



## **“Strong, manly, and full of human nature”: The Roots of Rubén Darío’s “Walt Whitman”**

Jonathan Fleck  
*Sacramento State University*, [jonathanfleck@utexas.edu](mailto:jonathanfleck@utexas.edu)

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)  
ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Fleck, Jonathan. ““Strong, manly, and full of human nature”: The Roots of Rubén Darío’s “Walt Whitman”.” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 38 (2021), 169-188. <https://doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2403>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

“STRONG, MANLY, AND  
FULL OF HUMAN NATURE”:  
THE ROOTS OF RUBÉN DARÍO’S  
“WALT WHITMAN”

JONATHAN S. FLECK



THE SECOND EDITION OF NICARAGUAN POET Rubén Darío’s *Azul...* introduces an unexpected character: an elderly Walt Whitman, in a sonnet named in his honor. As I seek to demonstrate, Whitman’s surprise appearance in the foundational work of Latin American *modernismo* culminates a complex sequence of textual transfers occurring over several months in 1890: In late May, two reporters visit Whitman in Camden, New Jersey, and narrate their experience in an interview that was republished in several newspapers; in June, a Nicaraguan journalist incorporates an unacknowledged translation of the interview in an article for the *Revista Ilustrada de Nueva York*; and Darío cites the Spanish-language article as part of the inspiration for his sonnet, published that October. What links these depictions is less an admiration for Whitman’s verse than a fascination with his body, imagined and re-imagined across languages, genres, and media. The texts dwell on the poet’s weakened physique, only to insist upon the virility of a face that comes to express intersecting anxieties of sexual nonconformity and socioeconomic reordering in continental America.

★

Walt Whitman<sup>1</sup>

In his country of iron lives the great old man,  
comely as a patriarch, serene and holy,  
he has in the Olympic furrow of his brow  
something that reigns and conquers with noble charm.

His soul seems a mirror of the infinite  
his tired shoulders are worthy of the mantle  
and with a harp carved from an aged oak,  
like a new prophet he sings his song.

Priest, who breathes divine breath,  
he proclaims a better day to come.  
He says to the eagle “Fly!” “Row!” to the sailor,

and “Work!” to the hearty worker,  
And so goes this poet on his path,  
with the haughty face of an emperor!

Darío’s sonnet endows “the great old man” with the power and responsibility of multitudes. Whitman is a “poet,” yes, but also a “patriarch” whose “tired shoulders” belie the “Olympic furrow of his brow” and the “haughty (*soberbio*) face of an emperor!” At once “priest,” cantor, and oracle, Whitman “like a new prophet sings his song.” The physical qualities of Whitman’s person accrue moral significance within his multiple vocations. Beauty accentuates sanctity; wrinkles confer sovereignty; and shoulders bear the artist’s mantle. The material Whitman and the stuff of his world suggest a conflict between artistic and industrial production. The poet’s harp, an irreplicable talisman, empowers him to resist aesthetic cheapening in a “country of iron” where goods are mass-produced in factories, not carved from aged oaks. The poem homes in from Whitman’s industrial country to his weary body, and finally to an imperial face that incarnates the patriarchal victory of idealism over materialism.

To explain the source of his vision, Darío cites “an excellent article” by “Román Mayorga R[ivas] . . . in the *Revista Ilustrada de Nueva York*,”<sup>2</sup> along with two other sources. The *Revista Ilustrada* was a Spanish-language arts, culture, and news editorial published out of New York from 1885 to at least 1894, possibly 1898.<sup>3</sup> The June 1890 issue offers “El Poeta Walt Whitman,” a profile dated May 31<sup>st</sup> by Román Mayorga Rivas, a Nicaraguan poet, critic, and diplomat living in Washington, D.C. (see figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Rivas had a “brief but productive” relationship with the *Revista Ilustrada* in 1889 and 1890, and returned to contribute an obituary for Whitman in 1892.<sup>5</sup> He was an accomplished Spanish translator of French and English texts, but “El Poeta” does not indicate that it contains translated material.

The article narrates a visit to Whitman’s home in Camden. Rivas himself was not present at the house call, referring only to a pair of unnamed “American reporter friends of mine” who passed along “the news of this report.”<sup>6</sup> In spite of



Figure 1: Detail of “El poeta Walt Whitman.”



Figure 2: Detail of “The Good Gray Poet,” in *Evening Star*.

its second-hand sourcing, the article describes Whitman’s environment in intimate detail, contrasting the “tranquil” city of Camden with the “noisy industrial centers” to which the author is averse.<sup>7</sup> As Rivas relays his friends’ impressions, he juxtaposes Whitman’s paralysis with his “haughty” (*soberbia*) lion’s mane and “manly” (*varonil*) face.<sup>8</sup> Following a series of increasingly reverent descriptions of Whitman’s countenance, the narrative ends in high praise of a “poet-seer” destined to prophesize in song a glorious future for a continental “our America” (*nuestra América*).<sup>9</sup> The profile frames an unattributed pen-and-ink portrait of the subject’s face. The gaze, the position of the collar, and the weight of the furrow of his brow recall a photograph by Jacob Spieler probably taken in 1876.<sup>10</sup>

While the imagery of Rivas’s narrative is evocative of Darío’s sonnet, the enigmatic reference to “reporter friends” motivated further archival research. I turned to *Chronicling America*, the Library of Congress’s digital archive of historical periodicals, which has yielded important discoveries related to Whitman.<sup>11</sup> A query for newspaper pages that mention Whitman, Camden, and the poet’s face between January and May of 1890 identified Rivas’s sources.

