

## THE GHOST OF WHITMAN IN NERUDA AND BORGES

In attempting his lucid overview of the history of the presence of Walt Whitman in Spanish America, Professor Fernando Alegria of Stanford University had to come to grips with a question that inevitably haunts Hispanists as they assiduously delve into poets of the Spanish language and try to come up with something that might convincingly be identified as an "influence" of such a magisterial and protean poet as Walt Whitman in the poets Pablo Neruda and Jorge Luis Borges. Professor Alegria's bafflement before his task might well serve as a starting point for my own comments:

To study Whitman in Spanish American poetry is to trace the wanderings of a ghost that is felt everywhere and seen in no place. His verses are quoted with doubtful accuracy by all kinds of critics; poets of practically all tendencies have been inspired by his message and have either written sonnets celebrating his genius or repeated his very words with a somewhat candid self-denial.

We have to start, therefore, with the fact that Whitman undergoes a sea-change as he enters the imagination of a poet in Spanish; not only that, what they know of Whitman is very much to the point, what they do not know or choose to ignore in *their* vision of Whitman is even more to the point. Without having made an exhaustive survey of the matter, I would say that *Song of Myself*, *Calamus*, "Salut au Monde," "Song of the Open Road," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and "When Lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" have attained, with a few others, almost canonic status in Spanish, whereas *Drum-Taps* and most of the prose, above all *Democratic Vistas* offer the figure of Whitman which is not at all contradictory to the first canonic Whitman, but which does not quite jibe in all respects, and is thus not perceived with the same intensity. For instance, in the essay entitled "Whitman, Poet of America" by the contemporary Mexican poet Octavio Paz, we find such sentences as the following: "Whitman can sing with full confidence and innocence democracy on the march because the Utopia of America is confounded and is indistinguishable

from American reality. The poetry of Whitman is a great prophetic dream, but it is a dream within another dream, a prophecy within another even more vast which feeds it. America dreams itself in Whitman's poetry because it itself is dream. And it dreams itself as a concrete reality, almost physical, with its men, its rivers, its cities and its mountains . . . America dreams itself in Whitman because it is dream, pure creation. Before and after Whitman we have had other poetic dreams. All of them — be they called Poe or Darío, Melville or Emily Dickinson — are, more precisely, attempts to escape the American nightmare."

Well, this is one way of putting it. But I want to emphasize to you that as we enter into the world of poetry in Spanish, I do not wish, nor do I feel competent, to compare such a comment as that of Octavio Paz with the multiple, contradictory and unseizable literary reality that is Walt Whitman; I just want to tell you as clearly as I can, *how he is seen by them*, and this may entail gross misreadings for their purposes, or partial overlooking or abandonment of aspects of Whitman, in poetry and in prose, which do not serve their creative purposes. I think that all I am trying to say is that in responding to Whitman as they read him and as they imagined him, they found their own voice, with the possible presence of Whitman as a sub-text for their own most original utterance. I have chosen two of Whitman's most fervent admirers, Pablo Neruda of Chile, born in 1904, and Jorge Luis Borges of Argentina, born in 1899. They are both eminently worthy of consideration in the light of Whitman, because both are major poets who have openly confessed their allegiance and debt to Whitman, and who have produced texts which accompany their professions of allegiance which express, in poetical terms, the overwhelming magisterium of the author of *Leaves of Grass*. That having been said, we could not imagine two poets less similar in comparison with each other, two poets who have such differing convictions over the years concerning the nature of poetry, the relation of word to object, the relation of the poem to the self and the possible society which engendered the poem. I wish to emphasize the radically opposing nature of their achievement, including some amusing comments with which they expressed, sometimes in barbed terms, their sense of mutual admiration mixed with the most openly-argued views concerning each other's selves, both personal and

