

Rubén Darío: Little Nicaragua's Giant Poet

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THE YEAR 1898 was about to close when an incident occurred which was to change the entire course of Rubén Darío's life and no doubt that of his career as a poet and a writer. The Spanish-American War was just over, and Darío was chosen by *La Nación* of Buenos Aires to be sent to Spain to report on conditions in that country as a result of the war.

This brings us to one of the most interesting phases of Darío's personality and work. The poet's dream had always been to live in Paris, but this urge was the fruit of his aesthetic inclinations rather than any feeling of loyalty to French traditions and culture. The fact is that, as time went on, his symbolic words in the preface of *Prosas Profanas* (1896), "My wife I have taken from my homeland, but my mistress I have found in Paris" should reverse their order to assume their true relative importance and read "My mistress I have taken from Paris, but my wife I have found in my homeland," the word homeland in this case meaning not Nicaragua alone but the Hispanic world at large, and Spain in particular.

As Darío's pen began to produce the ripe fruits of maturity, which came from deeper in his heart, and are his greatest, it becomes more and more evident that his first loyalty, his profoundest affection, and the very roots of his culture and tradition, were in the mother country. In fact, his reports on Spain are among the most self-revealing and heartfelt writings which he has left us. The attitude with which he approached Spain is evidenced in the opening paragraphs of the first of his fortnightly reports for *La Nación*. Alluding to his previous voyage to Spain in 1892, he wrote: "Once more on high sea; once more on my way to the mother country which the soul of America, of *Spanish America*, will always greet with reverence, will always love with profound affection. For if she is no longer the great power, the imperial mistress that she was in former days, for that very reason we must love her twice

as much; and if she is wounded, we must cling to her all the more."

Darío was primarily a contemplative soul, a worshipper of beauty, and to a great extent a creator of a world of his own. This is the phase of his work and personality which has come to be better known. As a result of this, and despite his poems with continental or racial significance which have attained wide popularity, such as his "Ode to Roosevelt," he is generally associated in the public mind with the ideal ivory tower. In his lesser known works, however, we find a Darío who is keenly interested in world affairs, an admirer of scientific and industrial achievements, and indeed a sharp observer of social, economic, and political conditions.

For his reports on Spain, Darío did not rely on his personal observations alone. In an effort to interpret conditions in the light of the forces which for centuries had been molding contemporary Spain, he read and digested all the information available to him on the political, economic, and social evolution of that country; on its psychological characteristics; on its literary and artistic life; and, in short, on all significant aspects of the history of Spanish culture.

INTIMATE FRIENDS of Darío's, commenting on various periods of his life, have expressed amazement at the rapidity with which he was able to produce his compositions, be they in prose or verse. That he also possessed a capacity for tremendously rapid reading and instant assimilation, is revealed by the large number of works and authors which he constantly cites and discusses in his books. These gifts are apparent in his reports on Spain, together with the remarkable versatility of his mind, which made it possible for him to cover a large variety of subjects. Although these reports succeeded one another every two weeks, each of them constitutes a well thought-out and richly documented study of a given phase of Spanish life and culture, ranging all the way from the search

for subtle manifestations of the Spanish soul in painting, in the bullfight, in the dance, and the like, to the factual and objective exposition of such prosaic matters as the agricultural problems of the nation.

In terms none too tender, he undertakes to review in detail Spain's great historical mistakes; her quixotic mismanagement of the great natural resources which she found in the New World; her disastrous colonial policy; and later her suicidal attitude toward the newly established Spanish-American republics which were flesh of her flesh. Darío's bluntness and openly critical tone in dealing with these matters are matched only by the great sincerity of purpose which moved him. If in some of his reports he wields his hammer against that Spain which is identified with bigotry and the Inquisition, and with the haughty heritage that in the midst of the nation's poverty and decadence impells her to look down scornfully upon the rest of the world from the heights of her tumbling windmills, it is because he is convinced that these practices not only have poisoned Spain herself but have also made impossible the wholesome relations, material and spiritual, which should naturally exist between the mother country and the American republics. These relations Darío ardently sought to bring about, and to this end he devoted a good part of his energies for the remainder of his life.

