

# RACE AND REUNION

THE CIVIL WAR IN  
AMERICAN MEMORY

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## ONE

### *The Dead and the Living*

And so good-bye to the war. I know not how it may have been, or may be, to others—to me the main interest I found, (and still, on recollection, find) in the rank and file of the armies, both sides, and in those specimens amid the hospitals, and even the dead on the field.

—WALT WHITMAN, *Specimen Days*, 1882

THE LONG AND TROUBLED CAREER of Civil War memory began well before the conflict ended. It took root in the dead and the living. The living were compelled to find meaning in the dead and, as in most wars, the dead would have a hold on the living. In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln referred to the “brave men” who had “consecrated” the ground of that battlefield above the “power” of his words to “add or detract.”<sup>1</sup> Implied in the rest of that speech was the notion that the difference between the living and the dead was that the living were compelled to remember, and from the stuff of memory, create a new nation from the wreckage of the old.

ON JULY 3, 1913, a day of withering heat in Washington, D.C., President Woodrow Wilson took a cruise aboard the *Mayflower* down the Potomac River toward Chesapeake Bay. A small party of aides and journalists accompanied a harassed President who was eager to be a historical tourist for a day at the Yorktown Revolutionary War battlefield. The following day, July 4,

Wilson was to address an extraordinary gathering of Union and Confederate veterans at America's most famous battlefield—Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

During his visit to the Yorktown sites, Wilson went almost entirely unrecognized by the variety of local people he encountered. Only a young white girl recognized the President as she offered to be his guide through the house that had served as Lord Cornwallis's headquarters. Neither the clerk at the court house, nor the local sheriff, who had a campaign photograph of Wilson on his own wall, recognized their famous visitor. Most poignantly, as Wilson entered and returned to the wharf he met several blacks who called him “Uncle” but did not recognize the President. According to press reports, a “group of old-fashioned darkies sitting around some equally old-fashioned scales” offered to weigh the tourists. After a jaunny exchange, Wilson consented and tipped the scales at 181 pounds. The next morning at Gettysburg Wilson would weigh in on another matter, speaking to the world about the meaning of the Civil War and of fifty years of the nation's remembering and forgetting. That he had gone virtually unrecognized on either side of the color line in a small corner of Virginia the day before may hardly have mattered much to the President. But perhaps the unnamed, and almost invisible, blacks hanging around a Potomac River wharf near a great historic site of Old Virginia (Wilson's home state) represent an appropriate backdrop for the resounding event that Wilson would visit within twenty-four hours. The ignorance of the clerk and sheriff is remarkable. But it is hardly surprising that rural black Virginians would not know Wilson; since 1904 none of them had been able to vote in the state without passing literacy tests, paying poll taxes, and meeting all but impossible property restrictions. They spent so much of their segregated lives being “disrecognized” by whites that recognizing a President might take special knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

President Wilson had initially declined to appear at the fiftieth-anniversary Blue-Gray reunion to be held in the Pennsylvania town July 1–4, preferring a vacation trip with his family in Cornish, New Hampshire. But circumstances, and the urgings of Congressman A. Mitchell Palmer, made him “constrained to consent to be present at the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg,” as he wrote to his wife, Ellen. Wilson realized that this reunion “was something we had to take very seriously indeed. It is no ordinary celebration.” Wilson privately expressed his awareness of being the first Southerner elected President since the Civil War. “Both blue and gray are to be there,” he observed. “It is to celebrate the end of all feeling as well as the

end of all strife between the sections." Wilson was also acutely aware that he followed Abraham Lincoln's footsteps to Gettysburg. "Fifty years ago, almost, also on the fourth of July, Mr. Lincoln was there (in the midst of business of the most serious and pressing kind, and at great personal cost and sacrifice to himself). If the President should refuse to go this time . . . it would be hotly resented . . . it would be suggested that he is a Southerner and out of sympathy with the occasion."<sup>3</sup> Sometime between changing his plans on June 28, when he announced that he would attend the reunion, and July 4, Wilson wrote his own short, restrained Gettysburg address.

The 1913 reunion at Gettysburg was a ritual like none other that had occurred in America. It had been designed to be a festival of sectional reconciliation and patriotism. The states appropriated some \$1,750,000 to pay the transportation of any Civil War veteran from any part of the country. The federal government, through Congress and the War Department, appropriated approximately \$450,000 to build a "Great Camp" to house and feed the veterans. A total of 53,407 veterans attended the reunion, and as many spectators were estimated to have descended on the town of Gettysburg during the week of the event, all riding the special cars of some forty-seven railroad companies operating in or through Pennsylvania. As it stood in American culture in the early twentieth century, Civil War memory never saw a more fully orchestrated expression than at Gettysburg on the battle's semi-centennial.<sup>4</sup>

Once the old men had arrived in their uniforms, decked out in ribbons and graced with silver beards, the tent city on the battlefield became one of the most extraordinary spectacles Americans had ever seen. For most observers, the veterans were men out of another time, icons that stimulated a sense of pride, history, and amusement all at once. They were an irresistible medium through which Americans could envision part of their inheritance and be deflected by it at the same time. They were at once the embodiment of Civil War nostalgia, symbols of a lost age of heroism, and the fulfillment of that most human of needs—civic and spiritual reconciliation.

As bands played, suffragettes lobbied the tented grounds, shouting "votes for women." The recently formed Boy Scouts of America served as aides to the old soldiers, and members of the regular U.S. Army guarded the proceedings. Newspapers gushed with amazement. "You may search the world's history in vain for such a spectacle," announced the *Columbus Citizen* (Ohio). The sense of completeness of the national reunion was especially prevalent in the newspapers. The *National Tribune* (an official organ of the Grand Army

of the Republic, GAR) rejoiced over the "death of sectionalism" and the ongoing "obliterating of Mason and Dixon's line." And the *Confederate Veteran* could declare with full confidence that "the day of differences and jealousies is past." The *London Times* of England marveled that, however pathetic their feebleness, the mingled veterans were "eradicating forever the scars of the civil war in a way that no amount of preaching or political maneuvering could have done." Glorious remembrance was all but overwhelmed by an even more glorious forgetting. "Thank God for Gettysburg, hosanna!" proclaimed the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. "God bless us everyone, alike the Blue and the Gray, the Gray and the Blue! The world ne'er witnessed such a sight as this. Beholding, can we say happy is the nation that hath no history?"<sup>5</sup>

