

# *The Civil War and the Unraveling of the American Renaissance*

Presented January 12, 2009 to the *Mahoning Valley Civil War Round Table*.

by **Jim Villani**.

Good evening. Let me begin by welcoming you to my presentation and thanking you for welcoming me to your Round Table get-together and a filling supper. My presentation has been loosely described as a talk about writers, writing, and the civil war. I begin, however, with a more focused title – “The Civil War and the Unraveling of the American Renaissance” – and let me explain how such a precise focus issues. My thesis is that the civil war, a turning point in U.S. history, further caused a stark reversal in the contour of American Literature; an ascendant heroic literary spirit came to be replaced by a local, private, soul-searching spirit; and a transcendent national literary heroism came to be replaced by a sectional, flawed literary protagonist chained to the narrow confines of personality, heroic in degrees, but fundamentally flawed in its total humanness. Although the dominant literary form of the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century is Realism, the ascendant heroic realism before the civil war came to be replaced by the focused realism of the local colourists and naturalism after the war. The civil war itself produced such transition.

I begin by defining terms. Literary scholars and other sources, right down to the Encyclopedia Britannica, use two metaphors to describe American Literature in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The period is variously described as the American Renaissance or the American Enlightenment. In Europe, the Renaissance was a period of cultural revival and flowering following the medieval or dark age period. Similarly, the Enlightenment was an 18<sup>th</sup> century British movement that rejected provincial social and political ideas. In both historical instances, both revivals heralded great cultural flowering. The comparing of early 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature to these epoch upheavals is logical and effective, given that writing in the new nation was itself new, was emerging, and in having no linkage to a prior literary tradition would be an establishing and grounding source of creative endeavor. What is established in those formative years of American literary output is a literature of heroic proportions, a literature

that establishes an ascending democratic, nationalistic, individualistic spirit, a literature reflective of Jacksonian democracy. There the American spirit is of genuine heroic proportions.

The unraveling I allude to in my title is not a decline by any stretch, but rather an adjustment to the notion of heroic, democratic spirit, where American spirit is seen to be fallible, and is seen to be varied, fragmented, and peculiar in its individuality by nature of where in the expanding nation that spirit is situated. What comes to replace the Renaissance figure after the Civil War are the Local Colourists and Naturalism.

First, let me define Local Colourism, which was the initial shift. Writers came to understand by nature of the Civil War that Americans were different sorts and not all of the same spirit and identity. Individuals were products of their environment and that environment varied by nature of the state, region, and immediate locale. Writers began to portray realistically the uniqueness of individuals by nature of the immediate locale wherein they lived, every section of the nation producing different kinds of people. It was the unique dimensions of experience that interested writers, and so the stories became only partially realistic, writers tending to emphasize and exaggerate peculiarity and the less glamorous aspects of life. Further, writers came to be interested more so in humor, in sentiment, in the picturesque, the quaint, in nostalgia developed for an America that disappeared with the Civil War. A kind of denial appeared in letters.



**Flaubert**



**Zola**

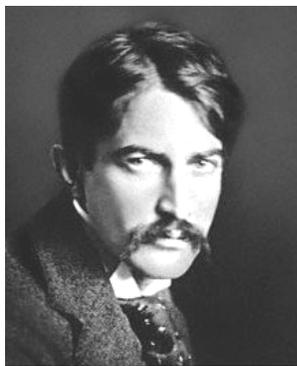
Naturalism was the second strain to emerge, also a spinoff of realism. The Naturalists proceeded from the mechanistic and biological determinism of Newton and Darwin. Writers began to accept the fundamental view that personality was determined by environmental forces and internal stresses and drives. The Naturalists conceived human nature to be comparable to the lawless jungle of nature. Naturalism appeared first in Europe, and there before the Civil War. Gustave Flaubert penned his classic work, Madame Bovary, in 1857. Also French, Emile Zola began his publishing career in 1864. Clearly, the devastation and violence of the War precipitated such resignation to sift into American letters. The literary protagonist came to be a fundamentally flawed individual, rather than heroic.

