

WHITMAN'S *SPECIMEN DAYS* AND THE CULTURE OF AUTHENTICITY

MARY McALEER BALKUN

SPECIMEN DAYS HAS RECEIVED less critical attention than Whitman's other work and perhaps with good reason: even the writer himself was not quite sure what to make of it. He referred to it variously as a "prose jumble (original emphasis),"¹ as potentially "the most wayward, spontaneous, fragmentary book ever printed,"² as "an autobiography after its sort," and as a "gathering up, & formulation, & putting in identity of the wayward itemizings, memoranda, and personal notes of fifty years, under modern and American conditions" (*Corr.* 3:308). At its most fundamental, much of the text records Whitman's struggle to understand and narrate the reality of an experience without parallel in his lifetime, the Civil War. In the course of this struggle, however, Whitman also delves into the complex issue of "authenticity," and in so doing helps to usher in a major shift in American culture, one in which he is later joined by writers and thinkers such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Thorstein Veblen, and Henry Adams.

The concern with authenticity, while timeless in many respects, was especially marked in late nineteenth-century America, when much of the population came to believe that existence had become unreal or illusory. The quest for the authentic took many forms: the valorization of the photographic image, the production of realist fiction that described people and events previously not acknowledged, the obsession with facts and statistics, and the attempt to "[recover] intense experience" through any means available, one example of which was the period's celebration and imitation of the martial ideal.³ In *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940*, Miles Orvell describes an ideological shift in the nation during this period, from a culture of imitation (which has never completely disappeared) to a culture of authenticity. Whereas the years immediately following the Civil War saw the celebration of the reproduction, the facsimile, and the copy, beginning in the 1880s there "was a reaction against the earlier aesthetic, an effort to get beyond mere imitation, beyond the manufacturing of illusions, to the creation of more 'authentic' works that were themselves real things."⁴ Whitman is an intrinsic part of this development.

Defining authenticity has traditionally proved as elusive as achieving it, and those who attempt to do so have often found it easier to identify the *inauthentic*. In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, an important early study of authenticity in Western thought and culture, Lionel Trilling writes:

It is a word of ominous import. As we use it in reference to human existence, its provenance is the museum, where persons expert in such matters test whether objects of art are what they appear to be or are claimed to be, and therefore worth the price that is asked for them—or, if this has already been paid, worth the admiration they are being given. That the word has become part of the moral slang of our day points to the peculiar nature of our fallen condition, our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences.⁵

These dual implications of the word “authentic,” the reality of the individual and reality of the art object, concerned Whitman at various points in his career, but particularly in the years after the war as he once again attempted to create, as he had with *Leaves of Grass*, a new literary form and a new self, both suited to a changing world.

Specimen Days recounts Whitman’s gradual realization that the forms and methods on which he had relied as a poet were no longer suited to the experience he felt compelled to narrate. The intensity and authenticity of his war experience was in sharp contrast to everything that had come before or would come after. Proceeding from his own “culture of imitation”⁶—the celebration of his ability to reproduce reality and create a genuine facsimile of experience for the reader to share, as he does in *Leaves of Grass*—Whitman embarks on a quest for the authentic that leads him from the hospitals of Washington, to Timber Creek near Camden, to the American West. It was a process made easier to some extent by his experience in journalism and its emphasis on facts and evidence, a background common to many of the writers who followed in his footsteps.⁷

Whitman is designated by Orvell “as the writer who, perhaps more than any other, was attempting consciously to model his work on the changed conditions of modern life, which encompassed the conditions of commercial life, the technology of manufactures, and the invention of the daguerreotype.”⁸ Focusing primarily on *Leaves of Grass* as a new form, the result of the poet’s attempt to capture all of American society and culture and to create a model self that readers might emulate, Orvell places Whitman in a privileged position as a writer who not only reflects the culture of his time but whose work of self-invention provides a model for later artists who are attempting to “establish an art appropriate to the conditions of the country.”⁹

