

**The Poetic Prism:
Personification of Nature and Vegetalization of Humans
in the Poetry of Walt Whitman and Eugénio de Andrade¹**

**João de Mancelos
(Universidade Católica Portuguesa)**

Palavras-chave: Walt Whitman, Eugénio de Andrade, vegetalização, personificação

Keywords: Walt Whitman, Eugénio de Andrade, vegetalization, personification

“Our bodies are our gardens to which our wills are gardeners”
— William Shakespeare, *Othello, the Moor of Venice* (1603).

1. The death of History

“History as a god-term is dead”, announces geographer Sara Blair, adding: “Temporality as the organizing form of experience has been superseded by spaciality, the affective and social experience of space” (Blair, 1998: 544). This argument implies that political, religious and philosophical ideas travel; historic events occur at a certain place; and human beings can only be understood when contextualized in an urban or rural, real or imaginary, utopic or dystopic landscape (Mancelos, 2003: 5).

Departing from this assumption, in the present article I analyze several essential questions: how do two canonical poets, Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Eugénio de Andrade (1923-2005), experience the place where they lived or the towns they visited? How did they invoke the *genius loci*? Which rhetorical and stylistic devices did they use to construct or reimagine the space? How do they reflect the sense of place through their poetic prism?

My objective is to examine the representation of nature in both poets, recognizing similarities, differences and relations. Some of these proximities can be explained by intertextuality, since Eugénio accepted the Long Island poet as a mentor and an influence: “In Whitman”, he states, “it was not only poetry that seduced me, but also his personality, which is inseparable from everything the bard wrote” (Andrade, 1995: 184). Other similarities — regarding, for instances, the symbolic value of land and ocean in the work of these authors —

¹ Mancelos, João de. “The Poetic Prism: Personification of Nature and Vegetalization of Humans in the Poetry of Walt Whitman and Eugénio de Andrade”. *Reading Nature: Cultural Perspectives on Environmental Imagery: Conference Proceedings*. Org. Rebeca Valverde et al. Alcalá de Henares, Spain: Friends of Thoreau/Franklin Institute, 2012. 78-88. ISBN: 978-84-695-4950-6.

may be explained by the Theory of Archetypes, as proposed by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961).

Thus, in this comparative study, I resort to an intertextual and an archetypal perspective, and also to Ecocriticism, defined by Cheryl Glotfelty as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (1996: xviii). The result will be, I expect, a more encompassing vision of the significance of nature in these authors.

2. Bodies of salt, poems of wind

Telluric poets, Whitman and Eugénio were influenced by the environment, especially in childhood and youth, crucial ages in the development of literary sensitivity. The author of *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1892) enjoyed both the sea maritime landscape of Long Island, still relatively unaltered by industrialization, and the urban vibrancy of New York, in the second half of the nineteenth century. In his work, the cycles of Mother Nature, the turning of seasons, and the constancy of tides constitute a metaphor for birth, death and rebirth.

In the biography *Listen America: A Life of Walt Whitman*, Adrien Stoutenburg and Laura Baker describe this passion towards the Atlantic coast:

(...) he loved the open countryside, the sloping hills from which he could catch glimpses of the sea. Long Island Sound lay only a few miles to the north, and to the south was the gray and blue glimmer of the Great South Bay. The Atlantic Ocean was about fifteen miles away — an easy hike for Walt’s strong, young legs — and on still nights he could hear its rustle and boom. (Stoutenburg/Baker, 1968: 1-2)

Nature is also a recurring presence in the poetry and chronicles of Eugénio, since the poet spent his childhood in Póvoa de Atalaia, a typical village in the region of Beira Baixa, in the South of Portugal (Saraiva, 1995: 31-32). It is a place inhabited by farmers, shepherds and women dressed in black; made of houses built of granite, and surrounded by wheat-fields. This atmosphere, bereft of luxury and exuberance, invites reflection on life and inspires a poetry freed of excess (Saraiva, 1995: 31-32). The author recalls his roots in these words:

