Songs of Life and Hope

CANTOS DE VIDA Y ESPERANZA

RUBÉN DARÍO

A BILINGUAL EDITION Edited and Translated by Will Derusha and Alberto Acereda

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FOR MANUEL MANTERO

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Introduction

An increasing number of translations have appeared in recent years, rendering entire poetic worlds into English, often for the first time. Languages, cultures, and literary traditions have varied widely, from the somewhat familiar to the weird and wonderful. Recent English translations of Spanish and Spanish American poets such as Rosalía de Castro, Federico García Lorca, Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges, and Octavio Paz have found a receptive audience in the United States. Some of the more remarkable publications might well represent new standards for verse translation and provide encouragement for others to attempt similar works. As interest in Spanish and Spanish American poetry grows in the United States, a deeper appreciation of Rubén Darío (1867–1916) and his work is all the more urgent.

Darío—born Félix Rubén García Sarmiento in Nicaragua—became a writer of major importance to the literary history of the Spanish language, and as such he has received a lot of critical and scholarly attention. But despite his significance as one of the greatest innovators in Hispanic literature, few attempts have been made to translate his works, particularly his poetry, into English. There are practical reasons for such neglect. The very ingenuity that makes Darío so important also makes him one of the most difficult poets to translate into other languages, in part because the musicality of his rhyme and rhythm becomes extravagantly singsong when followed too tightly and sounds curiously flat when not followed closely enough. In addition, much of the original charm of his verse depends on a craftsmanship that has gone out of style in the United States and elsewhere and may sound like affectation to the contemporary ear. The scarcity of solid, representative translations since Darío's death nearly a century ago is probably the best evidence of the difficulty in expressing a real sense of his poetry in English.

A brief history best illustrates the point. In 1916, to commemorate the poet's death, Thomas Walsh and Salomón de la Selva prepared a brief anthology of eleven of Darío's poems in English for the Hispanic Society of America. A few years later, in 1922, Charles B. McMichael published a brief collection of eight poems, five of them from *Prosas profanas y otros poemas* (Profane prose and other poems), together with a translation of Darío's original prologue. In the fol-

lowing decades a handful of translations—some in verse and others in prose—appeared in anthologies and scholarly journals. In 1965, Lysander Kemp published a book-length collection of seventy-odd poems he had translated into English. Unfortunately, this volume provided no Spanish text and no annotations. The collection—long out of print—stood as the only book-length translation for over thirty years. On the eve of Darío's centennial celebration in 1967, Helen W. Patterson published a bilingual anthology that included a sampling of Darío's modernist poems among selections from twentieth-century Nicaraguan poetry. None of these translations of Darío's verses, however, enjoyed subsequent editions.

Darío's importance to Spanish and Spanish American literature, and the lack of translations and dual editions of his poetry, recently led us to prepare a bilingual anthology published in 2001 by Bucknell University Press. Our anthology addressed two pressing needs: Through our study of the original manuscripts and first editions, we endeavored first to restore the purity of Darío's text and second to reproduce in English a sense of the original poetry in all its elegance, rhythm, thematic eclecticism, and suggestiveness. Most of the texts, including the artistic credos that Darío composed for his major works, had not been previously available in English. The increasing interest in our anthology in international academic circles, especially among Anglo-American Hispanists and students, has encouraged us to carry on the task in this volume, a complete and accurate text and rigorous translation of Darío's most important—and arguably most successful—book of poetry: *Cantos de vida y esperanza. Los cisnes y otros poemas* (Songs of life and hope. The swans and other poems), first published in 1905. It is our hope that scholars will again appreciate the fidelity to the Spanish originals, while the careful rendering of the verses in English will find a ready public among teachers, students, and lovers of poetry.

Our own experience in reading Spanish poetry in English translation has generally been frustrating in terms of meaning, rhythm, and grammatical construction. In teaching Spanish poetry in translation, we have often confronted texts that baffle and discourage students and, very likely, the majority of nonspecialists. We value a text that imparts some real sense of the original poetic voice in its own time and place, rather than a sense of the translator. The atmosphere of historical or literary allusion surrounding a verse is as problematic as the acoustic dimension of what is actually written on the page. Vague or incomplete translations can mislead as much as overwrit-

