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Michael Cunningham, *Specimen Days*.
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Introductory

Specimen Days follows the same basic plan of Cunningham's earlier novel *The Hours* (1999). He attempts here with Walt Whitman's poetry a literary experiment similar to the one he tried in *The Hours* with Virginia Woolf's narrative. The timescale, however, is larger, ranging from the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 22nd. The first episode, "In the Machine," is set in an industrial New York at the end of the 19th century, the second – "The Children's Crusade" (also the subtitle of K.Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse Five*), – in Ground Zero, and the third – "Like Beauty" – in a future multiethnic Central Park mainly populated by aliens as well as by highly technological, definitely otherworldly beings. Whitman shows up physically only once, in the first part, but throughout the novel Cunningham has various characters interact with Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. On a first reading, the book appears as a patchwork of styles, genres, and plots connected by the unifying thread of a series of narrative isotopies. Cunningham moves a critique to the gradual alienation, mechanization, fragmentation of U.S. contemporary society. The three narratives feature the same trio of characters – a kid, a woman, and a man – who, though with different nuances and transformations, almost retain the same characteristics and even names (Lucas/Luke, Catherine/Cat/Catareen, Simon), somewhat differing from one story to the other. Simon, for example, is a ghost in the first part, a minor character in the second, and a

cyborg with an evident human vocation in the third. To our knowledge, criticism on *Specimen Days* is still mainly online.

1. First of all it's a question of genre

It all starts with poetry, since Whitman's lines generate the book. Starting from and continuously going back to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Cunningham focuses on the condition of humankind and literature today: "A stone, a leaf …" we read at a certain point in the third episode, two images that well describe an art caught between the stone of tradition and the leaf of contemporary mobility –, an art which tries (Thomas Wolfe would have added) to open a "door" onto a new language that "everybody would understand." The sense of the narrative paradoxically follows a reverse course: to create beauty going back to a classic poet means to acknowledge the authority of tradition. But Whitman is the poet of transgression, a most authoritative innovator; going back in order to follow his steps means to open up to the future. The references to Whitman suggest a strong, original link with poetry which, in turn, raises the issue of the relation to the canon.

Cunningham makes an attempt – and a brilliant one, in our opinion – to face the never-ending debate about the canon, proposing a rather practical, matter-of-fact solution. The classic text is quoted and therefore inscribed in the modern text. The former informs and is informed by the latter, generating new possible interpretations in a mutual process of transformation. It is a translation-in-progress from past to present into the future, which becomes particularly evident in the last story where it is necessary to actually translate the alien's ungraspable language.

Cunningham never poses these questions in a theoretical way; rather, he allows them to emerge gradually in his writing, while the answer remains subject to the reader's interpretation. Whitman's poetry retains its striking "personal" identity and, taken out of context, easily fits in Cunningham's writing, casting a new light on the single episodes and on the entire text. The

uncanonical, rather unstable treatment of Whitman's lines is highlighted by an inconsistent typographical criterion: at times the lines are quoted in brackets, at times in italics, and at times they follow the typeset. Though he takes the old master into great consideration, Cunningham insinuates in his text the synthesis of two centuries of different critical evaluation; he opens up new points of view to his ironic, disenchanted glance. Cunningham himself tries out his 'othering' process on Whitman; theirs are two voices, two sensibilities in dialog that meet, quarrel, contradict each other and, more rarely, overlap. Whitman's voice sounds assertive and reassuring even if at times distant and unreachable; Cunningham's, on the contrary, is a doubtful, gracefully ironic one, but basically respectful, grateful and often yielding to the other's.

