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WALT WHITMAN

Specimen Days

Edited and with an Introduction and Notes by
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INTRODUCTION

I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you.
WALT WHITMAN ('Song of Myself')

BECAUSE Walt Whitman is one of the world's most beloved and influential poets, it is understandable that his prose writings, with the important exception of his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, often get overlooked. Many readers of Whitman's poetic opus, which he revised, expanded, and restructured in a total of six substantially different editions from 1855 to 1892, find themselves endlessly detained by its extraordinary verses.[1]

Yet Whitman also left a wealth of extraordinary writing in multiple prose genres. He was, for example, a prolific journalist and periodical writer who published news items, editorials, reviews, short stories, and philosophical pieces in dozens of newspapers and magazines. He also authored two novels—*Franklin Evans; or, The Inebriate* (1842) and *The Life and Adventures of Jack Engle* (1852)—as well as the recently rediscovered self-improvement guide to *Manly Health and Training* (1858). His long pamphlet *Democratic Vistas* (1871) is an impassioned and conflicted defence of democratic principles written during the challenging post-war years of Reconstruction, and his short book *Memoranda During the War* (1875) returns to the Civil War itself and to Whitman's experiences and impressions as a volunteer nurse in the army hospitals of Washington DC.[2] There are also two

[1] In addition to the six major editions of 1855, 1856, 1860, 1867, 1871, and 1881, a reprint of the 1871 edition was repackaged as the 1876 'Centennial' edition, a minimally supplemented reprint of the 1881 edition appeared in 1889, and a final repackaging—the so-called Deathbed Edition—appeared in the winter of 1891–2, shortly before which Whitman told a friend that Leaves of Grass was 'at last complete—after 33 y'rs of hackling at it, all times & moods of my life, fair weather & foul, all parts of the land, and peace & war, young & old' (Whitman to Bucke, 6 December 1891, the Charles E. Feinberg Collection of the Papers of Walt Whitman, 1839–1919, Library of Congress, Washington DC, https://www.loc.gov/item/mss18630001 08/)

[2] Thanks to the work of recent scholars, many of these prose works are back in print in up-to-date editions: *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*, ed. Christopher Castiglia and Glenn Hendler (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); *The Life and Adventures of Jack Engle*, ed. Zachary Turpin (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017); *Manly Health and Training*, ed. Zachary Turpin (New York: Regan Arts, 2017); and *Memoranda During the War*, ed. Peter Coviello (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

late, slender volumes—*Two Rivulets* (1876) and *November Boughs* (1888)—that combine miscellaneous prose and verse pieces of substantial interest. But Whitman's two last major prose works were published together in a single volume in 1882: one is *Collect*, an anthology of important prose pieces, and the other is *Specimen Days*, surely one of the best-kept secrets of modern autobiographical literature.

When it first appeared, *Specimen Days* was a hit with readers. The initial print run of 1,000 copies sold out quickly—spurred no doubt by the notoriety generated just a few months earlier by the banning of *Leaves of Grass* by Boston's district attorney.[3] Since then, overshadowed by Whitman's poetry, *Specimen Days* has been most frequently read by Whitman scholars and enthusiasts. However, as one of the great nineteenth-century autobiographies, it belongs in the company of other classics of the genre, such as Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (1873), and Ulysses S. Grant's *Personal Memoirs* (1885). As Alfred Kazin puts it in his introduction to a now long-out-of-print edition: 'The Whitman who had created a new self in 1855 was now, with *Specimen Days*, to show what a really determined genius in the nineteenth century could do by way of an "autobiography".'[4]

Written in the aftermath of a debilitating stroke (one of the alternate titles Whitman considered was 'Notes of a Half-Paralytic'), *Specimen Days* has, promisingly, begun to receive some attention in the emergent field of Disability Studies, where it is considered to be one of the very first 'disability memoirs'.[5] It is also a moving reflection on ageing and mortality and is thus being read in tandem with the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of Ageing Studies.[6] But *Specimen Days* is much

[3] On the ban and its cultural significance, see David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 540–5.

[4] Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days*, ed. Lance Hidy (Boston: David R. Godine, 1971), p. xx.

[5] Stephen Kuusisto goes so far as to call Whitman 'the progenitor of the "disability memoir" ' ('Walt Whitman's "Specimen Days" and the Discovery of the Disability Memoir', *Prose Studies* 27 (2005), 158). See also Don James McLaughlin and Clare Mullaney, 'Revisiting the Whitmanian Body at 200: Memory, Medicine, Mobility', special issue of *Commonplace: The Journal of Early American Life* 19/1 (2019), https://whitmanbicentennialessays.com/, accessed 16 June 2022.

[6] See E. Folsom, 'Walt Whitman: A Current Bibliography, Fall 2020', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 38/2 (2020), 126–38; and George B. Hutchinson, 'Life Review and the Common World in Whitman's *Specimen Days*', *South Atlantic Review* 52 (1987), 3–23.

more than a testament to waning powers and late-life nostalgia. It is also a boldly experimental life narrative, one that can lay claim—along with near-contemporary works like *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907) and Joseph Conrad's *A Personal Record* (1909)—to being one of the earliest modernist memoirs, a retelling of Whitman's exceptional life in relation to the shifting urban and rural ecologies of a young nation freshly emerged from catastrophic civil war and assuming the vanguard of artistic, technological, economic, political, and philosophical modernity. Experimental in form, lyrical in expression, and rich in experiential content, *Specimen Days* awaits a much wider readership than it has hitherto enjoyed.

Whitman's autobiography begins with a brief account of his ancestry and then proceeds, in episodic fashion, to chronicle the activities, people, places, and events that filled his days, captured his imagination, nurtured his talent, got in his way, and won and broke his heart. We get glimpses of his childhood world on Long Island and in Brooklyn and then follow him into adolescence and early adulthood—years Whitman spent learning and plying various trades, including stints as a schoolteacher and, like his father, as a carpenter and minor real-estate speculator.

But Whitman's first true vocations were printing and journalism—vocations that, from the mid-1830s to the mid-1850s, helped lay the groundwork for his emergence in 1855 as a radically new kind of poet. He published his first newspaper article at the age of 15, his first poem at 19, and his first short story at 22. He learned how to set type and to work printing presses, how to write political editorials and book reviews, how to publish and distribute his own newspaper, and how to use new media technologies like daguerreotype to create and project a public image. Other formative experiences during these years included frequent excursions to Manhattan's theatres and opera houses, where he enjoyed works by Shakespeare, Molière, Beethoven, and Rossini brought to life by some of the era's greatest performers, and to the many daguerreotype galleries that were springing up all over New York.[7] And, at home and abroad, there was the stage of life itself—not only to be observed but also on which Whitman himself learned to play many roles, including son and brother, reporter and editor, patriot and populist, flâneur, bohemian, streetcar enthusiast, lover of men, and a poetic iconoclast who, by 1855, had succeeded at putting 'to press for good' the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the

[7] See Whitman's ecstatic article about his 'Visit to Plumbe's Gallery' (*J* ii. 448–50).

revolutionary collection that would spur a sea change in poetry, not only in English-speaking countries but also around the world. Whitman's life as a poet had begun.

At the centre of that life was the US Civil War (1861–5), the bloody sectional conflict between northern and southern states that would determine the nation's future—indeed, whether it would even have a future. In the decade leading up to the war, slavery was the chief cause of escalating moral tensions and bitter disputes over territorial expansion, political representation, states' rights, federal authority, and free trade. When the fighting began, Whitman, like many Americans, feared that his beloved 'Union' would collapse. In the end, the nation survived, but at a dreadful cost: over 750,000 soldiers and untold numbers of civilians were killed; slavery was abolished, but not the pervasive and violent racism that persists to this day; and economic 'recovery' inflamed US imperial ambitions and the ever-increasing disparities between rich and poor.

The Civil War years themselves made a powerful and lasting impression on Whitman, who told his close friend and amanuensis Horace Traubel in 1888 that they were 'the very centre, circumference, umbillicus of my whole career' (*WC* iii. 95[8]). In *Specimen Days*, Whitman writes extensively about the internecine struggle, about President Lincoln and his assassination, and, with special pathos, about the young soldiers he nursed, befriended, loved, and mourned, both in battlefield encampments and, chiefly, in the military hospitals of Washington DC. No other American poet of the time saw (and heard and smelled and touched) as much suffering and death as Whitman did:

> the groans and screams—the odor of blood, mixed with the fresh scent of the night, the grass, the trees—that slaughter-house! O well is it their mothers, their sisters cannot see them—cannot conceive, and never conceiv'd, these things. (p. 41)

In passages like this, Whitman plays the role of sacrificial witness, subjecting himself to the full sensorium of war on others' behalf. Elsewhere, he asks his readers also to be witnesses—at least by proxy: 'You ought to see', he insists in 'The Wounded from Chancellorsville' (p. 39). 'Look', he commands in 'An Army Hospital Ward' (p. 37).