However, Whitman’s role is more overt than Orvell’s paradigm suggests; because much of *Specimen Days* (1882) was actually written during the Civil War, Whitman can be said to anticipate the concern for

authenticity that Orvell situates at the end of the nineteenth century, although this interest certainly became more pronounced during the years in which he is attempting to organize the text. It seems paradoxical to associate Whitman with a quest for "the real thing," since he is the American writer who, probably more than any other, is associated with the creation of personas, altering biographical information and abetting in his own reconstruction as the "good gray poet."¹⁰ Yet, for Whitman "authentic" did not just mean a faithful, surface rendering of reality; it entailed capturing the emotional quality of an experience, and experience is the key word in this context.

The very title, *Specimen Days*, embodies the central dilemma of the text. The word "specimen" can alternately be used to mean something that stands for the authentic or the thing itself, and although the definition was obsolete by Whitman's time, "specimen" had also been used to refer to an experiment or "A brief and incomplete account of something in writing."¹¹ Either description is appropriate for a work of such indeterminate genre. In fact, there is a suggestive link between the uncertain genre of *Specimen Days* and the theme of authenticity. Whitman's search for an authentic voice and for reality of presentation resulted in a form that was unique in its day, combining as it did the immediate and the retrospective. Other memoirs of the period (Henry Adams's *Education* comes immediately to mind) were less concerned with the immediate than with the past, unless it was to valorize that past and depict the present as bankrupt by comparison. Whitman's attempt to assert control over the shape of experience, which manifested itself early in his career, foreshadowed the tendency in the late nineteenth century "to enclose reality in manageable forms, to contain it within a theatrical space, an exposed exposition or recreational space, or within the space of the picture frame."¹² The image of the frame is essential to *Specimen Days* and its project: to serve as a paradigm for authentic experience.

As Betsy Erkkila has observed, the text is divided into four sections: "a brief account of [Whitman's] youth and manhood, which [he] wrote for Richard Maurice Bucke, who was planning an 'official' biography of the poet; an account of the Civil War, [which is] largely a reprint of *Memoranda During the War*; a series of meditations on nature based on Whitman's Timber Creek notes; and a final sequence of reflections on social and literary matters, including an extensive account of his trip West in 1879."¹³ This amalgam of genres—biography, war account, travelogue, to name a few—is a manifestation of Whitman's authorial uncertainty and his continuing efforts to find the form best suited to capturing a shifting reality. The text thus models the very search for authenticity in which the author himself is engaged.

Specimen Days starts very much in the typical Whitman fashion, with the author full of confidence in his ability to render the reality of his own experience through the accumulation of detail: lists of names

and places, dates and numbers. Even in section one, however, his preoccupation with the real is apparent. He speaks of giving locations their "aboriginal name[s]"¹⁴ and of ferries as "inimitable, streaming, never-failing, living poems"¹⁵ (my emphasis). But we do well to remember the compositional history of this text. This opening section was actually written after the others as an introduction to material that had been composed as many as twenty years before. If the middle sections are the most unmediated, and the most important for the purposes of this argument, the first and final sections form the frame that contains Whitman's struggle. The persona in these book-end sections is one who has regained his equilibrium after the trauma of war; however, the attempt to enclose the schism that occurs between sections two and three only serves to highlight the violent nature of his experience and Whitman's heroic attempt to understand and capture it in prose.

In the second chapter, "Answer to an Insisting Friend," Whitman introduces his concerns quite specifically, with open recognition of the value of "items" and "details" in the construction of an authentic identity. Asked for an accounting of his "genealogy and parentage," in particular his maternal ancestry, he promises to provide "some specimens of them all." He also refers to the events he will recount in the following pages as essentially "authentic in date-occurrence and fact," although they will be related in his own way. In addition, any extracts from previous writings he uses will be "the best versions" suggesting that authenticity is a process rather than a fixed state and one not bound by historical accuracy.¹⁶