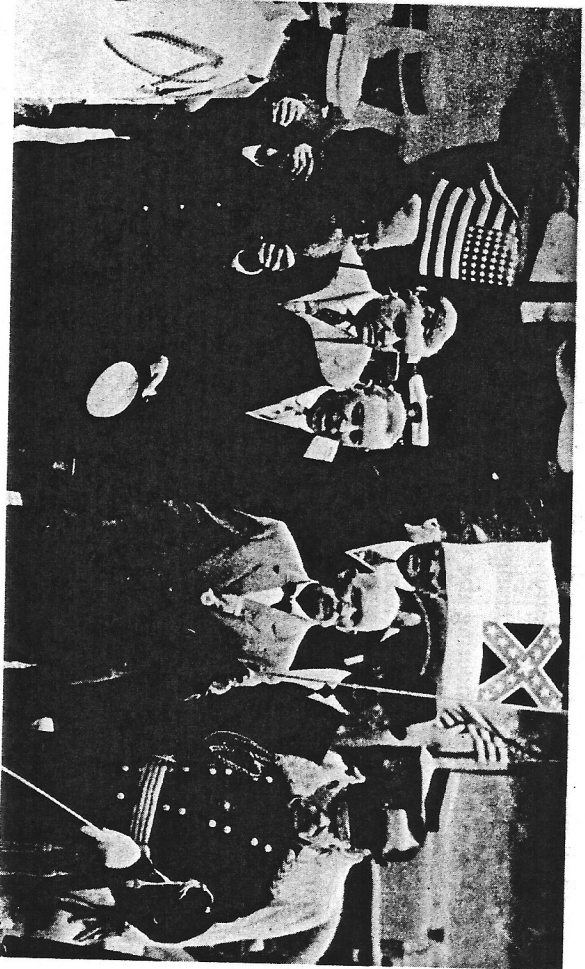
On the third day of the reunion, July 3, the governors of the various states spoke in a giant tent constructed on the field where Pickett's Charge had occurred fifty years earlier. Governor William Hodges Mann of Virginia struck the most meaningful chord of memory: "We are not here to discuss the Genesis of the war, but men who have tried each other in the storm and smoke of battle are here to discuss this *great fight* . . . we came here, I say, *not to discuss what caused the war of 1861-65*, but to talk over the events of the battle here as man to man" (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> Like the politics of reconciliation, which was several decades old by 1913, this reunion was about forging unifying myths and making remembering safe. Neither space nor time was allowed at Gettysburg for considering the causes, transformations, and results of the war; no place was reserved for the legacies of emancipation or the conflicted and unresolved history of Reconstruction. Because the planners had allowed no space for surviving black veterans, they had also left no space on the programs for a discussion of that second great outcome of the war—the failures of racial reconciliation.

Of course, nations rarely commemorate their disasters and tragedies, unless compelled by forces that will not let the politics of memory rest. One should not diminish the profoundly meaningful experiences of the veterans themselves at such a reunion; the nation, through the psyches of old soldiers, had achieved a great deal of healing. But the 1913 "Peace Jubilee," as the organizers called it, was a Jim Crow reunion, and white supremacy might be said to have been the silent, invisible master of ceremonies. At a time when lynching had developed into a social ritual of its own horrifying kind, and when the American apartheid had become fully entrenched, many black leaders and editors found the sectional love feast at Gettysburg more than they could bear. "A Reunion of whom?" asked the *Washington Bee*. Only those who



"fought for the preservation of the Union and the extinction of human slavery," or also those who "fought to destroy the Union and perpetuate slavery, and who are now employing every artifice and argument known to deceit and sophistry to propagate a national sentiment in favor of their nefarious contention that emancipation, reconstruction and enfranchisement are a dismal failure?"<sup>7</sup> Black responses to such reunions as that at Gettysburg in 1913, and a host of similar events, demonstrated how fundamentally at odds black memories were with the national reunion. In that disconnection lay an American tragedy not yet fully told by 1913, and one utterly out of place at Blue-Gray reunions.

Woodrow Wilson did not likely think of this disconnection between black and white memories as he arrived at the Gettysburg train station on the morning of July 4. Wilson did not come to Gettysburg as a historian probing the past. Whisked in a car out to the battlefield where the great tent awaited with several thousand veterans crammed inside, Wilson, the Virginian-President, stood before the entrance, flanked by a Union veteran in long beard, holding a small U.S. flag, and a Confederate veteran in long mustache, holding a small Confederate flag. Behind him, Governors John K.



On July 4, 1913, Woodrow Wilson, the first Southerner elected President since the Civil War, spoke on the battlefield at Gettysburg during the fiftieth anniversary Blue-Gray reunion and declared the war America's "quarrel forgotten." (Record Group 25, Pennsylvania State Archives)

Tener (Pennsylvania) and William H. Mann (Virginia) followed him into the tent, as the President doffed his top hat. As the assembled throng of old veterans rose on the ground and in high-rise bleachers, Wilson strode to the stage. Wilson stood without a podium, the great beams of the tent arched behind him, the script in his left hand, and began to speak. He had not come to discuss the genesis or the results of the war. He declared it an "impertinence to discourse upon how the battle went, how it ended," or even "what it signified." Wilson's charge, he claimed, was to comprehend the central question: What had the fifty years since the battle meant? His answer struck the mystic chord of memory that most white Americans were prepared to hear:

They have meant peace and union and vigor, and the maturity and might of a great nation. How wholesome and healing the peace has been! We have found one another again as brothers and comrades, in arms, enemies no longer, generous friends rather, our battles long past, the *quarrel forgotten*—except that we shall not forget the splendid valor, the manly devotion of the men then arrayed against one another, now grasping hands and smiling into each other's eyes. How complete the union has become and how dear to all of us, how unquestioned, how benign and majestic, as state after state has been added to this, our great family of free men! (emphasis added)<sup>8</sup>

Wilson strained to look ahead and not to the past, to call the younger generation to a moral equivalent of war, doing battle "not with armies but with principalities and powers and wickedness in high places." He appealed to a new "host" for a new age, not the "ghostly hosts who fought upon these battlefields long ago and are gone." That new host was the teeming masses of the Progressive era, "the great and the small without class or difference of kind or race or origin; and undivided in interest." Wilson's great gift for mixing idealism with ambiguity was in perfect form. After this sole mention of race, and probably without the slightest thought of Jim Crow's legal reign, Wilson proclaimed that "our constitutions are their [the people's] articles of enlistment. The orders of the day are the laws upon our statute books." After the obligatory endorsement of the valor of the past, Wilson devoted the majority of his fifteen-minute speech to the present and the future. "The day of our country's life has but broadened into morning," he concluded. "Do not put uniforms by. Put the harness of the present on."<sup>9</sup> These were telling words for the future war President who had studied the Civil War with keen interest.

