

## The Whitman of *Specimen Days* Joseph Eugene Mullin

*SPECIMEN DAYS* consists of fifteen pages of “an off-hand letter” of autobiographical information, another seventy-five pages of “Diary-jottings, war-memoranda of 1862–’65,” and another one hundred and fifty or so pages of “Nature-notes of 1877–’81” and reports of journeys to the West, Canada, New York, and Boston, mixed in with short essays on literature and on contemporaries like Carlyle, Longfellow, and Emerson. It was published with *Collect*, which includes “Democratic Vistas,” towards its beginning, as well as an essay on the “Origins of Attempted Secession,” two prefaces, from 1872 and 1876, and a lecture on the “Death of Abraham Lincoln,” to which “Notes Left Over” and “Pieces in Early Youth” were also appended. All this is quite a conglomeration of odds and ends to respond to in any aesthetic way, and Walt Whitman disarms us further by telling us at the outset that the materials of *Specimen Days* and *Collect*, “incongruous and full of skips and jumps,” were “all bundled up and tied by a big string.”<sup>1</sup> He avows it must be “the most wayward, spontaneous, fragmentary book ever printed,” for what he did was “tumble the thing together, letting hurry and crudeness tell the story better than fine work” (690).

But tell what “story”? It is true that the book is basically autobiographical. If we place it together with *November Boughs* and *Good-Bye my Fancy*, we may have before us the material for the Walt Whitman autobiography. It would be tempting to rearrange the pieces with a bit of creativity. His reminiscence of New Orleans in 1848 would find its place with “Through Eight Years” in the late pages of that autobiographical letter. The remarkable sketch of Lincoln arriving in New York, at the Astor House in 1861, to “sulky, unbroken silence” (1038), might be moved up from *Collect* to where it “belongs,” just before Whitman’s war memoranda. And that

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sketch itself might be preceded by "Origins of Attempted Secession." His "Indian Bureau Reminiscence" could be placed in among his memories of visiting the Washington hospitals in 1863 and 1864. The Lincoln notes might be gathered and put together at the time of the assassination. The prefaces ought to precede the nature-notes for chronological reasons, and "Democratic Vistas" ought to precede these prefaces.

This editorial work has its attraction, but one senses almost at once that spontaneity would be lost. Part of the appeal of the Lincoln notes is that attitudes grow and accumulate through the war, for example, and fix themselves slowly. What we sense we would lose is part of the reality of *Specimen Days*, which is that Walt Whitman didn't intend they be so very personal after all. He says, with some sense of his own wonder at his book, that it is meant "to symbolize two or three specimen interiors, personal and other, out of the myriads of my time . . . a strange, unloosen'd, wondrous time" (690n). And we can make sense of this. *Specimen Days* has its autobiographical letter about Whitman's early years, but the war memoranda are about the war in the hospitals rather than about Whitman, and the nature notes are about a life in nature, not Whitman's exclusively. Then, Whitman finishes off this preceding remark with the observation, "But the book is probably without any definite purpose that can be told in a statement" (690n), which, if it doesn't leave us precisely where we began, suggests our shrewdest policy would be to submit to this book just as it is.

In his autobiographical letter, from 1882, which opens *Specimen Days*, he characterizes the boundless energy of his childhood in the country and at the seaside of Long Island and, equally, the enthusiasm of his manly youth there and later in Brooklyn and New York. He makes much of the influence of the variety and bustle of the city, of the ferries and omnibuses, of the plays and operas. He recalls the names of a dozen omnibus drivers as easily as the names of singers and actors he saw forty or fifty years before. He remembers watching old John Jacob Astor swathed in furs being placed in a sleigh. The effect is a rush of experience, of seeing Lafayette and Charles Dickens, and Cooper and Poe, of hearing Jackson, Webster, and Clay, of being constantly outdoors and in crowds, of working on newspapers, of jaunting about the city hours and years on end. He details his journey at the end of the 1840s through the Middle States, down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans, where he worked for a newspaper, and back up the Mississippi into the Great Lakes States, on the lakes themselves, across

lower Canada, then into New York State and down the Hudson to New York City.

