

## ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF LATIN-AMERICAN MODERNIST LITERATURE. THE CASE OF RUBÉN DARÍO'S POETRY

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Modernist poetry made its appearance in Latin America and Spain during the last third of the 19th century, revolutionizing the very concept of poetry. In the US and other English-speaking countries, Hispanic Modernist poets have never enjoyed the recognition which they truly deserve and none of them has been adequately translated into English. Ruben Darío (Nicaragua, 1867-1916), the most well known and valuable Modernist poet, is a case in point. From my experience as a Darío translator and editor, this presentation will attempt an illustration of aspects particularly problematical when translating Darío's poetry into English language, and how the failures in rendering a Darío poem into English are due to a clash of meaning and poetics, as well as the devices of rhythm and rhyme.

Recent English translations of Spanish and Latin American poets such as Rosalía de Castro, Federico García Lorca, Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges or Octavio Paz have been very successful in the English-speaking world. In the last several years there have appeared a number of exemplary translations into superbly crafted English verse of poetry of various sorts. Some of these remarkable publications might well be considered touchstones for verse translation. As interest in Hispanic poetry in translation increases, a greater appreciation of Latin American Modernist literature is all the more urgently necessary. The Nicaraguan "Rubén Darío" (Félix Rubén García Sarmiento, 1867-1916) is an author of major importance, and a writer who has received much critical attention. In the literary world of Latin American *fin-de-siècle*, Darío soon became one of the leaders of a new Hispanic literary movement called *Modernismo* (Modernism), which cannot be confused with other *Modernisms*: Anglo-American Modernism, *Modernismo brasileiro*, *Modernisme català*, and all the modern Western artistic movements which later led to the *Avant-Garde*. Hispanic Modernism was a cultural and artistic attitude that dominated Latin American art and letters toward the end of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. In the United States and other English-speaking countries, these Latin American Modernist writers have never enjoyed the recognition which they truly deserve

as poets, and none has been adequately and fully translated into English. Darío, the most prominent figure of Latin American Modernism, still lacks a rigorous English translation of the vast majority of his works. Since Darío's death in 1916, the volume of writing devoted to him is perhaps greater than that given to any other writer in the history of Latin American literature, and it appears strange that the poet himself and his poetry are not better known to readers in the Anglo-American world.

Despite Darío's significance as a great innovator in Hispanic literature, there have been very few attempts to translate his work, and particularly his poetry. Darío is one of the most difficult poets to translate into any language because his stylistic affectations sound to a contemporary ear as extremely crafted and well accompanied by the musical wonders and rhythm of his verses. Hence, it is hard to transfer Darío's poetry into English, and this explains that since Darío's death there have been very few attempts to translate his poetry. In 1916 Thomas Walsh and Salomón de la Selva prepared a brief anthology of eleven poems for the Hispanic Society of America. In 1922, Charles B. McMichael published a brief collection of eight poems, five of them from *Prosas profanas y otros poemas* (1896 and 1901) (*Profane Hymns and Other Poems*), including a translation of the original prologue by Darío. In 1965 Lysander Kemp translated seventy-odd poems. This volume provided no Spanish text, which was quite unfortunate. It had no annotations, and it became the only book-length translation. Although in some instances, Kemp included interesting versions of Darío's poetry, it also had a number of "corrections" of Darío's originals. That collection, long out of print, remained the only source available for those who were interested in Darío's poetry and yet lacked the means to read it in Spanish. After Kemp's translation, and on the eve of Darío's centennial celebration in 1967, Helen W. Patterson published a bilingual anthology that included a sampling of fifteen of Darío's Modernist poems among other selections from 20th century Nicaraguan poetry. Apart from scattered translations by poets and scholars, none of these translations of Darío's verses, however, enjoyed subsequent editions. Darío's importance in Latin American Literature and the lack of translations and dual editions recently led my colleague Will Derusha and myself to prepare a bilingual anthology of his poetry (a volume published in 2001 by Bucknell University Press). Our bilingual anthology addressed two pressing needs. Firstly, by studying the original texts either in manuscript or in first editions, we aimed to restore the purity of Darío's text free from typographical errors and faithful to the poet's intent. Secondly, we tried to reproduce in English a sense of the original poetry in all its elegance, rhythm, and thematic eclecticism. Many of the texts, including the artistic credos that Darío composed for his most important works, had not been previously available in English. An increasing interest in our translations among international academic circles, especially the Anglo-American scholars, led us to carry on this task with a new volume currently in press at Duke University Press. It is a complete and accurate text and rigorous translation of Darío's most successful book of poetry: *Cantos de vida y esperanza. Los cisnes y otros poemas* (1905) (*Songs of Life and Hope. The Swans and Other Poems*).