It is not long after his stint as a "wound dresser" begins in section two that Whitman discovers the war presents a reality far different from the one he had previously known and narrated. As a result, he must find a different way to represent and authenticate his experience. At first he relies on dates, detailed descriptions of soldiers and other participants that are almost extended versions of the catalogues that fill the poems, and juxtapositions of people and events that become more substantial for the comparison. But there is a growing uncertainty that he can ever hope to capture the reality of this experience. Walking past the White House on an unusually warm February evening during the first year of the war, he describes the building as being "full of reality, full of illusion."¹⁷ The structure that more than any other represents America looks peaceful on this night, but elsewhere the war goes on and the sentries watch passersby suspiciously. While paradox is a common Whitmanian technique, the accumulation of such ambivalent references indicates that the war is much on his mind, and only more so as it progresses.

Thus, one effect of the war for Whitman is to confuse what is real with what is fake, a pattern that appears in a variety of forms in *Specimen Days*. Whitman begins section two by attesting to the authenticity of the report that the war has begun, as if even at this early stage the reality of

the event has to be verified. Then there are the countless “versions” of battles and behavior, with the attendant difficulty of separating rumor from fact, or of knowing who is a deserter and who is not. Even history becomes suspect, prompting him to ask, “What history . . . can ever give—for who can know—the mad, determin’d tussle of the armies, in all their separate large and little squads—as this—each steep’d from crown to toe in desperate, mortal purports?”¹⁸ The potential for bias and inaccuracy in history is reiterated at the end of *Specimen Days* when Whitman declares that “the real war will never get in the books,” simply because it will be impossible to capture the event accurately in prose. He goes further to posit the impossibility of capturing not only the war but also its “interior history” and its participants, as if trying to convince himself that it cannot be done. Finally, he reaches the conclusion that not only will the real story of the war never be written but that it “perhaps must not and should not be” written.¹⁹ Following this logic, any relation of the war must be less than authentic, including his own.

The war was a catalyst for Whitman’s search for the authentic, but it was also significant in any history of the authenticity movement, for a number of reasons. Primarily, the war signaled a final break from a simpler, agrarian America and the emergence of a more complex and confusing society, one in which reality was not a matter for speculation. What Whitman gradually discovers as a result of his involvement in the war is that the authentic requires first-hand encounters, not vicarious experiences. In section two he describes the makeshift hospital set up in the Patent Office, an episode that provides a disquieting preview of the rise of museum culture in America, one of many attempts in the late nineteenth century to create “genuine facsimiles” of reality. Wounded soldiers lie between display cases that are filled with “models in miniature of every kind of utensil, machine or invention,” as if they themselves are on exhibit, types of the real thing. Whitman acknowledges this bizarre juxtaposition, describing it as “a sort of fascinating sight” and “a curious scene, especially at night when lit up.” His frustration as he attempts to recreate the scene in prose is palpable, and he concludes by pointing out parenthetically that in fact the “wounded have since been removed from there, and it is now vacant again,” in case there are any who might want to challenge his depiction.²⁰ Ironically, while the wounded eventually depart the scene and thereby become ephemeral, the objects in the cases remain behind and can be affirmed as “real.”²¹ It is not hard to detect a measure of frustration, if not defeat, building in section two as Whitman realizes that his own efforts to produce an “authentic” portrait of the war may fail. In the chapter “Soldiers and Talks,” he declares, “I now 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.”²² This acknowledged inability to reproduce the war for those who have not experienced it in

some measure reflects Whitman's long-held belief that art stands in the way of reality, but it also signals a resignation not heretofore evidenced in his writing.²³

Until this time Whitman had not doubted his ability to recreate experience in authentic fashion. This is, after all, the same poet who told readers that when they touched his book they touched him as well. However, authenticity presupposes an ability to identify the real thing, and such identification has an important place in Whitman's technique. In *Specimen Days* he is several times forced to acknowledge that identification has become difficult, if not impossible, and not only in the case of deserters. He must acknowledge that there are "grand soldiers" on both sides, choosing a representative "unknown southerner, a lad of seventeen."²⁴ Several times he declares that the bravest and most representative soldiers are those who die anonymously, "[u]nnamed, unknown."²⁵ Soldiers eventually become a primary source of truth about the war by virtue of their experience, and so it is to them Whitman turns. They become the real representatives of America and its people, and their actions reveal the truth about men in the face of adversity.²⁶