One example: "Well, Whitman empathized with everyone. In Whitman there are no insignificant lives. There are mill owners and mill workers, there are great ladies and prostitutes and he refuses to favor any of them. He finds them all worthy and fascinating. He finds them all miraculous," says Rita Dunna, the literature professor at NYU. How do we read this rather traditional view of Whitman when we know that the woman who calls herself Walt Whitman is the mastermind of a criminal conspiracy and that, moreover, the entire episode takes place in the same building that was the site of a social tragedy caused by a violation of workers' rights? In the context of Cunningham's book, thus, Dunna's rather traditional view of Whitman sounds quite provocative. Cunningham's ironic glance is there but it does not erase Whitman's poetic identity. The three stories, on the contrary, show three different degrees of assimilation (albeit ironic) of that art: Whitman as bard and seer in "In the Machine," as innovator in "The Children's Crusade," and as cosmic visionary in "Like Beauty."

2. Sense (and the novel), I

In the author's note to *Specimen Days*, Cunningham implies that his book is a novel. Even though Whitman might provide for an internal coherence, the question still remains: What makes these three pieces a novel?

Traditionally, the genre is defined by alienation and an ineluctable fragmentation. Firstly, its technique relies on the detachment of a specimen from the whole expressed. Secondly, its internal movement of the novel consists in the progress of the individual toward self-knowledge from within a condition of "enigmatic servitude to a heterogeneous reality that is purely given and thus void of any meaning" (Lukács 310). Finally, the alienation and fragmentation of the novel are expressed simultaneously in a subjective split (between being and social role) and in an intellectual split symptomatic of the individual's loss of a visible relation to the world of ideas (Lukács 310). Consequently, any unity and coherence in the novel are to be considered as solely illusionary.[1] The genre projects a world abandoned by sense.[2]

In *Specimen Days* these structural features of the novel merge with its thematic concern: the narrative tracks the historical permutations of an exquisitely modernist feeling – alienation – through postmodernism and an imagined future. The pivotal episode of the first section, "In the Machine," is the fire that broke out at the Triangle Waist Factory, a block from Washington Square, in the afternoon of 25th March, 1911. Nearly 150 seamstresses working there, mostly teenagers and young women, were killed; they found the exits blocked and faced either the flames or a leap from windows higher than any fire engine ladders could reach. Cunningham juggles history and sets the tragedy back in time so that his protagonist, an adolescent named Lucas, can meet Walt Whitman. (Whitman died 20 years before the fire.) In "The Children's Crusade" fordist alienation modulates into a pervasive fear of terrorism, and in the third section, "Like Beauty," it further translates as posthuman

estrangement. Clearly, Cunningham's job is no longer to spin delicate arabesques from an admired modernist source as he had done in *The Hours*. As he informs us in the acknowledgments, the new challenge is "trying to do a little more than one is technically able to" (308). We take this to include his attempt to connect, more obviously than he had done in *The Hours,* with the great American novel.

For some of the most remarkable individuals of the modernist American novel the internal movement described by Lukács translates into a doomed affirmation of being. Gertrude Stein's David Hersland, Jr. (*The Making of Americans*), Martin Eden, Edna Montpellier (*The Awakening*), and Claire Kendry (*Passing*), for example, all share the quest for an aliveness that capitalizes even further on the trademark alienation and fragmentation of the novel form. Stein's David pursues the immanence of being with exemplary persistence but, failing to transcend the body, he lets himself die of an intellectual anorexia similar to what Lukács called the "reduction of the soul." The protagonist of "In the Machine" shares a similar restlessness:

> What he wanted was the raucousness of the city, where people hauled their loads of corn or coal, where they danced to fiddles, wept or laughed, sold and begged and bartered, not always happily but always with a vigor that was what he meant, privately, by soul. It was a defiant, uncrushable aliveness.

From the beginning Cunningham latches his narrative onto the novel's traditional concern for individual lives and, as it progresses, registers an increased awareness of our disposable bodies after the 9/11 trauma. It opens under the sign of such saturnine awareness:

> Walt said that the dead turn into grass, but there was no grass where they'd buried Simon. He was with the other Irish on

> the far side of the river, where it was only dirt and gravel and names on stone. (3)

Cunningham begins with the enigma of the person and, with Whitman as a guide, interrogates the concept of person, of the materiality and mortality signaled by the term. Whitman is invoked as a transformative object that should channel the passive leanings toward the death instinct into a positive transgenerational feeling that transcends implosion and nihilism. Although he argues with the master, pitting his linguistic magic against an inert life bound for its own putrefaction ("dirt and gravel and names on stone"), Cunningham ultimately asks the master's poetry to operate as a bridge between his novel and a contemporary intellect the novelist does not trust.

