Rubén Darío:
Little Nicaragua's Giant Poet

By ANTONIO M. DE LA TORRE

In the year 1886 a young man whose features revealed a sturdy mixture of Indian and white, vaguely tinged with Negro, arrived in Chile in search of a job as a reporter on *La Epoca,* Santiago's most aristocratic and up-to-date newspaper of the time. This was 19-year-old Rubén Darío, hailing from Central America, where he had won fame as "the Child Poet," and was already the author of some half a dozen volumes of verse and prose. *La Epoca's* sumptuous halls, built of marble in Greek style, decorated with paintings by Watteau and Chardin, with a Venus of Milo, a Beauvais tapestry, and all the refinements afforded by wealth and good taste, had become Santiago's favorite intellectual center. Thinkers, writers, and artists gathered there daily to discuss the latest literary and artistic productions of the great European capitals. Conversation centered around the Wagnerian opera, impressionism in art, the Russian novel, and, above all, the literary trends set forth by the French poets of the *Parnasse Contemporain.*

All of this had a tremendous effect on the youthful poet, who in a short time devoured a large number of books and periodicals coming from France, and it was not long before the columns of *La Epoca* began to carry his own novel creations in latest Parisian style. A year later, 1888, these compositions were published in book form under the symbolic title of *Azul (Azure).*

To appreciate the stylistic revolution which this small volume was destined to bring about in Spanish literature, both in Spain and in Spanish America, we must recall that poetic creativeness and expression in the Spanish-speaking world at that time were characterized by exhaustion and lack of originality. Romanticism had run its course, and yet the egocentric outburst and the lyrical shout continued to be heard in the form of worn-out *clichés,* like false echoes of poets long since buried.

Against this background, *Azul* appeared upon the scene with a fresh literary outlook, injecting new vigor into poetic fantasy and literary expression, thanks in part to the author's own creative genius and in part to the novelty and the possibilities for further exploitation of the elements adapted to Spanish from other languages and literatures, particularly French and post-Romantic literary trends in France. Of these trends, undoubtedly the most influential upon *Azul* was the Parnassian concept of literary art. It will be recalled that the Parnassians, reacting against the excesses of subjectivism and sentimentality of the Romanticists, upheld the concept of art for art's sake, objectivity, and impassiveness. They emphasized the perfection of form, too often neglected by the late Romanticists. To the Parnassians, poetic creation was essentially the same as that of painting and the plastic arts. The poet, therefore, must seek new sources of inspiration, outside of himself, in harmony with this concept of poetry which drowns the ego and brings forth the artist.

In *Azul,* Darío's objective, like that of the Parnassians, was to express in prose and verse that which the painter expresses on canvas and the sculptor in stone. Unlike the Parnassians, however, he aimed not only at the transposition of the arts but at a complete orchestration of them. As he painted and chiseled his creations, the words from his pen formed a magic blend of sound, color, and form until then unknown in the Spanish language. The brilliancy of form went hand in hand with the novelty of the subject matter. Although life's biting reality creeps into these creations through the back door, the dominant element is poetic fantasy colored with a worship of Beauty for Beauty's sake, and with love of nature, of ancient Greece and its mythology, of exoticism, and of the orient with its legends and pomp.

Of the compositions in *Azul,* the Shakespeare-inspired "Queen Mab's Veil" is one of the most successful expressions of Darío's artistic ideal. The story itself blends fantasy with realism woven around a brilliant dialogue which depicts the dreams, the ambitions, and, alas, the inevitable disappointment of four gaunt, bearded outcasts: a painter, a musician, a sculptor, and a poet. This is a creation in prose which is at once music, poetry, color, and form. It is art in terms of art itself. It reflects nothing but the poet's ideal, his artistic sensibility, his consuming urge for the expression of Beauty, and the clash of all of this with the prosaic reality of life. Despite the bitter pessimism which pervades this story, a pessimism which no doubt was inspired by Darío's hardships and poverty in Chile, the poet remains true to the Parnassian ideal of impersonality in a work of art.