James Foster Coates and Homer Fort visited Whitman in anticipation of the poet’s 71<sup>st</sup> birthday and subsequently published “The Good Gray Poet” in the May 24<sup>th</sup> issue of the Washington D.C. *Evening Star* (see figure 2),<sup>12</sup> which was reprinted with slight edits in at least two papers, the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*

and *The Indianapolis Journal*. The multiple iterations of this “Good Gray Poet” across multiple papers complicate the search for an original printing.<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this article, I cite the *Evening Star* report, which was published in Rivas’s city of residence and includes a drawing that resembles an 1878 photograph by Napoleon Sarony, an illustration that is absent from the subsequent reprints.<sup>14</sup>

“The Good Gray Poet” promises a glimpse of “What the Poet Looks Like and How He Acts,” and Whitman’s appearance and manner are indeed the article’s primary concern.<sup>15</sup> After presenting the “quaint” environs of Camden, Coates and Fort depict a beguiling physical specimen whose paralysis is belied by a “leonine look” and a face—“[s]trong, manly, and full of human nature”—whose plenitude transcends materiality and admits nothing that does not conform with “human nature.” “The Good Gray Poet” does not explicitly broach the topic of homosexuality; however, its imagery and rhetorical structure echo William Douglas O’Connor’s identically titled pamphlet, originally published in 1866 and reprinted in Richard Maurice Bucke’s 1883 biography of Whitman, *Walt Whitman*,<sup>16</sup> that alludes to the masculine beauty of Whitman’s face to bolster a “vindication” of his poetic “obscenities” and implied sexual deviancy. Similar apologias of Whitman’s “troubling abnormality”<sup>17</sup> are well-documented in the *Chronicling America* archive of the late nineteenth century, and Rivas references the controversy in his 1892 obituary of Whitman.<sup>18</sup>

With all these references that Darío could have possibly turned to, my analysis suggests that it is the *Evening Star*’s account of the visit as retold by Rivas in the *Revista Ilustrada* that contributes to Whitman’s appearance in *Azul*.... Parsing this textual journey requires an expanded understanding of translation, one that bypasses the assumption of a unitary, superior “source text” that transfers to a self-contained, derivative “target text.” A more inclusive and flexible framework offers rich, previously unexplored links between historical texts. To shape “The Good Gray Poet” into “El Poeta Walt Whitman,” Rivas surreptitiously translates key passages from English to Spanish, but the degree and nature of his additions preclude classifying the article as a translation *per se*. The imagery of O’Connor’s “vindication” of Whitman, filtered through the English and Spanish journalistic texts, becomes embedded in Darío’s sonnet. Similarly, the “Olympic furrow of his brow” (Darío, “Walt Whitman” 3), the source of a “noble charm” (4), suggests an ekphrasis or “portrait-encounter”<sup>19</sup> more than a response to verse. The sketch of Whitman, which Darío viewed in the *Revista*, itself adapts Spieler’s photograph, further expanding the textual transfer to include what Roman Jakobson terms “intersemiotic translation,” or

the rendering of non-verbal signs in verbal language.<sup>20</sup>

Whitman’s likeness undergoes several mutually reinforcing transformations. These co-acting modes of translation, moreover, do not occur in a vacuum. Scholars understand translation as a genealogy of perspectives, interventions, and ideologies that accompany texts as they travel.<sup>21</sup> Translation resignifies images through the competing stances of individuals, communities, and institutions. Rivas’s text transmits anxieties over Whitman’s sexuality, just as it reinscribes the English-language report within a fraught hemispheric drama, the stakes of which are nothing short of the “great future of our America.”<sup>22</sup> The accumulated meanings of Whitman’s environment, body, and face reappear in *Azul...* to intersect with Darío’s project. Positioning modes of translation in the poem does not diminish the aesthetic imagination of *modernismo*; rather, the Nicaraguan author channels Whitman as he expands his original poetic. I conclude by considering the photographs and portraits, where multiple intersemiotic translations ground authors’ fascination with Whitman’s “manly”<sup>23</sup> and patriarchal<sup>24</sup> face.

*From “The Good Gray Poet” to “El Poeta Walt Whitman”*

As narrated in the *Evening Star*, James Foster Coates and Homer Fort choose the sunny morning of Tuesday, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1890 to visit Whitman at his Camden, New Jersey home. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, they reported on their visit in an article that opens on Camden’s “quaint” environs. Román Mayorga Rivas sets the same scene in his *Revista Ilustrada* article, interspersing his narrative with passages translated the English-language report. Both “The Good Gray Poet” and “El Poeta Walt Whitman” depict the silence, grass, sun, lilac scent, and happy vegetation of Camden. While the translator maintains the sequence of these observations, however, he invests the sights and sounds with metaphysical consequence. Camden transforms into a sexualized, aristocratic landscape that rejects and overpowers the corrupting influence of capitalist industry.

The line-by-line comparisons in this section display the text of Coates and Fort’s “The Good Gray Poet” (left column) alongside an English rendering of Rivas’s “El Poeta Walt Whitman” (right column).

What a quaint old town this is, to be sure!	How tranquil is the old city of Camden, in New Jersey! <sup>25</sup>
---	--

Rivas takes care to locate Camden geographically by expanding a reference to “N.J.” in the *Evening Star* byline and by placing it in the opening sentence of his

article. This geographical clarification reflects the readership of the *Revista Ilustrada*, which circulated primarily outside of the United States and often featured articles comparing life in the United States and Latin America (Chamberlin and Schulman 4-5). Although Rivas was living in Washington, D.C., and writing for a New York publication, he addresses a Latin American public and his article implicitly contrasts the anglophone and hispanophone contexts. This opening shift from a “quaint” to a “tranquil” Camden reinforces Spanish-language article’s unification of Whitman with his surroundings. Rivas adapts the setting to ground later descriptions of a poet just serene as his locale.

