A BRANCH ON THE TREE OF WHITMAN: MARTÍN ESPADA TALKS ABOUT *LEAVES OF GRASS*

EDWARD CARVALHO

MARTÍN ESPADA WAS BORN in Brooklyn, New York, in 1957. He has published thirteen books in all as a poet, essayist, editor and translator. Samuel Hazo says of Espada's eighth collection of poems, *The Republic of Poetry* (New York: Norton, 2006), "Espada unites in these poems the fierce allegiances of Latin American poetry to freedom and glory with the democratic tradition of Whitman, and the result is a poetry of fire and passionate intelligence." His previous book, *Alabanza: New and Selected Poems, 1982-2002* (Norton, 2003), received the Paterson Award for Sustained Literary Achievement and was named an American Library Association Notable Book of the Year. An earlier collection, *Imagine the Angels of Bread* (Norton, 1996), won an American Book Award and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Other books of poetry include *A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen* (Norton, 2000), *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators* (Norton, 1993), and *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands* (Curbstone, 1990). He has received numerous awards and fellowships, including two NEA Fellowships and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He recently appeared in the PBS documentary about Whitman telecast on *American Experience*. His poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, and *The Best American Poetry*.

Much of Espada's poetry arises from his Puerto Rican heritage and his work experiences, ranging from bouncer to tenant lawyer. He is a professor in the Department of English at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, where he teaches creative writing and the work of Pablo Neruda. During the week of July 4, 2005, on the sesquicentennial of the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Espada took time from one of his writing workshops at the Castle Hill Center for the Arts in Truro, Massachusetts, to talk about Whitman. This interview originally appeared in the online journal *Quay* (quayjournal.org) in 2007.

Carvalho: What initially drew you to Whitman as a poet? How did you first discover him? Were you inspired more from a stylistic interest in his aesthetic or through the attention he afforded the dispossessed? What are the aspects of his voice that have found their way into your own work?

Espada: Let's take these one at a time, starting with what initially drew me to Whitman. I would say, first of all, that when I first encountered Whitman I wasn't ready for him. And I wasn't ready for him in part because nobody taught Whitman to me. I did not get any Whitman in high school; I did not get any Whitman in college. We're talking about the 1970s now. And Whitman was, and I think to some extent still is, a poet who is quietly censored in this country. It's ironic because, at the same time, he has gained a reputation as one of our great poets and certainly the founder of so much of what we call poetry today. Yet, in a really tangible way, we're not ready for Whitman as a society. We're still not ready for his message of radical egalitarianism; we're certainly not ready for his expressions of compassion for everyone and many of us, I should add, are not ready for his sexuality.

I think, therefore, I had to come to Whitman on my own and very slowly. When I did, I realized something, which is that I had been reading Whitman all along without knowing it. His influence is that pervasive. You can read a poet like Allen Ginsberg or, for that matter, a poet like Pablo Neruda and not realize you're reading Whitman. You're not aware that you are actually looking at *Leaves of Grass* when you're reading *Canto General* or *The Fall of America*. Certainly I had come to other poets in Whitman's lineage in the Whitmanic tradition before I came to him. When I finally came to him with that understanding, that he was everywhere, then I had a deeper appreciation of him.

Actually, I can remember walking around with a copy of *Leaves of Grass* everywhere I went. I'd carry it with me. I would underline and star certain lines or passages. I would read him out loud to anybody who would listen and some who wouldn't listen. So, at a certain point I began to look at *Leaves of Grass* as almost Biblical in its resonance and its impact on how I saw the world. This wasn't something that happened overnight; it took me a while to figure out how important this voice was to me.