The war gradually becomes a fire that burns away all that is false, artificial, fake, imitative, and derivative. But the question remains, what is then left? Whitman's attempt to answer this question is the defining activity of section three of *Specimen Days*. Describing events that occur a decade after the war has ended, this section represents a marked difference in the way Whitman handles the trope of authenticity.²⁷ For one thing, he appears to temporarily abandon the search for the real thing: there are far fewer references to authenticity and his uncertainty is more evident. In the opening chapter of that section, "An Interregnum Paragraph," he expresses a wish that "the notes of that outdoor life could only prove as glowing to you, reader dear, as the experience itself was to me," and immediately afterwards alludes to his invalid state, as if one were a rationale for the other. He also decides that "The trick is . . . to tone your wants and tastes low down enough, and make much of negatives, and of mere daylight and the skies."²⁸ The mode of expression is decidedly more hesitant, revealing a wariness and a set of reduced expectations about his ability to recount the authentic. He refers to the sky on a July afternoon as "a vast voiceless, formless simulacrum—yet may-be the most real reality and formulator of everything," and follows this description with the question, "who knows?" "Being" as opposed to "seeming" (original emphasis), the "inherency" of "earth, rocks, animals," the "idealistic-real," these are the recurring motifs of section three.²⁹ They reflect a pervasive malady at the end of the nineteenth century, an uncertainty about what is real and what is fake.

However, the ambivalence about the real that Whitman exhibits in section three is but a prelude to a renewed sense of balance, one reiterated in sections one and four. "Do you know what *ducks & drakes* are?"

he once asked William Douglass O'Connor. "Well, S. D. is 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 and flits along—enough at least to give some living touches and contact-points—I was quite willing to make an immensely *negative* book."³⁰ According to Erkkila, "What Whitman's comment suggests is that only by negating the 'real area' of his life and times was he able to mold *Specimen Days* into a story of personal and national success."³¹ However, the real or authentic remains essentially "untouched" in *Specimen Days* because Whitman is no longer certain what constitutes it. The personal success Erkkila describes is, in part at least, his renewed commitment to identifying and narrating the authentic, regardless of the potential for failure.

It is in his trip west in section four, which provides the other half of the textual "frame" described earlier, that Whitman once again finds possibilities for the real as well as a new relation to authenticity. He has passed through the war and its aftermath, both the personal and national effects, and withdrawn to the unfailing reality of the natural world. In section four we find him searching for authenticity in the world at large and finding it in a variety of places: in the behavior of a young man who tries to save a drowning woman; in the prairies, which are themselves works of art; and in the central states, where he finds "America's distinctive ideas and distinctive realities."³² The inauthentic are those things that bear too close a resemblance to their eastern or European counterparts, whether women or works of art. They are lacking the originality that is at the heart of personal experience and, by extension, of the authentic.

Like the ferries Whitman mentions in section one, "real" things are those beyond imitation, usually ones with correlatives in the natural world. Another ferry appears near the end of *Specimen Days*, mirroring the movement of the sea hawks flying above it. But although the boat is a "creation of artificial beauty and motion and power," it is "in its way no less perfect" than the birds, according to Whitman.³³ Being artificial does not make it any less real or original. In the end, it is to the "original" and the "concrete" that he must return, although these concepts remain problematic. In the final passage of *Specimen Days* he writes, "Perhaps indeed the efforts of the true poets, founders, religions, literatures, all ages, have been, and ever will be, our time and times to come, essentially the same—to bring people back from their persistent strays and sickly abstractions, to the costless average, divine, original concrete."³⁴ This very progression is enacted by the text.