Its silence is almost idyllic.	In the silence that surrounds it, after one travels and lives in these great, noisy industrial centers, one finds a truly idyllic and rustic poetry. <sup>26</sup>
--------------------------------	--

The translation upgrades Camden’s silence from “almost idyllic” to “truly idyllic” and contrasts it with the din of industry. Situating “these” (*estos*) epicenters of materialism in the United States suggests an anti-imperialist stance that would be familiar to some Nicaraguan intellectuals (Franklin 2-3), and more generally to the *Revista Ilustrada*’s cosmopolitan readership, wary of the United States’ “threat to Latin America’s cultural independence” (Chamberlin and Schulman 8).<sup>27</sup> José Martí’s “Nuestra América” essay, first published in the January 1891 *Revista Ilustrada*, for example, protests the economic and cultural interventions of the capitalist “giant” to the north.<sup>28</sup> Darío himself expresses a similar sentiment in his 1903 poem “To Roosevelt,”<sup>29</sup> in which the United States is a “[h]unter” (Cazador) and an “invader” (invasor) against whom Latin America must rally the bible and “the verse of Walt Whitman” (verso de Walt Whitman). The same dynamic impels Rivas’s “El Poeta”: the translated setting of Camden indexes Whitman’s role as a guardian against materialist encroachment.

The sun shines out warm and bright today.	The sun’s rule [imperio] over man and nature there is disputed not by the gigantic buildings, nor by the thick black smoke of the steamship; which has become the absolute king of the populous cities; <sup>30</sup>
---	---

After sounding the victory of poetry over industry, the translator juxtaposes two forms of authority in Camden’s visual panorama. The shining sun boasts a monarchic rule (*imperio*) for which the mercantile flurry below, manifested in the polluting steamship, would be no match. The battle is fought and won

“there” (*alli*) in Camden, where the boat’s transient authority fades before the permanence of the sun. The rift between Whitmanesque aristocracy and bourgeois capitalism becomes explicit later in the article, which depicts the poet “holed up in his tranquil mansion, far from the malice of men, from the prose of business and the coldness of materialist calculations” (7-8).<sup>31</sup>

The air is perfumed with the odor of lilacs.	the air is impregnated in this bright season with the odor of the lilacs, which open to the moist kisses of the dawn; <sup>32</sup>
--	---

As the translator’s gaze descends, Camden transforms into the stage for a fantastical sexual pageant acted out by the lilacs, the air, and the dawn. The air is not merely “perfumed,” it is “impregnated,” while further down, the ground exudes both sensuality and cultivation.

The grass is green	and the ground is but a green carpet, where the trees tower lush and quiver in time, producing with their sonorous leaves a sound similar to that which is made by ladies’ silk garments on the night of a ball, <sup>33</sup>
--------------------	--

An eroticized landscape merges with the best of human artifice. Grass and leaves embody the unique and the exquisite—the artistry of a carpet, the rustle of silk. The ornamentation of the flora is also expressed musically. The “trees” that appear in translation appear responsive to human rhythms (*se agitan a compás*), while the leaves harken an occasion for refinement and elegance (*una noche de baile*).

and the plants in the garden are nodding and smiling in the warm sunlight	whilst the flowers in the gardens that surround Camden stretch fragrant and trembling towards the sky, amidst the solemn quietude of the summer nights, so that the moon may illuminate them in their fecund lovemaking. <sup>34</sup>
---	--

The translation’s sequence of sensual oppositions culminates in the flowers, engaged in quite a bit more than “nodding and smiling.” This stylized reproductive ritual takes place outside of time, as a description of the town on a spring morning narrates the eroticism of its “summer nights.” Camden is a translated space in which nature rallies its forces in a war of two fronts. The monarchic sun conspires with an idyllic silence to defeat the threat of materialism, while the vegetation defends a fantastical and timeless vision of sex.

After setting the scene, Coates and Fort narrate their entrance into Whitman’s home and brief conversations with a doorman (“a young man, hatless and coatless”) and pair of visitors (“a lady and a gentleman”).<sup>35</sup> Rivas, similarly, notes a doorman (“a boy”) and other visitors (“a gentleman and a lady”)<sup>36</sup> before the reporters are granted entry to Whitman’s room. As they prepare to meet the man of the hour, Coates and Fort inform their readers of Whitman’s frailty. Rivas issues a similar disclaimer:<sup>37</sup>

He is very feeble, troubled with paralysis, and only on great occasions goes out of his house or sees visitors.	he is thin and weak, martyred by paralysis, and rarely is he seen crossing the garden streets of the poetic and silent city. <sup>38</sup>
---	--

Once inside Whitman’s chamber, Coates and Fort encounter a sight that inspires a visceral exclamation:

He had a leonine look. His long white hair fell partly over his face. And such a face! Strong, manly, and full of human nature.	Whitman’s countenance was majestic, with long thick hair that fell about his shoulders, half covering his face, as if it were the haughty [soberbia] mane of a lion [...] Whitman’s face is manly [varonil], full of noble signs and lines that accentuate a full, firm character. <sup>39</sup>
---	--

Whitman’s “look” evokes readings both physical and metaphysical. For the reporters, the animality of Whitman’s “leonine” hair ironically reinforces the manliness and humanity of the face it partly hides. The owner of such a face assumes a dual identity: he is both a “splendid picture” of old age and an undiluted specimen of “human nature.”

The reporters were not alone in their adulatory, oversignified portrayal of Whitman’s virile beauty, and their article speaks to public anxieties regarding the poet’s sexuality.<sup>40</sup> A week prior to the Camden visit, for example, a note in the *Bridgeton Pioneer* lauds the elder Whitman’s beauty to preface a corrective to his youthful indiscretions. The unattributed May 14<sup>th</sup> note in the “Peculiarities of People” column admires Whitman’s “splendid wealth of white hair,” his “face of majestic beauty,” and his “magnificent figure,” before admonishing his earlier “habit of associating with stage-drivers” and “outrageous style.”<sup>41</sup> The fuss over “stage-drivers” brings to mind Fred Vaughan, a Broadway stage driver that many suspect to have had an erotic relationship with Whitman in the 1850s.<sup>42</sup> Within the coded language of the *Bridgeton Pioneer* note, the poet’s past association with “Bohemian” dress and the ‘Fred Gray Association’—possibly an underground society for gay men<sup>43</sup>—is forgiven by his current state of purity:

“But of late years he has settled down into a decorous and most respectable character, as ‘the good, gray poet.’” The “good” in the reformed poet’s infamous epithet, then, is deemed incompatible with the allegations of “sexual evil” against which O’Connor defended Whitman in 1866. The *Bridgeton Pioneer*’s “good, gray poet” encodes a rebuke of Whitman’s “unsanctioned sexual nature” (Folsom, “Walt Whitman” 146).

