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WALT WHITMAN IN BRAZIL

MARIA CLARA BONETTI PARO

IN 1889, ON THE OCCASION OF A REPUBLICAN government replacing a monarchy in Brazil, Walt Whitman sent a "Christmas Greeting"¹ to the South American country, welcoming his "Brazilian brother" into democracy. But not until the twentieth century did the new and rebellious perfume of *Leaves of Grass* reach Brazil, carried by Symbolism and the avant-garde movements, mainly Futurism and Unanimism, which were flourishing in Europe during the first quarter of the century.

Literature in Brazil at the turn of the century was ruled by neo-Parnassians, neo-Naturalists, and neo-Symbolists, who emphasized rigid obedience to metric rules and Portuguese grammar. Beyond this there flourished an impersonal concept of art for art's sake that had grown artificial and outdated amidst a nationalistic climate that strengthened civic pride and the desire to find a personal voice for Brazilian literature. Even though good poetry had been written, Parnassianism, the dominant school, was incapable of coping with the increasing social, political, and cultural changes of the first decades of the new century that required new forms of expression. "To make rhymes in Brazil is still the best way not to be a poet," wrote poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1902-1989) in 1923.² Striving to change the situation, a new generation of writers had to wage long, hard battles that led, eventually, to poetic renovation and to the literary movement known as Modernism (1922-1945).

The principal arena in this artistic struggle was the Municipal Theater in São Paulo, where the Modern Art Week Exhibition (the Brazilian equivalent to the American Armory Show) was staged in February, 1922. The date had been deliberately chosen to make the overthrow of the archaic aesthetics coincide with the centennial celebration of Brazil's political independence. The period from 1922 to 1930 is correctly called "heroic" because both sides, the "traditionalists" (*passadistas*) and the "futurists" (as the modernists were known at that time) assumed militant and often extreme positions. Consider the following lines by writer and critic Sergio Milliet (1898-1966) regarding the position of those who wanted renovation: "We had to break everything, destroy, kill, bury, cremate. That is what we did from about 1921 to 1932."³ Although *Leaves of Grass* was not well known at that time, Whitman's reputation was strong enough for him to be enlisted in the

ranks of Brazilian Modernism. Amazingly enough, in the first phase of Brazilian Modernism, Whitman came to be respected by both of the opposing groups.

In the early 1920s "Whitmanism" had reached its greatest peak in France and remained influential throughout the decade.⁴ It is no surprise that there was also a Brazilian "whitmanismo," for in the first decades of the century, Brazil was culturally linked to France. Whitman's presence in French literature was then so strong that he was even included in a collection of contemporary French poetry entitled *L'Anthologie de L'Effort*, published in 1912 by Jean-Richard Bloch.⁵

Before the 1920s, Whitman was scarcely mentioned in Brazilian periodicals, and when he was, his name was frequently paired with French and Belgian Symbolists. *Leaves of Grass* crossed the Brazilian border with a Symbolist literary passport. Pointing out the importance of Belgian Symbolism for the study of that movement in Brazil, critic Andrade Murici said that "the powerful Verhaeren prepared the road for a late but numerous Whitmanian seaquake."⁶ In the 1920s, in Brazil, Whitman's *spirit*, or his gospel, was easily found. He was the welcome spokesman of the modern world, the apostle of renovation in form and content, and, to use John Barth's expression, one of the poets who could nourish a "literature of replenishment" after the exhaustion of the old aesthetic rules and principles.

References to the singer of the New World became increasingly more frequent in the debates that followed the Week of Modern Art. In an article written in 1934, the essayist Sebastião Sampaio expressed regret about the delay of reciprocal cultural exchange between Brazil and the United States and added that "Whitman came so late that it was in fact Modernism that made his homage to Brooklyn Bridge ["ponte de Brooklyn"] known to the public."⁷ Due to Whitman's literary reputation and "contemporaneity," he was used by the *passadistas* as a shield against the attacks of those who accused them of being behind the times; and by the futurists, for whom he was a spear, to encourage Brazilian literature to venture "in paths untrodden."