Except for a literary quarrel between the staunch conservatives and the adherents of modern aesthetic principles as expressed in *Azul,* this book remained almost totally unnoticed outside of the most advanced literary circles in Chile until one of Spain's foremost critics of the time, Juan Valera, devoted to it two consecutive articles in his literary column of *El Imparcial* of Madrid, in October of the same year, 1888. Valera praised *Azul* so highly that it soon became the most sought-after of Spanish-American publications. Writing in the form of an open letter to Darío, the distinguished Spanish critic stated, among other things:

> I must confess that . . . at first I looked at your book with indifference . . . The title was responsible for this . . . I suspected that you were a little Victor Hugo . . . As soon as I read it I formed a very different opinion of you. You are yourself, with a great wealth of originality, and of the rarest kind. The book is so impregnated with a cosmopolitan spirit that, were it not that it is written in excellent Spanish, its author could just as well be French, Italian, Turk, or Greek . . . You have no national characteristics but you do have individual character . . . Hugo, Lamartine, Musset, Leconte de Lisle, Gautier, Bourget, Proudhon, Daudet, Zola, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Catulle Mendès . . . and all the rest, poets and novelists, have been studied and well understood by you. And yet you do not imitate any of them . . . You have combined them all into a substance which has been brewed in the still of your brain, and then you have extracted from it a quintessence. The result is that you are a Nicaraguan author so up to date in Parisian style, with so much *chic* and distinction, that you even get ahead of the present trend to the extent that you could modify it and impose it . . . If I were asked what your book teaches, or with what it deals, I should answer without hesitation: it teaches, and deals with, nothing and everything. It is the work of an artist . . .

The stylistic revolution initiated in *Azul* did not reach its full impetus until the publication of *Prosas Profanas,* 1896, in which Darío launched a far-reaching program of renovation in the field of versification by revitalizing old, forgotten meters, by forging new ones of his own, and, above all, by creating with the words of the Spanish language such a wealth of bewitching harmonies is his illustrious predecessors had never suspected.

Eight years had passed since the appearance of *Azul*. In the meanwhile Darío had read, written, dreamed, and lived much. He had been mellowed by life and grief. During a short trip to Spain as Nicaraguan delegate to the Columbus Centennial he had been in intimate communion with great celebrities of the Spanish literary world. *Prosas Profanas,* therefore, is not only the fruit of a more skillful artistry than is found in *Azul,* but it is also imbued with a richer and deeper soul.

As to Darío's artistic equipment at this time, in addition to a more thorough acquaintance with mythology, world literature, foreign languages, particularly French, and a mastery of his own such as few have ever attained, he now had at his command new avenues of poetic expression revealed to him by the French Symbolist poets.

Parnassian impersonality and emphasis on the objective world, after the degeneration of Romanticism, was indeed a most logical step in the evolution of poetic art; it was a disciplinary measure which was more sorely needed in Spanish America than elsewhere. But in Spanish America, as in France, it was only that; a reaction against an existing evil, a step toward something else, itself being entirely too rigid and too narrow a formula to provide for the full expression of the human soul in poetic form. We shall recall that, no sooner had the French Parnassians laid down the law than there issued from their midst a rebellious note, later identified with Symbolism, bringing about a compromise between the frigid impassiveness of the Parnassians and the strident, unsophisticated subjectivism of the ego-centric Romanticists. This took the form of a muted, subtle, and vague, but penetrating lyrical note throbbing with sensitivity in the depths of its mysterious connotations. To the Symbolist poets, as Mallarmé himself put it, "Poetry is a mystery in which the reader must search for the clue."

Darío's genius for assimilating a great many influences, and then turning them into a substance of his own, had been pointed out by Juan Valera in connection with *Azul,* and it is even more in evidence in *Prosas Profanas*. Indeed Darío had not *become* a Symbolist; he had merely incorporated some elements of Symbolism into his art for the sake of a richer means of expression, particularly in what pertains to the veiled and subtle manifestations of the human spirit by means of a mere suggestion, in which the element of association of ideas and the suggestive power of musical effects play a vital role.

There is hardly a composition in *Prosas Profanas* which does not contain Parnassian as well as Symbolist elements. Side by side we find subtle images emerging from mere suggestion, and those which are chiseled out with Parnassian thoroughness. The musical element, a characteristic of Darío's since his childhood poems, now acquires a specific function and is blended, with superb virtuosity, into the *leit motif,* be it of an objective or subjective nature. He covers a wide range of musical effects, from the tenderest to the most vigorous. Most characteristic of him, however, are his mellow, silken tones, suggesting violins, cellos, and flutes, with an occasional bolder note, introduced by way of contrast, at the opportune moment. His resources for musical effects are too varied to be discussed in the present article, but we shall make occasional reference to some of them in connection with specific poems.

