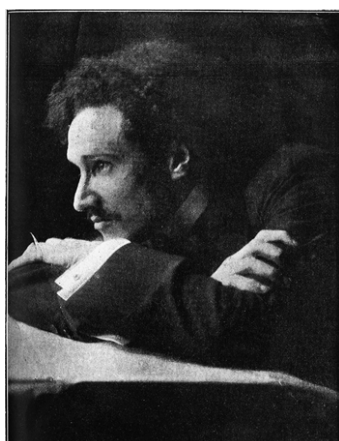


criticism in translation

Preface to the Sixth Edition of *Walt Whitman: Poemas*

ÁLVARO ARMANDO VASSEUR



INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION
BY MATT COHEN AND RACHEL PRICE

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Introduction

ÁLVARO ARMANDO VASSEUR'S 1912 SELECTION AND TRANSLATION OF WALT WHITMAN'S POETRY, TITLED SIMPLY *WALT WHITMAN: POEMAS*, WAS an extremely influential text for hispanophone readers—the first substantial collection of Whitman poems in Spanish. Scholars have identified Vasseur's translation as instrumental in accelerating Latin American poetry's shedding of its *modernista* tendencies in favor of franker, often more explicitly socially and politically engaged verse.¹ Republished frequently throughout the period of extraordinary historical and aesthetic change bounded by 1912 and 1951, *Poemas* played a crucial role in keeping both Whitman and Vasseur in the public eye. Of Vasseur's prefaces to the various editions of the work, that to the sixth edition is the longest and most elaborate declaration of his sense of Whitman's importance to international letters.

Vasseur was born in 1878 to French immigrants in Montevideo, Uruguay. He grew up in the small town of Santa Lucía, Canelones, about thirty miles outside the capital, leaving at twenty for Buenos Aires, Argentina. There he mingled with the prominent *modernista* writers Rubén Darío and Leopoldo Lugones.² While in Buenos Aires, Vasseur grew increasingly interested in Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and scientific materialism. The last provided him with tools to combat what he later called the “sentimental socialism” he had previously known (*Infancia* 59).

In 1901 Vasseur returned to Montevideo and threw himself into a host of projects. He soon published several books of poetry, including *Cantos aurales* (1904) and *Cantos del Nuevo Mundo* (1907). At the turn of the century, neo-Romanticism and *modernismo* had reigned in River Plate literature; now they were giving way to more “social” poetry. With fin de siècle sociopolitical ferment and the turn toward both socialism and *modernismo*, the liberal literary scene in Montevideo took up residence in a series of informal watering holes such as the café Polo Bamba, the “Carlos Marx” and “Emilio Zolá” clubs, and the International Center for Social Studies.³ Vasseur found

The photograph on this page is the frontispiece of Américo Llanos (Álvaro Armando Vasseur), A flor de alma (Montevideo?: O. M. Bertani, 1907).

Whitman's rhetoric of democracy consonant with the overlapping of politics, civic culture, and art in this climate. It is not surprising, then, that the same press responsible for the diffusion of European revolutionary thinkers such as Max Stirner, Marx, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Georg Büchner, and Nietzsche would publish Vasseur's translation of Whitman: the Spanish editorial house Sempere, based in Valencia.

In 1907, at age twenty-nine, Vasseur was named an Uruguayan consul to San Sebastián, Spain. As he recounts in the preface translated here, his interest in Whitman developed quickly during this time. Though Whitman's work had been known to Spanish-language critics (such as José Martí) who encountered it in the United States or in translation in other European languages, Whitman remained all but untranslated into Spanish until Vasseur's 1912 edition. Balbino Dávalos translated a few of Whitman's poems on the occasion of the second American International Congress held in Mexico City in 1901; Miguel de Unamuno translated some in 1906 (Englekirk 134; Allen 320). Only with Vasseur's edition did Whitman become available and important to generations of Latin American poets, from the residual *modernistas* to the region's major figures in the twentieth century, including César Vallejo, Pablo Neruda, and Jorge Luís Borges.⁴

In the preface translated here, Vasseur situates Whitman and his translation in the history of American cosmopolitan literary channels. To do so, he necessarily offers a detailed account of both the context for his translation and the methods he used to compose it. In it, too, he struggles with the influence of Darwinism and Freudianism as new intellectual frameworks for understanding Whitman's complex blend of spirituality and materialism.

Here Vasseur repositions Whitman largely through a critique of George Santayana's account of Whitman's poetry in "The Poetry of Barbarism" (1900 [*Interpretations*, ch. 7]). Vasseur uses Santayana to read Whitman as simultaneously a national and an international figure, critiquing Santayana's intellectual homelessness as he defines Whitman's portability against it.⁵ Some anxiety about Santa-

yana's international literary capital may be at work here, betrayed also in the harshness about Martí and Darío (figures often praised by critics today as vectors for Whitman's poetry into the hispanophone world). Throughout the preface, Vasseur argues that Whitman is in the vanguard of secular civilization, which Vasseur equates with high culture. But in using the consistently spiritual Whitman to argue for secularization and in arguing his Americanness—implying both a kind of *terroir* and a search for hemispheric affinity in Whitman's writing—Vasseur suggests how complex the uses of Whitman were in Latin America. Vasseur's text is rich with the challenges of the translation enterprise and exemplifies the flexibility Whitman offers his translators.

