



Aristocratic Rebellion:

Ruben Darío and the Creation of Artistic Freedom in the World-System

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Abstract

The late 19th struggle for artistic freedom in the capitalist world-system put the artist in a contradictory position. This contradiction is particularly relevant for writers of the periphery. Freedom or autonomy to pursue purely intellectual projects required a certain aristocratic defense of the value of art. At the same time, however, artists and intellectuals did confront structural subordination: they belonged, as Pierre Bourdieu explained, to the dominated fractions of the dominant class, subordinated both to the state and the bourgeoisie. The life of Nicaraguan Ruben Darío (1867–1916), probably the most well-known poet in Latin American history, provides a paradigmatic instance of this dilemma. Moreover, it sheds light into a dilemma particular to the peripheral intellectual. Peripheral writers, in the 19th century and still today, are subject to world-systemic hierarchies, even cultural ones. This double subordination is clear in the case of Ruben Darío. He was in a subordinated position not only vis-à-vis the national state and the bourgeoisie. Darío was also in a subordinated position, even if symbolic, in relation to those same intellectuals that Bourdieu celebrated as creators of the autonomy of culture in France. One can account for this complex of hierarchies only through a 'world-systems biography' approach. World-systems biographies clearly examine the dialectic of personal, national and global levels of social life. Moreover, it can uncover the core-periphery dialectic in the realm of artistic production. Thus, this world-systems biography approach is shown to be a useful framework through a brief analysis of Darío's life and work.

Keywords: Ruben Darío, Latin American literature, literary field, world-systems theory, world-systems biography



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I have never thought that I was committing an act of sacrilegious arrogance when I posited, without taking myself for the artist, like so many inspired critics, that Flaubert or Manet was a person like me. —Pierre Bourdieu, Sketch for a Self-Analysis

The Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío struggled from the periphery in both in his life and work for a position in the newly globalizing cultural field of the late 19th century. One of the most consecrated writers of Latin America today, Darío's approach to an era of intertwined European universalism and imperialism provides a useful case to assess the world-historical significance of individual biography. As a writer on the world capitalist periphery, Darío's position was doubly subordinate to sociocultural and economic structures at local and global levels. By competing on these two planes simultaneously, Darío occupied an ambiguous historical position. He described himself as aristocratic, yet he was a revolutionary in pushing for the autonomy of cultural production. Through his aristocracy of literature, a utopian field free from external subordination and dedicated to a lofty aesthetic life, Darío opposed the domination and utilitarian ethos of the 19th century's age of empire. Yet through this gesture of intellectual autonomy, Darío laid the foundations for the artistic modernism of the 20th century. Darío's biography is of world-historical importance in a double sense. He created both the autonomous literary field in Latin America and a Latin American literary tradition independent from European traditions.

To analyze Darío's double impact in the late 19th century global cultural field, we must reassess one of the prevailing methods in contemporary Latin American literary analysis. Inspired by Bourdieu's work on the genesis of the French literary field (1996), studies of Latin American culture are usually framed strictly along regional or national lines.¹ Jeff Browitt's

¹ Bourdieu (1996: 193-208) introduced the notion of autonomous literary field to overcome the dichotomy between readings excessively concerned with 'external determination' and readings narrowly focused on 'internal'/inter-textual' connections. In the camp following the principle of external determination we find most forms of sociological explanations of art. Within this tradition, Marxist 'reflection theory' has the merit of being the most sophisticated expression. In reflection theory, art and literature are seen as reflections either of socioeconomic processes or of the world-view of particular classes (cf. Goldmann 1975). On the other hand, we find the tradition that, in some form or another, engages artistic texts as if focusing only on form, and on the construction and deconstruction of meanings *within* texts is the only valid analysis (examples range from some traditional forms of criticism to semiotics and deconstruction). In opposition to both traditions, Bourdieu argued that the literary field, the relatively autonomous space of artistic production, was an outcome of historical struggles that in different countries and at different moments positioned avant-garde and 'art for art's sake' writers against heteronomy, specifically against what he calls the structural subordination of art with respect to the new industrial bourgeoisie and the state. He explained that in the 19th century there emerged out of these struggles the literary field as a world apart: 'a social universe which has as a fundamental law, as a *nomos*, independence with respect to economic and political power' (Bourdieu 1996: 61). *Within* this newly created world 'internalist' readings are dominant and tend to govern the production of literary knowledge. This dominance is itself understandable if one examines the social process of autonomization that instituted the search for internally (de)constructed meanings as the legitimate form of reading. Marxist reflection theory's failure resided in that it bypassed this problem and instead sought to substitute

analysis of Darío (2004) and the groundbreaking studies of Ramos (2001) and Carlos Altamirano and Beatriz Sarlo (1980; also Sarlo 1988, 1999) all center on the origins and autonomization of the literary and intellectual field in Latin America. Though an important contribution, the regional/national focus within both Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field and its Latin American application misses the world-systemic complexity of Rubén Darío's position as a peripheral writer.²

A Literary Biography from the Age of Empire

Rubén Darío was born in central Nicaragua in 1867 and died in 1916, putting this fin de siècle poet firmly in the 'age of empire,' ca. 1875-1914 (Hobsbawm 1987). The culmination of the 'long' 19th century, this period experienced the rise of new European empires and the widening of living standards between the West and "the rest." In the years from 1876 to 1915, virtually one quarter of the world became colonies under imperial sovereignty (Hobsbawm 1987: 59). Although mostly independent, Latin's America's subordinate status was re-affirmed and consolidated in the late 19th century through reintegration into the world-economy. This reintegration was marked by the new foreign investment boom of the 1880s, after the wave of Latin American defaults of the 1870s (Taylor 2006: 65-72). This occurred first under British free trade imperialism and then under the sphere of American capitalism. Subordination was not limited to the economic realm alone. Cultural imperialism was part of the 'rise of the West.' 'Orientalism' (Said 2003) or 'coloniality' (Quijano 2007) went hand in hand with economic imperialism. Of course, these cultural dimensions of imperialism were not utterly totalizing forces. Internal resistance to the symbolic aspects of subordination could transform semiperipheral and peripheral cultures.

