

Parallelisms in the Poetry of Walt Whitman and of Rigoberto Pérez: Death and Nature as Dicotomics

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Doctora Graziella Cartaya, in a review of *Raíces de la Espina* by Rigoberto Pérez Vélez, observes that at times the contemporary Moccan poet may be compared with the mid-nineteenth century North American poet, Walt Whitman, especially in "sus acentos fuertes, rotundos..."¹ A profound study of each poet sheds much light on a particular theme treated by both: death—symbolized and accompanied by the sincerity and fidelity of nature on the one hand, and the insincerity and hypocrisy of human nature on the other hand:

Dame un árbol, un árbol cuando muera,
que me acompañe en mi reposo eterno.²

With these words, The Puerto Rican poet, Rigoberto Pérez, begins poem XI which pleads with his native Moca for a ceiba tree as a symbol of its peaceful silence in death. The North Ameri-

1. Dra. Graziella Macias de Cartaya. Review of *Raíces de la espina*. Rigoberto Pérez Vélez. Horizontes: Revista de la UCPR. Ponce: Imprenta Revista del Café. Año XVI, Número 31-32.

2. Rigoberto Pérez Vélez, *Raíces de la Espina*, Ponce: Imprenta Quiñones, 1974, página 1.

can poet, Walt Whitman, also uses the theme of the companionship of a tree in death when in "Song to Sunset" he writes:

How the trees rise and stand up with strong trunks, with
branches and leaves!
(Surely there is something more in each of the trees,
some
living soul.)³

Meanwhile, the same poet, in "Scented Herbage of My Breast", invokes Death thus:

Indeed, Oh Death, I think these leaves mean precisely
the same as you mean,
Grow up taller sweet leaves that I may see!
grow up out of my breast!⁴

Moreover, in section 49 of "Song of Myself" these ideas stand out:

And as to you Death, and your bitter hug of mortality,
it is idle to try to alarm me.
.....
And as to you Corpse I think you are good manure,
but that does not offend me,
I smell the white roses sweet-scented and growing,
I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish'd breasts
of melons.⁵

This philosophy of Whitman flows through poem XI of Dr. Pérez who is found describing the future work of his faithful ceiba "que se levante grave". Accordingly, he declares:

3. Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1949. p. 242.
4. *Ibid*, p. 98.
5. *Ibid*.

Un día sus raíces, blandamente
hundiéndose en el suelo—
perforarán el cedro de mi alcoba eterna
buscando las cenizas de mis huesos.

Por su tronco, tatuado por los años
todo cicatrizado por el tiempo,
treparé mi espíritu sonámbulo
a ver la luz eternidad de tu cielo.⁶

We can discover this same thought projecting itself in Whitman's work, "Ashes of Soldiers", when he supplicates Love:

Perfume all—make all wholesome,
Make these ashes to nourish and blossom,
O love, solve all, fructify all with the last chemistry.⁷

Furthermore, in "We Two, How Long We Were Fool'd", this theme pervades:

We two, how long we were fool'd,
Now transmuted, we swiftly escape as Nature escapes,
We are Nature, long have we been absent, but now we
return,
We become plants, trunks, foliage, roots, bark,
We are bedded in the ground, we are rocks.
We are oaks, we grow in the openings side by side,
We browse, we are two among the wild herds
spontaneous as any,
We are two fishes swimming in the sea together,
We are what locust blossoms are, we drop scent around
lanes
mornings and evenings,...⁸

6. Pérez, *Op. cit.*
7. Whitman, *Op. cit.* p. 104.
8. *Ibid*, p. 325.

Death is beautiful from you, (what indeed is finally —
beautiful
 except death and love?)
 O I think it is not for life I am chanting here my chant
 of lovers, I think it must be for death,
 For how calm, how solemn it grows to ascend to the
atmosphere
 of lovers,
 Death or life I am then indifferent, my soul declines
 to prefer,
 (I am not sure but the high soul of lovers welcomes
death
 most,)

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Terminating poem XI, the poet again entreats his beloved town:

Moca, dame un árbol cuando muera,
 la Ceiba milenaria como firme compañera,
 que la sienta avanzar desde mi sombra,
 que la pueda mirar desde mi sueño.¹⁴

For each poet, nature expresses goodness, sincerity, fraternity, happiness, vitality—in death as well as in life. Each poet senses the friendship and companionship of the trees; there is no fear of death for them who were lovers of nature during their life. In contrast with nature's nearness, friendliness, and warmth, we find in the verses of Whitman and Pérez the aloofness, hypocrisy, and frigidity of men. Whitman, for example, when invoking Death, mocks the masquerading of man:

Give me your tone therefore O death, that I may
 accord with it,
 Give me yourself, for I see that you belong to me

13. Whitman, Op. cit.

14. Pérez, Op. cit.

now above all,
 and are folded inseparably
 together, you love and death are,
 Nor will I allow you to balk me any more with
 what I was calling life,
 For now it is convey'd to me that you are
 the purports essential,
 That you hide in these shifting forms of life,
 for reasons, and that they are
 mainly for you,
 That you beyond them come forth to remain,
 the real reality,
 That behind the mask of materials you patiently wait,
 no matter how long,
 That you will one day perhaps take control of all,
 That you will perhaps dissipate this entire
 show of appearance,
 That may-be you are what it is all for, but it does not
 last so very long,
 But you will last very long.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the verses of the Moccan poet are infiltrated with similar references. Poem XXVI sharply criticizes the great ostentation of by-standers at the scene of the writer's own foreshadowed funeral:

Estoy viendo el velorio de mi muerte
 Y asistiendo a la farsa del entierro.

Un tumulto de gente
 hace ostentación de sentimiento.

Y deseando, soñando para siempre
 sobre el gris sepulcro de las horas fijas.¹⁶

15. Whitman, Op. cit.

16. Pérez, Op. cit. "Poema XXVI".

In reciprocal terms, the author of *Leaves of Grass* continues to address Death:

Yea, Death, we bow our faces; veil our eyes to thee,
We mourn the old, the young untimely drawn to thee,
The fair, the strong, the good, the capable,
The household wreck'd, the husband and the wife,
the engulf'd forger in his forge,
The corpse in the whelming waters and the mud,
The gathered thousands to their funeral mounds,
and thousands never found or gather'd.
Then after burying, mourning the dead,
(Faithful to them found or unfound, forgetting
not, bearing the past, here now musing.)¹⁷

Commensurately, in "Quicksand Years", we hear:

Quicksand years that whirl me I know not whither,
your schemes, politics, fail, lines give way, substances
mock and elude me,
Only the theme I sing, the great and the strong-
soul, eludes not, possessed
One's-self must never give way—that is the final
substance—that out of all is sure,
Out of politics, triumph, battles, life, what at last
finally remains?
When shows break up what but One's Self is sure?¹⁸

Dr. Pérez keeps pace with Whitman and continues to satirize the pretentious vociferation:

y comentan con pérfido susurro:
Era sencillo, bueno

17. Whitman, *Op. cit.*

18. *Ibid.*

cordial y generoso.

Y haber muerto...

(Dicen así los que restaron fuerza a mi alma
cuando aspiraba
a desgarrar el tiempo de la distancia.)¹⁹

Whitman likewise offers comparable verses in "To Think of Time" as he observes:

Steady the trot to the cemetery, duly rattles the
death-bell,
The gate is pass'd, the new-dug grave is halted at, the
living alight, the hearse uncloses,
The coffin is pass'd out, lower'd and settled, the whip
is laid on the coffin, the earth is swiftly shovel'd in,
The mound above is flatted with the spades—silence,
A minute—no one moves or speaks—it is done,
He is decently put away—is there anything more?
He was a good fellow, free mouth'd, quick-temper'd,
not bad-looking,
Ready with life or death for a friend, fond of women,
gambled, ate hearty, drank hearty,
Had known what it was to be flush, grew low-spirited
toward the last, sicken'd, was help'd by a
contribution,
Died, aged forty-one years— and that was his funeral.²⁰

Moreover, in the last stanzas of poem XXVI, Rigoberto Pérez persists in detesting the conduct of those who assist at his obsequies and whom he overhears uttering sweet but false words:

Y en el desfile hasta el camposanto
se oyen risas, voces y cuentos.
Un necróforo, dos, quien sabe cuántos

19. Pérez, *Op. cit.*

20. Whitman, *Op. cit.*, "To Think of Time", p. 291.

doblan sus ramas, como escuchando
sobre las tristes tumbas del suelo,
las quejas hondas
el infinito renunciamento
que en su tiniebla ya sin aurora
dicen los muertos.²⁴

This poet, like the North American, sings encouragingly of the human traits exhibited by nature and its symbolism of life in death. Nevertheless, Rigoberto Pérez impregnates his poetry with a pessimistic tone while Walt Whitman generally creates an optimistic mood. Poem XXIV shows a pessimism that weighs as heavily as the overburdened branches of the trees. Its lines speak of “noches sin estrellas y sin mañanas”— of “tinieblas ya sin aurora”— of “noches de cruel ausencia”.

