THE RHETORICS OF HOSPITALITY IN WALT WHITMAN'S *SPECIMEN DAYS*[1]

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of hospitality in Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days* (1882). The article is informed by a Levinasian reading of the concept since the main argument is that Lévinas' interpretation of hospitality sheds light on Whitman's years in Washington during the Civil War and his much debated relation with wounded soldiers. Lévinas' phenomenology is centered on care of the Other, which leads to the question of how far the self's personal obligation to respond to the other in need actually extends. Whitman wanted to create a persona that was meaningful and useful in the Civil War and he chose to be a nurse, or, as he called it in a poem, "the wound-dresser". By writing about the Civil War, he would both put himself in the center of the historical moment and support Lincoln's decision to fight the South. In *Specimen Days* he wanted to write a memorandum of the war that rejected the 'sanitized' versions already circulating. He focused on Union soldiers, who were representative of the best American qualities in Whitman's view and who endured the hardships of the war, the injuries, pain and death included, but he also described the Southern soldiers, who were the 'ghosts' of the Union during the Civil War.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, hospitality, *Specimen Days*, American Civil War, Emmanuel Lévinas.

Resumen

El artículo analiza el concepto de hospitalidad en el libro *Specimen Days* (1882) de Walt Whitman. Metodológicamente sigue la idea propuesta por Emmanuel Lévinas de hospitalidad como cuidado del otro, pues el autor cree que esa lectura levinasiana ayuda a entender algunos aspectos del tiempo que Whitman pasó en Washington durante la Guerra Civil. Su intención era crear un personaje que respondiera a las necesidades de dicha guerra. De ahí que escoja ser un enfermero o "the wound-dresser". Al escribir sobre la Guerra Civil, se situó en el centro del momento y apoyó la decisión de Lincoln de atacar el Sur. Con *Specimen Days* el objetivo era escribir unas memorias de la guerra que fuera más allá de las versiones depuradas que ya circulaban. Se centró en los soldados de la Unión, representantes de los mejores valores americanos, según dejó dicho. Estos soldados soportaron lo peor de la guerra, las heridas, el dolor y la muerte; también escribió sobre los soldados sureños, a quienes vio como los 'fantasmas' de la Unión durante esos años.

Palabras clave: Walt Whitman, hospitalidad, *Specimen Days*, Guerra Civil americana, Emmanuel Lévinas.

Introduction

Hospitality is a term that appears in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as early as 1855. In the preface Whitman uses the word hospitality when writing about the greatest poet. "The premises of the prudence of life are not the hospitality of it or the ripeness and harvest of it" (Kaplan 1982: 20). Whitman assumes that the reader knows the meaning of the term, and implies that the word does not carry any other particular connotation for him. The *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* defines hospitality as "the friendly reception and treatment of guests or strangers" (*Webster's* 1971: 686). This friendly welcoming of strangers is also acknowledged in the text. Whitman mentions "the perpetual coming of immigrants" (Kaplan 1982: 8) in the context of the poet's responsibilities. Among these, Whitman alludes to the concept of hospitality when he writes: "Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. To him the other continents arrive as contributions… he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake" (Kaplan 1982: 7). A few years later he wrote about the hospitality of the American language in "Rambles Among Words" (1859). In the twelfth Ramble, he considers the theory of America: "Land of Ensemble, to her the consenting currents flow, and the ethnology of the States draws the grand outline of the hospitality and reception that must mark the new politics, sociology, literature and religion" (Grier 1984: 1661). A few lines later, he adds "Language […] moulded

more and more to a large hospitality and impartiality" (Grier 1984: 1661). The linguistic sign would be meaningless for Whitman if it were not for its capacity to welcome and embrace new objects and thoughts since this language is created in order to name objects and thoughts that were before then still unnamed. Language also functions as a container for those new thoughts but if it was to be creative it would be so only by means of its hospitality. Hospitality, then, is a central feature of Whitman's poetics and deserves more attention. Puspa Damai (2012: 27-67) and Ana Manzanas and Jesús Benito (2017: 28-36) have partially studied hospitality in Whitman's poetry. However, none of them has fully explored the centrality of hospitality to Whitman's poetics. I propose to study the importance of hospitality in *Specimen Days*, Whitman's troubling autobiography. The issue poses some questions that are central to an understanding of Whitman's late works. Whitman claimed in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" that without the Civil War he would not have written *Leaves of Grass* (Kaplan 1982: 666). Since *Specimen Days* relates his experience during the war, it is necessary to inquire to what extent hospitality centered Whitman's late poetics and how it created a rhetoric of its own in his work.