ten or "enhanced" ones. Language and culture are inseparable. As recent theorists have taken pains to point out, translations carry as much ideological weight as original texts. Lawrence Venuti's vision of translation as "rewriting" takes on deeper meaning when we consider gender and similar issues, as Joyce Tolliver has shown in regard to English translations of Rosalía de Castro's poetry (see the "Translations" section of the bibliography). With all these factors in mind, we have attempted to translate Darío's poetry as meticulously as possible in order to respect his erudite tone, while also rendering much of the structural and acoustic dimensions of his language in *Cantos de vida y esperanza*. Although Darío is especially adroit at crafting intricate rhymes, we have generally preferred to forgo rhyme in favor of preserving rhythm and meaning in our translations, not only in keeping with the overall scholarly aim of this volume but also due to the vagaries of the linguistic systems involved. Anyone with a minimum of study and effort can sound out the original Spanish text and appreciate the wealth of rhyme. Not so the rhythm, depending as it does on complex rules regarding acoustic syllables, and even less so the meaning. Of course, readers familiar with Darío in the original Spanish may have their own ideas about the meaning of a favorite verse or phrase and wish we had arrived at the same conclusion. This is to be expected. We hope that such readers will be able to recognize that our version is at least as legitimate as their own. Furthermore, our translation encompasses not a verse or a phrase, but an entire book, and it aims at a unity of voice—to be more precise, a vision—that we have found in this unique and wonderful work. We wish to stress from the start that our translation is not an attempt to rewrite Darío's book but rather to suggest in English as best we can what and how Darío wrote in Spanish.

Alongside the literary translation, we reproduce the most reliable and authoritative Spanish text of *Cantos de vida y esperanza* available anywhere. As we have demonstrated in a number of articles and book editions, all previous attempts to edit Darío's volumes of poetry have included typographical errors and misreadings of the original texts. The need for further editorial interest in Darío's works is evidenced by the fact that even today no critical edition of his complete poetry is available. In the past, textual research on Darío was inhibited by three problems. In the first place, most scholars did not have access to first editions, nor to existing manuscripts. Second, many scholars followed previous studies that contained typographical mistakes and lacked proper annotation. And third, researchers proved inconsistent

with their own announced practices, or simply careless in execution. No doubt the universal recognition of Darío as a key figure in modern and contemporary Spanish and Spanish American literature will spur more research into his works. In order to provide a truly authoritative text, we have carefully followed the first edition of the book, as well as the manuscripts housed at the Seminario-Archivo Rubén Darío in Madrid and at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. This volume, then, is not only concerned with translating Darío into English but also with presenting his 1905 Spanish text in an authoritative and scholarly edition. We hope this book will introduce an important poet to readers with varying degrees of reading knowledge in Spanish, or with none at all. At the same time we know that scholars will find our critical text indispensable in their research.

In the following pages we will present a general literary biography of Darío and a more comprehensive analysis of *Cantos de vida y esperanza* to give readers the cultural and historical context of both. For further information, readers may also find the bibliography at the back of this book useful; it lists primary works by Darío himself as well as secondary sources, representative studies of the poet and his works that we consider among the best in the field, with particular emphasis on studies of *Cantos de vida y esperanza*. In an effort to make citations less obtrusive, this introduction streamlines bibliographic information according to a few simple rules: If the bibliography cites only one work by a particular author, we include here the author's name and, where applicable, a page number. In the case of multiple works by the same author, we also include the publication date. Following the bilingual edition of the poems, readers will find a glossary and annotations section that gives concise and contextual definitions of many terms found in this introduction as well as in the translations.

RUBÉN DARÍO AND HISPANIC MODERNISM

Writers and critics have long recognized Darío as one of the most influential authors of his age, the poet who changed the course of Hispanic poetry and brought it into the mainstream of twentieth-century modernity. In 1953 the Spanish poet and Nobel prize winner Juan Ramón Jiménez wrote: "Spanish poetry of that time, as in Spanish America, starts with Rubén Darío [. . .]. He is much more substantial, more wide-ranging, richer than the rest. Therefore, he embodies the very essence, the synthesis of Spanish American Modernist poets" (229–230). We could recount similar opinions from major poets such

as Leopoldo Lugones, Manuel Machado, Antonio Machado, Francisco Villaespesa, Amado Nervo, Ramón del Valle-Inclán, Federico García Lorca, Gerardo Diego, Pedro Salinas, Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, José Hierro, and many others, all of whom underscore Darío's pivotal role in Spanish-language literature. Enrique Anderson Imbert has rightly pointed out that Darío's work divides Spanish American literary history into a "before" and an "after," as many university curricula reflect in survey courses. The Mexican essayist and poet Octavio Paz, another Nobel prize winner, states in his essay "The Siren and the Seashell" (translated 1991): "Darío was not only the richest and most wide-ranging of the modernist poets: he was also one of our great modern poets. He was the beginning" (31). Paz also suggests that the movement known as Hispanic modernism—of which Darío became the undisputed leader in both Spanish America and Spain—has yet to run its course and that everything written since Darío has been influenced in one way or another by him.