Reading Spanish poetry in English translation is normally quite frustrating because all translations encounter problems in terms of meaning, rhythm and grammar constructions. Recent theorists of translation (Venuti, Bassnett, and others) have suggested that translation carry an ideological weight. Venuti's vision of translation as "rewriting"

takes on deeper meaning when one also attends to the translation of gender specific issues, as Tolliver has recently shown regarding the English translations done on Rosalía de Castro's poetry. With all these factors in mind, it is important to attempt to translate Darío's poetry as meticulously as possible in order to respect this poet's erudite tone while rendering a good deal of the structural and sonic dimensions of the language he employed.

As we advanced in the beginning of this article, one of the primary reasons for Darío's relative obscurity in the English-speaking world is the lack of a solid body of translations. English versions of individual poems have been available almost from the start, wildly divergent in quality and fidelity. Anthologies of Spanish and/or Latin American poetry may include a handful of Darío's poems in translation, though the principles behind the selection often mystify. While several partial translations have served Anglo-American readers over the years, any real scrutiny of the text reveals general misreading of the original Spanish, lapses in versification, and even cases of translators imposing an interpretation on the original. The failures in rendering a Darío poem into English are often due to a clash of meaning and poetics, especially poetic form, the devices of rhythm and rhyme. We will attempt a brief illustration of some aspects that are particularly problematical when translating Darío. Whereas regular English versification has come to depend on the number of metric feet, a repeated unit of stress rhythms (traditionally the iambic, trochaic, anapaestic, dactylic, and amphibrachic foot), Spanish verse is measured by the number of syllables. For the purpose of measuring a verse, these syllables are acoustic rather than simply lexical, involving such processes as synizesis, elision, cesural pause, etc. The two systems –metric and syllabic– rarely coincide. Thus, for instance, the prevalent Spanish hendecasyllable may well show an iambic “tendency”, but cannot in fact be a case of iambic pentameter due to an extra syllable. The difference is even more pronounced with a rhythm based on three-syllable feet (anapaestic, dactylic, and amphibrachic): not only is an eleven-syllable verse not divisible into units of three syllables; but the Spanish hendecasyllable must follow a precise system of accentuation that precludes adherence to all but the iambic rhythm. Given the vastly different morphological-syntactic systems of English and Spanish, the translator can rarely follow Darío's rhythmic patterns while retaining the sense and register of what Darío is literally saying. The best a translator can usually do is to follow Darío by analogy: in other words, to use a rhythmic flow of words in English to suggest to the reader Darío's rhythmic emphasis in a certain line or stanza. An example of this occurs in the case of the celebrated poem “Salutación del Optimista” (“Salutations from the Optimist”). Darío's verse maintains a jubilant dactylic rhythm [óoo]: “Ínclitas razas ubérrimas, sangre de Hispania fecunda...”. Another three-syllable rhythm better suits the English translation, and so we could replace the original dactyls with a decidedly amphibrachic lilt [oóo]: “Distinguished, fructiferous races, blood of prolific Hispania...”. More often than not, unfortunately, it proves impossible to follow Darío's rhythm so closely. The translator must settle for some sort of regularity of accentuation akin to tumbling verse in order to suggest that Darío's original was composed of regular verses.