NOTES

The text, slightly abridged, is taken from Vasseur, "Prólogo." Among sections cut (all from the first part of the text) are passages describing Vasseur's first encounters with Whitman's work and his reliance on a variety of sources. A summary of excerpts conveys the timeline Vasseur sketches: "I saw a copy of the sixth edition of *Leaves of Grass* on Lugones's small worktable, towering over the piles of French modernist volumes. . . . In 1902, in the Comini Bookstore in Montevideo, I found the two short volumes of the Italian version of the *Leaves*, published by Sonsogno (Milan, 1896). . . . In the summer of 1908, in San Sebastián, Spain, I found out from L. Tailhade . . . that Bazalgette had been persuaded to undertake the arduous task of translating it into French. . . . Having arrived in March 1907, I had resided in the Balearic capital for almost two years. Most of my friends were English. In one of those pleasant homes . . . among many other books of prose and verse [was] Whitman: *Leaves of Grass*. It was the third encounter. The second had been in the library of Dr. Vitale, from 1905 to 1906, in Montevideo. . . . In general, when I needed to translate I undertook it well accompanied." We have translated poetic quotations literally, to convey the feel of Vasseur's style; we have rendered titles, however, using the standard English versions for the sake of clarity. Quotations from English-language writers like Santayana and Whitman may not, consequently, match their sources. We have provided citations of and occasional quotations from the originals where known.

1. The Chilean scholar Fernando Alegría's pioneering *Walt Whitman en Hispanoamérica* offers comprehensive, cogent readings of the Vasseur translation and has been

the foundation for all subsequent studies. Alegría writes that “of all the Spanish translations of Whitman’s book it is the one that has had the greatest influence on the poets and public of Spain and Hispanoamerica” (349). For a more detailed genealogy of the translation and for new insights into it, see Santí, “Accidental Tourist,” and an updated version of that essay, with an exhaustive list of post-Alegría receptions of Whitman in Latin America, in Santí, *Ciphers* 66–83.

2. Rubén Darío (1867–1916), born in Nicaragua, has been credited with pioneering some of the most profound changes in modern Spanish-language poetry and with inaugurating what would later be called *modernismo*. Though a break with earlier styles, *modernismo* in the hispanophone world was not completely radical; it was akin to symbolism, emphasizing the precious, the sublime, and the exotic, while favoring complicated meters. Still, Darío’s 1905 *Cantos de vida y de esperanza* (“Songs of Life and of Hope”) includes directly political poems, including “A Roosevelt” (“To Roosevelt”), cited by Vasseur, which critiques United States imperialism in the region. Leopoldo Lugones (1874–1938) is Argentina’s foremost *modernista* poet and one of the movement’s central figures overall. In his youth, Lugones contributed to socialist publications, but by the end of his life he had become a supporter of fascism. His poetry similarly shifted from innovative to reactionary, coming to reflect what Lugones considered simple, “Argentine” values that accorded with his conservative, nationalist political views. The Lugones Vasseur credits with having discovered Whitman in 1896 therefore belonged to the first stage in his career. In addition to his *modernista* poetry, Lugones wrote prose fiction, most notably the proto-science fiction or fantastic stories in his 1906 collection *Fuerzas extrañas* (“Strange Forces”).

3. For further consideration of this moment, see Achugar; Visca-Arturo.

4. For more on Whitman’s role in Latin American literary aesthetics, see Santí, “Accidental Tourist”; Salessi and Quiroga. Following Vasseur’s edition, selected poems by Whitman continued to be translated by writers such as the Cuban poet José de Armas y Cárdenas and the Chilean author and critic Arturo Torres-Rioseco. Complete translations of *Leaves of Grass* into Spanish followed in the postwar era, beginning with Concha Zardoya’s 1946 full translation with additional prose selections, *Obras escogidas*.

5. Vasseur calls Santayana—who, having lived his first years in Spain, remained a Spanish citizen despite

decades spent in the United States and Europe—“country-less” (*sin patria*). Vasseur praises select contemporary Spanish philosophers and writers, such as Unamuno (born one year after Santayana), for expounding an anti-fascist and democratic secularism. But he implies that as a foreigner (*extranjero*), Santayana (who at one time endorsed the Italian fascist emphasis on hierarchy) remains outside the early-twentieth-century, transatlantic hispanism that Vasseur endorses and finds in Whitman. On Santayana in Spanish American literary circles, see Rojas.

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Preface to the Sixth Edition

[. . .] I HAVE NEVER COMMENTED ON, NOR, IN the face of certain objections, defended, the Spanish translation¹ of the *Poems*. I undertook it, like so many other undertakings, in an educative spirit: selecting the most enthusiastic, the most meaningfully Americanist, psalms; making myself read the original; verifying the translations and preferring the most rhythmic; purifying, pruning, and at times enriching it with some spark, like that of “the Cathedrals strung with stars.” Poetic follies less childish than the one by Darío—“Oh faraway star, / who would kiss your luminous lips”—or that brash exclamation, in the final verse of the poem to the first Roosevelt, in which he treats as “one thing” the concept of the Infinite sum: “And if you have it all you lack *one thing*: God.”²

I left aside crude paths, redundancies, trivialities, particularly weaknesses and senile mawkishness.

In this way *the selection* proved to be the *sursum* that those directionless generations needed.

Revitalization of poetical thematics does not emanate from the mutiny of the Indo-Hispano-Gallic “Camelot.” Burns initiates it, Wordsworth continues it, Whitman accentuates it democratically. We continue it with the *Augural Songs* and then with the translation of the *Leaves*. We have always congratulated ourselves for having hit on what had to be done. It was a great, an opportune, move and, as such, thanks to incalculable subsequent reverberations, a cultural event, of moral and poetical import superior to the stir caused in the English language by Fitzgerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat*. The best that could be attempted in the format of the volumes—for pennies—of Sempere’s Popular Library (Valencia, Spain).

Ours is not a “sectarian version,” nor is it polemical, nor corrupt. It is the re-creation

of a thinker (“mais vous, vous êtes un philosophe,”³ Bergson’s phrase of 1909) that sows seed to nourish, to fortify, to exalt youth. Poetic prose, prosaic poetry, with a vitalist ethic, of a homo faber, conscious of continental destinies, that proclaims its faith in technological and social progress. The march of American generations toward ever-more-prosperous ends; confidence in and hope for everything and everyone.

