

P O
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Ruben Dario

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POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

RUBEN DARIO

Rubén Darío's work has a threefold significance: aesthetical, historical and social. As an aesthete, in the purest meaning of this term, Rubén Darío is the Spanish Keats: he taught that "beauty is truth, truth beauty," and that sincerity is the highest virtue. This message he delivered to his people, the family of Spanish-speaking countries, with such power that through his influence and that of the other poets and writers who, with him for a leader, formed the revolutionary modernist school, Spanish poetry during the last generation was changed from the rhetorical, conventional sort of thing into which it degenerated after it had flourished gloriously in the time of Góngora, to vibrant, real, sincere song.

His was a fine "horror of literature"—you will recall Verlaine's dictum. *Le pauvre Lelian* was his master; not his only master, it is true, for, seeking orientation for his genius in that pilgrimage of discriminate assimilation that all great poets must make before they find themselves, Darío worshiped at many a shrine. Nor did our poet lose his own personality, but rather enriched it, when he chose, in one of his earliest phases, to become a symbolist. The song he made on the bald faun's flute came from within his own self. To critics who would tag him as belonging to this, that or the other school, he would cry: "I am myself!" He despised servility, and warned those that sought to imitate his writings that at best they would be but as lackeys bearing the uniform of his house. Sincerity of expression only can bring forth real poetry, and this he knew could not be attained through

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mere imitation. But he was eager to learn, and the Pre-Raphaelites of England, the Parnassians and Symbolists of France, Carducci among the Italians, and Poe and Whitman of the Americans, as well, of course, as the classics of all languages, had much to teach him. And the wealth of knowledge that he made his own, brought to bear upon his work, gave it that cosmopolitan bigness that made him a truly universal poet. His work, like America, as he would often say, is for all humanity.

With this ideal always before him, it is not surprising that he should be, as the phrase goes, a coiner of words, and an enemy of steel-ribbed grammars. His work, always impeccable and rich in form, is of supreme importance in the history of Spanish literature not only because of the spiritual renaissance of which it was the dawn—the awakening of Latin America to a realization of its literary individuality—but chiefly because of the changes that he wrought in the language, giving it a treasure of new expressions, new turns of phrase, *nuances*, in prose as well as in verse.

To appreciate this achievement justly, it must be remembered that for centuries the Spanish language had hardly been free to follow new paths of development such as English and French and German had taken. The dykes of linguistical traditions raised by the conservative and tyrannical Royal Academy of Spain had all but stagnated literary style. Up to Darío's time Spanish prosody was perhaps the poorest in Europe; it is true that sundry measures new to the language, such as the Graeco-Latin hexameter, the French alexandrine, and verses based on a four-syllable foot, had

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been essayed now and then; but there had not been a poet of sufficient power to use them as medium for great poetry and so to give them permanence.

The enneasyllabic verse, for instance, in which Rubén Darío wrote some of his best poems, had for a long time been used by comic opera librettists in Spain, but the makers of serious poetry had always shown utter disregard for it, never realizing its musical virtues and possibilities. And so with no less than a score of other metres which Darío invented or introduced and gave permanence to, or dignified, or revived. He was an indefatigable prosodist; and his poetry, magnificently sonorous at times, always elfin-touched, reveals the master craftsman no less than the born poet. His verse possesses the very magic of pure music. Rubén Darío was a virtuoso of words fully as great as Swinburne or D'Annunzio, with more ideas than either.

And since the publication of *Prosas Profanas*, his fourth book, in 1893, the poetical leadership in Spanish is incontestably no longer of the mother country but of the neo-Latin republics of America. It was the wresting of this leadership that made Darío a social power in all the countries south of the United States. To realize fully what this means we must consider the poet's position in all the Latin, and especially in the Spanish-American, countries. The poet there is a prophet, an inspired, God-anointed leader of the people. He is for us the treasurer of hope, the master of the tomorrow.

It is true that we have never enriched him with worldly goods as, for instance, Kipling and Masfield and Walt

Mason are said to have been enriched; true that the publications that print his verses do not often pay him for it. But, on the other hand, we believe in him. We alone of all peoples have elected poets to be our presidents and political leaders solely on the ground that they were great poets; and we have not fared so ill as readers of Plato's *Republic* might imagine. For instance, José Martí, the Cuban liberator, was also one of her chief poets; and it was because he was a poet that he realized the epic task of uniting his people solidly and enlisting on their side the sympathy of the entire world. The American guns at San Juan Hill and at Santiago but echoed the patriot-poet's songs.

And Darío, by his singing, united all the Latin-American countries, intellectually and morally, arousing them to a sense of their true grandeur. When, in one of his sincerest poems he said:

La patria es para el hombre lo que siente o que sueña,

which freely translated means: "a man's country is as great as his mind and heart are great," each *petit pays chaud* (the bitter phrase is Daudet's) shook from itself that terrible feeling of littleness in size that had so weighed upon it.

Horrified by the war, he left Europe, where he had lived for some time as minister of Nicaragua, his native country, to Spain and France, and came to America, late in 1914, to preach peace, and to work for a Pan-American Union based on a community of ideals and the intellectual fellowship of the two Americas. His last great poem, not yet published entire, is a magnificent ode voicing this aspiration. During

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his visit to this country, early in 1915, he read this poem at Columbia University. He had planned to make a continental tour, starting here. But death blocked his path. He became seriously ill in New York; and in February of this year, the forty-ninth of his life, he died at León, Nicaragua, his native town.

The solemnity of death has served to emphasize his message of fraternity. Latin America waits to hear it echoed by the poets of this country. It is dawn.

Salomón de la Selva

REVIEWS

SHELLEY IN HIS LETTERS

The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley: Edited by Roger Ingpen. Bohn's Library, G. Bell and Sons, London.

That light whose smile kindles the universe,
That beauty in which all things work and move,
That benediction which the eclipsing curse
Of birth can quench not, that sustaining love
Which, through the web of being blindly wove
By man and beast and earth and air and sea,
Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of
The fire for which all thirst, now beams on me,
Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality.

This stanza of *Adonais* will recur often to the reader of the contradictions and the complications of Shelley's life, as these are revealed in his fascinating correspondence.

Without strength to hold up for long at a time the magnificent torch of his belief that human love is the light that kindles the beauty of creation, Shelley could yet wave the

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