And, yes, there is a particular part of Whitman that most appeals to me, and that's Whitman the advocate. If you look at the 1855 introduction to *Leaves of Grass*—the first edition—you'll find a passage that's very telling when it comes to Whitman the advocate. It's Whit-

man there who says that the duty of the poet is to "cheer up slaves and horrify despots." I can identify with that. You find other indications of Whitman the advocate throughout his work. If you go to number 24 of "Song of Myself," you'll see there that Whitman says, "through me many long dumb voices." Whitman says there, "voices veil'd and I remove the veil." He takes it upon himself to become a voice for the voiceless. He declares his intentions, which is one of the things that sets him apart from other poets. He says "this is what I'm going to do" and then he does it. Whitman is a didactic poet in the best sense. He's a teacher; he's fully aware of the instruction he's giving and he's completely unembarrassed about giving it. This is refreshing, actually, when you consider how many poets have a hidden agenda. Many poets don't come out and say what is on their minds, exactly. There's never any doubt to me that Whitman is saying what he's saying, that he means what he means.

But that Whitman, certainly—Whitman the advocate—has had the greatest effect on me and on other poets. Neruda again comes to mind. Think, for example, about *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*, where Neruda ascends to that summit and looks down, then speaks to generations of dead laborers and says, "I come to speak for your dead mouths." This is Neruda expressly taking on the role of advocate in the middle of the twentieth century, just as Whitman had in the middle of the nineteenth century. So, I'm definitely part of that tradition—definitely part of that great tree. I see myself as a branch on the tree of Whitman. And there are many, many branches.

Carvalho: 150 years later, what would you say are the key points to Whitman's legacy from *Leaves of Grass* and who are its contemporary inheritors?

Espada: There are so many things to take away from *Leaves of Grass* 150 years later, one of which is obviously that Whitman is a poet of faith. His faith, however, is not faith in God: it's faith in democracy, and it's faith in poetry, and the power of poetry to change people and change the world. We need that kind of faith right now at a time when democracy is being challenged by those who claim to uphold it, who make war in the name of democracy, when in fact it's a war of profit.

We also need faith in poetry. Poetry has become so marginalized in this country, almost to the point of being mocked. I think, again, it's not a coincidence that this is happening in a time when we need dissident voices, in a time when we need people to speak up. It's not a coincidence that poetry is so derided because it's one vehicle by which those dissident voices might be heard.

Looking at *Leaves of Grass* you are immediately struck by Whitman's faith both in poetry and in democracy. It's a faith that we need to reassert in these days. Certainly, I think the universal compassion expressed in *Leaves of Grass* has to be reasserted. This is another timely lesson for us now. It's not a coincidence that certain kinds of people recur throughout his work, especially in "Song of Myself." We can see the pattern by which prisoners, prostitutes and slaves keep cropping up in Whitman's verse. He makes continual statements of solidarity with these most marginalized of people. We need more of that today. Whitman also had a vast appreciation for work and the working class in this country. There are many lessons to be taken away.

Finally, on strictly an aesthetic level, one of the striking things about *Leaves of Grass* 150 years later is that we can understand it. It's accessible, it's clear, it's direct. There is an aesthetic statement there that poetry should communicate, that it should clarify, instead of moving in the opposite direction. As you well know, too many poets today believe in obscurity for the sake of obscurity, weirdness for its own sake. That only serves to further alienate people from poetry, and rightly so. Poets complain about lacking an audience, and then they write incomprehensible poems. They have no one to blame but themselves if that's what they choose to do.

Whitman did not do that. Whitman wanted to communicate. There is an urgency about Whitman's voice that comes across in the direct, clear address of his words. That's a lesson we can take away from *Leaves of Grass* 150 years later. There are good reasons why we're talking about this work now. There are good reasons why it's still relevant even though it was written 150 years ago, when certain poems written 150 days ago are no longer relevant.

Carvalho: Recently, an article surfaced where Whitman was quoted as saying, "don't be a poet" to the two young reporters who came to visit him. In the context of the article where he also discussed the importance of learning the complete craft of writing from typesetting to aspects of self-publishing and door-to-door distribution, it appeared as though Whitman was providing a blueprint for writers, particularly poets, to break with convention and forge into new territory of individual celebration as a writer or an artist. Do you think Whitman consciously approached poetry from this point of view throughout his life?

