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SOCIO-POLITICAL CONCERNS IN THE POETRY OF RUBEN DARIO

CATHY L. JRADE

Critics who have set out to examine Rubén Darío's political poetry have tended to define politics in a narrow manner. They have confined themselves for the most part to those poems that deal explicitly with American themes. As a result of this focus, scholars as perceptive as Pedro Salinas, Arturo Torres-Ríoeseo, and Enrique Anderson-Imbert, among others, have written about gaps in Darío's interest in politics—usually from the 1888 publication of *Azul... [Blue...]* to the 1905 publication of *Cantos de vida y esperanza [Songs of Life and Hope]*—and have tended to emphasize a few specific poems such as "A Colón" ["To Columbus"], "Los cisnes" ["The Swans"], "Salutación al optimista" ["Greetings to the Optimist"], "A Roosevelt" ["To Roosevelt"], "Salutación al águila" ["Greetings to the Eagle"], "Raza" ["Race"], "Pax" ["Peace"], and "Canto a la Argentina" ["Song to Argentina"].¹ But Darío's concern with social and political conditions in Latin America is present throughout his career. Much of his writing subtly deals with the search for a proper course and identity for the new Spanish American nations and their literature during the second half of the nineteenth century. His poetic vision offers a response to trends that simultaneously molded and alienated him. As an intellectual responding to his surroundings, Darío was not alone.

Aware of their extraordinary place in Spanish American history, Modernist poets broke with Spanish models which they understood to be both grandiose and inflexible. They turned their eyes instead toward Europe to bring themselves up to the present and into the future. This attitude is evident in Darío's selection in 1888 of the term "Modernism" to designate the tendencies of Spanish American poets (Henríquez Ureña 158-172). This choice underscores the Modernists' will to be modern, that is, to become contemporaneous with all of Europe but most especially with Paris. The poets sought to leave behind—either through their travels or their imagination—an anachronistic, local reality in order to establish for themselves a modern mode of discourse in which they could speak for the first time with their own voice and with a clear, critical vision of Spanish America.

Thus the most "escapist" of Modernist literature almost immediately became, as noted by Octavio Paz, a literature of exploration and return (*Puertas al campo* 11-19). Modernist writers turned their attention from the most up-to-date European trends towards home and resurrected, through flights of fancy as much as through historical fact, a Spanish American past that included ancient civilizations, indigenous peoples, and a Spanish

American consciousness. This consciousness is clear in the Modernist attitude toward language and poetry. From the beginning, their concern for formal perfection reflected, along with Parnassian influences, a desire to formalize and to found a modern Spanish American discourse. Their pursuit of beauty throughout the centuries and across all borders was a manifestation of their desire to choose freely the elements of their ideal language. At the same time, Modernist authors struggled with the dominant poetic and prosaic modes of discourse in their attempt to find their own voice. This founding effort was simultaneously aesthetic and political, with the political becoming more pronounced when the pressures that gave rise to Modernism exploded in crisis in 1898 with the Spanish American War and later in 1903 with the creation of the state of Panama through United States intervention.

The social, economic, and political conditions that most directly affected the formation of Modernism of course vary from country to country. There were, however, certain key factors that consistently came into play. For the most part, the last decades of the nineteenth century saw a consolidation of power which brought about a new degree of political stability—despite the periodic resurgence of "caudillismo" and anarchistic tendencies. At the same time, economic reorganization and growth brought prosperity and affluence to the upper classes. In urban centers, wealth and international trade encouraged a perceptible Europeanization of life. As Roberto González Echevarría has expressed it, in exchange for its raw materials, Spanish America received culture, primarily in the form of manufactured products (159). The turn-of-the-century flood of luxury items filled the homes of the old landed aristocracy, the *nouveaux riches*, and the aspiring bourgeoisie. It also created an image of life that left a lasting impression upon the poetic imagination of the writers of the time, an image that evoked the sense of well-being, ease, and fashionable excess characteristic of the Parisian *Belle Époque*, that is, of Paris during the three decades beginning with the 1880's.²