I descend from farmers; I spent my childhood in one of those villages in Beira Baixa, near Alentejo, and, since a little boy, sun and water were the only abundant elements I knew. In those times — which were not of poverty, due to my mother’s attentive and tireless love — I learned that few things are absolutely necessary. Those are the things my poetry loves and exalts. Soil and water, light and wind, conspired to give birth to all the love my poetry is capable of. (Andrade, 1995: 37)

The passion Whitman and Eugénio felt for the environment, in general, and for the “locus nascendi”, in particular, is common to major authors, such as Homer, Matsuo Basho or William Shakespeare. What differentiates them is the singular way of translating, poetically, that nature, through two processes, which I will analyze in further detail in the next pages of this article: the personification of nature and the vegetalization of humans.

3. The water is a mother, the soil is a lover

In the poetry of Whitman and Eugénio, the ocean is comprehended as an old and protective mother, treated with reverence and affection. That personification becomes more relevant when rooted in archetypes, primeval images, common to all humans, engraved in the collective unconscious (Jung, 1976: 87-100). Therefore, an interpretation which is simultaneously literary and psychoanalytic, contributes to the global understanding of the poem, discloses new meanings and may give rise to poignant reflections.

In Whitman and Eugénio, the personification of nature is frequently associated with the archetype of the Great Mother, worshipped in several religious systems. In the North American author the maternal archetype is reified through images of a rare stylistic and symbolic beauty. On the basis of this love towards the *tellus mater* are both Transcendentalism — the philosophical movement developed by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) —, and the influence of the Quaker religion. According to Gay Wilson Allen,

The Hicksite doctrine — which closely resemble Emerson’s later “Self-Reliance” —, became the very foundation of Whitman’s own private religion, and he would always have a tender feeling for Quaker customs, such as the Quaker’s proud refusal to doff his hat to man or God and his devotion to plain dress and plain speech. (...) The Quakers were at least partly responsible for Whitman’s belief that all physical life is dependent upon and sustained by an infinite spiritual realm about which a human being may have intuitive knowledge. (Allen, 1997: 18-19)

Under this atmosphere of spirituality, combined with a strong importance attributed to the pleasure of senses, Whitman perceived oceans and hills as parts of the body Mother Nature’s body (Asselineau, 1995: 236). In his oeuvre, the presence of the Atlantic Ocean is more dominant in the eleven poems that constitute the section “Sea-Drift”, added to the sixth edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1881 (Oliver, 2006: 171). It is not possible within the scope of this article to analyze all those compositions, so I concentrate on “Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking”, one of the most expressive and musical poems of the mentioned cluster.

The title of this extensive poem suggests the idea of birth, through the word “cradle”, whilst the expression “endlessly rocking” points towards the movement of the cradle and of the waves (Casale, 2010: 190). The entire poem consists of a long meditation, dealing with the bard’s main themes — birth, life and death — seen through the perspective of a child. On the beach, a little boy observes, with curiosity, two mocking-birds: a female (representing the mother figure) feeding her children, and a male flying around the nest:

Two feather’d guests from Alabama, two together,
 And their nest, and four light-green eggs spotted with brown,
 And every day the he-bird to and fro near at hand,
 And every day the she-bird crouch’d on her nest, silent, with bright
 eyes,
 And every day I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing them,
 Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating.
 (Whitman, 2006: 275-276)

One night, the female mocking-bird disappears — perhaps it had been the victim of an accident or hunted — leaving her children orphan. Desperate, the male sings a painful aria to the ocean, described as a “fierce old mother” (Whitman, 2006: 279). The bird’s plaintive lament is joined by the boy’s sobbing and the murmur of the waves, in a bizarre polyphony.

