

Selected Poems

RUBÉN DARÍO

SAMPLER

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SAMPLER

Rubén Darío

SELECTED POEMS

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*translated from the Spanish by
Adam Feinstein*

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INTRODUCTION

Adam Feinstein

Rubén Darío, the Nicaraguan poet and founder of the Spanish-language literary movement known as *Modernismo*, died more than a century ago, in 1916. But his influence on Spanish-language poetry remains immense. Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca, Octavio Paz, César Vallejo, Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges, among many others, acknowledged their debt. Borges declared: ‘Darío was an innovator in everything: subject matter, vocabulary, metre, the peculiar magic of certain words ... We can truly call him the Liberator.’¹ As I stated in a lecture in León – the Nicaraguan city where Darío grew up (and died, at the age of just 49, after three decades of world travel) – Neruda, for one, never fully rejected Darío’s form of modernism. He considered the Nicaraguan the greatest Spanish-speaking poet of the nineteenth century, addressing him not only as his own father, but the father of all poets, in the long and very moving section of his 1967 collection, *La Barcarola*, that he dedicated to Darío.²

Darío is honoured in his homeland more passionately than any other poet in any other nation. He is in the airport of the capital, Managua. He is in hotels, theatres. But there is also a Calle Rubén Darío in Mexico City, Panama City, San Salvador and Tegucigalpa. Rubén Darío Middle School can be found next to Rubén Darío Park in Miami. Madrid has a Rubén Darío metro station.

So who was this literary giant who, according to the Mexican writer, Octavio Paz, created one of the most profound poetic revolutions in the Spanish language?³ He was born Félix Rubén García Sarmiento, on January 18, 1867 near San Pedro de Metapa, which has since been renamed Ciudad Darío. His parents having already separated, Rubén was brought up by his uncle and aunt, Colonel Félix Ramírez and Bernarda Sarmiento. In fact, he met his real mother, Rosa Sarmiento, by chance when a neighbour in León brought him round

¹ Jorge Luis Borges: ‘Mensaje en honor de Rubén Darío,’ Second Latin American Writers’ Congress, *El Despertar Americano*, Ciudad de México, 1967

² See ‘RD’ in *La Barcarola*, Buenos Aires: Losada, 1967

³ See Octavio Paz: ‘El caracol y la sirena,’ *Revista de la Universidad de Méjico*, Vol. XIX, No. 4, 1964, pp. 4–15

to her house. (Many years later, in 1912, he described this encounter in his short autobiography as like one with ‘a strange vision’).⁴

His uncle’s death in 1871 threw the family into economic turmoil. Nevertheless, his aunt and other relatives provided him with a cultural atmosphere and a good education (Rubén had already taught himself to read by the age of three). However, his studies with the Jesuits stirred profound liberal and anti-clerical sentiments within him, as evidenced by one of his very first poems, ‘El jesuita,’ dated as early as 1881, written when Rubén was just 14. News of this prodigy in their midst soon attracted the attention of a number of politicians and intellectuals who were keen to offer him a scholarship to study in Europe. That plan fell through, however, due to the teenager’s hardening anti-clerical views, which he continued to express boldly in his writings. And even at this slender age, he found himself caught up in political debates between liberals and conservatives.

Rubén’s first erotic passion was for a woman trapeze artist, Hortensia Buislay, whom he watched performing her act in the circus every night in León. When the circus left town, he wanted to leave, too. But he soon became captivated by the beauty of his cousin, Isabel. One night, he declared his love for her. She mockingly rejected the 14-year-old boy’s advances. He later said this was the night he cried his first bitter tears of disillusionment. He decided to move to Managua to pursue a literary career, writing for the press and giving poetry recitals. Still only 15, he met Rosario Emelina Murillo (whom he would call ‘mi querida garza morena’ – my beloved dark-skinned heron) and was determined to marry her. He was eventually persuaded, instead, to leave Nicaragua for the first of many foreign trips – to El Salvador, where the President, Rafael Zaldívar, took him under his wing. Darío also met the writer and journalist, Francisco Gavidia, who introduced him to the poetry of Victor Hugo, later to become one of Darío’s great lyrical influences.