Members of the ruling class allied themselves with foreign financiers and investors, and their primary ambition became the accumulation of capital at the expense of more traditional goals. The political philosophy of the day was the Positivism of Comte and later that of Spencer, both of which became linked with a type of social Darwinism. Comte had developed a philosophical system that rejected metaphysics and relied exclusively on the positive sciences. His final aim was to reform society so that all men could live in harmony and comfort. During the peace that followed the political consolidation of the 1860's, Positivism became the philosophy of order, promoting progress, science, and the "miracles" of free enterprise. Society in Spanish America was to be organized upon a more rational basis than ever before, and humanity was to find itself living in a world without problems. Scientists were believed to be the bearers of a demonstrable truth and trustees of the future. The evils of "modern life" and industrialization were accepted

as necessary for national development. In reality, however, Positivism provided the ruling classes with a new vocabulary to legitimate injustice as liberal ideology was replaced by the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. Inequalities were now explained, not by race or inheritance or religion, but by science. The Mexican Porfirio Díaz and his "científicos," the oligarchy of the Argentine landowners, and the Chilean nitrate barons best represented the political scene during this era.

Positivism generated in most Modernists a strongly ambivalent attitude. They maintained a respect for science, its breakthroughs, and its contributions to progress; they rejected it, however, as the ultimate measure of all things. Despite the promises made, it became clear that, far from becoming more understandable, life appeared more enigmatic, and the great inventions and discoveries had not provided answers to the fundamental questions of existence. If anything, Spanish America's growing prosperity, and its increasing involvement with the industrial capitals of the world, brought about social dislocations that heightened the sense of crisis among its writers. Two essential elements in the social context of Modernist art were the disappearance of the old aristocracy along with its patronage of poetic production and the transformation of all products of human enterprise—including art—into merchandise (Péru 65, 66, 81). In this situation, poets had to earn their living producing a marketable commodity. Many supported themselves as journalists at the same time that they sought, through their well-crafted poetry, to assert themselves in a world where the items of highest esteem were luxurious, opulent, and usually imported. Some, like Julián del Casal, became marginalized, creating a bohemian response to the vulgarity and utilitarianism of bourgeois society. Others, like Darío in his famous "El rey burgués" ["The Bourgeois King"], scorned the materialism, mediocre conformity, and aesthetic insensitivity of the growing bourgeoisie. Still others, like José Martí, put their faith in the superior individual, "el hombre magno" [the great man], who could see beyond the pressures of rapid urbanization and commercialization.

With these conditions, modernity, as it is understood in Western culture, arrived in Spanish America—or, at the very least, to its great, cosmopolitan urban centers. Recent studies have emphasized that modernity, as a stage in the history of Western civilization, began as early as the second half of the eighteenth century. Its essential characteristics are linked to scientific and technological progress, the industrial revolution, and the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism (Roggiano). The ideological adjustments necessitated by these far-reaching alterations in the fabric of life have consistently generated a literary response or, as Octavio Paz notes in *Los hijos del limo*, modern poetry has always represented a reaction against the modern era and its various manifestations, whether they be the Enlightenment, critical reason, liberalism, positivism, or Marxism (10). Modernism is the literary response to Spanish America's

entrance into modernity. It is a response to the spiritual and aesthetic vacuum created by the positivist abandonment of religion and metaphysics in favor of science as well as by the positivist support of materialistic, bourgeois values.

As the Modernists formulated their reaction to modernity and sought to deal with their feelings of alienation and anguish, they discovered appealing paradigms in the European literature that they had rushed to read in their attempt to create a modern poetic language consonant with the modern times. They found appropriate models in English and German Romanticism and French Symbolism, for these literary movements too had been reactions to the spiritual upheavals generated by modern life. A primary design that the Romantics elaborated for possible recovery and that was later adapted by the Symbolists and the Modernists centers on analogy, that vision of the universe as a system of correspondences in which language is the universe's double.

