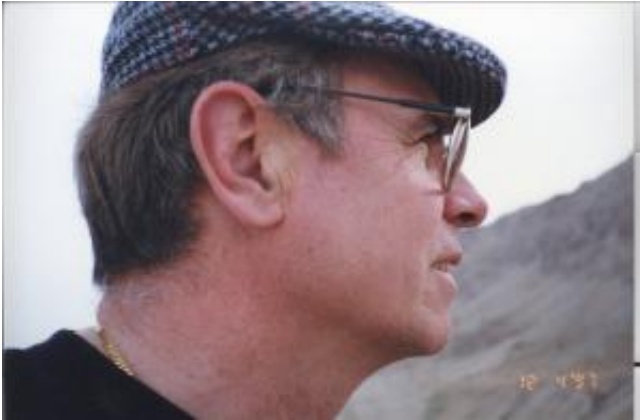


My Barbaric Yawp: Luis Alberto Ambroggio on translating Walt Whitman



[Click to Enlarge] WhitmanWeb translator Luis Alberto Ambroggio.

As more than 2,000 poetry lovers around the world journey through "Song of Myself" with [Every Atom: Walt Whitman's Song of Myself](#), the Shambaugh House blog series "My Barbaric Yawp" offers a special glimpse into the process, challenges, and delights of rendering Whitman's words, world, and intent into another language. Each week, we'll hear from translators who have spent hundreds of hours pouring over "Song of Myself" as part of online multimedia gallery project [WhitmanWeb](#). This week we hear from writer and translator [Luis Alberto Ambroggio](#), who edited the Spanish translation of "Song of Myself" and translated the WhitmanWeb commentaries in Spanish.

How (well) is Whitman known in your country/language?

Luis Alberto Ambroggio: It is difficult to talk about my country when discussing Whitman, the poet of a nation made of many nations. Actually, my country happens to be the Hispanic/Latin America of the United States, though I was born in Argentina, the land of Jorge Luis Borges, one of Whitman's translator/admirers, author of the poem "Camden, 1892" and several essays on *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman is very well known in my

language/my Hispanic-American countries. In fact, to implement the cultural diplomacy I so strongly believe in, I will soon be delivering a lecture at the recently inaugurated Nicaraguan-North American Cultural Center in Managua, Nicaragua as a US cultural envoy, addressing the Hispanic element in the American nationality according to 'the son of Manhattan,' and more generally talking about the role of Whitman's poetry of democracy for Hispanic-American poets. The published translations of Whitman's works into Spanish number more than 20, beginning, in 1901, with those of Balbino Dávalos and followed by many others, including Jorge Luis Borges, León Felipe, Francisco Alexander and those by Álvaro Armando Vasseur and Concha Zardoya; the two last translations were the basis for a version by Matt Cohen now featured on WhitmanWeb, and in which I fine-tuned some lines. In addition to the translations, numerous essays, articles, and poems have been written in the Hispanic-American world about Whitman and influenced by his democratic poetics, with all its virtues and contradictions. Indeed, it has been a honor to join this outstanding cluster of admirers and manifold creations composed by the likes of a José Martí, the Cuban Liberator; the head of the modernist movement Ruben Dario; Federico García Lorca; Nobel Prize winners Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral and Octavio Paz, and many other well-known Hispanic-American poets and writers as I embodied Whitman in my own translations and in my forthcoming poetry collection *We Are All Whitman (Todos somos Whitman)*.

What is your favorite section of the poem and why?



[Click to Enlarge] Luis Alberto Ambroggio at work on WhitmanWeb translations.

Luis Alberto Ambroggio: Each and every can be considered my favorite, for every single one reveals, expands, and lists the physical, revolutionary and liberatory visions. This begins with the line *I celebrate myself and sing myself, what I assume you shall assume for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you* in Section 1 to the discovery of the germinal question *what is the grass?* poetically narrated on Section 6, followed by the exhausting and challenging catalogues in Sections 15 and 33; the touching and sensual section 28 (characterized by Karl Shapiro as "one of the greatest moments of poetry"); then the amazing lines of Section 51: *Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself./I am large. I contain multitudes*), echoing Ralph Emerson's wise reflection that "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." In view of this, how can I possibly choose but every section of this masterful song?

