by further maintaining the idea of life’s wonders being present in every single atom of his blood, thus revealing how wide the scope of his celebration can be.

As we move to the final segment of the line, we find the poet making a jubilant connection between the life of his body and the natural world with the idea of both “tongue” and “blood” being “form’d from this soil, this air.” From here, the second line of the passage shows Whitman continuing to celebrate life by conveying the pattern of a second blood image--that of a bloodline. Through the bloodline, we receive images of birth and the continuity of life over generations, which in this instance amounts to the arrival of the “I” that begins the third line of the passage--the poet who proceeds to rejoice on the matter of his “perfect health.” The condition of good health often goes hand in hand with blood imagery when the poet is using the imagery to celebrate life, as one might expect. After establishing the soundness of his physique, Whitman triumphantly proclaims that he will “begin, / Hoping to cease not till death.” He is speaking about the beginning of two lives here: first, there is the life of his physical being after the acknowledgment of “perfect health,” and the second is his life as a poet. The culmination of this celebratory passage lies in the impression that we receive of how the poet is going to live his life to its fullest measure--an impression guided by the blood imagery in this passage; moreover, we receive the dual impression of Whitman’s assurance that his life as a poet will be exercised to its maximum extent as well.

The image of blood assists in a rather intriguing manner of life celebration in these lines which begin the twenty-eighth section of “Song of Myself”:

Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity,
 Flames and ether making a rush for my veins,
 Treacherous tip of me reaching and crowding to help them,
 My flesh and blood playing out lightning to strike what is hardly different
 from myself,

On all sides prurient provokers stiffening my limbs,

Straining the udder of my heart for its withheld drip. . . . (45)

The “prurient provokers,” serve as a catalyst to aid in the poet’s design of celebrating the life force through the exploration of his own sexual energy. The celebration is intense, occurring with a single touch. The touch is not merely “moving” or “bringing” the poet to a different level; it is “quivering” him to this level. The “new identity” into which the poet is being quivered is presumably another term for the awakening that he undergoes in regard to his own sexuality and the power therein. The effects of the touch begin to manifest themselves from this point onward through the section, and the intensity with which they do so is most vividly conveyed in three astonishing uses of blood imagery. The flames and ether which are making a rush for his veins amount to a comment upon the volatile properties that a touch can bring about in a body as sexually charged as his own. Beyond this, we receive the forceful impression of the poet’s blood being crowded or possibly replaced by the flames and ether due to the mysterious encounter he is making in this section.

With the second blood image, we see the explosiveness brought about in the poet’s body become further accentuated as his blood plays out lightning to strike; at the same time, we may also note this use of the blood image as displaying the often characteristic connection between the body and nature. The fact that the blood image in this line is connected with lightning, one of the most violent forces in nature, serves to fortify the growing intensity of the passage. However, we can also detect an even stronger connection of body and natural forces upon considering that both blood and flesh are actually the origin point for the lightning. The idea that the lightning is meant “to strike what is hardly different” from the poet seems to indicate the struggle of his body to maintain some semblance of order between the sexual energy surging within and an equal force of sexuality closing in upon him from the “prurient provokers.”

After relating the initial efforts of the provokers to subdue him, Whitman’s third use of the blood image displays his struggle in a more direct fashion. We find the center of the struggle with the idea of his heart’s “withheld drip,” an idea that seems to represent the poet’s attempt to safeguard at least a small degree of rationality in regard to his sexual energy so

that his life will not be completely consumed by passion, even though he realizes that his attempt may well be in vain. As much as Whitman's body may desire this, the poet understands the danger involved in losing such a struggle; moreover, this contention between passion and rationality is something which nearly every human being must come to terms with during a lifetime. For Whitman, it is a matter that warrants celebration, since it plays such an essential role in defining our lives.

