

The theme of self paralleled in the poetry of Julia de Burgos and that of Walt Whitman

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Towards the end of the Nineteenth Century—a decade before Walt Whitman's death—when the theme of Self was avoided by the generality of writers, this North American poet

set down for himself and his age the elements of his own simple separate person as well as the nature of its relation to the "Democratic En Masse", attempting to symbolize "two or three specimen interiors, personal or other," out of the myriads of his time.¹

In his prose counterpart of *Leaves of Grass*, namely *Specimen Days*, we find, as one American critic expresses it:

a bridge between the Me and the Not Me,...between literature and life, and Whitman and his fellows. Whitmanian symbols of the bridge concept run throughout the book: streets, boats, ferries, great avenues, and railroads. Nevertheless, his greatest

¹. Jay Martin, *Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967) p. 283.

symbol here is himself bridging the gaps between man, society, and nature through the power of sympathy and sensibility.²

Concha Meléndez points out that Whitman was the first modern poet who dared to tear down the barriers between the Me and the things that are called external, the dualism between spirit and matter, the provoker of painful disturbances in the most intimate waters of the consciousness.³

In referring to Walt Whitman's influence over Hispanoamerican literature another Puerto Rican critic, Angel Luis Morales, notes that the North American author of *Leaves of Grass* not only sings to the common people and to certain universal concepts but to the individual spirit and to nature in pantheistic form.⁴

Morales further mentions that one of Whitman's principal fountains of inspiration is Emersonian transcendentalism.⁵ Emerson's assertion: "Wherever we go, whatever we do, Self is the sole object we study and learn,"⁶ had a strong impact on Whitman, as did the words of another of his contemporaries, Thoreau, who insisted: "I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life."⁷ Impressed by those writers, as well as by Darwin and other philosophers, Whitman, in one of the first poems in *Leaves of Grass*, cries out: "Camerado, this is no book; Who touches this touches a man."⁸

This is America's finest poet exhibiting his sense of the dichotomy that exists between the Me and the Not Me. His is the first strong political voice raised in the conviction that the individual personality supersedes everything else.⁹

2. *Ibid.* p. 284.

3. Concha Meléndez, *Poetas Hispanoamericanos Diversos* (San Juan, P.R.: Editorial Cordillera, Inc., 1971) p. 62.

4. Angel Luis Morales, *Literatura Hispanoamericana: Epocas y Figuras*, Tomo II (San Juan: Departamento de Instrucción Pública, 1967) p. 17.

5. *Ibid.* p. 18.

6. Jay Martin, *Harvests of Change*. Cross reference to the *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson: 1820-1872*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Walden Emerson Forbes (Boston and New York, 1910). Vol. III (1833-1835).

7. Jay Martin, cross ref. Thoreau.

8. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973) p. 6.

9. Jay Martin, p. 285.

Almost a century later we hear the echo of Whitman's cry in the voice of a woman whom circumstances had forced to leave her beloved Puerto Rico: "Esta vida partida en dos que estoy viviendo, entre la esencia y la forma..."¹⁰

Yvette Jiménez de Báez, in her prologue to the life of Julia de Burgos, exposes the Puerto Rican Poetess's definition of the duality that was to determine Julia's entire life and to cause the tragic tone found in her work:

"Vivir será una eterna lucha por equilibrar los contrarios; por dar con la unidad esencial de la persona y de la realidad. Integrarse desde el origen será la meta del espíritu."¹¹

Later in the prologue we discover that the first of the three principal themes of Julia de Burgos, that is, the search for self-identity, marks a clear path of the spirit.¹²

In one of her early poems, "Agua, vida, y tierra," she profoundly philosophizes:

*Yo fui estallido fuerte de la selva y el río
Y voz entre dos ecos, me levanté en las cuevas.*¹³

As the voice between two echoes Julia writes from Cuba in 1941: "Ese es mi destino: la sombra al lado de la luz, el dolor junto a la felicidad."¹⁴

Moreover, Félix Franco Oppenheimer observes that the poetry of Miss Burgos is agile, profound, virile, sensual and tender, but above all "angustiosamente humano."¹⁵ On the other hand Cesáreo Rosa-Nieves describes the poetry as very feminine, sweetly sensual, and voluptuous. The latter critic then makes the observa-

10. Yvette Jiménez de Báez, *Julia de Burgos: Vida y Poesía* (Río Piedras: Editorial Coquí, 1966) p. 37. Cross. ref. to a letter from New York, I-III-1940.

11. Yvette Jiménez de Báez, p. 9.

12. *Ibid.* p. 10.

13. *Ibid.* p. 83.

14. *Ibid.* p. 90.