These are my terms, or scholarship's terms, and I mean to example them with specific figures. I will treat you to some passages from their writing, although not the Renaissance figures, which include foremost, James Fennimore Cooper, and his frontier hero, Natty Bumppo, otherwise known by his book titles, Pathfinder and Deerslayer, and as Hawkeye in Last of the Mohicans, and who makes his final appearance in The Pioneers; then the



Cooper

New England Brahmins – (figures of great culture and intellect) – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell (all aristocrats); and the Transcendentalists, beginning with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. There are many other figures to be sure, which you may not be familiar with, but I will leave it with these few as they are fully prior to the Civil War and not influenced by it. To not be sexist however, I add that Margaret Fuller is an important writer in the American Renaissance.



Crane

My address, to continue, examines those writers influenced by the Civil War. First, I mention a neglected New England writer, John William DeForest, author of the curiously titled 1867 work, Miss Ravenal's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty, which told truths about the Civil War and portrayed very lifelike characters. Also relevant to the war, two figures come to everybody's mind, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Hart Crane.



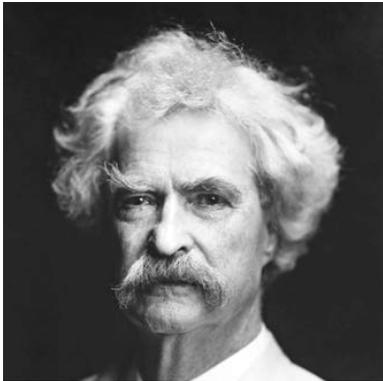
Stowe

Stowe, of course, authored Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1853 and Oldtown Folks in 1869, among many other works. Born in Connecticut, Stowe lived in Cincinnati for 14 years, although before she became a

published writer. Stephen Crane authored the most famous Civil War story, The Red Badge of Courage, although not until 1895, remarkable for its brilliant flash scenes of the battlefield and its portraits of ordinary soldiers. Stowe we recognize as a Local Colourist and Crane as a Naturalist.

Other Colourists included Thomas Nelson Page, looking at Virginia Negroes; George Washington Cable and Louisiana Creoles; Mary Moailles Murfree and Tennessee mountaineers;

the people of New York city were the subject of Henry Cuyler Bunner and William Sydney Porter, who we know better as O. Henry. The tight-lipped folk of New England were coloured by Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. These writers lived between 1844 and 1925 and their avowed aim mostly was to portray lives in the various sections to promote understanding in a united nation.



Twain

The greatest colourist, naturally, is Samuel L. Clemens, or Mark Twain. All of his writing issues after the war, beginning in 1869. His classics are The Adventures of Tom Sawyer in 1876, Life on the Mississippi, 1883, and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in 1884. Twain is not a pure colourist, however. He sometimes played the buffoon or sank into burlesque. He is more generally labeled a Humorist, which form is a popular subgenre in every period. Twain was also a travel writer, and worked as a journeyman printer and a steamboat pilot. He did brief service as a Confederate Irregular during the war, and then went to Nevada, where he adopted the name Mark Twain, which he peeled off of a minor deceased western writer who first used the name Mark Twain, also an alias. His later life is marked by bankruptcy, lecturing, and many private griefs.

An important Southern writer (1848 – 1908) is Joel Chandler Harris, born in Eatonton, Georgia, a journalist, short story writer, and novelist. When the war started he was fourteen years old. When he was sixteen, right smack in the middle of the war, he became a printer's apprentice at a literary newspaper The Countryman, published on a plantation near Eatonton.



Harris

After the war he stayed in the South, in Macon, New Orleans, Savannah, and finally Atlanta. He was on the staff of the Atlanta Constitution from 1876 to 1900. He became established as a humorist and a local colourist. He created the characters for which he is best known while working for the Constitution, where they first appeared in print. Those figures appear in the tales of Uncle Remus, which were Negro folk tales in authentic dialect, gathered from plantation slaves and retold through the Negro character of Uncle Remus. In

the modern era the Uncle Remus stories have been appropriated as Children stories and have appeared in cartoons. Many colorful characters grace the stories, although one recalled widely did not appear until the last collection of Uncle Remus stories in 1906, “Br’er Rabbit.”