Certainly this was an American Grand Tour, not unprecedented and not so uncommon perhaps. One recalls Twain's early travels, and in my reading, in the files of *The American Farmer*, published in the 1820s, I have come across a John Wilson, renowned as a walker, who twice a year traveled by foot from his home in Mason County, Kentucky, on the Ohio River, to New Orleans, about sixteen hundred miles round trip. I have not been able to discover Wilson's mission, but he moved along briskly, generally beating the mails. His remarkable story is a reminder of how Americans were then as ever on the move. Undoubtedly Whitman's partway "swing around the circle" was a source of sights and experience which fed both the expansive atmosphere of the poetry and some of the imagery of his catalogues.

There is much about Whitman's early years that *Specimen Days* does not tell us, unfortunately. Instead Whitman leaps ahead to the "secession outbreak" and his war memories, which together with his early years on Long Island and his young manhood in Brooklyn and New York gave, what he calls, "the formative stamps" to his character (705-6). His knowledge of the men in the war, from the South and Border as well as from the North, contributed to his sense of "the majesty and reality of the American people *en masse*" (740) and to his doubt "whether one can get a fair idea of what this war practically is, or what genuine America is, and her character, without some such experience as this I am having" (735). And, of course, that experience was fundamentally of people.

Many readers of Walt Whitman are acquainted with a sample of his sketches from the war years, but to read through, in their entirety, the seventy-five or so pages of reconstruction from "those lurid and blood-smutch'd little notebooks" (690n) he kept, is an exercise in distress. He describes the panic in Washington after the initial Union defeat at the first battle of Bull Run, the suffering of troops who survived the trip back to District hospitals from the war in Virginia, the wrenching reports of the horrible conditions at the Confederate prison camp at Salisbury, North Carolina (which as much foreshadowed the Second World War as the trench warfare at Cold Harbor and Petersburg gave a foreglimpse of the Somme and the Marne), and the portents in the weather, the heat, the

savage storms and crystal skies, the ominous cloud that passed over Lincoln when he spoke at his second inauguration.

Whitman found “the marrow of the tragedy” (779) in the hospitals, notwithstanding the political, economic, and military events which make, ostensibly, better historical narrative. In three years Whitman made “over six hundred visits or tours” to “hospital, camp or field” (775). “Fortifying myself with previous rest, the bath, clean clothes, a good meal, and as cheerful an appearance as possible” (727), he would set off for four or five hours of visiting, comforting the suffering and dying, reading to the weak, sometimes giving poetic recitations and declamatory pieces (743). He brought the wounded little gifts of money, combs, soap, towels, and toothbrushes. He gave them writing paper and stamps and small notebooks; he handed out tobacco, jam, oranges and apples (one poor fellow had “a great hankering for pickles, something pungent,” and Whitman found for him “a small bottle of horse-radish” (726). At least once he bought “a large quantity” of ice cream as a general treat for one of the hospital wards (745). The money came from a few unnamed people in New York and New England who knew what he was doing and sent him contributions.

Whitman’s whole wartime activity reflects a generosity and a practical sense of mercy that deepen our understanding of his character and spirit. There are odd moments: when Whitman helps a John Wormley, of the 9th Alabama regiment, to wash and get some clean underwear and pants, and Wormley “didn’t know what to make of me,” Whitman confides (757). Other sadder, more affecting scenes are far more frequent. Let one suffice for the many poignant encounters included in *Specimen Days*:

In one of the hospitals I find Thomas Haley, company M, 4th New York cavalry—a regular Irish boy, a fine specimen of youthful physical manliness—shot through the lungs—inevitably dying—came over to this country from Ireland to enlist—has not a single friend or acquaintance here—is sleeping soundly at this moment, (but it is the sleep of death)—has a bullet-hole straight through the lung. I saw Tom when first brought here, three days since, and didn’t suppose he could live twelve hours—(yet he looks well enough in the face to a casual observer.) He lies there with his frame exposed above the waist, all naked, for coolness,

a fine built man, the tan not yet bleach'd from his cheeks and neck. It is useless to talk to him, as with his sad hurt, and the stimulants they give him, and the utter strangeness of every object, face, furniture, &c., the poor fellow, even when awake, is like some frighten'd, shy animal. Much of the time he sleeps, or half sleeps. (Sometimes I thought he knew more than he show'd.) I often come and sit by him in perfect silence; he will breathe for ten minutes as softly and evenly as a young babe asleep. Poor youth, so handsome, athletic, with profuse beautiful shining hair. One time as I sat looking at him while he lay asleep, he suddenly, without the least start, awaken'd, open'd his eyes, gave me a long steady look, turning his face very slightly to gaze easier—one long, clear, silent look—a slight sigh—then turn'd back and went into his doze again. Little he knew, poor death-stricken boy, the heart of the stranger that hover'd near. (724-5)

It is all here, the great-hearted, affectionate, and embarrassingly sympathetic man, his barely-disguised, loosely-worn sensuality, and his comprehensive attention to the personality and integrity of others. There is much brave and fair and honest in this colloquial, careful tribute, this valedictory to a poor, forgotten fellow, combatant and victim both.

*Specimen Days* halts with the end of the war and does not resume until 1876. Whitman was stricken by a paralysis in 1873. He gave up work in Washington, went up to Camden, and commenced his convalescence. Three years later, at Timber Creek, outside Camden, he had recovered enough to begin recording his nature-notes. He observes,

After you have exhausted what there is in business, politics, conviviality, love, and so on—have found that none of these finally satisfy, or permanently wear—what remains? Nature remains; to bring out from their torpid recesses, the affinities of a man or woman with the open air, the trees, fields, the changes of the seasons—the sun by day and the stars of heaven by night. We will begin from these convictions. (780-1)

This assertion is not remarkable, really, except we might have expected him to begin “from these experiences” rather than “from these convictions.”

Whitman concludes, "Literature flies so high and is so hotly spiced, that our notes may seem hardly more than breaths of common air, or draughts of water to drink. But that is part of our lesson" (781). In fact, much of this writing is appealing for its simplicity. It does not have the vertiginous prose of "Democratic Vistas," which Lionel Trilling complained is filled with "jargon," "dull explosiveness of syntax," "half-educated words and phrases."<sup>2</sup> Whitman hasn't "worked up" his material in *Specimen Days*. In this book, he often writes "below" literature. The effect of nature on Whitman occupies our attention in these nature-notes. He does not "fly high" or "hotly spice" what he writes. He does not go oratorical or operatic on us. Indeed, that *is* "part of our lesson," for he tells us what he feels and what he sees and he is not quick to explain what feelings and observations signify. In *Specimen Days* Whitman seems to reverse that determination "to discard everything in particular and to accept everything in general," which Henry James, early on, discerned in the poetry.<sup>3</sup>

Often Whitman went to private spots around the creek and stripped off his clothes to sunbathe. He attributes his improving health to that—and his improving mood. "Perhaps the inner never lost rapport we hold with earth, light, air, trees, &c., is not to be realized through eyes and mind only, but through the whole corporeal body, which I will not have blinded or bandaged any more than the eyes" (807), but then he concedes, "Some good people may think it a feeble or half-crack'd way of spending one's time and thinking. May-be it is" (808). And this humor and lightness persist. "I had a sort of dream-trance the other day," he tells us, "in which I saw my favorite trees step out and promenade up, down and around, very curiously—with a whisper from one, leaning down as he pass'd me, *We do all this on the present occasion, exceptionally, just for you*" (816).

