

Walt Whitman, Christopher Columbus and Rubén Darío

*Ilán Stavans**

Was it destiny's game? Perhaps. The geographical and historical border that divides the United States from the rest of the hemisphere is, at least metaphorically, a chance happening and also a an abyss.

Two civilizations, two psychologies, two world views: the southern, timid and introspective, resenting abuses, encroachment and violence, looking backward to yesterday; and the northern, victorious, self-assured, looking forward to the future.

October 12, 1492 was zero hour, the first day, when tragedy struck some and glory came to others. From then on, patterns of behavior were established

and perpetuated. Today the creature has two faces.

It will always be a delightful pastime to analyze, compare, and dissect the two literary portraits of the Genoese admiral with the shifting names; Christopher Columbus north of the Río Grande; Cristóbal Colón to the south¹. This article compares the version by Walt Whitman, considered North America's poet of poets, with that of his Latin American equivalent, Rubén Darío. Is it the same song, or two different voices? Their perspectives and goals are diametrically opposed: one geography and two realities, one sailor and two portraits.

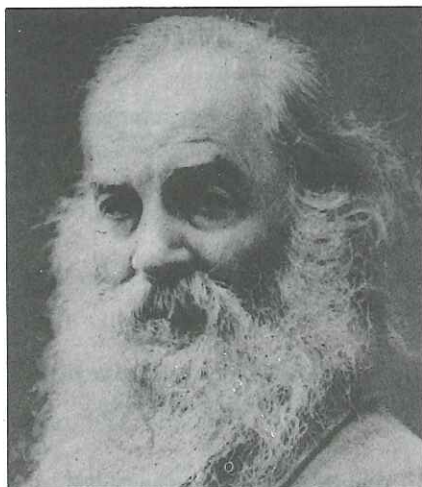
According to Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Darío is the first Latin American poet to be taken seriously in Spain, particularly by Juan Valera and Juan Ramón Jiménez. But something

very different happened in the United States, where the Nicaraguan's influence on poetry was minimal or non-existent.

On the other hand, Whitman's adventures in Latin America are well documented. His modernist followers were José Martí, Darío himself, Leopoldo Lugones and Manuel Santos Chocano; his post-modernist followers, Sabat Ercaasty and Gabriela Mistral; Pablo Neruda, Javier Martínez Estrada and Vicente Huidobro among the avant-gardists, as well as Jorge Luis Borges and Octavio Paz.

What did they all find in his work? The liberating poetic voice, a communion between poet and society, a celebration of the self. Darío should be included among the passionate Whitman admirers, although they never met².

It would be a serious error to conclude that, by a mere and not the least symbolic coincidence, both poets, one from the north and one from the south, chose Columbus as their target, their lyric inspiration. After all, he is the port of entry, the salutation. For better



Walt Whitman.

¹ Several studies undertake this analysis. The most ambitious is by Earl E. Fitz in *Rediscovering the New World, Inter-American Literature in a Comparative Context*, Iowa, 1991. It should be noted that the author omits this communion between Whitman and Darío on the cardinal point of Columbus. In this respect, see my essay, "E Pluribus Unum", *Review*, Penn. State University, vol. 14, 1992, pp. 43-54. Another valuable contribution is *Reinventing the Americas, Comparative Studies of Literature of the United States and Spanish America*, Chevigny, Bell Gale and Gari Laguardia, eds., Cambridge, 1986.

² See the excellent biography by Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman, A Life*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1980. Also my essay "Walt Whitman en persona", *La Nueva España*, Oviedo, May 10, 1992, p. 10.

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or worse, the continent's modern history begins with Columbus. The Cuban, Alejo Carpentier wrote: in him lies the metaphor of the beginning³.

Whitman's text, in *Autumn Rivulets*, is entitled "Prayer of Columbus". It became part of the 1889 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. According to Gay Wilson Allen's biography, *The Solitary Singer*, he wrote it in the autumn of 1873 or the winter of 1874, while going through a difficult period of loneliness and desperation, whence the autobiographical tone⁴.