[8] Please see the Abbreviations list at the head of the Explanatory Notes on p. 239 for full forms of abbreviations used in the Introduction, such as *WC* here.

'Here is the scene', he begins to recount in 'A Glimpse of War's Hell-Scenes', or, at least, 'a sample of it' (p. 65).

Whitman depicts many such 'glimpses' and 'samples' with vivid immediacy. Still, they seem to him insufficient:

> Multiply the above by scores, aye hundreds—verify it in all the forms that different circumstances, individuals, places, could afford—light it 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. (p. 66)

Committed to sharing such 'inklings', Whitman nevertheless concludes that 'the real war'—the 'filthy torments', the 'mutilations', 'these butchers' shambles'—is largely ineffable and 'will never get in the books' (pp. 92, 93, 41, 93). In the end, there seems to remain little more than the morbid stutter of 'the dead, the dead, the dead—*our* dead—or South or North, ours all' (p. 92).

But Whitman himself survived, though much the worse for wear and tear, and for almost three more decades he remained passionately connected to the world of the living. Too often, Whitman's biographers and critics have characterized 'late' Whitman as a figure of retreat and decline, both personally and creatively. However, the post-war sections of *Specimen Days* attest to his continued vitality and productivity. They also include accounts of some of his joyous friendships and 'amours' as well as family strife and sorrow. With wonder and excitement, he describes his extensive travels across post-war America, from Cambridge to Colorado, marvelling at the scale and development of new cities and territories and at the natural beauty of the continent's diverse regions. As he grows older and less robust, he nevertheless maintains a busy social life, receiving friends and dignitaries at his Camden home, travelling to cities throughout the north-east to deliver his annual Lincoln lecture, and spending as much time as possible at the nearby farm of his friends, the Staffords. There, he was able to savour the natural world, to bathe naked—often with his young lover, the Staffords' son Harry—in his beloved Timber Creek, and to compose many pages of what would become *Specimen Days*.

Whitman compiled his autobiography by joining new writing to various 'specimens' culled from his own newspaper articles and other

publications, his jumble of notebooks, unpublished manuscripts, and his voluminous correspondence. Not only was he an inveterate reviser of his writings, he was also a habitual gleaner and recycler of them. For example, much of the material in *Specimen Days* pertaining to the Civil War is drawn from his earlier work, *Memoranda During the War*. Like the word 'specimen', 'memoranda' conveys Whitman's predilection for the piecemeal, the fragment, the representative example, and the spontaneous utterance. Both terms implicitly resist demands for the 'whole' story or the 'complete' account and are very much in keeping with Whitman's insistence, in *Specimen Days*, that 'the real war will never get in the books'—that 'its practicality, minutiæ of deeds and passions, will never be even suggested' (p. 93).

On one hand, Whitman makes these sorts of claims to bolster his authority as both eyewitness and participant—as someone, that is, with an 'insider's' knowledge. He was *there*, he reminds us, at the white-hot centre of the war's fury, pathos, and magnificence. He, Walt Whitman, saw and experienced what most others (at least among those who survived) never did. He's saying he can't—or won't—share everything, but that he'll meet us partway and 'furnish a few stray glimpses into that life, and into those lurid interiors, never to be fully convey'd to the future' (p. 94), so that we, as readers, may learn just a little bit of what he knows. On the other hand, Whitman is revealing—perhaps to a greater extent than he realizes—his anxiety about the limits of representation and his own powers as a writer. That is, he's alerting us to something about his struggle adequately to communicate even those parts (never the whole) of the war he's witnessed and felt for himself. From this latter perspective, 'the real war will never get in the books'—not even Whitman's books—because its 'reality' is ineffable, inconceivable; it overwhelms the resources of artistry, perhaps even of language itself.

In a letter to his friend William D. O'Connor, Whitman made similar claims for *Specimen Days* itself, calling it

> a rapid skimming over the pond-surface of my life, thoughts, experiences, that way—the real area altogether untouch'd, but the flat pebble making a few dips as it flies & flits along—enough at least to give some living touches and contact-points—I was quite willing to make an immensely *negative* book. (*COR* iii. 315)

This inclination to *negate*, or leave unplumbed, the 'real area' of the self, however, is counterbalanced by Whitman's near-compulsive efforts to record and to preserve his 'life, thoughts, experiences'. Rarely caught without at least a scrap of paper and a pencil-nub to write down a 'wayward' thought or the name of a young man he'd just met, Whitman was forever jotting 'on odds and ends of paper in odds and ends of time' (*WC* iv. 389). He kept daybooks and diaries and journals. He stuffed commonplace books with quotations, clippings, photographs, letters, ferry tickets, menus, and other ephemera. And he loved to make lists.

Indeed, for Whitman, the list was a literary genre unto itself, akin to the famously lengthy 'catalogs' in his poetry. Among the lists in *Specimen Days* are: '*Trees I am familiar with here*' (p. 105), 'Birds and Birds and Birds' (p. 116), and 'Wild Flowers' (p. 142). Each list is a device of both accumulation and differentiation: a bird is a bird is a bird, yet each species of bird is distinctive and known to Whitman in its difference from the others. A list can also be vividly expressive of unrealized yet unabandoned potentialities, such as the extraordinary list of 'suggested and rejected names' for his autobiography (p. 195n.), in which is preserved a sense of the many different accounts of himself that Whitman could have given. For example, the title '*Echoes of a Life in the 19th Century in the New World*' (p. 195) implies history on a grand scale, while the title '*Such as I. . . . . Evening Dews*' (p. 195) evokes pastoral—or perhaps erotic—intimacy.[9]

One could infer from this long list of possible titles that Whitman shared, to some extent, the view later expressed by J.-B. Pontalis that 'one shouldn't write *one* autobiography but ten of them or a hundred because, while we have only one life, we have innumerable ways of recounting that life'[10]—or, in Whitman's case, of *assembling* that life from the raw materials he plundered. As a modernist work *avant la lettre*, *Specimen Days* emerged through a process akin to bricolage—the artistic technique of assemblage and recombination, in which diverse materials are gathered, sorted, recombined, and augmented

[9] Another kind of list familiar to every newspaper reader of the Civil War era was the daily newspaper casualty list.

[10] J.-B. Pontalis, *Love of Beginnings*, trans. James Greene (London: Free Association Books, 1993), p. xv.

in an improvisational manner.[11] This open-toolbox technique is strongly associated with twentieth-century works by artists and writers including Marcel Duchamp, Marianne Moore, Kurt Schwitters, and Jean Toomer—works that decontextualize words, images, and 'found' objects, conjoining often disparate or incongruous materials in order to defamiliarize them—and, moreover, to unsettle conventional notions of what counts as 'art'.

At the same time, the humble French verb *bricoler* means simply 'to tinker', 'to muck around', 'to rig up'. And, indeed, the mixing of 'high' and 'low' was fundamental to Whitman's work as a bricoleur, as he sat at his table or in his comfy chair, surrounded by stacks of bundled notebooks, newspaper clippings, abandoned manuscripts, books, photographs, and other memorabilia amassed over a lifetime—there to be rummaged through, pulled apart, selected or rejected, transcribed, revised, or wholly rewritten, and sutured together with new material to construct a distinctive account of himself.