The Modernist recourse to analogy sheds light on its cosmopolitanism, its obsession with verbal elegance and musicality, and its insistence on artistic freedom, formal experimentation, and heightened individuality. Many of these features, as well as others, were further fostered by the artistic rejection of what Calinescu calls "bourgeois modernity" (41-58). As Spanish America entered the world economy, it came in touch with a tradition of modern values which encouraged faith in progress, pragmatism, and the beneficial effects of science and technology. Commercialization and commodification affected all aspects of life including art and time, and success was judged by the accumulation of wealth. Modernist authors responded to the resulting superficiality and vacuity of everyday existence with what had become another tradition, namely, the expression of defiantly hostile anti-bourgeois attitudes. This expression took many forms including art for art's sake, eccentricity, dandyism, and decadentism.

In their unrelenting search for the ideal poetic language, one with which they could address their concerns regarding the life and future of their countries, Modernist poets embraced and reconciled varying styles, images, religious beliefs, philosophic perspectives, and modes of discourse. Their ability and desire to incorporate a bewildering diversity of images and ideas is linked, in part, to the economic imperialism of the end of the nineteenth century. Surrounded by an overwhelming proliferation of imported manufactured items, the Modernists created a parallel poetic environment in which things proliferate not in a referential but in an artificial system (González Echevarría 159). Nature is filtered through any number of aesthetic landscapes from any number of cultures, periods, or artistic media. Modernist art is filled with Versaillesque palaces, Oriental gardens and interiors, gods and nymphs, gold and pearls, folding screens (*biombos*), divans, lacquered pieces, urns, and tapestries (Pacheco I:VII-LI). These places and things are described—especially in early Modernist verse—with sophisticated vocabulary and numerous adjectives that both reinforce a sense of wealth and accumulation and, more importantly, reflect the relationship

that Modernist poets had with the materialism of bourgeois society (Jitrik 95). This relationship was strongly ambivalent. On the one hand, the values of the dominant classes are exalted in Modernism's rich language. On the other, however, the emphasis on wealth is criticized as superficial when it is seen as an end in itself and not recognized as subservient to the poets' profound search for transcendental beauty and universal harmony.³

The impact of this socio-political context on Modernism has generally been overlooked in favor of literary factors. It is, however, precisely this context that forms the background to poems by Darío that have not been considered political but that now can be read as reflections of socio-political concerns. Darío's response to the spiritual and aesthetic vacuum in Spanish America resulting from the materialistic and positivistic orientation of bourgeois culture is present in his formulation of Modernist principles, goals, and ideals. The challenge presented to bourgeois society by these ideals is political in so far as through them Darío aspired to reorder dominant values, placing transcendental, poetic goals above materialistic ends. Yet the language of exaltation comes, at least at first, from the flood of luxury items and cultural models imported into Spanish America. Darío's struggle to find himself and a modern mode of discourse for Spanish America—one that is truly Spanish American—persists throughout both editions of *Azul...*, both editions of *Prosas profanas* [*Profane Proses*], and into *Cantos de vida y esperanza*. However, by the time he publishes *Cantos*, following the Spanish American War and U.S. intervention in Panama, certain elements have changed, and in his work the subtle discussion of socio-political tensions is replaced by boldly political statements.

While "politics" is easily found in Darío's earliest poetry, *Azul...* has generally been considered apolitically aesthetic and "esteticista" [preoccupied by aesthetic concerns]. The short stories and the vignettes of "En Chile" ["In Chile"] show Darío's eagerness to experiment with the styles of many periods, his enthusiasm for the creative possibilities of all the arts, and his audacity, like that of the Romantics before him, in breaking out of the traditional confines of specific genres. Equally important, however, was Darío's expression of disillusionment with the mundane and pedestrian, especially when everyday reality implied a withering of aesthetic and spiritual powers. "El rubí" ["The Ruby"], "El sátiro sordo" ["The Deaf Satyr"], "El palacio del sol" ["The Sun Palace"], "El rey burgués" ["The Bourgeois King"] and, perhaps most directly, the introductory section of "En Chile" all criticize the limited and limiting vision of bourgeois materialism, science, and technology. "En Chile" begins with a sentence-long paragraph that suggests the fundamental focus of Darío's writings at this point.

