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Dialogue for Future Generations*

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*Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg and Pablo Neruda:
A Poetical/Political Dialogue for Future Generations*

Dr. Susan A. Foote¹

I didn't come here to solve anything.
I came here to sing.
And for you to sing with me.
(Pablo Neruda, Let the Railsplitter Awake!)

The poems “Song of Myself” (1855), “I Sing the Body Electric” (1855) and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed” (1865), published in Walt Whitman’s ever expanding book *Leaves of Grass*, describe vast journeys through the United States of America in which he celebrates a close connection with all those men and women he encounters along the way: the butcher boy, the blacksmith, the runaway slave, the Native American woman and her white trapper husband and the working class immigrant woman giving birth. At the same time the poet speaks intimately to the reader, and perhaps not only to the reader of his times but also those of the future like Ginsberg and Neruda as well as those ordinary readers like us who continue to look to him for inspiration today.²

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² I have taught several workshops based on this paper. I remind my students that both Allen Ginsberg and Pablo Neruda have a strong physical and symbolic connection to the Universidad de Concepción. Ginsberg was here in 1960, just five years after publishing “A Supermarket in California” and 18 years before his translation/adaptation of sections 5 and 6 Neruda’s 1948 poem “Que despierte el leñador” from the book *Canto General*. Neruda was invited in 1966 to give a speech entitled “La poesía es una insurrección” after being awarded the Universidad de Concepción’s Atenea Prize for

The speaker of his poems, identified as ‘Walt Whitman’, uses forms of address that, according to the critic James Miller, places the reader on “shared ground with the poet, [representing] a presence throughout much of the journey” (1). This is illustrated by the opening lines of “Song of Myself”: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/And what I assume you shall assume,/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (section 1, lines 1-3). But Whitman, fictionalized speaker in the poem, should not be identified with the historical figure. Harold Bloom cautions against the “tendency to confuse Mr. Walter Whitman, the author of *Leaves of Grass*, with Walt Whitman, the protagonist of *Leaves of Grass*...a sort of magnification of the poet...not the Whitman who was writing but the man he would like to have been” (477).

Whitman’s fictional self in the poem exceeds all boundaries, as can be seen in the following verses: “[I] am not contain’d between my hat and boots” (section 7, line 133); “In all people I see myself, none more and not one barleycorn less” (section 20, line 401); and, “I am large, I contain multitudes” (section 51, line 1326). This self, at once personal and collective, shows a respect for all peoples, regardless of social class, gender or ethnicity and never proposing an homogenization of the American character: “I resist anything better than my own diversity,/ [I] Breathe the air but leave plenty after me, / And am not stuck up, and am in my place” (section 16, lines 349-351). Here the poet seems to be saying that he not only respects diversity in others, leaving them plenty of air and space, but he also acknowledges and accepts his own internal diversity along with his own internal contradictions. The critic Betsy Erkkila says that “the poet’s act of self-naming inscribes the figure of many and one that is the founding myth of both poem and nation” (103).

Writing in the 1850’s before the Civil War (1862-1866), the poet shows a concern for the issues of slavery and inequality. He identifies with, even *becomes*, those who are humiliated and defenseless, especially the abused slave: “All these I feel or am. / I am the hounded slave,... The riders spur their unwilling horses...and beat me violently over the head with whipstocks. ... I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person” (section 33, lines 838-840, 844). Whitman seems to demand what today would be called racial, gender and class equality

Poetry. It would be almost impossible to talk about Ginsberg and Neruda’s work without referring to Whitman as both invoke and reinvent his spirit to guide them poetically through a brave and uncertain new world in the mid 20th century. In my workshops, I close my eyes and say to my students: As we leave the classroom, imagine yourselves walking down the hall these poets have walked down, asking them the same questions they asked themselves and each other: Where is poetry going today? Will your spirits accompany us today in our everyday lives in the pharmacies, the bus stations, at the movies and “in the far off regions of the saw mills of the Bio-Bio and the windy Patagonia”? Are we all part of their dialogue?

and the end to unspeakable situations of pain and torture that were normal practices under the institution of slavery as it was practiced in the uncertain times in which these poems were composed.