Speaking for the *passadista* group, Angelo Guido, in a 1923 article entitled "Futurism,"⁸ gave his own definition of this avant-garde movement and added that several *passadistas* had done exactly the same. Whitman is included among the *passadistas*. On behalf of the futurists, Murilo Araújo, in the article "Futurismo e Estética Intencional," declared that he took pride in being called a futurist because "Verhaeren, the great, and Walt Whitman, the two best poets in the world, are called futurists by critics nowadays."⁹

In those days in Brazil, "Futurism" was very often used in a broad sense. It was an antonym of "traditional" (*passadista*) and had almost nothing to do with the Italian Movement founded in 1909 by Filippo

Marinetti (1876-1944). Nevertheless, Futurism helped spread Whitman's work when Marinetti mentioned him among six other writers as a forerunner of his aesthetics. Despite the differences between Whitman and Marinetti, in some critical appreciations they were nevertheless paired as literary innovators.

For the embattled Modernists who were trying to break down the rigid adherence to metric rules, Whitman offered a model of free verse. At a time when the Modernists were trying to turn away from the poetic emphasis on the past, with its cultural allusions to Greek gods and mythology, Whitman was looked upon as the poet of the present and the singer of the common man and the modern world. And when, with nationalistic pride, and suffering from an "anxiety of influence," they were trying to do without European models, Whitman was looked upon as a brother and as an escape from European influence. He was someone who, like Poe, had inverted the direction of influence between the Old and the New World, named "notre poete" by Valery Larbaud.¹⁰

It is not difficult to find extremely appreciative references to Whitman's work in publications of the 1920s. In the article "A literatura em 1920" ("Literature in 1920"), Alceu Amoroso Lima expressed a desire for a Brazilian Whitman: "The world of action can produce a Whitman. We have not had him yet, and our poetry continues to be a place secluded from everyday reality."¹¹ In 1923, critic Tasso da Silveira (1895-1968) expressed the same wish: "I say 'our Whitman' and not just 'our great poet,' because it is a Whitman we long for; it is for a passionate singer who, in gigantic symphonies, would celebrate the new world that we are, the dawning of a new race we represent, the vastness of the place we have been given on the planet, and the multiform uproar of desire and dream which comes from our complex ethnic identity."¹²

Unlike in France where literary citizenship was conferred on the American poet, in Brazil Whitman was often regarded either as the singer of the New World (encompassing, therefore, the three Americas) or as a North American who could fertilize Brazilian or tropical leaves of grass.

Whitman's idealistic vision of America as a huge Bakhtinean market-place where a poet-prophet, with cosmic consciousness, could transform everybody into comrades and equals in a "new city of Friends" was especially attractive to the Carioca spiritualist group of the symbolist magazine *Festa*, which published twelve issues in 1927 and 1928. The influence of Jules Romain's *Unanimism* (1905-1914) and more specifically of Emile Verhaeren's poetry is also evident in this utopian vision, and many times Whitman and Verhaeren are mentioned together.

Among the members of *Festa*, Tasso da Silveira is the poet who most clearly embraces Whitman's prophetic gospel. He translated into

Portuguese the first poem from *Leaves of Grass* to appear in Brazil: in the fourth issue of *Terra do Sol* [*Land of the Sun*], a Portuguese translation of “Poets to Come” [“Poetas que Virão”] was published anonymously,¹³ and later Silveira acknowledged the translation as his. In the same issue, in “Notas e Comentários,” the same poem was presented in three other languages: in French, translated by Léon Bazalgette; in Italian, by Luigi Gamberale; and, in Spanish, by Armando Vasseur. The fact that the original English version was not given is an indication that many Brazilian writers read Whitman’s poems in translation before reading them in the original version.

