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Walking with Whitman and Neruda: Union and Disunion in *Song of Myself* and *Walking around*

Though they lived in different centuries and on different continents, it’s easy to imagine Pablo Neruda and Walt Whitman strolling down a beach together talking, arm in arm. Both loved walking in nature, foregrounded ordinary objects in their poetry, and wrote with unabashed eroticism. The impact of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* on Neruda’s poetry is well-established, both by critics and by Neruda himself: *Canto general*, Neruda’s epic poem of the history of the American continent from the Hispanic perspective, is cited as a prime example of his epigonic debt to Whitman. Yet, with the exception of extensive studies by Fernando Alegría and Miguel Unamuno (both of which are still inaccessible to English-speaking scholars except in small excerpts), the Whitman-Neruda comparison remains superficially analyzed in critical scholarship, and the chasm between Whitman’s Christian mysticism and Neruda’s evolving poetic identity -- from romanticism, to surrealism, to communist materialism – is glossed over as an inconvenient truth. A new and potentially fruitful way to reevaluate the dynamic between these two iconic poets may be found in examining samples of their “walking poems”.[[1]](#footnote-0) Whitman's *Song of Myself* and Neruda’s *Walking around* are canonical works by their respective authors that demonstrate how each poet walks in the world and discovers his place in it. [[2]](#footnote-1)

The passion for Whitman and Neruda has caused otherwise cool-headed critics to lose perspective about fundamental differences between the two. Poet-activist Jack Hirschman says, “Pablo Neruda is the inheritor of the greatest poet of the 19th century, Walt Whitman. He is the one who named -- *named --*  the elements of democracy, laid out the dream. I think Pablo Neruda was...the great poet, the one who named the things of the 20th century.” [[3]](#footnote-2) Certainly, there are parallels: both poets find their major metaphors in the artifacts of the natural world; both translated their erotic passion to the page in ways that challenged the mores of their respective times; both were tireless self-promoters and careful manipulators of their public images; and both wrote poems about walking in the world. But I argue that their ambulatory poetics take two very different approaches: Whitman’s “I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume,” emerges from a fundamentally different impulse from that of the poet who gloomily wrote “*Sucede que me canso de ser hombre*” (“It so happens that I’m tired of being a man”). *Song of Myself* is a walk as sample in which the poet actively applies himself to perceiving and collecting details from the phenomenal world in order to convey the hopeful message that unity of experience is possible between the world and the poet, and the poet and his reader. By contrast, *Walking around* is a walk as thinking, in which the poet is alone in a morbid environment full of objects that do not call to him poetically, and in which connection with other people and objects is problematic.

There are hermeneutic difficulties inherent in evaluating or comparing work by poets who, however historically and critically linked, lived in different centuries and and wrote in different languages. I also acknowledge the lopsidedness inherent in comparing the relatively brief stroll of *Walking Around* with the much longer hike of *Song of Myself*. Also, while Walt Whitman assiduously revised and rearranged *Leaves of Grass*, Neruda rarely revised past work extensively, so his *oeuvre* is significantly less monolithic than his predecessor’s.[[4]](#footnote-3) Neruda’s collections seem emerge from three related but distinct poets: the romantic bachelor of *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* and *El hondero entusiasta* (1920’s - early 1930’s); the existential surrealist of *La Generación de ‘27*, transitional, alienated, and resistant to his bureaucratic day-job who produced *Residencia en la tierra* (1925-1945); and, finally, the increasingly materialist and didactic poet-politician who wrote *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* and *Canto General* (1945 -1960’s). It’s the second Neruda from whom we’ll tease out the essential differences between two approaches to being -- and walking poetically -- in the world.

Roger Gilbert’s excellent book *Walks in the World* offers a creative, open theoretical framework for the study of walking poems, and delineates useful categories and touchstones that extend helpfully to this discussion. He suggests that walks have four experiential qualities in common with poems: they make use of the whole body; they are unique and unreproducible; they turn, one or more times, then return home; and both poems and walks have their own kind of internal and external motion that can only be experienced by entering into them. Gilbert encourages us to break free of his categories when useful to consider poems that fall into the group that he calls “further walks”, and emphasizes the ubiquity of the walking paradigm in poetry across the centuries: “Perhaps one reason that the walk appears so often in post-Romantic long poems is that it can serve as a meeting place of narrative and lyric energies. As epic and romance gradually cease to be viable generic models for the long poem, poets look for ways to represent extended experience without the linear pressure of an extended narrative plot” (Gilbert 261). This is certainly so of *Song of Myself*, which, while of epic length, defies the reader to sketch out a clear narrative or timeline in the poem. Whitman’s walk is one of discovery and he rewards the close reader with an spiritual return home, though he frequently digresses or “turns” to stop and meditate. By contrast, *Walking around* is compact and relates a concentrated narrative event that does not come “home” in any obvious sense, but makes several zigzags along the way. Neruda principally employs his walk as a framing device that provides an occasion for the poem and his gloomy reflections on the exterior world, rather than a way to seek inspiration through his experience of it. Whitman is able to shift his transparent gaze flexibly from country to city without diminished enthusiasm: “The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides”. (26). Neruda, on the other hand, is tormented by his urban setting, and longs for the healing pause in nature that seems forbidden to him: “The smell of hair salons makes me wail” (5),[[5]](#footnote-4) he complains, and then pleads for a rest in nature: “All I want is a respite made of rocks or of wool…” (6). [[6]](#footnote-5) I will continue to refer to Gilbert’s analytical touchstones throughout this walk with Whitman and Neruda.