It is not the same thing to take action between 1900 and 1910 as it is to do so between 1934 and 1938 or 1942 and 1945. Consider again the Hispanic situation then: in 1909 Ferrer, founder of the “Modern School,” is shot in Montjuic by order of the academic Maura and his minister La Cierva.⁴ Those who propagated or possessed books from [Sempere’s] Library, one of whose branches was directed by our friend Odon de Buen, were suspect. Marquina would go to Palacio to read his historical dramas. Valle Inclán evoked the exploits of mounted Carlist rebels. Machado confessed “that in spite of his drops of Jacobin blood, his verses gushed forth from a serene fount.” Unamuno, preaching in Salamanca, pressed on with his dexterous cleverness. Nervo wondered—perhaps with humor more political and literary than mystical—“Where do the dead go, Lord? Where do they go?”⁵

Amid that traditionalist sybaritism—the model for our oligarchies, our travesties of democracies—rare were they who, like Galdós, Iglesias, Blasco Ibáñez, Giner, Cossío, Soriano,⁶ some at *Modern Spain* and the *White Review*, conserved the sacred fire: the critical, rationalist, civilizing fire.

Sempere brought out our commentaries on Marx and Engels’s *Origins of the Family and the State* in 1908, comments written in Montevideo from 1901 to 1903. Pueyo was

publishing *El Memorial*—1908, where genuinely rationalist pages abound, like “The Word Game,” an insert in *The Day*, in 1906, and *Ovid’s Exile* in 1908.⁷

I should point out that in the same year—1912, or the following—in which Sempere issues the two works *Songs of the New World* and *Poems of Walt Whitman*, various innovations in lyric blossom in the United States: the magazine *Poets* [i.e., *Poetry*], Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, then Sandburg’s *Chicago Poems*, and around 1915 Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology*.

Considering the power of diffusion achieved in both worlds by the economical editions of the Sempere Press, it should come as no surprise that the launching of our works—daughter and goddaughter—should have contributed to these and other poetic renaissances, in particular the preface, enthusiastic, *augural*, to the *Poems of the Yankee*.⁸

Our object at present is defensive, concerning the selectiveness of the translation and the arbitrary, contradictory opinions of Santayana (whence his echoes among Selenites, mounted on cold-blooded Pegasuses).

I give three aspects of these, written in different historical moments. The second, in which [Santayana] recognizes that “there can be no better knowledge than that which rests on animal faith,” that natural science is the human symbol of these facts, emends no small number of the critical objections put forth in the first.⁹

“His world,” he says, “knows no personal passions, characters, destinies. It is a world without consistency or plan; rather, a chaos, a *fantasmagoria* of continuous internal visions, vivid, but monotonous and *difficult to distinguish* [!] in the memory, like sea waves or the decorations of a barbaric temple. *Sublime* only by *the infinite aggregation of parts*”: sublime!

Richness of perception without intelligent order, of fantasy without taste, is what characterizes his genius. There is no poet who equals him in apprehending the elemental aspects

of things. His vision of the immediate and primary, of the concrete and individual, is united with a power of graphic characterization whose lack of sustained style, of a fixed principle of selection, permits him to express aspects of things and of emotions that would be hidden to a more polished writer. His poetry is governed not by the mentality of a coordinator, nor by a formal mold that organizes its fragments into unity, nor by the memory of other poets. In the face of this baptismal style, all the old poets appear artificial and conventional [what praise!]. He submerges himself in the common life without confronting it with some precious ideal: he considers it as effect and index of the more indeterminate and elemental forces. Thus, vulgarity, in the midst of a cosmic scene, ends up appearing sublime.

He is the *poet of the common man*, and he would wish all men to be common [“I would also forge great individuals”]. In his work *there is no story, there are no characters. His hero is “I,” the man of today and of tomorrow, vigorous, cordial, rough, handy, of the fields and of the cities, particularly wanderers, drivers, pioneers. Those who believe that he represents the North American spirit are foreigners, desirous of finding some grotesque [?] expression of the genius of such an astonishing people.*

The foreigner is Santayana.¹⁰ Neither is he popular, for all that his verses might have sentiments of gregariousness, friendship, and human brotherhood.¹¹ If he had been able to plumb and comprehend the common people of his lands, he would have demonstrated the truth that nothing is farther from the common man than “*the perverse desire to be primitive.*” The poor profess the cult of heroes and believe that riches, power, knowledge, and love are indisputable goods. The work of W. is “that of a barbarian” *as much for its philosophy as for its form:*

Its value must be sought in the simple and elemental grandeur that his thought and art customarily achieve. Does he not, after all, definitively appeal—rather than to reasoned social aspirations—to more generic

and primitive impulses? He speaks to those souls and those circumstances of the soul in which a sensuality infused with base mysticism dominates. Freeing us from traditional conventions, descending to the level of the feelings and instincts, he creates the illusion that by doing so we return to the natural; or we soar to the infinite. Mysticism makes us proud and devout in renouncing the works of intelligence, as much in thought as in life; it persuades us that we will be divine in continuing to be rudimentarily human.

No doubt one would need to know when, where, why the professor who as a youth may have enjoyed Whitman's poetry until he sickened of it or never could stand its "Fugues" and "Sonatas" then attacked the *Leaves*. Often emotional vicissitudes, irrational circumstances, provoke the spirit, trigger one's intimate springs, determining attitudes, conduct, diatribes: passionate experiences that, once understood, would explain the enthusiasms of youth, the reactions of maturity. Or the case involves lucid, synthetic types, for whom incoherencies and superabundances are displeasing—the absence of delicacy and refinement, of the exquisite; the banality of those ingenuous realisms that do not reach the high spirituality of the critical intelligence.

No doubt the countryless Santayana is aggravated by Romance-language [Latino] "translations" and exaltations of the bard of percussion: Drum-Taps. The ecumenical diffusion of that evangelist of the "sans façons," of that hobo in shirtsleeves, of accordion and saxophone!