The desire to experiment with different ways of being seen and known was also at the heart of Whitman's passion for the new image-making technologies of the nineteenth century: daguerreotype and photography. Whitman loved to have his picture taken. In fact, with the sole exceptions of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, Whitman was the most frequently daguerreotyped and photographed person of the nineteenth century. Over 130 photographic images of him survive, dating from the 1840s to the final days of his life. Most of these were reproduced and widely distributed during his lifetime. Whitman himself made sure of that, for he keenly appreciated the power of such images to produce a new kind of mass celebrity. At the same time, he discerned their power to unsettle the photographic subject's self-relation. Surveying a heap of pictures of himself in 1888, Whitman told Horace Traubel that 'I have been photographed to confusion' (*WC* ii. 454). Even Whitman himself couldn't keep

[11] In his short essay on *Specimen Days*, Gilles Deleuze contends that, for Whitman, the world itself 'is not a totality but an assembly' ('Whitman', in *Essays: Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 59). Kuusisto calls *Specimen Days* 'a lyric collage' ('Walt Whitman's "Specimen Days" ', 155); and Daneen Wardrop characterizes the style of many Civil War nursing narratives, including Whitman's, as 'nineteenth-century bricolage' ('Civil War Nursing Narratives, Whitman's *Memoranda During the War*, and Eroticism', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 23/1–2 (2005), 27). See also Matt Miller's *Collage of Myself: Walt Whitman and the Making of* Leaves of Grass (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

track of all the images of Walt Whitman in circulation: 'I meet new Walt Whitmans every day. There are a dozen of me afloat. I don't know which Walt Whitman I am' (*WC* i. 108).

The anxiety Whitman felt—however ironically expressed—about 'which Walt Whitman I am' probably helps explain his willingness to spend countless hours in conversation with Traubel, who visited Whitman at his Camden home on an almost daily basis from the mid-1880s until Whitman's death in 1892. Beginning in 1888, Traubel took meticulous notes on their conversations, many of which were initiated by some question of Traubel's about this or that item he'd picked up from the floor of Whitman second-floor room (both bedroom and study) where, according to Traubel,

> There is all sorts of debris scattered about—bits of manuscript, letters, newspapers, books. Near by his elbow towards the window a washbasket filled with such stuff. Lady Mount Temple's waistcoat was thrown carelessly on the motley table—a Blake volume was used by him for a footstool: near by a copy of DeKay's poems given by Gilder to Rhys. Various other books. A Dickens under his elbow on the chair. He pushed the books here and there several times this evening in his hunt for particular papers. 'This,' he said once, 'is not so much a mess as it looks: you notice that I find most of the things I look for and without much trouble. The disorder is more suspected than real.' (*WC* i. 155)[12]

Whitman's inveterate and purposeful habit of producing 'memoranda' of the immediacy of his experiences extended all the way into his final years—even to the point of some misgiving:

> Had I not better withhold (in this old age and paralysis of me) such little tags and fringe-dots (maybe specks, stains,) as follow a long dusty journey, and witness it afterward? I have probably not been enough afraid of careless touches, from the first—and am not now—nor of parrot-like repetitions—nor platitudes and the commonplace. Perhaps I am too democratic for such avoidances. (*PW* ii. 736–7)

Like many readers of his 'late' work, Whitman himself gives way here, momentarily at least, to concerns about the waning of his creativity and judgement 'in this old age and paralysis of me'. But he quickly

[12] On the importance and remarkable range of meanings of debris in Whitman's life and writings, see Kenneth M. Price, '"Debris," Creative Scatter, and the Challenges of Editing Whitman', in David Haven Blake and Michael Robertson (eds.), *Walt Whitman, Where the Future Becomes Present* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 59–80.

rallies with the defence that his 'careless touches . . . platitudes and the commonplace' are signs, not of decline, but of his perennial ('from the first') nonchalance and inclusiveness—those same 'democratic' tendencies that led him, in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, to proclaim himself 'an American, one of the roughs . . . no stander above men and women or apart from them' (*LG* i. 31). Nevertheless, 'avoidances' do abound in Whitman's autobiography. And more than a little of the autocratic pose clings to its 'too democratic' subject, whose late-life anxieties about 'which Walt Whitman I am' are likely to have been among his motivations for writing *Specimen Days*, with all its formal peculiarities.

Whitman's autobiography is made up of new tracings of many acts of remembrance, including many remembered pains and pleasures that came only later to be recognized as what Whitman calls their 'go-befores and embryons' (p. 10). The resulting book sometimes behaves in the most varied and unpredictable manner—in a word, 'convulsively', which is how Whitman himself characterizes both its composition and the effect of those passages in the book that deal with the Civil War, calling them 'parts of the actual distraction, heat, smoke and excitement of those times' (p. 90). Indeed, many of these passages are transcriptions from 'soil'd and creas'd livraisons' (p. 9), hastily written and carelessly tossed aside during the war, only to be found and put to use much later, some of them still stained with the blood of soldiers Whitman had nursed. An image of the piecemeal composition and subsequent *rassemblage* of the various parts of *Specimen Days* is preserved in its segmented form. One might fancy, as Whitman possibly did, the book's 248 brief, titled sections as having been stitched together like disjecta membra—or ranged like soldiers on parade—or pasted into a family album—or gathered like blooms for a bouquet.

Whitman was 63 years old, disabled by illness, and living in Camden, New Jersey, when he published *Specimen Days*, but it begins with a vivacious and cheeky paragraph that rivals—both in its bravado ('the resolution and indeed mandate comes to me this day, this hour', p. 9) and in its claim of unprecedentedness ('I shall send out the most wayward, spontaneous, fragmentary book ever printed', p. 9)—the much more famous opening of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, published a century earlier. Like its bold opening, most of the book's sections are dated by day, month, or season. And they all

have titles, like the many hundreds of newspaper articles Whitman published during his early career as a journalist and editor. However, his narrative—which is, as he puts it, 'full of skips and jumps', obeying his 'happy hour's command'—often deviates from strict chronological order. Many other autobiographies do so as well, but the grandiosity of Whitman's quest to 'send out the most wayward, spontaneous, fragmentary book ever printed' signals an uncommon willingness to challenge the formal conventions of autobiographical verisimilitude and subjective continuity.

For the most part, autobiographers submit their narratives to the widely accepted notion that chronology is the 'natural' order of things and that chronological narratives best represent the workings of cause and effect in their life experience. In *Specimen Days*, we occasionally find Whitman himself indulging in this conventional perspective on temporality and causation. For example, two days after his 60th birthday, he finds himself sitting under an oak tree, 'musing over my life—connecting events, dates, as links of a chain, neither sadly nor cheerily, but somehow, to-day here under the oak, in the rain, in an unusually matter-of-fact spirit' (p. 129). Whitman's mood of neutrality ('neither sadly nor cheerily', 'unusually matter-of-fact') comports with the banality of the chain metaphor. Much more frequently, however, we find Whitman disrupting the conventional forms and structures of life narrative. He devotes especially keen attention to his own relation, as an autobiographer, to the present moment of composition and to the complex temporality of the 'specimen'.

Specimen Days is, among other things, a journal of its own composition, from the unbundling of 'that huddle of diary-jottings' (p. 9) with which the narrative begins, to its concluding farewell to 'these garrulous notes' (p. 231)—notes that are nevertheless returned to him to be reviewed and revised as printer's 'proof-sheets' (p. 90) and then parted with once again. Whitman frequently asserts that whole portions of the book are verbatim transcripts of scraps of earlier writing (some of them 'half-eras'd, and not over-legible when made', p. 67), taken 'as they come, from the heap, without particular selection' (p. 97), all brought together in a process meant to seem as wayward as the country rambles that many of these chosen scraps record.

In other words, much of the book was twice- or thrice-written: over the decades, Whitman habitually jotted down notes wherever he

happened to be—often while sitting on tree-stumps, fence-rails, gravestones, hospital cots, trains, ferry boats, and omnibuses. Much later, beginning in January 1882, he set himself the task of reviewing these often carelessly heaped and stowed 'budgets of personal memoranda' (p. 123) and began to copy some of them into the manuscript that would be published later that year as *Specimen Days*.[13] As he transcribed excerpts, or 'specimens', of these memoranda, Whitman interpolated dozens upon dozens of phrases, such as 'I write this' (p. 12), 'As I jot this paragraph' (p. 98), and 'I am here now writing these lines' (p. 128), among passages he had first written years—even decades—earlier. These prolific scenes of writing, or *autography*, are for the most part clearly situated in place and time: at the window of his home in Washington DC in 1863; on a mountain top in Colorado's Kenosha Range in 1879; at the Whitman family's burial-place on Long Island in 1881. Yet the autographic effect is, repeatedly, to collapse the distance between *there-and-then* and *here-and-now*—temporal distances 'join'd', as Whitman says of the country's new transcontinental railways, 'like magic' (p. 162).