THE COMPOSITION entitled "Blason" (Coat of Arms), is one of the most representative of the collection, and indeed it embodies more fully than any other the poetic personality of Darío at that time. The central figure throughout the composition, as might be expected in a poem which constitutes Rubén Darío's coat of arms, is the swan. In the opening stanza the poet-sculptor has sculptured out with Parnassian nicety the figure of this winged aristocrat as it polishes its beak against its wing, open to the sun in the manner of a fan. In the second stanza the neck of the swan is compared to the arm of a lyre and the handle of a Grecian vase, this allusion to ancient Greece being only a prelude to a series of mythological references in the following two stanzas. The technique in the next stanza is out and out Symbolistic, thanks to which the poet is able to incite a large number of images in our minds: the romance of Cygnus and Castalia, the Danube with its swans, and Leonardo da Vinci's painting of Leda and Jupiter. The last line summarizes all the associations suggested in the stanza, with emphasis on music, and particularly Wagner's, by mentioning his opera Lohengrin. The poet has condensed all of this into four swift, clear cut strokes of his pen, as we can see in a word for word translation: "White king of the Castalian fountain, his victory glistens over the Danube; Vinci was his Italian Lord; Lohengrin is his Nordic prince." The following two stanzas constitute a panegyric to the swan for its whiteness, its rhythm, its regal bearing. And in their turn come the fleur-de-lis and Madame Pompadour, recalling eighteenth-century France and expressing the poet's own love of royalty and regal pomp.

All of the above Darío sings to the light and graceful rhythm of a minuet, with most of the major accents falling on the light Spanish vowels *i* and *u* (pronounced ee and ōō, respectively) except for an occasional contrast with the heavier vowel sounds *ä, ĕ, ŏ*. Toward the end of the poem, however, the mood changes abruptly as the element of death is introduced by referring to Ludwig II of Bavaria in connection with his suicide in the Starnbergersee shortly after the performance of the opera Lohengrin on that lake. At this point in the poem the musical effect acquires a somber tone beautifully expressed by the insistent recurrence of the vowel *o* throughout the stanza:

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Antonio M. de la Torre, born in Huancayo, Peru, graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1926 after having studied at Indiana, Purdue, and Iowa State; he received his M. A. in 1929. In 1926 he began teaching as an Assistant in Romance Languages; he was made professor in 1950. His publications include various articles on Spanish and Spanish American literature, "Intimidades de Rubén Darío en Prosas Profanas," Revista de Revistas, *Mexico City, 1934, being the first of a series devoted to the work and personality of the Nicaraguan poet, who has been the main object of his research for many years. This appreciative study will be published in two issues of* The Quarterly.

Boga y boga en el lago sonoro
Donde el sueño a los tristes espera,
Donde aguarda una góndola de oro
A la novia de Luis de Baviera.

Eighteenth century France, with the brilliance, grace, and pomp which are associated with the courts of Louis XIV and Louis XV, had great appeal to Darío, who was a lover of elegance and splendor. In the preface to *Prosas Profanas* he stated: "In my verses you will find princesses, kings, things imperial, visions of distant and fantastic lands . . . I detest the life and the time in which it was my lot to be born; and I can not greet a president of a republic in the same language as I would offer my song to thee, oh Halagabal! whose court—gold, silk and ivory—I recall in my dreams . . ." He then goes on to say: "My white bearded Spanish grandfather points to a gallery of illustrious portraits. 'This,' he tells me, 'is the great Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra . . . ; that one, Lope de Vega; the other, Garcilaso . . .' I inquire about the noble Gracián, about Therese the Saint, the gallant Góngora . . . Then I exclaim: Shakespeare! Dante! Hugo! (And to myself, Verlaine! . . .) As I take leave I say: Grandfather, I have a confession to make; my wife I have taken from my homeland, but my mistress I have found in Paris."

The world of which Darío liked to dream is portrayed in several of the most beautiful compositions in *Prosas Profanas*. One of these is the opening poem, "Era Un Aire Suave," of which Darío himself wrote years later: "In this composition I followed Verlaine's precept of poetic art: 'De la musique avant toute chose.' The setting, the characters, the tone, are drawn from the environment of eighteenth-century France. I wrote as though listening to the violins of the king's court." And indeed the very first stanza transports us to the voluptuous ballroom where "Fairy Harmony is riming her flights" in a gentle melody of lingering cadences while fleeting words and amorous sighs flow amongst the sobs of the violoncellos. The scene then changes to the garden terrace, where the quietness of the night is suddenly pierced by the gaiety of Marchionesse Eulalia's golden laughter. "With the soul of champagne sparkling in her mischievous blue eyes," she is bestowing her flirtations simultaneously upon her two rival suitors: the dashing viscount, famous for his duels, and the youthful bard whose madrigals sing of her beauty.

Although Darío avoids description as such, the splendor of the garden is revealed by glimpses of the statue of bearded Terminus laughing within his mask, of a Diana showing "the white nakedness of her marmoreal beauty," of a Flying Mercury by Giovanni da Bologna, all of which surround the fountain where regal swans "impress their wakes like gondolas adrift." The scene in the garden is so interwoven with action in the ballroom as to produce the sensation of simultaneity. Within, we hear a fleeting gavotte; in the garden the tantalizing marchionesse continues her alluring laughter.