The most significant short story writer after the war is Bret Harte, 1836 – 1902. Harte, born in Albany, New York, became a western colourist, who also anticipates naturalism. In 1857, Harte went to California. He wrote and worked for various periodicals. Harte stayed in California for the entire war period. He did not serve in the war, and only wrote minimally about it. As a writer his focus was the cowboy spirit and western local colour. His famous short stories are “The Outcasts of Poker Flat” and “The Luck of Roaring Camp.” Harte also dabbled in poetry, and among his poems I find a Civil War poem, based on a true story, “John Burns of Gettysburg.”



**Harte**

John Burns was a 72-year-old cobbler in Gettysburg when the battle commenced. He took his rifle and joined the 150<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Infantry, and fought the Confederates. He was wounded. After Lee retreated, he returned home, but the combination of his valor, his age, and his injury caused him to be lionized by the Union press all over the country. Harte, a journalist, would have come by the John Burns story through various sources. The poem is a long narrative, 111 lines, and is not well-written by professional standards. I will share with you only the first stanza and four lines so that you can get a feel for Harte’s balladeering approach:

Have you heard the story that gossips tell  
Of Burns of Gettysburg? No? Ah, well:  
Brief is the glory that hero earns,  
Briefer the story of old John Burns.  
He was the fellow who won renown –  
The only man who didn’t back down  
When the rebels rode through his native town;  
When all his townfolk ran away.  
That was July, sixty-three, -  
The very day that General Lee,  
Flower of Southern Chivalry,  
Baffled and beaten, backward reeled  
From the stubborn Meade and barren field.



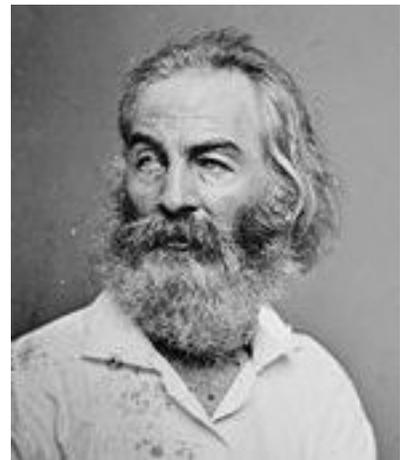
I might tell how, but the day before,  
John Burns stood at his cottage door,  
Looking down the village street,  
Where in the shade of his peaceful vine,

I introduce further, Ambrose Bierce, 1842-1914, also a journalist and short story writer, born in Meigs County, Ohio, where today is located Athens, Ohio and Ohio University. Nineteen years old when the war started, Bierce enlisted and was a distinguished soldier in the Union Army, 1861-1865. After the war, he moved to San Francisco and began writing for and editing periodicals. Between 1872 and 1906, he published seven collections of articles and stories. His most famous collection is Tales of Soldiers and Civilians, 1891, which contains what might be the 2<sup>nd</sup> most famous Civil War story, (after The Red Badge of Courage), “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” In 1913, Bierce went to Mexico, presumably to join Pancho Villa’s army. A collection of his Civil War stories, called Battle Sketches, was published in London in 1930 and in 1981 a collector’s handbook listed it at a value of \$100.



**Bierce**

Most scholars consider America’s most famous poet to be Walt Whitman, 1819-1892. Born of Quaker parents, he became an omnivorous reader, including the Bible, Greek, oriental, and other translated classics. Between 1832 and 1845, he worked as a printer, journalist, and schoolteacher. He brought out the first edition of Leaves of Grass in 1855, and published nine editions of it during his lifetime. In 1862, he went to Virginia to find and nurse his brother wounded during the war. He then volunteered as a nurse in Washington. Two books came from the war, a collection of poetry, Drum Taps, 1865; and a prose collection, Specimen Days and Collect, 1882. After the war, he obtained a government clerkship, but he was dismissed because his poetry collection, Leaves of Grass, was declared to be immoral. He



**Whitman**

received a second appointment, to the Attorney General’s Office, which only lasted until 1873, when he was stricken with paralysis and forced to retire. Whitman’s flowing free-verse rhythms

and joyous celebration of self-awareness and the union of the body and nature have vastly influenced 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry.