Sin pinceles, sin paleta, sin papel, sin lápiz, Ricardo, poeta lírico incorregible, huyendo de las agitaciones y turbulencias, de las máquinas y de los fardos, del ruido monótono de los tranvías y el

chocar de los caballos con su repiqueteo de caracoles sobre las piedras; del tropel de los comerciantes; del grito de los vendedores de diarios; del incesante bullicio e inacabable hervor de este puerto; en busca de impresiones y de cuadros, subió al Cerro Alegre, que, gallardo como una gran roca florecida, luce sus flancos verdes, sus montículos coronados de casas risueñas escalonadas en la altura, rodeadas de jardines, con ondeantes cortinas de enredaderas, jaulas de pájaros, jarras de flores, rejas vistosas y niños rubios de caras angélicas.

[Without brushes, without palette, without paper, without pencil, fleeing the excitement and confusion, the machines and bundles, the monotonous noise of the trolleys and the jostling of horses with their ringing of hooves on the stones, the throng of merchants, the shouts of vendors, the incessant bustle and unending fervor of this port in search of impressions and scenes, Ricardo, an incorrigible lyric poet, climbed up to Happy Hill, which, elegant like a great flowering rock, displays its green sides, its mound crowned by smiling houses terraced at the summit, homes surrounded by gardens, with waving curtains of vines, cages of birds, vases of flowers, attractive railings, and blond children with angelic faces.]

The world of the modern, industrial city with its traffic, noise, and newspapers (the commercial side of writing) is left behind in search of "impressions and scenes," that is, in search of a nature filtered through, captured in (like the caged birds and cut flowers), and idealized by art (blond children with angelic faces). He leaves the Valparaíso "that performs transactions and that walks like a gust, that peoples the stores and invades the banks" in hopes of finding "el inmenso espacio azul" ["the immense blue space"]—not only the free, clear sky of beauty and tranquility, but also the source of artistic vision, which converts the author into a seer capable of recording the profound realities of existence, an existence that is in essence beauty and harmony, an existence that is offered as an alternative to the crass commercialization of the urban setting.

The poems of the first edition of *Azul*...reflect the same tensions and longings mixed with an additional element, that of erotic passion. "El año lírico," ["The Lyric Year"] which begins the poetic selection, is an escape from the prosaic similar to that found in "En Chile" except the exotic, fanciful, and exquisite settings underscore a fundamental aspiration toward a harmony that is intimately linked to the fulfillment of sexual desire. Woman, more than the poet's Muse, is the Other that complements and completes and with whom the poet attains a vision of beauty, harmony, and artistic perfection that is simultaneously in tune with and supported by nature.

This exaltation of the seasons, of the natural order of things, and of sexuality is, as Paz recognized with regard to the Romantics, simultaneously a moral and political critique of civilization and an affirmation of a time before history (*Los hijos del limo* 56-60). Erotic passion is a part of nature that has been inhibited and/or destroyed by the social order. Reclaiming its importance becomes linked with intuiting a primordial, more perfect world. As a result, these poems offer a vision that is atemporal and cosmopolitan (from classical antiquity in "Primavera" ["Spring"], from British India in "Estival" ["Summer"], from the timeless world of art in "Autumnal" ["Fall"] and from South America in "Invernal" ["Winter"]) yet rooted in a reaction to a time and place. The political dimension is most evident in "Estival." Here the flow of sexual energy, which is portrayed as the animating force in nature and the inexorable bond between male and female, is disrupted by a cruel and senseless act on the part of the Prince of Wales. Power and modern technology burst upon a scene of lush sensuality and animalistic eroticism interrupting the natural order of things. The implications are both political and philosophic: human action must correspond to the natural harmony in life. Uninformed intervention destabilizes the balance of creation, unlocking violence, pain, and discord. Society must heed those who are in tune with the life force rather than those who blindly impose their will on it.⁴