The little boy questions the sea, searching for a reason for this loss: what is the value of life? What is the meaning of death? Why does beauty die? The ocean whispers, as a mother who wishes to calm down his infant:

With the thousand responsive songs at random,
 My own songs awaked from that hour,
 And with them the key, the word up from the waves,
 The word of the sweetest song and all songs,
 That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,
 (Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet
 garments, bending aside,)
 The sea whisper’d me.
 (Whitman, 1986: 281)

In this context, the ocean can be seen as a symbol of the poet’s mother-sense, and also as a representation of the power of nature, a force which offers and takes life away, in an endless cycle of creation, destruction and recreation (Killingsworth, 2007: 53). The movement of the sea (the waves and the tides) constitutes a clear representation of this cyclical and perpetual system. As the little boy understands this reality, and realizes that in the animal realm nothing truly dies or disappears, his poetic sensibility awakens: “My own songs awaked from that hour” (Whitman, 1986: 281).

Similarly to what happens in Whitman's work, in the poetry of Eugénio the land is understood as either an affectionate mother or a lover. In this context, Óscar Lopes, one of the leading specialists in the work of this author, notices: "The land reunites two distinctive meanings: the maternity and the fertility of the specific physical and human geography of Beira Baixa, and the empathy between two bodies, through desire and tenderness" (Lopes, 1981: 92-93).

In this sense, the ocean is frequently personified as the body of a lover, who offers repeatedly his caresses:

The sea: every time I touch
a body, it is the sea I feel
wave after wave
against the palm of my hand
(Andrade, 20005: 442)

On other occasions, the ocean becomes a mother, similar to the one Whitman sang, echoing the archetype of the Great Aquatic Mother. For instances, in another poem, the regular rhythm of the waves suggests the rocking of a cradle:

It is evident that my mother calls me
when one wave and another wave and another
tears its body against my body.
Then, the ocean becomes a caress,
the wet light where my recent heart
awakens.
(Andrade, 2005: 67)

Like fetal waters, the oceanic waves promise a return to the uterus in a continuous rebirth that fools death, a power only the eternal Aquatic Mother can offer. What could be more appealing than this, to a poet who systematically exorcises the thoughts of death in his work? As Eugénio states in one of his most celebrated fragments, opening his book *The Weight of Shadow*:

I work with the frail and sour
Matter of the air
And I know a song to fool death —
And thus I wander towards the sea.
(Andrade, 2005: 331)

4. A body with roots and leaves

Vegetalization — also known as *interanimation* (Parekh, 1994: 63) — is a rarely used figure of speech; the human body or parts of it are seen as plants, flowers, fruits or trees, or acquire characteristics belonging to those elements. Both Whitman and Eugénio resort to this technique, revealing a rich imagination and the belief in a cosmic link between humans and nature (Mancelos, 2009: 62-65). For instance, part 31 of “Song of Myself” presents a catalogue of small miracles of nature that fascinate the poet: a leaf of grass, a grain of sand, or a mouse constitute, to the bard, an undeniable evidence of the divine creation, capable of staggering millions of unfaithful individuals (Whitman, 1986: 93). John Symonds, a contemporary of Whitman, comments:

Whitman expels miracles from the region of mysticism, only to find a deeper mysticism in the world of which he forms a part, and miracles in commonplace occurrences. He dethrones the gods of old pantheons, because he sees God everywhere around him. (...) What is near to his side, beneath his feet, upon the trees around him, in the men and women he consorts with, bears comparison with things far off and rarities imagined. (Symonds, 1893: 89-90)

Whitmanian poetry is fertile in lines depicting the vegetalization of humans: in one of the most celebrated parts of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman reaffirms enthusiastically that we all belong to a living cosmos:

I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains,
 esculent roots,
 And I am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over,
 And have distanced what is behind me for good reasons,
 But call anything back again when I desire it.
 (Whitman, 1986: 94)

Along the same line, in the sixth part of “Song of Myself”, the author transforms beard and hair into leaves of grass:

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
 It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
 ...
 This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers.
 (Whitman 1986: 68)

The bard incorporates the whole of the universe and becomes part of it — a holistic fusion that transcends dichotomies and separations. Emerson, in the essay “The Over-Soul”, states: “within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal one” (Emerson, 1983: 386).