On his return to Nicaragua, Darío worked for a while at the Biblioteca Nacional (National Library) in Managua, while he continued to write incessantly – including a play with the odd title of *Cada oveja* (Every Sheep). He published his first book of poems, *Epístolas y poemas* (Epistles and Poems), in 1885. And it is from this book that I have selected an extract from a longer poem, ‘Ecce Homo’, which many specialists have called Darío’s first modernist poem, It

⁴ Rubén Darío: *La vida de Rubén Darío, escrita por el mismo*. Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1991, p. 19

shatters myths and mocks romantic tropes cleverly, bitingly and wittily. This humour, which has been so frequently neglected by both students and translators of Darío, emerges in many other poems in this volume.

Keen to broaden his horizons, the 19-year-old Darío left Nicaragua again in 1886, this time for Chile. That nation was thriving politically, with the triumph of the liberals in the Presidential elections and the recent victory in the War of the Pacific against Bolivia and Peru. Nevertheless, Darío found life tough on his arrival. He struggled economically and the upper classes tended to look down on the newcomer. The Chilean capital, Santiago, also suffered from occasional outbreaks of cholera. But in 1887, he published his second collection of poems there, called *Abrojos* (a word meaning both ‘thistles’ and ‘problems’). As you will notice from the sample I have selected for this volume, some of the poems in *Abrojos* read like aphorisms: satirical and whimsical (with a frequently embittered tone surprising in a man so young – just 20). Others remind me very much of the self-deprecating humour of one of my favourite Neruda collections, *Estravagario* (1958). Still others are more profound, like the deeply moving poem about companionship with a dog (again reminiscent of Neruda, specifically his poem ‘Un perro ha muerto,’ eventually published posthumously in the Chilean’s *Jardín de invierno* – Winter Garden).

Chile represented Darío’s monumental first encounter with modernity. And it was in Chile, in 1888, thanks to support from friends, that he published the book which would make his name: a collection of poems and prose pieces, called *Azul* ... (Blue). Why the title? For a long time, it was believed it was a tribute to his much-admired Victor Hugo, who had famously declared ‘L’art, c’est l’azur’. That may have been part of the explanation. However, Darío later clarified the situation in his autobiography: ‘Blue, for me, was the colour of daydreams, the colour of art, a Hellenic and Homeric colour, the colour of the oceans and the firmament...’⁵

Azul did not initially arouse a great deal of interest. But that changed after the renowned Spanish writer and critic, Juan Valera, published two open letters to Darío in the Madrid newspaper, *El Imparcial*, in which he praised the Nicaraguan’s burgeoning talent. The two letters were subsequently published in various Latin American newspapers. *Azul* is an exotic, artistic, cosmopolitan and literary collection. It marked what another critic, the Uruguayan Ángel Rama, called Darío’s ‘Chilean

⁵ Rubén Darío, op. cit, p. 136

De Azul... (1888)

Primaveral

Mes de rosas. Van mis rimas
en ronda a la vasta selva
a recoger miel y aromas
en las flores entreabiertas.

Amada, ven. El gran bosque
es nuestro templo; allí ondea
y flota un santo perfume
de amor. El pájaro vuela
de un árbol a otro y saluda
tu frente rosada y bella
como un alba; y las encinas
robustas, altas, soberbias,
cuando tú pasas agitan
sus hojas verdes y trémulas,
y enarcan sus ramas como
para que pase una reina.
¡Oh, amada mía! Es el dulce
tiempo de la primavera.

