

El gran viejo: Walt Whitman in Latin America

Josef Raab
University of Bielefeld

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Josef Raab,

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Abstract: In his article, "*El gran viejo: Walt Whitman in Latin America*," Josef Raab examines the role and relevance of Walt Whitman within Latin American poetry. It is observed that since the publication of José Martí's essay of 1887, "El Poeta Walt Whitman," Whitman has been a prominent figure in the literary imagination of Latin America. While Martí lauded Whitman as a prophet, his reception in the Americas is far from homogeneous, however. Raab's study addresses ways in which some of the more prominent Latin American poets -- José Martí, Rubén Darío, Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, Vinícius de Moraes, Jorge Luis Borges, and Octavio Paz -- have re-fashioned Walt Whitman. Further, Raab argues that the reception of and response to Whitman illustrate that we can think of Whitman as a kind of Rorschach test: The ways in which he is being read and employed by Latin American writers reveal more about his readers than about him. Depending on their own poetic and political agendas, Latin American poets pick up (approvingly or disapprovingly) divergent aspects of Whitman's sometimes contradictory positions, thus constructing their own versions of Whitman and integrating them into their own poetic imagination and practice. The heterogeneous appropriations of Whitman by Latin American poets underline the vitality and polyvocal quality of Whitman's work and the continuing appeal of the man whom Darío called *el gran viejo*.

Josef RAAB

El gran viejo: Walt Whitman in Latin America

"There is no art of poetry save by grace of other poetry. ... How else to derive benefit from that which I love, unless I create a new thing of my own," wrote William Carlos Williams in his 1917 essay on "America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry," celebrating the continuing presence of Whitman in North American modernism (1). Because of his efforts to found a truly American poetry freed from European models and depicting American places, subjects, and people, Walt Whitman has often been seen as fulfilling the conditions Ralph Waldo Emerson had outlined in "The Poet" for a truly American literature. Whitman exulted in the immense diversity of New York City and treasured the many faces of America, which he celebrated in his *Leaves of Grass* (1855). His desire to be a poet of and for the people, to embrace Self and Other, his celebration of democracy, of the nation, of the human body, of the common person and of common speech, his prophetic utopianism, and the newness of his prosody appealed to a diverse crowd of followers at home and abroad. As studies of Whitman's international reception -- such as Walter Grünzweig's *Constructing the German Walt Whitman* or Fernando Alegria's references to Chinese reader reactions -- illustrate, followers of Whitman, past and present, can be found worldwide.

In Latin America it was the Cuban journalist, poet, and freedom fighter José Martí who first put Walt Whitman on a pedestal. Taking as his point of departure Whitman's participation in a New York literary festival, Martí, living in New York at the time, published his essay on "El Poeta Walt Whitman" in the Mexican newspaper *El Partido Liberal* in April 1887 and republished it in the Buenos Aires paper *La Nación* in June of that year. This laudatory essay was the beginning of what has been called a Whitman cult in Latin America, the elevation of this North American poet to a mythical status. It made Whitman a known -- and soon also a controversial -- figure in Latin American literary circles. Receptions ranged from idolizations of Whitman as a prophet to rejections of him as the representative of an overpowering neighboring country with imperialist tendencies. These diametrically opposed responses continue in the twentieth century. In part they can be traced back to the polyvocal quality of *Leaves of Grass*, in part to the plural identities of Whitman's "I" and of its author. When he has the speaker of "Song of Myself" announce: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" (88), Whitman conveys an awareness of the multiplicity of his "I" as well as of his posing.

