Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 265

Volume 265

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 265

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-7045-0
ISBN-10: 1-4144-7045-2

ISSN 0276-8178

Printed in the United States of America
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 16 15 14 13 12

Preface

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Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* (*CLC*) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC.*

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style,* 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

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A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in *TCLC* as well as other Literature Criticism series.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC.* Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Kuester, Martin. "Myth and Postmodernist Turn in Canadian Short Fiction: Sheila Watson, 'Antigone' (1959)." In *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations,* edited by Reginald M. Nischik, pp. 163-74. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2007. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism.* Vol. 206, edited by Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 227-32. Detroit: Gale, 2008. The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a works cited list set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 7th ed. (New York: MLA, 2009. Print); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

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Contents

Rubén Darío
1867-1916

(Born Félix Rubén García Sarmiento) Nicaraguan poet, essayist, editor, critic, autobiographer, novelist, and short story writer.

The following entry provides an overview of Darío's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *TCLC,* Volume 4.

INTRODUCTION

Darío is considered one of the most significant authors of modern Spanish-American literature, as well as one of the leading figures of the so-called *Modernismo* movement, a school of literary thought that dominated Spanish-American letters at the turn of the twentieth century. Darío is best known for his groundbreaking poetic works, such as *Azul . . .* (1888) and *Prosas profanas y otros poemas* (1896; *Prosas Profanas and Other Poems*), which facilitated a revival of Spanish-language literature following a long period of aesthetic dormancy. Throughout his career, the author explored religious, erotic, aesthetic, social, and existential themes and deftly combined images and ideas from disparate sources, including Christianity, Greek mythology, classical literature, and French Symbolism. He was also among the first of his generation to experiment with rhyme, meter, and various poetic forms, and is considered a founder of modern Spanish lyrical poetry. Although he is not as well known in English-speaking countries, Darío is nonetheless recognized as one of the most representative and influential writers of his age. In his lecture of 1967, Arturo Torres-Rioseco asserted that Darío "ranks on the highest artistic level" because of the "lyrical fluidity," "immense tenderness," and "psychological mastery with which he handles the poetic idiom." According to the critic, these qualities contribute to the "rigorous structure and formal perfection" of his work.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Darío was born Félix Rubén García Sarmiento on January 18, 1867, in Metapa, Nicaragua. His parents separated while he was still young, and in 1869 he moved to Honduras with his mother, Rosa. They suffered financially, however, and in 1872 Darío returned to Nicaragua and moved in with his adoptive parents, his great-uncle Colonel Félix Ramírez and great-aunt Bernarda Sarmiento de Ramírez. He was enrolled in a nursery school in León, Nicaragua, and then later attended the public school, where he first began writing verse. After a brief stint at a private academy, the author studied in the Church of the Recolección, where he learned Greek and Latin and began publishing poems. During this time, he gave public poetry readings and later began writing for the Managua press; he also worked as a clerk in the office of Nicaraguan president Adán Cárdenas. In 1885, Darío published his first collection, *Epístolas y poemas: Primeras notas,* under the name Rubén Darío, which he kept throughout the remainder of his career. Over the next few years, he traveled, held various positions, and contributed writings to a number of periodicals, including *La Epoca.* Darío's second volume of poems, *Abrojos,* appeared in 1887, which he followed with the first edition of *Azul . . .* in 1888. In 1890, the author published an expanded edition of *Azul . . .* and was married to Rafaela Contreras Cañas.

In 1891, Darío traveled to Costa Rica, and the following year accepted a position as secretary of the Nicaraguan delegation to ceremonies commemorating the fourth centennial of the discovery of America. He traveled to Cuba and Spain over the next few months and then returned to South America. His wife died soon after his return. In 1893, Darío was named consul general of Colombia in Buenos Aires, a post he lost two years later. During this time, he traveled to New York and Paris and continued to make a living as a journalist. He was named secretary to the postal director in Buenos Aires in 1896 and published another volume of verse, *Prosas Profanas and Other Poems,* that same year. Over the next few years, Darío continued to write for newspapers in Buenos Aires, and in 1898 he traveled to Spain as a correspondent for *La Nación,* covering the war between Spain and the United States. In Madrid, he met Francisca Sánchez, his companion for the rest of his life. They spent the next few months in Europe, and Darío recorded their travels in *La caravana pasa* (1902). In 1904, with the aid of Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, Darío earned money contributing articles to several Spanish magazines and, in 1905, published one of his most important poetic works, *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (*Songs of Life and Hope*). The author continued to travel throughout Europe, as well as South America, over the next few years and produced additional volumes of poetry, including *El canto errante* (1907). In 1907, he was named Nicaraguan minister to

