

Ode to Walt Whitman

Poem by Pablo Neruda

Background - Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), a Nobel Prize-winning poet from Chile, was greatly inspired by Walt Whitman's poetry. In a speech delivered in 1972, he said, "I was barely 15 when I discovered Walt Whitman, my primary creditor. I stand among you today still owing this marvelous debt that has helped me live." In the following poem, Neruda echoes Whitman's joyful exuberance

I do not remember
at what age
nor where:
in the great damp South
or on the fearsome
coast, beneath the brief
cry of the seagulls,
I touched a hand and it was
the hand of Walt Whitman.
I trod the ground
with bare feet,
I walked on the grass,
on the firm dew
of Walt Whitman.

During
my entire
youth
I had the company of that
hand,
that dew,
its firmness of patriarchal
pine, its
prairie-like expanse,
and its mission of
circulatory peace.

Not
disdaining
the gifts
of the earth,
nor the copious
curving of the column's
capital,
nor the purple
initial
of wisdom,
you taught me
to be an American,
you raised
my eyes
to books,
towards
the treasure
of the grains:
broad,
in the clarity
of the plans,
you made me see
the high
tutelary
mountain. From
subterranean
echoes,
you gathered
for me
everything;
everything that came forth
was harvested by you,
galloping in the alfalfa,
picking poppies for me,
visiting
the rivers,
coming into the kitchens
in the afternoon

But not only
soil
was brought to light
by your spade:
you unearthed
man,
and the
slave
who was humiliated
with you, balancing
the black dignity of his
stature,
walked on, conquering
happiness.

To the fireman
below,
in the stoke-hole,
you sent
a little basket
of strawberries.

To every corner of your
town
a verse
of yours arrived for a visit,
and it was like a piece
of clean body,
the verse that arrived,
like
your own fisherman beard
or the solemn tread of your
acacia
legs.