The importance of Darío in contemporary Spanish American poetry has been demonstrated by Paz in his 1974 book *Los hijos del limo* (Children of the mire), and the Spanish poet and critic Manuel Mantero has drawn attention to the profusion of Peninsular poets—virtually all the important ones—influenced by Darío, especially in the existential aspect. The Spanish poet and literary theorist Carlos Bousoño also maintains that contemporary poetry in the Hispanic world would be vastly different today without the existence of Darío at the starting point. Specialists in comparative literature find Darío an essential figure because of his contact with U.S. (Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe), French (Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine), Italian (Gabriele D'Annunzio), English (Oscar Wilde, Algernon Charles Swinburne), Luso-Brazilian (Eugenio de Castro, F. Xavier), and Spanish (the Machado brothers, J. R. Jiménez) literature. At the "Encuentro Rubén Darío" in January 1967, in Varadero, Cuba, preeminent Spanish American literary critics and poets (Nicolás Guillén, Mario Benedetti, Roberto Fernández Retamar, and many others) gathered to acknowledge Darío's contribution to literature. As the twentieth century was drawing to a close, Mauricio Ostria (1991) and Manuel Mantero and Alberto Acereda (1997) carried out similar surveys among contemporary Spanish American and Spanish Peninsular poets regarding the importance of Darío, and they arrived at the same results: writers continue to admit the influence of modernism in general and of Darío's poetry in particular.

In the Hispanic literary world at the end of the nineteenth cen-

tury, Darío soon became one of the leaders of a new movement called *modernismo*, which we generally translate as modernism but which should not be confused with other movements that go by this name. Each "modernism" formed a distinct historical and cultural entity with little or no direct contact with modernist movements beyond its linguistic borders, though all share some of the same impulses: Anglo-American modernism, the *Modernismo brasileiro* of Brazil, the *Modernisme català* centered around Barcelona, and all the "modern" Western artistic, literary, religious, philosophical, and cultural movements that flourished at the turn of the century and led to the avant-garde. Hispanic modernism refers most accurately to an attitude or approach to life as much as to the art that came to dominate literature on both sides of the Atlantic at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Modernist poets devoted themselves to freedom, passion, and renovation in pursuit of beauty. Along with writers such as José Martí (Cuba, 1853–1895), Julián del Casal (Cuba, 1863–1893), José Asunción Silva (Colombia, 1865–1896), Amado Nervo (Mexico, 1870–1919), Leopoldo Lugones (Argentina, 1874–1938), Julio Herrera y Reissig (Uruguay, 1875–1910), Manuel Machado (Spain, 1874–1947), Antonio Machado (Spain, 1875–1939), and Juan Ramón Jiménez (Spain, 1881–1958), Darío must be counted among the most significant authors of the age, modernist or otherwise. By force of personality and sheer talent, and by publishing and traveling almost constantly, he set his stamp on the entire modernist period. In many ways Rubén Darío and Hispanic modernism are virtually synonymous.

Before dealing with Darío's personal and literary biography, we should address some important issues regarding the concept of modernism. It would prove cumbersome to lay out the whole debate over divergent and often conflicting critical approaches—whether existential, psychological, socioeconomic, or spiritual—as to what constitutes modernism. José Olivio Jiménez has already analyzed the topic, and we refer the curious reader initially to him (1994: 42–47). The view of Hispanic modernism as a normative system based on cultural and linguistic codes of modernity may be found in studies by Ángel Rama, Evelyn Picón Garfield, Ivan A. Schulman, Cathy Login Jrade, Acereda, Gerard Aching, and the compilations by Javier Blasco, Carmen Ruiz Barrionuevo, Trinidad Barrera, and others. All these works offer insights into the multiple readings of modernism as a literary, historical, and cultural phenomenon. We must emphasize, however, that Hispanic modernism appeared as one manifestation of a much larger