Spain. During the last years of his life, Darío continued to travel, although his health declined considerably. In addition to verse, collected in *Poema del otoño y otros poemas* (1910), the author also published his memoir, *Autobiografía,* in 1912. After traveling to León, Darío died on February 6, 1916.

MAJOR WORKS

Azul . . . is considered a landmark work within modern Spanish-language poetry. Marking the emergence of Darío's personal poetic voice, the volume is recognized as a point of origin for the *Modernismo* literary movement. The first section of the work, titled "El año lírico," is comprised of poems dedicated to each of the four seasons. One of the most lauded poems of this section, "Estival," relates a tragic story of two tigers, joined in a primitive, instinctual love, who are interrupted when one of them is killed by human hands. In "Venus," from another section of the work titled "Sonetos," the speaker of the poem, suffering from an unattainable love, appeals to the planet Venus as the goddess of love but receives a sad gaze, devoid of hope, in response. Another section, "Medallones," includes poems addressed to people that Darío admired, including American poet Walt Whitman. *Azul . . .* also incorporates several prose writings, many of which, such as "El pájaro azul" and "El rey burgués," treat the subject of the artist's relationship to the world. In addition to blurring the lines between the poetry and prose genres, Darío also experimented with traditional stanza structures and meter in *Azul . . .*, in a effort to discover new poetic forms. Darío's next major work, *Prosas Profanas and Other Poems,* explores themes related to poetic writing, freedom, love, religion, and the past. In the prologue to the work, "Palabras liminares," the poet discusses his aesthetic ideals, including the aristocracy of thought and the mediocrity he associated with the masses, as well as his love for the erotic and his negative view of artistic imitation. In this collection, Darío employs various symbols, including swans, roses, lakes, and princesses. At times these symbols have been interpreted as mere decoration or evidence of Darío's desire for escape from industrial society, while other scholars have viewed them as representative of the poet's despair and sense of isolation. In several poems, including "Yo persigo una forma . . .," the poet, often seen as a warrior or hero, is identified with the swan. Several poems in the collection, such as "Era un aire suave . . ." and "Sonatina," explore erotic themes and laud the power of the eternal female. The Pythagorean concept of universal harmony is explored in one of the best-known poems in the volume, "Coloquio de los centauros," in which nature, humanity, and the divine are united across time. Another noted poem, "Responso," dedicated to the French poet Paul Verlaine on his death, reconciles pagan and Christian elements and culminates in an image of mercy and divine pardon. Darío continued to experiment with traditional and innovative poetic forms in *Prosas Profanas and Other Poems* and pioneered the use of free verse in Spanish-language poetry.

Darío's later work, *Songs of Life and Hope,* is also considered a pivotal volume within Spanish-language literature. The collection covers a wide variety of themes, including art, death, eroticism, and femininity, as well as the duality between Christianity and paganism. The poem "¡Torres de Dios . . . !" treats the subject of the poet's relationship to society, presenting the artist as a tortured figure threatened by human culture, while "Yo soy aquel . . ." offers a portrait of the poet's inner life and his struggle to realize universal harmony and the reconciliation of opposing forces. Solidarity within Hispanic culture is another theme in the collection, as indicated by the poems "A Roosevelt" and "Los cisnes," while many of the verses that comprise the section "Otros poemas" explore existential themes related to the poet's anguish, disenchantment, and disillusionment in the face of death. "Lo fatal," which concludes the volume, is often considered one of Darío's most successful poems. An expression of personal despair, the work addresses the pain, problems, and sorrows of life, and the inevitability of death. The formal departures presented in the poem, particularly the use of enjambment, emphasize and parallel the intense emotional content of the work. *Songs of Life and Hope,* for many scholars, is considered a defining text of the *Modernismo* literary movement, in its contemplation of existential themes, particularly the horror associated with consciousness and the tragic reality of humanity's fatal destiny. One of Darío's later works, *El canto errante,* is also considered among his most successful poetic contributions. As the title of the work suggests, the collection depicts a poet wandering through a world that is indifferent to poetry and art, and it returns to some of the themes that Darío explored in earlier works. While poems such as "Sum . . ." and "Eheu" address existential human questions, others, such as "Metempsícosis," reveal the poet's fascination with the idea of reincarnation. Various poems in the collection, including "Balada en honor de las Musas de carne y hueso," are poems of friendship, often dedicated to other poets of the *Modernismo* movement.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Darío first received significant critical notice in 1888, with the publication of his third volume of poetry, *Azul. . . .* An expanded edition of the work, published in 1890, drew praise from such notable figures as Juan Valera, the Spanish novelist, and brought the author international attention. Darío's break with the conventions of romanticism, which had dominated Spanish-