Coates and Fort return to the moniker to interpret a visage “full of human nature,” rejecting anything inhuman or unnatural.<sup>44</sup> Rivas discerns the same plenitude (*carácter entero y firme*) and substantiates Whitman’s “leonine look” as a “lion’s mane” (*soberbia melena de un león*). *Soberbia* (or *soberbio* in the masculine form, as in Darío’s sonnet) is often translated as “haughty.” The English word denotes an elevated demeanor, as in O’Connor’s description of Whitman’s “nonchalant and haughty step along the pavement.” However, Rivas applies *soberbia* not to a behavior or “look” but to a fixed physical feature that symbolizes the lion’s status as king of the jungle. The Spanish term’s etymological link to *soberano* (“sovereign” as a noun or an adjective), a term that appears later in Rivas’s article, reinforces an enduring, royal identity. The permanence of Whitman’s noble crest conforms with a setting in which the sun’s monarchic authority empowers it to transcend an ephemeral bourgeois order.

The sun’s aristocracy touches Whitman’s body as another description of his face undergoes translation.

<p>There was a ruddy glow upon his cheeks as if he had been exposed to the sun.</p>	<p>in the sunbeams that entered through the window and gilded [le doraba] his serene face, there emerged a figure imposing, severe, poetic, and sweet all at once.<sup>45</sup></p>
---	---

The English depiction lets a “ruddy glow” reinforce the healthy fortitude that repudiates the “febleness” of Whitman’s body. The Spanish translation infuses the portrait with a precious material, gold (*le doraba la faz*). Just as the sound of rustling silk adorned Camden’s vegetation with the trappings of elegance, the sight of Whitman’s gilded face grants him an aura of aristocracy. His persona accumulates all the more potency for its contradiction. A golden face is as placid as it is imposing, none the less severe for its sweetness.

Following their introduction, Coates and Fort briefly chat with Whitman about the poetry of the day. Whitman declares “it is a golden age for literary workers,” adding that “Americans are a busy, rushing people, but have time to pause and listen to the muses, and if they sing in tune our people are ready to applaud.” Shortly after foreseeing that “the banner of American literature

will never trail in the dust,” the visit and the *Evening Star* article conclude. “El Poeta,” on the other hand, continues to narrate Whitman’s actions and thoughts after the reporters’ departure. The transition is at odds with the article’s journalistic framing as “the news of this report” and further prevents its classification as a translation *per se*.<sup>46</sup> Narrated in the present tense, the remainder of the day sees Whitman contemplate literature, stroll through his garden, and reflect on his own mortality. These meditations encompass a messianic “vision” of a revolutionary, “sovereign” poetic:

Surrounded by books and papers lives Whitman. [...] Within him is a reconcentration of feelings and ideas with no outlet, and he is absorbed in the vision of the great future of our America [*nuestra América*], which will be the sovereign [*soberana*] of the world in liberty and democracy. The noble old man must not die before condensing into one magnificent song his prophetic ideas and generous sentiments, to greet the dawn of the day that he glimpses in his visions of sublime patriot and his deliria of a prophetic poet.<sup>47</sup>

The visit had been reported “in recent days,” but now Whitman “lives” in an asylum of “books and papers,” insulated from the cacophony of industry. To paint his picture, Rivas expands a description in “The Good Gray Poet” of Whitman’s immediate surroundings, relocates the scene from the past tense to an eternal present. Coates and Fort portray a seemingly haphazard assembly: “The little room was almost covered with papers, magazines, and periodicals. They lay on the ground in heaps, on the floor and on the tables, and evidently had not been moved in many months.”<sup>48</sup> In Rivas’s telling, Whitman’s “one magnificent song” harmonizes not with his immediate place and time, but with “our America” in the true continental sense, differing from his previous reference to the nationality of his “American reporter friends.” This collective America is home to a Whitman now cast a sovereign prophet-poet tasked with inaugurating a revolutionary aesthetic. In fact, it is the very contrast between the song’s “reconcentrated” permanence and the chaos of modernity that empowers Whitman revolutionary persona. Just as his leonine hair is “haughty” (*soberbia*), America’s future is “sovereign” (*soberana*).<sup>49</sup>

### *Darío’s Medallion*

In Rivas’ “El Poeta Walt Whitman,” Whitman emerges from translation a singer-oracle laboring within Camden’s “truly idyllic” silence to quell the trespasses of materialism. Such a portrait would appeal to Rubén Darío, as “El Poeta” recalls the Nicaraguan author’s own prose of the period. The first edition of

*Azul...*, published in Valparaíso, Chile on July 30, 1888, inaugurated an influential movement that the author would later call *modernismo*. Darío allegorizes the *modernista* project in one of the most-cited stories of *Azul...*'s first edition, "The Bourgeois King."<sup>50</sup> The anti-materialist hero is the Poeta who escapes the "inspiration" of the "unclean city" so that he may "sing the word of the future" (301-302).<sup>51</sup> His own future, however, holds only rejection and humiliation at the hands of a King who debases the Poeta's song to mere capitalist exchange. Reduced to playing a music-box to earn bits of bread, the Poeta eventually dies in solitude, forgotten by the court and by a society unable or unwilling to apprehend the purity of his song. The story enacts the *modernista* ideal of concentrated, contemplative stillness, running counter to the acceleration and mechanization brought on by the growth of bourgeois capitalism in nineteenth-century Latin America.<sup>52</sup>

The Poeta's defeat is reversed in the sensorial power struggle staged in the *Revista Ilustrada*. Rivas's characterization of the steamship, which "has become the absolute king of the populous cities" (7), resonates with Darío's text and biography. The double meaning of "inspiration" in "The Bourgeois King" story aligns the impure air of the city with the corruption of poetic truth, just as a respite from the steamship's "thick black smoke" fortifies Camden's serene transcendence of "materialist calculations" (7). Artistic, environmental, and social contamination is definitively repudiated by Darío's poetic depiction of a Whitman who "breathes divine breath."