In his 1855 poem “I Sing the Body Electric”, Whitman celebrates the individual bodies that make up the society: “The man’s body is sacred and the woman’s body is sacred, / ... / Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the wharf? / Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off, / Just as much as you, / Each has his or her place in the procession” (part 6, lines 84, 86-88). In parts 7 and 8 of this long poem Whitman refers to men and women “on the auction block”, those African American men and women being sold into slavery before the Civil War. He says that in the body of the man on the auction block “Within there runs blood, / the same old blood! / There swells and jets a heart, there all passions, reaching, aspirations, (Do they think they are not there because they are not express’d in parlors and lecture-rooms?) / This is not only one man, this the father of those who shall later be / fathers in their turns, / In him the start of populous states and rich republics...*How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring through the centuries?*” (part 7, lines 109-115) [The italics are mine]. Time has proven that these verses were prophetic because as historian Harold Holtzer commented to Bill Moyers on Public Television (PBS):

Two little girls, Sasha and Malia Obama, who are the descendents, through their mother’s side, of enslaved people, might this very evening be playing in the Lincoln bedroom [of the White House], which was Lincoln’s office, and the room where he signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This is the apex of the arc of history since the Civil War.

It is widely known that Whitman’s use of enumeration --the making of long lists-- is a technique of integration or inclusion and a way to develop a sense of equality or equal value among diverse terms that are usually arranged hierarchically. The items in Whitman’s lists seem to have equal importance, possess equal weight and each item or part is absolutely necessary for the functioning of the whole. In the case of the naming of body parts in “I Sing the Body Electric”, are all necessary for the correct functioning of an individual just as all the individual bodies make up the correct functioning of the social body, the body politic. Whitman emphasizes that every physical body is necessary to make a society work. Thus it can be said that enumeration serves as a cohesive social force that unites many different elements and, while respecting their diversity and the contradictions this might imply, creates a *mapping* of the body politic.

In “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed”, Whitman enumerates the diverse geographies of the country: “Lo body and soul—this land, / My own Manhattan with spires... / The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light, Ohio’s shores and flashing Missouri, / ... / And ever the far-spreading prairies cover’d with grass and corn.../ over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land” (section 12, lines 89-92, 98).

As he enumerated the diverse peoples and geographies that make up the United States at a time when the civil war was still being fought and on the assassination of his spiritual guide and poetic inspiration, Abraham Lincoln, he once more reinforces the idea of national unity based on inclusion but with respect for difference. But moreover, he seems to go beyond the boundaries of any individual country, defining a sort of world brotherhood-sisterhood. Betsy Erkkila notes that “moving from self to nation to world, the lines mark the poles of Whitman’s poetic identity: He is both single and multiple, common man and en mass, American and Kosmos” (103). A century later these ideas will inspire Pablo Neruda in “Que despierte el leñador” –translated as “Let the Railsplitter Awake!”-- a topic we will come back to later. Now let’s look at the influence Whitman exercises on Allan Ginsberg in “A Supermarket in California”.

In 1955 when Ginsberg (1926-1997), a founding member of the Beat Generation, published the poem “A Supermarket in California” in his controversial collection of poems, *Howl*, U.S. society was experiencing great transformations. The veterans had come home from World War II (1939-1945) less than 10 years before and now the country was experiencing the effects of the Cold War (1947-1991) being waged between the capitalist West and the communist Eastern Block, and which meant living under the threat of yet another devastating world war, this time threatening total nuclear destruction. Another factor was McCarthyism. A U.S. Senator, Joe McCarthy, and others like him, accused thousands of artists and intellectuals of being communists and traitors to their country. The attempt to limit free speech was characteristic of this era and Ginsberg himself was a victim of censorship and put on trial for obscenity for his book *Howl*. It was a time of rising individualism and social conformity, the beginnings of an impersonal urban society in which citizens were all too willingly being transformed into consumers. A reflection of this new society could be seen by the massification of televisions with their game shows, beauty pageants and variety shows that started to fill American homes, hearts, and minds. A new form of economic mass production that made products available at reasonable costs allowed middle and working class people to acquire more

goods and services than ever before. The supermarket in Ginsberg's poem can be seen as a symbol for U.S. society in this time period.