How did your relationship with Whitman evolve over the course of the translation project?

Luis Alberto Ambroggio: I am not the same person, I am not the same poet I was before reading Whitman. This is personal; not just another example of a reception theory or similar experiences. His vision of equality and diversity, of democracy as a force of nature, his sense of universality, recycling, transformation and permanence in the *Song of myself* has cemented a new vision of the universe, rendering me into a new myself, made up of everyone. The deep impact of this brotherhood goes beyond superficial absorption. The passion with which I wrote my own collection of poems derives from the emotional contact I absorbed from his lines, individually and as a whole. In spite of what Whitman is asking of us, I cannot and will not *destroy the teacher*, but rather try to widen *his own breast* as "We are all Whitman"..

How did translating the comments on Whitman inflect your own thinking, your relationship to your own mother tongue, and your sense of American culture?

Luis Alberto Ambroggio: Translating the comments of Whitman's 52

sections of *Song of Myself* inspired me in such awesome manner that I ended up, in the process, creating my own poetry collection entitled *We Are All Whitman (Todos somos Whitman)*, to be published in the next few months, as it happened previously with Vasseur, León Felipe and others. Some of my own 52 'Whitman-empowered' poems have already appeared in national and international newspapers. *We Are All Whitman (Todos somos Whitman)* encompasses my own debt and tribute to this visionary and inclusive poet, one who impacted me to the root of my own being by saying, "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Whitman and Thomas Jefferson make me proud of our American Dream. In our Hispanic-American culture, including the Hispanic US, poetic creation is by its nature social and political, and Whitman's work validates this ethic and aesthetic pronouncement in an electrifying way.

Which passage(s) were particularly difficult to translate? Why?

Luis Alberto Ambroggio: Each line and its context provides a peculiar challenge. Jorge Luis Borges pointed already to the dilemma faced by every translator of Whitman, the need to choose between a free and arbitrary interpretation and a certain rigor, or a compromise between the two. I subscribe to a view of translation as copulation, and copulating is not always the same. Challenges, when conquered, feel divine. The long enumerations and comments of section 33 presented some difficulties. In some passages I was more literal, in others more open in the line of an interpretation. But the challenges began with the title "Song of myself" (Canto *de* (or) *a* mí mismo) and in section 1 and throughout the poem, the contrast between "I" (yo) and "you"/"your" (which in Spanish is differentiated between the singular "tú" and the plural "vosotros" or "ustedes"/"tuya" or "vuestra"), just as one example of the labor pains of translation.

What did this translation teach you about your own language's special traits?

Luis Alberto Ambroggio: Once again, it made me sweat through the anxiety of the classic phrase *traduttore, traditore* ("a translator is a

traitor") only to emerge jubilant, celebrating the miracle of a cultural reincarnation, a new creation and an all-encompassing communion. When we truly communicate and thus form communities, differences and difficulties disappear as we touch, indeed live, the universal humanity in each atom of the "I," the "you," and the "we." I admire the vital synergy of our languages, even while we accept and master each other's peculiarities. I have noticed in the translations of my own poems that sometimes the English version sounds better than the original. Beauty, though difficult, is thus miraculously shared in content and form. I learned and celebrated that, quite literally, "We are all Whitman (Todos somos Whitman)" around the world, as equal and as diverse as atoms in a borderless universe.

In the line "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" (section 52), how did the translator deal with the onomatopoeic "yawp," and what can you tell us about the decisions that went into finding the best equivalent?

Luis Alberto Ambroggio: Hispanic translations have varied from those that decided to keep the sound--such as in the version by Cohen/Vasseur/Zardoya on the WhitmanWeb : *Hago sonar mi yawp barbárico sobre los tejados del mundo*-- to those that chose a harsh-sounding Spanish equivalent — *Mi gañido bárbaro resuena sobre los techos del mundo* (Francisco Alexander) — or the alliteration of guttural sounds with an onomatopoeic effect, such as in *sobre los tejados del mundo suelto mi graznido salvaje*, in a more recent rendition. The word "yawp" remains untranslatable but effective in the context of the vivid universe of images at the end of Whitman's song, of the multifaceted "I" embodied in all of us, in all of nature, in our unending search.