The sculptor's chisel and the painter's brush have not been laid aside in this poem. Such scenes as that which portrays the stately demoiselle in the ballroom, "her nymph-like fingers" holding out her skirt, and her dainty, nimble feet tripping to the rhythm of a magic minuet, are carved in ivory stanzas with classical purity of line. It is, however, through the polychromatic sensation of its musical effects that this poem impresses itself upon our minds, ringing with such lines as are written with the notes of the marchionesse's exquisite, though cruel and eternal laughter.

This poem suggests so much more than it actually says, that the first critic who attempted to analyze it, the distinguished Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó, soon found himself writing not about the actual text of the poem but about what it suggested to him. He wrote in his concluding remarks:

> The flavor of this composition is entirely new to our language . . . its grace is that of Watteau, the provocative and subtle, incisive and manneristic grace of the eighteenth-century France which the Goncourt brothers . . . called 'the smile of the line, the soul of form, the spirited incarnation of style.' The originality of the versification harmonizes admirably with its delightful fantasy. The rhythm of the dodecasyllable . . . never before fell upon our ears in this unique manner. The poet has retempered it in his shop, making it flexible, melodious, and graceful. By freeing it from the rigidity of the three fixed and immutable accents which held it in place like buckles on its armour of steel, he has endowed it with an air of voluptuousness and tenderness. It is as though the buckle had turned into silken bows, and the steel into ivory. *Meters have their destiny!*, we might exclaim . . . parodying the anonymous poet of antiquity. Indeed the ancient rhythm of the *Libro de las Querellas* and of the *Dance of Death* has bent its petrified warrior knees upon a cushion of roses of modern elegance.

The atmosphere of minuettish fantasy which characterizes the poem and several others in this collection is, unfortunately, the phase of Darío's poetic art with which he is most commonly associated. Sober criticism, however, has not been blinded by the brilliance of such compositions. Indeed the poems which have inspired the highest praises are those poems which are imbued with spiritual vigor and depth. Rodó brought out in masterful fashion the poetico-philosophical aspects of many of these poems, and left little unsaid about the artistic phases of this collection. That he failed to see the intimate revelations of Darío the man which are to be found in several of these poems, however, is witnessed by such statements as the following: "Darío's mind is pregnant with images, but all of them are taken from a world which is zealously guarded by gods, where reality is not allowed to enter unless it has been bathed in twenty purifying waters." In view of the fact that nothing had been published about the poet's life at the time Rodó wrote his famous essay, the limitations of his interpretation are only to be expected. Now the facts of Darío's life are well known; in addition to his autobiography, there are a number of books and articles, written by close associates of his, revealing the man in his various moods and at various periods of his life. Darío's prose works, moreover, contain numerous references to individual poems, indicating the mood which inspired them. Literary criticism, however, though reaching impressive proportions in what pertains to Darío the literary artist, has thus far shown little interest in the connection between the man and the poet. The American critic Isaac Goldberg has complained about this attitude in effective terms though from a slightly different point of view: "I believe that many Spaniards, on both sides of the Atlantic, have stressed Darío's technical perfection and innovating significance at the expense of his essential humanity . . . Without taking sides with Art for Art's sake or Art for Heart's sake, it is easy to understand that beauty shorn of its human aspect is only half as beautiful."

As far as *Prosas Profanas* is concerned, the connection between the man and the poet constitutes a virgin field the explorations into which I have found both fascinating and richly rewarding. The book is not exclusively a temple of Venus. The "twenty purifying waters" of which Rodó speaks did not quite succeed in dissolving the essence of the realities of this world; nor were the "zealous gods" guarding the enchanted palace enough to keep out the anxieties of life and death diffused within the soul of the poet. All of this is usually so subdued by the poetic creation as such that its reality is to be found only beneath the crust. In a few compositions, however, the personal element becomes at once evident. For instance, to understand the biographical significance of "El Poeta Pregunta por Stella," a poem which throbs with tenderness and love, all we need to know is that Stella was the pen-name of Darío's first wife, to whom he was married only a short time, for she died when the poet was on his way back from Spain in 1892. There are several references to her in Da-

río's works, including one in his essay on Poe, where her memory comes to him as he mentions Poe's Legeia. The poem appearing in *Prosas Profanas* ends by making the same association, which seems to have been fixed in his mind: "Have you seen perchance the flight of my Stella's soul? Oh sister of Legeia, my Stella, for whom my song can be so sad!"