Ginsberg begins the poem "A Supermarket in California" by addressing himself to Walt Whitman: "What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down the side streets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon" (136). He invites Whitman to accompany him on *a journey*. But this time it is not the journey through the vast open spaces of 19th century America but a journey from the moonlit night into the neon lit supermarket. And, although he later says to Walt "I touch your book", he finds no inspiration there. Rather, he invites Whitman to go with him to "shop for images" in the supermarket. Can the kind of inspiration Whitman found in the great open spaces of 19th century America be found in the 1950's supermarket? "In my hungry fatigue ... I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!" Ginsberg's brief but suggestive enumerations of items sold in the supermarket are perhaps a parody of those lengthy ones we have already had a glimpse of in Whitman's poetry. While Whitman's enumerations had the finality of bringing people together in spite of the fact that they occupied almost infinite geographical spaces, Ginsberg's show the separation of families in the reduced claustrophobic, closed space of the artificially lit supermarket: "Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes" (136). Family members become separated in the supermarket, each in a different aisle, and succumb to their fascination with products, developing a new relationship among themselves which seems to short circuit, interrupt or intervene in the world of human relationships, changing them forever. If we want to get technical we could say that the relationship of these people in Ginsberg's supermarket with the products contained therein borders on a commodity fetish. People no longer appreciate objects for their usefulness but for their mystical almost religious ability to spark and fulfill desires: "A definite relationship among men [sic] that assumes ...the fantastic form of a relation between things...commodities become social things"... "The relationship between men [sic] assumes the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx).

In the following section of Ginsberg's poem, even Walt Whitman succumbs to the seductions of consumerism, demonstrating that the supermarket (a symbol for mid- twentieth century capitalism) trivializes even grand poets, taking away their inspiration and the breadth of their imagination. No longer the 19th century bard, the poet laureate that sought to unify the United States after the civil war, Whitman is reduced to a "childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats

in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys” (136). Known for his erotic poems celebrating healthy male and female bodies and mostly taking place in the great expanses of nature, Whitman’s desire and sexuality have become perverted in the supermarket: Ginsberg imagines him as just another dirty old man eyeing an innocent young working boy, a poor boy or, obviously, he wouldn’t be working and probably underage too. Sexual desire has been banalized and commodified and can be gotten next to the meat counter, it is no longer the grand celebration imagined by Whitman a century before.

In the next section, Ginsberg imagines Whitman leading him down the aisles past the store detective and “never passing the cashier”. This suggests that while the poets are in the supermarket and partake of many of its benefits, they do not necessarily respect the rules of consumer society, they have not entirely fallen into the game. While they too are in it and seduced by what it can offer, they still maintain a somewhat critical view from its margins, refusing to *pay up*.

Another important point is the relationship between the poets and the people. Whitman speaks to the people, declares he is *with the people*, one of them, feeling their pain and humiliations as his own. On the other hand, Ginsberg is *alienated* from the people, he feels totally alone and has no one except for his imaginary friend Walt Whitman. The people are not listening to Ginsberg, he is with them in the supermarket but they’re not together, just as families become separated, the poet also becomes *alienated* from the people. The poet has lost his voice and, with it, his power to define national identity. Whitman is invoked but does not speak. He just looks on in a voyeuristic way reminding us that we all become passive onlookers in the supermarket, no longer active citizens but passive consumers.

And it appears that there is nothing outside the supermarket because when the doors close, the streets are solitary, empty, the lights go out in the houses and all are asleep (*unconscious*). Outside the supermarket there are only alienation and loneliness: the trees add shade to shade, giving the poet a headache, *self-conscious of his own role in all of this*, allowing himself to be seduced but too weak to see any other alternative, not able to imagine a social world outside the supermarket and once more, proving that even the most brilliant poets are grubbing around in it, fascinated not by ideas and comrades but by commodities.