A world-systems biography should examine these global transformations via 'microscopic observations' (Derluguian 2005: 290), and Darío's life illustrates how cultural autonomy could be conquered by means of resistance against, and negotiation of, core world-systemic impositions. As Perry Anderson reminds us, the coinage of the term "modernism" belongs to Ruben Darío himself, codified in reaction to these intertwined economic and cultural impositions:

internalism with its exact opposite without historicizing the dominance, in criticism and in artistic production itself, of the concern with internal and inter-textual connections.

² By refocusing away from regional cultures and short-term aspects to world-historical processes of literary evolution, this article follows from the early work of Ángel Rama on the global significance of *modernismo* (1985) and the long-term project of Franco Moretti (2004a, 2004b, 2004c). While Moretti's work tends to bypass key local struggles, it nonetheless advances world-systemic research in the humanities.

Contrary to conventional expectation, [modernism was] born in a distant periphery rather than at the centre of the cultural system of the time: [it comes] not from Europe or the United States, but from Hispanic America. We owe the coinage of *modernismo* as an aesthetic movement to a Nicaraguan poet, writing in a Guatemalan journal, of a literary encounter in Peru. Rubén Darío's initiation in 1890 of a self-conscious current that took the name of *modernismo* drew on successive French schools—romantic, parnassian, symbolist—for a 'declaration of cultural independence' from Spain that set in motion an emancipation from the past of Spanish letters themselves, in the cohort of the 1890s (1998: 3).

Our debates on modern culture thus have an origin in this “distant” peripheral writer. While millions of other individuals also lived through and shaped the age of free trade imperialism, Darío's response was transformative and historically enduring. The poet's life and work fostered the constitution of the autonomous literary field in Latin America and the region's declaration of independence from European culture. Darío, then, illuminated a convergent space for intellectual resistance to *both* local political and economic powers *and* global cultural powers.

By broadening the scope for historicizing gifted individuals proposed by Bourdieu (2008: 112-113), a world-systems biography can remove the halo that mystifies cultural producers. The “extraordinary,” “genius” character of these intellectuals and artists is as much a product as a producer of history. By doing so, the sociologist engages in an empathetic identification to discover that so-called geniuses are, in many respects, ordinary people like us. Accordingly, we must note how Darío's life was not only shaped by artistic struggles but also by more common problems: difficult family relations, economic insecurity, and alcoholism (Torres 1966). Alcoholism in particular was central in Darío's life and ultimately led to his death (Torres 1966: 496-505). However, as Enrique Anderson Imbert argued (1967: 275), Darío's addiction to alcohol was less important to his historical significance than his addiction to literature. For the poet, all other aspects of life were, in the last instance, secondary to the love of artistic writing. In the context of artistic biography, his thirst for alcohol, ordinary in itself, became one element of bohemian ethos (Torres 1966: 239, 245; Anderson Imbert 1967: 275). This ethos equally took Darío to wander between different Latin American countries and later to Spain, France, and the United States, before he finally returned and died in Nicaragua. Darío's bohemian lifestyle was also characterized by multiple romances, constant social gatherings lasting until the next morning, and the conspicuous consumption of clothing and hotel rooms which projected a higher economic standing than actually possessed (Anderson Imbert 1967: 163, 262, 275).

In hindsight, these bohemian elements produced a distinct “artistic way of life” that corresponded with Darío’s efforts to create an autonomous literary field. Darío’s bohemia was part of a more general trend that found register in the 19th French artistic field. In France, where Darío lived for some 15 years during the turn of the century, bohemianism was one element in the creation of a society of writers and cultural producers as an autonomous world with its own forms of socialization, values and judgments (Bourdieu 1996: 54-57). As participant, Darío joined in the world-historical transformation of the writer’s position from a subjugated client vis-à-vis state patronage and small bourgeois audiences to a position of relatively autonomous cultural producer. Yet when compared to the 19th century French writers who acted as the archetypes of this world-historical transformation, Darío’s role remained a subordinated one. He was, after all, a writer from the periphery of the world-system.

While there still exists an autonomous literary field in Latin America partly due to the struggle of Darío and his intellectual contemporaries, the current global field of literary production is structurally analogous to his own time. Intellectuals and intellectual traditions originating from semiperipheral and peripheral areas are subordinated to those originating in core areas. And the unequal relation applies, I argue, to cultural production in general, whether artistic or scientific. The clearest contemporary evidence is the rise and dissemination of neoliberal economic theories and their adoption by significant fractions of the Latin American intelligentsia. A generation earlier, and from the other side of the ideological spectrum, one could argue the same relation accounted for rise and spread of Marxism. Through Darío’s biography as a cultural producer, we can historicize this global relation of structural intellectual subordination.

Darío’s Perspective on the Early Field, or, Darío Looking at Himself

While there is a long tradition of Darío scholarship, the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama most fruitfully situates the poet’s main works and the ambiguous character of his *modernismo* in Darío’s socio-economic and historical situation (Rama 1985: 19) by identifying it as a creative response to the integration of Latin America into the world market via free trade imperialism (for the term, see Gallagher and Robinson 1953; also Arrighi 1994: 47-58). Rama, however tends to assume that imperialism and modernization are causally and necessarily linked, which may not be the case. Here I consider Darío’s *modernismo* as the outcome of world-systemic struggles which take place alongside imperialist incorporation of new economic and cultural zones, whereby “modernization” becomes a possibility but not a necessary outcome.

