

# Remembering Salomón de la Selva—Pioneer Leader of Pan-American Poetry

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Who was Salomón de la Selva? One hundred years ago, when the cultural aspect of the Pan-American movement was first flourishing, he was the self-appointed leader of Pan-American poetry. He advocated in a variety of ways for literary exchange between the Americas. His passion was poetry. Indeed, de la Selva was a remarkable personality in New York during the years of the First World War: A young and fiery Nicaraguan-born lyric poet. A teller of tall tales about his life. The most prolific translator of U.S. poetry into Spanish, and Latin American poetry into English. The author of poems to form the first book of poetry written in English by a Hispanic poet—*Tropical Town and Other Poems*. A dreamer who believed poetry could be “a spiritual bond between the United States and the Latin republics of the continent,” and that the “dawn” of a hopeful new age in the Americas had arrived, as he says in his statement of purpose as editor-in-chief of *Pan American Poetry*, his short-lived “magazine of song in English and Spanish.”

De la Selva's known early history, albeit sketchy, provides clues about his genius with language, his adventurous spirit, and his Pan-American

mission. The *New York Herald* quoted him as saying his ancestry included “Aztec chiefs and Spanish conquistadores” and that “one of his grandmothers was an English woman of noble blood.” He was born in 1894, in León, Nicaragua, the son of a prominent lawyer who had fought against the dictator José Santos Zelaya, then President of Nicaragua. When the boy was twelve, his father was imprisoned, and Salomón confronted Zelaya at a public function. He gave him a brilliant little speech reminding him of human rights and those of a citizen, which impressed the president. Consequently, Zelaya ordered his father’s release and offered the young de la Selva, then barely thirteen, a scholarship to study in the United States. He accepted and traveled north to study first at Newton Hall Military Academy in New Jersey, then at Westerleigh Collegiate Institute on Staten Island, which gave him the chance to discover the world of New York. When his father died in 1910, he returned to Nicaragua, whereupon the Nicaraguan Congress decreed to adopt him as a ward of the nation. He stayed there for more than a year, studying law and also spending time in the company of poets.

In 1911, with a family friend’s help, de la Selva returned to New York to pursue his studies there once more—literary, not law or engineering as his father had wanted him to pursue. He took courses at different colleges, never graduating from any of them (despite his claim about Cornell). He was defining himself as a poet and man of letters, writing poetry constantly. This burst of literary activity facilitated his friendship with the eminent poet of the time, Edwin Markham, who had just established the Poetry Society of America, and who kindly opened doors for the young Nicaraguan, in many ways his protégé.

Between 1913 when he met Markham and 1915, de la Selva worked for a time as a teacher of English, history, and math at his old high school, Westerleigh Institute. In the fall of 1914, he met Nicaragua’s famous poet, Rubén Darío, also from León, who would spend several months in New York. Some claim he was the young poet’s godfather. De la Selva accompanied him as his interpreter at various public events in the city. He also co-authored the translation of a collection, *Eleven Poems of Rubén Darío*, to be issued by the Hispanic Society of America. It would be de la Selva’s first published book. By 1915, de la Selva’s identity as a poet and critic was growing firm, as was his confidence in his literary abilities. In the July issue of *The Forum*, a then popular New York-based magazine (one of the most respected in America, alongside *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s Magazine*), he published his long poem titled “A Tale from Faerieland.” This was his first major poem in print.

It was in 1915, soon after the publication of his “Faerieland,” that de la Selva fell madly in love with Edna St. Vincent Millay, the glamorous young star of American poetry. He is the mystery man in her famous poem “Recuerdo,” about riding the Staten Island Ferry: “We were very tired, we were very merry, / We had gone back and forth all night on the

ferry. . . .” He later said she was his “constant obsession” during the years of the First World War. (The romantic and literary details of this affair require much more space than is available here.)

During this period, de la Selva was actively translating Millay and several other U.S. poets into Spanish, including Amy Lowell, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Joyce Kilmer, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, Muna Lee, and Carl Sandburg, as well as translating Latin American poets into English, including Darío, Pedro Prado (Chile), Carlos Pezoa Véliz (Chile), Arturo Capdevila (Argentina), José Santos Chocano (Peru), Rufino Blanco-Fombona (Venezuela), Froylán Turcios (Honduras), Rafael López (Mexico), and Enrique González Martínez (Mexico)—to name just a few. In a letter to Lowell, he said:

I do not mind telling you that Hipólito Mattonel, Nicolás Escoto, James Crowhurst-Rand, Cristina Salavatierra, Isabel de la Selva, Jane McDonald, Laurence Greenough, M. L. S., J. Glenton, Miguel del Carmen Urcas, Oswald Tenney, Pedro Salgado, etc., etc. are but some of my pen-names. You see, no one hardly cares to translate; it is hard, wearisome, inglorious business; so I have to do it nearly all myself. I am not trying to emulate Ficke and Bynner [poets Arthur Davison Ficke and Witter Bynner, who published their spoof collection *Spectra* under the pseudonyms of Anne Knish and Emanuel Morgan, respectively]: before their hoax came out into the sunlight I had already multiplied myself. My sole motive has been, in the first place, not to let it be known that Pan Americanism almost has in me its beginning, middle and end.