artistic revolution in the Western world, which produced not only the different "modernisms" discussed above, but also schools and styles associated with all the variations of Art Nouveau: the French Modern Style, the German Jugendstil, the Austrian Sezessionstil, the Italian Stile Nuovo, and even the Tiffany designs in North America. For this reason we reject the distortions of any canon (as some have proposed) that attempts to divorce Hispanic modernism completely from the so-called Generation of 1898 in Spain or from comparable movements in Catalonia and, years later, in Brazil. A look at the art and the thinking anywhere in the Western world at the turn of the century soon reveals a similar picture: an increasing urgency for change (the modernists) in the face of resistance (the entrenched arbiters of taste and decorum). Suffice it to say here that Hispanic modernism was a heterogeneous cultural and artistic way of thinking, of looking at the world and the artist's place in it, that combined characteristics of such schools or movements as English Pre-Raphaelitism; French Parnassianism, symbolism, and impressionism; Italian Decadentism; and all the varieties of expressionism. To the modernist, the ideological basis or cement of these wildly assorted elements was a philosophical irrationalism in the name of freedom. The difficulty in establishing a precise definition of Hispanic modernism stems from its own diverse (and at times conflicting) tendencies, which several of the movement's own theoreticians demonstrated in screeds and manifestos and which Bernardo Gicovate, Ned Davison, José-Carlos Mainer, and others have studied at length. (For a broader look at modernism in Western literature, especially in Anglo-American literature, we suggest consulting Vassiliki Kolocotroni or Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane.) Beyond delineations and definitions, scholarly interest in Hispanic literary modernism and its most prominent figure, Rubén Darío, revolves mainly around a new orientation or sensibility in the Spanish language, what has come to be called modernity. Federico de Onís, one of the first critics of Hispanic modernism, has stated: "Our mistake lies in the implication that there is a difference between 'Modernism' and 'modernity,' because Modernism is essentially, as those who named it had supposed, the search for modernity" (1967: 462). Along these lines, Ricardo Gullón, José Olivio Jiménez, and Ivan A. Schulman, to mention a few, make explicit connections between these terms and the literary expressions that gave rise to them. Jrade, an outstanding scholar of Hispanic modernism and of Darío, recently pointed out that "*Modernismo* represents Spanish America's first full-fledged intellectual response and challenge to modernity" (1998: 137). There-

fore, she continues, each new work produced in contemporary Spanish American literature "reconfirms the lasting foundational nature of the *modernista* vision. Each emphasizes the need to read *Modernismo* from the perspective of modernity" (145). After many years of a monolithic view that would ground modernism (and Darío) in elements of the exotic and the beautiful, it seems clear that critics now perceive Hispanic modernism more accurately and more usefully as one of the initial phases of literary modernity.

In this sense, Darío's work stands among the most influential literary efforts in the Spanish language, which underscores the value of his masterpiece, *Cantos de vida y esperanza*, in the evolution of Hispanic poetry. This book's significance becomes more readily apparent when the writer and his work are viewed in their historical context. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Spanish-language literature was just beginning to experience reverberations from a line of bohemian, doomed, and marginalized poets from other cultural traditions, particularly the French, who truly comprise the foundation of poetic modernity. The social, historical, economic, and cultural environment confronting poets in various regions of the Hispanic world seemed a somewhat stagnant counterpoint to these stirrings from abroad. Such circumstances have been studied by Rama, Noé Jitrik, and Lily Litvak, while Schulman sees a need to reorganize the critical modernist canon based on a new reading of the texts and their interrelationship with Spanish American society. It is important to bear in mind what modernism meant within a social structure that marginalized poets as unproductive members of its materialistic economy. Contrariwise, and almost perversely, such marginalized poets came to see themselves as an artistic elite, if not an aristocracy, fending off the flood of mediocrity from lesser mortals.

The latter part of the nineteenth century witnessed a second industrial revolution and the consolidation of great colonial empires, a series of profound economic shifts with their concomitant social disruptions. The turmoil and transformations would soon converge in such events as the Spanish-American War, the Russo-Japanese War, the Boxer Rebellion in China, the Mexican Revolution, the bloody General Strike in Spain, and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, not to mention World War I. A new social order reflected a paradigmatic shift in the relationship between capital and work. After 1870, European capitalism spread to Spanish America and, together with other transformations peculiar to Hispanic societies, conditioned the concepts of art and poetry. It was at this point that modernist poetics and

Darío's lyrical production entered the picture. Poetry and public life diverged, at least outside the official academies, and the ethos guiding modernist authors had no concern for wealth or power or place in society but rather centered on the cultivation of art and beauty, the bohemian lifestyle, and rebellious individualism, even an eccentricity ultimately defined by the odd, the debased, the marginalized, the debauched. Pedro Piñero and Rogelio Reyes, as well as Anthony Zahareas and José Esteban, have published significant studies on the modernist bohemia, and artistic or lifestyle marginalization is the subject of a volume edited by Anthony Geist and José Monleón.

In a world dominated by an overt consumerism hostile to their aesthetic and spiritual pursuits, modernists embraced a movement that by its very "strangeness" often achieved an extravagance and decadence that offended polite company and official institutions alike. Given the socioeconomic climate in which it found itself, modernist poetics clearly did not win the day in the Southern Cone, in Mexico, or in the Caribbean, never mind in Central America or in Spain. Modernism embodied the crisis of poets driven to create something new in a society where poetry was little esteemed and less valued, as Baudelaire had announced half a century earlier in France. Between 1880 and 1920—the time frame of Hispanic modernism for the purposes of this introduction—all modernist poets have one thing in common, whatever the competing or conflicting literary directions to which they subscribe: a sense of having been left out, marginalized, demoted by society at large. Paz clearly perceived the tragic despair of modernist authors when he wrote: "The modern poet does not have any place in society because he is a 'nobody' " (1972: 243).