In the decades before 1890, Darío and a minority of Latin American cultural producers proceeded to constitute a partially autonomous literary field on the continent. A look at the

development of this field, then, was a look at their own careers. In his autobiography, Darío ([1912]1991: 143) expressed frustration with what he considered the culturally “backward” character of Nicaragua and other Central American countries. The absence of an autonomous literary field in these countries entailed a symbolic *and* material subordination. Dependence translated into a life-long accumulation of debts in both realms. In the absence of a literary market to support the writer’s autonomous production, Darío saw his own life resting on the favors of others, especially politicians and editors. As a result, his autobiography reads like a settling of accounts in which the poet makes a gesture of gratitude by naming hundreds of people who are seemingly included only because they helped his career. No matter the intent, this long list makes for useful sociological data. Table 1 reconstructs these symbolic and material debts from Darío’s autobiography. The list illustrates the paradoxical situation whereby a master poet celebrated and denounced for his aloof aristocratism portrays himself as an indebted and dependent man.

The table lists the geographical location of each favor’s construction, the people who helped him and the favor itself, according to Darío’s own account. I prefer the term favor as opposed to benefit to avoid falling in the ‘rational choice’ fallacy of a life governed by means-ends calculations.³ As Darío himself frequently points out, his precarious condition of existence structurally subordinated him to various social agents in position to grant him favors. Various contingent encounters patterned his life trajectory: a failed attempt by liberals in the Nicaraguan government to provide him with a scholarship to study in Europe; a Salvadorian president who gave him money for his studies; and friends who secured employment for him at different newspapers, such as *La Época* in Chile, *La Nación* in Argentina and even the editorship at the official Salvadorian newspaper, *La Unión*, under the regime of General Francisco Menéndez.

As Darío saw it, in Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador, where he first cultivated his art, no one could appreciate it. Only in Buenos Aires could the poet find his suitable audience. This was Darío’s Argentinean utopia, a place where, according to him, the supply of art was equaled by a sufficiently sophisticated demand on the part of readers. Yet even his arrival into the Argentinean utopia in 1893 (Carrilla 1967) did not eradicate his awareness of two interrelated problems: the cultural subordination of Europe over Latin America and the domination of the market over the writer. In this context, Darío’s much criticized *preciosista* (extremely refined) poetry was a creative response and utopian compensation—with aristocratic tone—to his finely-tuned sense of economic and cultural subordination.

³ For the question of the economy of favors in 19th century literature, see Schwarz (2000).

Table 1. Rubén Darío's Accumulation of Symbolic Debt

Country	People	Outcome
Nicaragua	'liberal politicians in Congress'	'Scholarship' to study in Europe (Not approved)
El Salvador	Rafael Zaldívar, President	Education, Money
Nicaragua	Pedro Ortiz	Job in the <i>secretaría del presidente</i>
Nicaragua	Juan Cañas	Arrangement of (and money for) Darío's travel to Chile, letters of recommendation
Chile	'C.A.' (a politician to whom Juan Cañas's letter was addressed)	A job at <i>La Epoca</i> newspaper
Chile	Luis Orrego Luco, Pedro Balmaceda (son of President Balmaceda), Luis Orrego Luco, Manuel Rodríguez Mendoza, Jorge and Roberto Huneeis, etc.	Introduction into young literary aristocracy of Santiago
Chile	Eduardo de la Barra, José Victorino Lastarria	Job at <i>La Nación</i> , Argentina's most prestigious newspaper
El Salvador	Francisco Menéndez, President	Job as director of <i>La Unión</i> , an official newspaper. Under the protection of the same powers, he gets married.
Guatemala	General Barillas, President	Job as director of a semi- official newspaper
Colombia	Rafael Nuñez, former President	Job as Colombia's <i>consul general</i> in Buenos Aires
New York, USA	José Martí	Being able to locate Martí, a consecrated master, in his network of literary peers
Paris, France	Alfonso Daudet, Alejandro Sawa	With them was able to 'meet' Verlaine
Buenos Aires, Argentina	Young literary aristocracy	A place in the constitution of the literary field
Buenos Aires, Argentina	Carlos Vega Belgrano	Funded the publication of <i>Prosas profanas</i>

Source: Constructed by the author on the bases of data from (Darío [1912] 1991).

A Literary Aristocrat against the Bourgeois Empire

Darío's Argentinean period, from 1893 to 1899, was a defining moment of his career. There he took a stance against a main cultural tenet of free trade imperialism: utilitarian profit-seeking. If art were to be measured by the same standards imposed by British free trade imperialism on most of economic life, it would practically disappear. In opposition, an autonomous art field was posited as a space where culture, not money, would rule. In Bourdieu's words (1996: 61), the cultural field operates as "a social universe which has as a fundamental law [...] independence with respect to economic and political power" (1996: 61). In the Latin American artistic field being constituted during Darío's career, art opposed itself to utilitarian standards even if dependent on it in everyday life (e.g., the search for funding a publication or a market of buyers). Poets who shared Darío's ambiguous position also embodied his formula: subordination to the ethical dictates of free trade imperialism on the material plane, and disgust for it on the aesthetic plane. In this sense, as I show below, Darío's poetry was a utopian compensation for the disappointment with the re-integration of a politically independent Latin America into the world market under free trade imperialism.⁴

His most intense disappointment was directed towards Central America, where he worked during the 1880s before moving to Chile. At times, Darío linked his artistic endeavors to the cause of Central American unification.⁵ Yet Darío's disaffection with local and regional politics led to a fascination with Greek mythology, which he approached through 18th century French writers (Anderson Imbert 1967: 82-84). In his *preciosista* poetry, Darío directly makes his disappointment with Latin America clear. Both his 1892 poem "A Colón" (To Columbus)⁶ and the prologue to arguably his most important work, *Prosas profanas* ([1896]1983) are exemplary. As one literary critic noted, Darío's poetry contained a "desperate man's *indigenismo*" (Anderson Imbert 1967: 163) resulting from the hopeless state of 19th century Latin America. In

⁴ The notion of 'utopian compensation' is used here in line with Jameson's definition of the term. He argues for a reading of modernism (European) that takes account of its utopian/compensatory dimension in the gray world of capital (Jameson 1981: 63).