After the playing of the "Star Spangled Banner," Governor Tener immediately escorted Wilson to his car and back to the train station. In all, Wilson had spent less than an hour in Gettysburg; before noon he was on his private car en route to New York City, and eventually on to a New Hampshire retreat with his family. Within fifteen minutes of the conclusion of Wilson's speech, the closing ceremony of the reunion took place. At high noon, all across the town and hillsides of Gettysburg, cooks and generals, Boy Scouts and veterans, journalists and tourists, Congressmen and latrine cleaners, all came to attention. The colors were lowered to half mast at all the regimental or unit headquarters throughout the tent city. A lone bugle played taps, and in the distance a battery of cannon fired intermittently. Then, for the next five minutes, the vast crowd stood in utter silence and paid the "Tribute to Our Honored Dead."<sup>10</sup> As Wilson's train sped away in retreat, and as the fifty thousand assembled veterans tried to look down through what the President had called "those fifty crowded years" to fathom the meaning of the war and its aftermath, the dead and the living, the memories and the sun-baked oblivion, who can know what stories played on their hearts? In collective silence what memories careened back and forth between gleaming monuments and flapping flags? How did the silence of the honored dead speak?

THE FIVE MINUTES of silence to honor the dead on July 4, 1913, was two minutes longer than Abraham Lincoln's famous speech on November 19, 1863, dedicating an unfinished cemetery for more than twelve thousand soldiers (many whose names were unknown) still in the process of being properly reburied. Since the battle nearly five months before, Gettysburg had been a community in shock and a macabre scene. Makeshift graves had been hastily dug all over the fields where men fell; others had been dug up by families looking for loved ones. Serious health hazards had threatened the local population, and hogs had fed on human body parts protruding from the ground. The horror that was the real battle of Gettysburg was to be transformed into something proper, solemn, perhaps even exalted by the carefully planned cemetery to be dedicated in November. The struggle to define the Civil War in America and determine its meaning did not begin at Gettysburg on that late autumn day, but it did receive an important ideological infusion. Lincoln's brief speech followed the official address—a long funeral oration by one of the nation's premier orators, Edward Everett. Rich in detail

about the battle and its participants, partisan and unflinching in its descriptions of the carnage, Everett's nearly two-hour effort held the audience of twenty thousand in his customary spell. Drawing inspiration from Pericles's funeral oration during the Peloponnesian War, Everett established America's ancient lineage of sacred bloodletting. He laid responsibility for the "crime of rebellion," and therefore, all the death, in the hands of Southern leaders. But no matter how long the war or the scale of death, Everett saw a future of "reconciliation," a revived spirit of Union forged in such apocalyptic and necessary sacrifice.<sup>11</sup>

As Lincoln assumed his function in the dedication (intended to be largely ceremonial), only about one-third of the Gettysburg dead had actually been buried in the new cemetery. Lincoln's address contained no local details of the battle or cemetery preparations. He never mentioned the town of Gettysburg, nor that year's other great document—the Emancipation Proclamation—which had changed the character of the war. Lincoln assumed the task of offering an assessment of the graves' deepest meanings. As President, he would try to explain the war to audiences far beyond Cemetery Hill. It is as if Lincoln, beleaguered by death on a scale he could no longer control, could only discuss *why* it had happened.

Although Lincoln's speech must have seemed abstract to many auditors, an ideological explanation of the Civil War flowed through the brief address. The United States was an idea, Lincoln argued, a republic fated to open its doors, however unwillingly, by one of its founding creeds, the "proposition that all men are created equal." History had caught up with the contradictions to that creed and all but killed the idea. Only in the killing, and yet more killing if necessary, would come the rebirth—a *new* birth—of the freedoms that a republic makes possible. Humankind will forever debate what kinds of ideas men should be asked to die for. But Lincoln did not lack clarity at Gettysburg. The sad-faced Lincoln looked beyond Appomattox to the "unfinished work" of the "living." When he said "the world . . . can never forget what they did here," he anticipated not an endless remembrance of soldiers' valor, not a bloodletting purified and ennobled by extraordinary courage and manly sacrifice alone.<sup>12</sup> He envisioned an ideological struggle over the meaning of the war, a society's tortured effort to know the real character of the tragedy festering in the cold and in the stench of all those bodies awaiting burial. Lincoln seemed to see fitfully that the rebirth would be rooted in the challenge of human *equality* in a nation, ready or not, governed somehow

by and for *all* the people. This was an idea that might make most future orators at monuments, reunions, and memorial days flinch and seek refuge in the pleasing pathos of soldiers' mutual valor. This was an idea so startling that, as the years went by, the forces of reunion would be marshaled in its defiance.

If Garry Wills is at all correct in his exuberant praise of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as a speech that "revolutionized the revolution" and offered the nation a "refounding" in the principle of equality, then Woodrow Wilson, on his day at Gettysburg fifty years later, provided a subtle and strikingly less revolutionary response. According to Wills, Lincoln had suggested a new constitution at Gettysburg, "giving people a new past to live with that would change their future indefinitely." So did Wilson in his very different context of 1913. But that new past at the semicentennial was one in which all sectional strife was gone, and in which racial strife was covered over in Wilson's pose as a Progressive reformer. His moral equivalent of war had nothing to do with the creed of racial equality. Lincoln's "rebirth of freedom" had become in fifty years Wilson's forward-looking "righteous peace." The potential embedded in the idea of the Second American Revolution had become the "quarrel forgotten" on the stature books of Jim Crow America.<sup>13</sup>

Wilson, of course, did not believe he was speaking for or about the ravages of segregation, or other aspects of racial division in America, on his day at Gettysburg. He was acutely aware of his Southernness and eager to leave the mysticism of the reunion to others' rhetoric. He was still negotiating the uneasy terrain of a minority President elected by only 42 percent of the popular vote in the turbulent four-way election of 1912. Educated by events, and compelled to explain the totalizing character of the war, Lincoln had soared above the "honored dead" in 1863 to try to imagine a new future in America. Wilson soared above the honored veterans and described a present and a future in 1913 in which white patriotism and nationalism flourished, in which society seemed threatened by disorder, and in which the principle of equality might be said, by neglect and action, to be living a social death. Wilson's ambiguity paled in the shadow of Lincoln's clarity. But as the *New York Times* reported, "it is a difficult and disconcerting task for any statesman these days to deliver an address on the battlefield at Gettysburg, especially for any President of the United States." The *Times* declared the speech "good," but a "trifle academic in its argument." Wilson was interrupted only twice by "perfunctory" applause. Some observers thought the speech "out of place" for the

occasion.<sup>14</sup> Whether in 1863 or in 1913, Gettysburg haunted American memory, both as a reminder of the war's revolutionary meanings and as the locus of national reconciliation.