The element of love, purely ornamental in the light and festive composition of *Prosas Profanas,* again acquires autobiographical significance in a sonnet entitled "Bouquet." The entire composition is a symphony in white, in terms of wax candles, roses and lilies, stars, daisies, sea foam, and a swan. With all of these the poet forms a bouquet for his beloved, Blanca, a name which harmonizes with the whiteness of the other elements, and which may also be taken as the symbol of purity. Several lines in this sonnet, though expressed in metaphorical language, leave little doubt that the Blanca of this poem is none other than Stella, and that the poem itself commemorates the anniversary of her death, then still fresh in the mind of the poet. As the poet offers the bouquet to his beloved, he exclaims: "Now that you are celebrating your snow-wedding anniversary, (your wedding as a virgin is now no more) . . ." In the last stanza the poet gives us additional clues, including an image alluding to his bleeding heart: "In sending you my verses I pluck from my very life the flower which I offer you: Behold the stain left on your white bosom by the reddest rose of my garden."

The note of tenderness which vibrates in all of Darío's allusions to his Stella forms a sharp contrast with the mood which inspired a poem entitled "Marina," in which the poet purges himself of the venom with which another woman poisoned the rest of his life. This composition, extremely vague at first, acquires significance in the light of some specific details. When Darío was stopping in Nicaragua in 1892, on his way back from Spain to El Salvador to join his family, the news reached him of his wife's death. In order to drown his grief, the poet resorted to alcohol, which by that time already held a grip on him. His state of unconsciousness lasted several days. So long did it last in fact, that his childhood sweetheart had enough time to arrange a no meager surprise for the ungrateful poet. One night Darío was forced to come to, as best he could; there stood blue-eyed Rosario accompanied by a priest and her two brothers, pistol in hand. When the poet later regained full consciousness it was only to learn that his childhood dreams had come true in spite of himself. Darío managed to rid himself of Rosario in Panama, on his way to Paris, shortly after this incident, but her dogged determination to establish a home with him constituted an ever-haunting shadow on the path of the timid poet for the rest of his life.

To return to the poem "Marina," if we bear in mind this experience, together with a remark which Darío makes in one of his books: " 'Marina' is a true and bitter page of my life," we find that the intrinsic vagueness of this typically Symbolistic poem fades away, its meaning becoming all the clearer if we reduce it to its bare outline: The poet is about to sail for the Island of Citeres in search of refuge from the sorrows of this world; on the legendary island await the temple of Venus and a realm of rosy dreams. As he is bidding farewell to the land and the rocks which have been so unfriendly to him, he is startled by a cry from the shore; then he sees that it is a long forgotten romance. The poet goes out to sea, but there remains on the beach that desolate vision "howling as a dog howls at death."

So much for the love affairs of Darío latent in the poems of *Prosas Profanas.* Now let us look for the manifestations of some of his dominant psychological traits. Born and reared in an atmosphere heavy with superstition, and with the vivid imagination of a precocious child stimulated by gruesome bed-time stories which he later incorporated in his autobiography as being an integral part of his childhood, the poet grew up to be a victim of terrifying hallucinations, which were no doubt aggravated by his excessive use of alcohol. His dread of the dark, even during maturity, was such that he required lighted candles by his bedside while he slept. Even so, sleep offered no escape to him; Tranquilino Chacón, who lived with Darío in El Salvador, tells the story of his having to spend the wee hours of the morning out in the park taking care of the terrified poet, who, assailed by a nightmare, had rushed out of bed in the middle of the night.

Though Darío went through life haunted by visions of the dead, it was death itself that he feared most. It is not unusual to find in his writings such passages as "I hardly ever go to funerals. I am possessed by the obsession of death; since childhood I have been imbued with the Catholic terror."

His preoccupation with the Great Beyond, as expressed in *Prosas Profanas,* presents a problem of special interest. By virtue of the artistic recasting of his morbid thoughts, Death appears disguised in the garb of Beauty. Thus in the poem "The Colloquy of the Centaurs" the mention of death brings forth two flashes of horror which are promptly followed by the rationalization, and eventually even by the actual idealization, of what the poet calls "Life's Black Sister." As the centaurs are seated on the shores of the Golden Island, philosophizing about the fair sex, Hipea exclaims: "The human female is the sister of Grief and Death." This remark leads to the contemplation of death in the following dialogue:

Licidas: The secret terror of its fatal mystery is hidden in the depths of Death's own empire.

Arneo: Death is Life's own, inseparable sister.

Quirón: Death is the victory of the human race!

