Rubén Darío (1867-1916)

Born Félix Rubén García Sarmiento in Metapa, Nicaragua in 1867, Rubén Darío is largely considered the father of “modernismo” in Latin America. This poet, essayist and journalist travelled widely across the Americas and Europe and was a key figure in articulating a new Latin American voice on the world literary stage. Darío’s work in unifying the disparate threads of a pan-American literature was crucial in the development of modernismo and the resultant vanguard literary forms on the continent.

Darío’s first publications were written when he was just a teenager. His early success earned him the nickname in Nicaragua as “the boy poet.” By fifteen he had earned a post in the national library and was invited to San Salvador (Franco 1994: 138). In an effort to continue his literary education, he made the move to Chile where he published his first major collection of poems, *Azul*, in 1888, a collection that most scholars mark as the landmark text in the modernismo movement. It met with mixed reviews in Spain with Miguel Unamuno commenting that “a feather still stuck out of Darío’s hat,” a derisive comment reflecting Darío’s heritage and his status as a Latin American author (González Echevarría 2012: 24). Yet, Spanish literary critic Juan Valera offered high praise for the work which now forms the preface to *Azul,* helped to launch his career. In it Valera identifies Darío as a descendant of the romantics, naturalists, decadents, symbolists and Parnassians, but as an imitation of none; he is a new kind of writer who has absorbed all of these currents and extracted a unique essence (xi).

Darío’s network of connections solidified with his arrival in Buenos Aires in 1893 as a correspondent for the newspaper *La Nación*. The city had by this point become the major metropolis in Latin America and its eclectic and diverse population was a fertile meeting place for cosmopolitan writers. There, Darío developed strong friendships with other leading authors including Eduardo Holmberg and José Ingenieros. With this group he founded the Ateneo de Buenos Aires that brought together not just writers, but scientists, journalists and philosophers. He also created the *Revista de América* with Bolivian writer Ricardo Jaimes Freyre, a “little magazine” and literary journal that lasted for just three issues, but became one of the first collective spaces from which to articulate their new intellectual and literary revolution.

Darío elucidates the roots of modernismo in his collection of essays *Los raros*, published in 1896. The book includes profiles that had originally appeared in *La nación* of the most prominent figures on the literary scene and reveals some of Darío’s largest influences. Much like Arthur Symons’s work *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* that would appear three years later, *Los raros* included a number of French Symbolists who he identified as foundational figures for the new avant-garde. The contents also include profiles of two Latin American authors (José Martí and Augusto de Armas) while the rest are international figures like Edgar Allan Poe, Henrik Ibsen and Paul Verlaine.

Describing modernismo in a 1901 essay, Darío acknowledged the diverse contributions of the up and coming generation of writers and attempted to bring all of these divergent threads together into a cogent vision of contemporary literature. Latin American authors of the new generation carry with them “an immense desire for progress and an enthusiastic life, that constitutes its great potential with that which little by little triumphs over traditional obstacles, barriers of indifference and oceans of mediocrity”[[1]](#footnote--1) (6). He sees the new generation as uniquely suited and uniquely positioned to harness the energy of modernity, overcoming traditional obstacles and oceans of mediocrity to find new modes of expression that better fit an American context independent from Spain. While he deliberately never wrote a manifesto for modernismo, preferring to leave the category open, at its core modernismo was a movement that held poetry in opposition to the utilitarian concerns of the modernizing state in its refusal of didacticism and its “art for art’s sake” mentality that held beauty as the highest goal (Franco 1994: 119). Modernismo’s rupture of traditional poetic form provided the space for a poetry that was better able to capture the energy and enthusiasms of this new generation.

In the same year as *Los raros*, Darío also published *Prosas profanas y otros poemas*, a collection that married the modernista techniques with Darío’s interest in spiritualism. The verses reflect his ideas of poet as creator and poetry as an expression of the ideal harmony of the universe where the symbols of Greek mythology mingle with poetic innovations drawn from contemporary literary experiments (Paz 1997: 154).

In 1898 Darío moved to Europe and lived primarily in Paris until 1914. There he writes *Cantos de vida y esperanza* in 1905 a text that is the culmination of his syncretic thoughts on spiritualism, religion, politics and art. Darío returned to Nicaragua in 1914 where he died from complications of alcoholism. At just 49 years old, he had made an enormous impact on Latin American writing. Although many of the avant-garde movements of the 1920s and 30s would reject modernismo’s aestheticism and classicism in favor of future oriented, political modes of writing, modernismo forms the foundation for a burgeoning Latin American literature.

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Paz, Octavio. (1997) “El caracol y la sirena: Rubén Darío.” *Obras completas V. 3 Fundacíon y disidencias.* Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, pp. 137–171.

1. …un inmenso deseo de progreso y un vivo entusiasmo, que constituye su potencialidad mayor, con lo cual poco a poco va triunfando de obstáculos tradicionales, murallas de indiferencia y océanos de mediocracia. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)