To the 1890 edition of *Azul*...Darío added poems that highlight his rapid maturation and his continued preoccupation with finding the "right" language for Spanish America. Most of the poems deal with literary figures and themes, with the exception of the first of the "Sonetos" ["Sonnets"] which describes the heroism of the Araucanian chief Caupolicán. The subject and placement of this initial poem colors the readings of those that follow, especially the sonnet on "Salvador Díaz Mirón," which addresses the issue of the "newness" of the world for which the Modernists aspire to speak. Darío praises Díaz Mirón for the unfettered poetry with which the Mexican proclaims artistic strength and political freedom. The goal shared by both Modernists is to create a powerful new language that will speak for the nations of Spanish America, a language that breaks the chains of Spanish rule, that is up to date with Europe and North America, and that is, at the same time, faithful to Spanish America's originality and difference, that is, faithful to the ancient traditions and values represented by Caupolicán.

This new, Modernist language is in evidence with the subsequent publication of *Prosas profanas* in 1896. The struggles faced in the formulation of this new language appear in the form and substance of the prose introduction, "Palabras liminares," ["Liminal Words"] and in many of the poems of the collection. Despite the most widely held perceptions regarding *Prosas profanas*, these struggles continue to reflect a serious mix of social, economic, political as well as artistic considerations.

Prosas profanas is often described as a youthful, exuberant work full of exotic frivolity, playful imagination, and pleasure. When Darío himself refers

to the content of the collection and its title he directs attention toward sexual passion—a sexual passion that is inextricably linked to art, poetic creation, music, and religion. He wrote: "Yo he dicho, en la misa rosa de mi juventud, mis antifonas, mis secuencias, mis profanas prosas." ["I have said, in the pink Mass of my youth, my antiphons, my sequences, my profane proses."] Darío plays with the medieval allusions, breaks expectations regarding the genre in question, and equates divine love and religious devotion with sexual exploits. While pleasure is certainly at issue here, so is a great deal more. As Javier Herrero has pointed out, this blasphemous religiosity consists of replacing the Christian gospel with a new one in which the altar is presided over by Venus. Darío aspires to a mystical experience—radically different from those of Catholic mystics—that reveals the meaning of the universe, life, and art. His poetic renovation proposes a revolutionary change in values (Herrero: 40-43).

It becomes clear that Darío's preoccupation with sexuality is linked to his fascination with the limits, restrictions, and constraints imposed on behavior, language, and vision by society. As a result, the socio-cultural context of Modernism is never far from his mind. He begins "Palabras liminares" with regret over the lack of understanding common to the general public and to professionals. It is art that sets him—and the others that he would rally to his cause—apart. Yet art is not imitation; it is the transgressing of limits; it is the reinterpretation and revitalization of habit and custom by each artist.

The art that Darío envisions is presented as an alternative to the dominant values of the day. Its aristocratic, exotic, and fanciful elements are offered in response to and escape from the vulgar materialism that flourished at the expense of aesthetic and spiritual concerns. This unstated dissatisfaction with the status quo forms the background to Darío's declaration that "yo detesto la vida y el tiempo en que me tocó nacer..." ["I detest the life and times to which I was born..."] This statement is not meant, however, as a rejection of Spanish America. Darío finds poetry in "our America," as he did in *Azul...*, in "the old things," in Palenque and Uxatlán, in the sensual and refined Inca, and in the great Montezuma. The thrust is, nevertheless, toward the cosmopolis, exemplified by Buenos Aires, and toward the future, for in this envisioned milieu the Spanish, Spanish American, and European (Parisian) would find a balance that would facilitate the creation of a modern mode of discourse, that is, the creation of musical verses in which "each word has a soul."