Lumbre de tumbas abandonadas,
última huella de los caídos.
Arboles mustios,
envejecidos como una pena
aferrados a sus troncos lamiendo distancias.
Donde el sol nunca riega la savia de sus reflejos,
y apenas cuelga sus telarañas
grises, el tiempo.²⁵

On the other hand, Whitman, in *Passage to “India”* manifests joy:

At Nature and its wonders, Time and Space and Death,
But that I, turning, call to thee, O soul, thou actual Me,
and lo, thou gently masterest the orbs,
Thou matest Time, smilest content at Death,
And fullest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space.
Greater than stars or suns,

24. Pérez, Op. cit., “Poem XXIV”.

25. Ibid.

Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth;
What love than thine and ours could wider amplify?
What aspirations, wishes, outvie thine and ours, O soul?
What dreams of the ideal? What plans of purity,
perfection, strength,
What cheerful willingnesses for others' sake to give up
all?

For others' sake to suffer all?

Reckoning ahead O soul, when thou the time achiev'd,
The seas all cross'd, weather'd the capes, the voyage
done,
Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim
attain'd
As fill'd with friendship, love, complete, the Elder
Brother found
The Younger melts in fondness in his arms.²⁶

Proceeding with the study of poem XXIV, the reader can still sense through the lugubrious expressions that the pessimistic tone reachest its highest point:

Pasa la sombra por el camino
con sus presagios de sueño lento,
abre la puerta ferrada y dura
donde el silencio sueñan los muertos,
y bajo el palio de tantos siglos
dice su rezo.

Porque un día cuando esté muerta,
cuando sus sombras cubran su sombra
y duerma su sueño,
y de las savias de sus raíces con ciego esfuerzo
bañen el sueño de su tiempo,

26. Whitman, Op. cit., “Passage to India”, p. 540-41.

su pobre cuerpo...
será también
entre los árboles mustios y yertos
un gajo fuerte
sobre las tapias del cementerio.²⁷

An exception to Whitman's optimism regarding death is his poem "Yet, Yet Ye Downcast Hours" wherein we may find many expressions of great weight:

Yet, yet ye downcast hours, I know ye also,
Weights of lead, how ye clog and cling at my ankles,
Earth to a chamber of mourning turns—I hear the
o'erweening.
*Matter is conquerer—matter, triumphant only, continues
onward*

Despairing cries float ceaselessly toward me,
The call of my nearest lover, putting forth, alarm'd
uncertain
The sea I am quickly to sail, come tell me,
Come tell me where I am speeding, tell me my
destination.

I understand your anguish, buy I cannot help you,
I approach, hear, behold, the sad mouth, the look out of
the eyes, your mute inquiry,
Whither I go from the bed I recline on, come tell me;
Old age, alarm'd, uncertain—a young woman's voice,
appealing to me for comfort;
A young man's voice, *Shall I not escape?*²⁸

Nevertheless, the author of *Leaves of Grass* includes in this work an essay entitled "Democratic Vistas" which favors much discussion

27. Pérez, Op. cit., "Poem XXIV".

28. Whitman, Op. cit., p. 367.

of the themes of nature and of death. Concerning the former, he explains:

Lo! Nature (the only complete, actual poem), existing calmly in the divine scheme, containing all, content, careless of the criticisms of a day, or these endless and wordy chatterers.²⁹

Later in the same work he treats of death and of the necessity of future poets to compose some great verses on death:

The poems of life are great, but there must be the poems of the purports of life, not only in itself, but beyond itself.³⁰

The answer to Whitman's invitation has been verified in the Mocan poet, the majority of whose versos embrace these two themes. In addition to the verses found in *Raíces de la espina*, there are many more in the second book, *Obito* which is in print. For example, that which begins:

Cuando el entierro pasó
los hombres que se encontraban en el camino
hacían reverencias
como sonámbulos adormecidos.
Saludaban al cortejo
absortos en sí mismos.

Seres entumecidos como estrellas sin luz
que vivían para sí
aferrados a la vida.

En la última jornada del entierro
uno, sin embargo,

29. Ibid, p. 540-41.

30. Ibid.

se descubrió con un gesto más extenso y mesurado,
clavando sus miradas en el féretro.
Sabía que la vida era una intensa agitación
feroz,
sin finalidad para tantos,
todo para otros.
Sólo uno sabía la verdad,
la verdad que se perdía entre aquellos muros de soledad,
Yo.³¹

This poet not only speaks of bodily death, but of spiritual death as well—loss: of soul, of spirit, of love, of faith—each becoming another death. Another poem from *Obito* exclaims with anguish:

Mi alma anda perdida,
perdida en las noches de líricos lamentos.
Batir de tempestades
en mi templo de arcilla.
Lúgubres visiones
pueblan todos mis horizontes.
Mi alma busca una cobija,
una cobija sepulcral de barro.
Allí donde las telarañas rasguen sombras encendidas,
y las tumbas sedentarias
alberguen mis nuevos pasos.³²

The tension rises as the poet persists in passionately addressing his soul:

¡Mi alma! Como una flor se marchita,
y frente a todos se acucilla.
¡Mi alma! Golondrina adolorida
que abre su pecho a la muerte.