Mira en tus ojos, los míos,
da al viento la cabellera,
y que bañe el sol ese oro
de luz salvaje y espléndida.
Dame que aprieten mis manos
las tuyas de rosa y seda,
y ríe, y muestran tus labios
su púrpura húmeda y fresca.
Yo voy a decirte rimas,
tú vas a escuchar risueña;
si acaso algún ruiseñor
viniese a posarse cerca,
y a contar alguna historia
de ninfas, rosas o estrellas,
tú no oirás notas ni trinos,

from *Azul...* (1888)

Springtime

Month of roses. My rhymes
circle the vast forest,
stoop to pluck the scent of honey
from half-opened flowers.
Come to me, my love. The woods
are our great temple. There's a wave,
a whiff of the sacred perfume
of love. A bird flutters between the trees,
greets the beauty of your pink forehead
just as it would the dawn. And the oaks,
so tall, so square-shouldered and proud,
quiver as you pass,
their green leaves shuddering,
locking their branches in an arc
as if a queen were walking through.
My love, these are sweet
days: it is spring.

Gaze into my eyes through yours.
Offer the tangle of your hair
to the wind, let this ring of savage
light bask in the spender of the sun.
Give me your hands, those silky
roses, so I can hold them in mine.
Then laugh: bare your lips
of fresh, moist purple.
I will read you my poems
and you will smile as you listen.
If, by chance, a nightingale
settles close by and starts
to tell tales of nymphs,
of roses, of stars,
you will be deaf to its music,
its warbles. All regal and besotted,

sino, enamorada y regia,
escucharás mis canciones
fija en mis labios que tiemblan.
¡Oh, amada mía! Es el dulce
tiempo de la primavera.

Allá hay una clara fuente
que brota de una caverna,
donde se bañan desnudas
las blancas ninfas que juegan.
Ríen al son de la espuma,
hienden la linfa serena,
entre polvo cristalino
esponjan sus cabelleras,
y saben himnos de amores
en hermosa lengua griega,
que en glorioso tiempo antiguo
Pan inventó en las florestas.
Amada, pondré en mis rimas
la palabra más soberbia
de las frases, de los versos,
de los himnos de esa lengua;
y te diré esa palabra
empapada en miel hiblea.
¡Oh, amada mía! en el dulce
tiempo de la primavera.

Van en sus grupos vibrantes
revolando las abejas
como un áureo torbellino
que la blanca luz alegra;
y sobre el agua sonora
pasan radiantes, ligeras,
con sus alas cristalinas
las irisadas libélulas.
Oye: canta la cigarra
porque ama al sol, que en la selva
su polvo de oro tamiza
entre las hojas espesas.

you will listen to my songs instead,
watching the twitch of my lips.
My love, these are sweet
days: it is spring.

There's a bright fountain over there,
gushing from a cave,
with nymphs in it. They bathe and play,
pale-skinned, naked,
laughing to the sound of the spray.
They spill the sappy lymph
in the crystalline dust,
They sponge their hair,
sing songs of love
in the lilting Greek tongue,
composed by Pan in glades
of ancient glory, now long gone.
And I, my love, will choose
from those Greek hymns
the finest rhymes,
phrases, whole lines,
then whisper just one word to you:
that word you know so well,
drenched in Hybla honey ...
My love, these are sweet days:
it is spring.

Bees fpulse and thrill
in throbbing clouds
as if a golden whirlpool
were laughing in the white light.
Watch the rainbow waltz
of dragonflies shimmer
with crystalline wings
over the echoing water.
Listen to the cicada singing
because it loves the sun,
loves how it sieves its golden dust
through the thick forest tangle,

Su aliento nos da en un soplo
fecundo la madre tierra,
con el alma de los cálices
y el aroma de las yerbas.

¿Ves aquel nido? Hay un ave.
Son dos: el macho y la hembra.
Ella tiene el buche blanco,
el tiene las plumas negras.
En la garganta el gorjeo,
las alas blandas y trémulas;
y los picos que se chocan
como labios que se besan.
El nido es cántico. El ave
incuba el trino, ¡oh, poetas!
De la lira universal,
el ave pulsa una cuerda.
Bendito el calor sagrado
que hizo reventar las yemas,
¡oh, amada mía, en el dulce
tiempo de la primavera!