This magical *autographic effect* is very much in keeping with Whitman's persistent, metanationalist fantasy of an 'absolute fusion… steadily annealing, compacting, identifying all' (p. 177). Yet it is also undoubtedly a sign, in the ailing, ageing Whitman's autobiography, of his struggle with bereavement: lost loved ones, lost memories, lost opportunities, even lost instants of the present, as time hurries him towards death. Thus, his inveterate habit of tracing in writing as many instants as he can, in a notebook or on a scrap of paper—wresting his own and others' 'little tags and fringe-dots' of experience from oblivion. His technique of hastily transcribing autographic scenes, whether of disappearing ancestral graves, dying young soldiers, or his own body's infirm and forgetful flesh, helped him, in the composition of *Specimen Days*, to keep what was passing in the present—including, grammatically speaking, in the present tense.

Indeed, Whitman's adroit *poetics of the tense* reflects the homonymy of the noun 'tense' (from the Latin *tempus*, meaning 'time') and the adjective 'tense' (from the Latin *tensus*, meaning 'stretched taut') and seeks to relax the tension (anxiety, uncertainty, hypervigilance) so

[13] Whitman began writing *Specimen Days* in the form of a letter to Richard Maurice Bucke, who aimed to write Whitman's biography.

often generated by commonplace distinctions—including past/present, author/text, and life/death—grounded in grammatical tenses and tense-shifts. We are often 'stretched taut' by tenses, perhaps never more so than in our relation to mortality. Whitman uses the present tense to project himself into his posthumous future, often—as in his poetry—by addressing the reader directly and personally: 'let me pick thee out singly, reader dear, and talk in perfect freedom, negligently, confidentially' (p. 97). This voice re-sounds in my reading (and yours) of words consigned to a page by someone now dead—yet *not precisely absent*. We might experience Whitman's hortative present tense as an inviting or seductive or beguiling prolepsis, or we might shudder, as if at the touch of the ankle-grabbing hand of a graveyard revenant—as if the touch of death itself, which will inevitably 'pick thee out', had in fact *already* singled us out by being always, at every moment, imminent. We know, though we may strain mightily to forget it, that the bow is always already drawn—to which Whitman says: 'Away then to loosen, to unstring the divine bow, so tense, so long' (p. 97),[14] venturing to disarm tenses, to spoil the aim of death as what literary critic Paul de Man, in his tightly strung essay on the genre of autobiography, calls 'a displaced name for a linguistic predicament'.[15]

A 'displaced name' is what we more commonly refer to as a 'metaphor'—a word 'carried over' from one place or context to another. To his autobiography, Whitman carries over the word 'specimen', chiefly from the scientific empiricism of fields such as botany, biology, geology, medicine, natural history, anthropology, anatomy, and ethnology.[16] Whitman would also have known the word from the tradition of *Wunderkammern*, or cabinets of curiosities: those capacious

[14] The divine bow is an ancient and heavily overdetermined symbol of domestic and political authority (e.g. the bows of Odysseus and Arash), strength and military might (e.g. the bows of Heracles and Rama), death-dealing (e.g. the bows of Apollo and Artemis), desire (e.g. the bow of Eros), self-discipline (e.g. the bow of Confucius), liberation (e.g. the bow of Arjuna), prophecy (e.g. the bow of Sagittarius), and judgement (e.g. the bow of the Abrahamic God).

[15] Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', *MLN* 94/5 (1979), 930.

[16] As Les Harrison points out, there are troubling implications to Whitman's embrace in several of his works, including *Democratic Vistas* (1871), of the term 'ethnology', given that ethnology 'in the latter half of the nineteenth century, was often in practice a theory of scientific racism' ('Specimen Days and the Exhibitionary Complex', in *The Temple and the Forum: The American Museum and Cultural Authority in Hawthorne, Melville, Stowe, and Whitman* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 207).

private collections of objects that first became popular in the sixteenth century and that were the precursors of modern museums, such as Philadelphia's Mütter Museum of anatomical and pathological specimens.[17] A 'specimen' is something both visible (Lat. *specere*: 'to look at') and representative (Lat. *specimen*: 'example')—that is, both tangible and symbolic (synecdochal, metonymic); something to be preserved, displayed, studied; to be inventoried.[18] The forensic value of specimens extends, of course, to handwriting, such as the facsimile of Whitman's signature stamped onto the cover of the binding of David McKay's 1892 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which can be compared to other Whitman signatures to help determine the authenticity of his 'hand'. His handwritten specimens—Whitman calls them, variously, 'memoranda', 'jottings', 'notes', 'scraps', 'scratchings', 'items', 'extracts', 'lines', 'samples', and 'traces'—accumulated chiefly in the bedroom of his Mickle Street home. This room was the *Wunderkammer* of which *Specimen Days*—a consequence of 'that eternal tendency to perpetuate and preserve' (p. 10n.)—is a kind of *catalogue raisonné*: autobiographical acts captured in and as writing, traced and retraced, described and depicted (transcribed, paraphrased, excerpted), carefully arranged and richly annotated in order to beef up the tenuity of memory.

Other autobiographers have adopted similar methods. For example, the sixteenth-century autobiographer Thomas Whythorne combined verse and prose fragments about the different 'seasons' of his life, adding to and commenting on them for more than twenty years.[19] More

[17] One of those specimens was Whitman's brain, which had been removed during his autopsy by Henry Ware Cattell (1862–1936) and donated to the American Anthropometric Society for study at the museum's Wister Institute. Cattell accidentally destroyed Whitman's specimen brain by leaving its container improperly sealed. See Sheldon Lee Gosline, '"I Am a Fool": Dr. Henry Cattell's Private Confession about what Happened to Whitman's Brain', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 31/4 (2014), 158–62.

[18] In the section called 'Patent-Office Hospital' (p. 35), Whitman comments on the uncanny juxtaposition of human and material 'specimens'. See also Lindsay Tuggle, *The Afterlives of Specimens: Science, Mourning, and Whitman's Civil War* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 73–6.

[19] Thomas Whythorne, *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne*, ed. James M. Osborn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961). Whythorne's manuscript, entitled 'A book of songs and sonetts, with longe discoorses sett with them, of the chylds lyfe, togyther with A yoong mans lyfe, and entring into the old mans lyfe. devysed and written with A new Orthografye', was completed sometime in the mid-1570s, making it one of the earliest surviving autobiographies written in English.

recently, Martin Buber assembled various 'moments', 'incidents', and 'indications' for his *Meetings: Autobiographical Fragments* (1960).[20] Vladimir Nabokov, too, was a collector—most famously of butterflies but also of previously published magazine pieces and other written fragments of his life story, which he collated and revised for his *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1966), which he describes as 'a systematically correlated assemblage of personal recollections'.[21] *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975) is also a series of prose fragments: 'a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections', condensed into semiotic units that Barthes calls 'biographemes'.[22] As Barthes puts it, a 'biographeme' is 'nothing but a factitious anamnesis: the one I lend to the other I love', as if autobiography were meant to achieve a kind of Whitmanian dissemination of the author's phantasmic body 'and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body, destined to the same dispersion'.[23] A few years earlier, Barthes had written of this 'future body', the reader's body, as a distinctly homoerotic object of desire (much like Whitman does in his 'Calamus' poems in *Leaves of Grass*): 'Does writing in pleasure', asks Barthes, 'guarantee—guarantee me, the writer—my reader's pleasure? Not at all. I must seek out this reader (must "cruise" him) *without knowing where he is*.'[24] When Barthes comes to write more explicitly about cruising the parks and restaurants of Morocco and the boulevards and cafés of Paris, his otherwise sinuous and efflorescent prose becomes quite spare and flat, in clipped 'incidents' of ardour rendered so as to evade the promises of plot—much as Whitman does in his many cryptic notebook entries about the men he cruises on the streets of New York. Like Whitman, Barthes makes each glance, each

[20] Martin Buber, *Meetings: Autobiographical Fragments*, trans. Maurice Friedman and Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), 21, 38, 60. Deleuze observes that 'when Whitman speaks in his own manner and his own style, it turns out that a kind of whole must be constructed, a whole that is all the more paradoxical in that it only comes after the fragments and leaves them intact, making no attempt to totalize them' ('Whitman', 58).

[21] Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 9.

[22] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 9.

[23] Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 109, 9.

[24] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 4.

concession, each departure into 'a gesture excised', as literary critic D. A. Miller puts it, 'from the consistency of character'.[25] Yet, with the often melancholy irony of a sexually reticent author, the posthumous dispersion of such fragments may bring out far more robust characterizations.