A note about translation: my analysis is based on the sound and arrangement of Neruda’s words in the original Spanish. Translating Neruda, especially his more surreal poems, is not only difficult, but has also inspired great public *agon* between the poets and translators who have attempted it.[[7]](#footnote-6) Like Donald D. Walsh, I lean toward taking Neruda at his word, that is, literally. I offer my conjectures about the symbols that appear in his poem insofar as they are resonant of Neruda’s life and other work , without making firm conclusions. All translations from the original Spanish into English of Neruda’s poetry and supporting texts are my own.

The form and movement of *Song of Myself* demonstrates a muscularity that emphasizes a walking gait. In the poem's fifty-two parts, the poet travels through many physical settings, and his lens widens and contracts to show both the microscopic and the cosmic, city and country, objects in the exterior world, and the poet's interior reflection on those objects. This interleaving of these dualities evokes a gentle internal in-and-out effect, that recalls the tide or the regular respiration of a person, while regular changes of scene move the walk forward. Whitman sometimes suggests the many single steps that constitute a walk by linking the separate numbered sections of the poem by means of a kind of conceptual chiasmus. For example, the final lines of part 26, he describes the physical sensation of being sensually overcome by music at the opera, making him “lose [his] breath”, and then “...feel the puzzle of puzzles,/ And that we call Being.” Part 27 seamlessly takes up this thought-thread of being, asking in its first line: “To be in any form, what is that?” Similarly, Part 27 ends with an the intimate admission, “[t]o touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand”, and part 28 picks up the tactile theme in its first line: “Is this then a touch?” Like each step propels a walker forward, these conceptual handoffs help to propel the poem forward. But Whitman’s walk does not depend on thoughts for forward motion: rather, ideas sprout naturally from experience. Ideas link to modified iterations of similar ideas, propelling the poet forward, being to being, touch to touch.

Sense impressions enter Whitman and leave him again in the form of language, apparently simultaneously; but the phenomenal world always maintains its primacy over the abstraction of language. When the world enters him, it is both beautiful and dangerous, and language serves to protect him from sensory overload:

Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me,

If I could not now and always send the sun-rise out of me.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,

With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds.

Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself,

It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically,

*Walt you contain enough, why don’t you let it out then?* (560-568)

If he could not write the poem, the beauty of a sunrise would kill him. The simple tongue is miraculous enough to contain galaxies, and yet the words it speaks are like common bodily fluids that must be expelled as necessary. There’s a friendly, mocking quality to Whitman’s personification of speech, who “provokes” and ironically suggests “why don’t you let it out then?” Ultimately, Whitman writes the poem because the phenomenal world fills him up too full; words serve only because that's how he lets it out.

When Whitman becomes momentarily abstract, he pauses; but he always quickly returns to his source, existence. The child’s question at the start of part 6 gets at this tension between being and the word-symbols for being: “A child said: *What is the grass*? fetching it to me with full hands” (99): the question is not “what is grass”, but rather “what is *the* grass”, the definite article suggesting the word-symbol grass as opposed to the actual grass itself in the child’s hands. What is the relationship, the child seems to ask, between this stuff in my hands and “the grass”? Whitman’s responds, speaking of his own struggle to resolve the “is-ness” of things in words, beginning with an analogy (“I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord”), moving through the world of symbol (“I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic”), and finally defining grass by what it *does*:

And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,

Growing among black folks as among white,

Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same. (107-109)

Grass, then, is democratic and undiscriminating, growing under the feet of everyone without distinction. It is giving and receiving equally, it is sprouting. Grass is a verb. The poem is also a verb, or as American poet A.R. Ammon wrote “A poem is a walk”,[[8]](#footnote-7) and not at its best striving for completeness of form, or message. “To be in any form, what is that?” (611) Whitman asks, answering himself in the next line with a parenthetical child’s rhyme, (“Round and round we go…”) (612), as if to puncture the question’s abstractness and let its ontological air out, to deflate the idea of form as a motionless object, a still-life. The child’s game gently reminds that static form is illusion, all is in constant motion. Then, as if to spare us from vertigo and remind us that, despite constant change, the world is still real, Whitman restores us to the solidity of an object in the world, a clam: “If nothing lay more develop’d the quahaug in its callous shell were enough.” (613) Whitman always takes the next step forward on his walk, favoring evidence over theory, verbs over nouns: “I pause to consider if it really be,” he declares, astonished at his own thought, “A morning-glory at my windows, satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books.” (448-449)

The poet who takes the walk in *Song of Myself* is a palpable physical presence in the poem from the title to the last line: his sensuality, movement, and aesthetic appreciation of the world is what makes the poem special, and not simply a transcription of a series of events that might not otherwise ascend to the level of poetry.[[9]](#footnote-8) Unlike John O’Hara who, as Gilbert notes, sometimes become nearly transparent in his walking poems, Whitman’s self is nearly always in the foreground, except during his extensive “catalogs”. Whitman proleptically addresses any perception of poetic arrogance, however, and unites himself with all the human race by disclaiming his own specialness: “These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me.” (355) This anxiety of interpretation gestures at his sense of himself, simultaneously central and centrifugal, and where he fits into the cosmic scheme of things. When he sees a black man holding “the reins of his four horses” (225), there follows a potent image of masculinity:

His glance is calm and commanding, he tosses the slouch

of his hat away from his forehead,

The sun falls on his crispy hair and moustache, falls on the

black of his polish’d and perfect limbs.