3. Sense (and the novel), II

As mentioned earlier, Lukács saw intellectual alienation as a defining trait of the individual of the novel. Intellectual alienation pervades Cunningham's book.

Even the most cursory look at the "plot" will reveal that the author engages the epistemological shifts of our time (the self/other divide and the overthrow of dualisms, among them) but also cultivates a suspicious attitude toward them, as if they were formal enterprises destined to implode in an inane flirtation with the death drive. "The Children's Crusade" is dominated by a crude death instinct and "the goblin-faced," Whitman-declaiming Lucas of "In the Machine," with his "frail heart and mismatched eyes," morphs into an adolescent suicide bomber trained to fanaticism by an old woman called Walt Whitman. From loving companion of the oppressed, *Leaves of Grass* turns into the patriotic weapon in a crusade to purify the US. Catherine of part one (vaguely reminiscent of Dreiser's Carrie), in part two changes into Cat, a psychologist working for the NYPD. She illustrates a postmodern sensibility open to otherness and difference. In her intellectual pursuit of the enigma of the other (the child suicide

bomber's reasons) she goes to extremes and eventually crosses the line over to the enemy. But Cat is also a slave to the ephemeral values of her time and the old fears they produce, first of all the fear of not being someone, then the fear of not being looked at, of becoming invisible. As we move from part one to part two, Whitman's humanitarian embrace increasingly merges in the reader's mind with the Foucauldian vision of anonymous multitudes all imbricated in a network of power relations, and Whitman's dead filling the atmosphere and becoming grass are confused with Foucault's famous image of the face of man washed away on the sand. Cunningham's celebration of cultural hybridity (the questioning of the boundary between self/other, person/machine, enemy/family) is deflated by the persistence of the ego and identity. (The concern with "being someone" recurs throughout the narrative.) In the third part Cunningham negotiates the opposing wishes of transcendence and subjectivity through recourse to a science fiction tale about a tender bond between the humanoid Simon, who cannot fall prey to the seduction of an aggressive ego, and the alien Catareen, an ageless lizard. Programmed not to feel, this third Simon above all wants to be touched by "something like beauty."

As interesting as it might be, the hospitality of the novel for the ideas that bind us has its disturbing effects. Cunningham starts with modernism ("In the Machine") only to postmodernize it. In the process he displays an unease with contemporary intellect which at times verges on nihilistic abandon. The modernist hero of part one, Lucas, far from hating the machine, accepts it and humanizes it. Thus machines trade qualities with humans. They are "the others": they wait for us (35), are "gladdened by [our] touch" (74), wait "patiently through the night, singing…, thinking of [us]" (74). Progressively, he learns to appreciate an instinct for vanishing. Through Lucas, Cunningham celebrates a subject position suspended between presence and non-presence (81), a "giving [oneself] over" (81) that borders on death wish. (In the

end, the Whitman-loving Lucas will give himself over to the machine.)

The use of Whitman – with his gift for celebrating a heterogeneous reality – is far from problematic. But in giving us his poetry, Cunningham perhaps has the same intent of Emory, the maker of the third Simon. When the cyborg asks why his maker gave him poetry, referring to his Walt Whitman chip, his maker replies: "I could program you to be helpful and kind, but I wanted to give you some moral sense as well ... I thought that if you were programmed with the work of great poets, you'd be better able to appreciate the consequences of your actions" (281). It is precisely the ironic twists Cunningham applies to Whitman, combined with the persistent question about the status of person, that allows the novelist to imagine himself beyond a world of familiar ideas from which he nevertheless feels estranged and affirm a moral stance on the inviolability of "the living human body."