Jorge Luis Borges, too, in his *Introducción a la literatura norteamericana* (1967; *An Introduction to American Literature*, 1971) addresses the multiplicity of Whitman: "The Walt Whitman of the book is a plural personage; he is the author and he is at the same time each one of his readers, present and future. Thus certain apparent contradictions can be justified: in one passage Whitman is born on Long Island; in another, in the South. 'Leaving Paumanok' begins with a fantastic biography: the poet tells of his experiences as a miner, a job that he never held, and describes the spectacle of herds of buffalo on the prairies, where he had never been" (32). Further, the mingling of the writer's self with his fictional identities widens the range of receptions. After José Martí's essay had elevated Whitman to prominence in Latin American literary circles, many poets felt compelled to react to him in one way or another, even if they had never read him in the original. French and Italian translations of *Leaves of Grass* provided the most common sources for a Latin American reception (French then still being the international language of the literati) until the first edition of the Uruguayan poet Alvaro Armando Vasseur's *Walt Whitman: Poemas* in 1912. Vasseur had started translating Whitman into Spanish as early as 1881, but since he did not know English, he used Italian translations as a basis for his rewriting of Whitman. It is not surprising, therefore, that what emerges from Vasseur's translations and from his own poetry is an imagined Whitman rather than a linguistically accurate rendering (see Santí 163). Portuguese translations did not follow until decades later. Whitman's life was primarily imagined through idealizing biographies like Léon Bazalgette's *Walt Whitman: L'Homme et son oeuvre* (1908).

These indirect venues of encountering Whitman opened up further possibilities of misunderstanding or selective reception. My study here addresses reactions to Whitman by some of the more prominent Latin American poets. Of course, no claims of any kind of comprehensive treat-

ment can be made for a paper of this length. What I want to illustrate through the paradigmatic examples I have chosen is that we can think of Whitman as a kind of Rorschach test: The ways in which he is being read and employed by Latin American writers reveal more about his readers than about him. Depending on their own poetic and political agendas, Latin American poets pick up (approvingly or disapprovingly) divergent aspects of Whitman's "multitudes," constructing their own versions of Whitman and integrating them into their own poetic imagination and practice. The often contradictory nature of Walt Whitman's work, his open texts, his wish to have it both ways, i.e., to be "kosmos," and his changing outlook facilitated a heterogeneous reader reception of the man whom Rubén Darío called *el gran viejo*, the grand old man.

What we end up with is, as Alexander Coleman has termed it, a "multiple, contradictory and unseizable literary reality": A Whitman subtext in the work of various Latin American poets, literary appropriations of reading and imagining Whitman (77). Fernando Alegría, in his comprehensive (although incomplete, and as Enrico Mario Santí has shown, by now dated) study, *Walt Whitman en Hispanoamérica* (1954), complains that "studying Whitman in the poetry of Hispanic America is like searching for the footprints of a ghost that can be felt everywhere but is nowhere to be seen" (9, Alegría's translation in "Borges's" 208). What Alegría found is that Whitman is taken up as a figurehead or myth and is then adapted to the time and place of his users: "Whitman ... survives nationalized in the language of his admirers, translated into different realities" ("Borges's" 208). We should add that such adaptations are highly selective in what they mean by "Whitman." For example, scholars such as Doris Sommer and Enrico Mario Santí have written partial narratives of an imaginary Whitman in Latin America: Focusing on the politics of omission, Santí speaks of a "commonly shared contest or *conquest* of Whitman -- a contest or conquest of wills over the most accurate appropriation of the American bard's legacy" (159). The result, according to Santí, is "a rhapsodic production of contradictory, often erratic effects" (174). Such heterogeneity can be taken as testimony to the vitality of Whitman's presence, his polyvocal style, and polemic stance.

Whitman's sometimes contradictory statements are sure to have fostered such selective receptions and their imaginative uses -- as in a Rorschach test. For example, Eric Wertheimer has illustrated Whitman's struggle with the idea of a heterogeneous national identity: Seeking to unify America, Whitman tended to obliterate some of its aspects, especially its pre-Columbian and Spanish components. He realized that he was participating in the construction of a national narrative, which, while attempting to be "absorbing" could also be "predatory and destructive. He, like his imperial nation, was unable to bring Latin America and its pre-Columbian legacies into 'American' history and literature without 'devouring' or placing them outside the realm of the national/cultural 'resume' (or memory)" (Wertheimer 167). Whitman's ambivalent position between consolidating a unifying national narrative and individualizing America's national identity is certainly one key to the wide range of receptions with which he has met in Latin America. His positions on freedom, equality, and patriotism were judged very differently depending on the situation and agenda of his interpreters. In his preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman appoints the American poet to be the protector of liberty: "In the make of the great masters the idea of political liberty is indispensable. Liberty takes the adherence of heroes wherever men and women exist ... but never takes any adherence or welcome from the rest more than from poets. They are the voice and exposition of liberty. ... The attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots" (722). For Whitman, the liberty which he proclaims for America and Americans extends to all races, genders, and classes, which is why the poet of liberty must be "the equable man" (714). However, as David Simpson writes, "the enormity of what is excluded from Whitman's representation of an exemplary America is quite staggering" (184). Whether Whitman's championing of equality is limited to what lies within the borders of the U.S.A. or whether it applies also to an inter-American context has long been a contested question among his Latin American readers. Is he a patriot of an imperialist U.S.A. or of an equable New World?