Medón: Death! I have seen her. She is not gaunt and wilted. Neither does she hold a sythe by her side, nor is her expression one of anguish. She resembles Diana, and like her, she is chaste and virgin. Her face has the glow of a bride in waiting, and on her forehead she wears a garland of stars. In her left hand she holds fresh palms of triumph; and in her right, a vase with water from the fountain of oblivion. At her feet lies, like a dog, a sleeping romance.

One of the most interesting aspects of Dario's attitude toward death is the paradox which arises from the fact that his dread of the great unknown was coupled with an irresistible attraction toward its appalling mystery. His explorations into the occult sciences began early in life. Several years before he wrote *Prosas Profanas* the occult had already become to him a fascinating torture. Several of his friends have told of amazing experiences with the poet, to which he himself makes brief references throughout his writings. It was not an uncommon sight, on coming to visit Darío, to find him lying under a table, surrounded by burning candles, absorbed in his evocation of the spirits. On a certain occasion, Darío and Jorge Castro made a pact that the spirit of him who should die first would come to reveal the secret of death to the other. Shortly after this, Castro left for Panama as Consul of Costa Rica. One evening, while Darío was entertaining in his home, the image of Jorge Castro suddenly appeared to him cast upon the wall. None of the people whom Darío mentions as witnesses of this strange incident admit having seen the image, but those who have commented on it agree that Darío claimed to have seen it and that it is a fact that the following morning a telegram from Panama announced Castro's death. They also add that Darío suffered a nervous breakdown which lasted several months, carrying him to the borders of insanity.

Despite such violent effects upon his nervous system, the poet was not able to resist the attraction which the world of the spirit, in the hereafter, held for him. This anxiety

Continued page 29

lisher filled an abandoned canal with discarded books then covered them by the use of bulldozers. One great danger to any cheap-book movement has been avoided so far, the ruining of the market by "dumping." Along with this liquidation, several firms cleared up their covers, reduced royalty payments, adopted a stricter editorial policy, and in other ways tried to get their houses in order. The margin of profit to the publisher of a paper-back is so small that the return of just one unsold book can wipe out the profit from the sale of a dozen others. Incidentally, the author gets his 1c royalty on the basis of the number of copies printed rather than the number of copies sold.

Another problem confronting the paper-back publisher today is a shortage of titles suitable for mass distribution. The backlog of titles has been almost exhausted, and enough new titles of the right kind for reprinting are not being published currently. Some 11,000 new books are published each year in the United States, but most of them are not suitable for mass sales. Whole classes of books such as technical works and textbooks are not suitable, and many others are too limited in appeal for general distribution. One solution to this problem has been attempted by two paper-back firms, Gold Medal Books and Dell's Original Editions. These companies have gone into the new-book field and have published original works in paper covers at 25c. They appear to be reasonably successful in attracting manuscripts and selling the books. Perhaps others will have to follow their example, or else public taste will change so that more of the 11,000 titles published in hard covers will become suitable for mass sales. An increase in price for some series also has proved successful, especially for non-fiction works and for other works not available except at high royalties. The problem of how to find enough good titles is a knotty one that will not be easy to solve.

What has been the effect of these drugstore, newsstand, and other such sales of paper-bounds on the publication of regular editions? The publishers have found that the 25c reprints have little if any effect on the publication of regular editions. The conclusion has been reached that the drugstore reaches an entirely different clientele, which does not or would not buy books elsewhere, and which prior to pocket books may have read only slightly. The paper-bound reaches even the reader of only the telephone directory, and probably has created vast new groups of readers.

At this stage, I should point out that as fantastic as the figure of 250,000,000 books a year may seem, books are after all only a small part of the mass media of information. About 90 to 95% of the adult population sees-listens to TV or radio every day. About 85 to 90% of the adult population reads one or more newspapers regularly. Some 45 to 50% used to see a motion picture every two weeks or oftener, though this percentage probably has changed lately. Finally only 25-30% of the adult population reads one or more books a month. This includes both books bought and books borrowed from libraries. Book sales have not kept pace with the increase in educational level that has taken place during the last fifty years. In time the potential market may become much greater, but if so, cheap books readily available are essential.

The establishment of Pocket Books back in 1939 was welcomed with great joy by the public and by leaders—ministers, educators, librarians, and critics. Good books at low prices were being brought to a wide audience and it was wonderful. It still is wonderful, but the praise often is now overshouted by the criticism. Some of this criticism undoubtedly arises from what some allege is the increasingly dangerous tendency in our country to compel conformity to a common pattern and to stifle freedom of thought and inquiry. But this criticism also arises from an honest indignation, perhaps misguided and illogical, perhaps aroused more by the excesses of that shrieking salesman, the lurid bookcover, than by the actual average pocket book itself.