Similarly, Eugénio suggests the dissolution of the individual in the larger frame of nature. According to Gastão Cruz, “This superposition, interpenetration or continuity between the human body and the other elements of the environment is a characteristic of Eugénio de Andrade’s work, and there is hardly a poem where that is not present” (Cruz, 2005: 122).

Even though there is a myriad of examples, I will concentrate on one of Eugénio’s most anthologized texts, the poem “Green God”, included in *The Hands and the Fruits* (1948), his first book to capture the attention of the critics and fellow poets in the forties:

He carried with him all the grace
of wellsprings at the close of day.
His body flowing without haste,
a slow stream challenging its banks
as it descends upon its way.

He strode like someone passing through
without the time to stop just there.
Fresh grasses from his footsteps grew
and from his arms thick branches spread
as high he raised them in the air.

He smiled like someone in a dance.
His body, dancing, dropped its leaves
and trembled in a rhythmic trance
he recognized must surely be
a thing of gods alone conceived.

And he continued on his way,
for a god can't think of staying.
Distant from all there was to see,
entangled in the melody
of the flute that he was playing.
(Andrade, 2007: 15)

This lyrical portrait was probably inspired by the Celt’s Green God, also known as Viridius by the Romans, a pagan deity associated with fertility and the Spring rebirth. Recently a team of Channel Four discovered in the tomb of an English soldier an ancient inscription, stating: “Deo Vridi (...) sancto” or “God Viridius (...) holly”, a proof that this figure was worshipped (Harding, 1998: 1). The Green God in Eugénio’s poem is also unmistakably linked to nature, and is metaphorically vegetalized: the body is a tree and drops its leaves; his passage causes plants to grow, an allusion to his fertile power. Moreover, the flute that the Green God plays evokes springtime, when Viridius was celebrated through dance (Mancelos, 2009: 84-85).

There are many other examples of vegetalization in the poetry of Eugénio, in particular in the first books by the author: “O hands of my soul, / flowers open to my secrets” (Andrade, 2005: 19); “the roses were on your mouth” (Andrade, 2005: 26-27); “We are ephemeral leaves”

(Andrade, 2005: 28). These examples prove the importance of vegetalization as a creative device in his poetic work.

5. Intertwined branches

There are clear similarities between the personifications and vegetalizations created by Whitman and Eugénio to beautify their poems. To be sure, the contact with the maritime and rural landscape played an important role in the development of their artistic sensitivity. Also, the similes and metaphors used suggest mythical or symbolic interpretations, and are frequently rooted in archetypes, such as the Great Aquatic Mother. Both Whitman and Eugénio read the classics attentively, and show a significant influence of the theory of the cosmic unity, which the Brooklyn poet may have absorbed through Emerson.

The strong connections between humans and nature imply an acute attention to ecological matters. In poems such as “This Compost”, Whitman foresees the environmental problems our world faces today: “Something startles me that I though was the safest” (Whitman, 1986: 390). Interestingly enough, in 1892, one year after Whitman’s death, John Muir founds the Sierra Club, an ecological organization which counts, today, hundreds of thousands of members. These were the first signs of the troubled conscience of a nation who was slowly turning its back to the fields and becoming more industrialized.

Eugénio also revealed his preoccupations, namely with a possible nuclear conflict, in several chronicles. He denounces:

As if the previous alarming situations (water and atmospheric pollution, demographic explosion, starvation in the four corners of the world) had not been enough, we now have all those missiles pointed towards our heart, which will soon be multiplied, as in the miracle of the bread. A nuclear catastrophe has never been so close. (...) Ours is a civilization of barbarians. (Andrade, 1995: 141)

Whitman and Eugénio are two writers living in opposite shores of the Atlantic, and so distant in time, who shared the love for nature and participated in the same communion with the universe. Through intertextuality, the poems of Eugénio and Whitman are intertwined branches of separate trees, both growing under that inexhaustible sun we call poetry.