The standard-bearer of these modernist writers was Rubén Darío. His works, along with those written by others on both sides of the Atlantic, reconceived the notion of Art around the ideals of good, beauty, and truth. Art was, then, the embodiment of a divine force that provided Darío and others with the freedom they needed and craved as human beings. At the same time, their contact with Art—their own authentication as individual human beings—depended on that very freedom to be. But within the social and economic modernization of Spain and Spanish America in the late nineteenth century, nontraditional art—especially poetry—soon became isolated if it challenged, questioned, or refused to conform to what society considered art's proper function: namely, that it should be useful or profitable or simply pleasant and reassuring. From society's point of view, some degree of utilitarianism in the face of widespread poverty and cultural

backwardness was not asking very much of the modernists, who were behaving like ungrateful and unruly children and had to be treated as such: sometimes rejected, often scolded, but mostly ignored. As witnesses of industrial, technological, and socioeconomic modernization, Darío and the modernists interpreted the negative response as a demoralizing affront to truth and beauty. Modern life, they suspected, kills the soul. This sense of peering into the emptiness of the world, *l'experience du gouffre* (the experience of the abyss, as the French poets would call it), produced an anguish in their personal life as well as in their literary works. Darío and the modernists sought to alleviate their despair by somehow escaping the reality in which they felt trapped. Such escapist attempts reveal themselves in often contradictory attitudes as well as in the creation of art dealing with universal themes such as existence, spirituality and religion, eroticism, and politics. In Darío's case, poetry is a direct consequence of that despair. Whereas Romantic world-weariness had led to boredom and tedium, Hispanic modernism found a new expression and sensibility for the concept of anguish. Darío, Martí, Casal, Silva, Herrera y Reissig, Lugones, Antonio Machado—all the prominent modernists—struggled desperately with a sense of doom.

Although painfully aware of his own demoted status in the sociocultural matrix in which he lived and worked, Darío still managed to leave his mark on literature as the protagonist of a movement dedicated to poetic reform. He brought in the fresh air of renovation so badly needed to reinvigorate the genre and, in consequence, opened the door on modernity for contemporary Hispanic poetry. The prevailing view that the Spanish poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836–1870) ushered in poetic modernity is open to serious question, without denying either the value or the originality of Bécquer's *Rimas* (Rhymes), published in 1871, a scant four years after Darío's birth. The real initiator of modernity in the Spanish language must be sought in modernism and, most evidently and logically, must be Darío. Leaving aside national or personal preferences, we can easily corroborate this claim by citing the manifold qualities of Darío's verse: no other modernist offers the range and the depth found in Darío, whether we consider his thematic complexity or his handling of a purely poetic language distinct from either the Romantic tradition or Bécquer himself.

Darío broke new ground in expressing existential tragedy in verse, as well as erotic force, the religious tension between faith and doubt, the social awakening of human fraternity and solidarity, the lament of Hispanic peoples in danger of losing their cultural identity, and

submersion in the occult, the Masonic, the esoteric, and the Orphic-Pythagorean. All this, and Darío's prodigious handling of poetic language at every level—from versification and rhythm to the exact adjective and the precise syllable—confirm the role of modernism, and especially of Darío, as the advent of poetic modernity in the Spanish language. Thanks to his example, Hispanic poetry again turned its attention to the formal aspects of language in its acoustic, grammatical, and lexical dimensions, a concern all but forgotten since the death of Francisco de Quevedo in 1645. In the case of Spanish America, the dislocation of poetic language and the extraordinary rupture of linguistic conventions in a poet such as the Peruvian César Vallejo owe much to the formal concerns of modernist poetry and, most of all, to Darío. Vallejo's *Los heraldos negros* (The black heralds) from 1918, for example, derived clearly from Darío's modernist ethos and aesthetics, and the poetic vanguard would later attempt to fracture and twist poetic language beyond previously known limits, in a sense to out-Vallejo the master. If Vallejo looks to Darío, and if most twentieth-century Spanish American poetry holds Vallejo in its sights, then at least indirectly Darío appears in all the poetry that follows him. In a similar vein, the view of poetry in many representative Hispanic poets of the twentieth century—poetry as queen of the arts and of all human activity—stems from the adoration the modernist writers, and especially Darío, lavished on the poetic genre.