I behold the picturesque giant and love him, and I do not stop there,

I go with the team also. (228-231)

That tossing of the “slouch of his hat” is a detail that evokes the Hollyer engraving of Whitman himself that adorns most edition of Leaves of Grass, and which he liked “because it is natural, honest, easy: as spontaneous as you are, as I am, this instant, as we talk together." There are many such moments during his walk when Whitman “do(es) not stop there” and goes with “the team also”, whether it is the colors of ducks “playing within” him or the “hundred affections” (253), that is, emotions, that a single step on the earth elicits. Whitman draws his body close to what calls to his soul and becomes one with it. His poem is not a hardened artifact wrought from an idea, it is a walk, an exploration generated from found objects. The poem spontaneously generates itself by means of Whitman’s give-and-take with the exterior world and the details that are, for Whitman, the proof of God in the world.

Language and words, the symbols that represent reality, create a paradox for the poet who takes a walk as sample. How is he to make the language seem spontaneous and fresh, and how does ordinary experience become a poem? Throughout *Song of Myself*, Whitman’s resolves this with direct language that is idiomatic and undeflected, and by using the present tense in most of the poem. While the reader may sometimes pause with Whitman to ponder a difficult question or observe a compelling scene, we don’t need to seek recourse to the dictionary to decipher what he’s saying. A hawk is a hawk, a leaf of grass is a leaf of grass. But what is the grass? Whitman doesn’t coddle: he knows that each object is infinite, and so he does not embellish. It is up to us to find meaning, not in the poet’s words, but in life itself.

The poetic walk, according to Gilbert, does not require a destination, and is “undertaken purely for the pleasure of movement, reflection, and aesthetic perception...”.[[10]](#footnote-9) “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan a son” (477) undertakes a walk that is wide-ranging, detailed, deeply personal, but also universal in its intent and above limiting destinations. The walk we take with the poet over a period of a morning, a day and another night, is coexistent with the arc of his life from the awakening of his consciousness through the prefigured death of “Walt Whitman”, the walker. He prepares us for this: “I tramp a perpetual journey...my right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road. / Not I, not anyone else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself.” (1202-1211) The poet takes us along, but ultimately we find out that his walk is not *our* walk, it’s Whitman’s: we have to go gather our own, unique impressions. Finally, Whitman evokes the hawk, his spirit animal, that chides him for delaying to talk with us. Primarily, a hawk is a diurnal bird of prey, and the sound of the word echoest the poet's own “barbaric yawp” (1333), a wordless, guttural cry. A hawk is also a wired frame used for catching lobster and fish, surely a tool Whitman was familiar with in all his coastal wanderings; and it’s the shallow wood trencher in which laborers contain the plaster for plastering walls. So the simple word “hawk” does quadruple duty here: allying the poet with the spirit, or sky; implying vision, of which speech is the “twin” (566); evoking the primal sound of his song; and giving a nod to the working class people he loved. This hawk chides Whitman for his “gab”, a word that de-romanticizes the poem, and it accuses him of “loitering”, a word that suggests a purpose delayed that is redeemed by the result, which in this case is unity with the dirt and with us:

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love.

If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

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. (1139-1346)

The poet’s final offer is one of both assurance of unity and shamanic self-sacrifice: he asserts eternal comradeship with all of existence, simply and without fanfare. His walk has no destination, because it is eternal. The knowledge that the walk continues and that we are a part of it is the Promethean gift that Whitman derives from the world -- and returns to the world.

Pablo Neruda, like other modern Hispanic poets (including, among others, Pessoa, García Lorca, Darío and Martí) “talks back” to Whitman in his *Oda a Walt Whitman* (1969), expressing his affiliation to Whitman in the setting of a walk:

I don’t know

at what age,

nor where,

whether in the great wet South

or on the fearsome

coast, beneath the sharp

cry of the seagulls,

I touched a hand and it was

the hand of Walt Whitman:

I stepped on the earth

with naked feet,

I walked on the grass,

on the firm dew

of Walt Whitman.

[Yo no recuerdo

a qué edad,

ni dónde,

si en el gran Sur mojado

o en la costa

temible, bajo el breve

grito de las gaviotas,

toqué una mano y era

la mano de Walt Whitman:

pisé la tierra

con los pies desnudos,

anduve sobre el pasto,

sobre el firme rocío

de Walt Whitman.] (1-14)

Written two years before Neruda’s death, these short, controlled lines are Nerudian, while the nouns resonate as Whitmanian. This speaks to how Neruda interacts with Whitman, particularly in relation to the phenomenal world, embracing his objects while cultivating a distinct poetic style. By the time he wrote this ode, Neruda was ill with cancer and seeking to secure his legacy as the great American[[11]](#footnote-10) poet. Neruda’s obsessive collection of a vast number of copies of *Leaves of Grass*, some valuable and others dog-eared paperbacks that he picked up in flea markets, speak to this impulse to possess Whitman.[[12]](#footnote-11) But the increasingly didactic political tone of this poem as it continues puts distance between the two poets, echoing Neruda’s *Instigation to Nixon-cide and the Chilean Revolution* [*Incitación al Nixonicidio y Alabanza de la Revolución Chilena*],a poem that also awkwardly invokes Whitman, this time as a political ally. Neruda applies Whitman’s mystical brotherhood of man to his own idea of a political brotherhood, and others including poets Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Jack Hirschman continued to carry this flag for him. They make a mistake in doing so: Whitman’s beloved “camarado” is not the same as Neruda’s sindicalist “compañero”.