A glowing statement about a writer's work can only be evidenced by the work itself, and so I will read some Whitman selections, all of which are instrumentally about the war. I'm going to begin with some prose journal entries from 1862, the war now heightened. As a volunteer nurse, he witnessed great bodily mayhem. Being a practiced writer, he often wrote letters for wounded soldiers, to their kin back home. This reflection is dated Wednesday February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1862:

Wrote letters. Saw and talk'd with two or three members of the Brooklyn Fourteenth..... A poor fellow in Ward D, with a fearful wound in a fearful condition, was having some loose splinters of bone taken from the neighborhood of the wound. The operation was long, and one of great pain – yet, after it was well commenced, the soldier bore it in silence. He sat up, propp'd – was much wasted – had lain a long time quiet in one position, (not for days only, but weeks,) – a bloodless, brown-skinn'd face, with eyes full of determination – belong'd to a New York regiment. There was an unusual cluster of surgeons, medical cadets, nurses, &c., around his bed – I thought the whole thing was done with tenderness and done well.

In one case, the wife sat by the side of her husband, his sickness, typhoid fever, pretty bad. In another, by the side of her son – a mother – she told me she had seven children, and this was the youngest. (A fine, kind, health, gentle and dress'd like home – what a charm if gave to the whole Ward.) I liked the woman nurse in Ward E – I noticed how she sat a long time by a poor fellow who just had, that morning, in addition to his other sickness, bad hemorrhage – she gently assisted him, reliev'd him of the blood, holding a cloth to his mouth, as he cough'd it up – he was so weak he could only just turn his head over on the pillow.

Whitman was stationed at Campbell Hospital on Seventh Street in Washington, D.C. Being in Washington, he was in the proximity of President Lincoln, who was not a stay-in-the-Whitehouse President, but was on the street daily. This next selection describes encounters with the president, dated August 12, 1862:

I see the President almost every day, as I happen to live where he passes to or from his lodgings out of town. He never sleeps at the White House during the hot season, but has quarters at a healthy location, some three miles north of the city, the Soldiers' Home, a United States military establishment. I saw him this morning about 8 ½ coming to business, riding on Vermont Avenue, near L street. The sight is a significant one, ..... He always has a company of twenty-five or thirty cavalry, with sabers drawn, and held upright over their shoulders. The party

makes no great show in uniforms or horses. Mr. Lincoln, on the saddle, generally rides a good-sized easy-going gray horse, is dress'd in plain black, somewhat rusty and dusty; wears a black stiff hat, and looks about as ordinary in attire, &c., as the commonest man. A lieutenant with yellow straps, rides at his left, and following behind, two by two, come the cavalry men in their yellow striped jackets. They are generally going at a slow trot, as that is the pace set them by the One they wait upon. The sabers and accoutrements clank, and the entirely unornamental cortege as it trots to Lafayette square, arouses no sensation, only some curious stranger stops and gazes. I see very plainly ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S dark brown face, with the deep cut lines, the eyes, &c., always to me with a deep latent sadness in the expression. We have got so that we always exchange bows, and very cordial ones.

A third passage finds Whitman still visiting camp hospitals. This passage is rather graphic with its description of blood and grime and amputation. It is dated December 21, 1862 in Falmouth, Virginia, opposite Fredericksburg:

Began my visits among the camp hospitals in the Army of the Potomac. Spent a good part of the day in a large brick mansion, on the banks of the Rappahannock, used as a Hospital since the battle – Seems to have receiv'd only the worst cases. Out doors, at the foot of a tree, within ten yards of the front of the house, I noticed a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for a one-horse cart. Several dead bodies lie near, each cover'd with its brown woolen blanket. In the door-yard, towards the river, are fresh graves, mostly of officers, their names on pieces of barrel-staves or broken board, stick in the dirt. (Most of these bodies were subsequently taken up and transported North to their friends.) ..... The large mansion is quite crowded, upstairs and down, everything impromptu, no system, all bad enough, but I have no doubt the best that can be done; all the wounds pretty bad, some frightful, the men in their old clothes, unclean and bloody. Some of the wounded are rebel soldiers and officers, prisoners. On, a Mississippian – a captain – hit badly in the leg, I talk'd with some time; he asked me for papers, which I gave him. (I saw him three months afterward in Washington, with his leg amputated, doing well.)

