

Rubén Darío's *Modernismo*: Modernism away from Europe

Rindon Kundu & Saswati Saha

Sikkim University, India & Jadavpur University, India

Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt of looking at trends of modernism that developed outside Europe in the Latin American nations. Europe has always been regarded as the centre which organizes and controls modernity and Modernism. This paper takes into consideration Rubén Darío's concept of *Modernismo* and tries to show how trends of modernity and Modernism can also be located in regions outside the periphery of the continent of Europe. The paper concentrates on how the small Latin American countries were struggling hard after independence to break away from the neo-colonial cultural control of the former colonizers and were looking forward to a newer kind of creative impulse based on the ideas of thematic innovations, flowery language, exquisite meter, brevity of expression, emphasis on form and structure, and harmonious rhyme scheme. Darío experimented with the form and content of poetry in the 1980s and 90s and emphasized on pristine beauty much influenced by the Classical Greece, Parnassiansim and French Symbolism. Darío was looking outwards, away from the Spanish cultural influence to bring about this revolution in the Hispanic literature. But Darío's *Modernismo* is not the only kind of modernist approach noticed in the Latin America. This paper also brings out the major criticism faced by Darío from his contemporary poet Enrique González Martínez, who rejects the 'superficial' beauty in Darío's works and brings into context a much wiser inward looking approach to solve the conundrums of everyday existence in Latin America. The paper will specially focus on Darío's image of the swan and Martínez's contrasting figure of the owl to bring out the contrast between Darío's *Modernismo* and González Martínez's *Indigenismo*.

Keywords: *Modernismo*, Darío, Modernity, Latin America, *Modernista*

Modernismo is a literary movement in Spanish speaking regions of Latin America which started roughly around 1880 and continued until 1920. It is difficult to determine the dates of the origin of the movement, but it is unanimously believed to have matured with the publication of Rubén Darío's *Prosas Profanas* in the year 1896. Rubén Darío's poems are known to have rescued the literary conventions of the continent from the rhetorical, excessively stylized odes and ballads dedicated to nature or hymns written to praise the patriots. Darío, an avid learner of world literature, had grasped the literary traditions that preceded him. He was aware of the emotional and subjective Romantic Movement, the Pre-Raphaelites of England, the Parnassians and the Symbolists of France, Poe and Whitman of North America. All this knowledge combined in the mind of a great poet, and exerted a huge impact on what came to be known as Darío's brand of *Modernismo*.

Darío's poems, albeit influenced by preceding literary movements, had a uniqueness in terms of thematic innovations, flowery language, exquisite meter, brevity of expression, emphasis on form and structure, and harmonious rhyme scheme. In *Modernismo* sensation is also of extreme significance and represented reactions to sights and sounds, visual, acoustical and olfactory images. Darío's poetic endeavor aspires to break away from the hegemonic Spanish

influence on the literature of Latin America. The *Modernismo*, as a movement, began when almost all the Latin American nations had achieved independence from the colonial rulers—Spain and Portugal—and therefore this movement can be viewed as an attempt of giving a cosmopolitan bigness to the literature produced in the continent post-independence. Darío brought *Modernismo* to Europe and it is then that the world outside gradually started recognizing literature that emerged from this Hispanic region. Thus this movement is truly modern in the sense that it brought a spiritual reawakening in the history of Spanish literature written outside Spain and made Latin America realize its literary individuality with newness in terms of expression, theme, diction and form.

Modernity is believed to have its center in Europe which organizes and controls it. But modernity appeared in Latin America at a different time. Adam Sharman, in his book, *Tradition and Modernity in Spanish American Literature: From Darío to Carpentier*, writes that the concept of modernity can be allowed a certain flexibility and when applied to non-western parts of the globe, the word modernity cannot mean “a historical phase of western civilization”, but must mean something like “a general condition extrapolated from a phase of western civilization.” He continues: “re-working what Hardt and Negri say of the concept of modern sovereignty, one can say that modernity emanates largely from Europe but was born and developed in the midst of Europe’s relationship with its colonial outside.” (Sharman 2006: 1-2) Modernity is both temporal and qualitative and is marked by an idea of approaching better days taking leave from the ages that preceded it.

However Sharman points out that *Modernismo* makes two of the founding moves of European modernity, “First, it names itself (the Enlightenment was the first to do this); and second, in naming itself as modern it insists on the break that it represents in relation to the past, which it desires to wipe out.” (Sharman: 67) He quotes from Paul de Man’s essay “Literary History and Literary Modernity” to establish his point that “Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure.” (Ibid.)