My reading of Whitman's hospitality in *Specimen Days* will be informed by the Levinasian conceptualization of hospitality. It is my view that despite the fact that Lévinas is a post-Holocaust philosopher whose writings are basically concerned with an ethical understanding of society (Plant 2003: 436), his interpretation of hospitality sheds light on Whitman's years in Washington during the Civil War and his much debated relation with wounded soldiers. For Lévinas, hospitality is the welcoming of the Other as the stranger. He notes that the welcoming "comes from the exterior" (1969: 51) and produces an epiphany in which the face is the central element. This epiphany signals the very moment in which inwardness and outwardness meet. The outwardness of the Other's face meets the interiority of the self, and calls into question the subject's uniqueness and possession of the world, according to Lévinas' theory in different parts of *Totality and Infinity*. The epiphany has as its main consequence the breaking of stable categories such as the self, the Other or inwardness and outwardness, since this epiphany "overflows images" (1969: 51) and breaks through any preconception (1969: 297). The home is a site of inwardness for Lévinas that, nonetheless, is rootless because the individual ventures outside his inwardness. This venturing outside makes hospitality possible as the individual becomes an ethical subject by means of recollection, which is a kind of "coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome" (1969: 155). It makes the welcoming of the Other possible (1969: 155). Thus, when the subject becomes ethical, the 'I' becomes "the non-interchangeable par excellence" and the state of being becomes a hostage (1998: 177). For Lévinas, only the

hostage can experience pity, compassion and proximity (1998: 177) while welcoming the Other at the same time. This welcome becomes a type of hospitality in the view of Derrida, who says that Lévinas' hospitality is "not simply some region of ethics […] it is ethicity itself, the whole and the principle of ethics" (1999: 50).

As Clive Barnett states, Lévinas' phenomenology is centered on care, which leads to the question of how far the self's personal obligation to respond to the other in need actually extends (2005: 6). He also asserts that "Lévinas' work places considerable emphasis upon the ethical primacy of relations of proximity" (2005: 6). Both assertions pose the issue of proximity/distance not only in geographical terms, which is Barnett's main concern, but also in terms of kinship and belonging to the same community. In the Civil War hospitality was not just a matter of physical but also of communal proximity. In this sense the Levinasian notion of home would cover other places such as hospitals, as I discuss later. The question that readers should ask (and that probably Whitman himself asked) is whether hospitality went beyond his care for Union soldiers, or whether the Union was the limit that would define the subjectivity of care.

The limits of hospitality would point to the notion of the ghost. For Whitman this ghost would be the Southern soldier. He would be a presence that could not be acknowledged or even named. Lévinas himself claims that "we remain forever accused, with a bad conscience" since, Plant argues, the 'ghosts' of the Holocaust "emerge from the nazi death camps of the 1940s" (2003: 436) and haunt Lévinas' writings (Lévinas 1984: 63-64). In the Civil War the 'ghosts' were the Southern soldiers, and the Southern prisons would be the ghostly sites. These would show the ideals of democracy and national union in a different light. Whitman was well aware that his memoir of the Civil War would remain incomplete if he did not devote some chapters of his autobiography to the Southern troops. Again the reader may wonder if Whitman wanted to reestablish a Union that went beyond political sectionalism. In the end the individual's subjectivity is the final tenet in establishing the limits of hospitality as Lévinas himself concedes in his essay *Totality and Infinity* (1969: 27).