poetic. Bits of literary gossip, i.e. Borges on Neruda, Neruda on Borges, are always to be taken with high seriousness, given the fact that the grandeur of their respective achievements is indisputable. But since in many ways they are irreconcilable, the simplest way to get at the contrast between the two is to brashly suggest that the only thing they had in common was their mutual admiration of Whitman; they were parallel lines in poetry, touching ever so slightly in various periods of their poetic development, be it early, middle or late. The one constant between the two is Whitman, that is to say, *their* peculiar and at times idiosyncratic imagining of Whitman's achievement. They both started with major discontents with the Spanish language, and a determination to infuse into a fossilized poetic language a new vigor, new metaphors, a new view of the poet in the cosmos. This Whitman, generalized and mythic, is at the core of this revolt against both didactic poetry and the aestheticist excesses of *Modernismo*. But almost as soon as that is said, we must recognize their divergence — Neruda began to write a political poetry, while Borges wrote increasingly his metaphysical poetry. This is one way of saying that in the major phase, the political poetry of the thirties and the forties, Neruda fled his earlier hermeticism to obey Tolstoy's final injunctions contained in *What is Art?* — that is, art should produce "a feeling of brotherhood and love of one's neighbor." Neruda glories in his poetic multiplicity, in his role as a civic poet of national and continental consciousness, a poet who intentionally simplifies his language to make it a mode of communication with the unawakened consciousness of all Latins. In this prophetic, bardic phase, Neruda's poetry is above all celebratory and hortatory, a poet of optimism and plenitude, an agent of moral fervor; all this in order that the word touch and press itself upon those who had never been given a voice. Does this not echo Whitman's transcendental vision? It must be said, though, that such a poet — the role of such a poet — is not at all prevalent in the post-Whitmanian literary history of the United States, and such a voice is immensely difficult to transmit in the sound of a contemporary voice, in the same way that Mayakovsky has similar difficulties in English. But the point is that Neruda's divergence from an Eliotic poetry of anguish gave him an audience quite unimaginable before. The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, who was a witness to Neruda's hypnotic power in mass readings of his poetry often attended by thousands, expresses this mat-

ter in a revealing passage:

This extraordinary fact could only occur in a culture such as that of Latin America, where a poet can still be a poet of the people. I don't think you have to be a poet of the people to be a good poet, of course. I think Mallarmé is a great poet. I'm just trying to explain this phenomenon of a writer who is really capable of giving voice to the voiceless. And of being repaid for this art with the grace of anonymity. Of being recited by people who do not know that the poet exists, or that the poems were written by a man called Pablo Neruda. This is unthinkable in the United States.

For the moment, you will have to take it on faith that the poetry of Borges is a radically different proposition, in all its phases. As Neruda's most imposing poetry takes wing by being read aloud, Borges's poetry is not heard, but overheard. As we will see, he began as a poet inebriated with Whitman's vision of the possibilities of poetry in this age, but his evolution over the years is not toward a poetry of a striding multiplicity of selves, but a more private, delimiting voice which owes so much less to the oratorical or acoustic sound with abundant accumulative images, than a single inner vision, a voice which comes across *both* in English or Spanish as reminding us of the meditative poetry of Eliot, Yeats, Donne or Herbert. If I were to say one thing about the differences between the two to end this introductory aspect, we might say that Neruda in his most political phase lives a poetry of touching, of communication, of diving into the world and being immersed in its processes, while Borges's voice veers away from society to the solitary expression of a rich inner vision. And let it be said that each poet reads and sounds differently in English. Borges's voice more nearly matches our verbal expectations, our unconscious contemporary expectation of the nature of poetry, while Neruda's discontent with his translators is not at all related to the incompetence or insensitivity of the various hands who have translated him, but rather his deepest suspicions about the suitability of the English language as a medium for his neo-Whitmanian verse. In a memorable comment, he noted that "It seems to me that the English language, so different from Spanish and so much more direct, often expresses the meaning of my poetry but does not convey the