4. Borderlines

Many characters in the novel are pushed towards (and sometimes over) the edges of "normal behaviour." This is particularly true of the adolescent in his several avatars, all of them somehow physically flawed and with heightened sensitivities. This feature might be related to Cunningham's articulated view that "strangeness," "diversity" gives a different and more interesting perspective on the world. Especially in the first two parts, however, the kid's oddness has a chilling effect, even though Cunningham is very skilful in underplaying the destructive side of Lucas' madness (for example, the fact that he does actually, albeit unwittingly, kill his parents goes all but unnoticed in the hallucinatory atmosphere as the story draws to its tragic conclusion).

5. Seeds

The main function of the Whitman text throughout Cunningham's novel is that of a "seed" or a catalyst that stimulates the development of the characters' awareness, and offers, as it were, a structure around which their consciousness can thrive and make (partial) sense of an otherwise puzzling world. In Lucas' case, the text resurfacing in his confused mind does actually substitute what he has trouble to articulate, albeit in a misty and unsatisfactory way. In the second story, the text is ironically used as a wallpaper that paradoxically indoctrinates the would be terrorist children, in what appears to be a misguided and aberrant attempt of the whitmanian element to counter the de-humanising trends of industrial and post-industrial society. Finally, in the third part, the Whitman chip implanted in the cyborg gradually works its magic and transforms Simon from an artificial dispenser of strong and negative emotions, to a sensitive user of subtle and positive emotions. Incidentally, Cunningham seems to retrace with Simon the same path that Philip K. Dick blazed open in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Thus the parabola implied in the diachronic structure of the novel is completed: the life-threatening and de-humanising machines of the first part, thanks to the *fil rouge* of Whitman's poetry, turn, in the end, into a life-enhancing and progressively humanised ex-machine.

6. The Constant Bowl

In order to reinforce the function of poetry, as incarnated in *Leaves of Grass*, Cunningham broadens his thesis and clinches the three stories together using another object as a catalyst of emotions: the mysterious and beautiful bowl that serves as a constant love token in all the stories. Not only the object and its function are the same, but even its circumstances remain largely unvaried. Like the Grecian Urn, the well wrought bowl incarnates the power of the aesthetic object as a magic aid against the negative forces set out to destroy and alienate humans. This often

misunderstood and undervalued Holy Grail might be undecipherable, but its power is always recognised instinctively by Lucas, Cat and Simon when they chance to encounter it.

7. Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you

The theme of the other, with all the paradoxes and contradictions it implies, is crucial to understanding the three episodes. If, in *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison is "struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs … of *dismissive* 'othering' of people," Cunningham – probably echoing Whitman's attempt in "Song of Myself" to "acknowledge red,/yellow, white, playing/within [him]," – tries to find a language capable of evoking and enforcing hidden and not hidden signs of *admissive* 'othering' of people [our emphasis]. From the brothers' relationship of the first story to the mother/son of the second, and the friendship/love of the third, a great variety of human feelings are considered in their essential substance as well as in their infinitely diverse nuances. The 'othering' process is considered in its ability to overcome natural boundaries and limitations. In their attempt to stretch and reach toward the other, the main characters overcome death in the first episode, hate in the second, and differences in the third. This process is quite completely and literally fulfilled in the last story, where Simon renounces to leave toward a New World in order to assist his alien friend Catareen on her death bed; Catareen, on the other hand, seems almost to have hastened her own death in order to allow Simon to board the spaceship.

The way toward the other is described as a risky, demanding one and as being complexly marked by notions of identity. Lucas dies after having learned, by reading his dead brother's copy of *Leaves of Grass*, a new way of looking at the world and Cat has to abandon her previous job and identity in order to move a first step toward a new highly problematic motherhood.

"Who needs to be afraid of merge?" is one of Whitman's lines that interweave in the text, and that all 'othering' circumstances continually refer to, implicitly or explicitly. The question is reconsidered by Cunningham in a wider cultural sense, making it work both at an existential and textual level. As the narration develops, it can be easily connected to the concept of 'rewriting.' What is the boundary between 'me' and the 'other', between one text and an other? "Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." How ironic is Cunningham's voice in quoting this line?