The latter interpretation is supported, for example, by Whitman's statement at the end of *Specimen Days*: "I like well our polyglot construction-stamp, and the retention thereof, in the broad, the tolerating, the many-sided, the collective. All nations here -- a home for every race on earth" (qtd. in Asselineau 323). The contrary position, however, can cite section 34 of "Song of Myself" as

evidence: Recalling the 1836 massacre of Captain Fannin and his company of 371 Texans at Goliad, Whitman heroicizes "the glory of the race of rangers, / Matchless with horse, rifle, song, supper, courtship," while he presents the Mexican troops as treacherous "murder[ers] in cold blood" (68). Roger Asselineau argues that Whitman's "pan-Americanism, definitely tainted with nationalism and even chauvinism at the beginning, was gradually purified and rose from a rather narrow Americanism to a very broad internationalism based on the universal brotherhood of men" (326). This widening of Whitman's sense of allegiance had already occurred by the time when Martí attended his reading in New York. Martí's essay about Whitman's poetics and concerns, entitled "El Poeta Walt Whitman" (1887), was to become the foundation of the enormous presence that Whitman would come to have in Latin America (see, e.g., Molloy). Reading Whitman as Martí's Rorschach test, we see Martí disregarding any indications of Whitman's defense of the Mexican-American war; instead, Martí considered the U.S. poet a kindred spirit, an ally in his pan-American aspirations, and a fellow defender of a poetic sincerity that is in tune with the people and places out of which the verse emerges. The Rorschachean inkblots that the twenty-four year-old Martí took in referred almost exclusively to *Leaves of Grass* and to the public appearance of the by then seventy year-old Whitman, not to Whitman's more controversial statements. The young Cuban exile projects onto Whitman the poetic qualities that he endeavored to produce in his own verse and the politics that he defended in his own essays.

Martí believes that Whitman's writing reveals "un hombre veraz, sonoro y amoroso" ("a truthful, sonorous, and loving man," "Poeta" 1144, all subsequent translations are mine unless indicated otherwise), a champion of liberty and equality and thus a potential model for Latin American writers. He criticizes U.S. censorship of *Leaves of Grass*, defending the volume, by contrast, as "a natural book" ("Poeta" 1134): "Thus appears Whitman, with his 'natural persona,' with his 'nature without bounds in original energy,' with his 'myriads of handsome and giant youths,' with his belief that 'the smallest infant shows that there is no real death,' with the formidable gathering of peoples and races in his 'Salut au Monde,' ... knowing the perfect propriety and harmony of things" ("Poeta" 1135). These attributes entitle Whitman, in Martí's opinion, to "an extraordinary position in the literature of his country and of his period. Only the holy books of antiquity offer teachings that are comparable in their prophetic language and robust poetry to the grand and priestly apothegms that this old poet emits like gulps of light" (1134). For Martí, Whitman is a poet who -- like Martí himself -- goes against division and whose work is to have a healing effect on readers, imparting the desire and power to live (1135, 1138). José Martí's perception of Whitman as a prophetic healer of divisiveness may in part be based on the poem that has come to be known under the title "States," which Whitman included only in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Here Martí could find a utopian pan-American vision very akin to his own. Both writers consider a diverse America their mother and plead for mutual acquaintance and love among its progeny: "The old breath of life, ever new, / Here! I pass it by contact to you, America. / O mother! have you done much for me? / Behold, there shall from me be much done for you. / There shall from me be a new friendship ... / Affection shall solve every one of the problems of freedom, / Those who love each other shall be invincible... // To Michigan shall be wafted perfume from Florida, / To the Mannahatta from Cuba or Mexico, / Not the perfume of flowers, but sweeter, and wafted beyond death. // No danger shall balk Columbia's lovers" (609). This same vision and appeal can be found, for example, in Martí's essays "Madre América" and "Nuestra América." Significantly, Whitman uses the names "America" and "Columbia" rather than "U.S.A." And Martí's consciousness understood those terms as expressions of inter-American inclusiveness and equality.