atmosphere." He prefers above all his own poetry in Italian, "because there's a similarity of values between the two languages, Spanish and Italian." "English and French," he says, "do not correspond to Spanish, neither in vocalization, nor in placement, color or weight of the words. This means that the equilibrium of a Spanish poem . . . can find no equivalent in French or English. It's not a question of interpretive equivalents, no; the sense may be correct, indeed the accuracy of the translation . . . may be what destroys the poem." The same impression is not given by the poetry of Borges either in Spanish nor in English, above all because Borges's first language was English at home in Buenos Aires, and the resultant tone of his mature poetry is so much more subdued than Neruda's. I bring up these differences not to emphasize an interesting but irrelevant aside, but to remind you once again that their allegiance to Whitman, *their* Whitman, is still more or less constant — both are translators of good portions of *Leaves of Grass* — but Neruda is an unquestioning celebrator of Whitman's mission as he appropriated it, while Borges, a fervent adept at first, challenges both Whitman's vision *and* his language, all while constantly commenting upon his various and changing views of Whitman over a poetic career that spans, as does Neruda's, some six decades.

Where we touch their books, so do we touch each man, each poet in himself. There is an auspicious encounter between Neruda and Borges which, though lying well within the realm of a literary anecdote, might help us distinguish between the invisible and unconscious impulses of the poets as they began their respective lives as poets.

In June or early July of 1927, Neruda, at the age of 23, had been named Chilean honorary consul in Rangoon. On his way to his post via a circuitous route, he stopped off in Buenos Aires on route to Portugal, from whence he would take a steamer to Burma. By that date, Neruda had written one of his most famous texts of exacerbated love poetry — the "Twenty love songs and one desperate song." He had also by then already written a few of the first poems now contained in "Residence on Earth," specifically, the "Galope Muerto" (Dead Gallop) with which the book still opens. Borges, on the other hand, was already a known figure in Buenos Aires, author of two

volumes of poetry and two collections of critical essays. After arriving in Ceylon, Neruda took the time to recall to a friend his epocal meeting with the young Borges, and his words seem to give to us a convenient point of departure to distinguish the two poets and their poetry of the future. Speaking of Borges, Neruda noted that

he seems to be more preoccupied about problems of culture and society, which do not seduce me at all, which are not at all human. I like good wines, love, suffering, and books as consolation for the inevitable solitude. I even have a certain disdain for culture; as an interpretation of things, (I think that) a type of knowledge without antecedents, a physical absorption of the world seems to me better, in spite of and against ourselves. History (itself), the problems of "knowledge," as they call them, seems to be lacking some dimension. How (many of these problems) would fill up the vacuum? Everyday I see fewer and fewer ideas around and more and more bodies, sun and sweat. I am exhausted.

Naturally, this intuitive, even mysterious perception by Neruda of the young Borges might be read many ways, but for our own convenience, I would baldly state that here Neruda announces himself as a poet of the body, where the body will be both the perceiver and filter of all perception, and that the mind of the poet, the verbalizing faculty, should do nothing but submit to the sensual apparatus of the body as it moves through the world. We should be struck by Neruda's disdain for bookish culture, even though he was a voracious reader and tireless bibliophile. We should also note that "a physical absorption in the world" is greater material to the poet than an intellectual perception. For Borges, all of Neruda's evaluations are reversed, in ways and modes we might now proceed to observe.

Absorption in the world is fundamental to Neruda. In a later interview, he will make this more precise: "Just as the action of natural elements pulverizes our deepest feelings and transforms them into an intimate reflective substance . . . which we call literature, so also it is the writer's duty to contribute his own work to the development of the cultural heritage, by pulverizing, purifying and constantly transforming it. It is the same effect nutrition has on the blood, on the circulation. Culture has its roots in culture, but also in

life and nature." This is the fundamental agency of the Whitmanian body which we must recognize in all Neruda, in spite of the radical transformations of style, tone, politics and themes evident throughout his work. The body must be all men, the agent of all perception and suffering; as he says, "there's only one command (for the poet), and that is to penetrate life and make it prophetic: the poet should be a superstition, a mythic being."