FROM WELL BEFORE Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, from the first attempts to recruit black soldiers, from the initial waves of "contraband" slaves who escaped to an increasingly less abstract "freedom" in 1861-62, and simply from an ever-lengthening war that tested the life of slavery as much as the life of the Union, Americans, North and South, white and black, would forever possess and deny an ideological memory of their Civil War. No contemporary Northerner contributed more to the war's ideological meaning and memory than Frederick Douglass. An abolitionist orator-editor with few equals, Douglass had, by 1863-64, waged an all-out propaganda campaign to help foment a holy war on the South and on slavery; he had given his own Gettysburg Address many times over during the war. If Lincoln "revolutionized the revolution" at Gettysburg, if his speech engineered a "correction of the spirit" that cleared the "infected air of American history itself," as Wills boldly asserts, then Frederick Douglass was his stalking horse and his minister of propaganda. On the level of ideology, Douglass was the President's unacknowledged and unpaid alter ego, the intellectual godfather of the Gettysburg Address.<sup>15</sup> The Northern postwar ideological memory of the conflict as a transformation in the history of freedom, as an American second founding, was born in the rhetoric of 1863 fashioned by Douglass, Lincoln, and others whose burden it was to explain how the war's first purpose (preservation of the Union) had transfigured into the second (emancipation of the slaves).

In a speech delivered in Philadelphia only two weeks after Lincoln had dedicated the cemetery at Gettysburg, Douglass made an aggressive appeal for what he repeatedly called an "Abolition War." During the first year and a half of the war, Douglass had been one of Lincoln's fiercest critics among abolitionists, scolding the President on many occasions for his resistance to a policy of emancipation. Much had changed with the Emancipation Proclamation and the recruiting of black troops in 1863. The all-out war on southern society and on slaveholders that Douglass had so vehemently advocated had come to fruition. The war could still be lost on the battlefield, at impending elections, or in political compromise. But Douglass felt confident that history itself had taken a mighty turn. He took the pressure off Lincoln.



"We are not to be saved by the captain," he declared, "but by the crew. We are not to be saved by Abraham Lincoln, but by the power behind the throne, greater than the throne itself." The supreme "testing" of that "government of the people" about which Lincoln had spoken so carefully at Gettysburg was precisely Douglass's subject as well. In language far more direct than Lincoln's, Douglass announced that the "abolition war" and "peace" he envisioned would never be "completed until the black men of the South, and the black men of the North, shall have been admitted, fully and completely, into the body politic of America."<sup>16</sup> Here, in late 1863, he demanded immediate suffrage for blacks. In such expressions of equality, Douglass, too, looked beyond Appomattox to the long struggle to preserve in reality and memory what the war could create.

Douglass's Philadelphia speech took place on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary meeting of the American Antislavery Society, the organization in which his own career began. While reminiscing with his old colleagues, he did not miss an opportunity to invoke the symbol of Gettysburg and tell the story of his first meeting with Lincoln, which had occurred in August 1863. He remembered traveling twenty years earlier to a meeting of the same society "along the vales and hills of Gettysburg," when local antislavery friends warned him to travel only by night, lest he be kidnapped back into slavery across the Maryland border. This year, however, he had journeyed "down there" all the way to Washington, where "the President of the United States received a black man at the White House." Douglass spoke with enormous pride about how he "felt big there" after secretaries admitted him to Lincoln's office ahead of a long line of solicitors strewn through the hallway. The President received Douglass with "a kind cordiality and a respectful reserve." "Mr. Douglass, I know you, I have read about you," said the standing Lincoln. With Douglass at ease, Lincoln remarked that he had read one of the black man's speeches where he had complained about the "lardy, hesitating, vacillating policy of the President of the United States" (toward emancipation). According to Douglass, Lincoln responded with complete sincerity: "Mr. Douglass, I am charged with vacillating . . . , but I do not think that charge can be sustained; I think it cannot be shown that when I have once taken a position, I have ever retreated from it."<sup>17</sup>

The abolitionist had gone to Washington in August to confront Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton about the unequal pay and other discriminations suffered by black soldiers. Lincoln engaged Douglass in a conversation about how the whole idea of blacks in uniform had needed

much "preparatory work." The President unflinchingly told black America's leader that he had feared that "all the hatred which is poured on the head of the Negro race would be visited on his administration." Moreover, Lincoln looked Douglass in the eye and said, "remember this . . . remember that Milliken's Bend, Port Hudson and Fort Wagner are recent events; and that these were necessary to prepare the way for this very proclamation of mine."<sup>18</sup>

In this encounter, narrated to an audience in early December 1863, Douglass constructed his own proud mutuality with Lincoln. However fallaciously, by whatever unjust means blacks had to die in uniform to be acknowledged as men, Douglass was determined to demonstrate that his own ideological war aims had now become Lincoln's as well. The "rebirth" they were imagining was one both clearly understood as a terrible ordeal, but one from which there was no turning back. Douglass came away from this extraordinary meeting with the conclusion that Lincoln's position was "reasonable," but more important, that he would go down in history as "Honnet Abraham." By invoking the sacred ground of Gettysburg, the symbolic space of the White House, and recounting his direct conversation with Lincoln, Douglass was declaring his rightful place at the new founding. Near the end of his Philadelphia speech, he asserted that "the old Union, whose canonized bones we so quietly injured under the shattered walls of Sumter, can never come to life again. It is dead and you cannot put life in it."<sup>19</sup> During those last weeks of that horrible year, Douglass and Lincoln seemed to be speaking with the same voice about what had been buried and what was being reborn. Douglass would outlive Lincoln by thirty years and carry the burden of preserving their shared vision.

On December 8, 1863, only four days after Douglass spoke in Philadelphia, Lincoln delivered his Annual Message to Congress. Lincoln still labeled the war in limited terms, calling it an "inexcusable insurrection." But the last five pages of the document demonstrate his understanding of the revolutionary turn in the character of the war. Recounting the past year, "the policy of emancipation, and of employing black soldiers," he declared, "gave to the future a new aspect, about which hope, and fear, and doubt contended in uncertain conflict." Lincoln wrote admiringly of the one hundred thousand "slaves at the beginning of the rebellion . . . now in the United States military service." Emancipation, said the President, had turned the nation's "great trial" into its "new reckoning," and had made the cause of the Union and a "total revolution of labor throughout whole states" one and the same. In the last lines of Lincoln's message, he stressed the iron necessity of the "war

power" and paid tribute to the soldiers to whom "the world must stand indebted for the home of freedom disentrilled, regenerated, enlarged, and perpetuated."<sup>20</sup>

Lincoln's language makes a striking comparison to a speech Douglass wrote sometime late that fall and delivered many times across the North throughout the winter and spring, 1863-64. In "The Mission of the War," Douglass summed up more than two years of his war propaganda, his sense of the Civil War as America's cleansing tragedy and bloody rebirth. However long the "shadow of death" cast over the land, however ugly the "weeds of mourning," said Douglass, Americans should not forget the moral "grandeur" of the war's mission. "What we now want is a country—a free country," said Douglass, "a country not saddened by the footprints of a single slave—and nowhere cursed by the presence of a slaveholder. We want a country which shall not brand the Declaration of Independence as a lie."<sup>21</sup>

