WALT WHITMAN'S 1879 VISIT
TO
MISSOURI, KANSAS, AND COLORADO
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Walt Whitman first visited the Mississippi River valley in 1848, going down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to and returning from New Orleans via steamboat, and he even spent a few hours walking around St. Louis on his return trip, while waiting to change boats. Thirty-one years later, Whitman passed through St. Louis again, spending the night of September 12, 1879, there, this time headed further west, first to Kansas and later to Colorado. He had left Philadelphia by train on September 10, accompanied by Colonel John W. Forney, a prominent Philadelphia publisher; both men had been invited to address a Kansas Quarter Century Centennial Celebration at Lawrence. Much of the rest of September he traveled in the region between St. Louis and Denver, but for the remainder of 1879 and the first few days of 1880, Whitman lived with his favorite brother, Jeff, and family in St. Louis. Twenty years old and in poor health because of his stroke six years earlier, as well as the stresses of travel, Whitman gradually recovered some vigor in pleasant family surroundings; using $100 provided by a generous friend back East, he left St. Louis on January 4, 1880, returning by train to his home in Camden, New Jersey, across the Delaware River from Philadelphia.

Whitman had not gone on to San Francisco, as he had wished, and in fact had gotten no farther west than Leadville, Colorado, hardly one hundred miles beyond Denver. But according to Whitman's foremost biographer, Gay Wilson Allen, "Emotionally this trip was one of the most thrilling experiences of his life, ..." He had finally made "a trip which he had dreamed of for many years—indeed, in his early poems had often made in his imagination." Nor did the reality of the West disappoint Whitman, beginning perhaps with the sunsets: in St. Louis and elsewhere. Some of Whitman's autograph notes from the trip, now in the Philip Ashton Rollins Collection of Western Americana at The Princeton University Library, include this description:

Impressive sunsets
Three beautiful sunsets—over an hour each time.
One in Illinois west of Columbus; [probably Columbus, Ill., across the river from St. Louis]
one at Tower [Grove] Park St. Louis, and one crossing west Missouri.
The golden sun & light blue clouds.
On September 19, in Denver, he also wrote his sister-in-law, Louisa Whitman, "I have seen the mountains just before sunset--It was only ten minutes but I shall never forget it..." Because of such experiences, Allen says that "for the remainder of his life [Whitman] never tired of talking about his trip West." Certainly his memories of those Western sunsets were the foundation of his 1888 poem, "A Prairie Sunset":

Shot gold, maroon and violet, dazzling silver, emerald, fawn,
The earth's whole amplitude and Nature's multif orm power
consign'd for once to colors:
The light, the general air possess'd by them--colors till now unknown,
No limit, confine--not the Western sky alone--the high meridian--North, South, all,
Pure luminous color fighting the silent shadows to the last.

Yet only rarely did Whitman's 1879 Western sojourn result in poetry.

Whitman had long since visited the West in his imagination, as amply demonstrated by such poems as "Starting from Paumanok" (1855), "Facing West from California's Shores," "The Prairie-Grass Dividing," "A Promise to California," "Our Old Foliage" (1868), the popular "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" (1865), and "Passage to India" (1871), especially Section 3 with its references to the geography and topography of the Trans-Mississippi West. (Martha Scott Trumble ably surveys Whitman's poetic references to the West in her essay, "The Westerning of Walt Whitman"; she estimates (p. 45) that Whitman "evokes the frontier, western sights, images, and individuals, and the qualities or characteristics identifiable primarily with the American West" in about one-fifth of the poems included at one time or another in Leaves of Grass. In fact, as Edwin Pussell demonstrates in Frontier: American Literature and the American West, Whitman had for most of his literary career considered himself a poet of the West.) And it is easy to see familiar, often stereotypical, features of the West in Whitman's writing, both poetry and prose, with constant emphasis on democracy, freedom, opportunity, fortitude, expansiveness, inclusiveness, newness, individuality, and the like. ("Song of Myself" and "Democratic Vistas" are two obvious cases in point here.) During Whitman's lifetime, which began in 1819, the West--or the frontier, at least--was constantly moving, until 1890, two years before his death, when the U. S. Bureau of Census declared it closed. But except in his imagination, Whitman never visited the true, raw, "wild West." In 1848 he floated comfortably on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers by steamboat, and in 1879 he went West by railway train, heaping praise on the sleeping car, "with perfect bedding and fare," despite experiencing a wreck on the way out. Civilization's representatives and machinery had already driven out many of the manifestations of wilderness by the time Whitman finally arrived in the West. The buffalo of which he had written in "Song of Paumanok"
wrote his sister-in-law, Louisa, just before sunset—it was only nine o'clock. Because of such expertise of his life Whitman never doubted his memories of the inspiration of his 1888 poem. "A dazzling silver, emerald, fawn, 
d Nature's multiform power 
was'd by them—colors till now 
then sky alone—the high 
ill, 
s silent shadows to the last, 