Whitman's use of the blood image as a means of celebrating the life of the body often leads to instances where the image serves as a center for some of the poet's most enchanting and uplifting scenes. One of these scenes comprises the third section of "I Sing the Body Electric," which contains this line: "He drank water only, the blood show'd like scarlet through the clear-brown skin of his face" (72). In all of the lines leading up to this point, we are provided with an abundance of descriptions which characterize the farmer as a man who is fairly brimming with vitality; yet none of these descriptions pertaining to his physical nature, benevolent demeanor, or other attributes speak quite as loudly of his vitality as does the image of this man's face filled with the color of blood--a color which does not bespeak his advanced age. In fact, there are several instances throughout *Leaves of Grass* where Whitman's use of blood imagery to celebrate life amounts to remarks concerning the color of one's face, one of the human body's surest indicators of good health. Conversely, the poet also makes frequent use of face images that are devoid of color to represent death or ill health. When we encounter all of the descriptions leading up to the blood image in the third section of this poem, we obtain firm impressions of the farmer's liveliness. However, when we read of the blood that remains to color his face after so many years, we begin to feel a certain intimacy with him due to the celebration of life found in this application of the blood image. It is an intimacy akin to what we feel upon considering many of the other instances where life is rejoiced through the poet's discussions of how faces gain color. We acquire a full picture of the farmer's life replete with vigor from the blood image, and Whitman seems to encourage our intimacy with this man--especially at the end of the section: "You would wish long and long to be with him, you would wish to sit by him in the boat that you and he might touch each other" (72). He is using rather commanding tones in this portion because he emphatically

desires that the reader partake in this celebration of the body which the overall work is putting forth. The blood image is crucial for maintaining this celebration in the third section of the poem.

The blood in the farmer's face is modified by the word "scarlet," which refers to a particular shade of red on one hand; yet, in an archetypal sense it is often associated with images of passion and promiscuity. This would seem to indicate that there is more life in the old fellow than we may realize at even a second glance. The issue of color in this application of the blood image simply brings out another facet of the image's life-sustaining properties; however, the question gains greater significance as we examine the fifth section of the poem "Faces." Here we find no mention of the word "blood," yet the third stanza provides us with this line: "[I] Heard who sprang in crimson youth from the white froth and the water-blue" (325). The poem itself is one which puts forth the idea of fruition and life celebration taking the day; the culmination of these types of images comprise the fifth section with the mother image taking precedence. It is unnecessary for Whitman to rely on the word "blood" in order to put this image across to the reader; here, we only need the mention of "crimson" to sustain the blood image. We are able to imagine the blood of good health rising in the faces of young people in this section, just as we are similarly able to imagine it in the face of the old farmer; only the color changes. The image of blood that we derive from "crimson" plays an integral role in a line which serves as perhaps the keystone of this poem's finale of life force images (aside from the great importance of the mother image). It is an exquisitely beautiful line which gives us three color applications (crimson, white, and blue) that all deal with some aspect of the life force when addressed as archetypes. With crimson we have the liveliness of youth; in "white froth," we detect an image of the sexual act, and with "water-blue" we obtain two traditional maternal archetypes. We should note that the latter two images serve as antecedents to the blood image suggested by "crimson"; this seems to indicate that even beyond the considerable life energy expended by the mother of the piece is the desire that the energy keep progressing through the young people and that they eventually pass their crimson energy on to future generations.

The majority of blood images contained in Whitman's Civil War poems are affiliated

with statements concerning death and the horrors of war; however, there are also a number of instances in these poems where blood imagery is used to convey a celebration of life by rejoicing in the energy released by cities and soldiers preparing for war--a life activity perhaps unmatched in terms of sheer intensity. The poem "First O Songs for a Prelude" shows us the bustle of such activity as reflected by the streets of the poet's beloved Mannahatta and, more directly, by the blood imagery which we find connected with these lines: "How I love them! How I could hug them, with their brown faces and their clothes and knapsacks covered with dust! / The blood of the city up--arm'd! arm'd! the cry everywhere," (202). A basic interpretation of "brown faces" tells us that the soldiers' faces are brown simply because of the dust which has also covered their clothes and knapsacks. However, beneath this interpretation lies a common literary motif which fits remarkably well into the poem's context--the idea of how mankind is born of the dust and inevitably returns to the same. If we choose to accept this underlying motif, then it becomes quickly evident that we arrive at a much richer interpretation of "brown faces" than if we remain with the basic idea of the soldier's faces being dust-covered from the forces of the elements alone. Through the alternate reading, we can determine that the dust which covers their faces, clothes, and knapsacks serves to represent the fact that their life forces arise from this dust and will ultimately be restored to it. Thus, the soldiers are covered by an element which is at once a symbol of their lives and a foreshadower of their deaths; one would be hard-pressed to find a more appropriate symbolic covering for those who are riding into war. From the dust, we move directly to the blood image--an exquisite elemental connection. The soldiers have prepared themselves by donning their symbolic covering; now, the city inhabitants must add the life energy from their rising blood to further prepare the regiments through cries of "arm'd! arm'd!" and vigorous flag waving. Whitman seems to realize the vital importance behind rallying the soldiers with as much positive energy as the life force of Mannahatta can muster, for he is well aware of the "red business" which awaits them--although he is not as acutely aware of it as he will later become. The poet knows that, at least in a small sense, the life celebration encountered at home will fuel the soldiers in their impending engagements.