Espada: It's striking to me that Whitman would insist upon learning all aspects of printing and publishing in addition to writing, *per se*. Obviously, if you look at Whitman's work you see that it's very physical, very visceral. Whitman believed in evoking the senses. If you look at

a poem like "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," you can still feel that. That's why Whitman can speak so successfully to the future reader. In essence he can say, "just as I do this today, you will do this" or "just as you do that today, so I did that." He's well aware of communicating with the future reader, and he can do that because his work is so steeped in the senses. He knows that we'll still be experiencing life in fundamentally the same way a century-and-a-half later. It's not surprising to me that he would insist on knowing and understanding the physical part of making a poem, the physical part of making a book, how that goes into the process.

Speaking for myself, I learned a long time ago how to make a book. My first book came out twenty-three years ago when the process was much different. I drive publishers crazy because I know all the steps. And, of course, I have to argue about everything. My father is another one. My father is a professional photographer, and he insists on understanding and teaching the entire process of making a print as part of a larger creative process. To him, they're inseparable. There is a very definite connection between snapping the photograph, developing the photograph into a print, and then framing the photograph. It's all of a piece. So I understand that approach.

Whitman's advice, "don't be a poet," sounds a bit tongue-in-cheek, and it's important to keep in mind that not everything he said can be taken at face value. Certainly, late in life, he said some things that would strike us as controversial or just plain wrong. And some of them he said in the company of his devoted friend, Horace Traubel. Traubel is an interesting character, and this is a bit of a digression. Traubel was a German socialist who read Whitman's work from a socialist point of view and argued for that reading even with Whitman, who eventually conceded that his work was more socialist than he admitted.

At the same time, Traubel was so devoted to Whitman that he recorded every inkling, every burp that came out of Whitman in the last few years of his life in Camden, New Jersey. Not all of that is flattering, to say the least, and some of it was undoubtedly produced by the "good gray poet" as he was losing his grip on what we call reality. So, it's a mixed bag. I still think it's important to read Whitman the way Traubel read him, but we also have to be guarded against interpreting every single utterance of Whitman as gospel.

Carvalho: I heard you read last year in Boston at a Boston Adult Literacy function, and you opened with a Spanish translation of number 24 from "Song of Myself." Do you ever see yourself undertaking a project in your writing similar to what Whitman did with *Leaves of Grass*? Will we ever see an Espada translation of *Leaves of Grass* in its entirety?

Espada: Well, I enjoy reading Whitman aloud in Spanish. Whitman, you must remember, runs both north and south. He was introduced to Latin America and the Spanish-speaking world through José Marti. And later on, of course, Neruda became Whitman's greatest disciple in the Spanish language. But Whitman influenced many in Latin America and, in fact, at one point, he arguably had more influence in Latin America than he did in this country.

He is certainly a poet who appeals to Latin America because he is wrestling with some of the great questions that still bedevil Latin America today, including national identity, and his thirst for justice has considerable appeal in Latin America, particularly among writers. So it's not surprising to see that he had the effect that he did in the Spanish language.

I would never presume to translate Whitman into Spanish myself. I am bilingual, but English is my first language and Spanish is my second language. I was born in Brooklyn, and there are places in Brooklyn where English is still spoken, so that's the language I grew up with.

In any case, I see very few poets undertaking the kind of epic project that is *Leaves of Grass*. Neruda certainly did it with *Canto General*; if anything it's even vaster than *Leaves of Grass*. But such an epic project is rare and understandably so. I content myself with trying to understand things at a much smaller scale. Nevertheless, I deeply appreciate anybody who can do that.

Carvalho: I see and hear Whitman's influence in many of your works, most notably the poem "Alabanza" and many of the poems from *Imagine the Angels of Bread*. What poem(s) of yours do you see as distinctly Whitmanian?

Espada: Whenever I write about work, I hear Whitman's voice. The work could be my own or someone else's work. But surely, "I Hear America Singing" is in my head and will never leave. When I write about people who are incarcerated, I hear Whitman's voice, and I've written quite a number of prison poems, based to a large extent on my own experience working either as lawyer or a poet with people who have been incarcerated.

