

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Reconciliation

WALT WHITMAN

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This 1865 poem by Walt Whitman, unlike the previous two, dwells not on concrete details of battlefield experience remembered, but on larger philosophical and religious themes of purification, reconciliation, and redemption. What is the “Word over all” that the speaker invokes at the beginning of the poem? What does the speaker find “beautiful” regarding the carnage of war and “this soil’d world”? What is the connection between those thoughts and the sight of his enemy in the coffin? How does he regard that enemy now, and why? What, according to this poem, makes reconciliation possible?

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 soil’d 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;
I bend down, and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.