My final selection, not a journal entry, is a letter to his Mother, and concerns his quest to find his wounded brother George Whitman. It is dated Monday forenoon, December 29, 1862. Jeff, also cited in the letter, is another brother, Thomas Jefferson Whitman.

Mrs. Louisa Whitman, Brooklyn  
Washington, Monday forenoon, Dec. 29, 1862

Dear, Dear Mother – Friday the 19<sup>th</sup> inst. I succeeded in reaching the camp of the 51<sup>st</sup> New York, and found George alive and well. In order to make sure you

would get the good news, I sent back by messenger to Washington a telegraphic dispatch (I dare say you did not get it for some time) as well as a letter – and the same to Hannah at Burlington. I have staid in camp with George ever since, till yesterday, when I came back to Washington, about the 24<sup>th</sup>. George got Jeff's letter on the 20<sup>th</sup>. Mother, how much you must have suffered, all that week, till George's letter came – and all the rest must too. As to me, I know I put in about three days of the greatest suffering I ever experiences in my life. I wrote to Jeff how I had my pocket picked in a jam and hurry, changing cars, at Philadelphia – so I landed here without a dime. The next two days I spent hunting through the hospitals, walking day and night, unable to ride, trying to get information – trying to get access to big people, etc. – I could not get the least clue to anything. Odell would not see me at all. But Thursday afternoon, I lit on as way to get down on the Government boat that runs to Aquia creek, and so by railroad to the neighborhood of the Falmouth, opposite Fredericksburg – so by degrees I worked my way to Ferrero's brigade, which I found Friday afternoon without much trouble after I got in camp. When I found dear brother George, and found that he was alive and well, O you may imagine how trifling all my little cares and difficulties seemed – they vanished into nothing.

Let me now share with you some Whitman poetry. For Whitman, 1865 was a watershed year. It marked the end of the war, which ravaged his sensibility; it was a vastly prolific year for his poetry; and it yielded some of his most profound poetic work. First, listen to “Spirit Whose Work is Done,” a poem dated 1865/1866. he is watching troops returning home, marching:

Spirit whose work is done – spirit of dreadful hours!  
Ere departing fake from my eyes your forest of bayonets;  
Spirit of gloomiest fears and doubts, (yet onward ever unfaltering  
pressing,)  
Spirit of many a solemn day and many a savage scene – electric  
spirit,  
That with muttering voice through the war now closed, like a  
tireless phantom flitted,  
Rousing the land with breath of flame, while you beat and beat the  
drum,  
Now as the sound of the drum, hollow and harsh to the last,  
reverberates round me,  
As your ranks, your immortal ranks, return, return from the battles,  
A the muskets of the young men yet lean over their shoulders,  
As I look on the bayonets bristling over their shoulders,  
As those slanted bayonets, whole forests of them appearing in the  
distance, approach and pass on, returning homeward,  
Moving with steady motion, swaying to and fro to the right and  
left,  
Evenly, lightly rising and falling while the steps keep time;

Spirit of hours I knew, all hectic red one day, but pale as death next  
day.  
Touch my mouth ere you depart, press my lips close,  
Leave me your pulses of rage – bequeath them to me – fill me with  
currents convulsive,  
Let them scorch and blister out of my chants when you are gone,  
Let them identify you to the future in these songs.

With the war coming to a close in 1865, Whitman remains preoccupied with death and loss of vitality. In “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim,” he is contemplating three dead soldiers on stretchers, a poem dated 1865 and revised in 1867:

A sight in camp in the daybreak gray and dim,  
As from my tent I emerge so early sleepless,  
As slow I walk in the cool fresh air the path near by the hospital  
tent,  
Three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought out there untended  
lying,  
Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woolen blanket,  
Gray and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.

Curious I halt and silent stand,  
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest the first just  
lift the blanket;  
Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-grayed hair,  
and flesh all sunken about the eyes?  
Who are you my dear comrade?