⁵ The cause of the Central American union was the failed political project of restoring the Federal Republic of Central America (the union of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica) that existed for some twenty years during the second quarter of the 19th century. Regarding Darío's stronger disillusion with respect to Central America's state in comparison to his more positive view of Southern Cone countries such as Chile and Argentina, I would argue it has to do with the different positions these two regions within the world-system. While Central America has historically been closer to a peripheral condition, Southern Cone countries have historically been closer to a semiperipheral position in the world-economy (Arrighi and Drangel 1987: 66-71). And semiperipheral countries have more core-like activities enclosed within their borders (Arrighi and Drangel 1987), intellectual autonomy probably being one of those activities.

⁶ The poem appears in (Darío 1977: 308).

“To Columbus,” Darío completed his turn toward Europe with an added romanticization of pre-Columbian America. This poem expressed the idea that if only Columbus had not “discovered” the continent, it would have been in a presently better state under the control of vigorous indigenous cultures. The poem cries out, “if only white people could have had the same ways as Atahualpa, Moctezuma and other great kings!” Although it praises the “heroic deeds” of the Spanish, the poem portrays the balance sheet of colonization as being a negative one: Latin America lost more than it earned. In the end, Darío asks Columbus to pray for the future of the wretched land he conquered.

As Darío learned from his days as a journalist during the Spanish decline of the late 1890s (Torres 1966: 272), praying was the only thing that either the imperial spirit of Columbus or contemporary Spaniards could do for the future of Latin America. The rise of U.S. hegemony was further confirmation that the capitalist ethos of profit maximization (or as Marx put it, ‘endless accumulation’) was a new cultural dominant of the world. In this context of a declining but still relevant British hegemony and a rising United States as world power, Darío saw poetry as a refuge “from men’s ferocious struggles, in times in which the heavy hands of the utilitarian try to asphyxiate man’s soul” (Darío [1896]1983: 19). Elements of this literary utopian escape from the suffocating effects of capitalist power included the idealization of Europe and the romanticization of the pre-Columbian world.⁷

In *Prosas Profanas* ([1896]1983), Darío’s hostility towards his position in the world is directly expressed in an “aristocratic” manner. Published when he was 29, Darío considered the collection as the high point of his career.⁸ These poems “correspond to a period of arduous intellectual struggles when I, together with my friends and my followers in Buenos Aires, defended the new ideas, including those of the freedom of art [...] of literary aristocracy” (Darío [1912]1991: 142). During his time in Argentina, Darío positioned himself vis-à-vis the world as a literary aristocrat against the economic empire of the bourgeoisie. In world-historical terms, he

⁷ In good Darianian fashion, however, Darío’s attitude towards the United States was ambivalent and depended on the context of his writing. He is the author of the much celebrated anti-imperialist 1904 poem, “A Roosevelt” (Darío 1977: 255-256), where he wrote, as a response to Roosevelt’s imperialist ambition in Panama (Torres 1966: 307), “You are ,the United States, /you are the future invader /of the naïve America that has Indian blood, /that still prays to Jesus Christ and still speaks Spanish.” But he is also the author of 1906’s “Salutación al Águila” (‘Saluting the Eagle’) (Darío 1977: 313-314) where he outlined his newfound believe in the friendship of the two Americas, under the guidance of the Northern one. Darío was convinced about U.S. benevolence after attending the speeches of Elihu Root, Theodore Roosevelt’s secretary of state, in a 1906 Pan-American conference in Rio de Janeiro (1966: 336). Roots’ words at the conference were all about the understanding and respect the U.S. supposedly felt towards Latin American nations. According to Torres (1966: 336) a naïve Darío had his sensibility invaded by Roots words, “to the point where [Darío] could not see the claws and the damaging steel beak of the attacking eagle.”

⁸ Regarding what he considered his three best books, Darío wrote that “*Azul...* symbolizes the beginning of my spring, and *Prosas Profanas* my full spring, *Cantos de vida y esperanza* encompasses the essences and saps of my autumn” (Darío 1991: 149).

presented an artistic rebellion against both local dominant classes and western economic and cultural imperialism.

In the work's prologue-cum-manifesto, Darío straightforwardly reflected on his own position in the world:

Is there in me a drop of African blood, or of Chorotega Indian? If so, it is in spite of my marquis' hands. Thus, you will see in my verses princesses, kings, and imperial things, visions from strange or even impossible countries: what you want! I detest the life and the time in which I was born; and I will not be able to salute a Republican President the way I salute you, Oh Elagabalus! you court -gold, silk, marvel- I remember in dreams... If there is a poetry in our America, it resides in the old things: in Palenke and Utatlán, in the legendary Indian and the sensual Inca, and in the great Mectezuma[.] Everything else is yours, democrat Walt Whitman. (Darío 1977: 180)

On one level here, Darío rejected modern times in general. He was not content with the modern world under emerging U.S. hegemony. He seemed to prefer images from pre-modern social forms, be it imagined European kingdoms or pre-Columbian indigenous cultures. That is why he lamented the decline of the pre-Columbian civilizations of America. Consequently, he rejected the position of the Latin America of his times. He saw Latin America as the underachieving successor of great Mayan, Inca and Aztec civilizations. This positioning implied that Darío had a historical understanding of Latin America's difference with respect with the Northern part of the continent. Difference, however, was not celebrated by Darío. In part, he saw Latin America's singularity as associated with the fact of its historic decline, its transformation from a region of vigorous indigenous civilizations to a subordinated region of the modern world. If we read the passage closely, what Darío refuses, then, is the condition of colonized and subordinated modern Latin America: all that is great is in the pre-colonial past ('in Palenke and Utatlán, in the legendary Indian and the sensual Inca, and in the great Mectezuma') or in the hegemonic countries ('Everything else is yours, democrat Walt Whitman'). And these two sources of greatness, the indigenous past and the hegemonic powers of the present became sources of inspiration for his work. In other words, Darío's modernism, as Rama (1983: 4) argued, implied a new recognition of Latin American singularity. But it was a pessimistic recognition of this singularity. It pointed out Latin America's cultural subordination to core powers, here the new hegemon (the United States) All in all, the irony is that the movement that Darío baptized as *modernismo* was in part a utopian embrace of an imagined pre-modern and pre-colonial world.