Sitting in his folding camp-chair, sometimes swinging on his tree, bathing in the creek and rubbing himself raw with a brush, outdoors at night as well as day, he improves and health returns. During his convalescence he discovers, "The trick is . . . to tone your wants and tastes low down enough, and make much of negatives, and of mere daylight and the skies" (780). One lesson from sitting quietly in the woods is the rediscovery of the self-sufficient existence of the physical world (789–90), and Whitman takes that simple lesson a step further:

What worse — what more general malady pervades each and all of us, our literature, education, attitude toward each other, (even toward ourselves,) than a morbid trouble about *seems*, (generally temporarily seems too,) and no trouble at all, or hardly any, about the sane, slow-growing, perennial, real parts of character, books, friendship, marriage—humanity’s invisible foundations and hold-together? (As the all-basis, the nerve, the great-sympathetic, the plenum within humanity, giving stamp to everything, is necessarily invisible.) (790)

His convalescence allows him to reconfirm the lowdownness of material things and the unseen foundation of essential experience and even of life itself.

Recovered, Whitman travels again to New York and up the Hudson River to visit John Burroughs, takes a pullman trip through Kansas to Denver and into the Rocky Mountains, and makes another journey to New York, continuing to Boston, where he meets Emerson for the first time in years and spends an evening in Concord talking about the Alcotts and Thoreau. He visits Hawthorne and Thoreau’s graves and stops at Walden Pond, where he deposited a stone on the cairn marking the site of the hut. He recalls the extraordinary episode in 1860 when he paced Boston Common with Emerson while the latter pressed home (“like an army corps in order, artillery, cavalry, infantry”) all the arguments against “Children of Adam.” When finished, Emerson asked Whitman what he had to say in response, and Whitman for all his thoughtful respect gave this answer: “I feel more settled than ever to adhere to my own theory, and exemplify it.” A more fitting moment of self-reliance is hard to imagine. Whitman adds, “Thenceforward I never waver’d or was touch’d with qualms (as I confess I had been two or three times before)” (915).

His health and mood improved, his mind unimpaired, Whitman is reading again, arguing, and placing into perspective his remarkable contemporaries. He writes shrewdly of Grant, of Lincoln over and over, of Poe, of Emerson (tucking into “Notes Left Over” a trenchant four-point criticism of that genius), of Hegel, and of Carlyle. For all his admiration for Carlyle, Whitman can find in him no faith to match his own, no

intuition of the absolute balance, in time and space, of the whole of this multifarious, mad chaos of fraud, frivolity, hoggishness—this revel of fools, and incredible make-believe and general unsettledness, we call *the world*; a soul-sight of that divine clue and unseen thread which holds the whole congeries of things, all history and time . . . like a leash'd dog in the hand of the hunter. (894)

Whitman wishes us to value his confidence, but the dark side of his mood, given Whitman's special case, may be more assuring. The savage clarity with which he could see the political cowardice and vulgarity of the American nineteenth century is confirmed by "Democratic Vistas," "Who Gets the Plunder?" and the especially gloomy "Eighteenth Presidency!" in which, of the election of 1856, he observes, "A pretty time to put up two debauched old disunionist politicians, the lees and dregs of more than sixty years! A pretty time for two dead corpses to go walking up and down the earth, to guide by feebleness and ashes a proud, young, friendly, fresh, heroic nation of thirty millions of live and electric men!" (1325). Whitman's angry disappointment is reconfirmed, remarkably to my mind, by the fact that, in naming the great poets, Homer, the Hebrew writers, Shakespeare, Cervantes, he more than once includes the satirist, Juvenal.