15. Félix Franco Oppenheimer, *Imagen de Puerto Rico en Su Poesía* (Río Piedras: Editorial Universitaria, 1972) p. 187.

tion that "el paisaje brota de su pluma con sabor de panteísmo de alma que se vuelca como un cántaro fresco y cristalino."¹⁶ Rosa-Nieves terminates the biography of Julia de Burgos by stating that:

De todos estos felones líricos, emergió su verismo personal muy único; ese su exquisito decir en verso libre whitmaniano, su rico amanecer frutal, como se nota en su monumental poema *Río Grande de Loiza*: inmensa voz inmortal.¹⁷

Both poets, then, the Puerto Rican and the North American, in their untiring search for self reveal an intensely human spirit, a savor of pantheism, and a deep interest in the eternal contrast determined by marked polar forces which stand as the constant in their lives.¹⁸ It is this eternal contrast—the counterparts played by essence and form in the songs of both these poets in the quest for Self—that provides parallel points for discussion.

Self is the subject of several of the songs of the Puerto Rican as well as of the North American writer: Miss Burgo's chant is submerged in tragic tones in many of her unusual works among which are: "A Julia de Burgos", "Pentacromía", "Íntima", "Yo Mismo fui mi ruta", "Dadme mi número", "Tengo el desesperante silencio de la angustia", "Poema para mi muerte", "Entre mi voz y el tiempo", and "Voces para una nota sin paz".

Whitman, on the other hand, generally writes more optimistically of the Self, at times even injecting a sense of humor into his lines. However, while many of the Whitmanian poems are permeated by the Self-theme, for example: "One's Self I Sing", "The Modern Man I Sing", "Had I the Choice", "Small the Theme of My Chant", "Continuities", "When the Full-Grown Poet Came", "A Voice From Death", and "When I Read the Book", his most outstanding expression of Self sounds throughout his epic—the only known American original—"Song of Myself".

16. Cesáreo Rosa-Nieves y Esther M. Melón, *Colecciones Puertorriqueñas: Biografías* (Connecticut: Troutman Press, 1970) p. 76.

17. *Ibid.* p. 77.

18. Jiménez, *Op. cit.* p. 85.

A more in-depth study of a few of the poems of each—Burgos and Whitman—reveals a strong similarity in delineating the theme of Self, especially in the duality between the Be and the Not Be. It is not uncommon for Miss Burgos to question:

*¿Estoy viva? ¿Estoy muerta?
¡Presente! ¡Aquí! ¡Presente!*¹⁹

The Burgosian search for Self looms through her verses. Julia's initial quest is mirrored in *Poema en veinte surcos* in which the poetess defines her soul as "Una armonía rota..."²⁰ Hers is a constant anguishing search for her destiny. In "Retorno" from *El mar y tú* she exclaims:

*Como que quiero amar
y no me deja el viento.
Como que quiero retornar
y no acierto el porqué, ni adonde vuelvo.
Como que quiero asirme a la ruta del agua,
y toda sed ha muerto.*²¹

Whitman likewise spent many years vainly seeking the world in broken bits of mirrors, making the search itself, not its resolution, his subject.²² He explains regarding his poems that they

have mainly been the outcropping of my own emotional and other personal nature—an attempt from first to last, to put a *Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America) freely, fully, and truly on record.²³

19. Julia de Burgos, "Entre mi voz y el tiempo" *Antología Poética* (San Juan: Editorial Coquí, 1975) p. 232.

20. Burgos, *Poema en Veinte Surcos*.

21. Burgos, "Retorno", *El Mar y Tú*. Reprinted in *Antología*. p. 117.

22. Jay Martin, *Op. cit.* p. 283.

23. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Preface.

In "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" he again presents himself as a bridge between opposites. He acknowledges:

I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
A reminiscence sing. ²⁴

Besides, in the "Prayer of Columbus" which Whitman wrote in 1874 when he had little hope of recovering from his first severe paralysis attack, he carries on a kind of mental exploration:

*Is it the prophet's thought I speak, or am I raving?
What do I know of life? what of myself?
I know not even my own work past or present,
Dim ever-shifting guesses of it spread before me,
Of never better worlds, their mighty parturition,
Mocking, perplexing me.*

*And these things I see suddenly, what mean they?
And if some miracle, some hand divine unseal'd my eyes,
Shadowy vast shapes smile throught the air and sky,
And on the distant waves sail countless ships,
And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me. ²⁵*

The perplexing mockery which besets Whitman reflects itself in the thoughts of the Puerto Rican poetess as she commences her famous poem "A Julia de Burgos" with the concept of the constant struggle between the Me and the Not Me:

*Ya las gentes murmuran que yo soy tu enemiga
porque dicen que en verso doy al mundo tu yo.
Mienten, Julia de Burgos. Mienten, Julia de Burgos.
La que se alza en mis versos no es tu voz: es mi voz*

24. *Ibid.* "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking".
25. *Ibid.* "Prayer of Columbus".

