

Poetry: Excerpts from Countersong to Walt Whitman

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Translated from the Spanish by Jonathan Cohen

*Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater
than before known,
Arouse! for you must justify me.*

* * *

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.

Unscrew the locks from the doors!
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!

Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.

Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through me the
current and index.

I speak the password primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their
counterpart of on the same terms.

-Walt Whitman in "Poets to Come" &
"Song of Myself"

I,
a son of the Caribbean,
Antillean to be exact.

The raw product of a simple
Puerto Rican girl
and a Cuban worker,
born precisely, and poor,
on Quisqueyan soil.
Overflowing with voices,
full of eyes
wide open throughout the islands,
I have come to speak to Walt Whitman,
a kosmos,
of Manhattan the son.
People will ask
Who are you?
I understand.
Nobody had better ask me
who Walt Whitman is.
I would go sob on his white beard.
And yet,
I am going to say again who Walt Whitman is,
a kosmos,
of Manhattan the son.

[Note: Quisqueya is the aboriginal name of Hispaniola, the island divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic.-J.C.]

1

There once was a virgin wilderness.
Trees and land without deeds or fences.
There once was a perfect wilderness.
Many years ago. Long before the ancestors of our ancestors.
The plains would play with galloping buffalo.
The endless coastlines would play with pearls.
The rocks let loose diamonds from their wombs.
And the hills played with goats and gazelles . . .

The breeze would swirl through clearings in the woods
heavy with the bold play of deer and birch trees
filling the pores of evening with seed.
And it was a virgin land filled with surprises.
Wherever a clod of earth touched a seed
all of a sudden there grew a sweet-smelling forest.
At times it was assaulted by a frenzy of pollen
squeezing out the poplars, the pines, the fir trees,

and pouring out the night and landscapes in clusters.
And there were caverns and woods and prairies
teeming with brooks and clouds and animals.

6

O Walt Whitman, your sensitive beard
was a net in the wind!
It throbbed and filled with ardent figures
of sweethearts and youths, of brave souls and farmers,
of country boys walking to creeks,
of rowdies wearing spurs and maidens wearing smiles,
of the hurried marches of numberless beings,
of tresses or hats . . .
And you went on listening
road after road,
striking their heartstrings
word after word.
O Walt Whitman of guileless beard,
I have come through the years to your red blaze of fire!

9

For
what has a great undeniable poet been
but a crystal-clear pool
where a people discover their perfect
likeness?
What has he been
but a deep garden
where all men recognize themselves
through language?
And what
but the chord of a boundless guitar
where the fingers of the people play
their simple, their own, their strong and
true, innumerable song?
For that's why you, numerous Walt Whitman, who saw and ranted
just the right word for singing your people,
who in the middle of the night said
I
and the fisherman understood himself in his slicker

and the hunter heard himself in the midst of his gunshot
and the woodcutter recognized himself in his axe
and the farmer in his freshly sown field and the gold
panner in his yellow reflection on the water
and the maiden in her future town
growing and maturing
under her skirt
and the prostitute in her fountain of gaiety
and the miner of darkness in his steps beneath his homeland . . .
When the tall preacher, bowing his head
between his two long hands, said

I
and found himself united with the foundryman and the salesman
with the obscure traveler in a soft cloud of dust
with the dreamer and the climber,
with the earthy mason resembling a stone slab,
with the farmer and the weaver,
with the sailor in white resembling a handkerchief . . .
And all the people saw themselves
when they heard the word

I
and all the people heard themselves in your song
when they heard the word
I, Walt Whitman, a kosmos,
of Manhattan the son . . . !
Because you were the people, you were I,
and I was Democracy, the people's family name,
and I was also Walt Whitman, a kosmos,
of Manhattan the son . . . !