Over the years Darío's poetry and modernist literature in general became identified with exotic affectation and the production of artsy, as in self-consciously artificial, verses detached from vital social, historical, and cultural concerns. Although some modernists obviously fit into such a framework, it would be a mistake to distil the contributions of Hispanic modernism into a precious liqueur of lakes, marquises, and swans blended together simply for art's sake. A substantial number of critics have come to recognize that modernist literature constitutes one of the most interesting manifestations of a profound transformation of Hispanic culture at the turn of the century. The 1896 publication of Darío's *Prosas profanas y otros poemas* marked the unqualified artistic success of modernism and confirmed its author as the defender of the new aesthetics, which would see in 1905, with the publication of *Cantos de vida y esperanza*, its crowning achievement. A close reading of *Cantos* proves that the traditional interpretation of modernist poets as artists locked in their ivory towers was always superficial and should no longer be accepted.

In the United States and other English-speaking countries, His-

panic modernist writers have never enjoyed the recognition they deserve and in fact enjoy in Spanish-speaking countries, and none has been adequately translated into English. As we pointed out at the start, the most prominent figure of Hispanic modernism—Rubén Darío—still lacks a rigorous English translation of the vast majority of his works. Since his death, the volume of words devoted to him is probably greater than that given to any other writer in the history of Spanish and Spanish American literature, with the exception of Cervantes. Numerous attempts have been made to interpret and evaluate Darío's written work in relation to his life (Edelberto Torres), in social and political terms (Rama), under the broad category of his rightful place in literary history (Acereda, Anderson Imbert, José María Martínez), through his use of poetic language (Avelino Herrero Mayor), of esoteric tradition and the occult (Jrade, Sonya Ingwersen, Raymond Skyrme), and through the influences of literature and the plastic arts on his poetry (Arturo Marasso).

In 1974 Keith Ellis published a groundbreaking study entitled *Critical Approaches to Rubén Darío*, in which he presented the range of methods and perspectives employed by scholars in studying Darío's life and works. A year later, Hensley C. Woodbridge compiled his *Rubén Darío: A Selective Classified and Annotated Bibliography*, which offered, along with Arnold A. Del Greco's volume, the most current information concerning an extensive bibliography on Darío's life and works. Since then, that bibliography has continued to expand, and in just the last five years we have seen notable books published by Jrade, Martínez, and Louis Bourne, to mention three prominent examples. Darío continues to intrigue scholars with a wide variety of approaches to the poet, his times, and his work. A complete understanding would require the exploration of the man's multifaceted dimensions: biographical, artistic, existential, religious, erotic, social, and political, for starters. Thankfully, little of this is necessary for the enjoyment of reading Darío. Perhaps his real contribution was the endeavor to turn poetry into a complete experience ranging from the metaphysical and existential to the erotic, from the religious to the social, all of it expressed through a new poetic language.

Darío and his fellow modernists created an art that searched the mysterious depths of life and awareness. Behind the imagery of swans, roses, fairy godmothers, princesses, and nymphs lies an attempt to interpret the enigmas of life through symbol and myth. Acereda has recently published a critical edition of Darío's *Poemas filosóficos* (Philosophical poems), in which he addresses this issue in

terms of the poetics of despair, anguish, religion, and the occult. A close reading of Darío's poetry shows its connection to the broader current of modernity and its impact on twentieth-century Hispanic literary production. Nowhere is this connection clearer than in *Cantos de vida y esperanza*.

LIFE AND POETRY

Rubén Darío was born in Metapa (today Ciudad Darío), a small town in Nicaragua, on January 18, 1867. His parents wrangled over everything and soon separated. In 1869 his mother, Rosa Sarmiento, took the infant to neighboring Honduras, where they suffered extreme poverty; as a consequence, relatives had to take over his care. In 1872 Darío moved in with his adoptive parents, great-uncle Colonel Félix Ramírez and great-aunt Bernarda Sarmiento de Ramírez, who enrolled the boy in a nursery school in León, Nicaragua. He soon entered public school, where he learned to write verse with his teacher Felipe Ibarra. In 1877, a wealthy uncle sponsored his studies at a private academy but soon stopped payment owing to a quarrel between Darío and his cousin, forcing the ten-year-old to drop out of school. Between 1878 and 1880, Darío studied Greek and Latin classics with the Jesuits.

Even as a young teenager, Darío wrote and published a few poems. In León in 1881, he came into contact with the Polish intellectual and Freemason José Leonard y Bertholet, who would greatly influence the young poet's education and introduce him to Freemasonry and the occult. He later traveled to El Salvador, where he met the writer and intellectual Francisco Gavidia, who encouraged his taste for Victor Hugo and the French Parnassians. Given young Darío's fame, the Nicaraguan government decided in 1882 to defray the cost of his education. However, he never received the promised aid. In August of that same year, he broke off his engagement to Rosario Murillo, the woman who would stalk him all his life. In 1883 he gave a number of public readings of poetry and became involved once more with Rosario. A year later, at age seventeen, he was in Managua working as a clerk in the office of Nicaraguan president Adán Cárdenas. Some of his literary reviews began appearing in the local press.