Ciro Augusto Floriani and Fermin Roland Schramm have delved into the relationship between hospitality and hospitals (2010). They analyze the etymology of the Latin word *hospes* to conclude that it initially meant 'host' and became 'stranger' with its Christian use in the fourth century. *Hospitalis* originated *hospitalitas* that meant both hospitality and the condition of the stranger and was also the lexical root of words such as hospital, hostel, hostelry, hotel and hospice (2010: 216). Both hospital and hospitality have the same root and both share the ethos of protection, home, den or shelter (2010: 216). If we now return to Lévinas' concept of hospitality as care, it is

clear that the relation between a person offering care and another receiving it embraces both hospitality and the function of hospitals. It is my contention that Whitman had in mind this sense of the term. Whitman arrived in Washington searching for his brother and after he had spent a few days at the front, he was fairly familiar with the direst consequences of the war. Once he saw that his brother was alive, he decided to stay in Washington in order to help and adopted the role of nurse to provide care to wounded soldiers. As he recalled in "The Wound-Dresser": "I thread my way through the hospitals,/ The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,/ I sit by the restless all the dark night" (Kaplan 1982: 445).

In this context the issue of Whitman's relation towards the wounded soldiers acquires a new sense. Whitman's homoeroticism comes to the front when dealing with the soldiers. For instance, Michael Moon argues that Whitman "could express his homoerotic desires with any degree of fullness, as he nursed and befriended dozens of other men which permitted [...] that he share with them a whole range of otherwise largely proscribed kinds of emotional intimacies" (1991: 210-11). Katherine Kinney resumes Moon's argument and admits that Whitman's handling of wounded soldiers and his depiction of them in his work "have posed a critical crux for understanding the poet of the body and of the Union" (1996: 174). She accepts that Moon's interpretation of Whitman's depiction of the wounded bodies is uncanny, in the Freudian sense, for readers (1996: 173). This uncanny condition makes a sexualized reading of Whitman's years in the hospitals in Washington problematic. Jerome Loving points out that Whitman "came to view his role as a 'hospital missionary' as a sacred undertaking" (1999: 262). However, Whitman wrote letters which seem to have embarrassed the soldiers he took care of. For instance, there is the letter he wrote to Thomas P. Sawyer on April, 21, 1863 (Miller 1961: 90-93). It reads like a letter from a friend until Whitman shifts the tone at the end to make an explicit declaration of his desire for Sawyer and himself to live together. As Edward H. Miller writes in a footnote, "Always WW was both an anxious father-figure and an ardent comrade desirous of establishing permanent ties with soldiers whom he had known and nursed in Washington hospitals" (Miller 1961: 90). There is little doubt that in some cases Whitman felt an attachment that went beyond his job as a nurse. What is not so clear is whether that was the only, or the main, reason why he undertook such work during the Civil War since it is well known that his primary interest when he first went to the scene of the Civil War was to have news of his brother (Miller 1961: 89-90).

My contention is that Whitman stayed in Washington with the sole aim of helping wounded soldiers. This was possible because at the time of the Civil War nursing was not a job as professionalized as it became later and any person willing to help could join a hospital (McPherson 1990: 477-480; Sheeny 2007: 555-563). It is necessary

to notice that when Whitman arrived in Washington after having good news of his brother George, he had to look for a means of subsistence, which he found in raising funds and in journalism, since he was not paid by the federal government or any other government agency, or even by the hospitals (Buinicki 2014: 135-157).