Among Latin American and Spanish poets, Darío is justly famous for the musicality –the acoustic dimension– of his verse. His use of rhyme was extraordinary even in his time. For a sense of Darío's rhyme schemes, and how end rhyme, interior rhyme, and

alliteration seem to crackle in chain reactions all over the page, the reader may consult the Edgar Allan Poe of “Annabel Lee”. And the same can be said about “The Raven”, though Darío has a more delicate touch, despite the similarities of acoustic bravura. On occasion Darío certainly employed assonant rhyme, but he much preferred consonance. There are intrinsic differences here as well between the languages: Spanish verses generally end with feminine rhymes, while the prevalence of the monosyllable in English produces an emphatic and sometimes harsher rhyme. Darío was a master of rhyme, including *rima rica*, the difficult or unusual rhyme. Often the translator can make use of softer assonant rhymes or even near rhymes to give readers a sense of the rhyming in the original. And here we arrive at the true question confronting every translator: due to the impossibility of transferring a multifaceted work –alive and well– from one language to another, what is the essence to be conveyed? Darío’s genius never resided in one aspect or another, but in the whole. His best poems, whether the first or hundredth time we read them, suggest a sense of having been inevitable. And inevitably *his*, for there is no mistaking that unique voice: what he says and the way he says it. Having admitted the formal limitations of translating poetry, the translator should decide to follow as closely as possible –and, sometimes, subjectively– the voice heard when reading Darío. That voice is what so many translations so often lack. We will mention here some recourse that is too often absent in a Darío translation.

The pursuit of Darío’s analogous voice in English involves some rather drastic hyperbaton at times: he loves to twist and turn his syntax from verse to verse, and only sometimes for the sake of a rhyme or for emphasis. English grammar simply does not have the same elasticity as Spanish. But the translator should stretch it as far as possible when reflecting the original, without, of course, completely obscuring the meaning (which, by the way, Darío himself has occasionally done, provoking a number of possible interpretations and the ensuing scholarly arguments). The register of Darío’s diction is an important element that many translators either overlook or choose to ignore. His choice of words is precise, leaving nothing to chance, and times rather high-brow, as in the line from “Salutación del Optimista” (“Salutations from the Optimist”) quoted above, and the translator must match him as closely as possible. For instance, in the opening line of a “Nocturno” (“Nocturne”), the poet writes: “Los que auscultasteis el corazón de la noche”, deliberately using the rare and rather technical verb *auscultar*. It so happens that a form of the same Latinate verb exists in English as well, and so an accurate translation would render the line: “Those of you who auscultated the heart of the night”, bowing to Darío’s word choice. Nevertheless, Lysander Kemp translated it in the following way: “You that have heard the heartbeat of the night”, employing the most common and general verb in English to describe the auditory sense. He then attempted to hint at *auscultate* by changing *heart* to *heartbeat*, altering the text on two levels (87). This is tantamount to correcting the poet. Needless to say, the sin of translators is contagious for those critics who follow their texts. Certainly a questionable trend common to several translators and many scholars and critics is the attempt to reproduce the “meaning” of a certain poem while reducing its poetic structure to prose. This is the unfortunate case of recent critical studies on Darío and other Latin American Modernist poets which, regardless of their careful documentation and research, lack a clear and consistent translation of Darío’s poetry.

Regardless of personal preference, it is extremely important at least to attempt to reproduce the atmosphere of Darío's language as faithfully as possible. This includes the use of odd, artificially "poetic" words like *lymph* for a limpid stream, for example, when Darío does the same in Spanish with the equally artificial *linfa*. Given modern tastes, there is a general tendency to tone down Darío in translation. Yet by first depriving him of his acoustic elegance through the simple act of translation and then dumbing down his expressiveness for the sake of imagined readers without access to a dictionary, translators all too often produce empty verses that fail even to hint at Darío's richness and complexity. In the same vein, translators have routinely gutted the allusions –mythological, esoteric, exotic, historical– so essential to Hispanic Modernist aesthetics. The motive is understandable enough: Darío's reading of myth, to give but one example, is often obscure even for Hispanic readers well-acquainted with the classical world of gods, goddesses, heroes, and monsters that is part of their cultural patrimony. For an average reader from the United States, for example, the classical world generally resonates far less than in Latin cultures. A rigorous translation, however, should reproduce as accurately as possible the allusive world of Darío's poetry and might include a glossary of terms, names, and events with which the reader may not be familiar.

What has been said regarding Rubén Darío can be extended to all Latin American Modernist poets, from José Martí to Leopoldo Lugones to Julio Herrera y Reissig. More English translations of Hispanic poetry will encourage readers to come to know the excellent literature produced by Spanish and Latin American Modernist writers. For the cause of textual accuracy and poetry in translation, then, I hope the present article can serve as a step towards a pressing reevaluation of Darío, and towards a renewed interest in translating his poetry into the English language.

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