Characteristically, of course, Whitman prefers to assure us of the design of the universe, as elsewhere of the progress of the race. When he closes *Specimen Days*, tying the knot on his odd bundle of thoughts, he reminds us that "the effort of the true poets . . . ever will be . . . to bring people back from their persistent straying and sickly abstractions, to the costless average, divine, original concrete" (926). This we would in no way argue with, but it is not what Whitman's poetry is thought distinctively to achieve. Martin Green complains that as poet Whitman "offers to discuss personal experience, and then forces on us everything but that—catalogues of objects, political exhortations, ideas of sexuality, day-dreams, grotesque posturings. Even his catalogues are of things he has read about, not seen and heard himself."<sup>4</sup> I would not wish to go as far as Green's conclusion: I would not wish to claim that Whitman "says he has felt and seen things which he has not," for *Specimen Days*—as sourcebook for *Leaves of Grass*—is evidence to the contrary. But the poetry, the catalogues especially, can bludgeon us with the undigested if not the inexperienced; and if



there is a measure of truth in Green's criticism of the poetry, his complaints do not characterize *Specimen Days*. That book of unaffected prose achieves what its closing reminder approves: it brings us back "to the costless average, divine, original concrete," it settles us to observe and savor the here and now.

We return to the puzzle with which we began: *Specimen Days*, what is it? Midway through the book Whitman has another go at describing it:

A melange of loafing, looking, hobbling, sitting, traveling—a little thinking thrown in for salt, but very little—not only summer but all seasons—not only days but nights—some literary meditations—books, authors examined, Carlyle, Poe, Emerson tried (always under my cedar-tree, in the open air, and never in the library)—mostly the scenes everybody sees, but some of my own caprices, meditations, egotism—truly an open air and mainly summer formation—singly, or in clusters—wild and free and somewhat acrid—indeed more like cedar-plums than you might guess at first glance. (884)

"Cedar-Plums Like" was an alternative title he toyed with using. He notes about thirty others he gave at least passing thought to, "Maise-Tassels . . . Kindlings," for example, or "Scintilla at 60 and after," or "Only Mulleins and Bumble-Bees" (886). Most of the titles are no more appealing than the descriptive *Specimen Days*. But the list reveals the difficulty Whitman had in choosing a title, and he concludes, "Let us be satisfied to *have* a name—something to identify and bind it together . . . without bothering ourselves because certain pages do not present themselves to you or me as coming under their own name with entire fitness or amiability" (885). What Whitman himself seems apologetic about are the discontinuities in the text, its fragmentary, discursive nature.

Generic classification can help sometimes. Alastair Fowler reminds us of a kind of verse collection called a *silva*. "*Silvae* or 'bits of raw material' were occasional pieces, rapid effusions on the model of Statius' *Silvae*, in a great variety of forms." Quintilian, the contemporary of Statius, complained about their "deliberate roughness." "He regarded it a fault," Fowler tells us, "that certain writers 'run over the material first with as rapid a pen as possible, extempore, following the inspiration of the moment.'"<sup>5</sup> The form

has its history. “Poliziano called his verse lectures of 1480–90 *Silvae*, perhaps with the same implication (roughness, miscellaneousness).” Scaliger made the term current. Ben Johnson’s *Timber* and *Forest* and *Under-wood* are all examples. Phineas Fletcher, Cowley, and Dryden all wrote *silvae*. So, too, Coleridge’s *Sibylline Leaves* and Robert Lowell’s *Notebook* work within that generic form—and *Leaves of Grass*. In all of these, Fowler stresses “their variety and their appearance of spontaneity” (135). The titles suggest some gathering from nature. It occurs to me that Whitman might have called his prose work *Leaves of Grass*, and we would certainly not have objected. He might have called his poetic collection *Specimen Days*, and we might well have applauded the aptness of that title.