Darío's affection for Spain brings up the interesting point of his attitude toward the United States in connection with the Spanish-American war. "The most frightful disaster has just occurred"; he writes on January 4, 1899, "only a few days ago a humiliating treaty was signed in Paris by virtue of which the Yankee's jaw has been left momentarily satisfied with the stupendous bite it has taken." A few days later, reporting an interview with the famous orator and head of the republican movement in Spain, Emilio Castelar, Darío adds to the above picture: "One must remember the extent of Castelar's enthusiasm for the

North American Republic previous to this iniquity . . . and now he expresses himself with the sober indignation of one who has been deceived, deceived in a way worthy of the colossal land of dental surgeons."

Darío's resentment toward the United States, however, does not prevent him from admiring its greatness, nor does he fail to see that Spain was to a very large extent the author of its own misfortunes. In his articles pointing out Spain's social flaws as a result of its present weakness and decadence, time and again he brings out significant contrasts between Spain and the United States. In reference to one of Spain's acute problems he writes, "It can be asserted that in very few countries in the world one finds these frightful statistical data: In Spain 6,700,000 women [total population around 20,000,000] are completely unoccupied, and 21,000 devote themselves to beggary. Outside of tobacco factories, sewing, dressmaking, and household work paying miserable wages, Spanish women find no other refuge . . . Idleness and want in the middle and lower classes are excellent fuel for prostitution."

Against this picture in Spain he quotes a long list of figures showing the progress made in the United States during the last thirty years of the century in the way of opportunities for women in the business world, in public employment, and as professional teachers, musicians, artists, writers, architects, journalists, physicians, etc., etc. Again, in the same breath he shows admiration for the United States, though indirectly in this case, and criticism of Spain: "The English take great pride in the triumphs of the North American Republic, flesh of their flesh and colossal flowering of their race. Spain has not bothered to take into account our progress, our achievements, of which other nations have taken cognizance and due advantage."

IN STUDYING the forces which bound Darío to the mother country, one must consider his personal relations with the representative figures of intellectual and spiritual Spain at that time. On his first trip to Spain in 1892 he had been honored by such celebrities as Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, Emilio Castelar, and Juan Valera, who, as we shall recall, had stated with prophetic accuracy in his review of *Azul*: ". . . 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." By 1898 he was no longer only a promise in what pertained to his possibilities as a creator of a new literary style. He was the central figure of the Modernista Movement in Spanish-

American poetry, which was soon to spread to Spain. Moreover, with the publication of his *Prosas Profanas* he had become generally acclaimed as the leading poet of the entire Hispanic world.

Upon arrival in Madrid, he was included in the highest literary and artistic circles of that capital city. He became a center of attraction at such gatherings as those held at the Argentine Legation and the elegant salons of Countess Emilia Pardo Bazán, which served as a *rendez-vous* for Spain's intellectual, political, and social leaders of the time. Countess Emilia, herself an outstanding critic and novelist, held one of her famous soirées in honor of our poet as Juan Valera had done on the occasion of Darío's first visit to Spain. At such gatherings as these, as well as at the Ateneo de Madrid, at the cafés, bookshops, and in private homes, Darío kept in close touch with the outstanding literary exponents both of the older and the newer generations gathered in Madrid. Many of these acquaintances developed into warm and lasting friendships, such as in the case of Menéndez y Pelayo, Valle Inclán, Miguel de Unamuno, Manuel and Antonio Machado, Juan Ramón Jiménez, and Martínez Sierra, to mention only a few of Spain's noblest figures of that generation.

As to the influence which Darío exercised upon his contemporaries in Spain, it would be perhaps more appropriate and meaningful to let the Spaniards themselves comment on what our poet has meant to them. For this purpose I have chosen as representative a group as possible from among the highest literary figures contemporary Spain has to offer. First let us listen to one who was at that time only a teenager and who was later to become one of the greatest Spanish poets of our time. I refer to Pedro Salinas, whose recent death has saddened all lovers of poetry. "I can testify," he states in one of his recent books, "that for the teen-agers of my generation given to reading poetry . . . Rubén Darío was more than an admired poet or a worshipped hero. To us he was something like an idol."

Among those who at that time were already making a name for themselves in the literary world was Gregorio Martínez Sierra, who later became a leading playwright characterized by the poetic quality of his prose. The following are a few excerpts from an essay by him touching upon various phases of Darío's significance to Spanish writers of his generation:

Rubén Darío is the master of beauty sung in Castilian verse today. And he is no less great as an educator of the intellectual youth of Spain. As poet, a prophet, a legislator of the new style in poetry, he is a magician who . . . has extracted

the sap of our old European literatures and has turned it into a new essence, with new life, in novel and musical forms. . . . The Spanish heart owes a debt of affection to Darío the American poet. And the youth and the intellectual of Spain owe a debt of technique and beauty to Darío the universal poet. With deep affection we express our admiration to him in words taught us by him, and in rhythms learned from his magic flute.