In his traversal from private to public poetry, it is Whitman who guides him in this expansion of poetic consciousness. In one of the *Elementary Odes*, he simply states, "I poet, I grass." In one of the *New Elementary Odes*, he goes further:

I touch a hand and it was  
The hand of Walt Whitman:  
I stepped on the earth  
With my feet bare,  
I walked over the pasture,  
Over the firm dew  
of Walt Whitman.

There is no single poetic voice of Neruda; as he says, "we are many," thereby affirming the total license of the unleashed poet to start each book anew, with new poetic duties and new audiences to be reached. We can see a touchingly adolescent, sentimental poet in him, then a poet of contemplation of infinite space, then a poet of disintegration and hallucinatory reality, available to us in his harrowing *Residence on Earth*. But there are more Nerudas. After his return from the East, participating as Chilean diplomat to Spain during the Spanish Civil War, Neruda's poetry takes a firm grip on material reality and politics. While in Spain in 1935, he will translate the second, third and thirtieth section of *Song of Myself*, and will also compose a fundamental manifesto of the new direction of this poetry, an essay entitled "Towards an Impure Poetry," where Emerson's and Whitman's injunctions are reformulated into an anti-aesthetic aesthetic. In Ben Belitt's translation, the key passages are the following:

Let (this) be the poetry we search for: worn with the hand's

obligations, as by acids, steeped in sweat and in smoke, smelling of lilies and urine, spattered diversely by the trades that we live by, inside the law or beyond it.

A poetry impure as the clothing we wear, (as impure) as our bodies, soup-stained, soiled with our shameful behavior, our wrinkles and vigils and dreams, observations and prophecies, declarations of loathing and love, idylls and beasts, the shocks of encounter, political loyalties, denials and doubts, affirmations and taxes.

After visiting the sacred city of the Inca empire in 1943, Neruda will become an even broader and more conscious poet, conscious of his role in the celebration of a silent "dead" consciousness. The result of his 1943 visit is the stunning "Heights of Macchu Picchu"; in a prose note composed after his visit, the change of focus in this poet, ever-exchanging old clothes for new is very apparent. He remembers the effect of those silent stones on his imagination, commenting that

I could no longer segregate myself from those structures. I understood that if we walked on the same hereditary earth, we had something to do with those high endeavors of the American community, that we could not ignore them, that our neglect or silence was not only a crime but the prolonging of a defeat . . . I thought many things after my visit to Macchu Picchu. I thought about ancient American man. I saw his ancient struggles linked with present struggles.

Neruda's communion reaches its culmination in the final passage of "The Heights of Macchu Picchu," where the poet begs the living and the dead to speak through him, just as Whitman had begged of the dead in Canto XXIV of "Song of Myself," which of course you recall:

Through me many long dumb voices,  
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and  
slaves,  
Voices of the diseas'd and despairing, and of thieves and  
dwarfs,  
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion . . .

Neruda's exhortation joyfully, heroically takes on the same grand task:

I come to speak through your dead mouth,  
All through the earth join all  
the silent wasted lips  
and speak from the depths to me all this long night  
as if I were anchored here with you,  
tell me everything, chain by chain,  
link by link, and step by step . . .  
Fasten your bodies to me like magnets.  
Hasten to my veins to my mouth.  
Speak through my words and my blood.