In the last section of the poem, Ginsberg asks his imaginary companion, Walt Whitman, a series of questions that go unanswered, that are left hanging in the air for the reader to think about: “Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour / Which way does your beard point tonight? /... “Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?” (136). And being uncertain of the America that Whitman left behind, if the America that existed in Whitman’s times corresponded to the America he imagined in his poetry, Ginsberg ends the poem with a final question: “Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, *what America did you have* when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?”³

Some years after writing “A Supermarket in California”, Ginsberg takes a detour south, both literally and figuratively, looking to Pablo Neruda, this poet from Patagonia “where / the wind beats at barns / and the Ocean spits ice” (697) for answers and inspiration. Almost 20 years after his 3 month stay in Chile, Ginsberg translates/adapts⁴ the last two sections of Neruda’s poem “Qué despierte el leñador”. The fact that Ginsberg published this version of Neruda’s poem in the book *Plutonian Ode* (1981) is not only a homage to Neruda’s poetry itself and to the Chilean poet’s vision of Whitman and Abraham Lincoln, it also represents a contrast to the complex poem “Plutonian Ode”⁵ which gives its name to the book. In any case, Ginsberg now seems to find a way out of the supermarket relying on both Neruda and Whitman and Neruda’s conjuring up of the spirit of Abraham Lincoln to defeat not only consumerism but also the threats of radioactive plutonian/plutonium waste.

Neruda’s style in *Leñador*, which is translated as “Let the Railsplitter Awake!”, is certainly Whitmanesque. He appeals directly to Whitman in section 3 of the poem. But in sections 5 and 6, those that Ginsberg chose to include, he only speaks of Abraham Lincoln, the president whom Whitman eulogized in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed”. Neruda says: “Let the Railsplitter Awake! / Let Lincoln come with his ax / and with his wooden plate / to eat with the

³ The River Lethe was the river of forgetfulness, unmindfulness or oblivion and was one of the 5 rivers of Hades. Once the dead had drunk from the waters of Lethe, they would lose their memories “with nothing to reminisce about for eternity” since they would forget all they had done when living (Mythweb)

⁴ The U.S. poet Waldeen made a translation of *Que despierte el leñador* in 1950. It was her version that was adapted by Ginsberg. (Whitman archive)

⁵ “Enrich this Plutonian Ode to explode its empty thunder through earthen thought-worlds/...destroy this mountain of Plutonium with ordinary mind and body speech” (705). The radioactive plutonium is linked to the underground wealthy mineral god Pluto Lord of Death in Greek Mythology. The “ordinary mind and body speech” would correspond to Whitman, Lincoln and Neruda.

farmworkers. ... Let him go shop in pharmacies, / let him take the bus to Tampa / let him nibble a yellow apple, / let him go to the movies, and / talk to everybody there“ (V, 696). We see Lincoln with the farmworkers, with the people, a great leader who, like the poet Whitman, wants to be *with* the people. But in the 20th century his spirit has been lost: “Let Abraham come back, let his old yeast / rise in green and gold earth of Illinois, / and lift the ax in his city / against the new slavemakers / against their slavewhips / against the venom of the print houses / against all the bloodsoaked / merchandise they want to sell. / Let the young white boy and the young black / march singing and smiling / against walls of gold, / against manufacturers of hatred, / against the seller of his own blood, / smiling, smiling and winning at last. // Let the railsplitter awake!” (V, 696).

It was 1948 when Neruda wrote “Que despierte el leñador” and for being a member of the communist party, he had been expelled from Chile, forcing him to live clandestinely as a fugitive in his own country. It is at this moment that he writes *Canto General*, of which the Leñador / Railsplitter forms a part. But Neruda is not only writing as a fugitive, he is writing in the wake of WWII and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). It is a time of great uncertainty and confusion, both personally and for the world. In section 3, before turning to Lincoln, he asks Walt Whitman to help him sing the praises of Stalin and the Soviet Union: “Walt Whitman, raise your beard of grass...What do you see, Walt Whitman? And the bard answers Neruda that the factories are working and Stalingrad is progressing. Neruda appeals: “Give me your voice and the weight of your deep chest, Walt Whitman, and the deep roots of your countenance / to sing these reconstructions”⁶ Undoubtedly it is significant that this poem ends not with Neruda’s version of Whitman singing praise for Stalin but with Neruda’s poetic voice (which, unlike Ginsberg, identifies with the people as much as Whitman does in *Song of Myself*) singing praise for Abraham Lincoln. By placing Lincoln in the conclusion of the poem –and this after a long section of criticizing U.S. capitalists and making threats to the United States --it seems clear that Neruda feels more comfortable in the Americas, more at union with ideas generated on this side of the world than in the Soviet Union.

