

Walt Whitman and the Week of Modern Arts in Brazil

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Edith Sitwell, English poet, critic and novelist, in her *Poetry and Criticism* (1926) says:

Every hundred years or so it becomes necessary for a change to take place in the body of poetry, otherwise the health and the force that should invigorate it fade. When a fresh movement appears and produces a few great men, and once more the force and vigour die from the results of age; the movement is carried on by weak and worthless imitators, and a change becomes necessary again.¹

In English Literature a significant change took place in 1798 originated by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge who in *Lyrical Ballads* broke with the reigning school of Pope and the spirit of the 18th century to achieve a new art freer in form and suited to the spirit of their time: Coleridge with poems of romantic wonder, Wordsworth with poems of nature and simple humanity. The new poetic tradition established by them and later romantic poets remained in authority in America until 1855 when the revolt of Walt Whitman, breaking away from the past, proclaimed a new age for America's poetry. Whitman considered himself - and was to some extent for his time - a literary radical, and as such he did not hesitate to write essays, poems, or utter remarks which among other things anathematized the poetry of his day.

Yet we cannot fully appreciate Whitman's rebellion unless we examine the literature against which he rebelled. He found fault with several specific phases of the literature of his day, the most important of these being what he called "the beauty disease".

The "beauty disease" characterizes a type of poetry popular in contemporary magazines of Whitman's day and best described by a commentator on the Good Gray Poet, Langdon Mitchell, as follows:

Poetry is beautiful imagery connected with a high

been enlarged, re-written, and re-printed during the next 35 years or so of his life. As expected, this publication of *Leaves of Grass* was a shock to the conservative critics. The public simply ignored his book. Yet the book found an echo in some poets and writers, like Ralph W. Emerson who foresaw "the beginning of a great career" for Whitman. Emerson thus realized that what he himself had written in 1837 in "The America Scholar"— "Your day of dependence, your long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands draws to a close", had at last found a response almost 20 years later.

It is relevant to notice that another American poet, William C. Bryant, in his lectures on Poetry in 1825 calls for a free and native literature. The central idea in Bryant's third lecture is the same as in Emerson's and later in Whitman's Preface of 1855 - namely that America is a free new country with materials for a poetry which should be liberated from the poetry of the Old World. This concept, stated too quietly and too sedately by Bryant some 30 years earlier is repeated with enthusiasm in the startling phrases of Emerson and reaches its culmination in the paradoxes of Whitman.

Whitman accepted the challenge Bryant and Emerson proposed, yet it would take years for him to be understood and loved in his own country. That is why in a projected preface to *Leaves of Grass*, he says about his great poem: "Of such a song I launch the novice's attempt and braves to the bards who, coming after me, achieve the work complete."⁶

Whitman considered himself important mainly as a precursor of later and greater poets who would accept his poetic creed, but surpass him poetically. In a poem entitled "Poets to Come" he says:

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!
Not today is to justify me, and answers what I
am for;

But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental,
Greater than before known,

Arouse, arouse - for you must justify me - you must
answer...⁷

The poets Whitman looked for did not appear suddenly; time was needed for his message to be understood and followed. In 1912 the United States was ripe for such a kind of poetry. With the poetic revival of that year Whitman became the master of the poets of our time: they did surely arouse, they did justify the man who sought justification; they at last answered his call. Among these are Carl

The placing of substance before form and meter;

The view of great poetry as serving to arouse and stir,
rather than to soothe and comfort.

No imitation is here implied, just parallel enthusiasm and
a strong urge towards change, towards emancipation.

In his poem "I Hear America Singing" we find Whitman evoking
his country and a whole group of industrial people:

I hear America singing, the various carols I hear,
Those of mechanics - each one singing his, as it
should be, blithe and strong;
The carpenter singing his, as he measures his plank
or beam,
The mason singing his, as he makes ready for work,
or leaves off work;
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat -
the deckhand on the steamboat deck;
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench - the
hatter singing as he stands;
The woodcutter's song - the ploughboy's on his way in
the morning, or at the noon intermission, or at
sundown;
The delicious singing of the mother - or of the young
wife at work - or of the girl sewing or washing -
Each singing what belongs to her, and none else;
The day what belongs to the day - at night, the party
of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths, their strong melodious
song.⁹

The same idea is found in Felipe d'Oliveira's poem
"Magnificat" - section 2:

O homem moço, cantando, contou que a terra
tem riso de sol na boca e perfume de mato no hálito,
tem fulgor de estrela e veludo de noite morna nos
olhos,
tem todas as forças nos músculos e todas as sementes
nas entranhas.