The term *silva* has its use. “When we investigate previous states of the type, it is to clarify meaningful departures that the work itself makes,” Fowler reminds us.<sup>6</sup> Whitman seems to have sensed he was composing a prose version of some such form by the list of titles he had flirted with. It is a matter of gathering up what might otherwise be lost. Alexander Solzhenitsyn is doing this in *The Oak and the Calf*, trying to reconstruct from notes and memory his cat-and-mouse game with the police even as the events continue to unfold. He did it as well in *The Gulag Archipelago*, especially in the third volume, bundling together other people’s letters, notes, and memories as well as his own, preserving a record of specimen days of another order entirely. And, too, we have *Paterson*. However certain critics may be of the thematic or other artistic unity of that “long poem,” William Carlos Williams more candidly admits the odd medley that *Paterson* is. Inside the title page of “Book One,” Williams attempts to describe what is to follow:

: a local pride; spring, summer, fall and the sea; a confession; a basket; a column; a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands; a gathering up; a celebration;

in distinctive terms; by multiplication a reduction to one; daring; a fall; the clouds resolved into a sandy sluice; an enforced pause;

hard put to it; an identification and a plan for action to supplant a plan for action; a taking up of slack; a dispersal and a metamorphosis.

This is a list of titles, of metaphoric characterizations, of what approaches descriptions of the lyrics. The list recalls Whitman casting about for a title for *Specimen Days*. It sounds like Williams is telling us intuitively that what we have here is rather a *silva*. In any event, stretching a generic term need not be an extravagance; it can be an exercise in useful literary tolerance.

Moses Hades observes that *silva* “denotes . . . in Latin writers a hasty draft for later polishing and elaboration.”<sup>7</sup> But “elaboration” by whom? Hades intends by the writers themselves, of course. Whitman, however, had a more original departure in mind than Hades or the Romans. The “elaboration” he foresees is to be our own. “Suggestiveness” is Whitman’s word for it. In “A Backward Glance o’er Travel’d Roads” he says, “I round and finish little, if anything; and could not, consistently with my scheme. The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as much as I have mine. I seek less to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought—there to pursue your own flight” (666–7). Such “suggestiveness” has its counterpart in architecture and music. In “A Song for Occupations” Whitman proposed that “All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it” and, similarly, “All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments” (359). “Suggestiveness” is related to and consistent with comradeship, the perfect equality of friends along the open road. The very occasional and fragmentary style of *Specimen Days* is a gesture of Whitman’s reaching out to us, a gesture of spiritual equality.

To be sure, *Specimen Days* serves as a gloss on the poetry. The opening fifteen pages, the autobiographical letter, can be read alongside “Starting from Paumanok” as a convenient parallel text, for example. Critics have been using *Specimen Days* thus for a long time. What weakens our appreciation of the book, however, is the instinct to mine it for confirmation of what we think the verse means or ought to mean. Much is lost by not reading *Specimen Days* for its own sake from first to last. We encounter another Walt Whitman, a less bombastic and more sympathetic personality, when we read *Specimen Days* casually as a literary work itself.

I do not think it is eccentric to return to the uncertainties I have about Whitman’s poetry, for nearly everyone has expressed doubts. Howells, in reviewing *Drum-Taps* in *The Round Table* in 1865, seemed to have grasped just what Whitman was trying to do, his “suggestiveness”—and to have demurred—when he observed that Whitman does make one “partner of the

poetical enterprise . . . but no one wants to share the enterprise.” Henry James objected to what he called the “brute sublimity”<sup>8</sup> of the verse, a phrase suggesting that while he failed to appreciate it, he did not fail to understand it. And William Carlos Williams thought that after Whitman’s first coup of breaking out into free verse, he let his message absorb him and “took his eye off the words themselves which should have held him.” Certainly, while respecting Whitman’s admonition that “no one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism” (671), I can still acknowledge my embarrassment at the preposterous language he is capable of using quite innocently, quite confidently in his best poems.