15

And now
it is no longer the word
I
the accomplished word
the password to begin the world.
And now
now it is the word
we.
And now,
now has come the hour of the countersong.
We the railroad workers,
we the students,

we the miners,
we the peasants,
we the wretched of the earth,
the populators of the world,
the heroes of everyday work,
with our love and our fists,
enamored of hope.
We the white-skinned,
the black-skinned, the yellow-skinned,
the Indians, the copper-skinned,
the Moors and dark-skinned,
the red-skinned and olive-skinned,
the blonds and platinum blonds,
united by work,
by misery, by silence,
by the cry of a solitary man
who in the middle of the night,
with a perfect whip,
with a meager wage,
with a gold dagger and an iron face,
wildly cries out

I
and hears the crystal-clear echo
of a shower of blood
that relentlessly feeds on us
ourselves
among the docks receding in the distance
ourselves
below the skyline of the factories
ourselves

in the flower, in the pictures, in the tunnels
ourselves
in the tall structure on the way to orbit
ourselves
on the way to marble halls
ourselves
on the way to prisons
ourselves . . .

17

Why did you want to listen to a poet?
I am speaking to one and all.

To those of you who came to isolate him from his people,
to separate him from his blood and his land,
to flood his road.
Those of you who drafted him into the army.
The ones who defiled his luminous beard and put a gun
on his shoulders that were loaded with maidens and pioneers.
Those of you who do not want Walt Whitman, the democrat,
but another Whitman, atomic and savage.
The ones who want to outfit him with boots
to crush the heads of nations.
To grind into blood the temples of little girls.
To smash into atoms the old man's flesh.
The ones who take the tongue of Walt Whitman
for a sign of spraying bullets,
for a flag of fire.
No, Walt Whitman, here are the poets of today
aroused to justify you!
"Poets to come! . . . Arouse! for you must justify me."
Here we are, Walt Whitman, to justify you.
Here we are
for your sake
demanding peace.
The peace you needed
to drive the world with your song.
Here we are
saving your hills of Vermont,
your woods of Maine, the sap and fragrance of your land,
your spurred rowdies, your smiling maidens,
your country boys walking to creeks.
Saving them, Walt Whitman, from the tycoons
who take your language for the language of war.
No, Walt Whitman, here are the poets of today,
the workers of today, the pioneers of today, the peasants
of today,
firm and roused to justify you!
O Walt Whitman of aroused beard!
Here we are without beards,
without arms, without ears,
without any strength in our lips,
spied on,
red and persecuted,
full of eyes
wide open throughout the islands,
full of courage, of knots of pride

untied through all the nations,
with your sign and your language, Walt Whitman,
here we are
standing up
to justify you
our constant companion
of Manhattan!

CONTRACANTO A WALT WHITMAN

by Pedro Mir

Yo,
un hijo del Caribe,
precisamente antillano.
Producto primitivo de una ingenua
criatura borinqueña
y un obrero cubano,
nacido justamente, y pobremente,
en suelo quisqueyano.
Recorrido de voces,
lleno de pupilas
que a través de las islas se dilatan,
vengo a hablarle a Walt Whitman
un cosmos,
un hijo de Manhattan.
Preguntarán
¿quién eres tú?
Comprendo.
Que nadie me pregunte
quién es Walt Whitman.
Iría a sollozar sobre su barba blanca.
Sin embargo,
voy a decir de nuevo quién es Walt Whitman,
un cosmos,
un hijo de Manhattan.

1

Hubo una vez un territorio puro.
Árboles y terrones sin rúbricas ni alambres.

Hubo una vez un territorio sin tacha.
Hace ya muchos años. Más allá de los padres de los padres
las llanuras jugaban a galopes de búfalos.
Las costas infinitas jugaban a las perlas.
Las rocas desceñían su vientre de diamantes.
Y las lomas jugaban a cabras y gacelas . . .