Finally, I shall quote a few lines from the pen of one of modern Spain's most celebrated characters, the poet-philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, then Rector of the University of Salamanca:

No one has plucked certain fibers of our being as has Darío. He revealed to us such subtlety of poetry as our comprehension had never reached before. His song was like the song of the lark; it compelled us to turn our eyes to a vaster sky by looking beyond the fences surrounding our home gardens wherein sang our indigenous nightingales. His song opened a new horizon to us, but a new horizon that could be better perceived by our ears than by our eyes. It was as though we heard mysterious voices coming from realms more remote than the line where the heavens and the earth come together before our eyes. . . .

Let us establish once more the relationship which existed between Darío the man and his poetic works. As has been said before, Darío's was a contemplative, beauty-worshipping soul, and no doubt his more representative poetic works are those which deal with poetry itself rather than with social or political issues. I hope, however, that the background which we have now gained may help us understand how much was in the poet's heart when he sang in his verses the glories and the sorrows of Mother Spain or the great issues confronting the Hispanic world at large.

Significantly the Hispanic theme does not appear in Darío's works until his first visit to Spain, 1892, in connection with the celebration of the Columbus Centennial. The "Ode to Columbus," which he wrote on that occasion, was followed by several poems on Spanish themes which appeared in *Prosas Profanas*. Not, however, until Darío lived in Spain, although this was for relatively short periods of time, did his poems become imbued with deep affection for that country. And it is precisely these compositions that have contributed very largely to making the volume in which they appeared, *Cantos de Vida y Esperanza*, 1905, Darío's greatest collection of poems. Some of these compositions have a particularly interesting history.

A few months after Darío's arrival in Madrid as a correspondent to *La Nación* of Buenos Aires, European dailies carried an account of the gracious gesture which King Oscar of Norway had made toward Spain; upon touching Spanish soil, he had enthusiastically cried out, "Long Live Spain." This gesture of friendship indeed called for a poet as a spokesman for Spain. It was

Darío, the Nicaraguan, who picked up the Spanish banner and rose to the occasion. In brilliant Alexandrine verses he thanked the Northern Monarch on behalf of Mother Spain; on behalf of the glories crowning her brave men of war at Lepanto, Flanders, Mexico, and Peru; on behalf of Cervantes and Velázquez; of Isabel the Catholic, and Christopher the Dreamer; on behalf of the gallant blood of a golden race and of Spain's symbolical lion; and on behalf of the flowers of Andalusia and of Granada's Moorish Alhambra. To Don Quixote, Darío refers in this poem only by allusion. In reply to King Oscar's gallant words of "Long Live Spain," our poet gives him assurance that, as long as there are dreams to be dreamed and a passion to fire man's imagination; as long as there is a lofty pursuit and an impossible deed to be turned into reality; as long as there is yet a new world to be discovered, Spain will live.

THE "Ode to Roosevelt," voicing "a continental protest" against the Panama affair of 1903, is another interesting poem on a Hispanic theme. The fighting spirit of this poem, coupled with the general indignation which Theodore Roosevelt's actions and words aroused in Spanish America, turned this ode into something like an international hymn of the Hispanic world. Darío once wrote in the preface to one of his books, "I am not a poet for the masses, but I know that I must unavoidably go to them." And indeed he did, for there is no poem in the Spanish language that has aroused more mass popularity, at least at the time of its appearance, than his "Ode to Roosevelt." This poem, however, is far from being one of his best. It is a resounding protest, the voice of a continent, if you wish; but it certainly is not that supreme expression of poetic beauty which we have come to expect of the creations of Rubén Darío.

The poet's deep concern for the fate of his people, for the destiny of the Hispanic world, constitutes a persistent note in a number of compositions the subtlety of whose poetic beauty has deprived them of wide popularity. In his poem entitled "The Swans," for example, we find very much the same concern and feeling of alarm as in the "Ode to Roosevelt," but here these sentiments are expressed in terms of poetic images rather than of poetized dagger-thrusts. To quote three of its stanzas in a word for word translation: "A northern mist fills us with sadness; our roses are wilting, our palms hold their heads low. Hardly an illusion soothes our brows; we are the beggars of our own poor souls . . . The children of Hispania, scattered in two worlds, gaze upon the orient of their fatal

destiny; with the interrogative signs of my patrician swans I pose the question before the Sphinx . . ." To be sure, the question which the poet poses bears on the fate which awaits the Hispanic world in the face of the threat which the Hispanic people of the time saw in the Colossus of the North. And the answer to this question comes in typical Rubén Darían imagery and faith in the latent strength of his race: "A black swan replied: 'Night always announces day.' Then added a white swan: 'Dawn is immortal! Dawn is immortal!' Oh sunny lands of harmony, hope still is yours in Pandora's Box."