According to Whitman scholar Ed Folsom, it’s likely that Neruda encountered the first extended translation of *Leaves of Grass* into Spanish by Álvaro Armando Vasseur as a teenager: the 1912 selection and translation had a dramatic impact on many Spanish-speaking poets, including Neruda.[[13]](#footnote-12) Writes Folsom, “Certainly, by the age of 19, Neruda had become a student and fan of *Leaves.*..[T]he earliest direct evidence of Neruda’s reading Whitman comes in his 1923 review (in *Claridad* 86 [May 5, 1923]) of Arturo Torres-Rioseco’s 1922 translation of Whitman… Neruda uses lines from Torres-Rioseco’s translation as an epigraph for *El hondero entusiasta,*[[14]](#footnote-13) so we know for certain he read and absorbed that translation, which he praises highly in his review.”[[15]](#footnote-14) Many years later, in 1972, Neruda gave a speech at the 50th anniversary of the PEN Club, clarifying when he first encountered Whitman, and the formative effect of that meeting on his poetry: “As for me, I who am now very close to 70 years old, when I had just turned 15, I discovered Walt Whitman, who is my greatest creditor. And I am here here amongst you accompanied by that marvellous debt that has helped me to exist.."[[16]](#footnote-15) Fernando Alegría, however, asserts that even when Neruda appears Whitmanian, particularly in his middle and later works, *Residencia en la tierra* and *Canto general*, he is more the “continuer” and “inheritor” of Whitman than his “disciple”. This would seem a hair-splitting distinction, made perhaps in part out of the natural desire of Latin American scholars to stand up for the originality of their own poets. Alegría remarks:

At first glance, Whitman and Neruda, in reality, seem to express a message with similar premises in a surprisingly similar style. But upon studying the works of these poets more deeply, one is advised that in that similarity there are many optical and auditory illusions...Neruda, as much as he’s been inspired by Whitman’s work...more than Whitman’s disciple, he is his continuer or, rather, his inheritor; as original and profound in his powers as his teacher himself.

[A primera vista, Whitman y Neruda, en realidad, parecen expresar un mensaje de premisas muy semejantes en un estilo sorprendentemente similar. Pero al estudiarse la obra de estos poetas más a fondo se advierte que en ese parecida hay mucho de ilusiones ópticas y auditivas... Neruda, por mucho que se haya inspirado en la obra de Whitman ...más que un discípulo de Whitman, es su continuador o, mejor dicho, su heredero; tan original y profundo en sus alcances como su mismo maestro.] (Alegría 315)

While Alegría considers such elements as Neruda’s strong first-person presence in his poems, frequent use of start-of-line anaphora, and strong eroticism and even auto-eroticism to be “illusory” points of comparison with Whitman, I do not.[[17]](#footnote-16) Alegría is more convincing, however, when he notes that “The level of sensuality is more intense in Neruda than in Whitman, and demonstrates a fundamental tendency in Chilean poetry: its total materialism. Love in Residencia en la Tierra is utterly morbid and generally contrasts with the sportive and joyful sensualism that predominates in Leaves of Grass.” [[18]](#footnote-17) Alegría astutely speaks to essence here, rather than style: Neruda magnifies the details of the physical world without lending them spiritual weight, and in so doing he is distinct from Whitman who invests all objects and people with the same spiritual value and potency. Neruda was shrilly insistent on the primacy of his materialism in interviews late in his life, [[19]](#footnote-18) and claimed that his poems were absent of metaphor and symbol, which is almost certainly not true as we will see.

Living in Buenos Aires, sick of his job at the Chilean consulate, and two years married to a woman “who knew nothing of the world of arts and letters”[[20]](#footnote-19) and whom he did not love, Neruda bled onto the page in *Walking Around.*[[21]](#footnote-20)The title announces a meandering stroll, as directionless Neruda considered his personal life to be at the time. There was some happiness for him, however, in his association with a forming group of writers and artists with whom he engaged in madcap artistic and sexual escapades. One of these was Federico García Lorca, who had arrived in Buenos Aires at the same time as Neruda to direct a production of his play, *Blood Wedding*. Neruda and Lorca collaborated on the publication of *Paloma por dentro*, a thin collection of Neruda’s poems illustrated by Lorca in which *Walking around* was first published. Already deep into surrealism, Neruda still explored his personal struggles on the page. His main impulse, however, was still ontological, and like Whitman before him, he was exploring the fundamental relationship between his own soul and the world.