Por los claros del bosque la brisa regresaba
cargada de insolencias de ciervos y abedules
que henchían de simiente los poros de la tarde.
Y era una tierra pura poblada de sorpresas.
Donde un terrón tocaba la semilla
precipitaba un bosque de dulzura fragante.
Le acometía a veces un frenesí de polen
que exprimía los álamos, los pinos, los abetos,
y enfrascaba en racimos la noche y los paisajes.
Y eran minas y bosques y praderas
cundidos de arroyuelos y nubes y animales.

6

¡Oh, Walt Whitman, tu barba sensitiva
era una red al viento!
Vibraba y se llenaba de encendidas figuras
de novias y donceles, de bravos y labriegos,
de rudos mozalbetes camino del riachuelo,
de guapos con espuelas y mozas con sonrisas,
de marchas presurosas de seres infinitos,
de trenzas o sombreros . . .
Y tú fuiste escuchando
camino por camino
golpeándoles el pecho
palabra con palabra.
¡Oh, Walt Whitman de barba candorosa,
alcanzo por los años tu roja llamarada!

9

Porque
¿qué ha sido un gran poeta indeclinable
sino un estanque límpido
donde un pueblo descubre su perfecto

semblante?

¿Qué ha sido
sino un parque sumergido
donde todos los hombres se reconocen
por el lenguaje?

¿Y qué
sino una cuerda de infinita guitarra
donde pulsan los dedos de los pueblos
su sencilla, su propia, su fuerte y
verdadera canción innumerable?
Por eso tú, numeroso Walt Whitman, que viste y deliraste
la palabra precisa para cantar tu pueblo,
que en medio de la noche dijiste
yo
y el pescador se comprendió en su capa
y el cazador se oyó en mitad de su disparo
y el leñador se conoció en su hacha
y el labriego en su siembra y el lavador

de oro en su semblante amarillo sobre el agua
y la doncella en su ciudad futura
que crece y que madura
bajo la saya
y la meretriz en su fuente de alegría
y el minero de sombra en sus pasos debajo de la patria . . .
cuando el alto predicador, bajando la cabeza,
entre dos largas manos, decía,
yo
y se encontraba unido al fundidor y al vendedor
y al caminante oscuro de suave polvareda
y al soñador y al trepador
y al albañil terrestre parecido a una lápida
y al labrador y al tejedor
y al marinero blanco parecido a un pañuelo . . .
Y el pueblo entero se miraba a sí mismo
cuando escuchaba la palabra
yo

y el pueblo entero se escuchaba en ti mismo
cuando escuchaba la palabra
yo, Walt Whitman, un cosmos,
¡un hijo de Manhattan . . . !
Porque tú eras el pueblo, tú eras yo,
y yo era la Democracia, el apellido del pueblo,

y yo era también Walt Whitman, un cosmos,
un hijo de Manhattan . . . !

15

Y ahora
ya no es la palabra
yo
la palabra cumplida
la palabra de toque para empezar el mundo.
Y ahora
ahora es la palabra
nosotros.
Y ahora,
ahora es llegada la hora del contracanto.
Nosotros los ferroviarios,
nosotros los estudiantes,
nosotros los mineros,
nosotros los campesinos,
nosotros los pobres de la tierra,
los pobladores del mundo,
los héroes del trabajo cotidiano,
con nuestro amor y con nuestros puños,
enamorados de la esperanza.
Nosotros los blancos,
los negros, los amarillos,
los indios, los cobrizos,
los moros y morenos,
los rojos y aceitunados,
los rubios y los platinos,
unificados por el trabajo,
por la miseria, por el silencio,
por el grito de un hombre solitario
que en medio de la noche,
con un perfecto látigo,
con un salario oscuro,
con un puñal de oro y un semblante de hierro,
desenfrenadamente grita
yo
y siente el eco cristalino
de una ducha de sangre
que decididamente se alimenta en

nosotros
y en medio de los muelles alejándose
nosotros
y al pie del horizonte de las fábricas
nosotros
y en la flor y en los cuadros y en los túneles
nosotros
y en la alta estructura camino de las órbitas
nosotros
camino de los mármoles
nosotros
camino de las cárceles
nosotros . . .