O homem moço, cantando, contou que viu outros homens
 retorcendo rios,
 achatando montanhas,
 comprimindo florestas,
 rasgando ístmos,
 fendendo promontórios,
 plantando torres de aço,
 derramando outros rios, rios de asfalto e de aço.
 puxando para cima outras montanhas de cimento e de
 aço,
 ferindo no ventre o chão de fartura (punções de petrô
 leo, raspagens sonoras de minerais),
 ferindo nas veias o corpo da terra (sangrias de óleos,
 resinas e seivas).
 O homem moço, cantando, contou e contou e contou e o
 seu canto ficou sendo o Canto da Terra.¹⁰

Ronald de Carvalho was not less vibrant in his ample verses
 to sing his country. In his poem "Brasil" there is a passage which
 says:

Eu ouço todo o Brasil cantando, zumbindo, gritando,
 vociferando!
 Redes que se balançam,
 sereias que apitam,
 usinas que rangem, martelam, arfam, estridulam,
 ululam e roncam,
 tubos que explodem,
 guidastes que giram,
 rodas que batem,
 trilhos que trepidam,
 rumor de coxilhas e planaltos, campainhas, relinchos,
 aboiados, e mugidos,
 repiques de sinos, estouros de foguetes, Ouro Preto,
 Bahia, Congonhas, Sabará,
 vaias de bolsas empinando números como papagaios,
 tumulto de ruas que saracoteiam sob arranha-céus,
 vozes de todas as raças que a maresia dos portos joga
 no sertão!
 Nesta hora de sol puro eu ouço o Brasil.¹¹

In these passages we notice, first of all, a very sensuous kind of writing with emphasis upon verbs like see, hear and sing with a predominance of visual and auditory images. Most of the verbs in these passages express movement, listing the various activities of young working people in long catalogues which Leo Spitzer calls "chaotic enumeration" and our poet Mário de Andrade "versos harmônicos".

The break with poetic convention is shown in stanzas with different number of lines, in lines with different lengths, and no rhyme at all. As for rhythm, these poems seldom present the conventional rhythm, that is, the interplay of stressed and unstressed syllables. Yet the repetition of ideas or thoughts is also rhythm, and this technique is frequently used by Whitman and his Brazilian counterparts. In section 18 of "By Blue Ontario's Shore" we have a good example of initial, central and final reiteration, i.e., anaphora, mesodiplosis, and epiphora or epistrophe:

I will confront these shows of the day and night,
 I will know if I am to be less than they,
 I will see if I am not as majestic as they,
 I will see if I am not as subtle and real as they,
 I will see if I am to be less generous than they...¹²

Ronald de Carvalho in a poem entitled "Entre Buenos Aires e Mendonza" presents an example of initial and final reiteration:

Oh a emoção da força em face dos elementos que vão
 ser dominados!
 O espírito que se faz força,
 o amor que se faz força,
 o direito que se faz força,
 a força que se faz aspiração e fecunda todos os de-
 sejos e cria todos os movimentos:
 o movimento que gera e aniquila,
 o movimento do sementeiro que enche o teu corpo de
 germens, América,
 O movimento do mecânico,...¹³

In "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads", which was the Preface to the last edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman says:

For grounds for Leaves of Grass as poem, I abandon'd

the conventional themes which do not appear in it: none of the stock ornamentation, or choice plots of love or war, or high, exceptional personages of Old World song; nothing as I may say, for beauty's sake - no legend, or myth, or romance, nor euphemism, nor rhyme. But the broadest average of humanity and its identities in the now ripening 19th century, and especially in each of their countless examples and practical occupations in the United States today.¹⁴

It is interesting to remember that in a passage of a speech the poet Menotti del Picchia delivered during the Week of Modern Arts he says:-

Queremos libertar a poesia do presídio canoro das fórmulas acadêmicas, dar elasticidade e amplitude aos processos técnicos... Queremos exprimir a nossa mais livre espontaneidade dentro da mais espontânea liberdade.¹⁵

By putting into practice what they preached in their prefaces and utterances, Whitman as well as the Brazilian innovators created a poetry that arouses and stirs. The first lines of "Song of the Open Road" convey this idea:

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road
 Healthy, free, the world before me,
 The long brown path before me leading wherever I
 choose.