Of course there is so much to praise in Whitman. He has pointed the way startlingly toward democratic society with his simple adjuration from “By Blue Ontario’s Shore”: “Produce great Persons, the rest follows” (470). But his taste for the grand Whitman cannot seem to shake. Often in his poetry he ascends a public platform and begins to speechify. His wayward taste in diction might be compared to the euphuistic rage of the English Renaissance, when that society with its language also underwent expansion and upheaval. Lyly and others paid the price of obscurity, despite their courage, for structures and neologisms, more radical than Whitman tried, which did not survive. Whitman flourishes with us because his extravagance though outrageous is occasional. Nevertheless, he does miscalculate and he does misfire. Truly, Whitman convinces, as he himself says, by his “presence” and not by his “arguments, similes, rhymes” (303). It is equally certain to me that Whitman does not convince primarily by his diction or even by his tone.

I record these objections to the poetry, mine and others’, so as to report that I do not find they apply to *Specimen Days*. The autobiography and war memoranda of *Specimen Days* have not been ground through the mill of his poetic idea, and the nature-notes convey what Gay Wilson Allen calls “repose” and “quiet resignation”<sup>9</sup> and, I might add, a simplicity and a calm the poetry does not characteristically evince. I find *Specimen Days* reveals a quieter, more restrained, less histrionic Whitman. And, perhaps, my notion that this prose work is a *silva* can help me accept its casual ordering and its fragmentary nature, for familiarity has taught me to accept the *silva* that is *Leaves of Grass*. *Specimen Days* is not the greater work. I do not suppose I

would be recommending *Specimen Days* now if Walt Whitman had not given us *Leaves of Grass*. And yet *Specimen Days* shows a Walt Whitman who has not “hotly spiced” the language, who has resisted most linguistic contrariness, and who is in more control of his expression. He may not be the bohemian genius and seer of *Leaves of Grass*, but he is more appealing—perhaps because he is not trying so hard—and, it emerges slowly to my awareness, a riper human being.

Once I had thought, as a teacher, the way to have a class read Whitman was to edit as much of the dross as possible, compress him to eight or ten essential poems, pass over their ridiculous lines and lapses of taste, and engage the students with the courage, energy, and honesty that remain. But to make Whitman the shaper of a few powerful poems may not be to present Whitman at all. Maybe my instinct to “present” Whitman is wrong. Perhaps I need, as he suggests, to work through the material and the process with him:

Books are to be . . . supplied on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast’s struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does. (992–3)

Perhaps Whitman must be taken in great draughts. Perhaps I should have to acknowledge his “brute sublimity,” to use again Henry James’s unpleasant and evocative phrase. Here is James once more: “the greatest thing in [him] cannot be exhibited by specimens. It is . . . the whole attempt—it is the method. This last is his unsurpassed, his incomparable merit. That huge, all-compassing, all-desiring, all-devouring love of reality which was the source of so many of his fallacies and stains, of so much dead-weight in his work, was also the foundation of his extraordinary power.”<sup>10</sup> This is James, but James on Balzac, whose appetites James did appreciate. Still, I shall let the insight stand for Whitman, as it is apt. What I suggest, to myself as to you, is that *Specimen Days* must be read. There is a quieter Whitman there,

wilier in his truths, and even a more circumstantial America somehow waiting for us.

## NOTES

1. Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York, 1982), p. 689. All further page citations from this Library of America edition will be included in the text.
2. *Walt Whitman: a Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Murphy (Harmondsworth, England, 1969), p. 291. My later citations from William Dean Howells and William Carlos Williams are to be found in Murphy, pp. 85 and 330.
3. *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (New York, 1984), p. 633.
4. These remarks appear in the chapter "Twain and Whitman" in Green's *Re-appraisals* (1963), pp. 125–9. This neglected book raises serious and largely unanswered objections to several standard American classics that are worth attention and reflection.
5. *Kinds of Literature: an Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), p. 134. The citation from Quintilian is in *Institutio* 10.3.17, not where Fowler places it.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 38. Fowler continues, "It follows that genre theory, too, is properly concerned, in the main, with interpretation. . . . It does not deal much with classification."
7. *A History of Latin Literature* (New York, 1952), p. 274.
8. *Literary Criticism*, p. 633.
9. *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York and London, 1986), p. 154.
10. *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (New York, 1984), pp. 66–7.