language letters for several centuries, and his attempt to discover new modes of expression through experimentation with poetic forms drew the interest of numerous readers and scholars of the time. With the publication of his next collection, *Prosas Profanas and Other Poems,* he was widely recognized as a leading member of the *Modernismo* movement in Spanish letters. In addition to presenting new poetic forms, these works were also considered revolutionary because they introduced important existential themes, such as despair and disillusionment, to a reading public hungry for relevant ideas in a post-romantic world. Over the next decade, Darío's works continued to draw praise and shape the trajectory of modern Spanish-language literature. His 1905 collection, *Songs of Life and Hope,* is generally considered the pinnacle of his artistic maturity. In the decades following his death, Darío's oeuvre continued to influence subsequent generations of writers in both Spain and Latin America. Several factors, however, including issues with translation and accessibility, have limited the author's readership in the English-speaking world.

In more recent decades, scholars have continued to probe the formal and thematic intricacies of Darío's work and attempted to assess his literary significance. While a few commentators, such as C. M. Bowra, questioned if the author's achievement, "in retrospect," may not "deserve its first renown," most critics generally acknowledged his influence and originality. Dolores Ackel Fiore and Cathy Login Jrade, for example, emphasized the "admirable agility" with which Darío was able to "harmonize models, sources and materials of the most varied origin," as Fiore asserted, while other scholars, including Alberto Acereda and Will Derusha, highlighted his "attention to language on every level" and the "resonance" of his poetry. Thematic studies have also dominated recent discussions of Darío's work. Raymond Skyrme and Jrade examined the pervasive theme of "universal harmony" in Darío's verse, while Miguel Enguídanos studied the conflict between "the ugliness of life and the purity of Art," which he claimed represents the "maximum inner tension" in the poet's work. Priscilla Pearsall, however, underscored the thematic importance of rebirth and artistic freedom in Darío's writings. Although his achievements have received considerable critical attention and confirmed his status as one of the most influential and innovative literary figures of his era, Darío continues to suffer neglect outside of Spanish-speaking countries. According to those who study and admire his work, this is unfortunate, for Darío's universal concerns and experimentation with poetic forms deserve broader recognition in world literature. As Acereda and Derusha maintained in their 2001 study of the poet, Darío stands as "one of the greatest voices in all the lyrical poetry ever written in Spanish" and "a poet of wide and varied interests, from the erotic to the religious, from the social to the metapoetic, from the occult to the existential." The critics concluded that his "strengths as a word artist, above and beyond any literary school or style, elevate him to the pinnacle of the world's greatest writers of lyrical poetry."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Epístolas y poemas: Primeras notas (letters and poetry) 1885
Abrojos (poetry) 1887
Emelina [with Eduardo Poirier] (novel) 1887
Azul . . . (poetry and short stories) 1888; enlarged edition, 1890
Prosas profanas y otros poemas [*Prosas Profanas and Other Poems*] (poetry) 1896; enlarged edition, 1901
Los raros (essays) 1896
Peregrinaciones (travel essays) 1901
La caravana pasa (travel essays) 1902
Cantos de vida y esperanza [*Songs of Life and Hope*] (poetry) 1905
Opiniones (criticism) 1906
El canto errante (poetry) 1907
Poema del otoño y otros poemas (poetry) 1910
Autobiografía (autobiography) 1912
Canto a la Argentina y otros poemas (poetry) 1914
La vida de Rubén Darío escrita por él mismo (memoirs) 1915
Eleven Poems of Rubén Darío (poetry) 1916
Selected Poems of Rubén Darío (poetry) 1965

CRITICISM

C. M. Bowra (essay date 1955)

SOURCE: Bowra, C. M. "Rubén Darío." In *Inspiration and Poetry,* pp. 242-48. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1955.