Whitman's use of the blood image in the short poem "Weave in, My Hardy Life" brings

us back to our discussion at the beginning of this chapter regarding the first section of "Song of Myself" and his manner of celebrating life and good health in his own body by way of blood imagery. As he takes the life celebration aspect of the image and directs it toward himself in this short piece, Whitman produces the line, "Weave in red blood, weave sinews in like ropes, the senses, sight weave in . . ." (334). He is calling upon his own blood, perhaps the strongest image in the poem, to further strengthen and sustain his life. The blood image in this line forms an impression which naturally acts upon the remaining components of the line, but its greatest significance lies in how it modifies the previous line: "Weave yet a soldier strong and full for great campaigns to come" (334). Through this relationship, we can observe that Whitman's desire for his blood to sustain him stems largely from his desire to produce more writings; after all, that is what his life is about. Moreover, this relationship forms a close parallel to the way in which the blood of good health strengthens the poet toward his triumphant proclamation in the first section of "Song of Myself"--that he will "begin, / Hoping to cease not till death." The key difference in this parallel is, of course, the time that has elapsed. The poet who greets us at the beginning of "Song of Myself" is a relatively young man who can boast of his good health without having any second thoughts on the matter, whereas the poet of "Weave in, My Hardy Life" is a man who is entering his twilight years and can sense the reality of his gradually declining health. Therefore, we can detect more of an urgency in Whitman's celebrations of life as he moves into these years, regardless of whether there is any blood imagery involved or not; however, it is difficult to deny the extra potency which the image of blood lends to the later verses where the poet's health is concerned.

As we observe the latter portion of Whitman's career, it seems as if his tendency to revel in the life of his own body begins to exhibit the characteristics of a therapeutic process rather than sheer brazenness. There is an ostensible need expressed by the poet through "Weave in, My Hardy Life" and later pieces like "Song at Sunset," which lead him to sing more forcefully of his good health due to the fact that more visions of his own mortality are naturally finding their way to the front of his thoughts with the passing of time. The onset of such visions does not leave him distraught or panicking; they simply appear strange to a poet

who has always found refuge in his good health. In "Song at Sunset," Whitman even comes to celebrate these visions as much as his life and physical soundness, although the poet's sentiments on the joy of living still carry the day. The end of the fourth stanza shows the poet commenting upon "the grandeur and exquisiteness of old age," and "the superb vistas of death" (343), but these notions are immediately followed by Whitman's rejoicing of his own robust nature after the opening line of the fifth stanza. This opening line ("Wonderful to depart!") can be read as a fitting transition between Whitman's visions of his own mortality and his celebrations of life, since it has the dual characteristics of referring to departure as either death or earthly movement. The life force images are strong throughout the remainder of the stanza, with the image of blood serving as a means of conveying the power that Whitman hopes to summon for his life celebration. We encounter images of the poet breathing, speaking, walking, seizing things with his hands, and more--but none of these images pointedly express the idea of the poet's own good health as much as the image of the "innocent blood" infusing the flesh to give it a rose-colored aspect, presumably of youth. Whitman seems to desire that his life force, his blood, should have the last word.