To allow Hispanic peoples to be invaded like this, nursed as they are "on the difficult facility and the arduous simplicity" of heroic romances! To disseminate the accordionist when symbolist lyric, poetry, and abstract philosophy—the highest qualitative games—had reached their peak. To drag poetry back to its theogonic stammerings—when in faunal caverns goats played at being oracles. To so profane the deity of magic gestures and syllables, the sober technique of the sorcerers! And

once more the philosopher denounces the fact that the "brutal law of success is not ethical, nor aesthetic, nor metaphysical."¹² No doubt in some measure his lyric expansion proceeds from a dynamic character, exalter of the vital values, disdainful of the old poetries of discontent, of weakness, of yearning—of the plaintive gushings of Poe, Leopardi, Baudelaire. In Santayana's critique of egotism in German philosophy, impartial considerations that give fresh value to Whitman's bright and powerful naturalism stand out:¹³

Christianity no less than Romanticism had habituated men to disdain the intrinsic value of things. Things had to be useful to "salvation," had to be symbols of other, better, although unknown, things. This life could be justified only when it took the form of a servile labor or an odious task, not in healthiness or artistic expression. The Romantic poets, through pride, worry, yearning for things vague or impossible, arrived at the same conclusion the church did. To be *unsatisfied* seemed the mark of distinction. How *could* the Romantics *believe such falsehoods*? Through their erroneous mystical interpretation of human nature, which *is perhaps the essence of Romanticism*. They imagine that what they desire is not this or the other: nourishment, progeny, triumph, culture, or whatever other specific objective. Instead, it is an abstract and perpetual happiness, which would exist beyond such necessities or interests. But an abstract happiness is impossible, for the fundamental reason that *we possess no abstract and perpetual instinct to satisfy*. Whatever supreme good one yearns to obtain, separated from all specific interest, is more than unattainable; *it is unthinkable*. They could have learned from Plato or any sound moralist that man's wellness consists in the harmony of the particular functions that express his temperament. In spite of feeling life to be a tragedy, Schopenhauer understood the *intrinsic value of fortune*. He instinctively felt the richness of the moral world. This secret sympathy toward nature, then, *distanced him from Christianity and from transcendental metaphysics*. Nevertheless, since nature's good things cannot be

desired or possessed *for all time*, he deprecated their value, believing that those who desired or possessed them disdained them, too.

The Romantic leavening that still fermented in him was what impeded his recognition of the *kingdom of nature*, in which *vital harmony can be established*. Nietzsche inherited this Romantic parody of life, this standard drawn from metaphysical anarchy. Schopenhauer's pain at the tragic accidents of nature and history, his desperate solution—the negation of living—his contemplative pessimism were so many homages to the faith he had lost.

Now we see the still-more-naturalistic opinions of the philosopher's maturity:¹⁴

[I]deas have a symbolic, expressive value. They are inner notes that the passions and art make resound. They come to seem rational through their vital harmony (reason is a harmony of the passions) and by their connection to external contingencies (for reason is a harmony between the inner life and destiny and truth).

I had then to discover what kind of wisdom can be achieved *by an animal whose mind is poetical*. And I found that it cannot imply *the lack of sincerity that supposedly rejects poetry* in favor of a science that one judges truthful and enlightened. *Wisdom consists in considering everything with a certain good humor, with a grain of salt*. Science is the intellectual accompaniment of art. How can universal experience support itself on any base other than the fantasy of either the psychologist or the poet?

I have arrived, then, at observing the emergence of conscience in an organism. A psyche, of hereditary mechanism, administers every animal organism, to the point of constituting a mind that suffers, dreams, and hopes. Fraser no less than Freud has offered evidence of how rich and wonderful the mind is, in essence. How deep is its play *in animal life*. How prohibitively remote are its deepest impressions for any interpretation of their true causes. Bodily life, modified, develops in a closed circuit of habits and actions. The mind is its concomitant spiritual expression, epiphenomenal or hypostatic, since the motive and the organic, animal tensions synthesize on another

plane of being: in the intuitions and authentic sentiments. This spiritual fertility of living bodies *is the most natural of things*. I am, then, *a naturalist, an animalist, a fantasist*. Nature, history, soul are phantasmal presences, or notions of them; the existence of such images amounts to something purely inward in them. *They possess neither substance nor hidden content*. They are pure appearance. Such beings or qualities of being we call "essences." Their kingdom is external, infinite. Seen as essences, ideas are compatible and complement each other as means of expression.

Animal faith—as much in the sensations as in idea essences. Thus, all the sensual and intellectual furnishings of the mind become a reserve from which it draws its formulas and *confabulates the puerile inner poetry* with which it speaks to itself of all that occurs to it. Everything becomes a story, hatched by a dreamer.

And so the philosophy of art—and the philosophy of history—*turn out to be mere verbalisms*. In art—manual skill, professional tradition; and in the contemplative plane—the intuition of essences, with intellectual enjoyment, characteristic of all intuition. I do not distinguish between moral and aesthetic values; beauty, beauty is a moral good, understood as an economy or a useful distraction. Goodness, carried out, is a source of joy and thus aesthetic. When joy is blind, it is pleasure; when it takes sensual form, it is beauty. When it diffuses itself in our minds, it is consolation, happiness, love. *Art does not lack madness. It is full of inertia, affectation, and can appear ugly to a cultivated spirit*.

How different would his comments have been had he considered Whitman's *Leaves* with the naturalistic healthiness with which he analyzed German speculative egotism and, still more, with the poetically animalist criteria that characterize the opinions of his full maturity.

Many of these [criteria] exalt the work and life of our cheerful bard. Free of so many musty Romantic ferments, megalomaniacal egotisms, rhetorical affectations, mystagogies, and illuminisms.