In addition to its allegorical value, the steamship stands out as a biographical point of reference. Darío would have recognized the "thick black smoke" first-hand as a resident of the port city of Valparaíso, Chile, where he primarily lived between June 1886 and February 1889 as he composed and published *Azul...*<sup>53</sup> Valparaíso was (and is) a nerve center of industrial transport, dominated by shipping steamships. The South American Steamship Company<sup>54</sup> was founded 1872, largely to compete with the London-based Pacific Steam Navigation Company, which also utilized the port.<sup>55</sup> In fact, North American and European immigrants played a central role in the city's rapid industrialization, contributing to an Anglophone association of bourgeois capitalism in the region. Darío's autobiographical "Tale of a Raincoat"<sup>56</sup> describes Valparaíso in 1887 as a hostile environment defined by rushed commerce and discomfort.

Valparaíso finds its antithesis in the Camden of "El Poeta Walt Whitman." A city invaded by industry gives way to a landscape of physical and temporal stillness. The hasty steamship is dethroned, echoing the temporal conflict of Darío's "The Bourgeois King." There, the Poeta's song of the future looks beyond the

bourgeois social order, even if the singer himself does not survive. Whitman's "magnificent song" is equally prospective, meant to inaugurate, as Rivas argues in "El Poeta," a glorious future for "Our America." Whitman harmonizes with Camden to affirm the *modernista* project laid out in *Azul*...

The work's expanded second edition, published in Guatemala on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1890, debuts Darío's sonnet "Walt Whitman" with this note:

Walt Whitman. In my opinion the greatest of North America's poets. [...] José Martí dedicated to him one of his most beautiful productions in *La Nación* of Buenos Aires, and Román Mayorga R. an excellent article in the *Revista Ilustrada de Nueva York*.<sup>57</sup>

Martí's 1887 essay, also entitled "El Poeta Walt Whitman," left a deep impression on Darío's view of the North American poet and his country (Lomas, 192). Rivas's rendition of "El Poeta," complex in its own right, would be fresh on Darío's mind: he read the article and composed his sonnet between the June publication of the *Revista Ilustrada* and the October 4<sup>th</sup> republication of *Azul*...

Like Rivas and Coates and Fort, Darío begins his portrayal not with the poet himself but with his locale. Whitman's "country of iron" in the opening line metonymizes the cold artificiality of factory production, corresponding to the "industrial centers" that Rivas juxtaposes with the serenity of Camden. The starkness of iron provides a contrasting backdrop for a first glimpse of the sonnet's "serene and holy" subject, whose beauty is identified with patriarchy. In presupposing a patriarch as inherently comely (*bello*), Darío sustains the polysemy assigned to Whitman's physique. Rivas's translation portrays a "serene face" gracing an oversignified "figure," echoing O'Connor's defense of "a man of striking masculine beauty—a poet—powerful and venerable in appearance; large, calm, superbly formed." Darío discerns this nexus of beauty, masculinity, and power in his subject's face.

Whitman's body both inhabits and transcends his material world. The uncorrupted air he breathes in line nine complements a mysterious power emanating in line three from "the Olympic furrow of his brow." The feature accentuates a moral, spiritual, and monarchical superiority. Whitman's cause is a noble one: the brow contains "something" (*algo*) that overcomes, conquers, and rules. By zeroing in on this vague yet transcendental force, Darío renews the corporeal reading of Whitman in which meaning expands just as the perspective narrows. More and more is gleaned as authors successively observe of Whitman's country, town, house, body, face, and wrinkles. Coates and Fort exclaim the normative power of Whitman's face, "[s]trong, manly, and full of human nature." Rivas's translation lauds these same qualities: virility and "full,

firm character” distinguished now in the poet’s the “noble signs and lines.” This overflow of significations is such that, ultimately, Whitman’s power escapes definition.

Darío caps his portrait in the sonnet’s final line with the “haughty (*soberbio*) face of an emperor!” The exclamation point recalls Coates and Fort’s cry – “such a face!” – and amplifies the loftiness of the poet’s behavior and identity. Whitman’s robust visage overshadows his “tired shoulders” and his kingliness perseveres even in a “country of iron.” By assigning *soberbio* both to Whitman’s appearance and to his status as “emperor,” the sonnet reaffirms the equation of the beautiful and the patriarchal. Darío’s poem reenacts the magnification of *soberbio* features to prefigure a *soberano* revolutionary poetic in Rivas’s “El Poeta Walt Whitman,” a formulation that translated and substantiated the “leonine look” described by Coates and Fort.

In “El Poeta,” Rivas departs from the journalistic register and past-tense reporting of Coates and Fort to convey words spoken by Whitman alone in his domicile. Darío’s Whitman also speaks, exhorting the “sailor” to “Row!” and thwarting the steamship’s mechanization of human labor. This approach is counterintuitive: the poem channels what James Perrin Warren identifies as Whitman’s “expansive, oracular, and often incantatory effect” through a form that could not be further from the North American poet’s free verse.<sup>58</sup> This paradoxical engagement illuminates Darío’s political vision of Whitman as a poetic counterforce to the United States’ imperialist project in Latin America.

### *Conclusion*

Each step of the translational journey traced here suggests further areas of inquiry. Coates and Fort’s narrative appears across multiple, at times contradictory publications. The various iterations of the article inconsistently present the actual date of the interview and obscure the search for a first, “original” publication. The indeterminacies expand as the narrative travels to a Spanish text that holds an ambiguous status as a translation that insistently magnifies and resignifies its source into scene that influences Darío’s imagining of Whitman. In addition to motivating further archival research, these lacunae reinforce the status of the North American poet’s representation as a nexus of competing narratives and discourses, and more generally highlight the problematics of translation and near-translation in Whitman’s international reception.