*porque tú eres ropaje y la esencia soy yo;
y el más profundo abismo se tiende entre las dos. ²⁶*

This is the echo of Whitman who, half a century before in "Song of Myself" had sung a similar stanza:

*I believe in you my soul, the other I am omit, must not
abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other. ²⁷*

Meanwhile, in his second Inscription in *Leaves of Grass*, "As I Ponder'd in Silence," Walt describes a vision he experienced as he was reviewing his poems, considering, lingering long:

*A Phantom arose before me with distrustful aspect,
Terrible in beauty, age, and power,
The genius of poets of old lands,
As to me directing like flame its eyes,
With finger pointing to many immortal songs,
and menacing voice, What singest thou? it said,
Knowest thou not there is but one theme for ever-enduring bards?
And that is the theme of War, the fortune of battles,
The making of perfect soldiers.
Be it so, then I answer'd
I too haughty Shade also sing war, and a longer
and greater one one than any,
Waged in my book with varying fortune, with flight,
advance and retreat, victory deferr'd and wavering,
(Yet methinks certain, or as good as certain,
at the last,) the field the world,
For life and death, for the Body and for the eternal Soul,
Lo, I too am come, chanting the chant of battles,
I above all promote brave soldiers. ²⁸*

26. Burgos, "A Julia de Burgos", *Antología*, p. 23.
27. Whitman, *Op. cit.* p. 32.
28. *Ibid.* p. 2.

Reiterating this theme of the soldier braving life's battles Julia de Burgos continues the song to herself thus:

*Tú eres fría muñeca de mentira social,
y yo, viril destello de la humana verdad.*

*Tú, miel de cortesanas hipocresías; yo no;
que en todos mis poemas desnudo el corazón.*

*Tú eres como tu mundo, egoísta; yo no;
que todo me lo juego a ser lo que soy yo.*

*Tú eres sólo la grave señora señorona;
yo, no; yo soy la vida, la fuerza, la mujer.²⁹*

Miss Burgos scarcely ever uses her pen without first dipping in into the fountain of her personality. Whitman before her in Part 12 of "Starting From Paumanok" has blazed this trail when he asserts:

*I will make the true poem of riches,
To earn for the body and the mind
whatever adheres and goes
forward and is not dropt by death;
I will effuse egotism and show it
underlying all, and I will be
the bard of personality.³⁰*

The North American poet's life and works demonstrate his intense struggle to fuse the radical democratic Me and the conservative Not Me in response to Emerson who had dared man to become "a transparent eyeball" and thus dissolve the Not Me in the Me.³¹

29. Burgos, "A Julia de Burgos", p. 23.

30. Whitman, "Starting From Paumanok", *Leaves*.

31. Jay Martin, p. 284.

Pursuing this ideal, Whitman states in *Specimen Days*: "Somehow I seemed to get identity with each and everything around me, in its condition."³²

Julia de Burgos, too, has become a "transparent eyeball", fusing the Soy and the No Soy. Aligned to Whitman in setting down the eternal sets of contrast, Julia argues:

*Tú eres de tu marido, de tu amo; yo no;
yo de nadie, o de todos, porque, a todos, a todos,
en mi limpio sentir y en mi pensar me doy.*

*Tú te rizas el pelo y te pintas; yo no;
a mí me riza el viento; a mí me pinta el sol.³³*

Cesáreo Rosa-Nieves remarks that Julia in her second stage of style in writing approaches superrealism, and it is at this moment that her poetry results in a submerging of herself in herself, and in this instant "aterrizamos en una lírica de subconciencia estética y emocional."³⁴

Whitman also is steeped in the concept of Self. While his "Song of Myself" might be mentioned here in its entirety as further evidence of his advancement of the search for the whole, individual Self, certain lines are outstanding:

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

*I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.*

*Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd
the earth much?*

32. Whitman, *Specimen Days*.

33. Burgos, "A Julia de Burgos", p. 24.

34. Rosa-Nieves, *Aguinaldo lírico de la Poesía Puertorriqueña*. III, p. 416.

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.³⁵

Shortly after this, the poet muses:

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and increase, always sex,
Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life.³⁶

Contradictions rise and fall from the poet's pen. He is the great magnet attracting the opposites, not to confusion, but to fusion:

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd

35. Whitman, "Song of Myself" Parts 2 and 3.

36. *Ibid.*

*babe, and am not contain'd between my bat and boots
And peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every one good.
The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.*³⁷

Whitman relates to all men of all times, the rich, the poor, the saint and the sinner, the learned and the unlearned, the laborer and the poet. He teaches:

What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me.