Instead, what most impressed Whitman was the least changeable aspect of the West—its topography. The man who could write of the unfathomable mysteries in a blade of grass was of course greatly moved by the immense natural displays of the West, even if viewed most often from a train window. Whitman rode the train from St. Louis to Kansas City, changed trains, and went on to Lawrence, Kansas, arriving the night of September 13. He stayed there in the home of Judge John P. Usher, the Lawrence mayor, and also visited in the Topeka area, touring extensively around Topeka in a carriage during September 15-17. However, Whitman became so engrossed in a dinner conversation at Judge Usher's that he missed his scheduled time to deliver a poem or speak at what he called "The Kansas State Silver Wedding;" thus the original purpose of the poet's trip west was never accomplished. On the 18th Whitman boarded the train for Denver arriving on the evening of September 19. From Denver Whitman made some day excursions by train, notably to the Platte River canyon above Denver, to Leadville, Kenosha Pass, and South Park. He left Denver on the morning of September 23, travelling south on the Rio Grande railroad, past Pike's Peak; of that already famous mountain he wrote: "I took a long look at Pike's peak, and was a little disappointed. (I suppose I had expected something stunning.)" Arriving in Pueblo, Colorado, he boarded an Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe train bound east, down the Arkansas River valley. He got to Sterling, Kansas, on the 24th and spent that night with a Civil War friend and family before going on to Kansas City. After a few days there, Whitman returned to St. Louis, repeating the train route he had used going west. A month later, still in St. Louis, he traced the routes of his western travels on railroad maps which he enclosed in letters to two friends, John Burroughs and Mrs. Anne Gilchrist. The excitement aroused by the trip is reflected in Whitman's surviving letters to his relatives and friends, as in this excerpt from the November 10, 1879, letter to Mrs. Gilchrist:
...Two months ago I started off (make or break) on a long journey west—have been to the Rocky Mountains (2000 miles) and Denver city, & Colorado generally with Kansas and Missouri—wonders, revelations I wouldn't have missed for my life, the great central area 2000 miles square, the Prairie States, the real America I find. (I find that I wasn't realizing it before) ... 19

Within two years after his return to the East, Whitman converted many of his notes and memories of this "real America" to twenty-nine brief essays, usually single paragraphs. Published as part of Specimen Days (1882), in these selections Whitman repeatedly exclaims in wonder at what he saw:

One wants new words in writing about these plains, and all the Inland American West—the terms, far, large, vast, &c. are insufficient (p. 218).

But perhaps as I gaze around me the rarest sight of all is in atmospheric hues. The prairies—as I cross'd them in my journey hither—and these mountains and parks, seem to me to afford new lights and shades. Everywhere the aerial gradations and sky-effects inimitable; nowhere else such perspectives, such transparent lilacs and grays. I can conceive of some superior landscape painter, some fine colorist, after sketching awhile out here, discarding all his previous work ... (p. 214)

Talk, I say again, of going to Europe, of visiting the ruins of feudal castles, or Coliseum remnants, or kings' palaces—when you can come here. The alternations one gets, too; after the Illinois and Kansas prairies of a thousand miles—smooth and easy areas of the corn and wheat of ten million democratic farms in the future—here start up in every conceivable presentation of shape, these non-utilitarian piles, coping the skies, emanating a beauty, terror, power, more than Dante or Angelo ever knew (pp. 213-4).