1. Washington D.C.: The City of Hospitals

At that time Washington was a city that was still being built. It had been negotiated as the site of government by different political factions despite being in the middle of nowhere (Plumly 2012: 13). By the end of the war the city had changed significantly and had tripled its population (Price 2014: 121). In *Specimen Days*, Whitman recounts his visits to the hospitals of the city, namely the Patent-Office hospital, the Armory hospital and the Campbell hospital, plus others he does not name (Kaplan 1982: 714). He also mentions his nightly walks near the White House (Kaplan 1982: 718). Interestingly, he evokes these rambles in a poetic vein, leaving aside the description of buildings and streets and focusing on the atmosphere that the moonlight creates:

> everything so white, so marbly pure and dazzling, yet soft —the White House of future poems, and of dreams and dramas, there in the soft and copious moon— the gorgeous front, in the trees under the lustrous flooding moon, full of reality, full of illusion (Kaplan 1982: 718),

and

> The night was sweet, very clear, sufficiently cool, a voluptuous half-moon, slightly golden, the space near it of a transparent blue-gray tinge […] Somehow it look'd rebukefully strong, majestic, there in the delicate moonlight. (Kaplan 1982: 738)

This is a very far-from-reality picture that might be contrasted with Loving's description of the city in Whitman's biography, "When the streets of Washington weren't mud, they gave off immense amounts of dust. The city's foul-smelling canal […] hosted malaria, and hospitals contended with typhoid poisoning and diarrhea because of an irregularly clean water supply" (Loving 1999: 263).

For a poet such as Whitman, familiar with the styles of contemporary poetry as well as that of the past, both American and British, his evocation of a picturesque scene is intentional. He had already written about the modern city before the Civil War. Unlike British poets such as William Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, Arthur H. Clough or Alfred Tennyson, Whitman saw the city as a suitable topic for poetry, and "hospitable to the poetic sensibility" (Beach 1996: 115). He did not find his models in poetry but in novels, Beach claims (1996: 117). He certainly created a powerful image of New York as a modern metropolis. This makes his description

of Washington in *Specimen Days* even more unexpected. The explanation lies in Whitman's desire to be accepted as a poet and the consequent use of more conventional poetic forms and tropes in a late stage of his career, as Price discusses in *Whitman and Tradition* (1990: 73-74). Whereas during his early years Whitman had dismissed the work of poets such as Tennyson, by the 1860s he felt increasingly attracted to them due to his wish to widen his own readership and be accepted as a poet. However, it is my view that there is a political poetics underlying this description. In the first excerpt the words "dreams" and "illusion" point to a sense of unreality. The city of hospitals is transformed during the night and it belongs to the realm of fantasy. It becomes a site in which daily dramas disappear. In these scenes the poet walks alone and during his rambles creates a picturesque and aestheticized scenario that ignores the Civil War. At night Washington becomes the site of a reality that transcends the tribulations of the hospitals.

2. Hospitals as Rhetorical Spaces: The Rhetorics of Aesthetic Democracy

Whitman created the sort of rhetorical space that Elizabethada A. Wright describes in "Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places: The Cemetery as a Rhetorical Memory Place/Space" (2005: 51-81). Following Pierre Nora, Wright defines the memory place (lieu de memoir) as the space representing "the concrete realization of the abstract memory" (2005: 52) in a way that not only makes it everlasting but also meaningful. Such a place exists in real life but meaning is only attained through a process of rhetorical construction, i.e., the discourse, the speakers, the characters, or persons that the place includes. All these elements convey a meaning that goes beyond the mere place and makes it a site of memory.

In Washington, then, Whitman centers his autobiography on his visits to hospitals. He writes that in the three years that he was in Washington, he visited, "counting all, among from eighty thousand to a hundred thousand of wounded and sick [...]. These visits varied from an hour or two, to all day and night" (Kaplan 1982: 775). It should be noted that, when Whitman talks of hospitals he does not write only about the grand federal buildings, he also means tents, wards in churches and schools. In total there were over 40 in Washington, and he visited them all (Roberts 2005). As Paul Zweig affirms:

> It is clear that the hospitals were vital places for Whitman. During four years, he rarely missed a day, with his knapsack full of gifts and his florid fatherliness. Even when the war was over, and the country labored to forget its four years' ordeal, Whitman went on visiting the chronic cases that lingered in a few outlying hospitals. He thrived as a bringer of comfort. (1985: 154)