Having once celebrated his ability to recreate an experience for others in a book like *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman finally becomes an exemplar of the culture of authenticity with its desire for experiences and texts "that were themselves real things."³⁵ His use of first-hand accounts,

his strategies of hesitation and negation, his identification of the West as locus of the real, all become recognizable strategies of both the local color and naturalist writers who follow him. Orvell describes *Leaves of Grass* as "a new invention, an expression of the energies and needs of [Whitman's] culture in a substantially new shape."³⁶ This is also true of *Specimen Days*. It is an original, a new shape to meet the needs of a changing and uncertain time, and one that both prefigures and furthers the culture of authenticity.

Seton Hall University

NOTES

1. Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 3:301. Hereafter *Corr*.
2. Walt Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 1:1. Hereafter *PW*.
3. T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 57.
4. Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), xv. In addition to Lears and Orvell, a number of critics and scholars from a variety of disciplines have written about the interest in authenticity at the turn of the century. For example, in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971, 1972), Lionel Trilling ranges over Western culture as he explores the evolution of authenticity as a concept; he not only identifies the late nineteenth century as a pivotal moment, but he describes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as "the paradigmatic literary expression of the modern concern with authenticity" (106). The philosopher Charles Taylor has continued the study of authenticity in his discipline as well, building upon the work already done by Hegel and Nietzsche in the nineteenth century and Sartre in the twentieth.
5. Trilling, 93.
6. The phrase is Miles Orvell's, xv.
7. Orvell distinguishes between early realists, such as Henry James and William Dean Howells, and later ones, such as Crane and Dreiser, arguing that James and Howells are part of the culture of imitation, creating "illusionistic fiction" as opposed to "veritism" or "naturalism" (103).
8. Orvell, xxi.
9. Orvell later observes that Whitman's "rhythm and vocabulary" are evident in the writing of later realists, such as Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris, who advocate the production of a "genuine American literature" (3, 114).
10. *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication* was first published for William Douglass O'Connor in pamphlet form by Bunce and Huntington (New York, 1866) and reprinted in Richard Maurice Bucke, *Walt Whitman* (1883; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970), 99-130.

11. "Specimen," *The Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
12. Orvell, 35.
13. Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 294.
14. *PW*, 1:10.
15. *PW*, 1:16.
16. *PW*, 1:3-4.
17. *PW*, 1:41.
18. *PW*, 1:47.
19. *PW*, 1:116, 117.
20. *PW*, 1:40.
21. I am indebted to Carol Singley for this observation.
22. *PW*, 1:63.
23. In *Walt Whitman's America; A Cultural Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), David Reynolds also notes the "genuinely ambivalent mentality" evident in Whitman's postwar work (452); however, I would add that this ambivalence extends beyond Whitman's fears for the nation and includes his perceived inability to narrate this new world.
24. *PW*, 1:43.
25. *PW*, 1:49.
26. Lears maintains that one of the models for authentic identity that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century was the so-called "martial ideal," often in the form of the medieval knight. He observes that it was "the warrior's willingness to suffer and die for duty's sake [that] pointed the way to national purification; to those who craved authentic selfhood, the warrior's life personified wholeness of purpose and intensity of experience. War promised both social and personal regeneration" (98). Certainly Whitman's depiction of soldiers in *Specimen Days* carries the same overtones of purification and regeneration.
27. A number of critics, Erkkila and Reynolds among them, have commented upon the sharp contrast between sections two and three. Erkkila observes that the "narrator's message of natural balance [in section three] is at odds with the narrative move from the strain of war to the restoration of nature, which occurs as an unnatural rupture in the story, a sign of discord rather than equilibrium in the text of book and world" (296). Reynolds suggests that the ten-year gap between sections two and three "allows [Whitman] to sidestep the complex postwar social issues that left him ultimately baffled" (523). I would include questions about reality and authenticity, which were becoming more frequent and more complex in late nineteenth-century America.
28. *PW*, 1:118-119.
29. *PW*, 1:129, 130, 175.
30. *Corr.*, 3:315.
31. Erkkila, 303.

32. *PW*, 1:208.
33. *PW*, 1:284.
34. *PW*, 1:295.
35. Orwell, xv.
36. Orwell, 29.