Whitman’s significance to *Festa* is unquestionable. He was the only foreign poet represented in the first issue—a translation of Section 3 of “Salut au Monde.”¹⁴ In the fifth issue (February, 1928), Sections 18, 21 and 24 of “Song of Myself” were published in anonymous translations (no doubt also by Silveira) again.¹⁵

It is not difficult to see which topic of Whitman’s “ensemble” was most cherished by the spiritualist members of *Festa* and by Silveira: the idyllic and optimistic vision of the natural, human and social world. As for form, Silveira’s free-verse, which he began writing in 1926, corresponds more closely to the model given by Verhaeren, whose importance in his work and life he acknowledged several times. Although dressed up in Christian array, Whitman’s diction is clearly perceived in most of Silveira’s poems from *Alegorias do Homem Novo* (1926) [*Allegories of the New Man*] to *Cantos do Campo de Batalha* (1945) [*Battlefield Songs*]. In this last book there is an overt allusion to Whitman in the poem entitled “Palavras a Whitman” [“Words to Whitman”].¹⁶ In direct opposition to the misreading of Whitman as singer of *all* the Americas, Silveira, as an ephebe who tries to “complete” his “truncated precursor,” abounds in “tesseractae” (to use Harold Bloom’s terminology).¹⁷ In his poetic tribute, Silveira calls Whitman the “wonderful incomplete” because, although he exalted the whole world, when he sang America he referred to only one half of the continent.

A outra metade que não advinhaste, não previste,
no fundidouro dos destinos misteriosos
se condensava
e vai surgindo agora
como algum virgem orbe que faltasse
ao equilíbrio das constelações . . .

E assim, Poeta-profeta,
ao lado de teu canto,
erque-se, por integrar-te, um canto novo:
—o canto da alma inquieta
do meu povo! (204)¹⁸

In spite of various readings or misreadings of *Leaves of Grass*, what is certain is that Whitman was part of the general literary consciousness in those days in Brazil. Even when references were made to the fact that Whitman was not well-known, it was always done with regret.

The same high standards by which Whitman was judged in *Festa* are used by the so-called "dynamic traditionalists," who gathered around writer and diplomat Graça Aranha (1868-1931). Among the members of that group, Ronald de Carvalho, one of Aranha's favorite disciples, unquestionably became the most Whitmanian writer with *Toda a América* [*All the Americas*], published in 1926.¹⁹ There is no doubt that Carvalho had Whitman in mind when he wrote *Toda a América*. In the general conception of the book, as well as in many of the poems, he echoed the American poet, or "completed" him, in a manner very similar to what had been done by Tasso da Silveira. Whitman's "Americanism" was enlarged to include the three Americas. Carvalho's interest in the continent as a whole was not an isolated attitude but a reflection of Brazil's general awakening to a feeling of brotherhood toward its neighbouring nations and an increasing interest in strengthening social and cultural ties with them. Brazilian intellectuals wanted to replace—or at least add to—their centuries of gazing across the Atlantic with an actual journey into the backlands of their own country and of the other American countries. They longed for an American discovery of America.

As soon as *Toda a América* was published, many writers would call attention to the similarities between this book and *Leaves of Grass*. Although the "Americanisms" in *Leaves of Grass* and in *Toda a América* are different, Whitman's impress is clearly present in several poems. In the poem "Brasil" (*TA*, 12-15), for example, Carvalho echoes Whitman directly in idea and image and uses a melange of passages from "Salut au Monde" and "I Hear America Singing." He delights in cataloguing what he hears by transporting his poetic self to different places in the country. Carvalho includes another poem that is connected to "Salut au Monde," or more precisely, to Section 4 of this poem, where Whitman describes what he sees. In "Entre Buenos Aires e Mendoza" (*TA*, 34-35) Carvalho again makes use of the Whitmanian catalogue and begins his lines with the repetition of "Eu vejo" ["I see"].