For Barthes, autobiographical writing is a fragmentary 'lover's discourse', or, as he put it in his book of that title, a 'discursive site: the site of someone speaking with himself, amorously, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak'. The fragmentary objects collated in such a discourse may also be likened, Barthes tells us, to 'gymnastic' or 'choreographic' figures.[26] Among these figures are legible traces that—as a consequence of Whitman's own descriptions, transcriptions, revisions, and reorderings—help compose *Specimen Days* itself. The book's waywardness is like that of Barthes's lover: directed by, even as it seeks out, its desired objects, while attempting to navigate numerous libidinal currents—as when Whitman, in the midst of reconstituting the fragments of *Specimen Days*, observes that he 'must keep more in my traces' (p. 17). He means that he must 'stay on course' and also that he must strive to keep (retrieve, retain, and preserve) more and more figures—figures of what once were gestures—in the traces he leaves behind for readers to come.

As an autobiographer, Whitman's challenge is to secure (or what may be the same thing: to fabricate) a sense of having a self, with a past that lends itself to narrative purposes—a past that can be made, however loosely, to hang together. 'The book', he later wrote, 'is probably a sort of autobiography; an element I have not attempted to specially restrain or erase' (*PW* ii. 734). Yet his ambivalence about the constraints as well as the putative coherence of the genre persisted. For example, in the diary he kept during his summer visit to Canada in 1880, Whitman offers the following apologia:

> After reading the pages of *Specimen Days* do you object that they are a great jumble, everything scattered, disjointed, bound together without coherence, without order or system? My answer would be, So much the better do they reflect the life they are intended to stand for. (*DN* iii. 661)

[25] D. A. Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 48.

[26] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1978), 3.

To achieve the paradox of what he'd described to O'Connor as an 'immensely *negative* book'—a life story told to a significant extent through its omissions—Whitman assembled various traces of his life and sought to frame them in relation to precisely what makes them hard to grasp and to connect up with one another: the vicissitudes of memory, fantasy, wishes, traumas, self-deceptions, the absence or inaccuracy of records, the unreliability of others' accounts, and his own misgivings about what to tell.

Like all autobiographies, *Specimen Days* is replete with blanks: events, places, people, objects lost to memory, or deemed too trivial, or repressed by guilt or shame, or left unmentioned due to norms of propriety and disclosure. D. H. Lawrence's wickedly brilliant caricature of Whitman as a 'poet with the private soul leaking out of him all the time. All his privacy leaking out in a sort of dribble, oozing into the universe' is just that: a caricature.[27] And, like all autobiographers, Whitman tells the story of his life through gaps and omissions as much as through explicit content. These blanks can be brusquely ignored. But the spaces they leave behind can also be given evocative shapes, even imaginatively repaired, so that they take on meaning, sponsoring associations, rejoining what has been sundered. The short section called 'An Interregnum Paragraph' (p. 94) goes so far as to *name* the long narrative gap between the end of the war and the 'New Themes' (p. 95) of the final two decades of Whitman's life—a period of more than ten years (years of tremendous challenges, changes, and successes on both the national and the personal level, including Whitman's love affair with Peter Doyle, his firing by the secretary of the interior from his job at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the death of his beloved mother, his own paralytic stroke, and his publication of almost a hundred new poems and two new American editions of *Leaves of Grass*) condensed into a kind of biographical-political void (Lat. *inter* + *regnum*: between realms).[28] Only readers who are at least somewhat familiar with Whitman's life and poetry (and with US history) will be able to suss out much of what he leaves undisclosed.

[27] D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1923), 246.

[28] For a recent biographical account of Whitman's ten years in the nation's capital, see Kenneth M. Price, *Whitman in Washington: Becoming the National Poet in the Federal City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Here and there, readers may recognize a variety of motivated omissions that, as such, become part of the story. Omissions may be 'motivated', of course, in numerous, ambiguous, and ambivalent ways, both consciously and unconsciously. Whitman's omissions often concern his sexuality and erotic life, and many of Whitman's readers have explained these 'motivated omissions' in terms of shame—Whitman's shame at certain feelings or behaviours, or at being what we would now call 'gay' or 'queer'. Regrettably, there is much evidence (almost too much) in both his published and unpublished writings to support this explanation. However, this often blinds readers to other possibilities.[29]

Perhaps the most conspicuous omissions from *Specimen Days* are those having to do with Whitman's sexual and romantic life. In his autobiography, he is extremely reticent about his longings, dalliances, hookups, and passionate affairs with the men—including the many soldiers and predominantly working-class 'camerados'—he loved and who loved him. Sadly, cruel prejudice against same-sex erotic relationships made it impossible for Whitman to write frankly and fully about this part of his life. Almost none of his lovers are even mentioned in *Specimen Days*—not Edward Cattell or Charles Chauncey or Oscar Cunningham or Bill Duckett or Herbert Gilchrist or Hugh Harrop or Tasker Lay or Jack Rogers or Tom Sawyer or Fred Vaughan or Thomas Woolston. (The list *does* go on—indeed, we know many of these names because Whitman kept such meticulous lists of them in his journals and notebooks. And, while many of the letters he

[29] For one of the more nuanced and sceptical accounts of Whitman and the mechanisms of shame and their performance, see Michael Warner, 'Pleasures and Dangers of Shame', in David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (eds.), *Gay Shame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 283–96. There is a rich and variegated body of scholarship on Whitman, sexuality, and eroticism, notably including Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Robert Leigh Davis, *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); Betsy Erkkila, *The Whitman Revolution: Sex, Poetry, and Politics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020); Robert K. Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry: An Expanded Edition* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998); Mark Maslan, *Whitman Possessed: Poetry, Sexuality, and Popular Authority* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Vivian R. Pollak, *The Erotic Whitman* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000). See also Edward Carpenter, *Some Friends of Walt Whitman: A Study in Sex-Psychology* (London: J. E. Francis, 1924) and Wardrop, 'Civil War Nursing Narratives'.

exchanged with his lovers have been destroyed, many others survive and are readily available in various editions and collections of his correspondence.) The few who do make a brief appearance are either, like Peter Doyle, depicted as platonic friends or, like Harry Stafford, referred to only in code.[30]

Some scholars have asserted that Whitman's devotion to the care and comfort of young, strapping, hospitalized soldiers should be understood as a merely neurotic manifestation of sublimated same-sex desire—that is, as Whitman's unconscious repression and transformation of taboo libidinal yearnings into socially acceptable and useful ministrations to the needy. But more astute readers, including Robert Leigh Davis,[31] have put paid to these highly reductive (and often homophobic) assertions, in part by recognizing, as Whitman himself did, that his visits to the hospitals were visits to 'a new world'. It was, he told Emerson in 1863, 'a world full of its separate action, play, suggestiveness . . . a medium world' (*COR* i. 69)—a world not of repressive barriers to intimacy but of what could be both physical and spiritual revitalization, a world in which libidinal energy was good medicine for both body and soul, as Whitman himself explained to his friend James Redpath:

> O what a sweet unwonted love (those good American boys, of good stock, decent, clean, well raised boys, so near to me)—what an attachment grows up between us, started from hospital cots, where pale young faces lie & wounded or sick bodies. My brave young American soldiers—now for so many months I have gone around among them, where they lie. I have long discarded all stiff conventions (they & I are too near to each other, there is no time to lose, & death & anguish dissipate ceremony here between my lads & me)—I pet them, some of them it does so much good, they are so faint & lonesome—at parting at night sometimes I kiss them right & left—The doctors tell me I supply the patients with a medicine which all their drugs & bottles & powders are helpless to yield. (*COR* i. 122)

The homoeroticism of this 'new world' is delicate rather than furtive, and its frequent mood is one of reflective melancholy rather than dread or panic. It's true—and unsurprising in the life of a poet—that aesthetic needs sometimes overshadow erotic ones. Here, for example,

[30] See Explanatory Note to p. 250.
[31] *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine*, 107–8.

is the opening of the section of *Specimen Days* called 'Three Young Men's Deaths':

> Somehow I got thinking to-day of young men's deaths—not at all sadly or sentimentally, but gravely, realistically, perhaps a little artistically. Let me give the following three cases from budgets of personal memoranda, which I have been turning over, alone in my room, and resuming and dwelling on, this rainy afternoon. Who is there to whom the theme does not come home? Then I don't know how it may be to others, but to me not only is there nothing gloomy or depressing in such cases—on the contrary, as reminiscences, I find them soothing, bracing, tonic. (p. 123)

Because Whitman liked men, some readers are very quick to find in passages like this signs of an unconscious defence against mourning a deeply repressed wish for a 'new world' that would throb with same-sex erotic possibilities.