American democracy needs paper-bound books. Books meet certain cultural and educational needs of society not readily served by any other medium of communication. Complex ideas and groups of facts can be dealt with extensively and thoughtfully, at a pace suited to the reader. Books provide a voice for the different, with the thousands of titles which appear each year providing the means for expressing every point of view. Actually, some of the great virtues of books have risen from the fact that they have not been mass media. This very fact has given rise to problems which may become even more pressing in the future. But in a democracy growing as complex as ours, we must have better knowledge than can be secured from brief news reports and newspaper items. Books afford this means of educating for better citizenship.

Paper-bounds have become an important educational and cultural medium, providing relaxation and information for millions who otherwise would never have read at all. While it is true that paper-bounds do have their Mickey Spillane, they also have found over 4,000,000 readers for dictionaries, 4,000,000 for copies of a book on baby and child care, and over 1,000,000 copies of perhaps 200 other titles. All of these sales were to new readers.

We must remember that the titles available in the paper-bound books are a reflection of the state of public interest and taste. Pocket books do not debase or retard the cultural level of the people; they only reflect it. The publisher issues what will sell; if he does not, he will not stay in business very long, for the mass-book business is a kind of quick-profit and also quick-loss proposition. Of course, the publishers issue a lot of detectives and westerns, and also a lot of fiction. But what harm is done by detectives and westerns, and besides most of the fiction is first-rate anyway? We should not criticize the other person for his poor taste and prevent him from reading detectives and westerns, if he gets pleasure from them, any more than we should prevent all persons from playing golf who are not skillful at it and do not beat par regularly. The level of reading ability and of taste varies widely in our country, but the reader should not for this reason be deprived of material suited to his interest and taste. If the public wants more nonfiction, it will buy more of it, and it will be only a few months until more is on the drugstore bookstand.

Rubén Darío . . .

Continued from page 24

to snatch the great secret is clearly manifested in *Prosas Profanas* in the form of a persistent search for the answer to the mystery of the universe. There are times when, forgetting his Catholicism, he becomes enraptured in the contemplation of nature with a pantheistic mysticism. At such times, nature itself seems to hold the clue to ultimate truth. In his poem "La Espiga" he attempts to interpret the language of the universe through a sensual perception of its beauty: "Behold the subtle signs made by the wind . . . They trace upon the blue heavens the immortal mystery of divine earth and the soul of things, which offers its sacrament in an eternal matinal freshness."

In the poem "Ama tu ritmo" (Love Thy Rhythm), the poet is eager to capture the various signs and sounds of nature in order to arrange them as the symbols of a hieroglyphic and then read the truth therein contained: "Listen to the divine rhetoric of the eolian song, watch the geometric brilliance of the nocturnal heavens, then string the pearls together, bead by bead, for there Truth pours forth its treasure."

In "The Colloquy of the Centaurs" he is overcome by the enigma of a double mys-

tery; he searches for the truth in the soul of things, but it fades away cloaked in the paradox of simultaneous unity and plurality. Thus speak the centaurs:

Abantes: Glory be to sacred Nature, to the entrails of the earth, and to the germ which, within the rocks, within the wood of the trees, and within human flesh constitutes a single secret and a single norm, potent and subtle; a universal synthesis of supreme power and of the virtue of Intelligence.

Quirón: Glory be! Things possess a vital being; things have rare and mysterious aspects; each thing is a gesture, a unit, an enigma of its own; each atom contains an unknown stigma; each leaf of each tree sings its own song; and there is a soul in each drop of the sea.

The "Catholic terror," however, brings him back to the realization that death alone holds the clue to the eternal mystery. Thus speaking to his own soul in "Alma mía," the poet admonishes it "Do persist in thy divine ideal; all things are governed by a supreme destiny; pursue thy path; follow on to the final horizon upon the trail leading to the Sphinx."

ANOTHER POEM in which Darío's preoccupation with death enters the realms of *Prosas Profanas* is "La Página Blanca," in which the poet brings out even more emphatically the idea that death alone holds the answer to the great mystery of life. The poem first introduces us to a white panorama expanding over a desert of snow. Against this is silhouetted a caravan of visions and shadows later taking the form of living marble statues which, overwhelmed by ancient sorrows, are slowly escorting across the desert of life the coffin wherein lies the corpse of Lady Hope. At the last there comes, riding on a dromedary in triumphant mood, the Invincible One, Death, clad in her tunic of night. "And man, who is haunted by startling visions, and who sees in the stars of the heavens frightening portents and bewildering signs, looks on the dromedary of the caravan as the messenger bearing The Light across the shadowy desert of life."