Mi dulce musa Delicia
me trajo un ánfora griega
cinclada en alabastro,
de vino de Naxos llena;
y una hermosa copa de oro,
la base henchida de perlas,
para que bebiese el vino
que es propicio a los poetas.
En el ánfora está Diana,
real, orgullosa y esbelta,
con su desnudez divina
y en su actitud cinegética.
Y en la copa luminosa
está Venus Citerea
tendida cerca de Adonis
que sus caricias desdeña.
No quiero el vino de Naxos

bringing mother earth back to life
with its fecund breath,
its chalice soul
and scent of herbs.

Do you see that nest? There's a bird,
no, two: a male and a female.
Hers is the white craw,
his the black feathers.
A gurgling in their throats,
soft, tremulous wings,
and their beaks colliding
like lips in a kiss.
Their nest is a poem. Yes,
two poets brooding their trills,
as if plucking the strings
of a universal lyre. Yes,
we are all blessed:
watch the buds burst into life
in the heat of the divine.
Oh my love, how sweet
are these days of spring!

My gentle muse Delicia
brought me a Greek amphora
chiselled in alabaster,
filled with Naxos wine,
and a fine golden glass,
its base bloated with pearls,
for me to drink wine
fit for a poet.

There, on the amphora, is Diana,
regal, proud and slender,
a naked goddess
in her hunting pose.
And on the lustrous glass,
Aphrodite
lying next to Adonis
who ignores her caresses.
I do not want Naxos wine

ni el ánfora de esas bellas,
ni la copa donde Cipria
al gallardo Adonis ruega.
Quiero beber el amor
sólo en tu boca bermeja.
¡oh, amada mía!, en el dulce
tiempo de la primavera!

SAMPLER

nor the amphora with its elegant handles,
nor the glass with Cipria
reaching out to dashing Adonis.
No, all I want is to taste the love
in your bright red mouth,
my darling, in the sweet
days of spring.

SAMPLER

Estival

La tigra de Bengala
con su lustrosa piel manchada a trechos,
está alegre y gentil, está de gala.
Salta de los repechos
de un ribazo, al tupido
carrizal de un bambú; luego a la roca
que se yergue a la entrada de su gruta.
Allí lanza un rugido,
se agita como loca
y eriza de placer su piel hirsuta.

La fiera virgen ama.
Es el mes del ardor. Parece el suelo
rescoldo; y en el cielo
el sol inmensa llama.
Por el ramaje oscuro
salta huyendo el kanguro.
El boa se infla, duerme, se calienta
a la tórrida lumbre;
el pájaro se sienta
a reposar sobre la verde cumbre

Siéntense vahos de horno?
y la selva indiaña
en alas del bochorno,
lanza, bajo el sereno
cielo, un soplo de sí. La tigra ufana
respira a pulmón lleno,
y al verse hermosa, altiva, soberana,
le late el corazón, se le hincha el seno.

Contempla su gran zarpa, en ella la uña
de marfil; luego toca
el filo de una roca,
y prueba y lo rasguña.
Mírase luego el flanco
que azota con el rabo puntiagudo

Summertime

The tigress of Bengal
with her lustrous fur stained in parts,
is so gleeful, courteous, elegant and tall.
She leaps from the steep ramparts
sloping down to the dense reedbed
of a bamboo tree; then on
to the rock rising at the entrance to her cave.
There, she lets out a roar, her head
shakes like a mad woman
and her hairy skin stands on end in joy, depraved.

The virginal beast is ready for love.
It's the month for passion. The earth fries,
like scorching embers, and in the sky,
the sun is an immense flame above.
The kangaroo leaps through the dark
foliage, the boa sleeps, basks,
swells, searches
for the torrid heat.
The bird perches,
resting on the green peak.

Vapour, hot as furnaces, has invaded
and the Indian forest, wrapped again
in the wings of humid air, paraded
under a serene sky, heaves
a gentle sigh. The vain
tigress fills her lungs and breathes.
Pounding heart and haughty breast can barely contain
the truth: she knows she's gorgeous, the queen of queens.