That Whitman grounded his verse in his American surroundings and that he presents the lyrical "I" as symbiotically connected to the people, landscapes, scenes, or history out of which it emerges greatly appealed to Martí. While for both poets the "I" is central, both try to prevent the Self from overpowering the Other. The Self and the Other, by contrast, form part of the same entity (as Whitman writes, for example, in "Spontaneous Me" or "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"). 497 lines into "Song of Myself" the speaker introduces himself as "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating drinking and breeding, / No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them, / No more modest than immodest" (52). This self-

characterization as a common person who is deeply rooted in the Western Hemisphere and as an anti-Romantic who approaches the human body and its needs naturally must have elicited the admiration of his Cuban reader.

Echoes of Whitman can therefore be found in Martí's *Versos sencillos*, which were published in New York in 1891, four years after the essay on "El Poeta Walt Whitman." Martí wrote the majority of those poems in New York in the winter of 1889-90, while also reporting on the meeting of the Pan-American Congress in Washington. In his frustration about the lack of progress toward a greater inter-American unity, Martí saw an ally in Whitman. He adapted Whitman's persona to his own circumstances, presenting himself as the poet of the common people who speaks simply and sincerely: "I am a sincere man/ from where the palm tree grows; / and before I die I want / to loose my verses from my heart. // I come from everywhere, / and I go everywhere" ("Simple" 343). Here, Martí integrates in his self-fashioning the characteristics that he had assigned to Whitman in 1887: "He is of all classes, creeds and professions, and in all of them he finds justice and poetry" ("Poeta" 1139). The imagined Whitman feeds into Martí's lyrical self. The young Cuban poet shared Whitman's belief in the poet as liberator and mediator and he extended Whitman's all-embracing attitude from the United States to the Western Hemisphere, highlighting those parts of it that -- like his native Cuba -- were still struggling to gain independence from colonial rule (see Raab). Whitman was for Martí, as he would be for Pablo Neruda decades later, a representative of the U.S.A.'s democratic principles and thus an ally against the U.S. imperialism that both writers chastised. However, in elevating Whitman to the status of model poet and model U.S. American, Martí did not differentiate between the author and his lyrical self and he projected his own convictions and values onto a man who did not necessarily share them. Martí writes in "El Poeta Walt Whitman": "Walt Whitman knows from the teachings of the sun and of free air that a sunrise reveals more to him than the best book. He thinks of the cycles, desires women, feels possessed by a universal and frenetic love; he hears rising from the scenes of creation and from the occupations of man a concert which fills him with happiness and when he looks out onto the river at the time when the shops close and the setting sun sets the water afire, he feels that he is in the presence of the Creator" ("Poeta" 1139-40).

Martí makes his version of Whitman more Christian and heterosexual than the actual Whitman was because those are qualities of Martí himself. And Martí adopted for himself Whitman's polyvocalism, which has made him a figurehead for the most diverse kinds of ideologies (for example, he has been quoted in public speeches by both Fidel Castro and Ronald Reagan). Martí's refashioning of Whitman occurred despite the fact that he had encountered Whitman and was able to read him in English. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of turn-of-the-century Latin American writers, who came into contact with Whitman more indirectly (through translations or biographies), refashioned him more freely, according to their own needs and agendas. Fernando Alegría has shown that while Whitman's influence in Latin America can especially be felt from the late nineteenth century onwards, there is little thorough or first-hand knowledge of him: "The first generation of modernists, headed by Rubén Darío, did not intimately know the content of *Leaves of Grass* nor did they understand to its full extent the meaning of Whitman's poetic reform, nor were they in a position to join in his social and political crusade" (*Hispanoamérica* 13).