What remains consistent across multiple modes of translation is the signifying power of Whitman’s figure. “Something” (*algo*) in his Olympic furrow

allures even as it dominates and masters. The vagueness of this “algo” is telling: Whitman’s likeness is formed, deformed, and reformed as it passes through ideological contexts and media. The genealogy of texts responds to dual sexual and economic concerns. On the one hand, the texts compound anxieties stemming from contestations of Whitman’s sexuality in the North American press. On the other, the translational choices reflect the *modernista* resistance to capitalist displacement of social norms, embodied in economic and cultural imperialism.

The textual trajectory of Whitman’s masculine, imperial face does not tell the whole story. Critics often approach Darío’s sonnet in a visual terms, and portraiture drives the history traced here.<sup>59</sup> A comparison of the images that accompany the English and Spanish articles with photographs from the *Walt Whitman Archive* indicates a complex web of intersemiotic translations.<sup>60</sup> By the late 1880s, photography had become conspicuous element of Whitman’s public persona. Widely shared photographic portraits “had made him something of a celebrity” and were of keen interest to O’Connor, who had “vowed to make a collection of Whitman photos.”<sup>61</sup>

The sketch in Coates and Fort’s report resembles Napoleon Sarony’s 1878 photograph and Rivas’s essay in the *Revista Ilustrada* frames a sketch of Whitman that may derive from Jacob Spieler’s 1876 photograph, or from an intermediate rendering (see figures 3 and 4). Darío’s imagining of a patriarchal Whitman parallels the textual and visual nuances observed in the *Revista Ilustrada*. Although the image clearly reflects Spieler’s photograph, the illustrator darkens and emphasizes the wrinkles on Whitman’s brow. This accentuation reciprocates the textual magnifications that characterize Rivas’s translation choices. Ultimately, Darío renders in poetry a sketch that is itself a “translation” of a photograph, challenging the notion of a one-to-one correspondence of “source” to “target” text.

The journey from news report to literature, from photograph to sonnet, from “human nature” to *soberbia* requires an expansive critical toolbox, as well as keen attention to the interests of the contexts through which texts pass. Accounting for the plurality of agents and interests operate behind the scenes of textual movement provides nuance to critical readings. Lomas reads Rivas’s profile of Whitman as “[b]ased on a firsthand report of several reporter friends” (194). However, an archival tracing of the text as translation reveals a wider set of actors whose perspectives accumulate to shape Whitman’s image. Similarly, Nicolás Magaril attempts to determine where and when Darío read Whitman, but a translational reading recognizes a confluence of sources that includes the visual impact of the sketch.

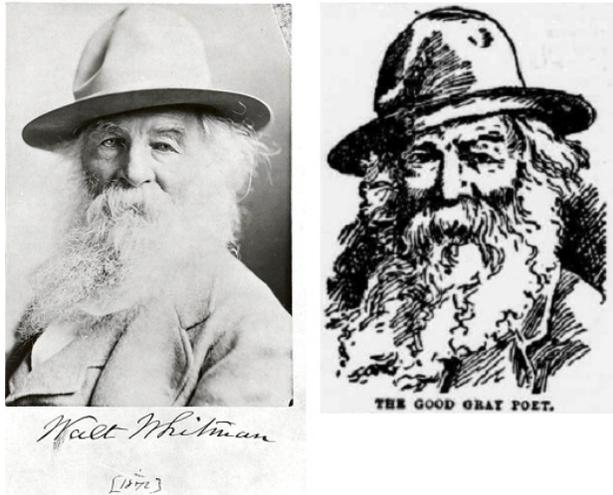


Figure 3: Comparison of Sarony's photograph with the sketch in the *Evening Star*.

Figure 4: Comparison of Spieler's photograph with the sketch in *Revista ilustrada*.



Understanding the complex actions of translation serves additional challenges to conventional institutional readings. Darío Villanueva's article "Darío in light of Whitman" was published during the 2016 "Century of Rubén Darío," commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the poet's death.<sup>62</sup> For the then-director of the *Royal Spanish Academy*,<sup>63</sup> "the North American's *oeuvre* did not escape the unending curiosity and erudition that characterize our poet [*nuestro poeta*]." Reciprocally, Carol M. Zapata-Whelan, in a brief entry for the *Walt Whitman Encyclopedia*, informs English-speaking readers that "[i]t is possible that Darío, unlike most of his contemporaries, read Whitman in English and soon honored this reading in his undervalued sonnet, 'Walt Whitman.'"<sup>64</sup> Rather than an isolated, singular "reading," the sonnet honors the synchronicity of multiple modes of translation in the Americas. The archival, transnational reading presented here challenges these reciprocal partialities, while showing how a traveling portrayal of Whitman accumulates markers of sociopolitical contestation in its origin as well as its destinations.

## Notes

1 Rubén Darío, “Walt Whitman,” in «*Yo Soy Aquel Que Ayer No Más Decía*»: *Libros Poéticos Completos* (Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2018), 388; all English translations are my own.

Original:

En su país de hierro vive el gran viejo,  
bello como un patriarca, sereno y santo.  
Tiene en la arruga olímpica de su entrecejo  
algo que impera y vence con noble encanto.

Su alma del infinito parece espejo;  
son sus cansados hombros dignos del manto;  
y con arpa labrada de un roble añejo  
como un profeta nuevo canta su canto.

Sacerdote, que alienta soplo divino,  
anuncia en el futuro, tiempo mejor.  
Dice el águila: «¡Vuela!», «¡Boga!», al marino,

y «¡Trabaja!», al robusto trabajador.  
¡Así va ese poeta por su camino  
con su soberbio rostro de emperador!

2 Darío, *Yo Soy Aquel*, 301. Original: “Román Mayorga R [le dedicó] un excelente artículo en la *Revista Ilustrada de Nueva York*.”

3 Vernon A. Chamberlin and Ivan A. Schulman, *La Revista Ilustrada de Nueva York: History, Anthology, and Index of Literary Selections* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1976), 10.