I have one poem where I speak directly at Whitman and that's a poem called, significantly, "Another Nameless Prostitute Says the Man is Innocent." It is for and about Mumia Abu-Jamal, the African-American journalist on death row in the state of Pennsylvania. Whitman makes an appearance because I actually visited his tomb in Camden, New Jersey in 1997, and incorporated that visit into the poem I was

writing about Mumia, a poem, which, by the way, was solicited by *All Things Considered* at National Public Radio and then censored by them. They refused to air it, which led to quite a public blow-up, I'm proud to say. And, so, Whitman made a very direct appearance—not by coincidence—in a poem about an African American on death row. I think he would have understood that situation. So, in that way, I see his influence on my work.

I think there are ways Whitman influences me that I have not yet discovered for myself. He is that pervasive. When he says, at the end of "Song of Myself," "look for me under your boot-soles," he's not simply trying to get our attention. He is saying that he is part of the world we inhabit and walk upon. And I certainly believe that. So I come back to the fact that we are not ready for Whitman yet. Whitman gives very good advice which we have not yet followed. In the workshop today, I'm going to talk about another passage from his Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves*, which has everything to do with how to live in the world. Beyond poetry, beyond politics, Whitman has advice for us on how to live everyday, and I think we should finally start listening to him.

Part of the context of this conversation is that so much is happening in our society that Whitman would absolutely condemn. Some of it is happening in poetry. Look at the movement toward obscurity, the movement toward a kind of trivialization of poetry, where the goal is to adopt a pose of detached, hip cynicism and not to engage with the world. Whitman is so deeply engaged with the world; you get that sense that he's so involved. He's bombarded by the sensations of being alive and he wants to share that with us immediately. He can't hold it back. It has to emerge somehow. We see, in a lot of ways, especially in the MFA world, people fleeing from the Whitman model, running in the opposite direction, toward what I don't know. Toward Ashbery? Toward Stevens in some way? It's a flight from anything that could move people, anything that could change people. It is, in some ways, profoundly dishonest. Whitman will be there no matter what they do. They could set fire to the whole forest and that's the one tree that won't burn down. It's that solid; it's that real.

But you have to wonder, where's everyone going? Why so many, in MFA programs especially, are fleeing from Whitman and what he represents? Why is it that there are so many MFA programs that don't even teach Whitman, and certainly do not teach his descendants? Why is it that so many MFA programs offer us only a model of obscurity and this pose of detached, hip cynicism? What's happening to American poetry that's so anti-Whitman? That's something to consider. Ultimately, I think in this country when we see any trend that can't be readily explained, we have to follow the money trail. We have to ask ourselves

where the money is. Where are the dollars? Strangely, the aesthetic of obscurity is being rewarded in this country to the extent it never has before, in the form of all the resources we're familiar with: the grants, the awards, the residencies, the teaching appointments, and on and on and on. Look at all the critical recognition that comes to the absurdism dominating so much of the poetic discourse. I think Whitman would have sneered at it; he would have snorted at it. Again, this is a poet of urgency, a poet of a true communication, which is why we're still reading him today. His approach to the world is so spontaneous and so real. You have to wonder why so many other poets went the other way, and why they're rewarded for it.

Carvalho: I have to tell you, when I went to that reading in Boston, it was a very pivotal shift in my own career, because I was seeing and hearing so much of this homogenized movement in contemporary poetry. I feel that I come from a tradition of Whitman, and that's what attracted me to writing: his style and what he had to say. When I heard you read, it really restored my faith to know there is still a grounding and acknowledgment of traditional roots in this country. Prior to this, I was seeing so much of a fragmentation and future of hopelessness in modern poetry.