It was first published in *Harper's Monthly*⁵. Consisting of twelve stanzas, it has an arithmetical poetic structure. Whitman, the individualist, portrays the navigator as an ambitious and confused man:

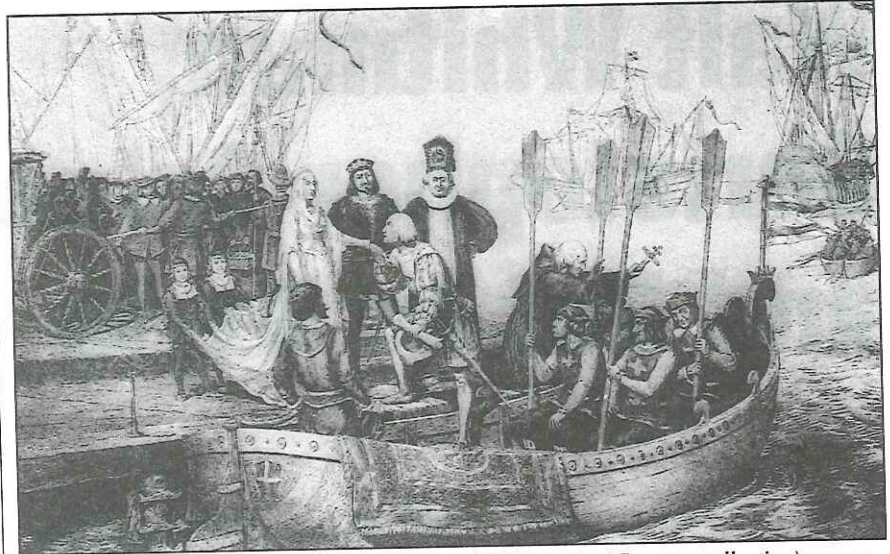
*A batter'd wreck'd old man,
Thrown on this savage shore, far, far
from home,
Pent by the sea and dark rebellious
brows, twelve
dreary months,
Sore, stiff with many toils, sicken'd and
nigh to death,
I take my way along the island's edge,
Venting a heavy heart.*

*I am too full of woe!
Haply I may not live another day;
I cannot rest O God, I cannot eat or
drink or sleep,
Till I put forth myself, my prayer, once
more to Thee.*

³ Columbus, as a literary figure, has attracted poets, dramatists and novelists on both sides of the Río Grande: Washington Irving, William, Carlos Williams, Alejo Carpentier, Carlos Fuentes, Abel Posse, Alfred Tennyson, Joel Barlow and others. See my book, *Imagining Columbus: The Literary Voyage*, New York, Twayne, 1992.

⁴ The same feelings are evident in "Song of the Redwood Tree". See Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, introd. Gay Wilson Allen, New American Library, New York, 1955, pp. 328-330. All quotes are from this edition.

⁵ *Harper's Monthly* XLVIII, February 1874, pp. 366-7.



Columbus' departure from the port of Palos, August 3, 1492 (Granger collection).

*Breathe, bathe myself once more in
Thee, commune with
Thee, Report myself once more to Thee.*

The preface to this first edition in *Harper's Monthly* says: "It was near the close of his indomitable and pious life — on his last voyage, when nearly seventy years of age — that Columbus, to save his two remaining ships from foundering in the Caribbean Sea in a terrible storm, had to run them ashore on the island of Jamaica — where, laid up for a long and miserable year (1503) — he was taken very sick, had several relapses, his men revolted, and death seemed daily imminent; though he was eventually rescued and sent home to Spain to die, unrecognized, neglected and in want...⁶" Thus it is Whitman himself who, in his old age, identifies with the Genoese admiral.

Eight years later, a few months after Whitman's death, Rubén Darío went to Spain, invited to take part in the four-hundredth anniversary festivities. For this occasion he wrote *A Colón*, which fifteen years later was included in *El canto errante*, a volume printed in Madrid in 1907.

⁶ Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer. A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman*, New York, 1967, pp. 458-9.

Composed in fourteen dodecasyllabic quatrains of unequal hemistichs, *A Colón* belongs to the second era of Darío's poetry, when he was in a period of intense poetic renewal. The content is more militant than historical; the cadence more denunciatory than harmonious. Whitman's Columbus, though confused and perplexed, looks to the future; Darío's *Colón* looks back on tragedy⁷.

*Unfortunate admiral! Your poor
America,
your beautiful, hot-blooded, virgin
Indian love,
the pearl of your dreams, is now hysterical,
her nerves convulsing and her forehead
pale.*

*A most disastrous spirit rules your land:
where once the tribesmen raised their
clubs together,
now there is endless warfare between
brothers,
the self-same races wound and destroy
each other.*

*The stone idol is gone, and in its place
a living idol sits upon a throne,*

⁷ Rubén Darío, *El canto errante*, Madrid: Editorial Pérez Villavicencio, 1907, pp. 23-24. Later references are from that edition.

while everyday the pallid dawn reveals
the blood and ashes in the fields of
neighbors.