Borges is so different from all that you have heard up to now that it is hard to know where to begin! We might start by saying that his is an intensely playful and droll intelligence, one that sees himself looking at himself, a kind of intelligence where the mind-body problem in poetry is resolutely solved in favor of the mind. Above all, he is often cruel and insouciant toward his earlier poetic selves and his earlier literary allegiances, a king of irascible high humor that is the polar opposite of the very uncritical but no less powerful poetic intelligence of Pablo Neruda. His views on Whitman follow along the above inconstant lines. For instance, in 1970, he published in *The New Yorker* a "Profile" under the title "An Autobiographical Essay" which is a mine of information about his earliest attempts at poetry, attempts where Whitman is going to play a role, though not a happy one. Listen to the *tone* of the aging Borges as he observes the qualities of his earliest poetry:

It was also in Geneva (in 1918) that I first met Walt Whitman, through a German translation by Johannes Schlaf ("Als ich in Alabama meinen Morgengang machte" — "As I have walk'd in Alabama my morning walk"). Of course, I was struck by the absurdity of reading an American poet in German, so I ordered a copy of *Leaves of Grass* from London. I remember it still — bound in green. For a time, I thought of Whitman not only as a great poet but as the *only* poet. In fact, I thought that all poets the world over had been merely leading up to Whitman until 1855,

and that not to imitate him was a proof of ignorance . . . (Later,) I saw my first poem into print. It was titled "Hymn to the Sea" and appeared in the magazine *Grecia* . . . In the poem, I tried my hardest to be Walt Whitman:

O sea! Oh myth! O Sun! O wide resting place!  
I know why I love you. I know that we are both very old,  
that we have known each other for centuries . . .  
O Protean, I have been born of you —  
both of us chained and wandering,  
both of us hungering for stars,  
both of us with hopes and disappointments . . .

Here is Borges's comment: "Today, I hardly think of the sea, or even of myself, as hungering for the stars. Years after, when I came across Arnold Bennett's phrase the third-rate grandiose, I understood at once what he meant." As you see by the tone and the humorous optic of old Borges looking at young Borges, the joke is not on Whitman, but on an immature imagination looking at Whitman with an uncritical, hagiographical point of approach. Some six years later, Borges published in Buenos Aires a collection of verses, one poem of which, "My whole life," is once again a Whitmanian exercise, but look at how the former grandiosity has been clubbed in a more inviting poetic modesty — I make use of the W. S. Merwin translation:

Here once again the memorable lips, unique and like yours.  
I am this groping intensity that is a soul.  
I have got near to happiness and have stood in the shadow of  
suffering.  
I have crossed the sea.  
I have known many lands; I have seen one woman and two or  
three men.  
I have loved a girl who was fair and proud, and bore a Spanish  
quietness.  
I have seen the city's edge, an endless sprawl where the sun goes  
down tirelessly, over and over.  
I have relished many words.  
I believe deeply that this is all, and that I will neither see nor  
accomplish new things.  
I believe that my days and my nights, in their poverty and their  
riches, are the equal of God's and of all men's.

This is still an unsatisfactory poem, but the point to be made, I think, is just to note that the enumerations have a more modest and restricted sense. You still feel that he wants to encompass worlds with his poem, but the feeling is less cosmic and more humble in Borges; one feels that he is trying to carve out a voice for himself from amongst the welter of voices that pulsate through "Song of Myself." Four years later, in 1929, Borges wrote "The Other Whitman," a laudatory essay where he suggested, albeit allusively, one of the principal fascinations that Whitman exercises over Borges — Whitman's *twoness*, the distance between "Walter Whitman, Jr." and "Walt." Or, as Paul Zweig has put it, "his simultaneous personalities of adventurous wordmaster and unsophisticated man of the people." For Borges in 1929, the "other Whitman is the writer himself, *not* the poetic character, and thus he points his and our way out of the biographical trap; what matters is the study of the texts as texts, "not as expressions of a certain writer's life or dreams or as documents of a given society."

We should be prepared for Borges's critical inconstancy before the phenomenon of Whitman, his wavering allegiance to him. In the following instance, the interviewer, Richard Burgin, caught Borges in a rather grumpy mood about Whitman's world-view:

... in Whitman everything is wonderful, you know? I don't think that anybody could really believe that everything is wonderful, no? Except in the sense of it being a wonder. Of course, you can do without that particular kind of miracle. No, in the case of Whitman, I think that he thought it was his duty as an American to be happy. And that he had to cheer up his readers. Of course he wanted to be unlike any other poet, but Whitman worked with a program, I should say; he began with a theory and then he went on to his work. I don't think of him as a spontaneous writer.