The dreamer calling men to die for grand ideas drew upon one of the deepest strains of American mission. "It is the manifest destiny of this war," cried Douglass, "to unify and reorganize the institutions of the country" and thereby give the scale of death its "sacred significance." "The mission of this war," he concluded, "is National regeneration."<sup>22</sup> Douglass spoke as though he and Lincoln had practiced from the same script, albeit one of them with the restrained tones of official state papers and the other in the fiery tones of a prophet. One spoke almost always with an eye on the fickleness of public opinion, and the other as though he were the national evangelist carrying the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" to that public in literal terms. Between them, Lincoln and Douglass provided the passive and the declarative voices of the Second American Revolution at its inception. This revolutionary—*regenerative*—conception of the war launched black freedom and future equality on its marvelous, but always endangered, career in American history and memory. All future discussion of the meaning and memory of this fundamental turning point in American history had to either confront or deflect the words, the laws, and the social realities the war had wrought in 1863.

WORDS ALONE did not give the nation its potential rebirth. To borrow from the word-master supreme, Walt Whitman, perhaps the "dead, the dead, the dead, our dead—or South or North, ours all" remade America. So did thousands of surviving soldiers, liberated freedpeople enduring near starvation in contraband camps, and women on both homefronts who performed

all manner of war work and tried to sustain farms, households, and the human spirit as their men were asked to die for ideas, self-defense, retribution, manly values, or some abstract notion of their community's future. In time, the war itself remade America. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it in 1862, "the war is a new glass to see all our old things through," and "our sole and doleful instructor."<sup>23</sup>

There were millions of individual stories unfolding at the end of this transforming war that gave real-life meaning to all the metaphors of death and rebirth. In all the material and human wreckage, in shattered families and psyches, new life was to take form. Countless private memories began to collide, inexorably, with the politics of collective memory. Contrary to Whitman's famous prediction, the "real war" would eventually "get into the books" because historians and writers have learned so much in the twentieth century about unearthing and telling the stories of real people.<sup>24</sup> Americans on both sides had experienced an authentic tragedy of individual and collective proportions. How people of both sections and races would come to define and commemorate that tragedy, where they would find heroism and villainy, and how they would decide what was lost and what was won, would have a great deal to do with determining the character of the new society that they were to build.

The initial task was to find meaning in the war's grisly scale of death. Death was all around in 1865, and no one tried to comprehend its meaning more passionately than the poet from Brooklyn who worked more than two years in soldiers' hospitals. By his own estimation, Walt Whitman, after moving to Washington, D.C., in 1862 to investigate the fate of his brother, George, made some six hundred visits to hospitals and attended to between eighty thousand and one hundred thousand sick and dying soldiers. What Whitman witnessed profoundly shaped and inspired him for the rest of his life. He saw, and one might say, intellectually and emotionally ingested, the horrible results of the "real war." When asked in old age if he ever went "back to those days," Whitman replied, "I have never left them. They are here now, while we are talking together—real, terrible, beautiful days." Whitman spoke the truth when he declared that "the war saved me: what I saw in the war set me up for all time—the days in those hospitals."<sup>25</sup>

In poetry, and especially in prose remembrance, Whitman left a literary testament to the war. In all the shattered limbs and lives, in all the youths he watched as they became voiceless, and then breathless, Whitman found authentic tragedy, as well as his own Homeric sense of self. "The war had much

to give," he later wrote, and it served as the "very centre, circumference, umbilicus, of my whole career." He compared himself to Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* who, when warned not to "act unwisely," declares, "No, let what must, come; I must cut up my capers." As though representing the thousands of veterans who would tell their increasingly sanitized stories to each other, and anticipating the endless obsessions of Civil War buffs in later generations who long for some transplanted, heroic place in the nineteenth century, he concluded, "I would not for all the rest have missed those three or four years."<sup>26</sup> Whitman could mix reality with nostalgia like no other writer; in so doing, he built and illuminated the literary avenue to reunion.

In "A Backward Glance o'er Travelled Roads" (1888), Whitman remembered first reading the *Iliad* on a peninsula at "the northeast end of Long Island, in a sheltered hollow of rocks and sand, with the sea on each side." Nestled in the "full presence of Nature," the young romantic had read the ultimate war book. In old age, though, he quickly converted such a remembrance into a statement of how war became his own great subject. "Although I had made a start before," he wrote, "only from the occurrence of the Secession War, and what it showed me by flashes of lightning, with the emotional depths it sounded and aroused (of course, I don't mean in my own heart only, I saw it just as plainly in others, in millions)—that only from the flare and provocation of that war's sighs and scenes the final reasons-for-being of an autochthonic and passionate song definitely came forth." Believing he spoke for millions (and in some ways he probably did), Whitman understood the war as America's own tragic recreation, a whole people reborn as something new by tearing themselves inside out. Words alone did not remake America, but they were mighty weapons in the myth-making that the Civil War inevitably produced. Whitman's own favorite descriptive word for the Civil War's character, if not its meaning, was "convulsiveness."<sup>27</sup> That "autochthonic . . . song," though, has had many discordant verses.

Whitman was certainly a Yankee partisan, but while he cheered the Union cause, the horror scenes he almost unrelievably witnessed gave rise to his own spirit of reconciliation. Whitman hated the war's capacity to mangle the bodies of young men, but he made few distinctions between the combatants themselves, or between their leaders. "What an awful thing war is!" he wrote home in March 1864. "Mother, it seems not men but a lot of devils and butchers butchering each other." Whitman's letters to his mother about his hospital work are a remarkable example of the very kind of experience (for so many women nurses as well) that demanded resolution over time in Civil

War memory. Writing at the peak of Grant's campaign against Lee in Virginia in June 1864, Whitman described the waves of wounded flowing into Washington hospitals: "We receive them here with their wounds full of worms—some all swelled and inflamed. Many of the amputations have to be done over again." He gave his mother a full picture of the hideous refuse of modern war. "One new feature," he said, "is that many of the poor afflicted young men are crazy. Every ward has some in it that are wandering. They have suffered too much, and it is perhaps a privilege that they are out of their senses." When he came to write in retrospect in *Specimen Days*, Whitman did not sanitize the "hell-scenes." He seemed to relish the descriptions of his soldiers, who were "horribly mutilated . . . groaning and moaning." They could be multiplied, he argued, and lit "with every lurid passion, the wolf's, the lion's lapping thirst for blood—the passionate, boiling volcanoes of human revenge for comrades, brothers slain—with the light of burning farms, and heaps of smutting, smouldering black embers—and in the human heart everywhere black, worse embers—and you have an inkling of this war."<sup>28</sup> In such honest language, a mix of memory and his own raw documentation, Whitman did speak for millions. This was the recurring national nightmare lurking beneath the revolution of black freedom and the quest for reunion. And these were the memories the nation would have to work through in the years ahead.