But any world of erotic possibilities is going to be, among other things, a meeting place for both Eros and Thanatos, as Edgar Allan Poe had observed almost two decades earlier with his notorious pronouncement that 'the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world'.[32] In Civil War poems including 'The Wound-Dresser', 'As Toilsome I Wander'd Virginia's Woods', and 'Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night', Whitman proved himself to be far more poetically attuned than Poe to the harmonies of love and death. Whitman's same-sex eroticism could be deeply melancholic in its contention with certain unavowed or unavowable perturbations and convulsions. Yet Whitman could also 'see behind each mask that wonder a kindred soul', and say:

> O the bullet could never kill what you really are, dear friend,
> Nor the bayonet stab what you really are;
> The soul! yourself I see, great as any, good as the best,
> Waiting secure and content, which the bullet could never kill,
> Nor the bayonet stab O friend.
>
> (*LG* ii. 554)

Whitman's intercourse with the soul was always grounded in the body—and in the sensuous and sensual lives of bodies (plural), including those 'of the men to whom he was attracted, e.g., a Pullman-car

[32] Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition', *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature and Art* 28/4 (Apr. 1846), 165.

conductor, a policeman, a 'bus driver, a great poet. His magnetic love always drew him hungeringly toward manly men', as his devoted friend William Sloane Kennedy put it (*DC*, 54). In a particularly bitter-sweet passage in *Specimen Days*, Whitman recalls handing out 'a general ice cream treat' to the horribly maimed and disease-ridden soldiers at Carver Hospital in 1864 (p. 62). Some of these young soldiers, he later told his mother, had never tasted ice cream before. Many, of course, would never taste it again. However, of the soldiers that did survive, many became lifelong friends and correspondents of Whitman's. Some even became his lovers, and the intensity of these hungering relationships is fully evident in various surviving letters. While this sort of hunger might not be plainly visible in *Specimen Days*, its abidingness, as well as the many occasions of its satisfaction, are nonetheless central to the story of Whitman's life.

There are other omissions that should, as much as possible, be kept in mind while reading *Specimen Days*. Many of these blanks can be anticipated and filled in by reading his surviving correspondence, which is often much more forthcoming—not only about his erotic life but also about his relationships with family members; about his ambivalent, often deeply troubling, views on slavery, ethnological science, Indian removal, white supremacism, and the consequences of emancipation;[33] and about his development as a poet and the history of *Leaves of Grass* (or, as he puts it in *Specimen Days*, 'my other soul, my poems', p. 224).

Some of Whitman's reticence about his 'other soul' and about his career as a poet may be an effect of modesty, though it's also very likely that he made the *immodest* assumption that any reader of *Specimen Days* would already be intimately familiar with his poetic oeuvre. According to an unsigned contemporary review written largely by Whitman himself:

[33] In *Specimen Days*, both African American and Native American peoples constitute a conspicuous gap. Native Americans are referred to only as 'extinct' (p. 16) or 'dead' (p. 218), and, apart from the various references to slaves and slavery, there are only five very brief mentions of particular African Americans—none of whom are named. Harrison argues that *Specimen Days* implicitly underwrites scientific racism and amounts to 'the presentation of a racially sanitized United States' ('Specimen Days and the Exhibitionary Complex', 209).

It is understood that Whitman himself considers 'Specimen Days' as the exponent and finish of his poetic work, 'Leaves of Grass'; that each of the two volumes is indispensable, in his view, to the other, and that both together finally begin and illustrate his literary scheme in the new world. Talking lately, in a half-jocular vein, to a friend, he called them his Adam and Eve, sent out in 'this garden, the world.'[34]

Nevertheless, it's surprising that in *Specimen Days* itself Whitman chose not to draw any explicit parallels between his prose autobiography and the long, untitled, autobiographical poem from the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass*—the poem he would later call 'Song of Myself'. By calling this poem a 'song' Whitman emphasizes the musical and ritualistic qualities of its poetic form, despite the fact that his unusually long and rhythmically wayward lines eschewed the conventional sonorities of most nineteenth-century poetry. But Whitman's 'song' isn't (simply) an empirical subject's attempt to give an account 'of myself' in verse rather than in prose. Indeed, in the poem 'As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life' Whitman insists that 'before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd' (*LG* ii. 320), as if to say: Look for 'the real Me' elsewhere.

Is it—this self or self-state that Whitman calls 'the real Me'—to be found in the prose of *Specimen Days*? Can prose autobiography account for this self in ways that a versified 'Song of Myself' cannot? Many critics and theorists of autobiography are uncomfortable with verse autobiographies and argue that prose is better suited to the narrative recapitulation of a life—not least because of the problem (as Philippe Lejeune and others see it) of 'the traditional lyric "I" ' and its tenuous relation to the 'clearly autobiographical "I" secured on the proper name of the author'.[35] Thanks to the tenacious association of discourse-with-line-breaks and the problematic term 'lyric', it is as if even a long, detailed, versified account of one's experiences must automatically be subsumed by the persistent mythology of a 'lyric I' that can't be sufficiently stabilized in relation to narrative. It can therefore be difficult to talk about verse autobiography in ways not

[34] [Sylvester Baxter and Walt Whitman], 'Whitman's New Book', *Boston Sunday Herald* (15 Oct. 1882), 9.

[35] Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 130.

steeped in notions of, on one hand, subjectivity as atomistic, interiorized, reflexive, and distinct from (though able to 'absorb') something called 'the world' and, on the other hand, presumptions of the universality of lyric subjectivity. Thus, among the many good reasons for reading *Specimen Days*, there is for the lover of Whitman's poetry the opportunity to explore, in the works of a single author, questions about autobiography and literary form that remain, to this day, inadequately addressed.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The copy-text for this edition is Walt Whitman's *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892). Whitman's use of punctuation, diacritics (e.g. accents), logograms (e.g. ampersands), and indeed all orthographic elements was often inconsistent. But Whitman was a trained printer, devoted to the typographic arts—and also to the 'wayward' and the 'spontaneous'. Therefore, I have chosen not to standardize or 'correct' the copy-text, apart from silently correcting unambiguous typographical errors. Readers interested in textual variants should consult the variorum edition of *Specimen Days* (*PW* i). Per the Oxford World's Classics series style, Whitman's own footnotes, signalled with asterisks in the copy-text, are given numerical callouts here, and asterisks are used to signal my own Explanatory Notes.

Whitman first published *Specimen Days* in the volume *Specimen Days & Collect* (Philadelphia: Rees Welsh, 1882). Many of its 'specimens', or prose fragments, had already been published in various periodicals and in Whitman's book, *Memoranda During the War* (Camden: the author, 1875). Whitman gathered together these and many unpublished fragments, transcribing, revising, rearranging, and adding new material in order to compose what he describes, in its opening paragraph, as 'the most wayward, spontaneous, fragmentary book ever printed'.

Specimen Days was subsequently published in a British edition as *Specimen Days in America* (London: Walter Scott, 1887) and in Whitman's *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892). It has also appeared in numerous posthumous editions and reprintings. The first authoritative scholarly text was Floyd Stovall's edition, *Prose Works 1892*, i. *Specimen Days* (New York: New York University Press, 1963)—one of the volumes in Gay Wilson Allen and Sculley Bradley's *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, 23 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1961–84).

One reader's edition of *Specimen Days* is worthy of note: an elegantly designed large-format edition—including a brief introduction by critic Alfred Kazin (1915–98) and 190 illustrations (chiefly

portraits of Whitman)—was published in 1971 in a small, three-format run of 6,250 'deluxe' hardcover and softcover copies by the distinguished Boston bookmaker David R. Godine. A short essay by the book's designer, Lance Hidy, appears in the Select Bibliography.

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A CHRONOLOGY OF WALT WHITMAN

A dagger † after the first occurrence of a person's name indicates that further information about them can be found in the Glossary of Persons.

1819 (31 May) Walter Whitman, Jr., later Walt, born in West Hills, farming village in Huntington Township, New York, second child of Walter Whitman† and Louisa Van Velsor†.