The early work of José Martí's contemporary, the Nicaraguan *modernista* Rubén Darío, shows a very different view on Walt Whitman, neglecting what Martí had praised. Darío's construction of Whitman, based not on reading the North American bard directly but on encountering him in French translation, is more skeptical than Martí's. The foundations of the pedestal onto which Martí had put Whitman are starting to crumble, as some of Whitman's ambivalence comes into focus. While he is the visionary poet of body and brotherhood, he is also, for the early Darío, the representative of his country, the "Hydra-headed monster," as Martí called it in view of U.S. businesses taking control of Latin American economic branches like Cuban sugar cane production and processing. Also, after a series of pan-American congresses it had become increasingly clear to political and cultural elites in Latin America that the U.S.A. would never give up their dominance of the Western hemisphere. Darío expresses growing fears of economic and political U.S. imperialism in Latin America in his sonnet "Walt Whitman," which is included in his 1888 collection *Azul*. While,

in writing his *Versos sencillos*, Martí relied on Whitman's philosophy and outlook as a model (although not on his prosody), Rubén Darío employed Whitman as a theme, as a synecdoche for the mighty American neighbor. Darío thus starts the Latin American trend of writing *about* Whitman rather than writing from a Whitmanean point of view, a trend that prevailed for several decades (see Santí 161). While the Whitman he constructs out of the bits of second-hand information available to him takes up Martí's characterization of the North American poet as "profeta" ("prophet," line 8), "sacerdote" ("priest," line 9), "santo" ("holy" or "saintly," line 2), and "divino" ("divine," line 9) -- which is itself taken from Whitman's preface to *Leaves of Grass* -- there is also a strong sense of the commander and "emperador" (line 14).

Darío's praise of Whitman as *el gran viejo* (line 1) is undermined through the comparisons of the North American bard to a patriarch and to an imperial commander. While Darío does take up some of the points which Whitman makes in his preface like combining the old and the new (line 7-8), reflecting the Other in the Self (line 5), or embracing one's surroundings (line 6), these are overshadowed by expressions of cold control like "país de hierro" ("country of iron," line 1) and "impera y vence" ("dominates and defeats," line 4), which lead up to the final "emperador" ("emperor," line 14) and the concluding exclamation mark. This semantic duality renders Darío's version of Whitman's activity ambivalent: moving from "canta" ("sings," line 8) to "Dice" ("Tells," line 11), Darío implies that Whitman's supposed love of nature ("águila," line 11) and of the common man ("marino," line 11; "trabajador," line 12) is also an expression of having power over these. Rather than celebrating, Darío sees Whitman as commanding. Readers are invited to draw parallels to the attitude which the United States are taking toward their Latin American neighbors. Darío's combative attitude toward an imperialist U.S.A. continued but his constructions and uses of Whitman changed. In 1905, seventeen years after "Walt Whitman," he published his famous poetic indictment of President Roosevelt and his Big Stick policy, "A Roosevelt." Here the "country of iron" becomes the "future invader of our native America," led by a man who is out to hunt and kill his neighbors to the South (*Selected* 69). Walt Whitman is no longer seen as part of imperialist North America but has now become a champion of anti-imperialism. His work and the Bible, both proclamations of brotherhood, are invoked by Darío as possible ways of abating Roosevelt's hunger for domination: "The voice that would reach you, Hunter, must speak / in Biblical tones, or in the poetry of Walt Whitman" (*Selected* 69).

As Enrico Mario Santí has noted, poets of Latin American *modernismo* like Martí, Darío, and Lugones "invoke rather than imitate Whitman. In their works Whitman tends to be a *theme* rather than a stylistic or rhetorical model" (160). But in the early twentieth century the lyrical self which Whitman had created rather than the person of the writer behind it became the focus of attention as Latin American writers increasingly read Whitman's work in the original, possibly also as a consequence of New Critical disregard for biography. Continuing along the path on which Darío had sent him in "A Roosevelt," Whitman was commonly imagined as the American poet of democracy in the 1930s. He became an ideal figure to invoke in the context of U.S. Good Neighbor policy. What was highlighted in the 1930s and 40s, the decades during which the Whitman cult became most intense in Latin America, was the political Whitman.

