Whitman's urgent summons to his fellow citizens to adopt the practices of healthy living constituted a significant portion of his agenda for America. "All comes by the body—only health puts you rapport with the universe," he wrote in "Poem of Many in One" (later titled "By Blue Ontario's Shore"). "Produce great persons, the rest follows," he affirmed (181). "Poem of the Road" stated flatly, "Ife travelling with me needs the best blood, thews, endurance" and warned that only the healthy are eligible to join him in the great American procession:

Come not here if you have already spent the best of yourself!
Only those may come who come in sweet and determined bodies,
No diseased person—no rum-drinker or venereal taint is permitted here [...].

In promoting physical health as a means of fostering national stability, control, and improvement, Whitman excluded those lacking the best blood. This exclusion raises the question of just how he and his contemporaries understood the etiology of sickness and disability. To what extent are people responsible for their personal health and that of their offspring? What is the connection between Whitman's metaphoric use of the language of health as applied to the nation and his actual treatment of the figure of the disabled?

My purpose is to explore Whitman's complex, sometimes contradictory, and shifting treatments of the concepts of health, disease, and disability. After considering the poet's own and his family's involvement with disease and disability, I analyze his efforts as a journalist to inculcate achieving vigorous physical health and production of offspring as a means of promoting the progress of the American nation. I then examine the role of the compassionate healer that he developed in the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass: much of the power of the volume's lead poem, later "Song of Myself," is due to its joyful enactment of practices of vigorous health, even as it gives voice to "the diseased and despairsing" and articulates "the rights of them the others are down upon, / Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised" (Poetry 50). Implicit in Whitman's first volume is the assumption that national progress and acceptance of the disabled are not opposed concepts, that diversity contributes to the national fabric. Next I focus on the 1856 Leaves of Grass, for it is there that, in reacting to the threat of national dissolution, the speaker deploys a prescriptive and exclusionary rhetoric of health and disability. I then look at Whitman's role as compassionate healer in the Civil War hospitals, as
reflected in the prose collection *Specimen Days* and the *Drum-Taps* poems. At a time when hospitals became a source of meaning for poet and nation, Whitman no longer could state that “only health puts you rapport with the universe.” Confrontation with death, illness, and disability forced the poet to face a conflict at the heart of his poetic project: his urgent push for national health and progress collided with his central commitment to democratic inclusion of the disabled. Finally, I consider the continuing tension in Whitman’s work between his cult of vigorous personal and national health and his compassionate treatment of the disabled and exploration of the experience of disability.

**From Disabled Family to Healthy Nation:**
**The Therapeutics of Poetry**

The poet who alternately embraced and rejected the disabled was all too familiar with various forms of disability and illness in his own family. When Whitman was only six, an unamed younger brother died in infancy, and in 1864 the poet was forced to commit his older brother, Jesse, whom he had helped care for, to the King’s County Lunatic Asylum, where Jesse died six years later. Another younger brother, Eddie, in the words of Harold Aspiz, “seems to have been feeble-minded, epileptic, and emotionally disturbed, his crippled left hand and paralyzed left leg indicating that the poet’s paralysis, like his dizzy spells and his appearance of being prematurely old, had a complex family history.” That paralysis was caused by a stroke in 1873. His brother Andrew died “aged thirty-six, apparently of tuberculosis of the throat” (Aspiz 18). Whitman himself was hardly the exemplar of the “perfect health” that he would claim for himself in “Song of Myself” (Poetry 188).

As a journalist in the 1840s Whitman formulated what Aspiz termed a “gospel of physical improbability,” which he planned to direct “to the favorite target of his reformistic age, the young men and boys of America” (49). He considered using lectures, magazine articles, and a manual of instructions to promote his evolving gospel of healthy living, which he based on such commonsense measures as plentiful fresh air, exercise, and frequent bathing as well as avoiding overeating, drunkenness, and other abuses of the body, including masturbation. As a newspaper editor, Whitman promoted public health as offering the best chance of redefining improvements in urban living in the face of rising mortality rates from diseases such as cholera. On 12 May 1846, he wrote an editorial in the *Brooklyn Eagle* supporting a bill to construct a state facility for the humane care of the mentally ill and retarded, who were housed in “the wretchedest of our wretched county poor houses” (Journalism 360).