[*In the following essay, Bowra surveys Darío's poetic achievements and argues that while "more than anyone else" he "was responsible for the dazzling revival of Spanish poetry," his own "achievement may seem in retrospect not fully to deserve its first renown."*]

Rubén Darío (1867-1916) presents a signal case of a man who had a remarkable influence on poetry but whose own achievement may seem in retrospect not fully to deserve its first renown. That he, more than anyone else, was responsible for the dazzling revival of

Spanish poetry with the generation of 1898 is beyond question. At the time when Spain lost to the United States the last remnants of her once world-wide empire this stranger from Nicaragua brought a ringing message of confidence and a range of verbal melodies such as Spain had never heard before. His metrical innovations, his rippling, lucent language, his unquestioning devotion to his art, did something to comfort Spain for her territorial losses by providing her with a new poetry. Through him men of pre-eminent gifts like Antonio Machado and Juan Ramón Jiménez found their true selves and inaugurated an era of creative activity which lasted till the Civil War. Yet, great though Darío's influence undoubtedly was, its results were paradoxical. The poets whom he inspired reacted against his methods and were in no sense his disciples. There is no trace of his mellifluous ease in the Castilian austerity of Machado or the delicate impressionism of Jiménez. Nor has his reputation for originality weathered the years. It is true that he did something that had never been done before in Spanish and that he handled the language with a dexterity which first shocked, and then enthralled, a generation which had come to believe that poetry was dying from inanition, but we can now see that much of his work was not ultimately original but a brilliant transposition into Spanish of French images and cadences. He absorbed with uncommon skill the most prominent qualities of French poetry from Hugo and Gautier to Mallarmé and Verlaine and presented them in an alluring Spanish dress, but the substance remained French. Even in this Gallicising task Darío was not influenced by those who were the greatest forces in the development of modern poetry. Rimbaud, Corbière, and Laforgue meant little or nothing to him, and though he was an ardent apostle of the Symbolists, we may doubt if he understood their essential aims. His achievement was largely derivative, and that no doubt is why he has lost some of his first glory.

It is not necessarily true that, because Darío's poetry is to some extent second-hand, it is therefore second-rate. European poetry presents many examples of men who have learned foreign manners and adapted them so skilfully and sincerely to their own languages that their work has a lasting appeal. The case against Darío is not so much that he derived his art from France as that he was too much concerned with the more superficial and more ephemeral qualities of his chosen masters. His metaphysical swans and butterflies, his Columbines and Pierrots, his figures from Greek myth, his *femmes fatales* like Herodias and Cleopatra, his scenes from Chinese vases and Japanese prints, his transposition of Catholic ritual to secular, erotic purposes, all betray their origins too candidly and suggest that Darío thought them to be essential elements of pure poetry, when in fact they were the fleeting fashions of an age whose other and richer resources escaped his attention. It is true that his debt to Verlaine was largely determined by a similarity of temperament, that Darío really had something of 'le pauvre Lelian' in his vagabond habits, his oscillations between gaiety and grief or between sin and repentance, and his childlike outlook on the world, but this similarity must not be pressed too far or made to justify too much. For Darío differed from Verlaine in several important respects. He was not a Parisian, not a European; he had nothing of Verlaine's cunning or love of mischief; his Catholicism was far less conscious and far less sophisticated; his literary training owed little to friends concerned with the same artistic problems as himself. If he was drawn to Verlaine by some similarity of personality and experience, he admired him chiefly because of his art. Much of Darío's poetry has lost its first appeal because, despite his unfailing technique, his excellent ear and abounding vitality, too much of it is concerned with matters which no longer touch us seriously but have passed into the limbo of lost curiosities.