Modernismo expresses this desire to be modern in the sense that it looked forward to a literary consciousness freed from the fetters of a colonial hangover. It had the urge of being spontaneous and a ceaseless desire to be new. The newness in the poetry of the *Modernistas* was connected with images of the Classical antiquity and had a persistent theme of Platonic eternity which marked the tendency to erase the memory of an immediate past which was gory enough, constantly reminding them of the hard earned independence from the *conquistadors*. Thus they wanted to build their own tradition, their own kind of modernism, where a poet sought for inspiration outside of himself and his own immediate surroundings replete with strong Spanish cultural influence.

Heavily influenced by the Parnassian concept of literary art, Darío rejected the subjectivity and mushy sentimentality of the Romantics. He advocated art for art’s sake and much like Keats believed that “truth is beauty, beauty truth”. His poems have an impassive objectivity of a painter expressing plastic beauty and a world of fantasy on a canvas with a magical blend of elevated colour, language and sound. “Rubén Darío’s esthetic constellation extends in every direction: into philosophy, European and Latin American history and politics, the Bible, ancient mythology, geography, academia, literature and the arts”. (Stavans 2005: 603) Antonio M. De La Torre in his article “Rubén Darío: Little Nicaragua’s Giant Poet” writes that “although life’s biting reality creeps into these creations through the back door, the dominant element is poetic fantasy

coloured with a worship of Beauty for Beauty's sake, and with love nature, of ancient Greece and its mythology, of exoticism, and of the orient with its legends and pomp."ⁱ (Torre 1955: 21)

These allusions to classical Greek and Medieval Latin proves that he considered these to be the epitome of beauty and aesthetics and somewhat pristine paganism. His poem "El cisne" (The Swan) represents the essential *Modernista* Darío and the image of the swan is regarded as the icon of what Darío understands as *Modernismo*.

The sonnet "*El cisne*" is a celebration of beauty and perfect art symbolized by the eternal world of Arcadia and Hellenism. The white winged swan is the epitome of pristine beauty and 'new' poetic form. It is at the juncture of the coming of the swan that Darío thinks a 'divine hour' has arrived for the human race as a new dawn breaks bringing new life, new hope of better days than the time that preceded it. In the dark days of the past the swan sang only at the time of its death, a reminiscence of the gloomy time when creative impulse was halted by the chains of colonial slavery and the zeal to be independent. Spanish Nicaragua was then looking inwards, lamenting at its loss and was blindly imitating the culture of the colonial masters. But with the ushering in of the Wagnerian swan, Darío breaks away from this tradition, takes leave of the immediate past and fosters a modernity that is looking outward making the creative impetus universally appealing. The reference to Wagner's musical opera *Lohengrin* marks Latin America's freedom from the literary and cultural dominance of Spain and a ready acceptance of other influential cultures of Europe. Not only Darío's resources and inspiration are from the larger world outside, but the theme of his poem itself elevates him to the first rank of the modern poets of the world.

The second quatrain rejoices the victory of the swan's song that can be heard even above the turbulent tempest raging in the human world. The mention of the mythic god of Thunder and the Icelandic warrior Argenty from Norse mythology shows Darío's continued interest in the myths and legends of the world outside. The tempestuous human sea might be a reference to the nationalist struggle that engulfed the Latin American countries towards the beginning of the century. But Thor could not dominate the swan, rather it emerged as a birth of creativity after apocalypse. It is the harbinger of optimism and 'revivir'. Its never ending 'aria' provides the poet with inspiration and hope that, breaking away from the storm of the past, this new form of creation will survive without obstacles.

Dan A. Van Meter, in his essay "Rubén Darío and Vincente: Two views of Language as Impregnation" (**Meter 2006: web**), views the swan as androgynous figure "with the masculinity of its phallus-like neck balanced by the femininity of its soft and full body." He understands Darío's *Modernismo* through the physicality of the swan. He writes:

Darío's evocation of the swan here functions on three levels: the artistic, the sexual, and the poetic. In the first instance, the swan that is transformed by art, especially by Wagner, with its natural grace, beauty, and androgynous features, becomes a standard of artistic excellence that the poet himself aspires to emulate. At the same time, the reference to Leda suggests sexual fusion by recalling the myth in which Zeus visits her in the form of a swan. Finally, on perhaps a more profound level, the images of artistic creation and sexual fusion seem to merge and give way to a type of poetic fusion in which artistic inspiration and the erotic impulses of the swan and Leda become one with the aesthetic impulses of the poet. (Meter 2006: 295)

With the third stanza Darío enters the Hellenic world of ideal beauty and perfection. He compares his new born poetry to the pristine beauty of Helen born out of Leda's union with Zeus.

Darío hopes that much like the eternal beauty of Helen, his poems will also survive beneath the snowy plumes of the swan. The birth of Helen through the divine union symbolizes the birth of the new Poetry that ushers in a new age of tranquility, harmony and novelty. Darío with his muse, the swan, hopes for an artistic unification that will result in the onset of a literary journey towards *Modernismo*.