There is in *Toda a América* another signal of indebtedness to *Leaves of Grass*. Both books have a poem entitled "Broadway" (*TA*, 22-24). The urban crowd is their common theme, but whereas Whitman regards the passersby with empathy and transcendental interest and inquires into their inner lives, Carvalho focuses on their external attitudes at the same time that he reveals a personal and impressionistic attitude toward them. The street which is taken as a lesson by Whitman remains unlearned in Carvalho's "Broadway."

As far as form is concerned, the two poets are most different, ironically, at precisely the moment when they seem most similar. Although Carvalho uses free verses in a manner that is reminiscent of Whitman, he frequently breaks up his lines, forming several verses; Whitman avoided such enjambment. By breaking up Whitman's end-stopped lines or thought rhythm, Carvalho also moves away from another key feature of Whitman's technique—the caesura. In its formal restraint, Carvalho's free verse is sometimes closer to Apollinaire's model. Nevertheless, when he sets his expansive lines with a relatively fixed initial structure, his verse resembles Whitman's. Just like Whitman's twenty-one-line delay of the main verb in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," Carvalho withholds the verb in the first stanza of "Advertência" ["Warning"] and writes a poem that clearly sounds Whitmanian:

Europeu!

Nos tabuleiros de xadrez da tua aldeia,
na tua casa de madeira, pequenina, coberta de hera,
na tua casa de pinhões e beirais, vigiada por filas de cercas paralelas, com trepadeiras
moles balançando e florindo;
na tua sala de jantar, junto do fogão de azulejos, cheirando a resina de pinheiros e
faia,
na tua sala de jantar, em que os teus avós leram a Bíblia e discutiram casamentos,
colheitas e enterros,
entre as tuas arcas bojudas e pretas, com lãs felpudas e linhos encardidos, colares,
gravuras, papéis graves e moedas roubadas ao inútil maravilhoso;
diante do teu riacho, mais antigo que as Cruzadas, desse teu riacho serviçal, que
engorda trutas e carpas;

Europeu!

Em frente da tua paisagem, dessa tua paisagem com estradas, quintalejos,
campanários e burgos, que cabe toda na bola de vidro do teu jardim;
diante dessas tuas árvores que conheces pelo nome—o carvalho do açude, o choupo do
ferreiro, a tília da ponte—que conheces pelo nome como os teus cães, os teus
jumentos e as tuas vacas;

Europeu! filho da obediência, da economia e do bom-senso,
tu não saves o que é ser Americano!²⁰

The striking parallels between both poets indicate that Carvalho had Whitman very much in mind when he wrote *Toda a América*. Although Carvalho claimed to be a poet integrated with his land, he never managed to get rid of European manners and taste, and he never became the poet he believed was necessary for America. Precisely when Carvalho used Whitman's gospel and form, he strayed from his model. He had not heard Whitman's advice in "Song of Myself":

He that by me spreads a wider breast than my own proves the width of my own,
He most honor my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher. (1234-1235)

And he had not paid attention to Whitman's warning in "By Blue Ontario's Shore":

Rhymes and rhymers pass away, poems distill'd from poems pass away. (213)

It was in São Paulo that Whitman's "yawp" was more clearly heard. Mário de Andrade (1893-1945), the most prominent figure in the first phase of the Brazilian Modernist Movement, was a careful reader of *Leaves of Grass* and a writer who showed interest in Whitman's poetry all his life. The marginal annotations he wrote on his volume of the Centennial edition of *Leaves of Grass* reveal his careful reading of Whitman's work. Besides having Whitman's *Complete Prose Works* (1920), he had Léon Bazalgette's translation, *Feuilles d'Herbe* (1922), as well as the two other books the French critic wrote on Whitman: *Le poème-évangile de Walt Whitman* (1921) and *Walt Whitman: l'homme et son oeuvre* (1908). He also had two German translations (by Karl Federn [1904] and by Gustav Landauer [1921]) and a Portuguese translation by Agostinho Veloso da Silva (1943). In a letter to poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade, dated July 23, 1944, Mário de Andrade comments that he planned to read Whitman again to see if he might find some suggestions for *Lira Paulistana*, a book he wrote in the year prior to his death.²¹

