The Pilgrimage of the Wolf: St. Francis as Peacemaker in Gubbio and Nicaragua

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When I took my first group of students to Nicaragua in 2010, we encountered a country whose public face was unmediated by tourism. Nicaragua is still a country served raw and uncooked to the visitor. As we traveled the countryside, my memories returned to the late 1970s when I explored the strade bianche of rural Tuscany and Umbria with Professor William R. Cook, searching out medieval churches and castles, anything that might provide some insight about the world that brought us Francis of Assisi and some evidence that spoke to the “Franciscan Question.” Since that time, we have seen agritruismo transform the territory of the Italian contadino. I smile when recalling those days with Bill, when we would ask a kindly woman to pause a moment from plucking her chicken so that she might open the Romanesque church that her family was using as a barn in order that we might enter and study it. Nicaragua brought those memories back.

The corrientes of Western thought can spring from the ground in unexpected places. This essay explores a modern, Nicaraguan retelling of a medieval, Italian legend and invites the reader to a fresh appreciation for the capacity of the Franciscan literary tradition to reawaken and incarnate itself anew wherever and whenever Catholicism confronts culture.

As I walked with my students for the first time in downtown Managua, amidst a busy cluster of monuments, we took note of a statue located in a small park honoring two of the stars of Nicaraguan history (as the current political culture sees things). Augusto Sandino (1895–1934), the martyred revolutionary who lends his name to the Sandinista movement, and Rubén Darío (1867–1916), the poet who helped to define the modernist movement in literature far beyond the borders of his home country. The statue of Darío caught my eye (as a long-time fan of all things Franciscan) because adorning its pedestal was a sculptural relief and quotation from one of Darío’s poems, Los Motivos del Lobo.¹ Darío’s poem offers a new conclusion to the legend of St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio once made popular by the early fourteenth-century work, The Little

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Flowers of St. Francis (I Fioretti). In the Fioretti, Francis intervenes on behalf of the people of Gubbio who find themselves tormented by a ravenous wolf. The great saint negotiates a miraculous peace treaty with the wolf that lasts until the animal’s death.

Writing from Paris in December of 1913, Darío imagines a new ending to the story. Like Dante’s sequel to Homer’s Odyssey in Inferno XXVI, Darío seems to find the traditional conclusion of the story to be implausible based upon his understanding of the motivations of the principle characters. In Darío’s version, the wolf returns to his predatory ways and terrorizes the local inhabitants as he did before Francis had intervened. When Francis returns, he goes to Brother Wolf and upbraids him for his recidivism. Brother Wolf counters by preaching a jeremiad against the hypocrisy and cruelty of sinful man. According to him, it was his human neighbors who failed to honor the bargain. Francis departs in sadness, praying the “Our Father” in a tragic catharsis.4

Much has been written exploring Darío’s extraordinary contribution to Spanish literature and its value in defining literary Modernismo. Biographers have debated the contours of his career as a poet and a diplomat. The revision of the legend from Gubbio offers us a chance to locate Darío in a corriente of modernist thought that has a global frame, the theological Modernism that Pope Pius X (1835–1914) attacked with such passion during Darío’s lifetime. Strangely enough, the disputed memory of the thirteenth-century Poverello provides us with a fascinating link between literary Modernism and theological Modernism in real time as both battles were raging during the Belle Époque. Moreover, it gives us a moment to observe the mysterious character of Darío’s own Catholicism as he witnesses the pope declare Modernism a heresy.

A close comparison of the texts of Los Motivos del Lobo and the version in the Fioretti would point to the hypothesis that Darío knew the older version as a source. The structure of the narrative is strikingly congruent if one subtracts four notable differences. The first and most obvious divergence is the new ending. In the Fioretti, the negotiated settlement between Francis and the wolf endures to the wolf’s death. The enduring success of the peace negotiation is

2 “The Little Flowers,” in Early Documents, 111, 566–656. Hereafter in the essay, I will refer to this work by its Italian nickname, the Fioretti.
4 Darío, Poesía, 594.
5 For a useful introduction to the term as it applies to Dario’s career, see Rubén Darío, Selected Writings, ed. Ilan Stavans, trans. Andrew Hurley, Greg Simon, and Steven F. White (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 45–93.