

REVIEWS



Walt Whitman. *Specimen Days*. Ed. Max Cavitch. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Oxford World Classics. xlx + 286 pp.

Whitman's *Specimen Days* has now been given a place in the Oxford World Classics series, where it joins longtime member *Leaves of Grass* (soon to appear in a newly edited version). It has been a long journey for Whitman's piecemeal autobiography, what he himself called an "immensely *negative* book." He knew many readers saw *Specimen Days* as "a great jumble, everything scattered, disjointed, bound together without coherence, without order or system," but, he noted wryly: "So much the better do they reflect the life they are intended to stand for." Max Cavitch quotes these characterizations in his illuminating introduction and goes on to reveal how the book's "negative" qualities, what Cavitch calls its "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"—are precisely what now make *Specimen Days* so fascinating to read and study in an era that has become autobiography-and-memoir obsessed. Nonfiction writing programs have cropped up all over the country; theorizing about autobiography is rampant; and Whitman's nonfiction writing—long considered far inferior to his poetry—is now emerging as an exciting early experimental model for how autobiographical narrative can be productively unsettled, broken, and scattered, revealing a life through seemingly random "specimens" instead of as a coherent and cohesive narrative whole. Cavitch offers a concise and perceptive commentary on just why *specimen* is the perfect choice for Whitman's title: "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."

In 2014, Melville House in Brooklyn issued a paperback edition of *Specimen Days and Collect*, with a wonderfully evocative introduction by essayist and novelist Leslie Jamison, who teaches in Columbia's nonfiction writing program. Jamison writes of how *Specimen Days* altered her own way of experiencing and writing about the world, admiring how Whitman's "rough accounting" could transform the way we apprehend the world around us, how Whitman's love of

“the world in its dross and guts and glitter, in its *everything*,” energized Jamison’s own journeys through Brooklyn, as “everything turned to specimen before me.” Jamison points out that Whitman’s joint title for his prose writings, *Specimen Days & Collect*, served to underscore his creative technique, as formative of his poetry as of his prose, to find a way “to hold it all”: “The *collect* was just another word for this desire: how can I gather all of these fragments in one place?”

It is notable that Oxford University Press has decided to issue just *Specimen Days* without *Collect*. Whitman himself never issued his autobiography in the U.S. as a separate publication, though *Memoranda During the War*, most of which was absorbed into *Specimen Days*, was published as a stand-alone book. Cavitch only briefly addresses the relationship of *Specimen Days* and *Collect*, calling them “Whitman’s two last major prose works . . . published together in a single volume” and then treating them as entirely separable books. As Jamison suggests, however, Whitman’s overall inclination was to collect rather than to separate, so Whitman’s later editions of *Leaves of Grass* tended to include most of the poems from earlier editions, as the book continued to grow larger, even as individual poems were revised or combined or rearranged (or occasionally dropped); in 1867, he collected into one volume (with separate pagination) *Leaves* and *Drum-Taps* and *So Long!*; in 1870, he began experimenting more with joining his poetry and prose, issuing the first (paperback) 1871 *Leaves* in a matching set with *Passage to India* and *Democratic Vistas*, then in 1876 issuing a matching set of *Leaves of Grass* and *Two Rivulets* (the “rivulets” were poetry and prose, printed in a typographical experiment as a dual stream of poetry and prose appearing one above the other on the same page, followed by alternating pieces of poetry and prose). Then he issued *Specimen Days & Collect* as a matching volume to his 1881 *Leaves* before combining both in a single volume (and including *November Boughs*), which he called *Complete Poems & Prose* (1888). Whitman’s final two books, *November Boughs* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*, were mixes of poetry and prose that he added as “annexes” to *Leaves* and *Collect*. It is striking that, as much as our criticism has divided Whitman the poet from Whitman the prose writer, usually valorizing one and denigrating the other, he himself seemed always fascinated with the ways the two forms worked together, even melded, when collected and juxtaposed. If we were to arrange all the various editions and issues of *Leaves of Grass* in chronological order, and read them consecutively, we would enter Whitman’s evolving *Leaves* through prose (the 1855 preface) and exit through prose (“A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” which concluded the 1891-92 “deathbed” issue).

Whitman’s disciple Horace Traubel once read aloud an article from

The Critic about how some modern poets like Whitman “whose thoughts are extremely poetical, but whose verses expressing them have little rhythm and less rhyme” should perhaps be known by a new name: “Why not call them ‘proets?’” Whitman liked the idea and said such a phenomenon goes back “to the Bible writers—to the old Hebrews, all—to the Hindu scripturists—to many of the Greeks and so on.” When *Specimen Days & Collect* first appeared in 1882, several reviewers immediately saw in Whitman’s prose all the marks of his poetry. Some of the first reviews even offered excerpts of *Specimen Days* lined out as poetry to demonstrate how easily Whitman’s prose could slip into his poetry (and vice versa). “As to Mr. Whitman’s prose it is obviously quite interchangeable with his poetry,” wrote the critic for *Literary World*: “Many pages of this book might be transferred to *Leaves of Grass* by simply a rearrangement of lines.” The *New York Sun* noted that “Many passages have little but continuous typographical arrangement to distinguish them from his poetry,” and the *New York Tribune* reviewer praised “an imaginative quality” in *Specimen Days* “which sometimes rises very near the level of poetry if it does not reach it.” The *New York Times* offered this perceptive insight:

Ensemble is Whitman’s strength and his weakness. . . . [He] carved out for himself the elastic system of poetry-prose, in which ‘Leaves of Grass’ appeared. That poem and this volume of essays and notes form in themselves a literary inter-state exhibition or American Institute Fair, such as Whitman has attempted to describe in measures. Every sort of thing is crammed into it, and the manager is the big, good-natured, shrewd and large-souled poet. . . .