.....
*These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands,
they are not original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing,
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.*³⁸

Later in the epic, Whitman asks the reader:

What is a man anyhow? what am I? what are you?

.....
*I exist as I am, that is enough,
If no other in the world be aware I sit content,
And if each and all be aware I sit content.*

*One world is aware and by far the largest to me, and that is myself.
And whether I come to my own to-day or in ten thousand or ten millions years,
I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheerfulness I can wait.*³⁹

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

Even the animals show their relation to him. He admits that he could probably live with them easily enough, for they do not complain, nor become dissatisfied, nor demented with the mania of owning things. As for his nearness to God, he claims:

*I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God
not in the least,
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than
myself.*

*I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and
each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face
in the glass,
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is
sign'd by God's name,
And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er
I go
Others will punctually come for ever and ever.⁴⁰*

The North American writer concludes his great epic—his ascent to perfection—reminding the reader to look for him everywhere until he finds him:

*You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.*

*Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.⁴¹*

It is interesting to note that both poets, besides having been called by the Muse to pour out their spirit in verse, have served as

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

teachers and as journalists. Whitman used the periodical as a means of communicating to the masses the new philosophy of the importance of the individual. Julia de Burgos likewise has disseminated this belief in her editorials, one of which, entitled "Ser o no ser es la divisá" won the journalism award in Puerto Rico in 1946.

Finally, both authors are hailed for their singular courage in expressing their philosophy of Self, not only when they are singing of love and life, but also when they are overshadowed by the thought of death. Isabel Cuchí Coll describes Julia de Burgos as "una conciencia tendida en sílaba de angustia." Miss Burgos forecasts her own tragic death in "Poema para mi muerte", various lines of which follow:

*Morir conmigo misma,
abandonada y sola
que nadie me profane la muerte
con sollozos
ni me arropen por siempre con
inocente tierra
que en el libre momento, me
dejen libremente
disponer de la única libertad
del planeta.⁴²*

The forecast of the circumstances surrounding her decease are even more striking in another work which Julia chose to call "Dadme mi número". The last two stanzas are particularly impressive:

*¡Dadme mi número! No quiero
que hasta el amor se me desprenda...
(Unido sueño que me sigue
como a mis pasos va la buella)*

*¡Dadme mi número, porque si no,
me moriré después de muerta!⁴³*

42. Burgos, *Antología*, "Poema Para Mi Muerte", p. 128.

43. *Ibid.*, "Dadme Mi Número" p. 108.

Walt Whitman envisions death in groups of poems such as that classified as "Whispers of Heavenly Death". One of his poems called "The Sleepers" has been judged the only surrealist American poem of the Nineteenth Century. Once more we encounter the North American poet projecting the Self throughout each stanza. Lines 66-69 particularly depict Whitman's attitude toward his last moments on earth:

*A shroud I see and I am the shroud, I wrap a body and lie in
the coffin,
It is dark here under ground, it is not evil or pain here, it is
blank here, for reasons.*

*(It seems to me that every thing in the light and air ought to
be happy,
Whoever is not in his coffin and the dark grave let him know
he has enough.)*⁴⁴

Towards the end of the poem, the writer invokes night, and with night, death:

*Why should I be afraid to trust myself to you?
I am not afraid, I have been well brought forward by you,
I love the rich running day, but I do not desert her in whom I
lay so long.
I know not how I came of you and I know not where I go with
you, but I know I came well and shall go well.*⁴⁵

Thus we observe that regarding the everlasting contrasts of body and soul, the Me and the Not Me, life and death—among other opposed forces, both Julia de Burgos and Walt Whitman endeavor to emancipate the individual and bridge the span between the polar forces. For this reason, Whitman has been lauded by Hispanoamericans for his individualism, and for his destruction of the dua-

44. Whitman, *L. of G.*, "The Sleepers".

45. *Ibid.*

listic body-spirit declaring that the body is as worthy of being sung as is the soul.⁴⁶

Simultaneously, as Julia de Burgos fearlessly sings of Self, she is counted among those whom Whitman praises in *Specimen Days* where he argues that:

*in an age of public evasion the
poet who could thus insist upon
self was the true hero the Specimen
Man of later Nineteenth Century America.*⁴⁷

46. A.L. Morales, *Op. cit.* p. 18.

47. Martin, p. 285.

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