Chapter 4

Whispers of Bloody Death: The Loss of Limb and Life

It seems appropriate at this juncture to move from the poet's employment of blood imagery as a means of exalting the life of the body to a discussion of his use of blood imagery in sequences which detail physical loss, most often in relation to war. These sequences contain some of the most startlingly graphic language to be found in the entire volume because Whitman not only wishes for us to read and understand these passages on a surface level but also on a subconscious level. He wants his reader to feel inwardly and be able to apprehend with all senses--no matter how intense the imaginative processes of the venture. For such purposes, the use of blood imagery is obviously a key factor in eliciting the kinds of emotional responses that Whitman desires from the reader. However, just as we are to look below the surface level of his treatments of death and the horrors of war in order to discover their various added dimensions, so we are also provided with blood images in this context which are often neither static nor without enhancements to maximize their potential chilling effects. The reader might be tempted to conclude from several of the following blood images that Whitman's application of them can sometimes border upon being exploitative, yet the fact remains that the ends which the poet is laboring towards are far from selfish ones. Indeed, the cruelty of bloody death and the utter madness of war are conveyed by this set of images as realistically as possible in an effort to touch mankind both on an individual basis and as a collective body, or more pointedly, as a nation. We cannot help but admire the poet's combination of dogged optimism with fierce descriptive realism in the use of blood imagery here, even if this optimism does not always shine through as readily as it would in some of his jubilant life celebrations. In all, if Whitman's use of blood imagery in these circumstances may sometimes appear exploitative, then we should understand that what is occurring here is a kind of positive exploitation--if such a quality does exist. For our purposes, we can simply state that Whitman manipulates this blood imagery to achieve his desired ends; he may sometimes shock us, but he has just cause for doing so. We can measure the probable effectiveness of Whitman's course by viewing examples of the basic style in which he delivers the language of his darker blood passages; by doing so, it becomes quickly apparent that

Whitman conveys ideas with this type of blood imagery which are too profound to allow the belief that the poet is using these images either for their own sake or merely to produce effects.

One of the more common stylistic turns that Whitman enacts with his darker uses of blood imagery is his inclination toward showing us blood in motion, in the sense of a bloodletting rather than circulation. He employs several action words to modify this sense; for instance, forms of the word "drip" occur quite frequently throughout the book as a means of conveying this kind of blood motion. In section 33 of "Song of Myself," Whitman assumes the voice of the old artillerist who is reliving a scene of past destruction as he speaks of his fort's bombardment. He claims that "I take part, I see and hear the whole . . ." (52), and in his recollections we find this line: "The ambulanza slowly passing trailing its red drip . . ." (53). In nearly all of the other lines which contain these recollections, we are provided with at least two sounds or visions in each line that operate toward relating the impression of the nightmarish scene, often with instances of cataloging--one of Whitman's most important stylistic trademarks, which allows him to add so many facets to an impression that it becomes overwhelming, and not easily forgettable. However, in the "ambulanza" line we are basically forced to respond to only one clear vision--the trailing of a red drip of blood. The length to which we are forced to respond becomes apparent when we note the placement of the line between the furious action of the line directly before it: "The cries, curses, roar, the plaudits for well-aim'd shots . . ." (52)--and the continued furious action of the line which follows: "Workmen searching after damages, making indispensable repairs . . ." (53). In this light, the slow passing of the ambulanza causes a slowing of the cadence by which the dark recollections are being numbered; thus, the one clear vision of the ambulanza trailing blood is allowed more time to penetrate our imagination and become the real centerpiece of this passage.