Modernism was an indication of his rejection of the modern world. His response to all this, was to take an aristocratic stance.

Darío's aristocratic approach required a high degree of cultural capital to appreciate his work, something not easily accessed by the dominated classes. Consider the opening of "The Inner Kingdom" from *Prosas Profanas*:

To Eugenio de Castro

...with *Psyche, my Soul*.

Poe

A sumptuous forest
 Traces its ragged profile on the blue of the sky.
 A path. The earth is rose-colored,
 Like that painted by Fra Domenica Cavalca
 In his Lives of Saints. One sees strange flowers,
 From the glorious flora of fairy tales,
 And, amid the enchanted boughs, "papemors"
 whose song would enrapture the bulbuls with love.
 ("Papemor:" rare bird. "Bulbuls:" nightingales.)

(Darío 1977: 225-227)

In likely a condescending manner, Darío felt inclined to provide the definition to two of his included words (papemor and bulbul). Overall, as Luis Monguió showed, this poem of only 10 stanzas refers to such cultural figures and works as "the *Mercure de France*, Pilate de Brinn' Gaubast, Edgar Allen Poe, Ingram, Griswold, Mallarmé, Fra Doménico Cavalca, De Sanctis, Costiro, Richepin, Verlaine, Samain, Morbas, Plowert, *El decir a las siete virtudes*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *The Psychomachia*, Botticelli, Rosetti, Burne-Jones, Epicure, the esoteric philosophers, all of them brought together to Darío's pencil" (Monguió 1968: 727-728).

The excerpt above highlights Pedro Salina's (1948: 115) characterization of Darío's poetry as a "landscape of culture," in the sense that the poet creates "concretized environments that are not natural but cultural because even its natural references are, al most always, processed through a foreign artistic experience." As Rama noted (1977: xxiii-xxx), Darío became a creator of "artificial roses." As both critics argued, Darío used as raw material not some romanticized version of pristine nature or a local and contextualized authenticity, but the entire cultural capital of Western letters. His material source was proudly secondhand (Rama 1985, 114).

In another poem from *Prosas Profanas*, “Blasón” (Blazon), we find Darío’s infamous symbol for poetry, the swan.⁹ “Blazon” was dedicated to a Spaniard noblewoman, the implied reader being the Latin American and Spanish dominant classes. It celebrates the aristocratic divinity of poetry and beauty (the swan), while simultaneously seeking the approval of the dominant class (the Countess):

He is the swan of divine origin
whose kiss mounted through fields
of silk to the rosy peaks
of Leda’s sweet hills.

[...]

This winged aristocrat displays
white lilies on a blue field;
and Pompadour, gracious and lovely,
has stroked his feathers.

[...]

Countess, give the swans your love,
for they are gods of an alluring land
and are made of perfume and ermine,
of white light, of silk, and of dreams.

(Darío 1977: 188-189)

“Blazon” affirms poetry’s divinity in the tradition of art for art’s sake. It expresses Darío’s refusal to reduce his work to matters of utility by proposing “*una poesía acrática*” (Darío 1977: 179). By calling for this “poetic akrasia,” Darío advocated the artist’s duty to act in opposition to the rationalizing economic judgment of the present. The swan symbolized high culture, and there is a high level of cultural capital required for readers to appreciate even a single poem of Darío and its complex network of references. This tendency towards the distinction of a high culture derives from the *modernistas*’ love/hate relation with an emerging mass literary public which perversely made possible these poets’ entrance into the market. Their high literary style embodied the conflicted relation to Western models of the market and “the public.” In response,

⁹ Here I avoid the discussion of Darío’s debt to Baudelaire in terms of the symbol of the swan. A discussion of this can be found in (Bush 1980).

they produced works that seemed obscure to the general reader and without relation to everyday life. As Rama explains, “their game of approaching and restraining themselves from the demands of the ‘public,’ ... this effort to impose their own standard but one valid for the many who would buy the product, all this points to an intense cogitation about the poet and his destiny” (Rama 1985: 62).

The intentional complexity of Darío’s writing and his emphasis on the value of art for art’s sake was a negotiated integration into the cultural sphere of the economic market governed by this new public’s demands. Against them he imposed a different demand, that is, the reader had to make an effort to approach the writer’s aesthetic interests. Darío’s refusal to assimilate to his “life and times” was ultimately of an aristocratic tone. This aristocratic impulse was metaphorical, however, not a state-sanctioned or hereditary aristocracy. Darío’s aristocratism was *cultural*, the idea of a cultural producer privileged enough to dedicate himself completely to the lofty subjects of aesthetic life, without considering the “usefulness” of his work or the everyday realities of common people. This aristocratism, in turn, required a certain cultural capital on the side of the reader. All in all, aristocratism on the side of the writer and sufficient cultural capital on the side of the reader became elements in the constitution of literary production as a field of social action governed by its own rules.