Andrade's interest in Whitman is evident from the beginning of his career. Whitman is mentioned in both of the most important texts in which Andrade, who was considered the "pope of the Modernist Creed," explains his own aesthetic principles and the movement's aims. The first text is the preface to his book of poems *Paulicéia Desvairada* [*Hallucinated City*], published in 1922, and the second is the essay, "A Escrava que não é Isaura" ["The Slave That Is Not Isaura"], published in 1925.²² There is only a single reference to Whitman in the preface (which he ironically calls "Prefácio interessantíssimo" ["The most interesting preface"]), suggesting that the reader should know the American poet, but Andrade mentions him four times in *A Escrava*. He calls attention to the effect of simultaneity, one of the characteristics of Modernist poetry that is already present in *Leaves of Grass* (*AEI*, 266-267). He also praises Whitman's thematic freedom and quotes "Starting from Paumanok": "I will make the poems of materials, for I think they are to be the most spiritual poems!" (*AEI*, 217) Andrade could have mentioned several artists of the avant-garde movements who defended thematic freedom, but he preferred Whitman because of the spiritual basis of his "materials." Andrade also cherished Whitman's social concern (*AEI*, 223) and declared in his literary essay "O Movimento Modernista" that all his work represented a commitment to his time and land.²³ Although one can hear echoes of Whitman's work in various poems written by Andrade, he did not imitate the North American poet. To employ T.S. Eliot's terms, he did not "borrow" from

Whitman but he “stole” whatever he needed, making it his own.

The same thing is true about another great artist, Jorge de Lima (1895-1953), who actually mentions the American bard in some poems, such as “A Minha América,” published in *Poemas* (1927) and “Democracia,” published in *Poemas Negros* (1947). The dates of these two books illuminate Whitman’s literary reception in Brazil. In the 1920s, critical and creative responses to his work were frequently found in books and literary periodicals. The same is not true in the 1930s. Political and social changes altered the focus of interest from poetry to prose and from aesthetics to ideology. Nevertheless, a second wave of Whitman enthusiasm began again in the 1940s when his “voice” was heard in Portuguese translations and books, and when essays about the poet were published.

The following list (which does not include books published in Portugal) is an indication that *Leaves of Grass* continues attracting Whitman’s “Brazilian brothers”:

Saudação ao Mundo e outros poemas, translated by Mário D. Ferreira Santos (São Paulo: Flama, 1944).

Cantos de Walt Whitman, translated by Oswaldino Marques (Rio de Janeiro: José Olímpio, 1946).

Whitman, poeta universal da América, by José Antonio Nunes Mendonça (Academia Sergipana de Letras, 1946).

O Camarada Whitman, by Gilberto Freire (Rio de Janeiro: José Olímpio, 1948).

Videntes e Sonâmbulos: Coletânea de Poemas Norte-americanos, by Oswaldino Marques (Rio de Janeiro: Ministério de Educação e Cultura, 1955).

Folhas de Relva, translated by Geir Campos (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1964).

Walt Whitman, by Babette Deutsch, translated by Breno Silveira, and poems by Péricles Eugênio da Silva Ramos (São Paulo: Martins, 1965).

Poetas Norte-americanos, a bilingual anthology by Paulo Vizioli (Rio de Janeiro: Lidador, 1976).

Folhas das Folhas de Relva, translated by Geir Campos (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1983), 141 pp. (The 3,000 copies of this edition sold so quickly that it was reprinted a second time in the same year. The same number of copies were issued again in 1984, 1989, and 1990.)

Walt Whitman: Profeta da América, by Irineu Monteiro (São Paulo: Martin Claret, 1984).

In spite of the interest in Whitman's work shown by the reading public in Brazil, *Leaves of Grass* ("the permanent revelation," as poet Paulo Leminski calls it²⁴) continues to wait for a complete Portuguese translation.