Narratively, *Walking around* has much in common with the 1929 silent surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou*, which Neruda had undoubtedly seen, and proposes a mockery of societal control and structures in general. The poet quickly asserts the primacy of thought over exterior phenomena by giving his poem an English title, and the form of a fraudulent syllogism with a primary premise (It turns out I’m fed up with being a man); a secondary premise (I don’t want to go on being a root in the darkness); and a conclusion (therefore Monday burns like oil). The surrealist film similarly mocked order with a time frame specified by a series of random title cards. Also like Buñuel and Dalí’s film, the poem aims to shock and disturb with morbid, vividly nightmarish images, and an urban setting that has all the aesthetic appeal of an *abattoir*.[[22]](#footnote-21) But while Neruda intends to criticize bourgeois norms, he is also very serious about the problem of a poet with a day job: for Neruda, poetry depends precisely on opening himself to spontaneity so that may be available to hear the call of “that which is other” (*lo otro*), that which is beyond the sphere of human plans. He is “walking around” without a fixed destination hoping that a miracle will happen that will transform an ordinary man back into a poet.

Neruda’s language suggests simultaneity of walking and the emergence of his thoughts, as well as the poet’s passivity, and verbs in the present tense and the cascade of places that he passes create an effect of cinematic immediacy. The repetition of the impersonal verb *sucede* [it turns out] in the first part of the poem suggests a lack of agency, as if the poet wants to emphasize that he’s not fully in control of where he’s going or what he’s doing: it just “turns out” that things are as they are. Even though a *paseo* [a stroll] is for exercise or pleasure, this *paseo* is inflected instead with the poet’s existential distress:

It turns out that I’m fed up with being a man.

It turns out that I go into tailor shops and movie theaters

wilted, impenetrable, like a felt swan

sailing in a water of origin and ash.

The smell of hair salons makes me wail.

I just want a rest made of stone or wool,

I just want not to see retail stores, or gardens,

or merchandise, or eyeglasses, or elevators.

It turns out I’m fed up with my feet and my nails,

and my hair and my shadow.

It turns out that I’m fed up with being a man.

Sucede que me canso de ser hombre.

Sucede que entro en las sastrerías y en los cines

marchito, impenetrable, como un cisne de fieltro

navegando en una agua de origen y ceniza.

El olor de las peluquerías me hace llorar a gritos.

Sólo quiero un descanso de piedras o de lana,

sólo quiero no ver establecimientos, ni jardines,

ni mercaderías, ni anteojos, ni ascensores.

Sucede que me canso de mis pies y mis uñas

y mi pelo y mi sombra.

Sucede que me canso de ser hombre. (1-11)

The simple declarative sentences are unrhymed, except for the last two lines in which *sombra* and *hombre* create a near rhyme, hinting that the poet may actually feel like a shadow of a man: he is sick of his own hair, nails and even of the feet that carry him from place to place. He is, quite literally, in pieces. Neruda’s relationship with his own walk is fraught with negativity and the implication that he doesn’t want to be taking it. The sibilance in the first part of the walk evokes the Argentine “vos” which replaces the “tú” (informal you) of standard Spanish, a characteristic of *porteño* Spanish,[[23]](#footnote-22) suggesting his (foreign and irritating) acoustic atmosphere. The “felt swan” (*cisne de fieltro*) is likely chosen for its sound, though it also evokes a personal Nerudian artifact: in his autobiography, Neruda relates a powerful childhood memory of trying to heal a wounded swan that, after two weeks, died silently in his arms. That’s how he found out “that swans don’t sing when they die,”[[24]](#footnote-23) belying the popular but meaningless saying *canto del cisne* [swan song]. This is a critique of the abstraction of words; they can’t be trusted. They isolate and misrepresent rather than communicate. If the poet see himself as a “felt swan”, perhaps it’s because his own “song” has no chance here, even as he feels himself dying.[[25]](#footnote-24) He only weeps and wails [*llorar a gritos*], that is, makes unintelligible sounds that have none of the exuberance of Whitman's “yawp”. His wish for “a rest made of stone or wool” is a yearning to walk in the forests of his native Temuco where his first poetry was born, and where moisture was healthy, not the sick humidity of Buenos Aires. Stones, a symbol of purity for Neruda, are a source of poetic inspiration, but here they cannot be found. This enumeration of objects appears Whitmanian on its surface, although as Alegría remarks, “In Neruda’s case, the intention [of the enumeration of things] is not so obvious nor simple nor, perhaps, so deep.” [[26]](#footnote-25) These objects are personal symbols, ones that don’t offer an easy way in for the reader seeking to understand why the poet is tired of being a man.

The thinking quality of the walk is in the poet's resistance to the objects of the exterior world, and a marked preference for the mental. He asserts a distinctly un-Whitmanian dislike of his own body, which is referred to only in segments: hair, nails, feet. His body is tiresome to him and lacking in erotic or creative potential, so he retreats into his mind, imagining himself committing absurd crimes:

Still, it would be delightful

to frighten a notary with a cut lily

or assassinate a nun with a whack to the ear.

It would be lovely

to go through the streets with a green knife

and screaming until I die of cold.

[Sin embargo sería delicioso

asustar a un notario con un lirio cortado

o dar muerte a una monja con un golpe de oreja.

Sería bello

ir por las calles con un cuchillo verde

y dando gritos hasta morir de frío.] (12-17)

These vigorous anarchic possibilities, imagined but not done, are Neruda’s escape both from his walk and from his own anguish. But they have the smell of the forced idea, the self-consciously “artistic” moment of premeditated madness that is exactly the opposite of the spontaneous madness required for true poetry.[[27]](#footnote-26) It is a self-indulgent moment, evidence of the mind “becoming sealed in its own discourse”, [[28]](#footnote-27) but it does not endure. Soon, Neruda returns to the present tense to express ennui with the physical processes of his body. Again, this retreat into surreal and hermetic symbols shuts us out, leaving us swimming in word abstractions that are not mutually comprehensible.[[29]](#footnote-28) Unlike Whitman, Neruda does not propose that we can assume what he assumes: all he can share with us is his anguished, interior experience of a world that is constantly in the process of dying.