Yet, when all this is said, something in Darío's work is still alive and compelling and undeniably serious; something still has more than a personal or historical interest and holds its own as original poetry. Amid all the flaunting stylishness, which has now rather faded, we come upon pieces which ring entirely true and have the authentic touch of a unique individual. But this individual has been misrepresented by false parallels and inapplicable standards. It is easy to think of Darío as yet another gifted wastrel of the Nineties, a Bohemian genius, who wrecked his health with drink and trailed a sordid entourage of mistresses from one place to another, whose air of innocent candour was no more than the impertinence of an overgrown urchin, and whose lack of any central philosophy was the defiant gesture of a sceptical and defeated age. It is no less easy to treat him as the typical poet of Latin America, who turned to the mother country and to Paris, the capital of the world, because he believed that in them he could find roots and feel at home, and whose success in Europe was a tribute paid to a prodigal son who brought back to Spain some return for what she had spent in the extravagance of imperial expansion. Neither of these views is right. Darío was a Bohemian only because he came from a simpler, less organised, less departmental, and less self-conscious world. His self-indulgence was that of a child of nature confronted with unexpected opportunities for pleasure, and he found no difficulty in combining it with hard work and the friendship of the best Spaniards of his time. His lack of philosophy is the natural condition of a man who has given his first love to art in a country where art hardly exists, and who for that reason treasures it beyond everything else and feels no call to look outside it. Nor is he the national voice of Latin America. There were indeed times when he spoke nobly for it, but they were almost incidental. Spain and France meant quite as much to him as his own country, and the world of his dreaming fancies meant more than any of them. To see him in his right perspective we

must remember that he was a stranger from an undeveloped land, that he had Indian blood in his veins and lacked the complexity and the sophistication which would belong to a European of his gifts and tastes. He differs from European poets of his time because he speaks for human nature at a very simple level and takes things as they come without shaping his life to a plan. Even his assumption of Parisian airs betrays his tropical love of bright colours and his desire to do the smart thing with rather too much emphasis and display.

Because Darío formed his art far away from Europe and saw in European models all that poetry ought to be, it was almost impossible for him to surrender gains which had been made at so much cost to himself and with so proud a sense of achievement. That no doubt is why he persisted almost to his death in writing verses which repeat the mannerisms of ***Prosas profanas*** (1896). This kind of poetry was not only an ingrained element in his life but a consolation for his personal troubles. If for long periods Darío retired into a secluded universe of dreams, he was well aware of it and not in the least ashamed. In his view this was all too natural and too necessary in a world which wounded and depressed him. In defending his art against the critic José Enrique Rodó, Darío is perfectly frank about his position:

> El dueño fuí de mi jardín de sueño,
> lleno de rosas y de cisnes vagos;
> el dueño de las tórtolas, el dueño
> de góndolas y liras en los lagos.
> . . . . . .
> (I was the master of my garden of dreams,
> full of roses and wandering swans,
> master of the turtledoves, master
> of gondolas and lyres on the lagoons.)

Though this withdrawal into imagination won for Darío his first renown, it was not responsible for his best work. When he writes on these subjects, he usually lacks the full strength and conviction of which he is capable, and his comparative failure is yet another proof that it is the apparently most attractive and brilliant qualities of poetry which perish first, while its more solid and less obvious worth survives.[1]

That Darío should wish for an escape into imaginary worlds was natural enough. He was troubled not only by his own temperament but by the society into which he had been born. Those who saw in him a laureate of Latin America must have been painfully shocked when they read his poem **"A Colón,"** which he wrote in 1892 for the fifth centenary of the discovery of America by Columbus. For an occasion which might all too easily have been drenched in sentimental rhetoric Darío paints a melancholy, even tragic picture of the New World which the great captain called into being. He dwells on its perpetual discords and wars, its perfidious ambitions and betrayed liberties, its destruction of ancient habits and its failure to put anything in their place. He cries out that it would have been better if Columbus had never sailed:

> ¡Pluguiera a Dios las aguas antes intactas
> no reflejaran nunca las blancas velas;
> ni vieran las estrellas estupefactas
> arribar a la orilla tus carabelas!
> . . . . . .
> (Would that the waters hitherto untouched
> had never reflected the white sails;
> would that the stupefied stars had not seen
> your caravels come to shore.)