Then to the second I step – and who are you my child and darling?  
Who are you sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming?

Then to the third – a face not child nor old, very calm, as of  
beautiful yellow-white ivory;  
Young man I think I know you – I think this face is the face of the  
Christ himself,  
Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.

Of course, 1865 also saw the assassination of President Lincoln, which greatly saddened Whitman. His “O Captain, My Captain!” is considered a masterpiece and is widely distributed in print, so I will not read it. Instead, I go to another ode to the fallen President, “Hush’d Be the Camps Today,” dated May 4, 1865:

Hush’d be the camps today

And soldiers let us drape our war-worn weapons,  
And each with musing soul retire to celebrate,  
Our dear commanders death.

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

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

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

Yet another 1865b tribute to the fallen President is a long narrative, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd,” sixteen sections and 205 lines. Yale literary scholar Harold Bloom describes this poem as springing from an historic moment and enduring because of its poetic merit, in the January 12<sup>th</sup> issue of Newsweek (that's today's issue). He calls it perhaps the best poem ever written to a president. I share with you the first four sections:

1 When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed,  
And the great star early drooped in the western sky  
in the night.  
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,  
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,  
And thought of him I love.

2 O powerful western fallen star!  
O shades of Night – O moody, tearful night!  
O great star disappear'd – O the black murk that hides  
the star  
O cruel hands that hold me powerless – O helpless soul  
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

3 In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the  
whitewash'd palings,  
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped  
leaves of rich green,  
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the  
perfume strong I love,  
With every leaf a miracle – and from this bush

in the dooryard,  
With delicate color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves  
of rich green,  
A sprig with its flower I break.

- 4 In the swamp in secluded recesses,  
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.  
Solitary the thrush,  
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,  
Sings by himself a song.

These few passages I share with you tonight represent only a few lines of many Whitman wrote about the war. And Walt Whitman is only one poetic voice raised to herald and regret the war. Hundreds of authors are anthologized in several collections. I could read selections to you for days, but I have promises to keep. You have been patient with me, and I bless you. There will not be a quiz at the next meeting. I will take questions, but I will close first with one last poem by another prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century poet who I have as yet to mention, John Greenleaf Whittier, 1807 to 1892. Also of Quaker stock, he was an editor, poet, and active abolitionist. After 1833, he devoted all his energies to antislavery. Much of his poetry had to do with the abolitionist cause, and he wrote poetry about the civil war itself. I close with his lyrical hymn to nature and the venerated American landscape. Whittier is able to see that the land and its blessing doesn't change with the agony and ravages of war. "The Battle Autumn of 1862." Listen:



**Whittier**

The flags of war like storm birds fly,  
The charging trumpets blow;  
Yet rolls no thunder in the sky,  
No earthquake strives below.

And, calm and patient, Nature keeps  
Her ancient promise well,  
Though o'er her bloom and greenness sweeps  
The battle's breath of hell.

And still she walks in golden hours  
Through harvest happy farms,  
And still she wears her fruits and flowers  
Like jewels on her arms.

What mean the gladness of the plain,  
The joy of eve and morn,  
The mirth that shaken the beard of grain  
And yellow locks of corn?

Ah! eyes may well be full of tears.  
And hearts with hate are hot;  
But even paced come round the years,  
And Nature changes not.

She meets with smiles our bitter grief,  
With songs our groans of pain;  
She mocks with tint of flower and leaf  
The war field's crimson stain.

Still, in cannon's pause, we hear  
Her sweet thanksgiving psalm;  
To near to God for doubt or fear,  
She shares the eternal calm.

She knows the seed lies safe below  
The fires that blast and burn;  
For all the tears of blood we sow  
She waits the rich return.

She sees with clearer eyes than ours  
The good of suffering born-  
The hearts that blossom like her flowers,  
And ripen like her corn.

Oh give to us, in times like these,  
The vision of her eyes;  
And make her fields and fruited trees  
Our golden prophecies!

Oh, give to us her finer ear!  
Above this stormy din,  
We too would hear the bells of cheer  
Ring peace and freedom in.

Thank you.

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