.....

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good
 fortune;
 Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need
 nothing,
 Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous
 criticisms,
 Strong and content I travel the open road.¹⁶

The same vitality is found in verses like these by Ronald de Carvalho from his poem "Entre Buenos Aires e Mendoza",

Onde estão os teus poetas, América?
 Teus poetas não são dessa raça de servos que dançam

no compasso de gregos e latinos,
 Teus poetas devem ter as mãos sujas de terra, de
 seiva e limo,
 as mãos da criação!
 E inocência para adivinhar os teus prodígios.
 e agilidade para correr por todo o teu corpo de fer-
 ro,
 de carvão, de cobre, de ouro, de trigais, milharais,
 e cafezais!
 Teu poeta será inocente, América!
 a alegria será a sua sabedoria,
 a liberdade será a sua sabedoria,
 e sua poesia será o vagido da tua própria substância,
 América, de tua própria substância lírica e numero-
 sa.¹⁷

Or in these by Felipe d'Oliveira from sections 3 and 4 of
 "Magnificat"

O canto da Terra embalou meus sentidos, o canto da
 Terra tocou os meus olhos e ouvi com os olhos a sua
 eloquência.

.....

O canto da Terra mostrou toda a Terra coberta de en-
 xames, fervendo de vidas,
 vertendo uma vida diversa das outras,
 e que sabe no gosto do sonho com gosto de mel,
 mas mel destilado de flores agrestes
 abertas nos limbos agrestes dos campos agrestes, das
 matas agrestes,
 o Canto da Terra mostrou toda a Terra.

And he starts section 5 of this poem:

À hora da aurora do mundo criança - a América toda.¹⁸

This as we see is a poetry of noble individualism, of
 national expansion, a crusading poetry pointing the way to a broader
 art. This is the prophecy announced in Whitman's Preface to the 1885
 Edition of *Leaves of Grass*: "The proof of a poet is that his country
 absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."¹⁹

Something of Whitman's irresistibility may be felt in the

tribute by another great poet, Ezra Pound. Pound acknowledges a debt which any honest American poet today must, to some extent, share. In his nine-line poem entitled "A Pact", Pound says:

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman -
I have detested you long enough.
I come to you as a grown child
Who has had a pig-headed father;
I am old enough now to make friends.
It was you that broke the new wood,
Now it is time for carving.
We have one sap and one root -
Let there be commerce between us. ²⁰

In conclusion I wish to say that no poet today - in America or in Brazil - would argue very much with Ezra Pound's acknowledged veneration.

NOTES

1. Edith Sitwell, Poetry and Criticism (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1926), p. 13.
2. Langdon Mitchel, "Walt Whitman," Understanding America (New York, 1927) pp. 165-166.
3. W. Whitman, "Poetry Today in America," Complete Prose Works (Boston, 1901), p. 201, note.
4. John Burroughs, Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person (New York, 1871), p. 27.
5. "Thou Mother With Thy Equal Brood," Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949), p. 374.
6. Walt Whitman's Workshop, ed. Clifton Joseph Furness (Cambridge, Mass, 1928) p. 168.
7. Mário de Andrade, Paulicea Desvairada, "Poesias Completas (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Editora, 1966) p. 15.
8. "Poets to Come", p. 11.
9. "I Hear America Singing," pp. 9-10.
10. Felipe d'Oliveira, "Magnificat," Lanterna Verde (Rio de Janeiro: Edição de Melo e Cia., 1926), pp. 94-96.
11. Ronald de Carvalho, "Brasil," Nossos Clássicos, ed. Peregrino Júnior (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Agir Editora, 1960), p. 45.
12. "By Blue Ontario's Shore," p. 295.
13. "Entre Buenos Aires e Mendoza," p. 55.
14. "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads," p. 475.
15. Menotti Del Picchia, "Arte Moderna", Correio Paulistano (São Paulo, Feb. 17, 1922), p. 2.

16. "Song of the Open Road," p. 124.
17. "Entre Buenos Aires e Mendoza", pp. 58-59.
18. "Magnificat," pp. 97-102.
19. "Preface," p. 472.
20. Ezra Pound, "A Pact", American Verse, ed. Oscar Williams (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1961), p. 383.