The Lesser Evil? Integration into the Capitalist Market and the Autonomy of Latin American Culture

Although Darío was hostile to free trade imperialism, he nonetheless became a supporter of the integration of the writer into the capitalist world-economy as a sign of modernity. A distinction needs to be made here: Darío’s idea of the market is not the utilitarian ideal. He wanted a literary market (Rama 1985: 51), something like an autonomous literary field (Browitt 2004; Bourdieu 1996). However, to go beyond Bourdieu’s framework wherein the literary field is a response to *national* political and economic powers, Darío’s ideal literary field was also a response to *global* economic and cultural structures of subordination. It was an adaptive response, as opposed to the ‘heroic’ response in Bourdieu’s account of the French field, to the undeniable reality of a capitalist world-economy. According to Rama, Darío’s thoughts on the writer

...derived from the conviction that it was not possible to remain in the era of patronage, and that the writer had to be incorporated into the market: live within it, whoever one can, even if it is bad, but within its coordinates. The risks were well known. Darío knew them, but in general, he defended the principle of the market, more than untrusting its

pernicious effects that will become clear at the end of his life. Thus, he attacked the behavior of the ‘amateur’ whose presence was a disturbance in the correct functioning of the literary market making difficult the secret ambition of all: the professionalization of the writer. (Rama 1985: 52-53)

If the poet wanted to constitute a literary market composed of professional writers and a cultivated audience, he therefore had to justify the creation of a literary market *in* Latin America and the production of a specific Latin American product for the world cultural market. Darío took part in this dual struggle for a cultural autonomy that, taken together, has two related meanings. First, there was the constitution of an autonomous Latin American literary field in Bourdieu’s sense of the term, which Darío and his friends conceived as a literary market. Second, there was the affirmation of a Latin American cultural autonomy with respect to European cultural traditions implied in the constitution of the first type of autonomy. In the constitution of literary autonomy (in the sense of an autonomous field) the embrace of an aesthetic that portrays poetry and poetic images as universal symbols of humanity is a logical strategy for the writer. In opposing the subordination of his/her art to the temporal powers of the state and the bourgeoisie, based on force and money, poets such as Darío took an aestheticist stance that affirmed the superior value of literary writing and its centrality in the human experience. This stance is most evident in Darío’s *Prosas profanas* but is also apparent in other works such as *Azul* ([1888]1946) and *Cantos de vida y esperanza* ([1905]1971).

Considering the universalist underpinnings of Darío’s work, it would seem paradoxical that he would be a founder of Latin American cultural autonomy in the second sense (Anderson 1998: 3). That is, his universalist aesthetic might seem contradictory to the creation of a specifically Latin American production for the world cultural market. However, we must keep in mind that cultural autonomy here is only relative. Total independence of Latin American culture from Europe is a myth. ‘Autonomy’ points to the fact that there is some historical singularity in Latin American culture derived from a historical experience: subordination to a specific group of imperial powers; extermination or subjugation, partial or complete, of pre-Colombian cultures; and, most important, similar structural configurations of cultural, social and economic relations (e.g., modern slavery) within the broader relations constituting the modern capitalist world-system.

Notwithstanding the commonalities of Latin American cultures, there are multiple ways to affirm historical singularity, from the national to continental level. The most extreme is ethnocentric claims of purity. Yet Darío went beyond ethnocentrism towards a nuanced understanding of cultural autonomy. In this paradoxical route towards cultural autonomy, Darío

differs from more reflexive writers, such as Brazilian novelist Machado de Assis (1839-1908). In his more ironic mode, Machado relativized bourgeois universalism revealing the particular European origin of these ‘universals’ (Schwarz 2001). Conversely, Darío embraced universalism and resisted the quasi-monopoly that Europe claimed of this discourse.

Darío’s Paradoxical Strategy and His Position in the Emergent Field

Darío’s work after 1896 characterizes the tension in this emergent literary field. For Ramos (2001), the 1880s literary field was instituted through a partial break by the new *literatos* (Darío, José Martí, Machado de Assis) from the 19th century *letrados* (Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Andrés Bello). While the mid-19th century *letrado* field (Rama 1984) implied a conflation of literature with state-building (e.g., the writer Sarmiento had become president of Argentina), the new literary field envisioned a political practice not necessarily identified with governmental politics. It was a struggle for the creation of an autonomous aesthetic sphere, and a space for critical thinking. This field defined itself against both local political powers *and* global cultural powers. Therefore, it required some element of ideological *Latino-americanismo*.

Darío participated in this process, positing himself at an extreme culturalist pole. The “revolutionary” formula was, in Darío’s words, “the defense of [...] a literary aristocracy” (Darío [1912]1991: 142). We should note that this cultural field which Darío championed still exists today, though transformed and under very precarious conditions, in Latin American universities, literature academies, and the world of progressive publishing houses. His works referred to the poet’s peripheral position as assumed in the era of the universalization of market liberalism via imperialism. They additionally embodied the tension between a passive adoption of European universal models, such as liberalism or romanticism, and their critical re-framing.

Given that Darío’s poems are ‘cultural landscapes’ full of seemingly Eurocentric aspirations, many jumped to conclusions and discarded his work as anti-national (an *afrancesado* Europeanist), as aesthetical, or as a reflection of bourgeois ideology. Darío’s submission to dominant class ideologies may be extreme, as the critic Carlos Blanco Aguinaga argued, but his case was exemplary (Blanco Aguinaga 1980: 555). Blanco Aguinaga noted how the poet opposed socialist and progressive ideas that, as Darío held, the poor of Europe brought to America (Blanco Aguinaga 1980: 544-545). In Darío’s mind, only those who refused the sovereign’s gifts were not able to enjoy “the proverbial chicken soup” (Darío quoted in Blanco Aguinaga 1980: 545). However, this reading is misleading because it eschews the process of *how* the poet arrived at such a position. This position-taking is understandable (which is not the same as commendable) if we locate it in relation to the position of the *modernista* poet in the social

space of Darío's cultural field. His ambiguous social position produced an equally ambiguous positioning.

The position taken by Darío became a double bind. *First*, to become a member of a global field of production dominated by writers from France and the United States, Darío surely needed the economic patronage of the local bourgeoisie. He needed resources to circulate his works. Thus his ambition to locate himself in the 'universal' sphere of culture, opening for himself a space in Western culture, entailed a subordination to the Latin American patrons who paid for his art. This occurred directly, as in paying for the edition of his books, or indirectly, as providing for him an income which would liberate his time for poetic production. His professed 'choice' to defend the Latin American bourgeoisie from a socialist contagion derived from his structural subordination to them. In this first case, Darío positioned himself in support of a 'benevolent' bourgeoisie.