Fernando Alegría's first encounter of Whitman is probably symptomatic for Latin American readers at that time. Recalling his student years at the Universidad de Chile in the 1930s, Alegría writes: "Whitman was, at that time, one of that class of fighters and rebels who taught me to distrust the sold-out culture of those who work to nourish the commercial values of small nationalist groups intent on dividing the human race and on fostering general hatred and envy. Whitman was the defender of the freedom of the spirit, the enemy of prejudices, the proud maintainer of the excellence and purity of the artistic work, the singer of youth, of life in contact with nature, the big brother of the workers, the romantic apostle of the persecuted and of the exploited" (*Hispanoamérica* 9). An admiration of these same aspects also dominates Whitman's reception by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who combines Whitman's political and social aspects with the celebration of a diverse America (inspired in part by Martí). Neruda's revolutionary and egalitarian politics very much reflect those of Whitman, whom Neruda uses -- as did the later Darío -- as a defense against U.S. hegemony. Neruda shares Whitman's valorization of the body, his skepticism

toward bookish culture, and his desire to absorb a diverse America. Neruda's "we are many" echoes Whitman's "I contain multitudes."

As Neruda's poetic sensibilities changed over the years, so did his attitude toward Walt Whitman: Having imitated the North American bard in his early verse, Neruda would soon reject him only to recover him again in later years (see Santí 165). Reviewing Arturo Torres-Rioseco's 1922 translations of Whitman, Neruda praised Whitman's energy and vitalism, but thought that those went nowhere and could not serve as a model for other poets (see Santí 166). But later on, in his magnum opus, *Canto general*, Neruda writes very much in the prophetic manner of Whitman, cataloguing and celebrating American landscapes and cultures, extending the brotherhood among individuals to a general, inter-cultural and inter-national brotherhood in the Americas. As Neruda told an interviewer, "Walt Whitman has been my constant companion. I haven't been much of a Whitmanian in my style of writing, but I am profoundly Whitmanian as regards his vital message, his acceptance, his way of embracing the world, life, human beings, nature" (Guibert 47). The extensive list which Santí has compiled of books by and on Whitman that Pablo Neruda kept in his library supports the strong presence that Whitman maintained in Neruda's political and poetic consciousness. For example, in one of his *New Elementary Odes* Neruda writes of the connection he feels with Whitman: "I touched 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" (qtd. in Coleman 82). Neruda underlines the importance of physical experience, which both he and Whitman value ("touched," "hand," "feet bare"), and he points to their shared privileging of an active absorption of one's surroundings ("stepped," "walked"). The "hand" that touches the Other and the "hand" that writes connects these two poets as kindred spirits. While Whitman had found his multiple America in the diversity of Manhattan and of the U.S.A., Neruda encountered his inter-cultural and time-transcending America in the ruins of Macchu Picchu and in Latin America.

Neruda's fellow countrywoman Gabriela Mistral, the first Latin American to receive a Nobel Prize in literature (1945), writes less directly out of a knowledge of Whitman, but his presence can be felt in her work nevertheless. As an educator and diplomat, Mistral was a reformer -- much like Whitman had aspired to be. While Neruda tended to focus on the larger picture of cultural and socio-political connection, Mistral remains more on the personal level, concentrating on the connection between individuals or on a connection to Christ. Both approaches are versions of Whitman. In "Dame la mano" ("Give me your hand"), Mistral takes up the initial lines of Whitman's "Song of Myself," the celebration of an "I"- "you" connection: "Give me your hand and we shall dance; / give me your hand and you shall love me. / Like a single flower we shall be, / like a flower, and nothing more.... // We shall sing the same verse, / you shall dance to the same step. / Like a stamen we shall undulate, / like a stamen, and nothing more. // Your name is Rosa and mine Esperanza; / but you shall forget your name, / for we shall be a dance / on the hill, and nothing more..." (217).

Whitman's "what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (28) has become in Mistral's poem a "me amarás" (line 2) and a convergence of "I" and "you" into "we," "single" and "same." Whitman's celebratory song of connection is taken up by Mistral's song and dance. Both poets strive to overcome the divisions between individuals, between body and soul, between the real and the imaginary. Whitman writes, "I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, / And you must not be abased to the other" (32), and Mistral has her figures forget their names in favor of togetherness. Their (metaphoric) dance replaces their individuality.