Whitman's war was rooted in his own brand of mystical Unionism. He almost never called the conflict a "civil war"; it was to him forever the "Secession War."<sup>29</sup> He threw blame for the war's outbreak, which he welcomed, on all those who had ever threatened America's unified destiny. Whitman loathed Southern "fiencers" and Northern "abolitionists" with equal disdain. He nursed, wrote letters for, and admired black troops, but only within the narrowly racist confines of his views on black capacities, and as a peculiar poetic subject. Whitman's "real war" did not ultimately include the revolution in black freedom of 1863; his own myriad uses of rebirth metaphors did not encompass black equality. This poet of democracy, whose work can and has been used to advance an antiracist tradition, never truly faced the long-term implications of emancipation.

During the seven pivotal years after the war, Whitman worked as a clerk in the U.S. Attorney General's office in Washington, D.C. Part of his job was processing the pardons that President Andrew Johnson proffered to ex-Confederates. Politically, Whitman became a devotee of Johnson and his lenient, state-rights approach to Reconstruction policy.<sup>30</sup> Whitman did not be-



lieve blacks capable of exercising the suffrage, and he viewed radical Reconstruction policies with the same contempt he had felt for abolitionists. "The republicans have exploited the Negro too intensely," he wrote to his mother in 1868, "and there comes a reaction." By 1875, Whitman had described Reconstruction racial affairs in words that would become with time the staple mythology of white Southern, and much Northern, comprehension of the aftermath of emancipation. "The black domination," he wrote, "but little above the beasts—viewed as a temporary, deserved punishment for their [Southern whites'] Slavery and Secession sins, may perhaps be admissible; but as a permanency of course is not to be considered for a moment."<sup>31</sup> Here again, Whitman spoke for a growing consensus. The image of Reconstruction as black domination, radical ideology taken too far, would become one of the deepest strains of American historical consciousness in the next generation.

Walt Whitman's never-ending quest to comprehend the convulsiveness of the Civil War can serve as a mirror of the larger culture's tendencies toward a reconciliation that would postpone, or evade altogether, its racial reckoning. Whitman never absorbed the anti-Southern political feeling of the prewar decade. In 1860 he declared his love of the South's natural beauty and its traditions:

O magnet-South! O glistening perfumed South! my South!  
O quick mettle, rich blood, impulse and love! good and evil! O all dear  
to me!

In such prewar poems as "O Magnet-South," in his war fever poetry of 1861–62, and in his immediate postwar verse, Whitman wrote of a war that would purge and unify the whole nation. Southerners were never really enemies to Whitman; they were family members to be nursed to their necessary deaths or revived to health. His hospital sketches were thoroughly nonpartisan descriptions of a shared agony. "How impressive was the fact of their [soldiers'] likeness," Whitman recorded after the war, "their uniformity of essential nature—the same basic traits in them all—in the Northern man, in the Southern man, in the Western man—all of one instinct, one color, addicted to the same vices, ennobled by the same virtues." In these compelling pictures of common soldiers as the shattered victims of modern war, Whitman depoliticized such suffering. Much partisan hatred dissolved on those cots where lads from Mississippi and Ohio were consumed by the same pneumonia, gangrene, or mercury poisoning. If an American nation was to survive this *civil war*, and if all the rhetoric of "national regeneration" was ultimately

to make sense beyond 1865, then America's own "cult of the fallen soldier" was destined in time to be the basis of a new civil religion, and therefore, of the reunion itself.<sup>32</sup>

One of Whitman's close friends, John Burroughs, described him after the war as "the lover, the healer, the reconciler . . . a great tender mother-man." This notion of the "reconciler," a role forged in the care of dying soldiers of both armies, as well as in the reversal of gender expectations implied in the label "mother-man," makes Whitman representative of the earliest root of sectional reconciliation—the mutuality of soldiers' death and the need to mourn, commemorate, and memorialize all of that death on both sides. In the 1866 poem "Reconciliation" Whitman captured the theme:

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,  
Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly  
lost,  
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash  
again, and ever again, this soiled world;  
For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,  
I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw near,  
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.<sup>33</sup>

Whitman no doubt never intended one irony embedded in this poem: in the shared divinity—a virtual kinship—of all the "white-faced" dead brothers rested that "beautiful" idea of *reconciliation*, as well as the ultimate betrayal of the dark-faced folk whom the dead had shared in liberating. Whitman's poetry and prose contained an infinity of truths, including those they masked.

IN THE FINAL MONTHS of the Civil War, all participants knew they were living through transformations. This was especially true for blacks. Black soldiers at the front wrote of their palpable expectations of a new future. Full of bravado and Biblical justification, Thomas B. Wester wrote in December 1864 from a camp near Bermuda Hundred, Virginia, that he and his comrades were overthrowing "Pharaoh" as "in the days of old." Wester made clear why blacks were fighting. "We are fighting as hard to restore the Union as the white man is," he said. "Why then should we not have equal rights with a foreigner, who comes to this country to fight for the preservation of the Government?" Wester looked ahead and imagined a legacy he would embody: "If we live to have families, we can sit down by the side of our wives, with our

children around us, and relate to them what we have endured and witnessed upon the battlefields, to help restore this now-broken Union. We can recount to them the privations and sufferings endured by both white and black soldiers in the rebellion." Another black soldier, Henry C. Hoyle, wrote from near Richmond, Virginia, on January 15, 1865, looking forward to the day when he and comrades could "surround our cheerful firesides, and relate to our wives and children, parents and friends, what we have witnessed during this struggle for freedom, liberty and equal rights." Black men too expected a soldier's due out of this war—safe firesides, public recognition, and a place in at least some form of reconciliation between blacks and whites. Indeed, both Wester and Hoyle, like the more famous Douglass before them, were convinced that in equal suffering, if not in natural law, the country might discover the roots of equal rights. In this sense, for black soldiers and their future families, *equality* was another word for reconciliation. These black soldiers had no trouble defining the meaning of freedom and the way; they were only beginning the long struggle to protect the memory of their story, one they already considered comparable to the older conquest of "Pharoah and his host."<sup>34</sup> They knew the older story well: Moses did not make it to the promised land, but many of his foot soldiers and his people did.