1825–31 Attends Brooklyn's only District School.

1825 (4 July) Embraced as 6-year-old child by Marquis de Lafayette† during latter's visit to Brooklyn.

1830 (Summer) Quits school to work as office boy for law firm of James B. Clarke.† Reads Walter Scott,† James Fenimore Cooper,† and Fanny Wright.

1832 Leaves Long Island to board out in Brooklyn with fellow apprentices.

1832–5 Attends New York theatrical productions, 'seeing everything, high, low, middling' (*WC* i. 455). Works at various New York printing houses until August 1835 when fire ravages printing district.

1836 (Mar.) Father forced to sell last of patrimonial landholdings.

1836–9 Teaches intermittently at several Long Island schools.

1838 (May) Founds and for one year runs weekly newspaper, *The Long-Islander* with help from brother George.†

1839 (Autumn) Briefly works at *Long-Island Democrat*, boarding with editor's family. (Winter) Resumes teaching at various schools, continuing until March 1841.

1840 (Autumn) Serves as Democratic electioneer for Queens County and campaigns for Martin Van Buren†. (Nov.) Beginning of unexplained seven-month gap in published writing.

1841 (May) Moves to New York City. Works as compositor for *New World*. (July) Addresses Democratic Party rally at City Hall Park. (Aug.) Publishes first short story, 'Death in the School-Room', in prestigious *Democratic Review*. Publishes poetry as well as more short fiction there, in *New World*, and in other periodicals.

1842 Writes for New York *Aurora*. (Nov.) Publishes temperance novel *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate* in the *New World* under name Walter Whitman.

1842–5 Works for various New York newspapers and John Neal's magazine *Brother Jonathan* (1843). Lives in various Manhattan boarding-houses. Publishes stories in English magazine *The Aristidean*.

1845–9 Attends opera regularly. Among other jobs, from March 1846 edits *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, writing more than 1,000 articles and editorials on local and national politics, economy, education, labour, prison reform, and US war with Mexico.

1848 (Jan.) Loses job at *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. (Feb.) moves to New Orleans to edit *New Orleans Crescent*; (May) resigns position and returns to Brooklyn via Mississippi and Great Lakes. (Aug.) As Brooklyn delegate for Kings County, attends Free-Soil Party convention in Buffalo, New York; admires Frederick Douglass's oration but continues to support Free-Soilers' white supremacist platform. (Sept.) Founds Brooklyn *Daily Freeman*, a 'Free-Soil' newspaper. (Oct.) Buys lot and begins to build three-storey house at 106 Myrtle Avenue.

1849 (Apr.) Parents and siblings move into completed house at Myrtle Avenue; with brother Jeff† runs job-printing office and bookstore on first floor. (July) Examined by phrenologist Lorenzo N. Fowler. (Sept.) Resigns as editor of *Daily Freeman*. Briefly edits New York *Daily News*.

1850–4 Publishes poems against 1850 Fugitive Slave Law.

1852 (Mar.–Apr.) Anonymously publishes novel *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle* serially in New York *Sunday Dispatch*. (May) Sells Myrtle Avenue house. Builds two three-storey houses on Cumberland Street, renting one and living in the other.

1853 (Spring) Both Cumberland Street houses sold by this time. Dazzled by enormous Crystal Palace housing New York's 1853 'Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations' (*PW* ii. 681).

1854 (Summer) Gabriel Harrison takes daguerreotype of Whitman from which engraving is made for frontispiece of first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (*WC* ii. 506).

1855 (May) Takes out copyright on first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (795 copies), containing twelve untitled poems and preface. (July) Designs and helps typeset book, printed by the Rome† brothers in Brooklyn; father dies; receives letter from Ralph Waldo Emerson† saluting him 'at the beginning of a great career'. (Sept.–Oct.) Publishes self-reviews of *Leaves of Grass* in *Democratic Review*, *Brooklyn Daily Times*, and *American Phrenological Journal*. (Nov.) Rufus Griswold publishes first negative review of *Leaves of Grass*, calling it 'mass of stupid filth'.

1856 (Aug.) Publishes second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, containing thirty-three poems, Emerson's letter, and open letter by Whitman responding to Emerson. Completes and runs off proof-sheets of political tract 'The Eighteenth Presidency!' (Nov.) Visited by Amos Bronson Alcott†, Henry David Thoreau†, and Sarah Tyndale.

1857 (Spring) Edits *Brooklyn Daily Times* (to June 1859).

1858 (Summer) Experiences first stroke. (Sept.–Dec.) Publishes articles on 'Manly Health and Training' in *New York Atlas* under pseudonym 'Mose Velsor'. Meets Frederick B. ('Fred') Vaughan. Continues freelance journalism and begins to frequent Pfaff's† bohemian Ratskeller.

1860 (Mar.–May) Visits Boston to oversee third, substantially revised and augmented edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published by abolitionist firm Thayer and Eldridge†. Hears Father Edward Taylor preach; calls him the 'one essentially perfect orator' (*PW* ii. 549). (Apr.) Attends trial of Franklin B. Sanborn†, backer of John Brown's raid on federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry. Meets abolitionists Ellen and William Douglas O'Connor†. Urged unsuccessfully by Emerson to expurgate 'Children of Adam' poems from *Leaves of Grass*.

1861 (Apr.) learns of attack on Fort Sumter by Confederate States Army; predicts war will be short; Brother George enlists in Brooklyn's 13th Regiment. Continues freelance journalism and (Sept.) publishes recruiting poem 'Beat! Beat! Drums!' Visits sick and injured at Broadway Hospital (aka New York Hospital).

1862 (Mar.–Apr.) Publishes series of articles on Broadway Hospital in *New York Leader*. (May) Brother Andrew† enlists. (Summer) At Pfaff's, befriends John Frederick Schiller 'Fred' Gray who gives him prized copy of Frederic Hedge's *Prose Writers of Germany* (1848). (Dec.) After seeing brother George's misspelled name in Fredericksburg casualties list, travels to war-front in Virginia to find him; after doing so, remains at Camp Falmouth for some days.

1863 (Jan.) Moves to Washington DC; visits military hospitals daily as volunteer nurse to ill and wounded soldiers. (Feb.–Mar.) Publishes articles critical of hospital bureaucracy. Works as part-time clerk in army paymaster's office. Regularly observes President Abraham Lincoln† in public, noting later 'I love the President personally' (*NUPM*, 539). (May) Witnesses procession of prison-bound Confederate soldiers, noting later 'my heart full of compassion [for] these too are my brothers' (*NUPM*, 533). (Autumn) Meets Nicholas D. Palmer, Alonzo S. Bush, and Thomas Sawyer. (Oct.) Befriends John Burroughs†. (Dec.) Brother Andrew dies of tuberculosis aggravated by alcoholism.

1864 (Mar.) Visits famous spiritualist Charles H. Foster, later calling it 'a shallow thing & a humbug' (*COR* i. 208). Health compromised by hospital service. (June) Returns to Brooklyn on extended sick-leave. (Dec.) Commits brother Jesse† to Kings County Lunatic Asylum.

1865 (Jan.) Returns to Washington. Takes job as clerk in Department of Interior's Indian Bureau. Befriends Peter Doyle†. (Mar.) Attends Lincoln's second inauguration; (Apr.) Learns of Lincoln's assassination while on furlough in Brooklyn. (May) Shortly after return to Washington, watches Victory Parade of the Armies of the East and West. (June) Discharged from Indian Bureau clerkship by Secretary James Harlan†, ostensibly for obscenity in *Leaves of Grass*; transferred to clerkship in Attorney General's Office. (Summer) Writes 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd'. (Oct.) Publishes *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum-Taps*.

1866 Continues to visit hospitals regularly. (Jan.) O'Connor publishes *The Good Gray Poet*, co-written by Whitman in response to his firing by Harlan.

1867 Burroughs publishes *Notes on Walt Whitman, as Poet and Person*, written with help from Whitman and O'Connor. (July) William Michael Rossetti publishes appreciation of 'Walt Whitman's Poems' in London *Chronicle*. Publishes fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

1868 (Feb.) Rossetti's expurgated *Poems of Walt Whitman* published in London. Whitman calls it a 'horrible dismemberment' but it boosts his international reputation, winning such readers as Edward Carpenter, John Ruskin, Algernon Charles Swinburne, John Addington Symonds†, Alfred Tennyson†, and Anne Gilchrist†, whose 'Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman' appears in *Boston Radical* (May 1870).