The slowing of the cadence facilitates a key focus upon the blood image here, and rather than simply stating that the ambulanza is trailing blood, Whitman draws the reader further into the scene with both the action of the bloodletting contained in the word "drip" and his effort to move beyond the word "blood" as an object which can be readily abstracted

to blood as a “red drip,” a more concrete characterization which is certainly easier to visualize. We are also informed that the ambulanza is trailing “its” red drip, as opposed to “a” red drip; this suggests the perpetual nature of the awful bloodletting that occurs here by making it synonymous with the ambulanza. The possessive pronoun lets us know that at the time of these recollected events, Whitman’s “old artillerist” associates the red drip of the ambulanza with bloodletting of the past and present--and there is nothing in the sequence to suggest that he could or could not see it continuing indefinitely. Indeed, this vagueness concerning the artillerist’s feelings of hope or hopelessness in the situation permits us to imagine with better clarity the seemingly endless journey of the ambulanza moving from post to post, carrying body after body. The line ultimately makes a stronger impact with the horrors suggested through the blood images than the horrors which are bluntly disclosed in the final line of the stanza: “The whizz of limbs, heads, stone, wood, iron, high in the air” (53). This is due to the fact that, as gruesome as the images in the final line may be, they are flashed before us and become fragmentary (both literally and figuratively), whereas the blood image brings us beyond the instant shock response of flying body parts to the more profound emotions connected with the idea of a bleeding train of human bodies. In truth, Whitman’s use of cataloging in the final line can cause the perception that the body parts are to be equated with the stone, wood, and iron. If we follow this idea in light of the incessant nature of the “red drip,” then it is possible to view a similar pattern emerging from both lines regarding the insidious mechanistic properties which can often surround and characterize war itself; it is the dehumanizing aspects of war which often seem to trouble Whitman the most, and he commonly focuses upon these aspects when writing of its horrors.

The horrible sights of death and mutilation viewed by Whitman while touring field hospitals during the Civil War serve as a foundation to many of the poems contained in the section titled “Drum Taps,” as well as several of his later poems. Among these, the poem “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown” is a veritable tour de force with regard to the kind of blood imagery being explored in this chapter. After telling of the army’s arrival at the church/hospital after midnight, Whitman goes on to discuss the disturbing play of shadows in the dimly lit place. The shadows serve as an exquisite prelude to the dark blood

imagery of the following passage:

At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death, (he is
shot in the abdomen,)

I stanch the blood temporarily, (the youngster's face is white as a lily,)

Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o'er the scene fain to absorb it all,

Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity, some of them dead,

Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood,

The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, the yard outside also fill'd. (218-19)

The bloodletting continues in the poem "France: The 18th Year of these States" as Whitman moves back in time to deliver his feelings concerning one of the opening years of the French Revolution. As we know, Whitman's poetic persona is quite malleable in terms of time, and with the statement of "I walk'd the shores of my Eastern sea" (172)--we find one of many examples concerning how this malleability also extends to the notion of place; in this piece, he is the spokesperson for the States--if not the States themselves. From the shores, he hears the waking voice of freedom personified by the image of the "divine infant," and then proceeds to relate the flurry of actions that make up the revolt out of which the voice of freedom is rising. Among these actions, we find the image of "the blood in the gutters running" (172). Whitman is once again showing us blood in motion to denote a bloodletting; moreover, in order to convey the grand scale of bloodletting which characterizes an event such as the French Revolution, he must evoke a sense of this motion in terms that reflect the proportions of the event. Whitman places the reader squarely into the immediate action with this particular use of the blood image; the corpses may be motionless, sealed chapters of a human drama, but we are still faced with the torrent of blood running in the gutters. The fact that it runs in the gutters rather than into the ground where it can nurture the soil shows the tragic extent of the waste which is occurring here, as does the image of "heaps" of corpses and the vision of people being "borne away in the tumbrils," presumably for decapitation. All of the ghastly visions of this line become encapsulated in the next line as facets of "the battues of death" (172). The poet claims that he is neither sick from nor desperate at what is taking place, namely because he realizes that the ongoing slaughter is a necessary evil which the

people of France must suffer in order to attain the freedom they seek--to receive the "divine infant" and allow her to grow.