The hospital became the site where he would comfort wounded soldiers, people who were strangers to him, yet who shared a commitment to a return to the national unity previous to the war. He would spend his days among soldiers, offering them relief from their pains and sorrows and would make no distinction between the different types of hospitals that had been set up. The differences between the Patent Office and the tents that served as hospitals were disregarded by Whitman in his role of comforter. This, however, was not an easy task, as Wry argues: "Wartime hospitals are liminal spaces for the wounded who either pass from life to death within their walls, or (less frequently) emerge stabilized or healed" (2009: 202). They would be places of recovery, rebirth, but also sites of mourning and of memory depending on the occasion. The instability that had turned them into liminal spaces would mark life as a process in which all that seemed slightly stable could change radically in a few hours' time.

In this sense, Whitman's insistence on the soldiers as a suffering but also an enduring people, his many visits to hospitals, and his role as comforter, helper or giver of small gifts, create a place that is a memorial densely occupied by Whitman himself. He creates an ambiguous rhetorical place in which his voice directs the readers' attention while giving presence, though not voice, to the soldiers. Despite his custom of going to hospitals carrying a notebook and a pencil, he never quotes the exact words that soldiers uttered, subordinating the soldiers' voices to his own and generating a place that is his sole creation.

3. The "Wound-Dresser", Soldiers and the Rhetorics of Hospitality

As part of the rhetoric of aesthetic democracy, Whitman would place himself in the role of the "wound-dresser" as he wrote in *Drum-Taps* (Kaplan 1982: 442-445). This role would not differ much from that of the poet as expressed by Ralph W. Emerson in "The Poet" (Porte 1983: 445-468), a role which was gladly accepted and adopted by Whitman in the 1855 "Preface". In the hospitals he found this new role that he could perform to help other people and bring them some comfort in a moment when his career as the American poet had not developed as he had anticipated in his early years. To make possible his new role, Whitman broadens the function of hospitals by focusing on his role as a nurse who helps soldiers during their hospital stay. Whitman is well aware of his role: "I found it was the simple matter of personal presence, and emanating ordinary cheer and magnetism, that I succeeded and help'd more than by medical nursing" (Kaplan 1982: 727). In several chapters of the book he details his tasks as those of letter-writer, talkative companion, generous provider of cigarettes and other sundry objects. Whitman

constructs his persona in *Specimen Days* as the wound-dresser, a role that he kept in *Drum-Taps*. At the same time he never stops mentioning soldiers who have had limbs amputated (Kaplan 1982: 745). This new role helped him to "revaluate everything he had ever thought or written about America" (Ignoffo 1975: 2) or, as he himself put it in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads", "[w]ithout those three or four years and the experiences they gave, *Leaves of Grass* would not now be existing" (Kaplan 1982: 666).[2] Looking at Whitman's role during the Civil War as a person who gives care and comfort to wounded people and who does not ask for anything in return, all the while never paying attention to the provenance of soldiers, it is correct to deduce that he was offering hospitality to wounded soldiers in a city, Washington, that, at first sight, was inhospitable. However it should also be emphasized that Whitman was performing a role that he intended to use as a comforter of wounded soldiers in a moment when his career as the American poet seemed to have reached a dead end.

Whitman's focusing on hospitals, wounded soldiers and himself as the center around which everything revolved was also meant to create a chronicle of war different from other contemporary war memoirs. Brian Jordan argues that from the beginning there were "sanitized" versions of the war, demanded by a readership that did not want to know the true consequences of the conflict (2011: 123). The segment of the Civil War in *Specimen Days* was first published as *Memoranda During the War* and this was intended, Daneen Wardrop argues, as a nursing narrative, a very common subgenre in the period (2005: 26). Whitman expanded on the nursing narrative style (2005: 27) and made particular use of the subgenre in the sense that he did not simply wish to describe his involvement with the patients. He wanted to show both the bright and the dark side of the Civil War and to express his understanding of hospitality. While writing about wounded soldiers Whitman was, in fact, revealing the bright side. He was describing people who did not know each other, whose provenance and background were extremely varied but who nonetheless had joined the common cause of the Union: "Down in the abysms of New World humanity there had form'd and harden'd a primal hard-pan of national Union will, determined and in the majority" (Kaplan 1982: 707). It was, as he wrote immediately afterwards: "the best lesson of the century, or of America" (Kaplan 1982: 707).