Like many Americans in antebellum America, Whitman criticized the dominant modes of contemporary medicine, those practiced by the regular physicians, who still resorted to such heroic treatments as bleeding and the use of strong purgatives and emetics to cure the patient. His 16 April 1846 essay in the *Eagle* entitled “Is Not Medicine Itself a Frequent Cause of Sickness?” charged that the violent stimulants and narcotics which are favorites with a majority of the physicians, cannot be used without the most serious and permanent effects on the system. [...] How much of the fevers, aches, rheumatisms, chronic and acute complaints [...] come to us through the physic vial. [...] There is much humbug in the pompous pretensions of the medical art. There are very few real specifics for disease in the whole catalogue of the pharmacist. Doctors and apothecaries pretend to know altogether too much. It will go down among those who understand very little of physiology and anatomy [...] but to all others, much of the loftiest pretensions of either the “regular doctor,” or “quack” doctor, is but a matter of sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

*Journalism* 332-32

In his therapeutic nihilism, Whitman articulated the suspicions of many ordinary Americans and also the judgment of a small group of elite physicians, many of whom were Bostonians who had studied in Paris. Notably, in his 1835 address to the Massachusetts Medical Society, “Self-Limited Diseases,” Jacob Bigelow of the Harvard Medical School stated that it was “the unbiased opinion of most medical men of sound judgment and long experience” that “the amount of death and disaster in the world would be less, if all disease were left to itself” (55).

Despite his admiration for certain physicians whom he observed closely in the New York hospitals, Whitman looked elsewhere for healing strategies. Although he refrained from advocating any one of the numerous alternative therapies, including Thomsonianism, homeopathy, and Grahamism, he preferred them to standard practice, as he wrote in the *Brooklyn Eagle* on 1 June 1846: “Their excellence is nearly altogether of a negative kind.—They may not cure, but neither do they kill—which is more than can be said of the old systems. They aid nature in carrying off the disease slowly—and do not grapple with it fiercely, and fight it, to the detriment of the patient’s poor frame, which is left, even in victory,
prostrate and almost annihilated” (Journalism 392–93). Much better, he wrote, would it be to inspire the patient to draw from the healing powers of nature itself, a task that he as poet would take up.

Whitman was writing at a time when, as the medical historian Charles E. Rosenberg observed, disease was understood not as a “discrete entity—or even a well-defined physiological process with a peculiar natural history” but rather as “the sum of one’s transactions with the environment—the resultant of a total physiological process. Hereditary constitutional endowment was one given, the peculiar pattern of life through which that original endowment passed, another” (No Other Gods 29). As Whitman put it, disease “is the result either of hereditary causes or a long train of circumstances acting, perhaps slowly and silently, long and long before the disease itself breaks out” (Journalism 393). There was a perception, as Rosenberg explained, that certain chronic and constitutional categories of illness, including “cancer, gout, mental illness, tuberculosis, and heart disease [. . .] seemed to be inherited in patterns of general, though not inevitable constitutional weakness. They appeared to be progressive, largely idiopathic, and related to individual idiosyncrasies of temperament and resistance.” What could be done? Even in cases of inherited tendency toward illness, “judicious prophylactic counsel might make the difference between being a merely potential and actual victim” (29, 32). Accordingly, the properly motivated and informed citizen could do much to resist illness and promote health. This effort became especially important in view of the widespread assumption that acquired characteristics, even patterns of behavior, could be inherited. At the moment of conception the particular biological identities of both parents were results of the cumulative interaction of all those habits, accidents, illnesses—and original constitutional endowments—which had intersected since their own conception” (27). Revealing his involvement in phrenology, which, as Rosenberg remarked, was “widely accepted and diffused in ante-bellum American society” (42), Whitman adopted what Aspiz called the “vulgar Lamarckian faith that everyone, from prostitute to poet, may better himself or herself, up to a limit imposed by nature, and that in time America will evolve a race of heroes by interbreeding her best specimens and breeding out her unwholesome biological strains” (Aspiz 194). Conversely, abuse of the body could result in serious harm to the individual and to future generations. If, then, health could be achieved by following established practices for healthy living and successful procreation, and the most effective way to combat illness and to improve health came from harnessing the body’s innate powers, then the poet might well play an integral role in promoting the health of the body politic.

In “Song of Myself” the Whitman persona, himself a paragon of health, takes up the role of heroic healer, rushing to the bedside where, after telling the “physician and priest [to] go home,”

I seize the descending man . . . I raise him with resistless will
[..........................................................]

I dilate you with tremendous breath . . . I buoy you up;
Every room of the house do I fill with an armed force . . . lovers of me, ballfiers of graves:
Sleep! I and they keep guard all night:
Not doubt, not decease shall dare to lay finger upon you,
I have embraced you, and henceforth possess you to myself,
And when you rise in the morning you will find what I tell you is so.

I am he bringing help for the sick as they pant on their backs,
And for strong upright men I bring yet more needed help.

(Poetry 73)

The poet also boasts of creating health in another way: “On women fit for conception I start bigger and nimbler babes, / This day I am jetting the stuff of far more arrogant republics” (73).