However, just because Whitman recognizes the bloodshed as a necessary evil does not mean that he is entirely comfortable with it, and we can observe this sentiment lying beneath the questions which constitute the third stanza: "Pale, silent, stern, what could I say to that long-accrued retribution? / Could I wish humanity different? / Could I wish the people made of wood and stone? / Or that there be no justice in destiny or time?" (172-73). These are ultimately rhetorical questions; the poet understands that he must assent to the retribution for the greater good which is to come from it (i.e. freedom, liberty, democracy), and that he also cannot realistically expect the people to carry on beneath dehumanizing oppression without making some effort to improve the quality of their lives. Yet, the simple fact that he must ask these questions at all seems to indicate the poet's reluctance toward justifying (or possibly advocating) violence and bloodshed, no matter how sound the reasoning behind it may be. Whitman places himself in a position where we can sense his uneasiness, and his method for alleviating this uneasiness is what we encounter in the final stanza, as he states that "I do not deny that terrible red birth and baptism, / But remember the little voice that I heard wailing, and wait with perfect trust, no matter how long, / And from to-day sad and cogent I maintain the bequeath'd cause, as for all lands." (173). The second blood image in the poem comes under the mantle of life celebration, and Whitman's use of this aspect in juxtaposition with the previous violent aspect amounts to a brilliant stylistic measure which conveys the poet's belief that, in this instance, blood will not be shed in vain; it will become part of the creation of a new life where freedom and democracy prevail. His method for alleviating the uneasiness that he may yet feel in justifying the bloodletting lies in the poet's vow to keep the thought of freedom alive in his own mind as he remembers its wailing voice over time and causes it to filter into his work, which will touch the minds of others and allow them to have their own freedom of choice as they examine the words of his song and determine whether or not the path to freedom must always involve bloodshed.

Chapter 5

The Deeper Truths: The Movement from the Spilling of Blood to Spiritual Affirmation

In Whitman's hands, blood imagery becomes an effective tool for uncovering deeper truths about the individual in a community of peace, love, or war. The physical entity, confronted by "dark" blood images that display Whitman's death threat, rests in peaceful antithesis with the spiritual entity, one that shows Whitman's insistent dream of affirmation and divinity. In his war poems the spilled blood, splattered blood, dripped blood connote death (unlike the circulatory blood), yet within the poetry Whitman uses touches of irony so that the harsh reality of death can be played against the immortal ideals. For example, in "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown" (mentioned above in Chapter 4), the impact of war's carnage is heightened when we consider that Whitman, with carefully drawn irony, uses a church as the field hospital. In this instance, the mixture of the church image with these dark images of blood allows us to glimpse some of his spiritual ideas. The origin of these ideas lies in Whitman's firm belief in the divinity of man and the primary importance of one's role as an individual in society. The church, of course, represents God; moreover, it represents the God for whom both sides of the war struggle. Both North and South have assembled armies which are fighting in the name of God, armies which contribute to the destruction of man's divinity by causing him to be less like a man and more like a machine--one that kills as well as one that can be broken in order to simply become part of "the crowd of the bloody forms." Therefore, the concept of man's divinity that Whitman holds so dear may be eradicated through war and replaced by the process of dehumanization. With a satiric edge to his voice, the poet combats the circumstances behind this process by displaying images of blood spilling in the church, especially since the war is being fought largely in the name of God. Whitman ironically places the bloody, dehumanized masses before God in a place of worship. By doing this, he seems to be expressing a desire for God to take a firm look at the carnage being wrought in His name--carnage which, at this particular time, appears to have no end; indeed, we are easily able to imagine the "bloody forms" waiting well beyond "the yard outside also fill'd."

In truth, Whitman knows that there will be no end to the bloodshed unless people accept the divinity within themselves and each other; only then can the proper worship of God occur. The poet is also thrusting an indictment upon religious institutions with this combination of church and blood imagery, or at least those which adopt a militant stance in regard to the war by espousing sentiments that the soldiers are fighting in God's army, or that God is in alliance with one side of the conflict or the other. He makes this indictment a lasting one not only by providing images of blood being spilled in the church but by placing emphasis on the magnitude of the group of "bloody forms" and the pervasive "odor of blood" to imply that the church is saturated with blood. Through this saturation, Whitman is ultimately suggesting that the notions of the church about the nature of this war and God's role in it have become, for the most part, trivialized beneath the alarming amount of bloodshed from both the North and South. God's role in the matter is, not surprisingly, a totally impartial one; he will let both sides of the struggle atone in blood for their failure to accept the divinity in themselves and each other. Until such acceptance is met, the American people will be left to the course of action given by the poet in the final two lines: "Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks, / The unknown road still marching" (219).