The valorization of community was also a feature of Whitman's work which the Brazilian poet Vinícius de Moraes incorporated in his work. Whitman's reception in the Luso-Brazilian world has not yet received much critical attention. Santí conjectures that Whitman was less a poet of "heroic vitalism" and more "a poet of death, a writer of elegies and of nihilist allegories" for his Brazilian readers, but he provides no proof for this assertion (174). As Maria Clara Bonetti Paro has shown in her essay on the influence of Whitman's free verse on Ronald de Carvalho, there are Brazilian uses of Whitman's formal characteristics. And as the example of Vinícius de Moraes illustrates, Santí's statement is too general. While translations of Whitman's work into Portuguese came later than those into Spanish, Whitman certainly also has a following in Brazil. One of his translators

was Vinícius de Moraes (e.g., "A última invocação" and "Meu legado," 1941). In his "Sonêto de Intimidade" Vinícius imitates and celebrates Whitman's persona, although he does not mention the North American bard by name. Elizabeth Bishop translated Vinícius' "Sonnet of Intimacy" as follows: "Farm afternoons, there's much too much blue air. / I go out sometimes, follow the pasture track, / Chewing a blade of sticky grass, chest bare, / In threadbare pajamas of three summers back, // To the little rivulets in the river-bed / For a drink of water, cold and musical, / And if I spot in the brush a glow of red, / A raspberry, spit its blood at the corral. // The smell of cow manure is delicious. / The cattle look at me unenviously / And when there comes a sudden stream and hiss // Accompanied by a look not unmalicious, / All of us, animals, unemotionally / Partake together of a pleasant piss" (103).

The blade of sticky grass, the bare chest, the celebration of nature and its musical sounds, the physicality of experience, the absorption of the ordinary and base as "delicious," the feeling of contentment, and the oneness felt with all organisms are all images and notions that we also find in Whitman. In terms of style, Vinícius uses the traditional rhymed sonnet form but he takes over Whitman's juxtapositions to catalogue what the lyrical self registers while "loafing" (as Whitman called it). Whereas Gabriela Mistral speaks of the connection between individuals, Vinícius de Moraes widens the scope to the self's symbiotic relationship or "intimacy" with its surroundings. Both uses of Whitman are justified; once again, like a Rorschach test, they illustrate what is important to different readers of Whitman and which of Whitman's many aspects have entered an individual poetic consciousness.

As we move further along in the twentieth century, Whitman's reception is increasingly based on his works (read in English now) and less so on his biography. The Argentine Jorge Luis Borges has repeatedly pointed out (from 1929 until the 1970s) that "the name Whitman really corresponds to two persons: the modest author of the work and its semidivine protagonist" (*Introduction* 30). As becomes apparent in his short essay "Borges and Myself," Borges also uses Whitman's strategy of a constructed identity. The Argentinean fabulist writes, "I [the author] live, I let myself live, so that Borges [the perceived public figure] can weave his tales and poems, and those tales and poems are my justification" (*Selected* 261). An admiration for this aspect of Whitman seems to be a prominent reason for the lifelong attraction to Whitman of which Borges told an interviewer: He takes the "I" of *Leaves of Grass* to be "an imaginary figure, who is to some extent a magnification and projection of the writer as well as of the reader. ... The character Whitman has created is one of the most lovable and memorable in all literature. He is a character like Don Quixote or Hamlet, but someone no less complex and possibly more lovable than either of them" (Guibert 97). And in his "Autobiographical Essay" (1970) Borges adds: "For a time I thought of Whitman not only as a great poet but as the only poet. In fact, I thought all poets the world over had merely led up to Whitman until 1855, and that not to imitate him was a proof of ignorance" (qtd. in Santí 168). Thus, Whitman became for the young Borges the incarnation of Literature and a model: This is why as early as 1927 he must have been working on his partial translation of *Leaves of Grass*. Borges's *Hojas de hierba* were announced as being "in progress" in 1927 but were not published until 1969. As a translator of Whitman, Borges emulates the original, seeking to achieve, as Walter Benjamin had postulated in "The Task of the Translator," "a unity of effect" with the original text. Fernando Alegría assesses Borges's rendering thus: "Borges does take liberties as he translates, but always making an effort to stay close to Whitman's directness and bluntness. ... Though he may replace some words, he does it in order to remain faithful to Whitman's *sense*, not only to *form*. He eliminates or adds words if it seems to him that by simplifying he will strengthen the text" ("Borges's" 209-10).