Feeling, expressing what a half-century later his critic, in the *Dialogues*, would specify.¹⁵ That lyric experience, as well as literary psychology, is a vital mode for an animal race in one corner of the natural world. All the activities that we call rational proceed from the animal life of man amid nature. The poetic animal is susceptible to spiritual adaptation, education, and elevation, its life worth living, all offices divine, so long as they further health and personal independence. Death as natural and beautiful as life. Celebrating the common man, the masses of common people, as he celebrates prairies and farmlands, first plantings and vegetable, human, social harvests. Contemplating all, freed of want, of the perverse will to dominate, which in so many ways goads the masses and their manipulators.

Thus, what the critic—"for whom all ethics are expressions of animal life"—terms "fluid fantasmagoria, without order or plan," is the temperamental loftiness that poeticizes the prosaic, ennobles the vulgar, above the comic, dramatic, or tragic game of antagonisms. If we leaf through Kempis's *Imitation*, we are surprised by its tone of resignation and relinquishing of life.¹⁶ If we immerse ourselves in Whitman's *Poems*, we are comforted by the symphonic happiness of images and perspectives, joyful or grave, trivial or solemn. This euphoric richness, which takes pleasure in itself, in beings, and in forms in the environment, this exceptional magnitude of cordiality, emanates from the same surging of heroic vocation as did Spinoza's forest of high equanimities, so admired by Heine. It is what, in everyday miseries and creative anguish, we tend to consider sublime. Magical poetic gift, of comprehending, mastering, transcending, that the simple artisan, raised in an artisan's home, son of the Van Velsors, possessed; and he has carried away with him the gift and secret of such loftiness.

It was this—which still surprises us when we leaf through our "Selection"—that most seduced us, that spurred us to the task of collat-

ing and selecting themes and, when possible, of refining them. Many times we have thought that such ethnic quintessence nourished itself at the Netherlandish udder more than on the sap of hardy Anglo-Saxon roots. It would be the secret heritage of the Van Velsors.

His infancy and adolescence unfold by the sea. This explains in part his predilection for outdoor occupations and recreations. His wanderings on Long Island during his youth, similar to the famous ones of Hugo's adulthood on the shores of Guernsey during the long exile, 1858–71: "Je suis le vieux rodeur sauvage de la mer, / Qui rode nuit et jour autour des sombre îles."¹⁷ Later, wherever his residence, Whitman works and rests with the windows open.

He needs to air himself, feel himself lulled by atmospheric murmurs, contemplate the circulating masterpieces of his art gallery: dawns, auroras, noons, afternoons, twilights, flashes of moonlight, stellar seas, fiery festivals of the tempests.

His pastorals, like his urban sketches, have the unevenness, chanciness, zigzags of native panoramas: muddy banks, rocky deserts, sandy spots, hidden oases, misleading paths, public ways. Where other poets dream of glimpsing celestial mirages, he sees the elements of both processes, the natural and the historical, fusing appearances and characteristically national dreams toward the apogee of the great Republic of Comrades. On all sides, the surge and buzz of human hives, in thousands of towns, millions of homes. In this geohistoric clime, his autodidacticism flowers, elucidates the emotional response to Emerson's augural pronouncement: "We owe you the discovery and conquest of the *new moral continent of America: individuality*. To these shores, discovered by you, you have guided the United States, and you have guided me."¹⁸

A doubly sensational acknowledgment: to owe to Emerson the consciousness of his particularly American moral individuality. And the consciousness of being the poet of

such Americanness. From these wellsprings will then flow, in ever-higher geysers, Personality, Nationality, Universality.

Thus, he will come to dream of a confederation of cities of the states of the Union, bound together, arm in arm, as we dreamed circa 1916, making Paul Fort's song ours; we were dreaming the dance of world Peace: "What a dance for the end of war—if all the human race—wanted to join hands—around the earth."¹⁹

[Whitman] frequently reminds us that slavery has been the basis of the economy and culture of the ancient societies and, despite the victory of the North over the South, of the modern cities, in all those occupations, industries, and businesses in which labor is a slave to the employer's control and advantage. Only in later years, after his voluntary social service in hospitals and ambulances, will he submit to administrative hierarchies.

Like that of the poet La Fontaine, with whom he shares several features, of Rousseau, of the lake poets, especially Wordsworth, his life as well as his work represents a turn to nature. Poetic art in the open air, an anticipation of impressionism.²⁰

Among Santayana's other "pruderies" figures the censure of [Whitman's] sensualism. How could the friend of the pre-Socratics, the disciple of Heraclitus, Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius forget the classical sources of art and poetry?

Ce qu'on appelle gloire—n'est que toi divine volupté—Pourquoi sont fait les dons de Flore? Les soleils couchants, les aurores? Les forêts, les eaux, les prairies? Mères des douces reveries?—J'aime le jeu, l'amour, les livres, la musique. La ville, et la campagne, en fin tout. Il n'est rien. Qui no me soit souverain bien. Jusqu'au sombre plaisir d'un cœur mélancolique.

Oh Venús, rien ne manque a ton être—ni les lis ni les roses, ni le mélange exquis des plus belles choses, ni le charme secret dont l'œil est enchanté. Ni la grâce, plus belle encore que la beauté. Il n'est soldat ni capitaine, ni prince ni sujet—qui ne t'ait pour objet.

Viens donc; et de ce bien, o douce volupté. Peux tu savoir, combien? Il m'en faut au moins. Bien plus que j'en ai besoin... Le doux souvenir de ces choses charmantes me suit dans les déserts. Hante mon cœur.²¹

What is the Greco-Latin tradition, from Anacreon to Ovid, whose coals still smolder beneath Judeo-Christian ashes—in the archpriest of Hita, in the highlands of Santillana, from Villon to Ronsard, Apuleius to the Decameron, from the romance of Tristan to the songs of Goethe, from Marlowe to Swinburne's "Laus Veneris," from Dante to Quevedo, Ariosto to the erotics of Carducci?²²

What is the root of human lineage in *De rerum natura*? Whom does Lucretius celebrate?