As regards soldiers, Whitman mentions both Union and Southern troops. Most of them are rank and file soldiers from the Union army who come wounded from the battlefield to be healed, both physically and psychologically. For Whitman this Union soldier is the representative of America. He contemplates a column of soldiers moving through the night and writes: "I never before realized the majesty and reality of the American people *en masse*" (Kaplan 1982: 740). Some pages

before he had written, "[l]ook at the patient and mute manner of our American wounded as they lie in such a sad collection; representatives from all New England, and from New York, and New Jersey, and Pennsylvania —indeed from all the states and all the cities— largely from the west" (Kaplan 1982: 719). Synecdoche is the rhetorical figure Whitman is using here. A few men represent the whole of America, properly speaking the whole Union, men who are not officials but rank and file soldiers. This is in accord with what the poet had written in the "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass*: "the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors… but always most in the common people" (Kaplan 1982: 5-6). As Jason Frank argues, Whitman "turned away from institutions to an unmediated understanding of the people as the only reliable source of democratic regeneration" (2007: 406). This attitude was one of the two ways in which he responded to the political crisis of his age, the other being a broad understanding of literature as a political medium. By merging both responses Whitman created his "aesthetic democracy" (Frank 2007: 406). In any case the initial creation of the figure of the common people and then, years later, of the soldiers as representatives of America points to a rhetorical construction of characters by means of synecdoche.

By focusing on amputees and badly wounded soldiers, most of whom died some weeks after entering hospital, Whitman is creating a site of disability, mourning and memory. As Stephen Kuusisto argues, "the poet's prose reveals Whitman's new and profound appreciation for the literal suffering of men" (2005: 157). Whitman gradually paid more attention to disability in his notebooks (2005: 158). For Whitman the war was not something grandiose, it was primarily represented by these amputees and wounded soldiers, and their physical suffering. As he wrote in "An Army Hospital Ward": "You may hear groans or other sounds of unendurable suffering from two or three of the cots, but in the main there is quiet —almost a painful absence of demonstration; but the pallid face, the dull'd eye, and the moisture on the lip, are demonstrations enough" (Kaplan 1982: 719). This section comes just after "The White House in Moonlight", in which he had described the Washington night as picturesque and, as it were, lyrical. By juxtaposing sections with a different intent, Whitman creates a written collage of contrasts that emphasizes the brutality of the war. In the end, his aim is to describe Washington as a town of wounded soldiers: "That little town [Washington] […] is indeed a town, but of wounds, sickness, and death" (Kaplan 1982: 737).

As stated before, hospitality has a spectral side to it. As Plant writes about Lévinas, "the other 'haunts our ontological existence'" (2003: 436) and Whitman's attitude towards Southern soldiers deserves detailed attention. The other is the self that is not

me while at the same time is my mirror image. Although we cannot say that the other is radically different from me, neither can we easily accept that the other and I share characteristics that bind us together. That is the reason why Whitman's acknowledgement of the Southern soldiers' humanity and his hospitable behavior towards them is textually necessary. Though he gives more space to Union soldiers in *Specimen Days*, the appearance of Southerners in the book reveals that Whitman needed these soldiers to contrast Union and Secessionist attitudes towards the troops.

He first introduces the Southern forces in negative terms: "In a few hours —perhaps before the next meal— the secesh generals, with their victorious hordes, will be upon us" (Kaplan 1982: 710). The use of *secesh* and *hordes* points to the barbaric aspect of the war, but it also reinforces the idea that the Union had simply done what was right. In a very specific way *hordes* opposes the *people en masse* that Whitman would mention in "Down at the Front" (Kaplan 1982: 740), and also the Union soldiers Whitman describes only a few paragraphs before under the same epigraph: "Washington gets all over motley with these defeated soldiers —queer-looking objects, strange eyes and faces, drench'd (the steady rain drizzles on all day) and fearfully worn, hungry, haggard, blister'd in the feet" (Kaplan 1982: 709).