Both Whitman and Borges stress that poetry has to come out of the people and sights that surround the poet, out of the ordinary, that it should aim to be timeless, and that the test of its greatness will be the emotional responses it triggers. Borges's "Arte poetica" echoes Whitman's convictions. In W.S. Merwin's translation the poem reads: "They say that Ulysses, sated with marvels, / Wept tears of love at the sight of his Ithaca, / Green and humble. Art is that Ithaca/ Of green eternity, not of marvels. // It is also like the river with no end That flows and remains...." (*Selected* 143). The Ithaca of both Whitman and Borges is America, and Borges notes that "Whit-

man ... and his followers represent the idea that America is a new event which poets should celebrate" (*Introduction* 33).

Although the Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz is a very different writer from Borges (and from Whitman), he, too, stresses the importance of seeing Whitman as the poet of the New World. In "Whitman, Poet of America," Paz writes, "the poetic dream and the historic one coincide in him completely. There is no break between his belief and the social reality ... With complete confidence and innocence, Whitman can sing of democracy on the march because the American utopia is confused with and is indistinguishable from the American reality. Whitman's poetry is a great prophetic dream, but it is a dream within another dream, a prophecy within another prophecy that is even vaster and that nourished it. America dreams itself in Whitman's poetry because America itself is a dream" (271-73). This view of Whitman as expressing a utopia in which Latin America can share still prevails in the New World. However, a contrary perception that focuses on the Whitman who found justification for the Mexican-American War and who voiced his nation's Manifest Destiny competes with that of Whitman as the "poet of America." For example, Mauricio González de la Garza set out to debunk the myth of a poet of democracy in his revisionist, well documented but exaggerated study of Whitman's alleged exclusionism entitled *Walt Whitman: racista, imperialista, antimexicano* (1971). An earlier attack had been launched in Pedro Mir's *Contracanto a Walt Whitman* (1952), a polemic that calls Whitman an imperialist who protects the banks and monopolies.

Despite such attacks, Latin American readers of Whitman largely continue to concentrate on what are to them appealing aspects of his verse and life. For example, on his last visit to the United States, Jorge Luis Borges wrote a kind of farewell to Whitman, "Camden 1892," in which he imagines the dying Whitman whose work will continue to reach out and embrace: "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" (*Selected* 175).

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Author's profile: Josef Raab teaches American Studies at the University of Bielefeld. His essay on Walt Whitman's reception in Latin America is part of his ongoing research on inter-American literary and cultural relations. Other work he has published in this area includes "Pan-amerikanisches Ideal und US-amerikanische Vormacht: José Martí's Sicht des 'vecino formidable'" in *Transatlantische Perzeptionen: Lateinamerika -- USA -- Europa in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Ed. Hans-Joachim König and Stefan Rinke, 1998) and "Los Gringos: Latin American Literary Views of the United States" in *Negotiations of America's National Identity* (Ed. Roland Hagenbüchle, Josef Raab, and Marietta Messmer, 2000). Apart from co-editing the latter volume, Josef Raab is also the editor of *Das 20. Jahrhundert: Nachkriegszeit* (1998) and *Klassische Menschenbilder* (forthcoming). Raab's publications on American poetry focus on Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, and Emily Dickinson. In recent years, he has also explored popular culture, Benjamin Franklin, Tony Kushner, and, especially, Mexican American Studies. At present, Raab is working on a monograph entitled *The Borderlands of Identity in Mexican American Literature*. E-mail: <josef.raab@uni-bielefeld.de>.

Yet surveys of scholarship on Walt Whitman produced outside the United States have long identified Latin American critics as among the more astute readers of the Good Gray Poet.¹ He took up journalism for newspapers such as the Montevideo-based *El Tiempo*, oversaw the Constitutional Manifesto of the Uruguayan Socialist Party, and gave lectures in favor of divorce. He also soon published several books of poetry, including *Cantos Augurales* (1904), *Cantos del Nuevo Mundo*, and *A Flor de Alma* (both 1907). In an essay entitled "The Accidental Tourist: Walt Whitman in Latin America," Enrico Mario Sant'Á begins the work of documenting the complex history of the Vasseur translation. Walt Whitman (/ˈhwɛtmɛn/; May 31, 1819 – March 26, 1892) was an American poet, essayist, and journalist. A humanist, he was a part of the transition between transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his works. Whitman is among the most influential poets in the American canon, often called the father of free verse. His work was controversial in its time, particularly his poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, which was described as obscene for its overt sensuality. Whitman's own life came