I would be remiss if I were not to mention two final artifacts related to Borges and Whitman. The first is his translation of most of the original edition of *Leaves of Grass*, an effort announced as "in preparation" in a Buenos Aires literary magazine of 1927, but which

was not actually published until 1969. Borges contributed a stunning prologue to his *Hojas de hierba*, where he returns, and maniacally so, to the baffling duplicity, doubleness or twoness of Whitman, and gives us a splendid appreciation of Whitman's achievement at the same time. Borges says:

Those who pass from the glare and the vertigo of *Leaves of Grass* to the laborious reading of any of the pious biographies of Whitman always feel disappointed. In those gray and mediocre pages, they seek out the semi-divine vagabond that these verses uncovered for them, and they are astonished not to find him. This, at least, has been my own experience and that of all my friends. One of the aims of this preface is to explain, or try to explain, that disconcerting discord . . .

He needed, as did Byron, a hero; but his hero had to be innumerable and ubiquitous, symbol of a populous democracy, like the omnipresent God of the Pantheists. That creature has a two-fold nature; he is the modest journalist Walter Whitman, native of Long Island, a man whom some friend in a hurry might greet in the streets of Manhattan; and he is, at the same time, the other person that the first man wanted to be and was not, a man of adventure and love, indolent, courageous, carefree, a wanderer throughout America . . . there is almost no page on which the Whitman of his mere biography and the Whitman that he wanted to be and now is are not confounded in the imagination and affections of generations of men.

During one of his last visits to the United States, Borges wrote a short poem, "Camden, 1892," which makes its quiet and painful point amidst a grey, subdued rhetoric:

The fragrance of coffee and newspapers.  
Sunday and its tedium. This morning,  
On the uninvestigated page, that vain  
Column of allegorical verses  
By a happy colleague. The old man lies  
Prostrate, pale, even white in his decent  
Room, the room of a poor man. Needlessly

He glances at his face in the exhausted  
Mirror. He thinks, without surprise now,  
*That face is me.* One fumbling hand touches  
The tangled beard, the devastated mouth.  
The end is not far off. His voice declares:  
I am almost gone. But my verses scan  
Life and its splendor. I was Walt Whitman.

Readers who want to know more about the influence of Walt Whitman in Spanish America might want to consult some of the materials listed below:

Jaime Alazraki, "Enumerations as Evocations: On the Use of a Device in Borges' Latest Poetry," in *Borges the Poet*, ed. Carlos Cortínez (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1986)

Fernando Alegría, *Walt Whitman en Hispanoamérica* (México: Ediciones Studium, 1954)

Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: The New York University Press, 1975)

María Luisa Bastos, "Whitman as Inscribed in Borges," in *Borges the Poet*, ed. Carlos Cortínez (See *supra*)

Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems, 1923-1967*. Edited, with an introduction and notes by Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: Delacorte Press, 1972)

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978)

Alexander Coleman, "Neruda: Vox Dei," in *Review '74* (New York: Center for Inter-American Relations)

John Felstiner, *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980)

Carlos Fuentes, "An Interview with Carlos Fuentes," with Alfred MacAdam and Alexander Coleman. *Book Forum*, Vol. IV, 4, 1979.

Rita Guibert, *Seven Voices: Seven Latin American Writers talk to Rita Guibert* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973)

Pablo Neruda, *Selected Poems*, ed. and tr. Ben Belitt (New York: Grove Press, 1961)

\_\_\_\_\_. *Passions and Impressions*, tr. M. S. Peden (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983)

Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Neruda: El viajero inmóvil* (Caracas: Monte Avila editores, 1977)

\_\_\_\_\_. *Jorge Luis Borges, A Literary Biography* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978)

Paul Zweig, *Walt Whitman, The Making of a Poet* (New York: Basic Books, 1984)