The somberness and majesty of the subject matter are most expressively brought out in "La Página Blanca" by the heavier vowel sounds *ä, ô, ĕ, the* open vowel *ä* being by far the dominant note throughout the poem. The treatment of the lighter Spanish vowels *i* (ee) and *u* (ōō) is also peculiarly interesting. Though in the minority, they bear from time to time some of the major rhythmic accents of the stanza along with the heavier vowels, all of them so arranged according to their relative degree of openness as to produce crescendo and diminuendo effects which are of unique beauty.

Darío was a devout Catholic, a great dreamer, and alas! a great sinner, his tragedy being that he did not find it possible to give the flesh to the devil and the soul to the Lord. In later collections he sang poems inspired by undisguised raptures of remorse. In *Prosas Profanas* itself, however, we can already find subtle but unmistakable traces of the dilemma which his religion and his weakness for the flesh constituted for him. In his poem "El Reino Interior" (The Inner Kingdom), at the end of an allegory of the seven virtues and the seven vices, the poet asks his soul to which it feels more attracted. His soul refuses to commit itself, but soon it falls asleep and whispers: "Oh sweet delights of the heavens! Oh rosy earth which my eyes have caressed! Virgin Princesses, shroud me with your veil! Crimson princes, clasp me in your arms!" Other times passion roars, free from fear, as in the "Colloquy of the Centaurs": "Oh aroma of her sex! Flowers and alabaster!"

Now it seems in order to ask: Can there be any connection between the poems in *Prosas Profanas* whose very essence is made up of the poet's sorrows and anxieties, and those minuettish fantasies, apparently free from all worry, as though written in an ivory tower, which characterize most of the compositions in this collection? Perhaps we shall find a direct answer to our question in Darío's own words: "How often have I sought refuge in an artificial paradise, possessed by the prophetic horror of death!"

Chaucer . . .

Continued from page 20

must, however, reckon always with the fact that the opus was far from any finished state. Any solutions we supply must be conjectural, at best.

Nevertheless, even as a fragment, it is Chaucer's most mature artistic utterance, and in Lowes' words, a "greater achievement than any single tale," for over and above a certain adherence to literary conventions, the depiction of the pilgrims has the ring of solid truth and the clarity of the most dispassionate observation. And yet there is implicit the most profound sympathy for the plight of man caught between the self-imposed penances and the profane pleasures that this life affords; caught, in short between the demands of his higher and lower natures. The *Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* surely is Chaucer's best known piece, surviving in more than eighty manuscripts. Its springtime setting, the description of the pilgrims, the plan the Host suggests to them for recounting stories on the journey are familiar to every literate person. Part of the air of reality is lent to the *Prologue* from Chaucer's real presence among them; if we may indulge our imagination, he is like an artist-guide in a picture gallery who wishes to show us his portraits. They shock and provoke us with their vividness; we feel that they are living human beings. They twitch and mutter; we examine their clothes, their distinguishing marks; we speculate with the artist about their motives and professions. And when he has finished his little tour, and the living portraits wait patiently for their creator to finish, he suddenly releases them into a larger framework, and himself with them, from which they cannot escape without paying their dues in the form of a story. If we are not careful, we will conclude that they are, for certain, drawn from living models, and only their stories are fiction; this deceptively lifelike quality is no doubt what makes their creation the highest kind of poetic art. And since he includes himself among their number, we are confused momentarily into welding together the real and the unreal into a new synthesis, into thinking they are all real people because he has given one of them his own name.

Just how far we may go in defining the philosophical unity of the Canterbury pilgrimage is difficult to decide, since the work is unfinished, and is indeed only a fragment. Yet the idea dies hard that Chaucer was not a sufficiently careful craftsman to make plans for working out the larger patterns of his finally assembled tales. I should like, myself, to believe that Chaucer knew with greater and greater clarity of purpose the end towards which the work was tending, and that he did, steadily and with purpose, exert upon his heterogeneous materials, a unifying principle that goes beyond the dramatic interplay of personalities. By and large, the broader outline of the *Canterbury Tales* is available to us, and we do know certain obvious matters about its organization: we know how Chaucer meant to begin, and we know how he meant to end. Although we may never fully fathom the meaning of the great middle of his *Tales,* we can scrutinize the beginning and the end and elicit a few clues as to the kind of order that Chaucer was in the process of imposing upon the pilgrimage.

We note, for example, that Chaucer chose to put the *Knight's Tale* first. The story seems to my mind to perform a real function for the entire pilgrimage, on a purely fictional plane. That is to say, it is the most patently philosophical tale of them all. It is relatively untouched by Christian