The speaker in “Song of Myself” refuses to countenance any divisions in the body politic, affirming, “Whoever degrades another degrades me.” He will “accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms” (50). Everyone, he insists, is welcome to participate:

I will not have a single person slighted or left away.
The keptwoman and sponger and thief are hereby invited . . . the heavy-lipped slave is invited . . . the venereal is invited,
There shall be no difference between them and the rest. (44)

The “venereal,” who in 1856 will be excluded from the procession on the “Open Road,” finds a place among all those whose lives enrich the nation. Through his catalogs, the speaker identifies with “whatever is commonest and cheapest and nearest”:

The farmer stops by the bars of a Sunday and looks at the oats and rye.
The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirmed case.
He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother’s bedroom;
The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,
He turns his quid of tobacco, his eyes get blurred with the manuscript;
The malformed limbs are tied to the anatomist’s table,
What is removed drops horribly in a pail; [ . . . ] (39)

In another 1855 poem, “The Sleepers,” the healing power of the poet is grounded in his powers of identification with one and all, his willingness to “dream in my dream the dreams of all the other dreamers” (108). Whitman concludes with a vision of healing that comes through the agency of the night and the poet’s transforming presence:

The stammerer, the sick, the perfectedform, the homely,
The criminal that stood in the box, the judge that sat and sentenced him, the fluster lawyers, the jury, the audience,
The laugher and weeper, the dancer, the midnight whistow, the red squaw,
The consumptive, the erysipalite, the idiot, he that is wronged,
The antipodes, and every one between this and them in the dark,
I swear they are averaged now. . . . one is no better than the other,
The night and sleep have likened them and restored them. (114)

Whitman, Phrenology, and the Trial of 1856

Whitman added twenty new poems to the 1856 edition of Leaves of Grass, which now contained thirty-two in all. Several of the new poems, including “Sun-Down Poem” (later “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”), “Poem of the Sayers of the Words of the Earth” (later “Song of the Rolling Earth”), and “Poem of Wonder at the Resurrection of the Wheat” (later “This Compost”) do not treat explicit political subjects. Yet most take on the role of inculcating the cult of vigorous health and those other qualities that are necessary if the nation is to survive its time of trial. As Gay Wilson Allen remarked, the 1856 edition combined a “robust-health motif” with an “excessive nationalism.” Allen also noted that the volume was Whitman’s first “experiment in working out a dramatic-allegorical sequence” (127, 83–84).

The phrenological publishers Fowler and Wells released the book, although the firm’s name does not appear on the title page. However, as Aszip recognized, the firm’s phrenological principles and its method of constructing books served as the key structural principle:

Like many of their publications, [the 1856 edition] may be read as a guidebook to the secrets of health, social justice, and spiritual advancement. It resembles one of their octavo handbooks: its table of contents seemingly offers thirty-two prescriptive poems about the attainment of physical, spiritual, and national greatness. [ . . . ] Its poems could, in fact, serve a perceptive reader as a manual of physical-moral self-discovery. (117)

The Whitman persona now assumed the role of saving the nation. “By great bards only can series of peoples and States be fused into the compact organism of one nation,” he wrote in “Poem of Many in One.” The poet becomes the “equalizer of his age and land,” he supplies what wants supplying—he checks what wants checking” (Leaves 188–89). Through the poet the many are integrated into one, thereby bringing health to the nation. Above all, what is needed is health, as Whitman stated in a stanza cited above: “All comes by the body—only health puts you rapport with the universe.” Then, after asserting, “Produce great persons, the rest follows,” the speaker silences the discarded: “How dare a sick man, or an obedient man, write poems? / Which is the theory or book that is not diseased?” (181). If the nation is to “be better than all that has ever been before,” it must heed the poet’s directives:

Fear grace! Fear delicatesset!
Fear the mellow sweet, the sucking of honey-juice!
Beware the advancing mortal ripening of nature!
Beware what precedes the decay of the ruggedness of states and men! (182)

He raises the stakes by identifying America’s global role: “Any period, one nation must lead, / One land must be the promise and reliance of the future” (183).

Reflecting on the responsibility of parents, the speaker as eugenist connects the health of citizens at the moment of procreation with their success in producing healthy future citizens:

Bravas to states whose semitic impulses send wholesome children to the next age!
But damn that which spends itself on flouters and dallyers, with no thought of the stains, pains, dismay, feebleness, it bequeathing! (188)

Precisely to avoid such “stains” and “feebleness,” the persona articulates what he calls the “idea of perfect individuals,” with the “bards” walking
I see the pirates, thieves, betrayers, murderers, slave-makers of the earth.  
I see the helpless infants, and the helpless old men and women. (116)

From today's perspective, the poem embodies what Lennard Davis, in *Enforcing Normalcy*, has called the "loose association between what we would now call disability and criminal activity, mental incompetence, sexual license." That association, Davis wrote, "established a legacy that people with disabilities are still having trouble living down" (37). It is revealing that the edition of 1856, which most strongly expressed its author's perception of threat to the body politic, also contained poems that dealt most explicitly with the place of the disabled.

