

Liberty and Individualism; The Effect of Walt Whitman on Three Latin American Poets

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In the words of Chilean author Fernando Alegría, “*estudiar a Walt Whitman en la poesía hispanoamericana es como buscar las huellas de un fantasma que se puede sentir en todas partes y ver en ninguna,*” “studying Walt Whitman in Latin American poetry is like looking for the traces of a ghost that can be felt everywhere and seen nowhere” (Alegría, 1955, p. 9). While Whitman’s poems did not become widely available in the Spanish language until the early 1900s, many poets and writers had heard of the Poet of Democracy, the Good Gray Poet, and were interested in how he viewed the world. Walt Whitman’s influence extended beyond the confines of American writers. Whitman was revered by many, and served as a source of inspiration for Latin American poets and writers such as José Martí, Álvaro Armando Vasseur, and Pablo Neruda.

José Martí

José Martí, the Cuban poet and essayist, recognized for his outspokenness regarding Cuba's struggle for independence from Spain, joined an audience in New York on April 18, 1887 where Walt Whitman

read his “Death of Lincoln” lecture. Whitman presented his writing to commemorate President Abraham Lincoln’s death in April of 1865. Martí was already familiar with Whitman’s work, having referred to him throughout his articles since the early 1880s, such as in the Venezuelan newspaper, *La Opinión Nacional*, in November of 1881, in which he describes Whitman as, “A poet of the United States, famous for the nerve of his rhymes, the daring of his thoughts and shamelessness...” (Keller, 2010, p. 13).

However, this experience with the poet prompted him to write, “El Poeta Walt Whitman” in 1887. Published in the Argentinian newspaper, *La Nación*, and the Mexican newspaper, *El Partido Liberal*, this essay expresses Martí’s fascination with Whitman and his success as a poet. He labels Whitman as, “*un rebelde admirable, que quiebra una rama de los bosques, y en ella halla poesía,*” “an admirable rebel who could break a branch in the forest and find poetry in it” (Fountain, 2003, p. 56). Martí’s choice to publish his essay in these newspapers is what helped the American poet’s words become widespread across Latin American countries. As he wrote about Whitman’s beliefs on life and death, spirituality, and love, he did not rely on paraphrasing or combining Whitman’s words with his own interpretation; instead he relied on the poet’s own words. He lets Whitman speak for himself throughout the essay, consistently quoting from *Leaves of Grass* and other poems. For instance, in the beginning of the essay, as Martí introduces the poet he uses Whitman’s own words describing, “his ‘natural person,’ his ‘nature without check with original energy’” (Martí & Allen, 2002, p.183). This use of his texts is what prompted the people of Latin American countries to become interested in Whitman’s work.

At times when direct translations of Whitman’s poems were not possible for Martí and a paraphrased line was needed, he thoroughly explained what Whitman’s goal was in writing those specific lines. He did not want to lose the integrity of Whitman’s words; rather, transform them through his translation into Spanish to show how, “Whitman’s poetry is valued, in part, for expressing liberty, equality, self-worth—the substance of its message” (Keller, 2010, p. 44).

Martí was known by many for his *Versos Libres* poems as they, too, express those themes and a call for democracy. Whitman, the “Poet

of Democracy,” showed how he saw the value in the individual and man’s rights which coincided with Martí’s core values, as he longed for Cuba to be freed from Spain’s rule and be able to govern themselves. This is seen in his most famous piece of writing, “Nuestra América,” “Our America,” where Martí urges the Latin American people to join together against American and European imperialism. He writes, “*Peca contra la humanidad el que fomente y propague la oposición y el odio de las razas*” (Martí, 1891), “Anyone who promotes and disseminates opposition or hatred among races is committing a sin against humanity” (Martí & Allen, 2002, p. 296). To Martí, all humans are created equal and one country should not be able to dominate another because there is no “superior” race. This belief parallels Whitman’s, “as part of his democratic effort, he tried to invent poetry as open, as nondiscrimination, and as absorptive as he imaged an ideal democracy would be” (Folsom, n.d.). Martí viewed Whitman as his comrade, a poet who shared his desire for advocating for freedom and writing about themes that were deemed controversial, without fear of the repercussions of their words.

Álvaro Armando Vasseur

Born and raised in Montevideo, Uruguay, the poet Álvaro Armando Vasseur was first presented with Walt Whitman’s poems through Italian translations created by Luigi Gamberale, between 1900 and 1907. Vasseur was mesmerized by Whitman’s poetry, stating that, “*la música sinfónica que solivanta sus versículos es comparable a la de los más potentes acordes de Wágner*” (Whitman & Vasseur, 1912), “the symphonic music that excites his verses is comparable to that of Wagner’s most powerful chords”. In 1904, Vasseur published his first book *Cantos Augurales*, which consists of poetry and prose about love, liberty, and the individual. Vasseur was inspired by Whitman’s poetry on those themes, and dedicated the book, “*Á la memoria de Walt Whitman, rhapsodia de la democracia*,” “In memory of Walt Whitman, rhapsody of democracy.” In 1907, Vasseur was named an Uruguayan consul to San Sebastián, Spain. It was there he made the decision to translate Whitman’s work into Spanish, as the only translations that existed prior to this were scattered excerpts of Whitman’s work translated by José Martí, Balbino Dávalos, and Miguel de Unamuno.