Works Cited

- Andrade, Eugénio de. *À sombra da memória*. Porto: Fundação Eugénio de Andrade, 1993.
- *Rosto precário*. 6ª ed. Porto: Fundação Eugénio de Andrade, 1995.
- *Os afluentes do silêncio*. 9ª ed. Porto: Fundação Eugénio de Andrade, 1997.
- *Poesia*. 2ª ed., revista e acrescentada. Porto: Fundação Eugénio de Andrade, 2005.
- *Forbidden Words: Selected Poetry of Eugénio de Andrade translated by Alexis Levitin*. New York: Norton, 2007.
- Allen, Gay Wilson. *A Reader's Guide to Walt Whitman*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1997.
- Asselineau, Roger. "Whitman in France and Belgium". *Walt Whitman & the World*. Ed. Gay Wilson Allen, and Ed Folsom. Iowa: U of Iowa Press, 1995. 233-267.
- Blair, Sara. "Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary". *American Literary History* 10.3 (Fall 1998): 544-67.
- Casale, Frank. D. *How to Write About Walt Whitman*. Introd. Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase, 2010.
- Cruz, Gastão. "Função e justificação da metáfora na poesia de Eugénio de Andrade". *Ensaio sobre Eugénio de Andrade*. Org. José da Cruz. Porto: Asa, 2005: 118-125.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays and Lectures*. 12th ed. New York: Literary Classics of the US, 1983.
- Ferraz, Eucanã. "Eugénio: animal amoroso". *Relâmpago* 15 (2004), 15-33.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll. "Introduction". *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996. XV-XXXVII.
- Harding, Mike. *A Little Book of the Green Man*. London: Aurum, 1998.
- Jung, Carl G. "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious". *Collected Works*. Vol. 9. New York: Viking, 1976. 87-110.
- Killingsworth, M. Jimmie. *The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman*. Cambridge: CUP, 2007.
- Lopes, Óscar. *A poesia de Eugénio de Andrade: Três ensaios*. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional/Casa da Moeda, 1981.
- Mancelos, João de. *O espírito da terra na obra de Toni Morrison, Rudolfo Anaya e Joy Harjo*. PhD dissertation. Coimbra: Universidade de Coimbra, 2003.
- *O marulhar de versos antigos: A intertextualidade em Eugénio de Andrade*. Lisboa: Colibri, 2009.
- Oliver, Charles M. *Walt Whitman: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York: Infobase, 2006.
- Parehk, Pashpa N. "Nature in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings". *Spring: The Journal of E. E. Cummings Society* 3 (1994): 63-71.

Saraiva, Arnaldo. *Introdução à Poesia de Eugénio de Andrade*. Porto: Fundação Eugénio de Andrade, 1995.

Stoutenburg, Adrien, and Laura Nelson Baker. *Listen America: A Life of Walt Whitman*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968.

Symonds, John Addington. *Walt Whitman: A Study*. London: Nimmo, 1893.

Whitman, Walt. *The Complete Poems*. London: Penguin, 1986.

Abstract

In the poetry of Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and of his Portuguese belated disciple, Eugénio de Andrade (1923-2005), elements of nature are frequently personified or occupy the center of delicate metaphors. At the same time, humans possess characteristics belonging to the vegetal world. It is of little wonder that humans are “vegetalized”, since both Andrade and Whitman share a telluric love and a belief in the unity of humans and the cosmos. In this paper, my goal is to prove that in these poets' prism, nature becomes not what is outside the realm of culture, but what constructs our humanity, and ultimately, the strength that eternalizes poetry. To accomplish my objective, I resort to examples extracted from poems of both writers and to the work of specialists in the areas of literature, archetypes and eco-criticism.