However, in order to partially neutralize the effect of this subordination to local powers, Darío affirmed his belonging to a 'universal' field of culture which requires autonomy from mundane political and economic powers, via a referent of Western letters. In this *second* movement, then, Darío reinforced his subordination to the universalist aesthetic of European art. He reaffirmed his position as a peripheral artist desiring to belong to 'universal' art. Here he positioned himself alongside universalist cultural producers as against the mundane utilitarianists, i.e., the bourgeoisie. Darío's position is more broadly formulaic for other peripheral cultural producers in a world-systemic field: given the context of a double structural subordination, his struggle against one form of subordination reinforced the other and vice-versa.

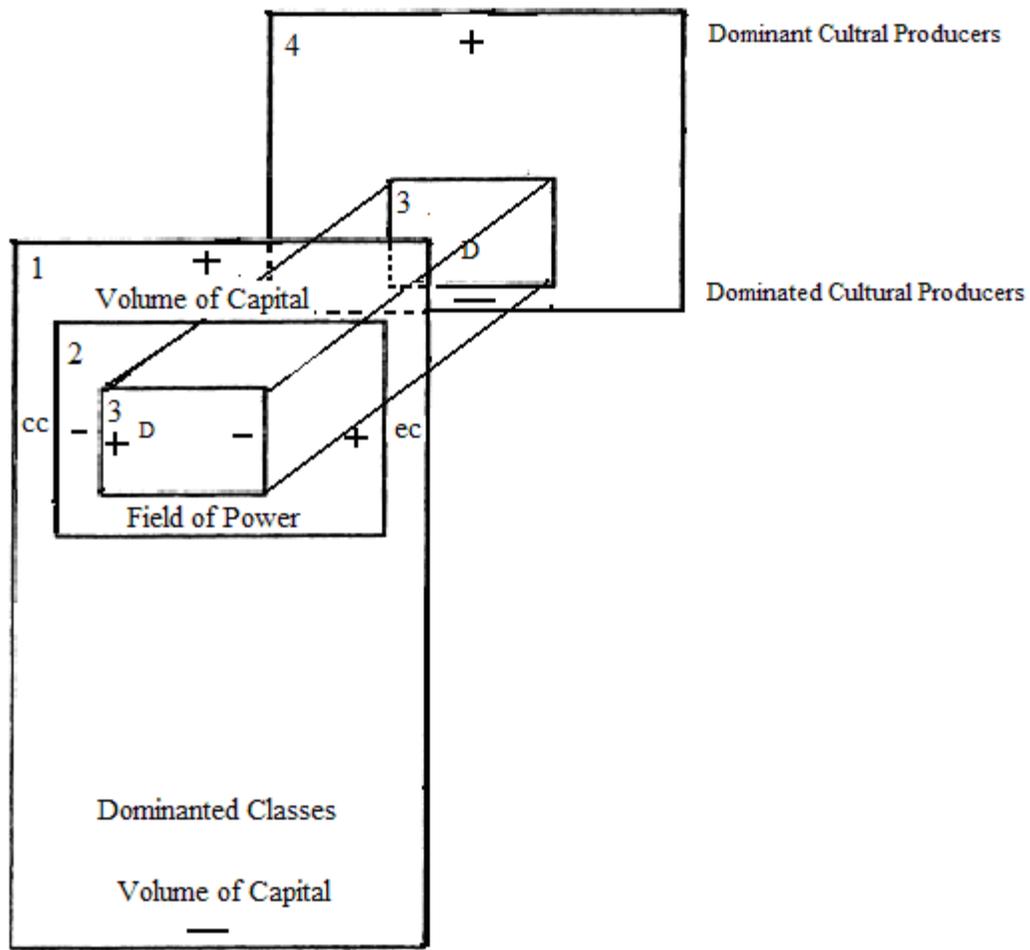
In spatial terms, the Latin American cultural producer is subordinated to the Latin American bourgeoisie, but, as cultural producer, she/he is subordinated to the artist of the core countries. This overdetermination can be portrayed by modifying Bourdieu's scheme (1993: 38; 1996: 124) of the relation between the cultural field and the field of power. In Figure 1, it is reworked to represent Darío's position in a *global* system of relations. We see Darío at point (D) where a complex system of relations becomes flesh. We see how in the context of Latin America's 19th century social space (field 1 in the diagram), Darío was a member of the dominant class, but occupying a dominated position in it. He belonged to the dominated pole of the field of power (field 2 in the diagram).¹⁰ Thus, he was structurally in the 'left,' culturalist side of the field of power. Specifically, he belonged to the emergent literary field (field 3 in the diagram). He was

¹⁰ The field of power is the social field constituted by the relations among the dominant members of society. These are relations that are simultaneously based on struggle and consent. That is, the principles which organized domination are put in question but not the fact of domination itself (for a discussion of the notion of 'field of power' see Wacquant 2005).

close to institutions (academies, universities, newspapers, literary journals, etc.) where cultural capital, as opposed to economic capital, is the main requirement for entry. This ambiguous position of being a dominated-dominant, an accumulator of cultural rather than economic capital, accounts for his opposition to capitalist rationality. *From this first angle*, Darío looks like an ‘anti-systemic’ writer opposed to capital’s domination of culture.

Nonetheless, the image of a purely rebellious Darío cannot be sustained. Even as a dominated-dominant, he was sociologically far from the proletariat and opposed to it (in field 1 of the diagram, the ‘social space,’ he belongs to the upper half, the holders of capital, either cultural or economic). Hence in his journalism he voiced his opposition to socialist workers’ movements and to the social struggles of the poor (Blanco Aguinaga 1980: 544-545). Thus, *from this second angle*, he appears as an ideologue of class exploitation. It is only from a third dimension, the global cultural field, that we obtain the necessary perspective to make sense of these seemingly contrasting political positions.