Espada: The larger question here is how do we make history? Who writes history? Who decides what history to include and what history to exclude? So often we accept the taken-for-granted reality. So often we accept the received wisdom without looking beyond those borders. We have to go beyond those borders to see Whitman, because Whitman is still an outlaw poet. Whitman is still a poet who represents certain values, which, if adopted, would radically transform this society. This goes beyond poetry. If we adopted the radical egalitarianism that Whitman expresses in "Song of Myself," let's say, or *Leaves of Grass* more generally, this society would look very different. If we were to accept Whitman's sexuality, what would that do to the so-called "red states"? Half the preachers would be out of a job; half the politicians would be out of work, just if we accepted Whitman and his views on sexuality, that's all. We're still arguing about whether or not the Confederate flag should be flown. What would Whitman make of that? The anti-slavery Whitman, the Whitman who wrote, "I Sing the Body Electric," that extraordinary anti-slavery poem. What would Whitman say about the people who still wave the Confederate flag a century-and-a-half later? What would the Whitman of the Civil War, the Whitman of *Drum-Taps*, the Whitman who was a nurse taking care of the dying soldiers, make of those who romanticize the Confederate cause today, who still

support the principles on which that Confederacy was founded? I think he would be aghast.

One of the most important interpretations I saw of Whitman—and this ties in to what we're talking about now—was an essay written by an African-American poet named June Jordan. Jordan wrote an essay called, "For The Sake of a People's Poetry: Walt Whitman and the Rest of Us." There, for the first time, I saw June Jordan make explicit the connection between Whitman and poets of color. Of course, those ideas did not originate with her necessarily, because Langston Hughes echoed those same sentiments during his day. He was a poet of Whitman, and he declared himself to be in that camp. To him there was no contradiction between being a poet of the Harlem Renaissance and being a poet in the tradition of Whitman. In the same way, I see myself as a Latino poet, a Puerto Rican poet, a poet coming out of the so-called Nuyorican experience, and a poet in the tradition of Whitman. There is no contradiction at all. There, to this day, is where Whitman gets his greatest reception in the poetry world: on the margins, on the fringes, in the places where poets understand what it means to be silenced or suppressed or neglected. There Whitman lives and breathes.

We're going to celebrate Whitman this year because of the 150th anniversary of *Leaves of Grass*, but how many of us are going to read him? Of those who read him, how many will really take those words to heart? This is the poet who says he stands for "the rights of them the others are down upon." How many of us believe in those rights and stand up for them?

Carvalho: I remember also, after having seen you on *NewsHour*, that you appeared to have quite a collection of various editions of *Leaves of Grass*.

Espada: What I discovered after a while is you can walk into a used bookstore and find a beat-up edition of Whitman from the 1930s or 1940s for next to nothing, and that they made good companions. I started collecting them, and it's remarkable to see how many different editions of Whitman have been produced.

One of the most interesting came out in the 1950s, and it was an edition of the Preface, and the Preface only from the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It was edited and produced by a guy named William Everson, a poet who felt, as many poets do, that the Preface from *Leaves* is really poetry itself. He took that prose, broke it down into verses, organized it with line breaks and stanza breaks and actually shaped a poem from the Preface. It's fascinating to look at because I believe he was right. It was a great way of calling attention to a piece of writing

that had been somewhat overlooked because it wasn't part of the body of poetry, *per se*. But, yeah, I do have a few things like that. Of course, I could never afford a signed edition of Whitman. That's out of my league, to say the least. If The MacArthur Foundation comes calling, I might indulge myself.

It's always great to see the way people respond to Whitman. Consider the assumption we so often make about poetry based [on] Auden's famous phrase, "poetry makes nothing happen." That's become an article of religious faith among so many poets whose work indeed makes nothing happen. But I won't soon forget being in Chile last July. I was there as part of a small U.S. delegation to commemorate the centenary of Pablo Neruda. He was born on July 12, 1904. I ended up visiting Isla Negra, Neruda's home on the coast, the day before his birthday. There was a huge gathering there, thousands of people, including a number of people who were there to visit his tomb. I went to his tomb. As part of the festivities, I was being videotaped. I decided to read the same passage you heard me read in Boston—number 24 from "Song of Myself"—in Spanish at Neruda's tomb. Strangely, it felt like I was reading to a sick friend—a very sick friend—a dead friend, in fact. I read that passage out loud at the tomb of Neruda. I got through with reading it and heard applause. I looked up, and I was surrounded by people who were listening. They were listening to Walt Whitman in Spanish, and it was remarkable to see their response that day at Neruda's tomb. It was as if they understood that the voice of Neruda's grandfather had just come calling.

