8. Back in Camden

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Walt Whitman's Western Jaunt.

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

Though I would not have dared to gather the various pieces of the following book in a single volume with a generic name unless I felt the strong inward thread of spinality running through all the pieces and giving them affinity-purpose—I yet realize that the collection is indeed a melange and its cohesion and singleness of purpose not so evident at first glance.

"Autobiographical Notes," 1882
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Whitman wrote to John Burroughs on 23 November that he would probably leave St. Louis after another ten days, “but I am not fixed,” he added. Actually, it would be another six weeks before he would get away. Burroughs’s next letter to him, on 29 December, contained a hundred-dollar “Christmas Remembrance” from an unnamed donor (James T. Fields). Whitman may have thought the money was from R. M. Bucke who had in early November offered him that same amount as a gift or as a loan, an offer he had rejected. On this later occasion he accepted the money gratefully, writing to Burroughs on January 2: “Believe me, I feel the gift, & it comes just right too.” Whether he actually needed the money to get back to Camden remains a question. Forney’s railroad passes had been for himself and friends “from Philadelphia to St. Louis and back.” Since he was no longer with Forney he probably had to pay his own way, as had the others, for the last leg of the homeward trip. That weekend, at any rate, he began preparations to leave Jeff’s house. He departed St. Louis on Sunday morning at eight o’clock, 4 January.

The backtracking journey home, though largely over the same rail routes he had taken going west, must have contrasted bleakly with the trip four months earlier when he was one of the “referees” for a companionable group. Another difference was that this time the stretch east of Pittsburgh was by daylight. He took in the sights, jotting down notes on the passing scenes:
through Pennsylvania [sic] / Jan 5 '80 [strikeover] by the RR / from Pittsburgh to / Altoonah, Harrisburgh [sic] / the fertile broken country, / the mining & coal interests / every where — the ? [sic] / — the beautiful-Conema and the Juniata river / — Altoonah — the / [rocky crossed out] / [& crossed out] wooded & rocky / land, so healthy & / pure-air'd, with creeks / or ragged threads of / rivulets every where / — the perpetual clusters / of houses in shelter'd / places, along the mountains5

Another set of jottings:

— the paths, fences, / [two strikeovers] orchards — at long / intervals, a grave yard / — horse-shoe curve / — school houses not so / plenty, as far west — / — some of the mountain / scenery. [strike- / over] very bold and / [strikeover] / — Pennsylvania / [state crossed out] land of amplitude and / varied industries / land of mountains and / health & pure air / — land of coal & iron / & railroads6

Whitman’s train arrived in West Philadelphia at 7:20 Monday evening, 5 January.7 Soon he was back in his other brother’s house in Camden. That Wednesday the Camden Daily Post had a front-page story headlined “Walt Whitman Home Again.” It was probably written by the poet himself:

After an absence since last August [sic] Walt Whitman returned yesterday [sic] to his home in Camden, from a long and varied journey through the Central States of the Union. His travel has been mainly devoted to Colorado, Kansas and Missouri, but he has made visits to four or five other states. His objects of especial attention have been the Rocky Mountains, the Great Plains, and the Mississippi River, with their life, scenery and idiosyncrasies. Of the West generally he says not the half has been told. He is in love with Denver City, and speaks admiringly of Missouri and Indiana.

Going and coming, largely by different routes with side excursions, Mr. Whitman has travelled over 5000 miles, and considers the trip the most valuable revelation of his life. He has not yet written out his impressions and notes, but will soon do so. After some pretty rugged experiences, and a tedious fit of sickness, he returns to Camden in his average health, and with strength and spirits “good enough to be mighty thankful for,” as he expresses it.8

Despite the “tedious fit of sickness” in St. Louis, the over-all trip was greatly rewarding to Whitman. Something of his pleasure in it
may be inferred from his already-noted sending of maps, school-boy fashion, showing John Burroughs, Anne Gilchrist, and the others how far west he had traveled. The jaunt bolstered his self-esteem. He had gone west first-class, and had been treated as a distinguished visitor at Bismarck Grove and in several cities.

The publicity helped too. The interviews, real and contrived; the numerous descriptions of “the venerable poet” with his open collar; the reports of his wanderings—“Walt Whitman is doing the Rocky Mountains”; the reported plans for a new book—all this in Forney’s Progress, in the Philadelphia Press, in Geist’s New Era, and in several other papers—all this, part genuine reportage, part self-advertisement, undoubtedly helped Whitman’s book sales the next year. As Edwin Haviland Miller has shown (with Whitman’s bank book as evidence), the poet in 1880 “sold his books with more success than he had experienced since 1876,” and “turned himself about economically.”

The western jaunt produced little new poetry immediately identifiable with it. His “Spirit That Form’d This Scene,” “The Prairie States,” “Italian Music in Dakota,” and “What Best I See in Thee” are the chief poetic expressions of the experience. But, as Gay Wilson Allen has observed, the trip confirmed a sense of the West he had already explored in his poetry. He thought himself that the images of the West “tallied” with his imaginings, and he was pleased to see “how truthfully he had represented in his poetry the vastness, the life, the soil and the rankness of the West.”