4 Laura Lomas, *Translating Empire: José Martí, Migrant Latino Subjects, and American Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 194.

5 Vernon A. Chamberlin and Ivan A. Schulman, *La Revista Ilustrada de Nueva York: History, Anthology, and Index of Literary Selections* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1976), 26. For this study, I viewed exemplars of the *Revista Ilustrada* at the Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas, Austin.

6 Román Mayorga Rivas, “El poeta Walt Whitman,” *Revista ilustrada de Nueva York* XI.6 (June 1890), 7. Original: “dos *reporters* americanos amigos míos [...] las noticias de este escrito” [*reporters* italicized in English in original].

7 Original: “tranquila” / “grandes centros industriales.”

8 Original: “flaco y débil” / “viril” / “llena de signos nobles y de líneas” Rivas’s makes note of Whitman’s weakness without specifying his strokes in 1873 and 1875. Whitman had moved to his family’s home in Camden after his stroke in 1873. Although he initially envisioned only a temporary stay, a debilitating second stroke in 1875 prevented his departure. See Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (University of California Press, 1999), 347-348.

9 Original: “poeta vaticinador” / “condensar en un canto magnífico sus ideas proféticas.”

10 Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*, ID: owu.00049 ([www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)).

11 See Stephanie M. Blalock, “More Than One Hundred Additional Reprints of Walt Whitman’s Short Fiction in Periodicals,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 35 (Summer 2017), 45–87; Ryan Cordell and Abby Mullen, “‘Fugitive Verses’: The Circulation of Poems in Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers,” *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 27 (Spring 2017), 29–52.

12 Foster Coats and Homer Fort, “The Good Gray Poet,” *Evening Star* (May 24, 1890), 8.

13 The articles’ bylines suggest a series of reprintings. The *Evening Star* presents the story as “correspondence of The Evening Star”; the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* as “Correspondence of The Dispatch”; and *Indianapolis Journal* as “special to The Indianapolis Journal.” As pointed out to me by Brandon James O’Neil, these bylines indicate that the stories were shared through the Associated Press, with which the papers were affiliated. O’Neil locates a fourth iteration in the May 25, 1890, edition of *The Buffalo Express* and suggests that others are likely to exist.

“The Good Gray Poet,” *The Pittsburgh Dispatch* (May 25, 1890), 9. “Whitman at Seventy-One,” *The Indianapolis Journal* (May 25, 1890), 9. Brandon James O’Neil, Personal communication, February 21, 2021.

14 Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*, ID: loc.05089.

Kelley Kreitz, “American Alternatives: Participatory Futures of Print from New York City’s Nineteenth-Century Spanish-Language Press” *American Literary History* 30 (Winter 2018), 681. The *Revista Ilustrada*’s office on Reade Street and West Broadway in New York City was just “a short stroll” from Park Row, the location of many English-language news outlets.

15 Coates and Fort, “Good Gray Poet,” *Evening Star*, 8.

16 William Douglas O’Connor, *The Good Gray Poet* (New York: Bunce and Huntington, 1866), available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*. Reprinted in Richard Maurice Bucke, *Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1883).

17 Ed Folsom, “Walt Whitman,” in *Prospects for the Study of American Literature: A Guide for Scholars and Students* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 134.

18 Roman Mayorga Rivas, “Walt Whitman,” *Revista ilustrada de Nueva York* XIII.5 (May 1892), 255-256. The obituary, which reprints the sketch found in the 1890 profile, is a complex text that merits further study. It contains several misattributed translations of descriptions of Whitman, and more directly addresses the controversies over the poet’s “obscurity.”

19 Kelly S. Franklin, “Nicaraguan Words”: José Coronel, the Vanguardia, and Whitman’s Language Experiment,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 34 (Summer 2016), 2.

20 Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” in *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna

Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 428-435.

21 See especially André Lefevere, *Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2002); Lawrence Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2012); Maria Tymoczko, *Translation, Resistance, Activism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010); Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler, *Translation and Power* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

22 Rivas, “El poeta,” 8. Original: “porvenir grandioso de nuestra américa.”

23 Coates and Fort, “Good Gray Poet,” *Evening Star*, 8; Rivas, “El Poeta,” 7.

24 Darío, “Walt Whitman.”

25 Original: “¡Cuán tranquila es la vieja ciudad de Camden, en New Jersey!”

26 Original: “En el silencio que la rodea, después que uno viaja y vive en estos grandes y bulliciosos centros industriales, encuéntrase una poesía verdaderamente idílica y campestre.”

27 For a summary of the “polemic” surrounding Darío’s sonnet among this same intelligentsia, see Nicolás Magaril, *José Martí y Pedro Mir: Walt Whitman en el Caribe* (2014), n.p.n.

Darío would later contribute personally to the *Revista* (Chamberlin and Schulman, 17).

28 José Martí, *Nuestra América* (Barcelona: Linkgua, 2010), 53. Original: “el gigante de las siete leguas!” Martí had seen Whitman lecture at the Madison Theater in 1887 and was in correspondence with Rivas during this period (Lomas, 194).

29 “A Roosevelt” in *«Yo Soy Aquel Que Ayer No Más Decía»: Libros Poéticos Completos* (Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2018), 388.

30 Original: “Al sol no le disputan allí su imperio sobre los hombres y la naturaleza, ni los edificios gigantescos, ni el humo espeso y negro del vapor, que se ha hecho rey absoluto de las ciudades populosas; . . .”

31 Original: “metida en su tranquila mansión, lejos de la malicia de los hombres, de la prosa de los negocios y de la frialdad de los cálculos materialistas.”

32 Rivas, “El poeta,” 7. Original: “el aire está impregnado en esta estación risueña con el olor de las lilas, que se abren á los besos húmedos de la aurora; . . .”

33 Original: “y el suelo es todo alfombra verde, donde los árboles se alzan frondosos y se agitan a compás, produciendo con sus sonantes hojas un ruido semejante al que hacen las femeninas vestiduras de seda en una noche de baile.”