31. Pérez, *Obito*.

32. *Ibid.*

No busca la arcilla suave
ni el vacilante madero.
Mi alma arrastrándose por el cielo
busca una llama para escapar al suelo.
Mi alma sólo es humo, ceniza, vapor de agua,
la esencia muerte,
bocado para que los buitres se alimenten.³³

And, where can we find a more profound sense of affliction and loss than in the following verses from *Obito*:

El mundo perdió la fe en mis fuertes pasos.
Sólo tú me apoyas con la mirada amplia.
Sólo quedas tú en medio de mis fracasos.
Tú, con tus proyecciones darás fuerza a mis manos,
y ya me levantaré con los brazos en alto.
Tú quedarás como el símbolo de fuerza
que en mi sangre se aumenta,
y te daré todos los siglos
de esperanza y de gloria
en los que quede nuestra historia,
escrita con nuestra sangre.
Sólo tú sabrás mis sueños derrumbados
porque sólo tú compartiste el dolor de mis años.

A ti te llevo en mis versos.
A ti te llevo en mis labios.
A ti te llevo en mi recuerdo.
A ti sólo llevo prendida en el tiempo.³⁴

Moreover, each parting is another death! With great sadness he is forced to utter:

Amor... te vas!
Dejas en mi alma una soledad seca.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

Sólo queda la trágica realidad:
el despertar.

Y mi pecho se desangra contemplando tu partida.
Dices que nunca te irás...
yo sé que no volverás.
Y te espero... te espero, amor:
como siempre, como ahora,
como entonces, como hoy.

Te vas, amor, para nunca más volver.
Lo sé.
Y me duele el alma,
y me duele la voz,
y me duele la garganta que se desgarran en dolor.
Amor... amor... amor...
adiós amor
y perdón.

Amor... llegaste a mí abriendo nuevos surcos.
Y yo te absorbí desesperadamente.
Me sorprendiste en la última florecida del crepúsculo.
Me dolía tenerte porque presentía perderte.
Y corrí la última jornada
presintiendo nuevas esperanzas.
Y hoy te vas.
Y me duele. Sí, me duele, pero no te maldigo.
Te vas porque así yo lo he querido.
Pero no vas sola...
Mi alma se va contigo.³⁵

After the poet has bereaved over the physical loss of his love, his tone seems to change as he remembers that her spirit will be with him still:

35. Ibid.

Tú estarás sumergida en mis sentidos
y mi voz desesperada rodará por los caminos.
Amor... me resigno,
pero no te maldigo.

Siempre estarás en mis sueños,
en mi nombre,
en mis besos,
en mis labios,
en mi boca,
en mis manos,
en mis versos,
en mi alma,
en mi pecho,
en todas mis horas,
en mi húmedo silencio.

Y la noche se va muriendo,
y tus manos se deslizan de mis manos
sin poderlas contener.
Cedí por cobarde,
cedí por amarte.
Ya es demasiado tarde.
Te vas, amor... cuatro letras anidadas en mi alma
que bendicen el momento del encuentro
en una noche de febrero.³⁶

Life is observed through movement or action; yet, action, in whatever language, is demonstrated through verb usage. With the absence of verbs in his works, a writer is able to convey more forcefully the theme of death which is the absence of life. Thus, without a single verb, the Puerto Rican poet in the following poem from *Obito* explosively announces the sacrifice of his spirit as he cries out:

36. Ibid.

Zarzales... espinas... lodazales...
 ¡Mi camino!
 Judas... Alevosos... fariseos
 ¡Mis amigos!
 Derroteros inciertos...
 ¡Mi nuevo destino!
 Cielos grises de infaustos ocasos...
 ¡Cobija para el nuevo nido!
 Tardes lentas... Horas muertas...
 ¡Crepúsculo inconcino!
 Mis pasos cansados... Mis brazos caídos...
 ¡Obito mezquino!
 Hombres de mi campo... Héroes petulantes...
 ¡Fariseicos fementidos!
 Cerviz doblegada... Derrota quijotesca...
 ¡Ultimo sacrificio!³⁷