The sharpest criticism of Darío's *Modernismo* and the swan comes from another great Latin American *Modernista* poet, Enrique González Martínez. Although González Martínez too uses Parnassian and Symbolists images and notes, they are not treated as objects of beauty and mere ornamentation. For him these images are essential to develop ideas and convey emotions. In his poem "*Tuércela el cuello al cisne*" (Wring the swan's neck) published in 1903, he proposes the death of the swan that for Darío brought in *Modernismo*. He calls the swan 'deceptive', 'unreal' and hence is nowhere close to Darío's idea of trust and purity. Ergo, it cannot be defined as true *Modernismo* for it represents superficiality and failure to capture the true soul of Latin American identity. The beautiful creative partner of the poet proved to be a deceitful and unfaithful mistress who never cared to peep into the reality of the Latin American existence. The true rhythms of life were lost underneath the "conceits of language and of style." González Martínez replaces the beautiful image of the swan with that of an owl who is wiser and more thoughtful and whose eyes can pierce through the darkness of the night. González Martínez is therefore moving away from the fanciful Hellenic world of exquisite images and focusing on indigenous fauna thereby urging the *Modernistas* to look inward through the darkness of times to derive sustenance. The true meaning of life can be realized only by acknowledging the past and not by breaking away from it. Thus, "*Tuércela el cuello al cisne*"

ought to be regarded chiefly as a rejection of surface rhetorical devices and exquisite frivolity, and not as a repudiation of the entire modernist movement. By "wringing" the neck of the swan with its "deceitful plumage"—and not of all swans, let it be clear—and by replacing it with the owl as the symbol for the new poetry, the lyric voice was in essence replicating Verlaine's wringing of the neck of the vacuous eloquence of Romanticism in "Eloquence". (Pastén B 1997: 3)

González Martínez, unlike Darío, is in favour of simplicity, precision and intimacy and solving the various dilemmas of everyday existence. Unlike Darío's *Modernismo*, González Martínez's *Indigenismo* is much more about the exaltation of the native land and national identity.

Although Darío has been criticized by González Martínez to be outward looking and oblivious of the dark 'manuscripts' of the lived experiences of Latin American existence, his poetry is not without the existential disquiet that characterized life in the Spanish colonies. It is true that Darío's swan looks to the world outside and derives poetic inspiration from lands far and wide. It is a metaphorical representation of Darío's own cosmopolitan travelling self who had been exposed to the world outside the territorial boundary of his nation. Albeit his swan has chaste white plumes symbolizing paramount feminine beauty, its neck is the question mark symbolizing the conundrum and crisis of existence. His style of writing is best unfolded in his own words:

I seek a form that my style cannot discover,

a bud of thought that wants to be a rose.

("I Seek a Form", *Selected Poems of Rubén Darío*)

Octavio Paz notes in his prologue to Darío's *Selected Poems* – this particular line "is a definition of his verse... He seeks a beauty that is beyond beauty, that words can evoke but can never state. All

of Romanticism – the desire to grasp the infinite – and all of Symbolism – an ideal, indefinable beauty that can only be suggested – are contained in that line.”

Works Cited:

- B, J. Agustín Pastén. 1997. “Enrique González Martínez 1871–1952”. *Spanish Language and Literature*, 9, December. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=modlangspanish>
- Darío, Rubén. 2005. *Selected Writings*. Ed. with an introd. by Ilan Stavans. Trans. Andrew Hurley, Greg Simon, and Steven F. White. Penguin Classics. New York: Penguin Group.
- Darío, Rubén. 1965. *Selected Poems of Rubén Darío*. Trans. Lysander Kemp. Prologue by Octavio Paz. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Meter, Dan A. Van. 2006. “Rubén Darío and Vicente Huidobro: Two Views of Language as Impregnation”. Alicante: *Fundación Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes*, <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/hispania--10/html/po000006.htm>.
- Reisman, Rosemary M. Canfield. 2012. *Critical Survey of Poetry: Latin American Poets*. Ipswich Ipswich, Massachusetts: Salem Press.
- Sharman, Adam. 2006. *Tradition and Modernity in Spanish American Literature: From Darío to Carpentier*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Torre, Antonio M. de la. 1955. “Rubén Darío: Little Nicaragua’s Giant Poet”. *Sooner Magazine*, October. https://digital.libraries.ou.edu/sooner/articles/p21-24,29,31_1955v28n2_OCR-2.pdf.

Saswati Saha is presently working as an Assistant Professor of English, Sikkim University, India and also pursuing PhD from Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

Rindon Kundu is presently working as a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, India and also pursuing PhD in Translation Studies from the same.