The reference to the soul of language implies a body which, in Darío's poetry, is clearly female. She is—as seen before—the ideal other who promises love, happiness, erotic fulfillment, emotional and even spiritual salvation. She is also the lover of the poet, the "flesh" of poetry, poetic language. With her, the poet will achieve his ideal and visionary discourse—a discourse that fills the void left by positivism, materialism, and

commercialization. He therefore concludes "Palabras liminares" with the mandate: "Y la primera ley, creador: crear. Bufe el eunuco. Cuando una musa te dé un hijo, queden las otras ocho encinta." ["And the first law, creator: create. Let the eunuch snort. When one muse gives you a child, let the other eight remain pregnant."] Despite the jocular tone of this command, Darío is never blind to the possibility that he may not find the language that would make possible his response to society and his vision for the future. This fear forms the background to the first three poems of *Prosas profanas*.

Darío begins with Eulalia of "Era un aire suave...." ["It was a soft air..."] By characterizing her—or actually her golden laughter—as cruel, Darío softens the bold and ambitious declaration of artistic goals of the prose preface. He acknowledges the possible recalcitrance on the part of poetic language to be molded to the form he envisions. By calling her eternal, he affirms his aspiration to take Spanish American discourse out of its limited and anachronistic present and to have it become "modern" through a syncretic exaltation of the beauty and art of all ages—primarily as they come to him filtered through contemporary French sensibilities.

At the perfect point in the timeless evening of the poem, surrounded by auspicious music and an ivory-white swan, the poet will join with Eulalia, vanquishing his rivals, the "vizconde rubio" [the blond viscount] and the "abate joven" [the young abbot]. This reference to the defeat of his social and literary competitors is crucial. It underscores the poet's success in a society where artists are no longer rewarded, through patronage, for the nobility of their spirit but rather must compete in the marketplace producing a desirable commodity. It also emphasizes Darío's sense of having "caught up" with and even superseded those who courted Eulalia earlier, namely his literary role models—most specifically the Verlaine of *Fêtes galantes*. Unfortunately the poet's happiness is mitigated by the fact that there is no lasting amorous conquest. On the contrary, he remains her page, her servant. The first section of "Era un aire suave..." ends with Eulalia's mocking laughter.⁵

With this emphasis on Eulalia's aloof nature and the possible intractability of poetic language, "Era un aire suave..." anticipates the lament as well as the images of "Yo persigo una forma..." ["I pursue a form..."], which was added as the last poem to the 1901 edition of *Prosas profanas*. But whereas "Yo persigo una forma..." pretends to decry the poet's limitations ("Yo persigo una forma que no encuentra mi estilo, /... / Y no hallo sino la palabra que huye, / la iniciación melódica que de la flauta fluye..." ["I pursue a form that my style does not find, /... / And I find only the word that flees, / the melodic initiation that flows from the flute..."]), "Era un aire suave..." suggests cautious optimism as Darío enters the *fêtes galantes* and competes with Verlaine and his other (imported) role models and rivals.

Darío's attempt to respond to and master the proliferation of cultural elements that dominated European and Spanish American values at the end of the nineteenth century is central as well to "Divagación" ["Wandering"], the

second poem in *Prosas profanas*. "Divagación" is filled with cosmopolitan references, exquisite vocabulary, and esoteric proper names. And, like "Era un aire suave..." it deals with a beloved that is much more than a possible love interest. She is the other with whom Darío aspires to attain the perfect poetic vision. Yet, throughout his poetic journey across the globe, he finds that no one woman can satisfy, no one style can fulfill his longing for an original mode of discourse. The poet's aspiration to a comprehensive grasp of reality takes him through a literary "museum," which he ultimately leaves behind. He affirms instead the transcendental power of poetry, through which he claims divine knowledge and authority. He makes this claim in the final three stanzas of the poem in which he leads the reader off the map, out of the world of inhibiting cultural conventions, into the realm where all styles become one.