At times, the verses of the North American writer also explode agonizingly. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" (his tribute to the assassinated President Abraham Lincoln) painfully spurts forth five lines that contain only three verbs:

O powerful western fallen star!
 O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!
 O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides
 the star!
 O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul
 of me!
 O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.³⁸

Similarly, in the section entitled "Whispers of Heavenly Death", Whitman, after asking himself:

Darest thou now O soul,

37. Ibid.

38. Whitman, Op. cit. "When Lilacs Last as the Dooryard Bloomed", p. 273.

Walk out with me toward the unknown region,
 Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to
 follow?³⁹

continues in detonations but with less force than Rigoberto Pérez:

No map there, nor guide
 Nor voice sounding, nor touch of human hand,
 Nor face with blooming flesh, nor lips, nor eyes,
 are in that land.⁴⁰

Although both writers present the idea of death in various isolated poems, each one dedicates one large section of his works to it. Walt Whitman, in *Leaves of Grass*, has separated at least five groups for this subject. Some of these areas are entitled: "Drum Taps", "Memories of President Lincoln", "Autumn Rivulets", "Whispers of Heavenly Death", and "Songs of Parting."

Likewise, Professor Rigoberto Pérez Vélez, in *Raíces de la espina*, sets apart the section of "Reflexiones" to deliberate on the end of life. Besides, we note that his second book, *Obito*, as its title implies, devotes itself to man's destiny—to the poet's own destiny: the death of mankind's faith in him, the death of his broken dreams, the death of his lost loves: "Día, mes, año recuerdo funesto", "Yo quedé más solo todavía", "Otra vez la cuesta del Calvario!", and a quantity of other such titles.

With the evidence presented we can conclude that in the theme of death—especially in the use of nature as a symbol or metaphor of death, there is manifested in the works of Walt Whitman as in those of Rigoberto Pérez Vélez, a strong basis for comparison. Not only does each refer to the end of man in general, but to his own death and funeral, as the following works attest. Sections 49-51 of "Song of Myself" permit us to eavesdrop on Whitman preaching to the world from his place in the cemetery. Section 49 describes his reaction to the interment:

39. Op. cit., "Darest Thou Now O My Soul?"

40. Ibid.

To his work without flinching the accoucheur comes,
I see the elder-hand pressing receiving supporting,
I recline by the sills of the exquisite flexible doors,
And mark the outlet, and mark the relief and escape.

.....
And as to you, Life I reckon you are the leavings of
many deaths,
(No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times
before.)

I hear you whispering there O stars of heaven,
O suns—O grass of graves—O perpetual transfers and
promotions,
If you do not say any thing how can I say anything?

Whereas, section 50 is dedicated to the little knowledge any
human being really has of death:

50

There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I
know
it is in me.
Wrench'd and sweaty—calm and cool then my body
becomes,
I sleep—I sleep long.

I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word
unsaid,
It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.

Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on,
To it the creation is the friend whose embracing
awakens me.

.....
Do you see O my brothers and sisters?
It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—
it is eternal life—it is Happiness.

The final section of "Song of Myself" to be treated here (51) is a
welcome, confident cry to those who are to follow him to the
grave:

The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied
them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the side of evening,
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only
a minute longer.)

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the
door-slab.
Who has done his day's work? Who will soonest be
through with
his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?
Will you speak before I am gone? Will you prove already
too late?⁴¹

A concluding comparison arises from the Moccan poet's work
which commences with: "Qué diáfano el cementerio." Pérez's
ultimate exclamations from his grave in the cemetery of Moca
illustrate a diminution of the poet's former pessimism as he
jubilantly salutes—not man—but rather the peaceful silence and
fecundity of his place of interment:

Qué diáfano el cementerio
y cuán imperturbables son las almas

41. Ibid., "Song of Myself".

que allí descansan en silencio.
¡Qué júbilo sentir las lápidas
inmersas en espectral misterio!
¡Qué fecundos los sueños
de los que duermen en el cementerio
donde no hay lodo ni inmundicia
que destruya nuestras espigas!
¡Qué plácido el cementerio,
lleno de tumbas y fosas frías!
Hoy te vi crecer en mis hombros
como un fuerte punto de apoyo.
Tus rumbos anchos, sinuosos, empinados
me arrastran con fuerte nervio
por tus cauces abiertos
y repleto de espacios.⁴²

The Puerto Rican poet's unforgettable parting words are powerful:

Todas las flores huelen a muerte
y yo leo en un epitafio:
"Descansa para siempre
Rigoberto Pérez Vélez."⁴³

42. Pérez, *Obito*.

43. *Ibid.*