It is no mere coincidence that Union and rebel soldiers appear in the same chapter and that their descriptions are so dissimilar. In fact, rebel soldiers are not described properly speaking; they are simply mentioned by using a noun that is ideologically charged. The rebel soldiers gather at the entrance to Washington as the Northern barbarians were at the gates of Rome. This creates the notion that the Southerners are the invaders while the Union soldiers remain in their land despite the fact that Washington is in the south of the United States and next to the secessionist State of Virginia. This rhetorical construction of the enemy as someone who lives outside the national frontiers helps Whitman create a hospitable persona for himself. In one of the first encounters in a camp hospital, soldiers asked him for paper, which he gave them (Kaplan 1982: 712). He also mentions a "good secesh" who helped a Union soldier in the battlefield (Kaplan 1982: 715) and in the chapter "A Secesh Brave" he even acknowledges that noble soldiers may be found on both sides in the war (Kaplan 1982: 720). This radical shift from his first description of Southern soldiers as a *horde* suggests that Whitman changed his view on the rebels and that his notion of hospitality became more inclusive as time passed by since he helped soldiers on the side that was attacking the Union, or in other words, troops who were destroying the American experiment that Whitman had celebrated in his poetry.

The contrast with his comments about Union soldiers is striking. First, Whitman gives his opinion openly when writing about Union soldiers: "It is, indeed, the

best lesson of the century, or of America, and it is a mighty privilege to have been part of it" (Kaplan 1982: 707). It cannot pass unnoticed that Whitman considered himself as a member of the group of Unionists who fought to keep the United States bound together. It should also be noticed that the terms *century* and *America* are equated as if Whitman was implying that the nineteenth century was the century of America and the best feats in the world had been American.

Whitman's description of Union soldiers in Washington after the Battle of Bull Run contrasts more vividly with his description of Southern soldiers, though this is not due to the Unionists' happiness or better appearance. In fact, they are described as "defeated soldiers —queer-looking objects, strange eyes and faces, drench'd (the steady rain drizzles on all day) and fearfully worn, hungry haggard, blister'd in the feet" (Kaplan 1982: 709). What makes the difference is the response of the Americans in Washington. These Americans, Unionists, react steadily when they hear about the defeat of the Union army: "Good people (but not over-many of them either,) hurry up something for their grub. They put wash-kettles on the fire, for soup, for coffee. They set tables on side-walks" (Kaplan 1982: 709). The comparison between the way Union and Southern soldiers are treated in Washington is problematic. Nobody would expect different behavior from Washingtonians for two reasons. The first is that Washington was already the capital of the United States and was on the Unionist side. The second is that the description of Union soldiers was made at the beginning of the war, July 1861, while the portrayal of the rebel soldiers dates from the end of the period, February 1865. A few pages later, the contrast is present again in the procession of Southern escapees. When mentioning them, he writes: "still it was a procession of misery" (Kaplan 1982: 755) as the final words of a longer description. Then he adds that he saw these processions every day and that the government did its best to help them, sending them north and west (Kaplan 1982: 755).

Though in different segments of the book Whitman mentions troops who came from the West with the sole aim of emphasizing that nationality consists "in the specifically affective attachments that somehow tie together people who have never seen one another, who live in different climates, come from different cultures, and harbor wildly different needs and aspirations" (Coviello 2001: 87), it is the Southern soldier who provides a contrast and defines the limits of hospitality. Whitman needs to go a step beyond his allegiance to the Union and include these soldiers, though he subtly marks the difference between both sides. The Southern soldiers are accepted as members of the Union once again but there are slight divergences between both sides. The Other haunts Whitman's ontological existence and though he wants to bridge the gap between both

armies, he still feels these dissimilarities. In any case, Whitman, though a clear Unionist, tries to understand Southern soldiers and, most importantly, remarks that the war is a fight between brothers. Close to the end of the second part of *Specimen Days*, Whitman writes about two brothers who enlisted in the Southern and the Union armies respectively. He concludes: "It was in the same battle both were hit. One was a strong Unionist, the other Secesh; both fought on their respective sides, both badly wounded, and both brought together here after a separation of four years. Each died for his cause" (Kaplan 1982: 771). This final statement dissolves all previous reservations Whitman might have had regarding Southern soldiers.