FIGURE 1. Darío in 19th Latin American Social Space and Global Cultural Field



Key

D = Rubén Darío

1 = Latin American social space

2 = Latin American field of power, or, the space of the dominant classes

3 = Latin American literary field (in the process of being constituted, late 19th century)

4 = Global Cultural Field (in the process of being constituted, late 19th century)

+ = Dominant Pole

- = Dominated Pole

ec = Dominant pole of the field of power, where economic capital governs internal relations

cc = Dominated pole of the field of power, where cultural capital governs internal relations

Cultural fields are constituted by local struggles against political and economic powers (Bourdieu 1996), but also by the opposition between different national or ‘continental’ cultures. Thus, a ‘Latin or Spanish American’ literary field only made sense in the context of mutually exclusive cultural fields at the level of the world-system (in parallel to the state system). Thus the Latin American literary field (field 3 in the diagram), to which Darío contributed as a founder, *projected* itself unto a global space of cultural flows, an emergent global cultural field (field 4 in the diagram). The particular Latin American literary world is also a field in a global space of culture. There, the authors praised by Bourdieu (1996) as creators of intellectual autonomy (Flaubert and Baudelaire, Zola and others), acted as subordinators of peripheral and semiperipheral cultural producers. In this sense, even if we would prefer otherwise, they share a parallel structural position with cultural producers of neoliberal ideology in the contemporary core. That is, both stand in an unequal relation to peripheral and semiperipheral intellectual production.

The core neoliberal intellectual is today often quoted by the peripheral intellectual as a signifier of knowledge of the standard scholarship on whatever issue, be it economic, cultural, political. In a parallel way, Flaubert and Baudelaire’s structural relation to Darío was that of the authors one reads but do not read you back. These are authors who one quotes but do not quote you in turn. They could engage in exoticizing relations with semiperipheral and peripheral cultures, but their relation to semiperipheral or peripheral culture could never be of the same character as the relation the semiperipheral or peripheral writer has to core culture. Reading them (Flaubert, Baudelaire, etc.) could be a sign of intellectual cosmopolitanism, of familiarity with universal culture. Reading Darío, Martí, etc., was and to a lesser extent still remains reading Latin American culture. In sum, it is within this global field of culture where a semiperipheral or peripheral cultural product becomes ‘semiperipheralized’ or ‘peripheralized.’

As outlined above, a world-system biography provides a multidimensional—historical and relational—view of how someone like Rubén Darío realized some of the possibilities inscribed in the structure of the historical system and became a master poet in the periphery, a rebel against a dual subordination. *From our third angle*, Darío was a subordinated participant in a global field of culture. And this structural subordination is still present.¹¹

¹¹ Unfortunately, the field of left and critical theories is not immune to the structural effect of this unequal relation; although it is more sensitive to it and is able to neutralize its worst aspects (e.g., racism, exoticism, and Rostovian stagism). One example: how many theoretical perspectives in critical political economy, coming from the periphery, have gained traction in global scholarship? On the peripheral side one quickly thinks of dependency theory. On the side of the core one thinks, as quickly, of world-systems analysis, the regulation school, the monopoly capital school, analytical Marxism, etc. Of course, this structural problem in no way invalidates the usefulness and critical content of those ‘core’ theories.

Conclusion: Darío and the Present

A world-historical biography of a ‘gifted’ person trades passion for understanding. It shows, in the materiality of an ‘individual’, the world-historical structures and economic processes which produced that ‘individual’. Dialectically, it also shows how the individual creatively contributed to the making of his world. Starting from the materialist assumption of a world which is ‘not of his making,’ a world-historical method can overcome these agent-structure and micro-macro dichotomies to recognize how people creatively respond and contribute to the constitution of the world under inherited conditions and constrained possibilities (Derluigian 2005).

What we have done here with Ruben Darío follows that logic. The world-historical field of forces has certain possibilities inscribed in its historical tendencies. These possibilities might or might not be realized during an individual’s life. A world-systems biography explains how the possibilities already inscribed in the secular movement of the system might become embodied in the social trajectory of particular historical persons; or how the historical subject invents other trajectories via conditioned improvisation. Thus, a set of historical possibilities confronted Darío as his literary biography unfolded. A radical or nationalist strategy was possible for him. Also, a complete and opportunistic submission to economic and political powers was another possibility (and undoubtedly Darío embodied this position at certain points). However, in the end Darío rejected both possibilities, since his career embodied a modernist disposition. Indeed, his search for literary aristocracy was parallel to the European movement of an ‘art for art’s sake.’ Darío therefore saw himself engaged in a historical struggle homologous to the one French artists confronted earlier in the century. Of course, Darío’s struggle was distinct since it remained peripheral to the French’s artistic revolution.

World-system biographies also help us in the context of more urgent issues. The analysis of Darío clarifies the recurring struggles of semiperipheral and peripheral intellectual producers. Just like Darío had to rebel (in contradictory fashion) against the political and economic powers of Latin America, he also had to struggle to unmake the intellectual monopoly of core artists. In fact, I would argue that his struggle marks the origins of our contemporary dilemma in confronting the dystopia of neoliberal rationality. In the context of the neoliberal onslaught on culture, humanity and nature (Bourdieu 1999; Quijano 2005; Harvey 2007; Moore 2009), the Latin American intellectual has to struggle against a reaffirmed subordination: against the national/regional political powers that impose ‘adjustment’ and try to turn poverty into a ‘technical’ issue, but also against those core intellectuals (think of Milton Friedman in Chile) that function as scientific mercenaries providing an authoritative perspective into the problems of

semiperipheral and peripheral economies. Outward appearances notwithstanding, in the logic of the *longue dureé* our neoliberal turn-of-the century is connected to Darío's fin de siècle. A realistic projection of his situation into the contemporary moment can clarify our dilemmas, starting from recognizing how tortuous will be the path towards the reinvention of intellectual autonomy in the context of a neoliberal technocracy.

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