On the evening of January 12, 1865, in the headquarters of General William Tecumseh Sherman in Savannah, Georgia, an extraordinary meeting took place. All present seemed aware of how unusual and historic the occasion might prove to be. Sherman's famous March to the Sea—the conquest of the Georgia countryside and the destruction of its resources from Atlanta to Savannah—had ended just three weeks earlier with the Confederate evacuation of the coastal city. The march and its wave of property destruction had liberated and displaced thousands of ex-slaves. Sherman faced a tremendous dilemma: what to do with so many refugee freedpeople, and how to begin to define their status. He and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton decided to ask the opinions of the representative black leadership of Savannah and of the very Georgia counties through which Sherman's troops had wreaked devastation. Twenty black ministers, most of whom had been slaves at some time in their lives, and some of whom had achieved freedom only in the past month at the hands of the Union armies, sat in a room together, face to face with Sherman and Stanton. Twelve carefully worded questions were written out and read aloud to the ministers. The answers as well were "written down in . . . exact words" and "read over" by each participant so as to determine

"concurrence or dissent."<sup>35</sup> These words, like the Gettysburg Address, might not remake America, but everyone present seemed to understand that their articulation was a part of that process.

Garrison Frazier, a sixty-seven-year-old Baptist minister, served as the blacks' spokesman. For \$1,000 in gold and silver Frazier had bought his freedom and that of his wife in 1857. The interrogatories in this meeting form an enduring testament to the meaning of the revolution of 1863–65; the exchange laid down for all time what would be both cherished and denied in Civil War memory. When asked for his "understanding" of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, Frazier delivered a definition in historical context. It had been Lincoln's offer to the "Rebellious States . . . that if they would lay down their arms, and submit to the laws of the United States before the first of January, 1863, all should be well; but if they did not, then all the slaves in the Rebel States should be free henceforth and forever." Asked next for his definition of "slavery" and the "freedom" given by the Proclamation, Frazier spoke from the deep past and to the future: "Slavery is, receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent. The freedom . . . promised by the proclamation, is taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor, take care of ourselves and assist the Government in maintaining our freedom." Asked how the freedpeople could best take care of themselves and assist the government, Frazier provided a motto for the early struggles of Reconstruction: "The way we can best take care of ourselves," said Frazier, "is to have land . . . we want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own." To assist the government in executing this revolution, "the young men should enlist in the service . . . and serve in such manner as they may be wanted."<sup>36</sup>

Frazier's shortest answer came to the query whether there was "intelligence enough" among the ex-slaves to maintain themselves and live peacefully with their neighbors. "I think there is sufficient intelligence among us to do so," he said directly. Then Frazier was asked to examine the "causes and object" of the war itself, and he responded with a poignant history lecture:

I understand, as to the war, that the South is the aggressor. President Lincoln was elected President by a majority of the United States, which guaranteed him the right of holding the office and exercising that right over the whole United States. The South,

without knowing what he would do, rebelled. . . . The object of the war was not at first to give the slaves their freedom, but the sole object of the war was at first to bring the rebellious states back into the Union and their loyalty to the laws of the United States. Afterward, knowing the value set on the slaves by the Rebels, the President thought that his Proclamation would stimulate them to lay down their arms, reduce them to obedience, and help to bring back the Rebel States; and their not doing so has now made the freedom of the slaves a part of the war. It is my opinion that there is not a man in this city that could be started to help the Rebels one inch, for that would be suicide.

After several exchanges about the character and degree of black enlistment in the Union armies, Sherman then left the room as Frazier was asked the group's opinion of the general. Frazier declared Sherman "a man in the Providence of God set apart to accomplish this work."<sup>37</sup>

This ceremonial and substantive exchange between the freedmen ministers and the military leadership of the United States was unprecedented. The interview had lasted three hours in all. According to James Lynch, a northern-born missionary and one of the youngest ministers, the colloquy was unforgettable. "We expressed our opinions freely," wrote Lynch, "and dwelt, with interest, upon every word that fell from the Secretary's lips." Lynch described Frazier's performance as "a splendid expression of Southern colored men's opinion of the war and its policy." The meeting had provided an unusual kind of council of war. It represented much of the interior meaning of Sherman's March to the Sea. Earlier in 1864, a report of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission had described the "state of . . . transformation" in some sections of the South that brought former masters and former slaves "face to face in the presence of the great revolution and of the trials to which it summons both." In Savannah, the conflict's greatest symbol of cruel war sat face to face with twenty "colored Georgians," as Lynch put it, hearing in many ways the same summons.<sup>38</sup> The career of Civil War memory over the next fifty years is, in part, the story of how these extraordinary face-to-face encounters gave way to a reunion in which General Sherman, and the soldiers he defeated, would be remembered for their noble fight, and how the Reverend Frazier, and his words, were forgotten. With time, face-to-face encounters between blacks and whites would rarely dwell upon those meanings discussed that night in Savannah.

There can be no mistake, though, that black Civil War memory, as well as national and sectional memories, took deep root in those final months of the war. Much of that memory took hold in the bitter experiences of soldiers bearing up to discriminations and unequal pay and of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who found their first homes in freedom in contraband camps all over the upper South and in regions occupied by Union forces. The hardships in those camps, the struggle to work and survive, to relocate family members, all were to become part of black remembrance. So too would memory rooted in the experience of military laborers building corduroy roads for Union forces in Georgia, or digging canals from the James River in Virginia.<sup>39</sup> Several thousand had labored in the camps and on the fortifications of both armies almost from the beginning of the war.

Other kinds of hardship would be remembered. The Louisiana freedwoman Emily Waters wrote to her husband (who was still in the army in the wake of the war's end) that the master of Roseland Plantation had come home from the Confederate army and threatened to turn the freedpeople on his land "out on the levee" if they did not pay eight dollars per month in "house rent." "I have no money of any account," Waters wrote, "and I want you to get a furlough as soon as you can and come home and find a place for us to live in." Waters was in dire straits: "My children are going to school, but I find it very hard to feed them all." Emily Waters's husband did get a furlough and returned to his home just in time to find a provost guard "at his house for the purpose of ousting his wife and children." "Persecution is the order of the day . . . against the colored race," complained Hugh P. Beach, an officer in Waters's company, to a Freedmen's Bureau agent. As Ezra Adams, an ex-slave in South Carolina, remembered some seventy years later, "dat somethin' called freedom" had to include what people could "eat, wear, and sleep in. Yes, sir, they soon found out dat freedom, ain't nothin', less you is got somethin' to live on and a place to call home." Moreover, a Virginia freedwoman, Catherine Massey, wrote to Secretary of War Stanton in July 1865, begging him to find and force her negligent husband to send her money. "I am his lawful wife and he has neglected to treat me as a husband should," wrote Massey. "I think it no more than right that he should be made to do what he has never yet done and that is to help me support myself as I . . . naturally did support him before he came in the army."<sup>40</sup> For many freedpeople, emancipation meant the struggle to survive in the new, chaotic social order, and it provided few if any occasions for celebration in the short term.