Disdaining kings, we give ourselves our
laws
to the sound of cannons and of bugle-calls,
and now, on the sinister behalf of black
kings,
each Judas is a friend of every Cain.

We love to drink the festive wines of
France;
day after day we sing the Marseillaise
in our indigenous, semi-Spanish voices,
but end by roaring out the Carmagnole.
(trans. Lysander Kemp, *Selected Poems
of Rubén Darío*)

In contrast to "Prayer of
Columbus", Darío does not speak
through Columbus: the navigator's
personal destinies interest him less than
the impact of the Spanish conquerors
who followed him. His indifference and
his complaint are aimed at them. He
needs to picture the continent's
apocalyptic destiny, with its fratricidal
battles and ominous fortune.

However, God's presence is
symptomatic in both. Whitman's
Columbus is puritan; he sees himself as
a prophet, or at least he surmises it.



Rubén Darío.

"Is it the prophet's thought I speak,
or am I raving?"

The entire text is a prayer, a plea,
a monologue to the divinity:
*One effort more, my altar this bleak
sand;
That thou O God my life hast lighted,
With ray of light, steady, ineffable,
vouchsafed of Thee,
Light rare untellable, lighting the very
light,
Beyond all signs, descriptions,
languages;
For that O God, be in my latest word,
here on my knees,
Old, poor, and paralyzed, I thank Thee.*

Darío is direct, crude; his images
are religious, allegorical. He advises
Columbus to pray to God for the future
of the Paradise Lost that is Latin
America:
*Evil mischance has placed afflictions,
horrors,
wars, and unending fevers in our way:
O Christopher Columbus, unfortunate
admiral,
pray to God for the world that you
discovered!*
(Trans. Kemp)

The phenomenon of religious
syncretism pains him deeply: pre-
Columbian gods replaced by Christ.
That substitution was ineffectual, he
says in stanza 13, because
Christianity's symbol travels weakly,
alone through the miserable, empty
streets of the hemisphere.

Other recurrent themes are corrupt
politics, governments that use terror to
enforce their law, linguistic destruction,
and the literatures that have betrayed
the glorious Spanish tradition of Miguel
de Cervantes and Calderón de la Barca.
Darío has abandoned his idealized
vision of the continent, expressed in
"Caupolicán".

While Whitman's favorite
pronouns are personal and first-person
possessive ("By me and these the work
so far accomplished/ By me earth's
elder cloy'd and stifled lands uncloy'd,
unloos'd/ By me the hemispheres

rounded and tied, the unknown to the
known"). Darío uses second person
pronouns and the accusative case
(*"When once the seed of the iron race
from Spain / was planted in the womb
of the Americas, / the heroic strength of
great Castile was mixed / with the
strength of our own Indians of the
mountains. // Would to God that these
waters, once untouched, / had never
mirrored the white of Spanish sails, /
and that the astonished stars had never
seen / those caravels arriving at our
shores!* (Trans. Kemp). Darío assumes
that collective misfortune has stained
everything, including literature.

According to Roberto Fernández
Retamar, the histories of North and
Latin America are so different, they are
incommensurable. Fernando Alegría
proves it: "It is curious to note that
writing on the same subject, they differ
so much; for Whitman, Columbus
represents the tragedy of vain effort, of
solitude, old-age misery and sublime
achievement ignored; for Darío, the
navigator's figure is a pretext for
arguing against the division of America
and the supremacy of material values,
which the poet calls "prosaic",
defended by dictators and
revolutionaries. On one hand, it is a
moving human story, on the other, a
political lecture⁸."

I doubt that two poetic texts better
illustrate two views of the world:
individualistic versus collective;
triumphalist versus fatalistic;
democratic versus politically corrupt;
futuristic versus unjust. Two versions
that are geographic neighbors, in spite
of the fact that they live with their
backs turned to each other.
Christopher split in half **M**

⁸ Fernando Alegría, *Walt Whitman en
Hispanoamérica*, México, "Colección
Stadium", 1954, p. 134. An essay that
enlarges on and discusses the book is "The
Accidental Tourist: Walt Whitman in Latin
America", by Enrico Mario Santi, in *Do the
Americas have a Common Literature?*,
Gustavo Pérez Firmat, ed., Duke University
Press, 1990, pp. 156-76.