The satiric voice of Whitman finds expression again with the poem "Thick-Sprinkled Bunting." Here Whitman joins his dark blood imagery to the highly provocative image of the American flag. Due to the brevity of the piece, it can be reprinted here in its entirety:

Thick-sprinkled bunting! flag of stars!
 Long yet your road fateful flag--long yet your road and lined with bloody death,
 For the prize I see at issue at last is the world,
 All its ships and shores I see interwoven with your threads greedy banner;
 Dream'd again the flags of kings, highest borne, to flaunt unrival'd?
 O hasten flag of man--O with sure and steady step, passing highest flags of kings,
 Walk supreme to the heavens mighty symbol--run up above them all,
 Flag of stars! thick-sprinkled bunting! (336).

Whitman identifies the American flag as a symbol in the poem, one that has gained supremacy

over divine forces. The mixture of the blood image and the concept of greed on this level serves to form immediate surface impressions in the mind of the reader concerning the past and present course of American life. The poet seems to allow the flag to affect the reader on a symbolic level because he is confident in the knowledge of how quick and passionate the emotional responses of most people can be when encountering subjects that connect with their nationalistic impulses. Thus, he keeps the symbolic value of the flag operating throughout the poem; the flag becomes synonymous with the nation and its people. Whitman moves beyond offering surface impressions to arrive at a greater depth of meaning. The flag gives Whitman the opportunity to confront the American people directly as he adopts the role of poet-prophet, a role which he assumes comfortably (and often). The confrontation amounts to a warning for all Americans to remember that a deep malevolence threatens to grow in proportion to the dizzying progress of the nation's march toward attaining status as a supreme world power. When the image of "bloody death" is connected with Whitman's symbolic use of the flag, it becomes simply one of many aspects which outline the darker pages of the nation's history.

However, the dark blood imagery emerges from both its past and present position of being ranked with other assorted bitter aspects surrounding the growth of the country and gains a high degree of potency by becoming the common denominator through which the poet unfolds his ominous vision of America's spiritual future. Thus, the image of "bloody death" moves from the symbolic sense of being clustered with greed, the relentless quest for global domination as a "prize," the envelopment of the world's "ships and shores," and other questionable aggressive acts to a position of being an inevitable result if such greed is allowed to continue unchecked. When Whitman actually names the flag as a symbol in the next-to-last line and attempts to project its symbolic import onto future events with the cry of "Walk supreme to the heavens mighty symbol--run up above them all," he raises two issues. First, the flag may rise "supreme to the heavens," but can the American people ever hope to rise as high without stemming the growing tide of greed and bloodshed which will continue to characterize the nation? Second, even if the flag's symbolic import persists in the minds of the people, will their thoughts in this area translate into more benevolent and less hostile

actions in the future? He is asking, in essence, if social expediency in all its complexity and ultimate bloodshed can walk supreme. His irony suggests the opposite. Bloodletting in the name of God cannot be condoned. The spilled blood of Christ is a redemptive, saving grace. Neither greed nor patriotic pride should prevail but love and compassion for the human spirit.

Whitman's immortal ideals were bloodied by the war and by the death of Lincoln, but they remained spiritually intact. His message, although shrouded at times in elements of irony, seems clear. In his preface to the 1855 edition, he says, "The old red blood and stainless gentility of great poets will be proved by their unconstraint," and then he announces, "We affirm there can be unnumbered Supremes, and that one does not countervail another any more than one eyesight countervails another . . . and that men can be good or grand only of the consciousness of their supremacy within them." In the same passage, he addresses the matter of human carnage:

What do you think is the grandeur of storms and dismemberments and the deadliest battles and wrecks and the wildest fury of the elements and the power of the sea and the motion of nature and of the throes of human desires and dignity and hate and love? It is that something in the soul which says, Rage on, Whirl on; I tread master here and everywhere, Master of the spasms of the sky and of the shatter of the sea, Master of nature and passion and death, And of all terror and all pain. (418)

As human beings, we may spill blood, both ours and that of others, yet Whitman affirms the spiritual essence of human existence: "It is also not consistent with the reality of the soul to admit that there is anything in the known universe more divine than men and women" (419).