The persistence of the ailing world calls Neruda back, and, turning another mental corner, he returns to the walk. Discouraged by the way things are, he doesn’t want to keep being[*seguir siendo*], he doesn’t want to continue [*continuar]*. He feels as if he were in a kind of living death, and expresses his weariness of all activity including, importantly, thinking:

I don’t want to go on being a root in the dark,

hesitant, laid out, trembling with drowse,

downward, in the wet guts of the earth,

absorbing and thinking, eating every day.

I don’t want for myself such misfortunes.

I don’t want to continue as root and tomb,

as underground room, as cellar with the dead,

frozen stiff, dying of sorrow.

[No quiero seguir siendo raíz en las tinieblas,

vacilante, extendido, tiritando de sueño,

hacia abajo, en las tripas mojadas de la tierra,

absorbiendo y pensando, comiendo cada día.

No quiero para mí tantas desgracias.

No quiero continuar de raíz y de tumba,

de subterráneo, de bodega con muertos,

aterido, muriéndome de pena.] (18-25)

This “secondary premise” is a long, drawn out negative, a whine. Desire has left him, and now he only knows what he does *not* want. Absorption of the environment in which he finds himself will not result in poetry, eating won’t bring vigor, and thinking won’t offer any result but absurdity. His isolation on his walk is underscored by his description of himself as a cellar filled with corpses. He doesn’t want to go on as a “root”, stuck, unable to really walk. In his anguished state, even while walking, he feels as if he were rooted to the ground.

The conclusion of Neruda’s bogus syllogism explains why the poet dislikes Mondays, a day which forces him into many metonymic corners. Monday, the beginning of the work week, sees him coming:

Therefore Monday burns like oil

when it sees me coming with my jail-face,

and howls in its passing like a wounded wheel,

and trails bloody footprints into the night.

And it pushes me into certain corners, into certain humid houses,

into hospitals where the bones stick out the window,

into certain vinegar-smelling shoe stores,

into streets as horrifying as cracks.

[Por eso el día lunes arde como petróleo

cuando me ve llegar con mi cara de cárcel,

y aúlla en su transcurso como una rueda herida,

y da pasos de sangre caliente hacia la noche.

Y me empuja a ciertos rincones, a ciertas casa húmedas,

a hospitales donde los huesos salen por la ventana,

a ciertas zapaterías con olor a vinagre,

a calles espantosas como grietas.] (26-33)

Now the poet departs from the walk to fearfully anticipate Monday, a day when he walks like a prisoner to work. Monday leaves bloody tracks, makes him go to horrifying places, and “howls” like “a wounded wheel”, and image that evokes Dalí’s deformed watches, a reminder of the bourgeois schedules and calendars that kill poetry. Other people in “certain” places are, like the poet, reduced to pieces: bones, and worn-out shoes in need of repair.

Again, the phenomenal world calls Neruda back to where he is on his walk. He slowly collects himself, though still full of rage and pretending to be without emotion [*con olvido*]. Wet, empty clothes, like soulless human beings, weep for him because he cannot weep for himself:

There are sulfur-colored birds and horrible intestines

hanging from the doors of the houses I hate,

there are dentures forgotten in a coffee pot,

there are mirrors

that should have wept from shame and horror,

there are umbrellas all over the place, and poisons, and navels.

I walk calmly, with eyes, with shoes,

furiously, impassively,

I pass, I cross, offices and orthopedic stores,

and patios where there are clothes hung from a wire:

undershorts, towels and t-shirts that weep

slow, dirty tears.

[Hay pájaros de color de azufre y horribles intestinos

colgando de las puertas de las casa que odio,

hay dentaduras olvidadas en una cafetera,

hay espejos

que debieran haber llorado de vergüenza y espanto,

hay paraguas en todas partes, y venenos, y ombligos.

Yo paseo con calma, con ojos, con zapatos,

con furia, con olvido,

paso, cruzo, oficinas y tiendas de ortopedia,

y patios donde hay ropas colgadas de un alambre:

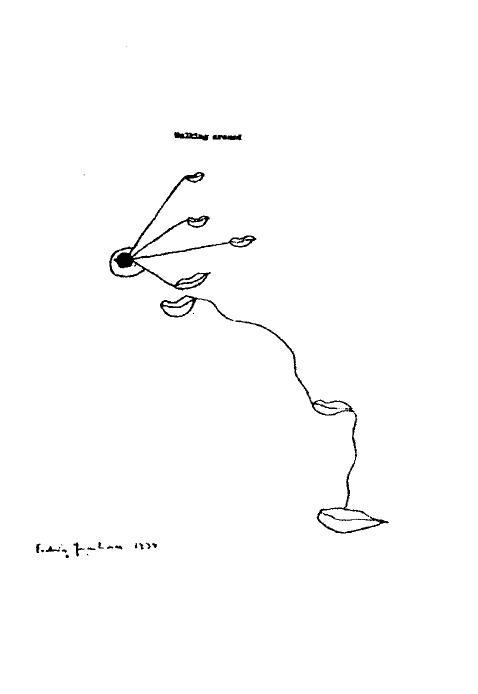
calzoncillos, toallas y camisas que lloran

lentas lágrimas sucias.] (34-45)

The poet still sees no one on this Buenos Aires street, only pieces of them, forgotten dentures and navels, and the stanza reverts to the impersonality of the beginning of the poem, retreating into passivity. Neruda doesn’t *see* birds; “there are birds”. The awful things around him now just *are*, independent of him, and he hates them. He is being, as Heidegger would suggest, and they are over there, and there is no connection.