She admires her huge claws.
Her marble paws caressing
the edge of a rock, undressing,
fumbling, scratching. A pause:
she gazes at her flank,
whipping it with her tapered

De Prosas profanas y otros poemas (1896)

Sonatina

La princesa está triste... ¿Qué tendrá la princesa?
Los suspiros se escapan de su boca de fresa,
que ha perdido la risa, que ha perdido el color.
La princesa está pálida en su silla de oro,
está mudo el teclado de su clave sonoro,
y en un vaso, olvidada, se desmaya una flor.

El jardín puebla el triunfo de los pavos reales.
Parlanchina, la dueña dice cosas banales,
y vestido de rojo piruetea el bufón.
La princesa no ríe, la princesa no siente;
la princesa persigue por el cielo de Oriente
la libélula vaga de una vaga ilusión.

¿Piensa, acaso, en el príncipe de Góconda o de China,
o en el que ha detenido su carroza argentina
para ver de sus ojos la dulzura de luz.
¿O en el rey de las islas de las rosas fragantes,
o en el que es soberano de los claros diamantes,
o en el dueño orgulloso de las perlas de Ormuz?

¡Ay!, la pobre princesa de la boca de rosa
quiere ser golondrina, quiere ser mariposa,
tener alas ligeras, bajo el cielo volar;
ir al sol por la escala luminosa de un rayo,
saludar a los lirios con los versos de mayo
o perderse en el viento sobre el trueno del mar.

Ya no quiere el palacio, ni la rueca de plata,
ni el halcón encantado, ni el bufón escarlata,
ni los cisnes unánimes en el lago de azur.
Y están tristes las flores por la flor de la corte,
los jazmines de Oriente, los nelumbos del Norte,
de Occidente las dalias y las rosas del Sur.

from *Prosas profanas y otros poemas* (1896)

Sonatina

The princess is sad... Whatever gives?
Sighs escape from her strawberry lips,
lips that have lost their laughter, their colour.
The princess is pallid in her golden chair.
No sweet keyboard music fills the air
and an abandoned glass grasps a fainting flower.

A garden harbours the peacocks' triumph
while its garrulous owner spouts banal bumph.
The court jester pirouettes in red
but the princess won't laugh, the princess feels numb.
In the eastern sky, lit by the setting sun,
the princess spies a dragon-fly – a vague illusion, it's said.

Is she thinking of princes in China or Golconda,
of one who's stopped his silver carriage to ponder
the sweet flare in her eyes, those blazing swirls?
Or maybe the king of fragrant rose isles
or the diamond lord with his brilliant smiles,
or else the proud owner of Hormuz pearls?

The princess with the rose blossom mouth sighs
and dreams she's a swallow, a butterfly,
soaring up to the sky with her gossamer wings,
climbing to the sun up a lightning bolt ladder,
greeting lilies with May poems or – still madder –
astray in the wind as the sea thunder sings.

She has no need for palace nor silver jenny,
nor her enchanted falcon, the scarlet jester or the many
swans flocking in the lake of blue.
To this flower-princess all other flowers feel sombre:
in the East, the jazmin, in the North, the *nelumbo*,
in the West the dahlia, in the South, roses too.

¡Pobrecita princesa de los ojos azules!
Está presa en sus oros, está presa en sus tules,
en la jaula de mármol del palacio real;
el palacio soberbio que vigilan los guardas,
que custodian cien negros con sus cien alabardas,
un lebrel que no duerme y un dragón colosal.

¡Oh, quién fuera hipsipila que dejó la crisálida!
(La princesa está triste. La princesa está pálida.)
¡Oh visión adorada de oro, rosa y marfil!
¡Quién volara a la tierra donde un príncipe existe,
(La princesa está pálida. La princesa está triste.)
más brillante que el alba, más hermoso que abril!