The note of faith in his people, which is dominant in this poem and in others of a racial character, constitutes the main theme of a long composition, "Salutación del Optimista," which is one of Darío's greatest poems. Written in 1905, in lofty hexameter verses which have been likened to the voices from a sermon resounding within the nave of a great cathedral, Darío addresses the people of Hispania:

Inclitas razas ubérrimas, sangre de Hispana
fecunda,
Espíritus fraternos, luminosas almas, salve!

After this introductory salutation, the poet announces the dawn of a new era as foretold by "muffled rumblings which are heard within the entrails of the world." Then he exalts the glorious heritage of the Spanish race, and in vigorous terms undertakes to dispell the note of pessimism which still lingers in some quarters of Spain. Finally, he goes into his actual message, which is in the form of an exhortation to the Hispanic world to unite in order to meet the great events which are to come with the approaching new era. The following comment by Pedro Salinas may give us an idea of the effect which this poem produced in the mind of another great poet of the Spanish world:

In this composition Spanish lyric poetry exhales a breath so far-reaching, so noble, and so robust, as had never before risen from its breast . . . No matter how vast the Hispanic World, scattered as it is in two continents, the voice of this poem is endowed with enough power to shake its most distant corners . . . We now see Darío as he had never before been seen. In the manner of a great political orator, he stands upon an ideal platform suspended between ancestral Hispania and the young Hispanic American nations. And from there his voice descends upon the people of two worlds.

Despite the loftiness both of the tone and message of "The Optimist's Salutation," I must confess that, of all of Darío's poems of racial character, my own favorite is his "Litany to our Lord Don Quixote." There is no social message in it, and much less a program of action; it contains nothing but poetry itself in terms of a heart throbbing with the sorrows and the uncertainties of

life, and also with the idealism which is symbolized in the noble figure of Don Quixote. In an intimate moment of despair and gloom, the poet lifts his soul to our Lord Don Quixote on behalf of a troubled world: "Pray for us who are hungry for life, our souls groping and our faith lost . . . for we are without soul, without life, without Quixote, with neither feet nor wings, with neither Sancho nor God." (Isaac Goldberg's translation.)

My purpose in these articles has been to present some specific aspects of Rubén Darío's poetic personality rather than a bird's eye view of his work as a whole. However, in view of the fact that the very nature of Darío's art has kept him from becoming better known outside of the Hispanic world, I feel that it is only a duty on my part to submit a general evaluation of Rubén Darío in terms of what he means to Spanish literature as a whole, considering both the negative and the positive aspects. Despite his many attributes as a superb literary artist, he was not endowed with that great singleness of purpose which is necessary for such creations of universal proportions as have been left to mankind by Homer, Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, or Milton. Darío's genius was kin to that of Lope de Vega; neither Lope nor Darío can lay claim to an individual masterpiece of monumental proportions, but the work of either, taken as a whole, does constitute a monumental contribution to the Spanish literary world. Moreover, Darío, like Góngora, opened new horizons to be explored and led the way in the creation of a new poetic sensitivity and the establishment of a new style. For this reason, Darío's contribution to Spanish literature is not limited to the forty-odd volumes of verse and prose which flowed from his pen. Indeed his contribution must be measured in terms of an entire generation of high-ranking poets and writers in both Spain and the New World who are avowed disciples of the great Nicaraguan. The literary revolution created by Darío marks a turning point in Spanish literature, and easily constitutes one of the most brilliant chapters in the literary history of the Hispanic World.

Mozart Bibliography . . .

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¹It is perhaps significant that in the nineteenth century only two of the concertos were generally known, the D-minor and the "Coronation"; the first one of the least typical, the second one of the weakest of his works in this form.

²A new German edition is in progress.

³See Thayer-Krehbeil, *The Life of Ludwig van Beethoven*. II, 226-7.

⁴Anderson, II, 879-85.