But in other places, especially churches, and at less formal gatherings in contraband camps or at soldiers' campfires, celebration was in order. Northern black churches held official celebrations of the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation as early as January 1865. In New Haven, Connecticut, at the AME Bethel Church (African Methodist Episcopal), religious fervor and patriotism mixed as perhaps never before in that free black community's history. A choir sang the old hymn "Blow Ye the Trumpet Blow," and then after a prayer for the preservation of the Union, it sang several verses of "America." Reverend S. V. Berry made a speech in which he linked the Proclamation and the Declaration of Independence in the same unified history. "As our forefathers fought, bled, and conquered for the Declaration of Independence," declared Berry, "just so hard are we now fighting for the Emancipation Proclamation." To great applause, and just before the singing of "Oh! Be True to Our Flag," Berry concluded with the idea that all present could now entertain: "The time is fast approaching, when we as citizens of the United States, will be respected as such."<sup>41</sup>

On the same day our west, in Chester, Illinois, the AME Church was decorated as never before. "Wreaths and evergreens . . . and the stars and stripes hung from almost every part of the room." The Proclamation, "beautifully framed in gilt, and containing the likeness of President Lincoln," hung above the pulpit. In Chester, they too began by singing "Blow Ye the Trumpet Blow," followed by "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." The Proclamation was then read in full. Following the first oration of the day, the congregation sang the "Battle Cry of Freedom," according to the recorder, "with a will." Speech after speech followed, one of them entertaining the audience with rousing metaphors about the "beast of slavery" being ushered through its stages of death. Similar to New Haven, the Chester celebration ended with a resolution to carry on the war for the "principles" in the Proclamation and the Declaration, including a recitation of Thomas Jefferson's preamble.<sup>42</sup>

In these remarkable commemorations taking place before the war had even ceased, blacks were preparing the script and forging the arguments for a long struggle over the memory of the events they were living through. They could not know how difficult that struggle would be. But in their unblinking medley of Negro hymns and the war-inspired national hymns, in their folding of the Proclamation and the Declaration into one seamless story, they named their text. In their understanding, and here they surely spoke for the Garrison Fraziers and the Emily Watereses in the South, America's rebirth was

one and the same with their own rebirth as "citizens." Words had become deeds, or so they had a right to believe.

FROM THE MOST MOURNFUL EXPERIENCE at the war's ending, Lincoln's assassination, Walt Whitman crafted unforgettable images of life and death on a mutual journey. In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed," the poet gave to grief (his own and the nation's) a mood and a setting. The mood is a calming, depoliticized contemplation of the "fathomless . . . sure-unwinding arms of cool-enfolding death." Whitman imagines a warbling in a secluded swamp singing a solitary "song of the bleeding throat, / Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know, / If thou wast not granted to sing thou wouldst surely die.)" The poet speaks for millions of Americans in 1865 who were wondering how to remember and forget: "How shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved? As an offering, Whitman picks a "sprig of lilac" and places Abraham Lincoln's funeral train in the setting of "ever-returning spring" across the vast landscape of America from the East to the prairie:

Over the breast of spring, the land, amid cities,  
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from  
the ground, spotting the gray debris,  
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless  
grass,  
Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the  
dark-brown fields uprisen,  
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,  
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,  
Night and day journeys a coffin.

As the bird sings its "carol of death," the poet tries to give words to the music. Yet one senses that even Whitman could not match the warbling's power to deliver "that powerful psalm in the night"—to capture the meaning of the death caused by the Civil War. He is left with visions of "battle corpses . . . debris of all the slain soldiers of the war." The funeral train passes by all the images the poet can muster and he is left to say: "The living remained and suffer'd."<sup>43</sup> Whitman leaves his sprig of lilac in the dooryard and takes hope from the fragrance of spring.

"Lilacs" is not a poem about victory through death. It is more of a contemplation, a psalm about Lincoln's death at the nation's new beginning. But the nation is the land, and redemption comes from nature, not so much from the people or their politics. Whitman wrote a victory/death poem of a sort in "O Captain, My Captain." But the mood and the setting of "Lilacs" may best represent the numbed horror that so many Americans (Northerners and blacks at least) felt at Lincoln's murder. This was profound mourning without politics; the warbling, the lilacs, and the fields of grass gave the best eulogies.<sup>44</sup>

That April, in Vicksburg, Mississippi, as in a thousand other places, a large crowd of ex-slaves, in silence and tears, gathered in front of a store window that contained a photograph of Lincoln. A black correspondent from Chicago tried to characterize the scene of Lincoln's funeral procession in that city. "The grandeur was beyond description," he remarked. "The colored citizens turned out in full force, and were well-received . . . We can only look on in breathless silence, and think of the great change." A month after the assassination, a black Union soldier, Corporal William Gibson of the Twenty-eighth U.S. Colored Troops, wrote from City Point, Virginia, worrying that his home state of Indiana might not remove its old "Black Laws" from its statute books. Gibson seemed flushed with hope and anxiety over the "rights" he believed his "old 28th" had earned. "We ask to be made equal before the law," said the veteran, "grant us this, and we ask no more. Let the friends of freedom canvass the country on this subject. Let the sound go into all the earth." The politics of rebirth mixed with all the mourning that could be felt, if not explained. With Whitman, the nation had "the knowledge of death as walking one side of me, / And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me, / And I in the middle . . . as holding the hands of companions."<sup>45</sup> But the new nation awaiting rebirth also had the thought of black equality on one side, the knowledge of sectional reunion on the other side, and no muse yet in the middle holding their hands.

## TWO

### *Regeneration and Reconstruction*

"It is far the best that the rebels have been pounded instead of negotiated into a peace. They must remember it . . . I fear that the high tragic historic justice which the nation . . . should execute, will be softened and dissipated and roasted away at dinner tables. But the problems that now remain to be solved are very intricate and perplexing.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, *Journal*, April 1865

RECONSTRUCTION was one long referendum on the meaning and memory of the verdict at Appomattox. The great challenge of Reconstruction was to determine how a national blood feud could be reconciled at the same time a new nation emerged out of war and social revolution. The survivors on both sides, winners and losers in the fullest sense, would still inhabit the same land and eventually the same government. The task was harrowing: how to make the logic of sectional reconciliation compatible with the logic of emancipation, how to square black freedom and the stirrings of racial equality with a cause (the South's) that had lost almost everything except its unbroken belief in white supremacy. Such an effort required both remembering and forgetting. During Reconstruction, many Americans increasingly realized that remembering the war, even the hatreds and deaths on a hundred battlefields—facing all those graves on Memorial Day—became, with time, easier than struggling over the enduring ideas for which those battles had been fought.