By 1917, de la Selva’s reputation as a poet was growing steadily. He was publishing in top magazines, including *Poetry*, *Harper’s*, and *Contemporary Verse*. In December of that year, an article in *Pan-American Magazine* stated that “if there were no more than the two stars of Rubén Darío and Salomón de la Selva in the Latin American poetic firmament, one already set and the other rising with a glow of brilliant fantasy, the fact that Latin America is a mother of genius would remain proved” (Elliott). He also was busy translating poems for his magazine, scheduled to make its debut appearance early the next year.

Nineteen eighteen saw two major events in de la Selva’s young literary life. In February his magazine *Pan American Poetry* appeared, and in May his book of poems, *Tropical Town*, was published to critical acclaim. The magazine contained twenty-four pages, with all poems in bilingual format. It sold for twenty cents. In the introductory statement, titled “Our Purpose,” de la Selva declared:

In one word, *Pan American Poetry* desires to work toward a fellowship of peoples, that shall protect with the good will of each citizen the ties of State created by diplomatic relations. *Pan American Poetry* shall persevere in this labour, and its editors possess the faith that the tomorrow shall find that poetry will have served to make firm and increase indeed the commercial, intellectual and moral relations between the two large halves of the continent. It is dawn.

The closing sentence of the statement was decisive and firm. De la Selva’s poem, “To Those Who Have Been Indifferent to the Pan American

Movement,” which appears in his book, carries the line as its epigraph. This poem furthers his Pan-Americanism:

I am the man who dreamed the new day dawned  
 And so arose at midnight with a cry  
 And came to where the many sleepers lie  
 Who only pushed their pillows up and yawned  
 And fell asleep again. Now in the curled  
 Abysses of the dark my feet are fast  
 Entangled, and I wait my weary last  
 Impotent, mad, and sick of all the world.  
 Yea, now I fall. So let it be. I know  
 Somewhere a womb is pregnant with my word:  
 Bigging it bides the ripe appointed day;  
 Somewhere the east is all with rose aglow;  
 But you shall know no dawn till whip and sword  
 And good blood flowing drive your sleep away!

The book of sixty-five poems, which employ traditional rhyme, meter, and form, is divided into four sections: “My Nicaragua”; “In New England and Other Lyrics”; “In War Time”; and “The Tale from Faerieland.” Silvio Sirias, editor of the 1999 reprint, says: “The hopes and visions within the pages of this poetic collection seek to move and inspire the American reader as well as reflecting the hopes and aspirations of Hispanic-Americans. *Tropical Town* constitutes de la Selva’s call for all of us to build a bridge of understanding and solidarity between the continent’s English- and Spanish-speaking peoples.”

The first issue of *Pan American Poetry* was its last issue because of financial reasons, though de la Selva continued that project himself in *Pan-American Magazine*, published monthly in New York. From April through August of 1918, this magazine included a special section called “Pan American Poetry,” along with its core articles to advance the economic exploitation of Latin America. It offered both translations and essays. He introduced it with this note: “*Pan-American Magazine* has been courteous enough to offer me space in which to continue the work I had too ambitiously begun. This is not a business arrangement, and this section is therefore a gift to readers of *Pan-American Magazine*.” In the August issue with the final section, the magazine published a farewell to de la Selva, saying “the literary circles of New York will miss this slim, boyish figure, always like a bright-eyed, ardent child.” He was just twenty-four years old. His *Pan American Poetry* was the first of its kind. He was planning to resurrect it, creating what he called the Pan American Poetry Fund “to be the financial basis for the rebirth of *Pan American Poetry* as an independent publication.”

Although de la Selva was enjoying considerable attention for his literary work and bi-cultural activity during the war years, his need to fight in the war had become more important to him than championing Pan-Americanism, or obeying the muse. He felt it was his civic duty to enlist. The U.S.

Army would not take him because he was not a U.S. citizen (he refused to renounce his Nicaraguan citizenship). But the British Army did. In July 1918, the *New York Herald* published an article, “Nicaragua Poet Enlists,” with a photo of him being sworn in as “Private 56478, Coy H in the 3rd Royal North Lancashire Regiment.”