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NOTES

1 Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds., *Leaves of Grass*, Comprehensive Reader's Edition (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 548. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

2 "Na curva do caminho," *Ilustração Brasileira* 38 (October 1923), 32.

3 Edgard Cavalheiro, ed., "O meu depoimento," *Testamento de uma geração: 26 figuras da intelectualidade brasileira prestam o seu depoimento* (Porto Alegre: Globo, 1944), 240-241.

4 See Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 287.

5 See Betsy Erkkila, *Walt Whitman Among the French* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 171. Hereafter abbreviated *WWAF*.

6 *Panorama do Movimento Simbolista Brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Departamento de Imprensa Nacional, 1952), 1:44.

7 "Brasil-Estados Unidos: duas nações irmãs," *Revista da Academia Brasileira de Letras* 149 (May 1934), 22.

8 See *Revista do Brasil* [São Paulo] 88 (April 1923), 376-379.

9 *O Mundo Literário* [Rio de Janeiro] 3 (July 1922) 314-316.

10 Erkkila, *WWAF*, 179.

11 *Revista do Brasil* 64 (April 1921) 3-15, 12.

12 "O poeta da profunda tristeza," *O Mundo Literário* [Rio de Janeiro] 20 (December 1923), 151.

13 "Poetas que virão," *Terra de Sol* [Rio de Janeiro] 4 (April 1924), 35.

14 "Saudação ao Mundo," *Festa* [Rio de Janeiro] 1 (October 1927), 12.

15 "Traduções Anonimas," *Festa* [Rio de Janeiro] 5 (February 1928).

16 Tasso da Silveira, "Palavras a Whitman," *Puro Canto-Poemas Completos* (Rio de Janeiro: GRD, 1962) 204-206.

17 See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 49-73.

18 The other half that you didn't foretell or foresee
was condensing itself
in the melting pot of an unknown destiny
and is becoming visible
as a virgin orb that was missing
in the balance of the constellations . . .

And so, Poet — Prophet
Beside your song,
Rising to join it, a new chant:
—the chant of the anxious soul
of my people. (39-49)

19 Ronald de Carvalho, *Toda a América* [com a versão espanhola de Francisco Villaespesa] (Rio de Janeiro: Hispano-Brasilena, 1935). Hereafter, *TA*. Quotations are transcribed in present day spelling.

20 *TA*, 9-11.

European!
In the chess boards of your village,
in your small, wooden house overgrown with ivy,
in your house with mallow and eaves, guarded by rows of parallel hedges with
slowly climbing trees that swing and bloom;
in your dining room, close to the tiled stove that smells of pine resin and white
poplar,
in your dining room, where your grandparents read the Bible and discussed
weddings, harvests, and burials,
among your black and bulgy chests, full of fluffy wool and stained linen,
necklaces, engravings, somber sheets of paper and coins stolen from
useless wonders;
in front of the brook, more venerable than the Cruzades of your providential
brook where trouts and carps are fed;
European!
In front of your landscape, your landscape with roads, small backyards, steeples
and boroughs that fits entirely in the glass ball of your garden;
in front of your trees that you know by the name—the oak by the dam, the poplar
of the blacksmith, the linden by the bridge—that you know by the name just
like you know your dogs, your donkey and your cows;
European! child of obedience, economy and common sense,
you do not know what it is to be an American!

21 See Mario de Andrade, *A Lição do Amigo: Cartas de Mario de Andrade a Carlos Drummond de Andrade*, second edition (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 1988), 210.

22 Mario de Andrade, *Obra Imatura* (São Paulo: Martins; Brasília: INL, 1972), 195-300. Further references to *A Escrava que não é Isaura* will be to this edition, hereafter *AEI*.

23 See Mario de Andrade, *Aspectos da Literatura Brasileira* (São Paulo: Martins, 1974), 252.

24 See Paulo Leminski's preface to *Folhas das Folhas de Relva*, trans. Geir Campos (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1990), 7.