Finally, however, in the last stanza, Neruda’s “I” returns in force, walking, passing and crossing, holding the world together with the tension between a fury within and a calm exterior: “I walk calmly” [*Paseo con calma*]. He walks, apparently aimless and calm, because “[f]rom the moment poetry is sought out, it hides, for it only permits itself to be born from spontaneity, never from the planned. It is a discovery, a surprise, a miracle, a find.”[[30]](#footnote-29) Now the miracle occurs: Neruda begins to play with the preposition “con” which, idiomatically, can turn a noun into an adverb, as in “con calma” meaning “calmly”; “con olvido” meaning coldly, emotionlessly; and “con rabia”, angrily. But he also walks around “con ojos”, with eyes (“eye-fully”?) and walks around with shoes (“shoe-fully”?). This playfulness opens him to the final image, for there hanging on a wire are undergarments dripping dry, at last calling to him with the voice of poetry. The image emerges from him in a series of beautiful alliterative L and S sounds in the final, enjambed couplet: “undershorts, towels and shirts that cry / slow, dirty tears” [*calzoncillos, toallas y camisas que lloran / lentas lágrimas sucias].*  Continuing the walk was worth it after all: unexpectedly, poetry at last finds him.

From a comparison of their walking styles, Whitman and Neruda emerge as very different poets, one basing his work on a transcendental philosophy that seeks and order of macrocosmic unity, and the other emanating from a post WWI world that rejects purity, eulogises the absurd, and places poetical feeling above descriptions of external reality. Whitman possesses a Promethean optimism, absorbing the details of the world returning them to us in an exultant and comprehensible message, with the aim of unifying his own perceptual experience with readers across time and space. Neruda, by contrast, exhibits the Odyssean apartness of the alienated modern man, who rejects what is there around him, and presents a hermetic poetry that is evidence of his isolation. Whitman perceives an exterior world of details that fill him with meaning that he wants to share. The weary Neruda, however, perceives a personally morbid exterior world that would not be recognizable to anyone else; it's a world that serves a man who's content with eyeglasses and umbrellas, but not one who goes walking to find poems. Harold Bloom usefully quotes poet Wallace Stevens, who wrote that Whitman “...is a great poet of nuance, of the inflection of sensations and perception, of ‘the hum of *thoughts evaded* in the mind’” (italics mine). [[31]](#footnote-30) During his walk, Whitman unites with the world physically, ecstatically sampling it and being inspired by his perceptions to go “all the way”, as it were, in order to “join with the team also.” Whitman thinks, but his thoughts emerge as products of his spirited engagement with phenomenal experience. He acknowledges that words are abstractions and as such are always lesser than first-hand perception, but he does not use words to deflect meaning. Rather, his details invite the reader to unite with the poem and the world in a way that is fundamentally good, generative, and, though sometimes mystical, never forbidding. Whitman's Promethean intention is, therefore, to perceive the world, and give it back to us in the form of the fire and light of his poem. He signals how others can take their own walks in the world, and, by doing so, offers both a tool, and a hopeful promise. Neruda’s stroll in *Walking around*, on the other hand, is one taken under protest by a man who feels horror at phenomenal existence, and who excludes the reader by means of a personal symbology that both repels and perplexes. The world is absurd, the human body in pieces, the walk without direction. In García Lorca’s drawing for Walking around, Neruda is represented as a black dot, perhaps an eye (“I”?) that is connected by various lines with multiple pairs of closed lips. The world he meets in Buenos Aires does not speak to him, does not offer him sound for his poem. Neruda, a poet who suffers his day job, struggles against the regimentation of his bureaucrat’s life in Buenos Aires. In the final instance, however, poetry finds him. His fury and sorrow at last find expression the exterior world, allowing him and us to experience cathartic relief. Poets take walks to find poems: in this regard, both Whitman in *Song of Myself* and Neruda in *Walking around* are, ultimately, successful.



Drawing by Federico García Lorca to illustrate Pablo Neruda’s poem, *Walking around*.