Section 6 of “Leñador” is a call for world peace using the very Whitmanesque techniques of enumeration and anaphora (repetition of the opening words or phrases): “Peace for all twilights to come, / peace for the bridge, peace for the wine, “ ... with earth and love’s old chant, / peace for Mississippi, the river of roots, / peace for my brother’s shirt, / ... peace for the great Kolkhoz of

⁶ Neruda also has Whitman singing “Invitación al Nixonicidio y alabanza de la revolución chilena” in 1973.

Kiev, / peace for the ashes of these dead / ...peace to my right hand / peace for the Bolivian, secret as a lump of tin, / peace for you to get married, / peace for all the sawmills of Bio-Bio, / peace to Revolutionary Spain's torn heart / peace to the little museum of Wyoming / in which the sweetest thing / was a pillowcase embroidered with a heart / ... / peace for all those who live: peace / to all the lands and waters" (697).

The poem continues with the poet returning to his home in Patagonia and stating "I'm nothing more than a poet: I want love for you all" and "Don't let anybody think about me. / Let's think about the whole world, / banging on the table with love" And to end: "let's all go to the movies and come / out and drink the reddest wine. // I didn't come here to solve anything. // I came here to sing / And for you to sing with me" (698)

Conclusions

What do these poets have in common? All are writing influenced by terrible wars and uncertain futures: Whitman before, during, and after the United States Civil War (1861-1865), Ginsberg and Neruda after the cataclysm of WWII (1941-1945), the 1930s Spanish Civil War and the 1950s cold war and the persecution and torture of leftists both in the U.S. (McCarthyism) and in Chile (under the government of González Videla). All three suffered censorship and persecution for their political ideals and Whitman and Ginsberg suffered discrimination for their sexual orientation as well. In situations of inequality, civil war and dictatorships, each imagines an "America" not as it is but as it might be and how they would like it to be.

If Ginsberg finds himself trapped in the claustrophobic supermarket, Neruda shows him a way out. Both appeal to Whitman to give them inspiration but both *transform* Whitman and use him to suit their own purposes, trying to imagine how he would have acted if he had been born in the 20th century. Ginsberg imagines him as a silent old grubber seduced by consumer society while Neruda has Whitman singing the praises of Stalin and, on the coup d'état against Salvador Allende's government in 1973, inciting to a Nixonicidio. But, most importantly for both poets, Whitman continues to speak to them and remind them of *ideals that transcend time and political ideologies*. The historical contingencies have changed but hopes for a just and democratic world have not. It is interesting to analyze the three poems in their spatial and temporal dimensions: in Whitman, space represents almost unlimited possibilities for the future, something that seemingly could never be

totally filled. For Ginsberg, there is no space, no-thing outside the supermarket which in itself is a space devoid of culture and meaning. Space is limited by the supermarket walls and what it contains, it's an enclosed, artificially constructed space, a sort of prison where *a false sense of equality* based on people's relationships with commodities is established and where human relationships themselves mirror relationships between commodities. The supermarket turns citizens into consumers and locks them into a circuit of desire and endless consumption that can never satisfy expectations. No one can resist its hypnotic pull. On the other hand, Neruda, in "Railsplitter" returns to Whitman's idea of space as representing an open future and reinforces the idea of the poet being with the people, taking the time to go to the movies, drink wine and sing. In a humbling Whitmanesque gesture, he says "I didn't come to solve anything. / I came here to sing / And for you to sing with me".

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