Then indeed the aboriginal Americans might have been left to their primitive occupation of hunting pumas and bisons in the forests and on the mountains. In such a world even the introduction of Christianity means nothing; for Christ is neglected, while Barabbas enslaves the people. And as for the gifts of civilisation, what can be said for it when it has given over to panthers the ancient cities of Chibcha, Cuzco, and Palenque? Darío sums up this sorry history:

> Duelos, espantos, guerras, fiebre constante
> en nuestra senda ha puesto la suerte triste:
> ¡Cristóforo Colombo, pobre Almirante,
> ruega a Dios por el mundo que descubriste!
> . . . . . .
> (Afflictions, terrors, wars, and constant fever
> miserable chance has set upon our way;
> Christopher Columbus, poor Admiral,
> pray to God for the world that you discovered.)

With time Darío was indeed to modify his views, and in his **"À Roosevelt"** to set against the crude ambitions of the United States his own Latin America with its Christianity, its tenderness, its ancient ceremonies. But his lines to Columbus spring from something deep in his being, his appalled realisation of the world to which by birth he belonged; and that is why this poem is more impressive than his challenge to Roosevelt, which somehow asserts too much and fails to carry us with it.

With this background behind him, and with all the music of French poetry in his head, Darío inevitably retired into fancies of his own making and was comforted by the thought that all over the world other poets were doing the same thing. He accepted from the start the view that poetry is an escape from the squalors of existence and must offer some harmonious alternative to them. When a poet does this, there is always a danger that his work will fail because it is insufficiently related to ordinary existence and lacks the substance which comes from a close contact with common life. When this poetry of escape succeeds, as it does in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* or in Keats' *La Belle Dame sans merci,* it is because the dream becomes a vehicle for something else which belongs to the waking consciousness, and

expresses through forceful imagery what the considering mind expresses less happily through analytical abstractions. Poetry of this kind needs an intimate relation to events of every day and must appeal as a heightened, purified form of them. However mysterious and impalpable it may be, we must assume that it speaks of something intelligible and has a message of some importance. In the last resort the poetry of escape, of a search for an ideal order or a 'beyond', must reflect some deep need in ourselves and provide for it a satisfaction which is not mere dream or mere fancy but is more solid and more absorbing than what we find in the daily round. In this respect Darío often fails. Though his desire for escape was often prompted by powerful motives, he did not often write about it in its full strength, but disguised it in the imaginary scenes in which his fancy delighted but which were liable to omit much of the experience which preceded their creation. Indeed these scenes are sometimes insufficiently imagined. Neither by temperament nor by conviction was Darío really fitted to follow Mallarmé in his search for a mystical or ideal 'beyond'. He felt that he was committed to a search, but he did not always know what he sought, and was liable to be led astray by his august masters and to feel that quite ordinary objects of desire were more remarkable than they actually are.

It would not be untrue to say that at its best Darío's 'beyond' was like the pleasure which children find in fairy-tales. He was able to lose himself in vivid fancies and not to ask for any meaning in them beyond the most obvious and most immediate. When he followed this impulse, he was able to put all his resources of rhythm and imagery to good use and to create something which stands on its own in some fascinating Never-Never-Land. So when he wanted to give pleasure to a young girl called Margarita Debayle, he wrote a delicate fairy-tale which surely pleased her and certainly pleased him. In it a young princess picks a star. Her father is furious and accuses her of a mad and godless caprice. Then Christ appears and tells her that she can have it. The king capitulates handsomely, and, when he sees white robes in the sky, sends out four hundred elephants to the sea-shore to pay homage. It is a trifle of gossamer, a toy for a child, but within its frail limits faultless. It succeeds because Darío's princess is just like other children and her picking of a star is what any child might in the right circumstances do.

Note

1. 'Le style sec traverse le temps comme une momie incorruptible, cependant que les autres, gonflés de graisse et subornés d'imageries, pourrissent dans leurs bijoux. On retire plus tard quelques diadèmes et quelques bagues, de leurs tombes.' Paul Valéry, *Tel quel,* ii, 334.