At the end, Darío's female Other evokes a male voice that speaks with mystical overtones. When Darío suggests that his love sleeps as he lights the censers, the quiet takes on a religious quality that is reinforced by the mention of a unicorn—associated with Christ—and dromedaries. He thus broadens his goals. He strives to create a poetry that is simultaneously Spanish American and universal, that is, a poetry that surpasses its artistic antecedents. He also aspires to achieve a divine mission. The poem concludes with the savior of poetry—as does "Sonatina" ["Sonatina"], the next poem of the collection.

At the end of "Sonatina" the sad princess is given hope for happiness, love, life, and salvation in the form of "el feliz caballero que te adora sin verte,/ y que llega de lejos, vencedor de la Muerte,/ a encenderte los labios con su beso de amor!" ["the happy knight that adores you without seeing you,/ and that arrives from far away, conqueror of Death,/ to inflame your lips with his kiss of love!"] No matter how frivolous "Sonatina" appears at first with its nursery-rhyme rhythm and its fanciful gardens and palace, by the final stanza the profound nature of the fairy-tale couple becomes evident. The knight who arrives mounted on his winged steed, victor of Death, is more than the proverbial "prince charming" who appears in time to revive the love-sick princess. The linking of the hero/savior with Pegasus, the horse of the Muses, identifies the hero as an artist. The princess that awaits him is the female consort of the male creator, poetic language.

Darío holds that poetic language has lost its vitality and color; it is imprisoned in a golden vessel. The music that should be heard is silent; the atmosphere is stifling, unimaginative, and uninspired. Poetry's only escape is through dreams of freedom and flight. She longs to attain unmediated contact with the order of the cosmos. To this end, she rejects wealth and the reigning values of the day ("ya no quiere el palacio..." ["she no longer wants the palace..."]) because they interfere with her achieving the higher goal and greater pleasure of understanding the universe.

The objects that have come to be associated with the princess's imprisonment as well as with her physical and spiritual decline are boldly denounced. But Darío's detailed rejection is just the opposite of what it claims to be. It becomes a way of possessing, internalizing, and incorporating into his art those aspects that he pretends to disown—very much like the cultural patterns "superseded" in "Divagación" or the viscount and abbot "defeated" in "Era un aire suave..." He disdains the palace and its wealth as incapable of providing spiritual gratification. In fact they appear as obstacles to knowledge and distractions that prevent the enlightened from seeing beyond the superficial trappings of life. At the same time, however, he takes possession of the opulence through description. This ambivalent position with regard to the riches of the palace reflects an even greater struggle—one common among Modernist authors. The poet challenges the superficial materialism of the bourgeois society in which he lives. He strives to assert the worth of his creation in an environment that tends to ignore the value of his art, knowledge, and spiritual insight. The poet fights for the respect and esteem that he feels he deserves by taking up the weapons of the enemy—wealth and opulence—and by poetically rendering them impotent.

The luxuries owned by the princess proliferate like the objects imported into Spanish America. Indeed, they are part of her attraction. She is a regal alternative to a bourgeois world, a means of reaching beyond the uninspired and prosaic. Darío's incorporation of these luxuries into his art indicate the degree to which he is part and parcel of his times and social context. He respects the art and objects brought from Europe and the Orient—like the many cultural possibilities considered in "Divagación"—while ultimately rejecting them as limited and disdaining those who fail to appreciate their transcendental worth. More importantly, the princess's wealth is made subservient to the spiritual wealth offered by the poet. The value of poetic vision and artistic achievement is thus doubly raised above everyday reality—"the life and times to which [he] was born." Only after the princess (poetic language) recognizes the appropriate (inferior) position of material wealth can the poet fulfill his superior destiny. In short, the poetic goals outlined in "Sonatina" and the other pieces examined point to a political and philosophic awareness behind the frivolity, musicality, and aesthetic play with which *Prosas profanas* has generally been characterized.⁶ In these works the passing pleasure of artistic experimentation and/or of the sexual *pas de deux* is an aspect of a profound, enduring response to a given social context, a response that reflects transcendental concerns.