34 Original: “en tanto que las flores de los jardines que rodean á Camden se enderezan olorosas y trémulas al cielo, en medio de la quietud solemne de las noches estivales, para que la luna las alumbre en el acto de sus amores fecundos. . . .”

35 An anonymous reader noted that the doorman was probably Warren Fritzinger, Whitman’s nurse in his late years.

36 Original: “un muchacho” / “un caballero y una dama.”

37 Rivas seems to misconstrue the chronology of the visit, which occurred shortly before Whitman’s birthday on the 31<sup>st</sup>.

38 Original: “Acaba de cumplir setenta y un años ese cantor antiguo, está flaco y débil, martirizado por la parálisis, y muy rara vez se le ve cruzar las calles de los jardines de la ciudad poética y silenciosa.”

39 Original: “El aspecto de Whitman presentábase majestuoso, con su cabellera larga y poblada, que le caía sobre los hombros, medio cubriéndole el rostro, como si fuera soberbia melena de un león. . . . La faz de Whitman es varonil, llena de signos nobles y de líneas que acentúan un carácter entero y firme.”

40 Several examples are listed in *Chronicling America*'s summary of Whitman's presence in the archive: “The Good Gray Poet Is White Now” *The Sun* (New York, NY), April 15, 1887, Image 1, col. 4; “Good Gray Poet, Walt Whitman's Seventieth Birthday is Celebrated To-Day,” *The Evening World* (New York, NY), May 31, 1889, Extra 2 O'clock, Page 2, Image 2, col. 5; “Good Gray Poet” *The Evening Bulletin* (Maysville, KY), October 22, 1890, Image 1, col. 2.

41 “Peculiarities of People,” *Bridgeton Pioneer* (May 16, 1890) 3.

42 Vivian R. Pollak, *The Erotic Whitman* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 2000), xx. The reference also recalls O'Connor's minimization of the allegations against Whitman as based on little more than seeing him “riding upon the top of an omnibus” (n.p.n.).

43 Zachary Turpin, “Introduction to Walt Whitman's ‘Manly Health and Training,’” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 33 (Winter/ Spring 2016), 151-152.

44 The reporters' reaction recalls the meaning the poet himself gave to “manly,” which tied together physical health, moral fortitude, and aesthetic bravado, as Turpin notes his reading of Whitman's 1858 “Manly Health and Training” (149). In the text, masculinity exudes from the body and from verse, and speaks to national character: “the poet treats as inseparable the notions of masculinity, strength, individual health, and national character” (166).

45 Original: “Presentábase . . . , á los rayos del sol que se entraba por la ventana y le doraba la faz apacible, una figura imponente, severa, poética y dulce á la vez.”

46 The hybridization of fiction and non-fiction is representative of the magazine's editorial philosophy (see Chamberlin and Schulman, 4).

47 Original: “Rodeado de libros y papeles vive Whitman. . . . Es que hay en él una reconcentración de sentimientos é ideas sin salida, y le tiene absorto la visión del porvenir grandioso de nuestra América, que será la soberana del mundo por la libertad y la democracia. No se ha de morir el noble viejo sin condensar en un canto magnífico sus ideas proféticas y sus sentimientos generosos, para saludar la aurora del día brillante que él columbra en sus ensueños de patriota excelso y sus delirios de poeta vaticinador.”

48 Coates and Fort, “Good Gray Poet,” (*Evening Star*), 8.

49 Rivas's image of an “absorbed” Whitman prefigures José Coronel Urtecho's proclamation of a generative, continental poetic (Franklin, 4). Coronel's canon of American deliverance comes to include, appropriately enough, Darío himself, alongside Whitman and Edgar Allen Poe.

50 Rubén Darío, “El Rey Burgués” in *«Yo Soy Aquel Que Ayer No Más Decía»: Libros Poéticos Completos* (Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2018), 301-302.

51 Original: “inspiración” / “ciudad malsana” / “canto el verbo del porvenir.”

- 52 See Franklin, 2-3, and Lomas for elaboration.
- 53 Alfonso Calderón, *A Memorial to Valparaíso* (Santiago de Chile: Ril Editores, 2001), 69-70.
- 54 Spanish name: *Compañía Sudamericana de Vapores*
- 55 René de la Pedraja Tomán, *Oil and Coffee: Latin American Merchant Shipping from the Imperial Era to the 1950s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998), 27-29.
- 56 Rubén Darío, "Historia de un sobretodo" in *Cuentos Completos de Rubén Darío* (Oregon Publishing, 2016), 246.
- 57 Darío, *Yo soy aquel*, 388. Original: "Walt Whitman. En mi opinión el más grande de los poetas de la América del Norte [...] José Martí le dedicó una de sus más bellas producciones en *La Nación* de Buenos Aires, y Román Mayorga R [le dedicó] un excelente artículo en la *Revista Ilustrada de Nueva York*."
- 58 James Perrin Warren, "Style and Technique(s)," in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman* (London: Routledge, 2013), 694.
- 59 Magaril; Josef Raab, "El gran viejo: Walt Whitman in Latin America," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 3.2 (2001), 3. Magaril describes the sonnet as a "sketch" or "portrait" to highlight the metrical irony of a *modernista* vision of Whitman. Similarly, Raab employs the pictorial metaphor of the "Rorschach test" to describe Whitman's reception by Darío and other Latin American authors. The visual register is also central to Martí's "El Poeta Walt Whitman," which opens with "a portrait of Whitman as aged prophet-bard" (Zapata-Whelan n.p.n.).
- 60 Franklin, 2.
- 61 Ed Folsom, "Introduction: 'This Heart's Geography's Map,'" "The Photographs of Walt Whitman," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 4 (Fall 1986), 1-3.
- 62 Darío Villanueva, "Darío a la luz de Whitman," *Babelia* (February 2016), 6.
- 63 Spanish title: *Real Academia Española*.
- 64 "Whitman in Spain and Spanish America," available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.