In 1885 Darío was working at the National Library in Managua, reading Spanish classics in Manuel de Rivadeneyra's collection *Biblioteca de Autores Españoles* (Library of Spanish authors). He prepared his first book, *Epístolas y poemas. Primeras notas* (Epistles and poems. First

notes) for publication, which he would reedit in 1888. This is a book of adolescence, at times mawkish and overly rhetorical in comparison to later books, the work of a poet just starting out. In 1886, Darío became manager of the daily *El Imparcial* of Nicaragua. Disillusioned with Rosario Murillo because of her relationship with a local politician, he embarked for Chile. He went first to Valparaíso and then to Santiago, where he contributed creative pieces and theater reviews to the daily *La Epoca*. In Santiago he met Pedro Balmaceda Toro, son of the president of Chile, and in 1887, he was named customs inspector in Valparaíso, a post he accepted for economic reasons. By this time, poetry had become a serious activity in Darío's life, and he continued to produce youthful works, correct in technique and generally praised. In the same year he took part in the "Certamen Varela," a poetry competition organized and financed by the Chilean politician Federico Varela. Darío won a prize for his *Canto épico a las glorias de Chile* (Epic song to the glories of Chile) and received an honorable mention for the group of compositions entitled *Rimas* (Rhymes) in imitation of the masterpiece by G. A. Bécquer, the Spanish Romantic poet. The "epic" is a standard patriotic ode in which Darío extols the heroism of Chile and its soldiers, a rhetorical exercise well crafted but narrowly pegged to the 1879 war between Chile and Peru. The *Rimas* collection, for its part, clearly reveals the adoration of Bécquer then current in Spanish America. Also in 1887, a new book of poems appeared under the title *Abrojos* (Thistles). It consists of a series of short poems that included texts improvised from anecdotes and reflections of the poet while in Chile.

By this time, Darío was already familiar with most of the important figures in Western literature. Like Whitman, whom he greatly admired all his life, Darío sincerely respected the past while recognizing the imperative of building a more perfect future. Italian literature interested him as a consequence of reading Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837). But the French influence was paramount in Darío's literary life, particularly the Romantic, Parnassian, and symbolist poets. Most notable among the French poets in this regard are Baudelaire (1821–1867) and Verlaine (1844–1896); he would arrange a meeting with Verlaine during his first European travels.

Darío completed his first mature work in Chile: *Azul . . .* (Blue . . .), a collection of verse and prose, appeared in Valparaíso in 1888, the same year his father died. The number of texts passed through several alterations from the first edition in 1888 through the third edition in 1905, which the author considered definitive. A truly personal

poetic voice emerged in this book, whose publication brought about a revolution in the poetry and prose written in Spanish and must be considered one of the turning points in literary history. Thematically, *Azul . . .* sings of eroticism intertwined with natural love and the pagan motif, as well as of absolute and impossible love. Poems from the section "El año lírico" (The lyrical year) pumped new energy and daring into the poetry then being written in Spanish. "Primaveral" (Spring), for instance, is a clear invitation to enjoy the season, combined with a mythological eroticism flowing sensuously in a refrain that runs from beginning to end. "Estival" (Summer), the second poem from the section, relates a tragic tale about two tigers in heat interrupted by a callous Prince of Wales, who kills one of them while out hunting. The solitary tiger's final dream of revenge lends the work a tragic tone, making it one of the best poems in the book. From the section "Sonetos" (Sonnets) we should cite "Venus," where the poet speaks to the planet as goddess of love and symbol of beauty. Her silence becomes a new source of pain, leaving him to suffer the pangs of unattainable love. Another section, "Medallones" (Medallions), contains poems addressed to real people who interested Darío by expressing either heroism or the ideal of the poet as a kind of prophet or messiah of art; such is the case in the sonnet addressed to Walt Whitman.

Stylistically, *Azul . . .* went beyond the use of traditional stanza forms in a deliberate search for a revolution in poetic structure, utilizing sonnet lines of twelve, fourteen, and even sixteen syllables, rather than the traditional eleven. The use of alliteration, run-on lines, epithets, metaphors, and a rich association of conceits and wordplay all point to a masterful exploration of poetry's musical possibilities. The book's prose pieces, transcending the traditional division of genres, reveal the same care and stylistic concerns. These short stories are not simply a literary game or the flaunting of Darío's considerable talent, but also become a personal metaphor of the modernist in the world. The story "El pájaro azul" (The blue bird) tells of an upper-class father who punishes his poet son with poverty. The same theme—the pain of pursuing beauty in a materialistic society—reappears in "El rey burgués" (The bourgeois king), which recounts the death of a poet in the house of a wealthy man who dismisses art as worthless and the artist as an unproductive member of society. To earn his keep, the poet is reduced to cranking the handle of a music box, producing in effect the same mechanical noise over and over; when winter sets in, he dies of exposure and starvation. Darío presents here an alle-

gorical view of art debased and enslaved by rank materialism. Later, in *Historia de mis libros* (History of my books), Darío would write that his story was meant to symbolize "the eternal protest of the artist against someone who is all business, of the dreamer against boorish wealth." Darío uses the conflict between art and life in other stories from *Azul . . .* , perhaps the most famous being "La muerte de la emperatriz de la China" (The death of the empress of China), in which a spoiled young woman rises up against an exotic porcelain figurine and exacts a shattering revenge, never really understanding her own decorative role in life.