Carvalho: As you are also heavily involved in the educational aspects of poetry, do you find that many of your students are separated from connections to Whitman or the Whitmanic tradition?

Espada: Many of them have had Whitman shoved down their throats, and they don't appreciate it. Of course, when Whitman is taught, especially at the high school level, I would imagine there's quite a bit of sanitizing going on. I am also quite sure that over the years, as teachers took the path of least resistance, they would end up teaching some of Whitman's lesser work like, "O Captain! My Captain!"—the poem about Lincoln—and avoiding some of the more challenging work. How, over the years, in the Southern states for example, would you teach the passages from "Song of Myself" where Whitman identifies so closely with the fugitive slave? There's one point at which Whitman embraces a fugitive slave who comes to seek refuge at his house. It's a fictional event, but still important for Whitman to put in the poem. There's another point at which Whitman actually transfuses himself into a

runaway slave—becomes a runaway slave—who is subsequently caught. How was that taught during all the years of segregation in the South? How is that taught today, anywhere, North or South? Is it taught at all, I wonder? Again, I don't think we're ready for him.

I don't know what to expect from all of these celebrations this year. I'm participating in a Whitman conference called "Look Back at Me" at Central Connecticut State University this coming September. I know that every year there is a walk across the Brooklyn Bridge organized by Poets' House where someone reads "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." That is, again, a remarkable poem, because he looks at the birds and knows that, crossing the same body of water we will look up at the sky and see the same birds: he's got it.

No doubt there will be some things that will happen this year that will be inspiring, to say the least. But we should celebrate Whitman all the time, not just this year. In fact, a couple of years ago I did a reading at the Smith College Poetry Center with Galway Kinnell and Kate Rushin to celebrate Whitman, and there was no particular occasion because we didn't need one.

Carvalho: I recently read Galway Kinnell's *Book of Nightmares* and thought it was over the top; I loved it.

Espada: He's an important inheritor of the Whitman tradition, someone who has written very intelligently about Whitman, too.

Carvalho: Who do you think are some of the other modern poets of this tradition?

Espada: I see a number of poets in that tradition. Certainly in North America we go back to the beginning of the twentieth century and there is Carl Sandburg, who is definitely part of the Whitman tradition. There is Edgar Lee Masters, who is definitely part of the Whitman tradition. There is Langston Hughes, who is definitely part of the Whitman tradition. Lesser known, but, nonetheless, important poets like Sterling Brown were doubtlessly influenced by Whitman. Of course, we all know about the Beats, about Ginsberg and Corso and Ferlinghetti all being devotees of Whitman.

I certainly see it in Latino poets, in Chicano poets like Jimmy Santiago Baca who came out of the prison experience. His early poems resonate with the Whitman influence. Feminist poets like Marge Piercy, poets who write the body, poets who write very physically, come out of the Whitman tradition, in my opinion. I think of Sharon Olds, for example, as very much being a poet in the Whitman tradition, being a poet who writes the body, absolutely. I think of gay poets, Rafael Campo,

Mark Doty. They're writing in the Whitman tradition. Obviously, the political poets—we think, immediately, if we use that phrase, of Carolyn Forché—are influenced by the Whitman inheritance. There are so many, and you start to realize they can't even be counted.

That's why I go back to the motif or the image of the tree, because it's not just that we have the strong roots and the strong foundation of Whitman, but there are so many branches. That's really where the metaphor makes sense to me. All the poets that we're talking about constitute one branch or another of Whitman's tree.