However, the greatest contrast is between Union hospitals and Southern prisons. In his descriptions of the hospitals in Washington, Whitman offers a view of comradeship and of himself as caregiver to the wounded soldiers, Southern soldiers included. When almost at the end of the Civil War section of *Specimen Days*, Whitman considers Union troops who had been prisoners in the South, his tone changes radically. While in his descriptions of wounded soldiers, comradeship and kindness prevail, in the chapter devoted to Union prisoners the tone moves towards wrath. His picture of these soldiers is revealing when compared to that of the wounded soldiers. Of the prisoners Whitman writes: "The sight is worse than any sight of battle-fields, or any collection of wounded, even the bloodiest", to add a few lines later, "are they really not mummied, dwindled corpses? They lay there, most of them, quite still, but with a horrible look in their eyes and skinny lips (often enough not enough flesh on the lips to cover their teeth)" (Kaplan 1982: 765).

Even though his descriptions of the wounded do not turn away from the suffering they endure, he also emphasizes the epic side of the war in his description of the prisoners, who resemble corpses that have a horrible look. He then continues by mentioning, as the cause of their horrible looks, that they were not given any food and were close to dying of starvation. To the list of offences, Whitman adds the Southerners' behavior: "An indescribable meanness, tyranny, aggravating course of insults […] The dead there are not to be pitied as much as some of the living that come from there" (Kaplan 1982: 765-766). Whitman also includes a review of a book about Southern prisons published in *Toledo Blade*, and a letter on the same topic published in the *New York Tribune*. The review is, as might be expected, a harsh and sour account of the Union prisoners' experience in those prisons. Whitman includes both texts with the aim of stressing the differences between the North and the South in terms of hospitality. While he himself took care of both Union and Southern soldiers, Southern officials did not provide Union soldiers in hospitals with any type of

medical treatment according to Whitman's account of the story. His depiction of Southern prisons is the dark reverse of Northern hospitality and is reinforced by his not mentioning any Southern hospital in order to make a harsher contrast with the North. This absence of mention of Southern hospitals in the text is meant to highlight the bright image of the North in terms both of hospitality and of politics.

Conclusion

A Levinasian reading of Whitman's concern with hospitality during the Civil War shows that the American poet was concerned above all with ethics as care. This reading demonstrates that the Other is offered care in hospitals as a substitute for the home in which he would be welcomed. Whitman creates a rhetoric of hospitality in *Specimen Days* that is a direct result of his unfailing support to the cause of the Union. He wanted to provide a different account of the war by making use of the subgenre of nursing narratives that was so popular in the period. In *Specimen Days* the soldier was both the representative of America and its ghost. For the first purpose, he focused on Union soldiers, who were representative of the best American qualities in Whitman's view and who endured the hardships of the war, the injuries, pain and death. On the other hand, his description of Southern prisons reveals the reverse of hospitality and, as such, become the antithesis of the Union. While in the Union wounded soldiers are healed, in the South union soldiers are imprisoned. Whitman's role as a nurse should be considered since he stands at the center of the scene in most chapters devoted to Washington hospitals. There is little doubt that he wanted to create a persona that was meaningful and useful in the Civil War and he chose to be a nurse. Assuming that role, i.e., taking care of soldiers, comforting them, writing letters for them, giving them small gifts, he managed to convey meaning to his new role as the American poet.

Notes

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[2]. "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" is the epilogue that Whitman appended to the 1889 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Previously it had served as a preface to *November Boughs,* published in 1888.

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