The problem of reciprocity is posed in Cunningham's subtle, – implicit but quite manifest – style. If it is true that the dominant point of view is inevitably that of the main characters, it is also true that the *others* are highly impressive, unique characters and that, even simply at the most naive level, it is just not possible to continue reading without taking into consideration their own feelings and points of views as grotesquely exaggerated as they may be.

"Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." The line raises a series of interesting considerations culminating in the second episode when the child, referring to his act of terrorism says, "it is not murder if you do it with love." Blurring, confusion, questions, paradoxes – identity, the other, the machine – Whitman gives the hint and Cunningham goes on.

Many questions remain unanswered. To what extent do we have to rewrite ourselves in order to effectively relate with others? The persistence of a dominant side, is it unavoidable? Has the text – the canonic text – to be rewritten in order to effectively communicate with the contemporary reader? Where and how does the issue of identity – both existential and literal – join in?

8. Holding the book

Cunningham has been criticized for resisting teaching us how to read Whitman (Rafferty). True, his characters recite Whitman by rote (hence its promiscuous use), without necessarily understanding his poetry. But we find this withdrawal of *Leaves of*

Grass from the horizon of interpretation an interesting choice on Cunningham's part. Whitman here is a signifier, midway between Keats's language-giving urn and Stevens's punishing grey jar. It is not a text to understand but a book to hold lovingly. Reading is for Lucas an exclusive affective bond. Walt's book listens and responds as a familiar "you" would. As the term of an intimate colloquy in the face of a hostile external world, the book affords some sort of maternal tenderness. Besides the mother-child bond, the Lucas-Walt pair evokes other modern dyads – the two lovers, the psychoanalytic pair, Beckett's existential duos. But perhaps the strongest source for Cunningham's pair is the prelude of Wallace Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":

> And for what, except for you do I feel love?
> Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
> Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
> In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
> Equal in living changingness to the light
> In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
> For a moment in the central of our being,
> The vivid transparence that you bring is peace.

Stevens's "living changingness," the restless desire for the "vivid transparence" of being, is precisely the stuff of great American novels, and a figure for the "uncrushable aliveness" that consumes Cunningham's deformed protagonist.

The dyadic formation is asserted as the narrative progresses. Lucas declares: "I don't need school. I have Walt's book" (4). Later, we follow him as he "got into bed, on his own side" and "read the evening's passage":

> *I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation,*
> *Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,*
> *And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,*
> *Growing among black folks as among white,*

> *Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same,*
> *I receive the same.* (28)

The book instructs him about "the uniform hieroglyphic" of egalitarian social part-taking. Coming to an appreciation of Whitman from his love of the vitality of Woolf's women and of their "unsteady heart," Cunningham cannot quite accept the master's faith in language's Apollonian power to shape death into the multicultural hieroglyphic – exotic effigy of transgenerational sameness, of collective wholes of ones who give and receive the same. Death is death, despite the magic of language and its moral instinct to celebrate equality. Death. Democracy. Language. How intertwined are they?

9. It is often a matter of life and death

"TO DIE IS DIFFERENT FROM WHAT ANYONE SUPPOSES, AND LUCKIER": this is another example of a line from *Leaves of Grass* expressing many different, even opposite, feelings including the fear of a death-threatening message written on a wall.

All three episodes in *Specimen Days* end with a very Whitmanesque image of death resulting in or, at least, pointing to a new vision of life. At the beginning of the first story the other is already dead, in the second – the story set in the present – the other represents a constant threat to the protagonist's life and, therefore, in "The Children's Crusade" life and death coexist in a continuous tension, in the challenging and dramatic reality "of our strange, terrible times." This aspect constitutes one of Cunningham's most interesting innovative contribution to Whitman's poetics: life and death are not seen as parts of a cyclical vision but are inseparable in an upsetting image full of pathos. In the third story Simon often complains about the lack of "stroth": "I have this sense of a missing part. Some sort of, I don't know. Engagement. Aliveness. Catareen calls it stroth" (281). In the economy of the book it is interesting that this lack occurs in the episode set in the future, a time in which the

characters are ready to start "from Paumanock"(285), all over again, toward a new world, or, as in Simon's case, ready to resume the westward journey.