Dolores Ackel Fiore (essay date 1963)

SOURCE: Fiore, Dolores Ackel. "'And Still Less in Greek'." In *Rubén Darío in Search of Inspiration: Greco-Roman Mythology in His Stories and Poetry,* pp. 49-74. New York: Las Americas Publishing Co., 1963.

[*In the following essay, Fiore investigates Darío's use of imagery and vocabulary from Greek mythology, concluding that "beauty and sensuality" are significant reasons for the author's attraction to this source; the critic adds that "with zest, but above all with talent, Darío uses this lexicon to create compositions ranging from the height of frivolity to the depths of mystery."*]

Many of the leading nineteenth century writers were well-read classical scholars. Tennyson could recite all of Horace's odes from memory. Arnold and Swinburne considered reading Greek and writing poetry interdependent activities. Robert Browning was as much at home in Greek and Latin as in French and Italian. Among those that more directly concern us, Leconte de Lisle spent many years trying to perfect his Greek.[1] He even published translations of several classical works: *Odes anacréontiques* (1861), *Iliade* (1866), *Odyssée* (1867), *Hésiode* (1869), *Eschyle* (1872), *Horace* (1873), *Sophocle* (1877) and *Euripide* (1885). The Parnassian recreation of ancient times had as its basis many complex reasons.[2] It was, though, part of the quest for historical exactness. The historical perspective that had in part been created by Gibbon, Winckelmann, Wood and Wolf spread and deepened in the nineteenth century. New history books were written. Vast historical paintings were produced. In plays on historical subjects care was taken to see that the details were authentic.

Leconte de Lisle stands out as one of those who wrote with a good historical sense. His penchant for exactness, coupled with his love of Greece, led him to reject the Roman names of the gods and goddesses in favor of the less commonly known Greek ones. His use of these designations, as well as such spellings as *Héraklès,* was so controversial that just about everybody had an opinion on the merits of such a practice. As a matter of fact, Leconte de Lisle was not the first to distinguish the gods in this fashion. Goethe had earlier transliterated the proper Greek names in *Achilleid.* In French Thalès Bernard was the first to employ this technique. Likewise, Victor de Laprade, who was very knowledgeable concerning ancient Greece, dared to give certain gods their Greek names as did Louis Ménard. In "Éleusis" (1844) Laprade spoke of *Zeus, Hermès,* and *Artémis,* among others. In his *Questions d'art et de morale* he frequently quoted in Greek.

Ménard was but one of the many who staunchly defended Leconte de Lisle's orthography: "Dans les *Poèmes antiques,* Leconte de Lisle a cherché à nous

montrer les Grecs comme ils étaient et à les faire parler comme des Grecs."[3] R. Fath pays homage to Leconte de Lisle's scrupulous exactness, claiming "C'est le respect de la vérité qui lui fit adopter l'orthographe originale des noms propres."[4] Georges Noël argues that the Greek names "nous semblent assez propres à donner à la poésie une couleur plus franche et plus nettement locale."[5] Estève maintains that Leconte de Lisle's meticulous attention to the names of the divinities was indispensable to distinguishing them from their Roman counterparts with whom they had too long been confused.[6] Desonay defends such transliterations from an aesthetic viewpoint, stating that for those who love the past, as did Leconte de Lisle, the artifice of such orthography as *Aphrodite* awakens a fresher, more poetic image than *Venus*; likewise, *Ḥéraklès* contains more of the primitive myth than *Hercule.* It seems that Leconte de Lisle, as part of his quest for historical exactness, sought to re-create the vigor and harshness of the original primitive myth by transliterating as he did. Similarly, Th. Gautier believed that by using, for example, the *k* in the name Chiron, Leconte de Lisle succeeded in producing an effect "plus farouche." Gautier adds that there are other advantages:

> Ce sont là sans doute des détails purement extérieurs, mais qui ne sont pas indifférents. Ils ajoutent à la beauté métrique par leur harmonie et leur nouveauté; leurs désinences inusitées amènent en plusieurs endroits des rimes imprévues, et dans notre poésie, privée de brèves et de longues, c'est un bonheur qu'une surprise de ce genre; l'oreille qui attend un son aime à être trompée par une résonance d'un timbre antique.[7]

Gautier concludes that the restoral of Greek names gives to Leconte de Lisle's works the over-all air of "un temple d'ordre dorique."