Aeneadum genetrix, hominum divomque voluptas?²³ And Alighieri, in the closing verses of each canto?

"L'amor che muove il sole et l'altre stelle..."²⁴ Does not its inspiring fire perchance flash in the pupils of the "philosopher," in his later years, as we perceive in some of his portraits? Was it not one of the inner motors of his projects, his ambitions, his dreams of spiritual glory?

Doubtless a range of similar lyric influences has converged in Whitman's poetic formation, besides temperamental dispositions, familiar routines and environments: Burns's democratic orientation and lively spontaneity, Wordsworth's predilection for rustic themes, humble lives, and simple people. "In general"—the latter wrote in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*—"humble and rustic lives were chosen because in that state the primitive sentiments manifest themselves more vividly and deeply, in their struggles and labors with nature."²⁵

Since the modest and rebellious Burns, no anglophone poet had felt as Wordsworth did "the happiness that emanates from nature, from simple duties, from elemental activities. None has expressed them in a more picturesque style, nor partaken of them with more intensity."²⁶ So Coleridge cast his sympathy

and admiration for the emotional eclogues of his friend Wordsworth, in the beautiful critical essay he dedicates to him. (*Olivero, Studies in English Literature, vol. 1:30–71, Madrid, 1917. Translation by A. A. Vasseur*).²⁷

Wordsworth's rustic naturist influence—Coleridge observes—extends to Tennyson, Arnold, and Browning. Such influence, both direct and mediated by these last poets, who were his contemporaries, had to extend to Longfellow and Whitman, as did that of Coleridge to Poe. The same sympathy *that, by contrast, Wordsworth's rustic ballads with their magical mysticism wakened in Coleridge explains our old fervor for Whitman's exalted, profane psalms.*

We do not find in Whitman's poems traces of the *genius irritabile*. Perhaps that only manifested itself in his daily life. It would help explain certain collapses and occupational changes, certain of his peregrinations, a fluctuating humor toward relatives and old friends.

His glands appear to apportion their tasks normally, amid the harmony of his basic organs. He does not manifest himself as satirical, or sarcastic, or epigrammatic. He shows himself to be simple, tolerant, cordial. Riverine rhythms of overflowing fluency and the majesty of the Bard evoke the power and character of Bach. When we listen to [the latter's] concerti, masses, or oratories, we forget the doctrinal plot, the mystical assumptions, as when the *Requiem* of Mozart or that of Beethoven enraptures us. We always liked the *Poems of Whitman* in the same way. Letting ourselves rock on the waves of his sequences, savoring the poetic charm of his evocations, his theometaphysical chimeras. Grateful for the absence of journalistic truculence, melodramatic pathos, traces of the grotesque, the many improbabilities and affectations of imagination and style that mar the works of other great poets.

In traversing his woodsy dominions, one must set aside European rhetorical models,

English or French parks of the seventeenth century, Italian gardens, the *retiros* of Madrid or Aranjuez.

Whitman is the American of the formative generations and states that live again in the narratives of Cooper and Bret Harte and in his own reminiscences.²⁸ Now in the greening meadows of the North, now in the warm lands of the South, now in the harbors and avenues of populous cities.

He would like to saturate workshops, schools, libraries, and museums with the wild fragrances of the forests, the gusts of the prairies, the balmy emanations of the plateaus, the clear light of the Floridas, the blue immensities of the lakes. And, as background, the contrabass of the sea on the shore, the dull roar of the oceans that oxygenate the states of the Union.

An autodidact like our Bard could neither deprive himself of the oratorical magic of the last “transcendentalists” nor renounce, without perishing ruined, the splendor of his imaginative riches. “I, my soul, and my body go together, a singular threesome.” He is too much the bard to divest himself of verbal riches, which imply faith—still so alive—“in the invisible world, in the soul, and in immortality.”²⁹

The archaic dualisms that animate the cults and cultures of the Ganges, the Nile, Greco-Egyptian, Judeo-Christian, duplicate human nature and the cosmic stage. They fallaciously divide the concrete frame of events, as in a hall of mirrors. From the myth of the descent of Ishtar to Hell, to the myth of the descent of Ulysses, or Aeneas, to the poetical descent of Alighieri, or Muhammad's flight to the Islamic Eden, the process of cementing belief seems increasingly loaded with “spiritual” prestige. These fantasies, made into cultural rites, then cultural abstractions, poetico-religious hypostases, seem capable of substituting any being—*homo faber, homo credulus*—for the immortal mammal of these pseudo-spiritual odysseys.

Names become men, voices demigods:

Wordiness, Word. Any word, god of a race.

Concrete reality thus fallaciously doubled, beings become substantial “essences.” “These supposed quintessences appear subject to the intellectual consequences of their errors, or to Karmic regressions, ‘owing to their sins. . . .’”

How to demand that he master those dualisms of the Eastern philosophical tradition? Substance and spirit. Good and Evil, visible world, invisible world, body and soul, Light and Darkness, Beauty and Loyalty, Order and Chaos. Did even the greatest of his contemporaries overcome them? Emerson, Poe, Longfellow, Tennyson, Carlyle, Eucken? Decades later, did not more systematic, more universal thinkers continue to perform theological and theosophical somersaults?

“He appears magnificent because he is diffuse, like gaseous nebulae. Without an original ideological nucleus.”³⁰ He has a wise excuse. None of the more or less Neoplatonic masters of his epoch could supply him that nucleus. And to manage it himself would have been fully more prosaic than poetic, more gravitational than weightless! Nearly half a century would have to pass before the mysticisms and idealisms of the fin de siècle would be exegetically blasted away, before the spiritualisms would be rubbed out in the face of coexistential criteria. And they would only reappear, artificially elaborated by antiquated alchemists like Dilthey, Heidegger, etc.