This book immediately brought Darío transatlantic recognition, mainly thanks to the Spanish novelist Juan Valera (1824–1905), who publicly championed the text and its twenty-one-year-old author. In 1889, Darío left Valparaíso for Nicaragua and then El Salvador, whose president appointed him manager of the daily *La Unión*, a newspaper devoted to the idea of a new Central American union. By 1890, he was the manager and owner of the daily *El Correo de la Tarde*, and in June of that year he married Rafaela Contreras Cañas. When his benefactor, the Salvadoran president, was assassinated the day after the wedding, Darío had to leave for Guatemala. The following year he traveled to Costa Rica, where his first son, Rubén Darío Contreras, was born. In 1892 he accepted a position as Secretary of the Nicaraguan Delegation that would attend festivities in Spain marking the fourth centennial of the discovery of America. In July he stopped in Cuba, where he met the modernist poet Casal in Havana. In August he arrived in Spain at La Coruña and went on to Madrid.

In November he returned to South America with stops in Havana and Cartagena de Indias (Colombia). Tragically, in January 1893, his wife, Rafaela Contreras, died. The poet was distraught, and only two months later was tricked into marrying his old flame Rosario Murillo in Managua. As soon as he sobered up, Darío began arranging his escape. After finagling an appointment as Consul General of Colombia in Buenos Aires, he left for New York in May. There he met the Cuban writer José Martí, another pioneer of modernism. Even granted the roundabout shipping lanes at the end of the nineteenth century, it would appear that Darío was in no hurry to reach Argentina. Darío left for France in July and met various poets and artists, among them his revered Verlaine. By August he was in Buenos Aires, writing for the Argentinean daily *La Nación*. In 1894, he edited the *Revista de América* (Journal of America) with Bolivian author Ricardo Jaimes Freyre (1868–1933). Darío took part in the Athenaeum of Buenos

Aires and frequented the bohemian nightlife of the cosmopolitan capital, drinking to the point of self-abuse. In 1895, his mother died in El Salvador. He lost his diplomatic post in Buenos Aires but continued to live off journalism.

In 1896, Darío was named secretary to the postal director of Buenos Aires. In December of that year, he published the first edition of *Prosas profanas y otros poemas* (Profane prose and other poems), a book that would be expanded for a second edition published in Paris in 1901. Most poems from the first edition were written in Buenos Aires between 1893 and 1896, and nearly all the poems added in 1901 were written after 1896. If *Azul . . .* reveals Darío's true poetic voice for the first time, *Prosas profanas* represents his poetic eruption, one that continued practically unabated until the end of his life. The prose introduction "Palabras liminares" (Liminary words) comprises the first of only three prologues that Darío wrote in the whole corpus of his poetic works. In these few pages he disavowed any intention of writing a manifesto but did raise important issues about the aristocracy of thought and the mediocrity of majority opinion. He also laid out his loathing of the historical moment in which he had to live, his penchant for the past, his love of the aesthetic and the erotic, the question of metrical rhythm, his Hispanic affiliation, and his admiration for French poetry. He declared his reluctance to serve as anyone's model, much less to imitate anyone else, all in the name of total artistic freedom, of every artist's need to create. He wrote:

> Yo no tengo literatura "mía"—como ha manifestado una magistral autoridad—para marcar el rumbo de los demás: mi literatura es mía en mí;—quien siga servilmente mis huellas perderá su tesoro personal, y paje o esclavo, no podrá ocultar sello o librea. Wagner a Augusta Holmes, su discípula, dijo un día: "lo primero, no imitar a nadie, y sobre todo, a mí". Gran decir.
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> [I have no literature that is "mine"—as one knowledgeable authority has put it—in order to blaze a trail for the rest; my literature is *mine* in me; whoever obsequiously follows in my footsteps will lose his personal treasure and, page or slave, will be unable to hide the hallmark or livery. Wagner said one day to Augusta Holmes, his disciple: "First of all, imitate no one, and least of all me." A worthy saying.]

To a certain extent the prologue reveals Darío's objective for the book: nothing less than establishing a new sensibility in Hispanic