And, much as Whitman’s western experience put him directly in touch with a portion of his poetic catalogs, so also it drew him into a dramatic historical context again. The Silver Wedding at Bismarck Grove invoked Free Soil and the even larger movement of westward expansion—a “passage to India.” And though the frontier was gone, the West was abuilding via the railroads, and he had for a time been witness to all that:

“Always, after supper, take a walk half a mile long,” says an old proverb, dryly adding, “and if convenient let it be upon your own land.” I wonder does any other nation but ours afford opportunity for such a jaunt as this? Indeed has any previous period afforded it? No one, I discover, begins to know the real geographic,
democratic, indissoluble American Union in the present, or suspect it in the future, until he explores these Central States, and dwells awhile observantly on their prairies, or amid their busy towns, and the mighty father of waters. A ride of two or three thousand miles, “on one’s own land,” with hardly a disconnection, could certainly be had in no other place than the United States, and at no period before this. If you want to see what the railroad is, and how civilization and progress date from it—how it is the conqueror of crude nature, which it turns to man’s use, both on small scales and on the largest—come hither to inland America.12

Though the jaunt yielded only a few poems, it did, of course, provide material for his projected book of prose. On his return home he was, as his last note on the trip has it, “Stored with exhaustless recollections.”13 With those recollections and with daybook jottings and other notes, he now had a whole new set of American materials for his next book.

In “A Happy Hour’s Command,” the opening section of Specimen Days, the poet tells us that on 2 July 1882, “down in the woods” on a fine day, he heard within the call to begin work to make a book out of his “huddle of diary-jottings, war-memoranda of 1862–65, Nature-notes of 1877–81, with Western and Canadian observations afterwards, all bundled up and tied by a big string.”14 That very hour he sensed the command, he said,

—to go home, untie the bundle, reel out diary-scraps and memorandum, just as they are, large or small, one after another, into print-pages, and let the melange’s lackings and wants of connection take care of themselves. It will illustrate one phase of humanity anyhow; how few of life’s days and hours (and they not by relative value or proportion, but by chance) are ever noted. Probably another point too, how we give long preparations for some object, planning and delving and fashioning, and then, when the actual hour of doing arrives, find ourselves still quite unprepared, and tumble the thing together, letting hurry and crudeness tell the story better than fine work. At any rate I obey my happy hour’s command, which seems curiously imperative. May-be, if I don’t do anything else, I shall send out the most wayward, spontaneous, fragmentary book ever printed.15

Whitman’s “happy hour’s command” in July is, of course, a fic-
tion. It is true that on 20 June he had written to Rees Welsh, his publisher, that *Specimen Days and Thoughts* (as it was at first titled) was “mostly in ms.” But as early as 21 March he had written to Osgood, his previous publisher, that the book was “about got into shape.” By 19 July he had “made a start” getting the work to the printers, and by 23 July was reading first page proofs. In other words, though he may have earlier put aside work on a book he had perhaps planned during his St. Louis stay (or even before, recalling his letter to Anne Gilchrist about a small book of nature jottings), his return to that work was a much more calculated step than the “command” in the woods reveals.

And there is authorial pretense, surely, in Whitman’s statement that he would “reel out” his materials “just as they are, large or small, one after another, into print-pages, and let the melange’s lackings and wants of connection take care of themselves.” The waywardness in the western sections of *Specimen Days* derives not from such spontaneity but from Whitman’s attempt to reconstruct his “diary-scraps and memoranda.” In that attempt he was not always a good editor, as when he gives Topeka as the site of the Old Settlers’ meeting, or when he misdates the Grant paragraph, or lets stand such an incongruity as “now, and from what I have seen and learn’d since.”

The other deliberate care that Whitman gave his western materials was to shape them to fit an almost fictional version of the trip that would enhance his reputation. Hence the suggestion of traveling alone, another Bayard Taylor roaming the storied West, and the omission of all references to the special hospitality and services he received by virtue of the status of his companions. Hence the carefully prepared “impromptu lines” and “hastily pencill’d” speeches and the as carefully placed “interviews.”

In Whitman’s revamping of his notes we see other pretenses—of visiting Leadville, of spending several days exploring Denver after a day’s excursion in the mountains, and of having an old “floricultural friend,” the coreopsis, follow him “from Barnegat to Pike’s Peak.” And, appropriate to the character he wishes to project (a persona, practically), he reports mainly in this section the smiling aspects of western American life. Of the two cats who took the same walk in his
fable for the St. Louis school-children, he is the cat whose habit of mind was to report the wonderful. For what there was of the “grim” and the unpleasant, we need to consult his daybook and his letters.\textsuperscript{20}

Writing about Bucke’s biography of Whitman, published in 1883, the year after \textit{Specimen Days}, Gay Wilson Allen notes that Whitman admitted he wrote the sketch in the book of his ancestry and early life. Allen then observes the “several glaring inaccuracies” in the sketch:

For example, Whitman was said to have spent a whole year in New Orleans (actually only two months), and in an introductory chronological table (which may or may not have been written by Whitman) this was given as having taken place in 1848–1849. In general the poet’s travels and his knowledge of American life were exaggerated, and much of his journalistic experience passed over in silence. His editorship of the Brooklyn \textit{Times} was not mentioned at all, or his earlier editing of New York papers. It is difficult to understand how Whitman’s memory could have tricked him so egregiously about the New Orleans sojourn, but the omissions could easily have been accidental. Probably Whitman wrote this sketch in haste, without attempting to verify the facts; yet it is difficult not to suspect that he deliberately stretched the period of his stay in the deep South. This may be a minor detail, but it shows that the poet was willing to make some adjustments in the facts in order to present his biography as he wished it to be.\textsuperscript{21}

“Adjustments in the facts” are as evident in Whitman’s account of his western jaunt as in his account of his southern one. So too are the errors he acknowledges as probable in his rushing copy to the printer that hot summer of 1882. The attempt here, then, has been to restore certain particulars to the record of his historic trip so that we might understand even better the “authentic glints, specimen-days” of a great poet’s life.\textsuperscript{22}