De la Selva returned to New York after the war ended, staying there intermittently before returning to his America for good in 1921. The renewed U.S. occupation in Nicaragua a few years later—together with the many other U.S. interventions in Central America and the Caribbean—extinguished his belief that poetry could “let flow in the soul of both Americas an inexhaustible current of sympathy” that would “make it possible for them to have reciprocal understanding and respect.” Poetry remained central in his life, though he stopped publishing poems in English. In 1922, he had published his first book of poetry written in Spanish, *El soldado desconocido* (The Unknown Soldier), an experimental testimonial work about the war he experienced in Europe that established him as a poetic force in Central America, contributing to the creation of a modern Latin American poetics.

Salomón de la Selva ultimately abandoned Pan-Americanism, in response to the hegemonic agenda of the United States. He woke from his dream. Back in Nicaragua, he served as a labor leader and also as a spokesman for Augusto César Sandino and his rebellion against the U.S. military occupation there. Over the course of the rest of his life, he became an important literary and political figure in Central America—to be laid to rest in Nicaragua when he died, in 1959, in the grand Cathedral of León, where Darío and other Nicaraguan luminaries are buried. In the United States, he must be remembered for his ambitious work as a translator and advocate of Latin American poetry—the pioneer leader of what has grown over the past century into a significant part of U.S. literature, extending the bounds of our poetry through translation, and bringing the Americas closer together through verse. This would have meant something to de la Selva, who once cried with every fiber of his being, “Long live Pan-American poetry!”

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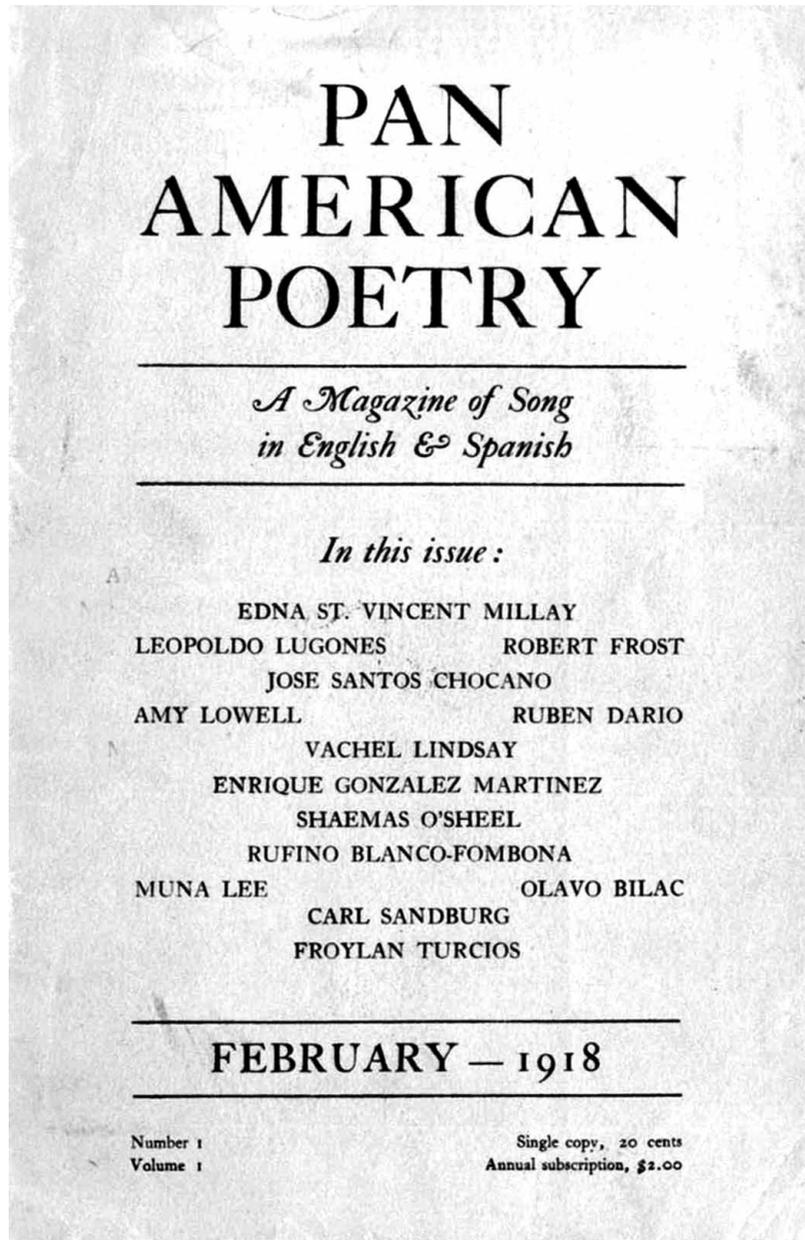
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Salomón de la Selva in 1918.



Cover of de la Selva's magazine.