Walt Whitman's Western Jaunt

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Walt Whitman’s 1879 trip to the West—first to Kansas, then on to Denver and the Rockies—was made late in his life, when he was sixty, after most of his truly creative work had been accomplished. During the seventies he had published *Democratic Vistas* (1871) and the fifth edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1871–72). Early in 1873 he had had a paralytic stroke, and that year (the same year in which his mother died) he had moved from Washington, D.C., to his brother George’s house in Camden, New Jersey, the city that was to be his permanent address for the rest of his life. There he had managed to bring out a special issue (the Author’s Edition) of *Leaves of Grass* to mark the nation’s centennial. He had had no role, however, in the ceremonies of the International Exhibition, the centennial celebration at neighboring Philadelphia. As Robert Scholnick demonstrates, that year a British-American debate, generated by Whitman himself, on whether he was a persecuted poet, had brought him a flurry of publicity that helped sell the commemorative issue and led to the widening of his readership. By the time he headed for Kansas, though he was far from being the people’s poet that, say, Whittier was, he was not without recognition in his own country.

By 1879, though Whitman’s main poetic statements had been made, his writing career was far from over. A year after the trip he would bring out the sixth edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1881), in which he would give his poems their final arrangement. *Specimen Days* and *Collect* would come out in 1882, *November Boughs* in 1888, *Goodbye My Fancy* in 1891, and the so-called Deathbed Edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1891–92.

The western jaunt yielded very little poetry, though it confirmed (“tallied with”), Whitman thought, the ideas and images of the West he had earlier presented in *Leaves of Grass*. Only four poems in the 1881 edition may be assigned specifically to the trip: “Italian Music in Dakota,” “The
Prairie States,” “Spirit That Form’d This Scene,” and “What Best I See in Thee” (written in St. Louis). “A Prairie Sunset” (1888) is a later recollection.

Whitman, of course, describes his trip in Specimen Days. It has been studied in detail by Robert R. Hubach in his Indiana University dissertation, “Walt Whitman and the West” (1943). A brief account is in Gay Wilson Allen’s Solitary Singer (1955). What I attempt in this new study is a thorough review of the trip in the light of more recent scholarship. With the publication of Whitman’s daybooks and notebooks now supplementing his collected correspondence, and with a definitive and annotative edition of Specimen Days available, a further inquiry seems justified.

We can now reconstruct much of Whitman’s western experience, including a fairly well-detailed itinerary, and compare it with his account in Specimen Days. This study in part constitutes a criticism of the sections of that book dealing with the West by examining the ways in which Whitman reordered his experiences to have them support a bardic pose he wished to maintain. It also shows him very much his own press agent, writing his own interviews, and sending back to the press in the East promotional accounts of his whereabouts, his health, and his plans. To demonstrate the extent of these matters I risk repetitiveness in relying on numerous, sometimes similar, quotations.

One omission in Specimen Days that is left mainly unrepaired in earlier studies is Whitman’s failure to report his traveling companions. Both Hubach and Allen note that Whitman traveled with the Philadelphia publisher John W. Forney; and Hubach quotes newspaper items containing the names of Whitman’s other fellow-travelers: J. M. W. Geist, E. K. Martin, and W. W. Reitzel. But that is all. What makes Whitman’s companions important and deserving of further attention here is the fact that, except for Reitzel, they were all correspondents for Pennsylvania newspapers, and their reports of the trip (and of the poet) are rewarding. In this study I fully restore them to the record.