– Calla, calla, princesa – dice el hada madrina;
en caballo, con alas, hacia acá se encamina,
en el cinto la espada y en la mano el azor,
el feliz caballero que te adora sin verte,
y que llega de lejos, vencedor de la Muerte,
a encenderte los labios con un beso de amor!

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Poor little princess with her deep blue eyes!
She's a prisoner of gold, of her tulle disguise,
caged in the marble of the royal palace
kept safe by the guards whom she's never liked:
a hundred dark-skinned sentries with sharp-tipped pikes,
a non-sleeping hound, a colossal dragon.

If only she were a Hypsipyle hatched from a pupa.
(The princess is sad, in a pallid stupor.)
Adorable vision of gold, rose and marble!
If she could fly to a land where her prince was waiting
(she's pale and sad – this scarcely needs re-stating!)
her prince, bright as an April dawn and more carnal.

Hush, hush, little princess, says the fairy godmother,
here comes the prince from somewhere or other,
on his winged horse, a hawk and sword at his waist,
the fortunate man who adores you unsighted,
winning out over Death, in love and delighted
to inflame your lips with love's tender taste.

SAMPLE

Margarita

In memoriam

¿Recuerdas que querías ser una Margarita
Gautier? Fijo en mi mente tu extraño rostro está,
cuando cenamos juntos, en la primera cita,
en una noche alegre que nunca volverá.

Tus labios escarlatas de púrpura maldita
sorbían el champaña del fino baccarat;
tus dedos deshojaban la blanca margarita,
«Sí... no... sí... no...» ¡y sabías que te adoraba ya!

Después, ¡oh flor de Histeria! llorabas y reías;
tus besos y tus lágrimas tuve en mi boca yo;
tus risas, tus fragancias, tus quejas, eran mías.

Y en una tarde triste de los más dulces días,
la Muerte, la celosa, por ver si me querías,
¡como a una margarita de amor, te deshojó!

Marguerite

In memoriam

Do you remember how you wanted to be another Marguerite
(Gautier)? I can still see your strange face
that first night, as we sat down to eat.
That happy night has vanished without trace.

Your scarlet lips – no, purple – drove me crazy
as they sucked the champagne from the slender decanter.
and all the while your fingers denuded the white daisy:
'Yes, no...' – you knew I loved you, my enchantress!

And then the hysteria: you laughed and you wept.
I swallowed you whole, your kisses and tears:
your laughter, your perfume, your moans were all mine.

Then one bleak evening, as the sweet day was dying,
Death, in her jealousy, needing a sign
that you really loved me, stripped you bare.

SAMPLED

Ite, Missa Est

A Reyaldo de Rafael

Yo adoro a una sonámbula con alma de Eloísa,
virgen como la nieve y honda como la mar;
su espíritu es la hostia de mi amorosa misa,
y alzo al son de una dulce lira crepuscular.

Ojos de evocadora, gesto de profetisa,
en ella hay la sagrada frecuencia del altar:
su risa en la sonrisa suave de Mona Lisa;
sus labios son los únicos labios para besar.

Y he de besarla un día con rojo beso ardiente;
apoyada en mi brazo como convaleciente
me mirará asombrada con íntimo pavor;

la enamorada esfinge quedará estupefacta;
apagaré la llama de la vestal intacta
¡y la faunesa antigua me rugirá de amor!

SAMPLER

Ite, Missa Est

To Reynaldo de Rafael

I adore a sleepwalker with a soul like Eloise
and a spirit hosting my mass of amorous fire.
She's virginal as snow and as deep as the seas.
I wake up at dawn to the sound of sweet lyres.

A prophetess with eyes that evoke and provoke,
perfumed with frequent altar visits.
Her laugh is like Mona Lisa's smile, subtle as smoke;
her lips are the only lips for kisses.

One day I'll kiss her in red-hot ardour
and, as if feeling faint, she'll lean on my arm or
stare at me, startled, with intimate awe:

a love-struck Sphinx, stunned by her hot urgings.
I'll douse the last flames of the vestal virgin
and she'll roar in passion like the ancient fauns!

SAMPLE