17

¿Por qué queríais escuchar a un poeta?
Estoy hablando con unos y con otros.
Con aquellos que vinieron a apartarlo de su pueblo,
a separarlo de su sangre y de su tierra,
a inundarle su camino.
Aquellos que lo inscribieron en el ejército.
Los que violaron su barba luminosa y le pusieron un fusil
sobre sus hombros cargados de doncellas y pioneros.
Los que no quieren a Walt Whitman el demócrata,
sino a un tal Whitman atómico y salvaje.
Los que quieren ponerle zapatones
para aplastar la cabeza de los pueblos.
Moler en sangre las sienes de las niñas.
Desintegrar en átomos las fibras del abuelo.
Los que toman la lengua de Walt Whitman
por signo de metralla,
por bandera de fuego.
¡No, Walt Whitman, aquí están los poetas de hoy
levantados para justificarte!
“-iPoetas venideros, levantaos, porque vosotros debéis justificarme!”
Aquí estamos, Walt Whitman, para justificarte.
Aquí estamos
por ti
pidiendo paz.
La paz que requerías
para empujar el mundo con tu canto.

Aquí estamos
salvando tus colinas de Vermont,
tus selvas de Maine, el zumo y la fragancia de tu tierra,
tus guapos con espuelas, tus mozas con sonrisas,
tus rudos mozalbetes camino del riachuelo.
Salvándolos, Walt Whitman, de los traficantes
que toman tu lenguaje por lenguaje de guerra.
¡No, Walt Whitman, aquí están los poetas de hoy,
los obreros de hoy, los pioneros de hoy, los campesinos
de hoy,
firmes y levantados para justificarte!
¡Oh, Walt Whitman de barba levantada!
Aquí estamos sin barba,
sin brazos, sin oídos,
sin fuerzas en los labios,
mirados de reojo,
rojos y perseguidos,
llenos de pupilas
que a través de las islas se dilatan,
llenos de coraje, de nudos de soberbia
que a través de los pueblos se desatan,
con tu signo y tu idioma de Walt Whitman
aquí estamos
en pie
para justificarte,
¡continuo compañero de Manhattan!

These excerpts from Pedro Mir's "Countersong to Walt Whitman" are reprinted from the new book, *Countersong to Walt Whitman*, translated by Jonathan Cohen (2006, Azul Editions, www.azuleditions.com), by permission of the translator and publisher.

Pedro Mir (1913-2000) is the Dominican Republic's foremost literary figure of the 20th century. Mir also produced considerable work in the fields of history, fiction, and art criticism. In 1947, the subject of mounting suspicions of the Trujillo dictatorship, Mir was forced to go into exile. When he returned fifteen years later, following the death of the dictator, the poet immediately won the hearts of the Dominican people, and his poetry recitals were mass public events attended by enthusiastic crowds of citizens from every walk of life. In 1982 the Dominican Congress conferred upon Mir the title of National Poet, and in January 1993 he received the National Prize for Literature. On the occasion of Mir's death, President Leonel Fernández declared three days of national mourning and said Mir would live on through his works.

Jonathan Cohen, a poet, translator, and independent scholar, has translated the work of several major Latin American poets, including Ernesto Cardenal, Enrique Lihn, Roque Dalton,

Octavio Paz, and Pedro Mir. His translation of Cardenal's *From Nicaragua, With Love: Poems, 1979-1986* (1987) won the Robert Payne Award of the Translation Center at Columbia University. He currently is preparing Cardenal's *Pluriverse: New and Selected Poems*, forthcoming from New Directions in 2008. His recent book, *A Pan-American Life: Selected Poetry and Prose of Muna Lee* (2004), recovers the work of Muna Lee, and presents the first biography of this prominent poet and social activist, who during the first half of the 20th century played a leading role as a poetry translator in the development of the Pan-American literary tradition.