Talk as you like, a typical Rocky Mountain cañon, or a limitless sea-like stretch of the great Kansas or Colorado plains, under favoring circumstances, tallies, perhaps expresses, certainly awakes, those grandest and subllest element—emotions in the human soul, that all the marble temples and sculptures from Phidias to Thorwaldsen—all painting, poems, reminiscences, or even music, probably never can (p. 211).

But it was in the Platte River canyon, ten miles from Denver, that the Western landscape most emphatically moved Whitman. In a single,
characteristically long sentence, he proclaimed:

"I have found the law of my own poems," was the unspoken but more-and-more decided feeling that came to me as I pass'd, hour after hour, amid all this grim yet joyous elemental abandon—this plenitude of material, entire absence of art, untrammeled play of primitive Nature—the chasm, the gorge, the crystal mountain stream, repeated scores, hundreds of miles—the broad handling and absolute uncrampedness—the fantastic forms, bathed in transparent browns, faint reds and grays, towering sometimes a thousand, sometimes two or three thousand feet high—at their tops now and then huge masses polished, and mixing with the clouds, with only their outlines, hazed in misty lilac, visible (pp. 210-1).

Later in Specimen Days, Whitman wrote, "Grand as the thought that doubtless the child is already born who will see a hundred millions of people, the most prosperous and advanced of the world, inhabiting these Prairies, the great Plains, and the valley of the Mississippi, I could not help thinking it would be grander still to see all those inimitable American areas fused in the alembic of a perfect poem, or other aesthetic work, entirely western, fresh and limitless—altogether our own, without a trace or taste of Europe's soil, reminiscence, technical letter or spirit" (p. 219). Unfortunately, he never managed to create that "perfect poem" about the West, or even much poetry at all about it after his 1879 trip. There is the 1888 "Prairie Sunset" poem quoted earlier, and this 1881 poem, clearly based on his Platte River canyon vision:

Spirit That Form'd This Scene
Written in Platte Canyon, Colorado.

Spirit that form'd this scene,
These tumbled rock-piles grim and red.
These reckless heaven-ambitious peaks,
These gorges, turbulent-clear streams, this naked freshness,
These formless wild arrays, for reasons of their own,
I know thee, savage spirit—we have communed together.
Mine too such wild arrays, for reasons of their own.
Was't charged against my chents they had forgotten art?
To fuse within themselves its rules precise and delicateness?
The lyrist's measured beat, the wrought-out temple's grace-
column and polish'd arch forgot?
But thou that revellest here—spirit that form'd this scene,
They have remembered thee.

Otherwise, only a few minor poems resulted from this Western visit,
such as "The Prairie States" (March 1880) and perhaps "Italian Music in Dakota" (1881). However, in some ways Whitman's most interesting writing from the trip is in his notes in the Rollins Collection, and the transmutation of three of their eleven pages into a part of a single paragraph, entitled "The Prairie and Great Plains in Poetry," in Specimen Days:

Everywhere something characteristic—the cactuses, pinks, buffalo grass, wild sage—the receding perspective, and the far circle-line of the horizon all times of day, especially forenoon—the clear, pure, cool, rarefied nutriment for the lungs, previously quite unknown—the black patches and streaks left by surface-conflagrations—the deep-plough'd furrow of the "fire-guard"—the slanting snow-racks built all along to shield the railroad from winter drifts—the prairie-dogs and the herds of antelope—the curious "dry rivers"—occasionally a "dug-out" or corral—Fort Riley and Fort Wallace—those towns of the northern plains, (like ships on the sea,) Eagle-Tail, Coyote, Cheyenne, Agate, Monotony, Kit Carson—with ever the ant-hill and the buffalo-wallow—ever the herds of cattle and the cow-boys ("cow-punchers") to me a strangely interesting class, bright-eyes as hawks, with their swarthy complexions and their broad-brimmed hats—apparently always on horseback, with loose arms slightly raised and swinging as they ride (p. 219).