Whitman even describes this new “elastic system of poetry-prose” in one of his *Collect* notes, “Ventures on an Old Theme,” where he announces that “the time has arrived to essentially break down the barriers of form between poetry and prose” because the modern world and the rough emerging democracy in America “can never again, in the English language, be express’d in arbitrary and rhyming metre.” Proetry would be America’s major contribution to world literature.

Oxford’s decision to isolate *Specimen Days* from *Collect* alters our sense of just how messy Whitman’s ensemble of an autobiography can be. By the time he issued his *Complete Poems & Prose* volume (1888), Whitman had added *November Boughs*, which contained a number of pieces that could easily have appeared in *Specimen Days*. Then, in *Complete Prose Works* (1892), his matching volume to his 1891-92 “deathbed” edition of *Leaves*, Whitman included the prose from *Good-Bye My Fancy* as well. Cavitch’s notion of the “blanks” in *Specimen Days* is revealing, but it makes me think of just how many small

blanks are filled in in the even more scattered *Collect*, *November Boughs*, and *Good-Bye My Fancy*—how *Collect* and the later prose offer missing sections to *Specimen Days*, including additional Civil War memories (with a vivid recollection of visiting the “First Regiment U.S. Color’d Troops” to hand out pay to Black soldiers, and another powerful recollection of his visits to injured Black soldiers in Harewood Hospital), more memories of Lincoln, memories of his “moonlight walks” along the Potomac with Peter Doyle, of his nights listening to the debates in Congress about the Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution, post-Reconstruction thoughts on the growing inequalities in the U.S., as well as recollections of his boyhood in Brooklyn, of his childhood on Long Island and recollection of slaves on his grandfather’s farm, memories of his trip to New Orleans, notes about the singers and actors he saw as a young man, memories of his father and his death, the death of his mother, and additional notes about his restorative visits to the Stafford farm in New Jersey. Whitman even fills in his own youthful life by giving us a sample of his pre-*Leaves* fiction and poetry. Given the “elastic” nature of *Specimen Days*, it is useful to have the stray bits of *Collect*, *November Boughs*, and *Good-Bye My Fancy* at hand when we read it.

Just as *Leaves of Grass* grew for twenty-five years over six very different editions, with endless revisions and rearrangements, and then grew even more during the final decade of Whitman’s life with the annexes of poems he wrote for *November Boughs* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*, so we might wonder just how open and changeable *Specimen Days* might have become, had Whitman had the stamina to keep revising and rearranging it. What we now read as *Specimen Days* already is, after all, a recycling and double extension (both before and after the war) of *Memoranda During the War*, with a number of significant changes to his Civil War book to make it sit (if a bit uncomfortably) in the later more extensive autobiography, which he pulled together during the six or seven years following *Memoranda*’s publication. And even in his debilitated condition, Whitman worked with Ernest Rhys in 1886 to publish the autobiography in Britain, with emendations, a new preface, an “Additional Note” (that brought readers up to date on his days), and even a new title, *Specimen Days in America*. How many of the short notes in *Collect* and in the prose in *November Boughs* and *Good-Bye My Fancy* (in clusters with titles—“Notes Left Over,” “Some Diary Notes at Random,” “Some War Memoranda,” “Small Memoranda,” “Some Laggards Yet”—that emphasize they are additional specimens of his days randomly gathered or recently found) are elastic extensions of (or potential insertions into) *Specimen Days*—notes he decided to add in the last decade of his life after the

autobiography was first published? He was, to the very end (as he said in his “Last Saved Items,” the final entry in his *Collected Prose*), writing “specimen clues” to put himself “quite freely and fairly in honest type.” Would these stray discovered memories or recollections—especially the multiple entries dealing with slaves, former slaves, and Black soldiers—have altered our sense of the way *Specimen Days* works? Since I like to raise such questions when I teach Whitman, I have tended to assign students the Library of America Whitman volume, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, which contains *Leaves* in its original and final states, as well as *Specimen Days & Collect* along with the additional late prose in *Boughs* and *Fancy*. The Library of America volume worked well in a graduate seminar I taught in the University of Iowa’s Nonfiction Writing Program, where we examined where and how Whitman drew the line between poetry and prose; we searched for the frequent places he crossed that line into the emerging territory of “proetry.”

The new Oxford World’s Classics volume of *Specimen Days* alone, however, will be an ideal text for the growing number of classes that are now reading Whitman’s autobiography as one of a number of autobiographies that have redefined the art of composing a life narrative. Cavitch has done a thorough job of annotating the text, including an invaluable “Glossary of Persons” that draws heavily on the work of Martin G. Murray (as Cavitch acknowledges) in identifying most of the Civil War soldiers Whitman mentions; it is very useful to have these identifications at the back of the book as we read the text instead of having to search for them online. Cavitch also includes in an appendix the preface and “additional note” that Whitman wrote for the 1887 British publication of *Specimen Days in America*—an important inclusion because it indicates, as I mentioned earlier, how Whitman was open to revising and expanding *Specimen Days*, just as he had done with *Leaves of Grass*. Cavitch also offers an up-to-date bibliography of criticism on Whitman’s autobiography, and his introduction is informed by his careful reading of that criticism—the introduction is in fact a kind of state-of-the-art examination of Whitman’s book, valuable for both students and teachers, and well worth reading for Whitman scholars as well. This well-edited and attractive volume, combined with the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Leaves of Grass*, would serve as an excellent pair of texts for classes largely devoted to Whitman.