The military thesis that Thucydides propounds with respect to the Peloponnesian War would imply adaptation and selection: “Only to a small degree does war unfold according to the same laws. It creates its forms as it develops, according to circumstances.” Circumstantial accidents continue to affect morphology: organs, instincts, neuropsychic networks. More important than the effects of an internal energetic spring will be circumstantial results. This holds for natatory vesicles turning into airy lungs, the contractile pocket into cardiac muscle, the dorsal nerve

cord into the spinal column, nerval antennae into the nervous system, the superior vertebra into the cranial cupola, the hormonal glands, determining sexual, physical, and psychic characteristics. On the quality of endocrine secretions, the fundamental equilibrium of the glands, depend sex, organ development, functional harmony, and neuropsychic potential. What we call mental energy will be fanned, stimulated by the quality of glandular secretions.

The glands being biologically, functionally *primary* and sexual, physical, and psychic character being *secondary*, speculations about the primacy of “spirit”—foundation of Eastern-mystic and Western philosophies—evaporate. Experiments and discoveries in the endocrine field strengthen the basis of experimental psychology: they confirm the biological truth of the coexistential thesis. That some injections of glandular extracts can effeminize men, masculinize women, repair ovarian deficiencies and illnesses, rejuvenate senilities, normalize psychopathic anomalies! What they cannot yet do is infuse either high culture and critical sensibility into those who have not acquired them through arduous selective labors or that ethical purification, impervious to social seductions.

These experimental prodigies confirm the intuitions of the *Aeda faber*, the lattice of hopes in his psalms to the progress of industries and sciences in “Song of the Exposition.” His faith in the wholesome and creative future of the common people. He projects his vitalist ethic to the humanities and to future worlds. Despite disasters and partial defeats, everything marches toward ever-more-global ends. Never, even in the obscurities of old age, does he admit the theocratic prospects to which Nietzsche once alluded: “Do not allow yourself to deceive. Nor consent to such deception. Nor collaborate in deception.” Neither does he denigrate by choleric counterpoint like Thoreau: he does not apostrophize political impresarios, “men of straw who

preach to puppets of straw.”³¹ He does not design temples as “houses of cards adorned with the faces of cards.”³² He does not insult demagogues, the mule drivers of confessional mobs, by holding a mirror to their hypocrisy. He does not denounce the perversion of councils of “philanthropic” institutions that serve plutocratic hypocrisy by domesticating the needy classes.

At the end of his essay on “Germanic egotism,” Santayana mentions a paragraph by Montaigne—heir of the Greco-Latin rationalists Plutarch and Seneca—that Whitman, too, repeats with Girondin savvy:

He who puts before him, as in a painting, this vast image of our mother Nature, in all her majesty, who sees in her manifestations so much universal and continual variety, he who sees himself in her, simply, like the most delicate of her creatures, and not just himself but a whole kingdom (*the mass of common people*), only he tallies things in accordance with the true measure of her grandeur.

To give new life to such a sentiment—ancient and modern, in Nature and History—we must reaffirm the civil rights of peoples, untiringly carry on the fight in defense of the *civilizing Old Cause*. Secularize institutions, secularize culture, secularize education and primary, secondary, normal, and superior instruction. Secularize customs, arts, occupations. For to civilize is to secularize: to secularize is to civilize.

Teachers, poets, philosophers, statesmen, pursue the eternal civilizing war against “the fierce Eumenides of private interest,” incarnate in the Tartuffes in democratic masks, in philanthropic masks, in so many masks by which they carnivalize the servitude of the masses and the commerce in superstitions.

“Let us support the enjoyment of civil privileges, faithfully venerate the Code, immune, glorious.”

As for Santayana’s *animula vagula*,³³ we shall see whether the spirits of Montaigne,

Montesquieu, and Steinach manage to keep it—in the Roman cartouche—from sliding into the limbo of neo-Thomist sublimities.

The paperback copy of *Poems of Whitman*, in Sempere’s first popular edition of 1912, sent to the California International Exposition, was awarded a gold medal. To the great annoyance of our publisher, we refused the medal—which he would have liked to exhibit in the windows of his press. Our colleague the American consul general told us by way of excuse, “When a great medal is desired a deluxe copy is sent. . . .”

In 1942 the [Roosevelt] administration’s cultural mediator, Rockefeller,³⁴ had recorded, on eight large records, some of the most characteristic poems from our translation, recited by an outstanding Mexican actor. The records were then broadcast by the continent’s leading stations. We have kept those that he had sent to us, as if they were another sort of enormous gold medal.

What we did with Whitman we had done in 1902–03 with some themes from the ethnographic work of the great Lewis Morgan, author of *Ancient Society*, in our critical essay *The Origin of Institutions*, published by Sempere in 1908.

We repeated it in 1918 in our translations of Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* and Poe’s “Raven” and “Ulalume,” in collaboration with Olivero.

NOTES

1. Ellipses not in brackets are in original. Vasseur repeatedly uses the term *versión*—instead of *traducción*—to describe his rendering of Whitman’s poetry. For consistency, we translate *versión* as “translation” throughout, though the connotations of each term are different, *versión* implying a looser approach than *traducción*. This distinction is evident in Vasseur’s text. Enrico Mario Santì believes that Vasseur translated not from the original English but from an Italian translation, a distance that allowed Vasseur to “turn his translation into a loose *versión* (his word) in which he rewrote Whitman according to his own idea of a certain Whitmanian voice or

persona" (163). Vasseur himself privileges a notion of version over straight translation, since in defending *Poemas* against what he imagines might be Santayana's critiques, he places *versiones* in quotation marks, as if to suggest that a "version" of Whitman's poetry might be too liberal for what he elsewhere calls Santayana's prudish sensibility: "Sin duda exacerban al sin patria Santayana las 'versiones' y exaltaciones latinas del seda de percusión: Drum taps" ("No doubt the countryless Santayana is aggravated by Romance-language [Latino] 'translations' and exaltations of the bard of percussion: Drum-Taps").