In applying what Allen called Whitman's "robust health motif" to the ills of society, Whitman directly addresses America's youth, as in "Poem of Remembrances for a Girl or a Boy of These States," where he urges them to avoid "decay, consumption, rum-drinking, dropsey, fever, mortal cancer [and] inflammation." Even so, he concludes by reminding readers, "Recall the sages, poets, savours, inventors, lawgivers, of the earth. / Recall Christ, brother of rejected persons—brother of slaves, felons, idiots, and of insane and diseased persons" (Leaves 276–77).

**The Wound Dresser: The Terror of Civil War**

In *Specimen Days* Whitman reported that, "startled by news" that his brother George was "seriously wounded" at Fredericksburg in 1862, he went down "to the field of war in Virginia" (*Poetry* 730). He remained in Washington, where he worked part-time in the army paymaster's office and devoted himself to visiting the sick and dying in the vast hospitals. The poet who had bragged about his own vigorous health and celebrated that of his fellow citizens now had to confront death, dismemberment, cruelty, and courage on a scale never before seen. He would in fact blame his later illnesses on the strain of his nursing rounds during the war. The poet who in "Song of Myself" was able to "seize the descending man. . . . I raise him with resistless will" (73) came to confess in "The Wound-Dresser" that "my fingers fall'd me, face droop'd and I resign'd myself. / To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead" (443). In attempting to sum up his Civil War writings and the nation's war experience, he discovered that only one word would do:
As I have look'd over the proof-sheets of the preceding pages, I have once or twice fear'd that my diary would prove, at best, but a batch of convulsively written reminiscences. Well, be it so. They are but parts of the actual distraction, heat, smoke and excitement of those times. The war itself, with the temper of society preceding it, can indeed best be described by the very word -

*convulsiveness.*

(799)

So deeply scarred were Union prisoners of war in Confederate prisons that he wrote: "The dead there are not to be pitied so much as some of the living that come from there—if they can be call'd living—many of them are mentally imbecile, and will never recuperate" (789–90). All that the healer of 1853 could do is "soothe and relieve particular cases," he wrote in "Patent-Office Hospital," where he graphically described "very bad cases; wounds and amputations" (741).

Whitman reported on acts of generous healing, as in the story he heard from a wounded Pennsylvanian who told him of a middle-aged southerner who moved among "the dead and wounded" Union soldiers "for benevolent purposes [. . .] treated our soldier kindly, bound up his wounds, cheer'd him, gave him a couple of biscuits and a drink of whiskey and water" (739). Calling his wartime experiences, "with all their feverish excitements and physical deprivations and lamentable sights," the "most profound lesson of my life," Whitman sought to create a new national identity, one forged not on the principles of robust health but in the hospitals: "I can say that in my ministerings I comprehended all, whoever came in my way, northern or southern, and slighted none. It arous'd and brought out and decided undream'd-of depths of emotion. It has given me my most fervent views of the true ensemble and extent of the States" (800).

Whitman blamed the stress and strain of his wartime hospital experiences for the paralytic stroke that he suffered in 1873. In a poem written in its aftermath, "Prayer of Columbus," published in *Harper's Magazine* in March, 1874, he identified with Columbus at the end of his life, calling himself "A batter'd, wreck'd old man [. . .] / Sore, stiff with many toils, sicken'd nigh to death" (540). Even so, he refused to surrender the notion of perfect health. On the contrary, in revising "Song of Myself" in 1881, he added the following four lines to the second stanza of the poem's first section, tying his entire poetic achievement to what he now called "perfect health":

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

These lines raise once again the question of the position of the disabled in Whitman's poetry. If, as the persona here implies, the possession of perfect health is a precondition for writing poetry, then all those whose health is less than perfect are denied a voice. There is also a nativist cast to the assertion that the fact that Whitman was "born here of parents born here" is responsible for his perfect health. Inescapably, his use of the notion of perfect health brings with it the establishment of its opposite, the disabled, as a cultural category.

Yet even as he was unable to surrender perfect health as an ideal, Whitman wrote movingly of the disabilities and compensations of illness and old age in such poems as "You Lingerer Sparse Leaves of Me" (633) and "An Evening Lull" (635). His work is driven by a tension between the search for physical vigor, for perfect health, and his compassionate embrace of all forms of human limitation. Both as journalist and as poet, he deployed a discourse of national perfectibility, which carried with it distinct eugenicist implications about the value of different races and individuals. But he also drew from a discourse of democratic inclusiveness in which all people are valued on their own terms. The tension between these two languages lies at the heart not only of Whitman's life work but also of the America whose song Whitman sang.