In the bomb explosion in the second episode the line "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" sounds highly ironic, and, in the third, the lack of "aliveness" results in a sort of Barthian 'end of the road.' Nevertheless, life resumes and is seen as a neverending process synthesized by the idea "of a life after life," which seems quite an interesting overcoming of Whitman's image of a life continually springing out of death. In this perspective Whitman's discovery that "to die is different from what anyone supposes, and luckier," seems to have been translated by Cunningham in "to live is different from what anyone supposes, and more unfortunate." But only in the present, even the troubled and unsettled present of the second story, is life fully alive and emotionally safe.

10. Iconographies of the past and of the present

As suggested earlier, the representation of the machine is symptomatic of Cunningham's technique of postmodernizing modernism. This is done in two ways. Firstly, by grafting a contemporary epistemological model onto a late nineteenth-century scenario. Thus, for example, while belonging to the Gramscian world of fordist alienation, the beauty and seduction of the machine also conjure Foucault's labyrinth of power relations in which we are all implicated. Secondly, the juggling of historical past and intellectual present is effected by iconographic links. Thus, the portrait of Lucas's deteriorated, ravaged father, who "sat as he did, in his chair by the window with the machine at his side" (34), echoes the face in Lucas's dream, with eyes "like blackpools" and its "skin stretched taut over its skull" (53), and, in turn, both allude to a contemporary iconography of illness. At the peak of the AIDS epidemics, the health of people infected with the virus deteriorated, just like the health of Lucas's father in the age of fordism, because of an "institutionalized neglect"

which took the forms of various prejudices (Crimp 118). In the past as in the present, the wasted body must be exhibited under everybody's objectifying gaze, the coerced witness of the social violence of the gaze. From modernism through postmodernism social neglect reigns. In Cunningham's novel modernist themes seem to validate the persistence of the humanist question of the person against our society's flaunting of institutional neglect.

11. Getaway

Cunningham does not play exclusively with literary genres in the fleshing out of his stories. In the second and, above all, in the third part he uses effectively also cinematographic topoi to enliven his narrative. Besides the atmosphere of the detective thriller exploited in "The Children's Crusade," it is especially in "Like Beauty" that the novelist unleashes his cinemimetic skills, paying homage to one of the most revered movie effects: the dynamic getaway scene (complete with Bruce Springsteen's *Born to Run* score) in which Simon and Catareen narrowly and spectacularly escape being zapped by the Infinitidot drones and make their way towards the West, out of the impersonally repressive regime of Old New York.

12. Riding into the sunset

After the "on the road" parenthesis of their trip to Denver and the dramatic denouement of the story, Cunningham uses another Hollywood stereotype to underscore (ironically?) Simon's definitive conversion from cyborg to human hero, having him ride into the sunset like many a Lone Ranger in Western movies. After having driven nuclear powered cars, overpods, trailers and having just missed a powerful, albeit homemade, rocket to outer space, "[a] pure change happened. He felt it buzzing through his circuits. He had no name for it," and Simon completes his metamorphosis riding the horse "through the long grass toward the mountains" and quoting Whitman one last time to cheer himself on.

NOTES

[1] After Lukács, Benedict Anderson will explain such illusionary coherence in terms of the novel's projection of an "imagined community."

[2] For more recent critical sources on the novel, apart from the volumes collected under the title *Il Romanzo*, edited by Franco Moretti, see David Minter's survey in vol. VI of *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Prose Writing 1910-1950*, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch, 1-281. An excellent manual for students is Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel*. For a collection on different critical approaches to the American novel, see Peter Messent, *New Readings of the American Novel: Narrative Theory and its Application*.

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