The basis for many of the details in the foregoing can be seen in the Rollins Collection notes (manuscript page numbers in parentheses):

Friday Sept 19 '79
On the Plains (western edge of Kansas, on to Colorado)—plains—plains—plains

The Dug-outs
antelope
the Prairie-Dog
emigrant wagons

camped for the night
The vast stretching plains
hundreds of miles area

The buffalo grass
The yellow wild flowers
The clear, pure,
cool, rarified air
(over 3000 ft above sea level)
The dry rivers (ms. p. 3)
(1860) and perhaps "Italian

ian's most interesting writing
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s into a part of a single para-
Plains in Poetry," in Specimen

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road from winter drifts—the 
telope— the curious "dry 
out" or corral—Fort Riley and 
the northern plains, (like 
Coyote, Cheyenne, Agate—
ver the ant-hill and the buffalo-
le and the cow-boys ("cow-
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y on horseback, with loose 
ing as they ride (p. 219). 23
a foregoing can be seen in the 
ge numbers in parentheses):

Kansas, on to Colorado)--

Tomahawks
Monotony— Eagle Tail after a Chief
Mirage 
see mirages train of cars
Agate 
signs of fires
a cedar woods, ridge
the long furrow for fire-guard
an occasional corral 

The ant-hill
the buffalo wallow
—The cow boys ("cow punchers") to me
a wonderfully interesting class
--clear swarthy complexion—with broad brimmed hats—their
loose arms
slightly raised & swinging as they ride—their splendid eyes—
(Fra Diavolo and his men in the opera)
--a herd of horses numbering 200

(ms. p. 7)

Whitman also described the Plains and the cowboys in a letter to 
Peter Doyle on November 5, 1879:

But the most interesting part of my travels has been the 
Plains, (the great American Desert the old geographies 
call it, but it is no desert) largely through Colorado and 
Western Kansas, all flat, hundreds & even thousands of 
miles—some real good, nearly all pretty fair soil, all 
for stock raising, thousands of herds of cattle, some 
very large—the herdsmen, (the principal common em-
ployment) a wild hardy race, always on horseback, they 
call 'em cow-boys altogether—I used to like to get 
among them & talk with them ... 24

Here are clearly the details, the raw materials, for a fine 
poem that Whitman might have written about the Great Plains and 
its most characteristic inhabitants during the 1870's. Instead, all 
we have are these notes, these lines from a letter, and part of a 
prose piece. Much the same was the fate of the rest of Whitman's 
experiences in the West: notes, letters, a few short poems, plus 
the prose pieces in Specimen Days. He seems to have treated those 
experiences rather as he wrote at the bottom of page 17 of the Rollins 
Collection notes: "Stored with exhaustless recollections."

Clearly Whitman's 1879 visit to the West had been of major 
importance to him personally (as witnessed, for instance, by his 
Platte River canyon declaration, "I have found the law of my own 
poems"), but the visit was not to result in a major work of American 
literature. Busy with many other interests and projects, including 
a tour of eastern Canada in 1880 and two more editions of Leaves of
Grass, Walt Whitman was never to write the "perfect poem" about the American West. And he was never again to visit the West, except in his "exhaustless recollections."
write the "perfect poem" about
for again to visit the West,
ons.

Notes


6Allen, p. 488.

7Allen, p. 488.

8Whitman, "Autograph Notes .... ", Rollins, ms. p. 2. This and all other quotations from the same manuscript are used with the kind permission of The Princeton University Library and Alfred L. Bush, Curator, The Princeton Collections of Western Americans.

9Letter 935, Whitman, Correspondence, ed. Miller, III: 165.

10Allen, p. 489.


16Whitman, "Autograph Notes . . .", Rollins, ms. p. 1; Stephen F. Smart was General Traveling Agent for the Kansas Pacific Railway, cf. Whitman, Daybooks and Notebooks, ed. White, I: 158.


18Both maps survived—the one sent to Burroughs is reproduced in Clara Barrus, Whitman and Burroughs: Comrades (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931; reprinted Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1968), facing p. 188.

19Letter 940, Whitman, Correspondence, ed. Miller, III: 169. See also Letters 934-936 to Louisa Orr Whitman and Letter 939 to Peter Doyle.

20Pages cited are from Whitman, Prose Works 1892, ed. Stovall, I (Specimen Days).


23This parallel is also discussed, in somewhat different form, by Walter H. Eitner, "Some Further Autograph Notes of Whitman’s 1879 Western Trip," Walt Whitman Review, 26 (March 1980), pp. 20-21.

24Letter 939, Whitman, Correspondence, ed. Miller, III: 168.