Vasseur, alongside the editorial house *Sempere*, then published *Poemas* in 1912, a collection of Whitman's poems that Vasseur translated into Spanish. It is speculated that he enlisted the help of his wife and son to aid with the translations. This publication was the first of its kind as Whitman's work had never been translated into Spanish in such a large collection. *Poemas* became widespread across Latin America, providing all kinds of people with access to the Good Gray Poet. As Fernando Alegría states in his essay on Vasseur's *Poemas*, *fue una obra de amor* (Alegría, 1955, p. 349), "it was a labor of love."

Despite that, Vasseur's book has oftentimes been criticized for incorrect translations, grammatically altering the content of, and adding in his own words, to certain poems. For instance, he translated the poem titled "Faces" to "La abuela del Poeta" which translates to "The Poet's Grandmother," and he omitted over 700 verses from "Song of Myself".

In addition, common with both José Martí and Vasseur's translations, both writers would often alter lines from Whitman's poetry that related to his sexuality. This includes changing phrases such as, "manly love" into "*afecto viril*," "male affection" and "hold hands" into "*estrecharse la mano*," "shake hands". While these changes are attributed to Vasser's decision making, it is possible that they were made unintentionally. He may not have been as fluent in English as was initially assumed, or he was translating from Italian to Spanish, using Gamberale's translations of Whitman's poetry as his primary source. Overall, Vasseur's translations were essential to Walt Whitman's popularity in Latin America.

Pablo Neruda

At the age of 10, Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto began writing and publishing poetry under the pseudonym Pablo Neruda, as his father did not support his artistic aspirations. He went on to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971. The Chilean poet and politician would buy every copy of *Leaves of Grass* that he came across, as he was first introduced to Whitman's writing at the age of 15. Neruda defines himself as the, "humble servant of a poet who strode the earth... pausing everywhere to love, to examin, to learn, to teach and to admire" (Neruda, 1972). Neruda felt a connection to the poet despite being born more than 10 years after Whitman's death. In 1956, Neruda published a

book of poetry titled *Nuevas Odas Elementales* in which the final poem of the book is an “Ode to Walt Whitman.” Neruda begins by describing how he has felt Whitman’s presence throughout his life, emphasizing Alegría’s statement that Whitman was a presence that could be felt everywhere but seen nowhere in Latin American writing.

Neruda did not directly copy Whitman’s style or most themes, but his spirit remained in Neruda’s work as he stated, “*Yo no recuerdo a qué edad, ni dónde, si en el gran Sur mojado o en la costa... toqué una mano y era la mano de Walt Whitman... Durante mi juventud toda me acompañó esa mano,*” “I do not remember at what age nor where: in the great damp South or on the fearsome coast... I touched a hand and it was the hand of Walt Whitman... During my entire youth I had the company of that hand” (Allen & Folsom, 1995, p. 118). Neruda goes on to thank Whitman for raising his, “eyes to books, towards the treasure of the grains,” “*levantaste mis ojos a los libros, hacia el tesoro de los cereales*” (Allen & Folsom, 1995, p. 118-119). Neruda credits Whitman with shaping his character as both a poet and a member of society.

Since Whitman believed in the importance of unique and equal individuals who would be treated justly in society, this idea was evident in his poems and prose and it impacted Neruda. Whitman felt that men, women, People of Color, and laborers mattered in society and should be valued. Neruda began to view those around him in this same sense, celebrating them and learning to view the world through Whitman’s eyes. This is seen in Neruda’s *Canto General*, a book of poems published in 1950. It was published after he was exiled from Chile for speaking out against President Gabriel González Videla’s corrupt actions. *Canto General*, his most famous book, was written to show the detrimental effects on the liberties of Latin American citizens as a result of the arrival of Spanish conquistadors. Neruda wanted to highlight how they continued to fight against injustice and seek freedom, it “shows us the history of the Americas... [from] the point of view of the people themselves, not the history told by the conquerors” (Eisner, 2018). Neruda’s approach to this book of poems is directly tied to Whitman, who understood the value of the individual and their experiences. Neruda gained courage through reading Whitman’s writing, which he found both earnest and fearless. Whitman was confident that

he could eloquently convey his message to his readers, even if the message were not yet accepted by society. Neruda was guided by these aspects of Whitman's character and courageously released his poems for everyone to know the reality of Latin America's oppression.

Ultimately, there have been various writers who were influenced by Walt Whitman: Martí, Vasseur, and Neruda are just a few examples of Latin American poets that felt the impact of Whitman's writing. Jose Martí wrote, "The language of Walt Whitman, entirely different from that which poets before him have used... neither lyres nor dainty quatrains could contain them" (Martí & Allen, 2002, p. 192). This is a statement that both Álvaro Armando Vassuer and Pablo Neruda would wholeheartedly agree with as they were continuously amazed by Whitman's writing. All three writers marveled over the themes in Whitman's poetry, and his ability to provide political and social guidance to his readers. The effects of their connection to Whitman will continue to be studied, as Whitman left a lasting impression on Latin American poets both during and after his time.

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