*La paloma a por dentro*, 1934

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1. I borrow this term from Roger Gilbert’s excellent book, *Walks in the World*, to whose scholarship I am indebted in this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Jason Wilson notes that “this single poem...stands for [Neruda’s] Residencia cycle.” Wilson also notes that American poet James Wright considered W.R. Hays’ English translation of Walking Around as one of the greatest poems in the modern American language (Wilson 148) . [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Hirschman speaks in a clip from the documentary currently in production, *The Poet’s Calling*, produced by Red Poppy and Mark Eisner. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Dominic Moran notes that “...Neruda, whose sprawling, dizzyingly varied oeuvre hardly seems to be the work of a single poet...defies every attempt at watertight summary or over-arching theorization” (Moran 10) . [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. “El olor de las peluquerías , me hace llorar a gritos” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. “Sólo quiero un descanso de piedras o de lana…” The rock appears elsewhere in Neruda’s poetry as correlated to purity, as in “Oh, earth, wait for me”: I want to go back to being what I have not been,/ and learn to go back from such deeps / that amongst all natural things / I could live or not live; it does not matter / to be one stone more, the dark stone, / the pure stone which the river bears away.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Wilson devotes several amusing pages to catfights between translators and the wide and significant differences between English translations of *Walking around,* which would make a fruitful study in itself. (Wilson 164-167) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Roger Gilbert quotes Ammons and uses his notion that a poem is a walk as the jumping off point for his excellent series of essays on different types of poetical walks. Ammons, writes Gilbert, “...sees a profound identity between the form and function of a walk and poem and he does not hesitate to posit is as ‘a reasonably secure identity’.” (Gilbert 4) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Gilbert notes the crucial role of the poet’s presence in the walk as sample: “O’Hara writes that ‘Poetry is experience, often peculiar to the poet,” an innocent-sounding but genuinely radical statement insofar as it asserts not just a connection but an identity between the two realms.” (Gilbert 174) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Gilbert (3) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. The people of Latin america view themselves as “Americans”, that is, residents of the American continent, and reject the use of the terms as the exclusive property of citizens of the United States. I respect this usage. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Delphine Rumeau writes wonderfully on the Whitmaniana in Neruda's three houses in Chile. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. email correspondence to me from Dr. Ed Folsom, Univ. of Iowa, July 7, 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. The collection *El hondero entusiasta* were begun in the 1920s by a young Neruda with a disclaimer that his style was derivative of Sabat Ercasty. But, as Wilson notes: “...Sabat Ercasty reads to me like Whitman, and Neruda also read Whitman”, so it’s impossible to parse out from which poet *El hondero entusiasta* was more derived. (CPN 77) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Folsom’s email correspondence with me, July 7, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. “Por mi parte, yo que estoy muy cerca de los setenta años, cuando apenas cumplí quince, descubrí a Walt Whitman, mi más grande acreedor. Y estoy aquí entre ustedes acompañado por esta maravillosa deuda que me ha ayudado a existir.” Neruda biographical page, Fundación Pablo Neruda. http://www.fundacionneruda.org/es/cronologia-biografica [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. It suffices to quote but a few lines from *Ritual de mis piernas* (Ritual of my legs) from *Residencia en la tierra I* to see the young poet’s Whitmanian freight-train in description of his onanist pleasures*:* “The seducer’s twilight and the husband’s nights / Join together like two sheets entombing me, / And the hours after lunch in which the schoolboys / And the schoolgirls, and the priests masturbate, / and the animals fornicate straightaway…”[Los atardeceres del seductor y las noches de los esposos / se unen como dos sábanas sepultándome, / y las horas después del almuerzo en que los jóvenes estudiantes / y las jóvenes estudiantes, y los sacerdotes se masturban, / y los animales fornican directamente…”] [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. [E]l grado de sensualidad es más intenso en Neruda que en Whitman e indica una tendencia fundamental en la poesía del chileno: su materialismo total. El amor en *Residencia en la Tierra* es enteramente mórbido y contrasta, por lo general, con el sensualismo deportivo y jubiloso que predomina en *Leaves of Grass*.” (Alegría 320) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. In a 1971 interview in *Paris Review,* Rita Guibert asks Neruda what the repeating images of the dove and guitar mean in his poetry. Neruda responds tersely, “The dove signifies the dove and the guitar signifies a musical instrument called the guitar.” (Paris Review, The Art of Poetry, No. 14) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Memoirs 109 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. The Neruda Foundation confirms the date and location of the writing of *Walking around* in an email, quoting Neruda scholar Professor Hernán Loyola of the University of Sássari, Italy as sometime between August 1933 and May 1934 in Buenos Aires when Neruda was briefly Chilean consul to Argentina. It was first published in the booklet, *La paloma por dentro* in April 1934 with illustrations by Federico García Lorca. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. So disturbing are Neruda’s images of disconnected body parts and death that many have mistakenly imagined that *Walking around* was written after his experience of the Spanish Civil War, rather than amid the bourgeois comfort ease of a European-style South American capital city. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. “Porteño” is an adjective that describes anything from the port of Buenos Aires. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. Memorias, 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. This swan has been interpreted many ways, even as possibly representing a hat (Wilson, p. 146). But the felt swan is not exterior to the poet, rather he is “like” (como) it. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. “En el caso de Neruda la intención [de la enumeración de objetos] no es tan obvia ni tan sencilla ni, quizás, tan profunda.”Alegría 326 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. On the death of Roja Giménez, Neruda said “I’ll say that madness, a certain kind of madness, often goes hand in hand with poetry. It would be very difficult for predominantly rational people to be poets…”, Memoirs, p. 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. Gilbert 209-210 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. Neruda packs many personal associations and memories into it this “walk within a walk”. The notary may be a reference to García Lorca’s father; the nun, to *Un Chien Andalou*; the green knife mirrors the murderous protagonist of *Blood Wedding*. The image of a poet running through the streets screaming is possibly a reference to a friend of the young Neruda, Rojas Giménez, who died of cold wandering the streets of Santiago, his poems unpublished. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
30. Carrasco Pirard, p. 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
31. Bloom xvii [↑](#footnote-ref-30)