Chapter 6

Conclusion

One of the more tragic flaws in human nature is that often we do not consider the extent to which our lives can and do affect the lives of others. This basic truth of human existence not only deserves careful consideration in regard to our aggressive tendencies and the consequences of our direct actions, but also in regard to our passive relations to the world around us (i.e. personal appearance, general demeanor, decisions not to act). Walt Whitman positions himself as a writer who understands these consequences and who forces us to accept the fact that we must gain a stronger consciousness of our connection to a wider range of existence, one that lies outside our often narrow perceptions of the world. Toward this end, he adopts the role of a self (or soul) which is capable of moving among all modes of existence in an effort to confront us with the special interconnectedness that we all share, regardless of any desire which we may have to separate ourselves from society. Thus, the poet himself becomes a supreme example of one who can think of the world in terms of a global community where, to employ a standard metaphor, each life is akin to a link in a chain--each life being of importance, with no one life being more important than another.

Along with this all-encompassing poetic persona, Whitman's use of blood imagery also conveys the necessity of maintaining a broader world view, and with greater urgency than we find in his employment of any other type of imagery. Whenever one notices a passage in Leaves of Grass that deals with an instance regarding an improvement in the understanding of human interaction, then one will more than likely notice that a blood image is involved in some capacity, either as a key factor or a relevant supporting image. Likewise, if a passage is detected where an improvement in the understanding of mankind's struggles takes place, whether they are related to life, death, love, war, work, poverty, or other conditions, the image of blood is usually involved to some degree; indeed, it can be a rather poignant image in such cases, and a remarkably versatile one as well.

Whitman possesses an understanding of how both our direct and indirect actions can have ramifications which extend to far reaches of the populace, and it is an understanding which has a symbolic equivalent in his use of blood imagery. This fact can be witnessed in the

poet's decision to employ the imagery in active terms and with direct purpose in some instances, while in other instances allowing the image to be an implied one through either substitution of a related word (red, pulse, drip, etc.) or through a reliance upon the possibility that the reader will supply a more vivid blood image to a given work than the poet could hope for. The image may be used in an aggressive or a passive manner, but the ramifications of its use still extend far in either case; in truth, there is no other image in Whitman's poetry that is inherently versatile enough to connect to as many diverse images, symbols, modes of thought, or states of being with the dexterous quality which is maintained through the blood image. Overall, if we view the aggressive or passive nature of Whitman's use of the image as being akin to the same two-fold nature as it exists in our actions, while at the same time viewing the various images touched by the image of blood as being symbolically related to the aforementioned "far reaches of the populace," then we can arrive at a clearer understanding of the symbolic equivalency between the wide-ranging effects of both our actions and of the poet's use of blood imagery. Ultimately, the many instances of blood imagery in Whitman's book prove his knowledge of its power as an image, especially when we note the many instances where the imagery is at the center of the poet's message.

Perhaps, above all, Whitman's greatest accomplishments with blood imagery come as both part and parcel of his role as an extraordinary poet of the human body and the human spirit. Blood, both in image and in fact, is the crux which stands between life and death; this is a common truth. Whitman finds a home within this truth. It *pulses* within his poetry:

One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,
 Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.
 Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
 Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse,

I say the Form complete is worthier far,
 The Female equally with the Male I sing.
 Of life immense in passion, *pulse*, and power, [emphasis is mine]
 Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,
 The Modern Man I sing. (5)

Whitman touches both the blood level of humanity and the spiritual level. In his preface he says, "The greatest poet does not moralize or make applications of morals . . . he knows the soul. The soul has that measureless pride which consists in never acknowledging any lessons but its own" (417). He asks men and women to trust themselves--the rising and falling levels of their blood, their intuitions, their sympathies. Whitman reminds us that the great poet "sees eternity in men and women . . . he does not see men and women as dreams or dots" (414).

Thus Whitman asks his readers to find their own identity, to discover their place within the community, to be wary and cautious about patriotic enthusiasm that borders on fanaticism, and--finally--to recognize the divinity flowing within the pulsing blood.

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