This trajectory, which began with *Azul...* and continued in *Prosas profanas*, reaches its zenith in *Cantos de vida y esperanza*, in which Darío reveals himself to be a poet who is more sure of himself and more willing to express his sense of difference—his sense of being Spanish American. The imported models that dominated his poetic imagination in *Prosas profanas* have receded. His concerns reflect his sad awareness of the passage of time

and of a youthful squandering of energies. At the same time, he directly addresses in a few powerful poems the socio-political context only alluded to previously. Darío discusses this change in the prose "Prefacio" ["Preface"] to *Cantos de vida y esperanza*. He wrote "Si en estos cantos hay política, es porque aparece universal. Y si encontráis versos a un presidente, es porque son un clamor continental. Mañana podremos ser yanquis (y es lo más probable); de todas maneras, mi protesta queda escrita sobre las alas de los inmaculados cisnes, tan ilustres como Júpiter." ["If there is politics in these songs, it is because it is universally present. And if you find verses to a president, it is because they are a continental clamor. Tomorrow we can all be *yanquis* (and that is what is most probable); at any rate, my protest remains written on the wings of immaculate swans, as illustrious as Jupiter."] Whether this willingness to express openly his political concerns is a result of external events—the Spanish American War or U.S. intervention in Central America—or his and Modernism's literary successes, Darío now speaks with his own voice.

The experimentation with rhythm and rhyme schemes, verse forms, styles, images, myths, religions, and philosophies that underpins the richness of Modernist art began as a search that inevitably turns back upon itself, that is, it is linked to the question of Spanish American modernity and, in broader terms, Spanish American identity. As the Modernist poets reflected upon the formation of nation states and the integration of Spanish America into the world economy, they confronted the issue of Spanish American literature. From this perspective, the political impetus of Modernist literature becomes evident—even in the early Modernist verse that had been defined by Modernism's first commentators as escapist and superficial.

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NOTES

¹ Some recent studies that have focused on political concerns see Darío as fundamentally apolitical but unavoidably aware of certain political events (González-Rodas and Lancha). Even those studies that perceive Darío to be a politically sensitive and committed writer have tended to emphasize this prose works or the poems already mentioned (see Cubeñas, Arellano, and Allen).

² For an informative discussion of this situation see Washington Delgado.

³ From a different perspective from the one developed here, Carlos Blanco Aguinaga arrives at a similar conclusion. He indicates that "...what happens in that Darío's work not only reflects the contradictions of independency, which we now recognize as insoluble within the structure that gives rise to them, but more specifically it reflects and refracts the self-deception and the false consciousness with which the Spanish American oligarchy happily postpones facing those contradictions" (p. 553). With this

view in mind, Blanco Aguinaga proposes a basis for reconciling apparently contradictory tendencies in Darío's early and late works and in his prose and poetry.

⁴ Rubén Benítez, while focusing on the poem's artistic elements, recognized its political implications. He suggests the "Estival" proposes to the reader a positive reevaluation of those aspects of the world and of man that bourgeois civilization rejects as barbaric. Furthermore, he underscores Darío's ongoing political concerns when he links "Estival" with "A Roosevelt" and the Prince of Wales with Theodore Roosevelt.

⁵ Ricardo J. Kaliman also recognizes the importance of "Era un aire suave..." as a Modernist manifesto, underscoring the parallel between Eulalia and Poetic language. His emphasis, however, is on the tension between the Parnassian and Symbolist strains in Modernist verse. He believes that in the same way that Eulalia rebels against the aristocratic and refined flirtations of her suitors, preferring the authenticity of the flesh (the page), the Modernist poet subverts the Parnassian model through the restoration of sexual desire as the psychic instance that defines the image (31).

⁶ Eliana Rivero highlights the socio-historic context of "Sonatina." She does not, however, find in the poem a proposal of alternate values.

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