1870 (Mar.) Brother Jesse dies.

1871 (Sept.) Delivers poem 'Song of the Exposition' at Fortieth National Industrial Exposition in New York. (Nov.) Gilchrist sends letter proposing marriage; Whitman politely declines. Publishes *Democratic Vistas* and fifth (1871–2) edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

1872 Leaves Attorney General's Office for job at Treasury Department. (May) Writes first will. Hailed while riding Fifth Avenue stage by Joaquin Miller†, who visits him in Brooklyn in July. Attends funeral of Peter Doyle's brother, a Washington police officer killed in line of duty (*COR* ii. 148–9).

1873 (Jan.) Suffers paralytic stroke. (23 May) Mother dies. (June) Leaves Washington and moves in with brother George's family in Camden. Befriends 15-year-old Horace Logo Traubel, his future amanuensis.

1874 (May) Receives first visit in Camden from Doyle. (June) Discharged from Treasury. (July) Receives adulatory letter from Carpenter. Publishes *'Tis But Ten Years Since*, series of articles about the war from which Whitman would draw heavily for *Memoranda During the War and Specimen Days.* Emerson publishes poetry anthology *Parnassus*, omitting Whitman.

1875 (Feb.) Suffers another stroke. Publishes *Memoranda During the War* and 'Author's' or 'Centennial' edition of *Leaves of Grass*. (Nov.) Travels to Baltimore for Edgar Allan Poe† memorial.

1876 (Jan.) Whitman's unsigned article 'Walt Whitman's Actual American Position' in *West Jersey Press* generates international controversy, book sales, and gifts. (May) Meets Edward P. Cattell, farmhand of George Stafford†. (June) Visited in Camden by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and George W. Childs†. Becomes intimate with Harry Stafford† and visits Stafford family farm throughout late 1870s and early 1880s. (Sept.) Still hoping to marry Whitman, Gilchrist arrives in US with her children.

1877 (Jan.) Lectures on Thomas Paine† in Philadelphia. Befriends John H. Johnston†. Sits for portrait by George W. Waters. Visited in Camden by Edward Carpenter (May) and Richard Maurice Bucke† (Oct.), who becomes close friend. With Harry Stafford, visits Burroughs at Esopus-on-Hudson, New York.

1878 (Apr.) Examined twice by neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell. Too sick to give planned lecture on 'Death of Abraham Lincoln'. (June) Attends Bryant's funeral. (Summer) Sketched by Herbert Gilchrist at Timber Creek; visits Burroughs in New York.

1879 (Apr.) Delivers first Lincoln lecture in New York. (June) Anne Gilchrist returns to England. (Sept.–Oct.) Travels to St Louis and west as far as Colorado. (Oct. 1879) Falls ill and stays with brother Jeff in St Louis.

1880 (Jan.) Returns to Camden. (Apr.) Delivers Lincoln lecture in Philadelphia. (May) Meets Robert Ingersoll. (June–Oct.) Travels in Canada, visiting Bucke in London, Ontario, and seeing Niagara Falls for a second time (June). (Nov.) Percy Ives, studying in Philadelphia, makes first of many visits over next three years to execute pencil sketches and oil portrait of Whitman; Edmund Clarence Stedman's influential essay 'Walt Whitman' published in *Scribner's Monthly*; visited by William Sloane Kennedy.

1881 (Feb.) Gives Harry Stafford copy of *Leaves of Grass.* (Apr.) Delivers Lincoln lecture in Boston; visits Longfellow. Deeply impressed by collection of paintings by Millet† at home of Quincy Adams Shaw†.

(July) Makes final tour of family birthplaces and graveyards on Long Island. (Aug.–Oct.) Revisits Boston to supervise sixth edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Visits with Franklin Sanborn†, Emerson family, Bronson and Louisa May Alcott† in Concord. (Sept.) Tours Old Manse, Thoreau's Walden Pond cabin, and graves of Thoreau and Hawthorne† at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. (Sept.) Meets Oliver Wendell Holmes and Henry James. (Oct.–Nov.) Returns to Camden via New York. (Nov.) *Leaves of Grass* published by Osgood.

1882 (Jan. and May) Visited in Camden by Oscar Wilde. (Apr.) Osgood withdraws edition of *Leaves of Grass* after warning from Boston District Attorney that some poems fall within 'Public Statutes respecting obscene literature'. (Sept.) Rees Welsh and Co. (later David McKay) reprints Osgood edition and publishes *Specimen Days & Collect*. Publicity associated with Boston 'banning' boosts sales of *Leaves of Grass*. (Oct.) Meets future biographer Thomas Donaldson.

1883 (June) Sends Doyle inscribed copy of *Specimen Days & Collect*; McKay publishes Bucke's *Walt Whitman*, a biography written under Whitman's supervision. Visited in Camden (Oct.) by Harry Stafford and (Dec.) by Doyle.

1884 (Mar.) Meets Bram Stoker. (Apr.) Buys house at 328 Mickle Street, Camden. Meets Bill Duckett. (June) Visited by Doyle in new home and again by Carpenter; attends wedding of Harry Stafford and Eva Westcott. Visited on several occasions by 17-year-old future art historian and author of *Conversations with Walt Whitman* (1895), Carl Sadakichi Hartmann.

1885 (Jan.) Visited in Camden by Edmund Gosse. (Feb.) Hires Mary Oakes Davis as live-in housekeeper. (June) Visited by Doyle. (July and Sept.) Suffers further strokes as a reslult of which friends buy him horse and buggy. (Nov.) Publishes essay 'Slang in America' in *North American Review*. (Dec.) Visited by Harry Stafford.

1886 Delivers Lincoln lecture (Feb.) in Elkton, Maryland, (Mar.) Camden, (Apr.) Philadelphia, and (May) Haddonfield, NJ. Sits for portrait by John White Alexander.

1887 (Apr.) Delivers Lincoln lecture in Camden and at New York's Madison Square Theatre, the latter netting $600 from audience including Andrew Carnegie, Mark Twain, and José Martí, whose essay 'El Poeta Walt Whitman' (June) introduces Whitman to readers throughout Spanish-speaking world. Sits for photographer George Collins Cox, sculptor Sidney Morse, and painters Herbert Gilchrist and Thomas Eakins.

1888 (Mar.) Traubel begins taking notes for what will become his nine-volume work, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. (June) Suffers multiple strokes; requires nursing care for remainder of life; visited by Doyle. Publishes *November Boughs* and *Complete Poems and Prose*. (Sept.) Visited by Harry Stafford.

1889 (May) Gift of wheelchair allows him to spend time outdoors; proceedings of 70th birthday party published as *Camden's Compliment to Walt Whitman*. Delivers Lincoln lecture in Philadelphia. (Dec.) Chooses burial lot at Harleigh Cemetery and arranges construction of massive self-designed tomb.

1890 Delivers Lincoln lecture for last time in Philadelphia. (May) Receives final visit from Vaughan. (Aug.) Writes to Symonds, rejecting as 'damnable' his homosexual interpretation of 'Calamus' poems and claims to have fathered six illegitimate children. (Oct.) Signs $4,000 contract for construction of his granite 'burial house' in Camden's Harleigh Cemetery. (Nov.) Brother Jeff dies.

1891 (Jan.) Eakins's portrait exhibited at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. (Feb.) Visited by Harry Stafford. Alexander's portrait purchased by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. (May) Publishes *Good-bye My Fancy*; prepares *Complete Prose Works* (published 1892); Traubel marries Anne Montgomerie at Whitman's home; last birthday celebration at Mickle Street. (Dec.) Harry Stafford visits with wife and children; falls seriously ill; prepares final will naming Bucke, Harned, and Traubel his literary executors; brother Eddy is principal heir; leaves Harry Stafford a gold watch and Doyle a silver watch.

1892 (Jan.) Adds codicil to will leaving Traubel gold watch, Stafford silver watch, but nothing to Doyle; publishes 'deathbed' edition of *Leaves of Grass*. (26 Mar.) Dies at Mickle Street home; the next day Thomas Eakins, Samuel Murray, and William O'Donovan fashion death mask and cast of hand. (30 Mar.) Coffin heaped with flowers sent from all over world borne to Harleigh Cemetery; funeral is attended by thousands.