2. The final line of Darío's poem "A Roosevelt" ("To Roosevelt"). Darío's poem, which mentions Whitman in its first line, may allude to Whitman's "With All Thy Gifts," which asks, "With all thy gifts America / . . . What if one gift thou lackest?" (*Leaves* [1892] 309).

3. "[B]ut you, you are a philosopher."

4. Francesc Ferrer i Guardia (1859–1909); Antonio Maura y Montaner (1853–1925); Juan de la Cierva y Peñafiel (1864–1938).

5. Eduardo Marquina (1879–1946); perhaps Armando Palacio Valdés (1853–1938); Ramón del Valle-Inclán (1866–1936); Antonio Machado (1875–1939).

6. Pablo Iglesias Posse (1850–1925)?; Vicente Blasco Ibáñez (1867–1928); Francisco Giner de los Rios (1839–1915); José María de Cossío (1892–1977)?; Juan Soriano (Juan Rodríguez Montoya, 1920–2006)?

7. Gregorio Pueyo (1860–1913).

8. This preface is available in English and the original Spanish in *The Walt Whitman Archive's* digital edition of the 1912 *Poemas* (www.whitmanarchive.org).

9. In the section following, emphasis and parenthetical and bracketed comments and exclamations in Santayana quotations are Vasseur's. This first long quotation is from "The Poetry of Barbarism" (*Interpretations*, ch. 7).

10. The word *extranjero*, here rendered as "foreigner," can also mean "stranger" in Spanish.

11. "Popular" here means something like "of the people."

12. See Santayana, *Egotism* 97.

13. See Santayana, *Egotism*.

14. The following quotations from Santayana are based on parts of "A Brief History of My Opinions," which discusses the genesis of Santayana's book *The Life of Reason* (*Philosophy*, esp. 14–15). Vasseur does not discuss (or may not have known) other Santayana texts that discuss Whitman: *The Sense of Beauty*, "Walt Whitman: A Dialogue," and "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" (*Winds* 186–215). Taken together, Kenneth Price argues, Santayana's essays reveal a "divided mind" about Whitman (133).

15. See Santayana, *Dialogues*.

16. Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471).

17. "I am the savage old prowler of the sea, / Who roams night and day about the somber isles." Vasseur is likely citing a poem by Hugo that begins, "J'étais le vieux

rôdeur sauvage de la mer, / Une espèce de spectre au bord du gouffre amer"; it is not clear from which poem Vasseur cites his second line.

18. This is from Whitman's response to Emerson's famous letter praising the first edition of 1855 (Whitman, *Leaves* [1856]; Vasseur's emphasis).

19. See Fort 1.

20. Jean de La Fontaine (1621–95).

21. This section is taken from La Fontaine's seventeenth-century poem "Invocation." Characteristically, Vasseur has considerably pared down and altered the order of La Fontaine's poem.

"What we call glory—it's you, divine voluptuousness. Why have the gifts of Flora been made? The setting suns, the auroras? The forests, the waters, the prairies? Mothers of sweet reveries? I love games, love, books, music. The city, and the countryside, everything. There is nothing. Nothing that isn't supremely good to me. Even the somber pleasure of a melancholic heart.

"Oh, Venus, your being lacks nothing: neither lilies nor roses, nor the exquisite mix of the most beautiful things, nor the secret charm that enchants the eye. Not even grace, more beautiful than beauty itself. There is no soldier, no captain, no prince, no subject who does not have you as his object.

"Come then; and of this goodness, oh sweet voluptuousness, can you know how much [I want]? I need at least . . . more than I need. The sweet recollection of these charming things follows me in the deserts, haunts my heart."

22. François Villon (c. 1431–c. 1463); Pierre de Ronsard (1524–85); Giosue Carducci (1835–1907).

23. Lucretius invoking Venus in *De rerum natura*: "Mother of Rome, delight of gods and men . . ." (our trans.).

24. "The love that moves the sun and the other stars. . . ."

25. In the original: "Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language. . . ."

26. Source unknown. The first sentence is probably from the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The second sentence is likely Vasseur's.

27. See Olivero.

28. James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851).

29. The first quotation is from "Pioneers! Oh Pioneers!": "I too with my soul and body, / We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way" (*Leaves* [1892] 185). The source of the second quotation is uncertain, possibly "Song of the Open Road": "the certainty of the reality and immortality of things, and the excellence of things" (*Leaves* [1892] 123).

30. Source uncertain; possibly a rough translation from Santayana, "Poetry of Barbarism."

31. See Thoreau 284: "The preachers and lecturers deal with men of straw, as they are men of straw themselves."

32. Source uncertain.

33. "Little wandering soul." From a poem by Hadrian, written as an epitaph: "Animula vagula blandula / hospes, comesque corporis / quae nunc abis in loca / pallidula, rigida, nudula / nec ut soles dabis iocos?" (Duff and Duff 444–45).

34. Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller (1908–79). Rockefeller had a long history of involvement in United States–Latin American relations. He became director of the Venezuelan Creole Petroleum Corporation, an affiliate of Standard Oil, in 1935. In 1940 Franklin Roosevelt appointed him to head the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, which Rockefeller parlayed into a new State Department position, assistant secretary of state for Latin America, in 1944. In this capacity, Rockefeller promoted the spread of North American culture in Latin America. He was also involved in the 1945 Conference on Inter-American Problems of War and Peace in Mexico City, or "Chapultepec Conference," which considered interhemispheric cooperation against potential threats. Here and in later activities, Rockefeller propounded the cold war argument that communism was the region's principal threat. Under Truman, Rockefeller headed the International Development Advisory Board, which continued to shape an interventionist international policy.

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