On the other hand, we have those negative or middle of the road attitudes. Ferdinand Brunetière first says that Leconte de Lisle's literal spelling was "un peu puéril," although he hastens to add that his work is "incomparable de couleur."[8] Fernand Calmettes, attacking the resultant phonetic difficulties, concludes, "Rien n'est plus spécieux et d'une prétention d'exactitude plus illusoire que le décalque des noms propres."[9] In a similar protest, Gustave Planche sees not precision, but confusion in Leconte de Lisle's *Héré* for the Greek *Hêrê* and in his *Hélios* for *Hêlios.* Moreover, Planche criticizes him for speaking of "le jeune Hélios" rather than "Phoibos." The latter is the word Homer used to designate the god, while *Hêlios* refers to the sun.[10] (Darío uses both forms equivalently.)

Other Parnassians, following Leconte de Lisle, were involved in this reform, though not to such an extent. In Anatole France and Heredia there is an occasional *Artémis, Hécaté* or *Séléné.* Heredia, usually such a faithful disciple of Leconte de Lisle, did not completely adopt the Greek terminology. In fact, Heredia's names show an almost classic discretion; *Aphrodite* appears with or without an accent on the *e* according to the needs of the rhyme. Rémy de Gourmont sees Heredia's conservative orthography as proof of his good taste, unlike the "facile érudition mythologique" that, he says, makes some of Leconte de Lisle's poems unreadable.[11]

Banville was very much influenced by Leconte de Lisle's preference in this area. In "L'exil des dieux" we find assembled, among others, *Zeus, Apollon, Aphroditè, Athènè, Hèrè, Dionysos* and *Hèphaistos.* In "La cithare" there is a veritable mythological parade, with a distinct leaning towards the Greek names of the divinities: *Zeus, Hèra, Ploutôn, Poseidôn, Hermès, Arès, Perséphonè* and *Kronos.* The Greek *k* appears again in *Hèraklès* in "Le festin des dieux." There are other apparent influences of Leconte de Lisle on Banville. He quotes Hesiod's *Theogony* in the original in "Clymène." Elsewhere, as in "Ariane," he avails himself of Leconte de Lisle's translation of Hesiod. Undoubtedly, though, Banville's motivation for the use of Greek names was decidedly distinct from that of Leconte de Lisle, who was interested primarily in the intellectual aspect of Greece. With Banville, it was largely an admiration of Greece as a symbol of beauty. Professor René Jasinski has appropriately characterized Banville's fondness for the classical world: "Il ne cherche pas les éruditions auxquelles s'astreindra bientôt le Parnasse, mais seulement la lumière, la grâce des noms et des formes, une souriante irréalité donnant à l'amour toute sa douceur. . . ."[12]

Darío's attitude towards Leconte de Lisle's transliterations was decidedly positive, judging from his own statement in his essay **"Leconte de Lisle"** in ***Los raros***: "Conservaba la ortografía de los idiomas antiguos y así sus obras tienen a la vista una aristocracia tipográfica que no se encuentra en otras."[13] For the most part, Darío is himself a conformist in his spelling. He uses, for example, *Hérakles* in **"Coloquio de los centauros," "Al rey Oscar"** and **"A Francia."** *Herakleo* also appears in the **"Coloquio."** [**"Coloquio de los centauros"**] At times, too, we find a *th* that is startling in modern Spanish where the phonetic has triumphed. Although Darío's transliterations were inspired to a large extent by his admiration for the "noble" and primitive effect of Leconte de Lisle's orthography, there had been a tradition of erudite spelling in Spanish that Darío surely knew. The Academy had once defended that orthography, though for reasons quite distinct from those of Leconte de Lisle and Darío. Since the Spanish tradition cannot be discounted in appraising Darío's innovations, a brief presentation of that idea is quite in order.

The vague Latinistic current that is apparent since the origin of the Spanish language grew with the writings of "mester de clerecía." This tendency gathered strength