

Influence of Oriental Culture in Latin American Poetry

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In this essay I explore the influence of Chinese poetic language and techniques on four Latin American writers, and also consider the Eurocentric distortion or underestimation of this influence. The Mexican poet Tablada, influenced more by Chinese language than by Apollinaire's typographic experimentations, employed an "ideogrammic" technique and introduced Haiku to Latin American poetry. The Nicaraguan Dario was not (as in the Eurocentric view) a poet of superficial, exotic chinoiserie; rather, he has a profoundly synthetic world-view fusing Hindu, Buddhist, Greek and Christian philosophies. While the Cuban Casal's orientalism was also not taken seriously, his poems display a deep understanding of Japanese and oriental culture. And the Mexican Octavio Paz believes in the Asiatic origin of the native American, which explains his deeply rooted orientalism, the fundamental "opposition and affinity" in his imagery between two elements, Chinese and American. Although Western ignorance of oriental culture has driven us to diminish the importance of oriental elements in our poetry, a period of greater sensitivity to these elements is now beginning.

KEY WORDS

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reincarnation

If for the European the discovery and conquest of America meant expansion and Christianization, from the perspective of the Native American, this same discovery and conquest meant suppression and imposition.

The colonization period lasted from 1542 until approximately 1810, when the majority of Latin American countries obtained their political independence from Spain. The independence process began as early as 1776 when the United States obtained its freedom from England, and continued until as late as 1898, when Cuba was liberated from Spain.

After obtaining their political independence, many Latin American intellectuals began asking for "real" independence, what they called "mental" independence. In the case of literary expression this independentist attitude meant the rejection of Spanish Literature (even though they were writing in the Spanish language), or at least the desire to liberate themselves from that area of influence. They adopted other European models. This adoption of primarily French and English models, in turn, pre-empted a *Mundonovista* reaction, a literary tendency whose goal was to depict Latin American life emphasizing the aboriginal. "*Mundonovista*" is a word that comes from two Spanish words: "mundo," world; and "nuevo," new. If we observe this *mundonovista* movement from a native perspective, in other words from the perspective of the indigenous mind, even this reaction against Europeanization shows suppression and imposition. This is particularly clear for example in religion and language: there are native or indigenous "notes," colorful additions to Catholicism and to the Spanish language. But the Eurocentric suppression prevails.

So strong was that suppression and that imposition that according to the teachings of literary history, the interest of some writers in cultures other than the European derives exclusively from their readings of European literature. These teachings of literary history are applied to practically to every writer who published poetry showing an interest in Oriental matters, using an Oriental subject, introducing Oriental characters or places, or expressing a world vision with an Oriental religious or philosophical component.

As an example of this Eurocentric imposition which confines the mentality of historians as well as that of critics of Latin American Literature we have chosen to briefly examine the case of the poetry of José Juan Tablada, a Mexican who lived between 1871 and 1945 (1). In 1920 Tablada published his book *Li Po and other poems*. Since the publication of this book all the available criticism states that Tablada's references to and paraphrases

of the Chinese poet come to the Mexican through Apollinaire's poetry, or through other avant gard tendencies such as cubism. Until 1983, as professor García de Aldridge made clear (2), no one has examined the relationship between Tablada's poetry and Chinese cultural tradition, and no one has even noticed that some of the poems of the cited book are simply translations of Li Po poems, or that others are paraphrastic figures of Li Po's imagery.

Tablada himself, answering some of his critics, clearly stated that his poetry was "totally different" from that of Apollinaire. Even after that clear statement, made in 1919, literary critics continued repeating that Tablada was writing his ideograms modeled on those of the French poet. Only in 1983 did Professor García discover that the Chinese ideogram, and not those of Apollinaire, were the main, and possibly the only source of Tablada's typographic experimentations.

A brief look at the case of the Nicaraguan Reben Darío's oriental images will also serve to support our assessment of the imposed Eurocentrism. Commonplace in Darío's secondary sources is the statement that the oriental imagery quite often found in his lyrics is the result of his exotist or escapist poetic attitude, and that it is not even related to secondary or lateral lines of his poetic thought, and, of course, much less to the center of his poetic vision. Equally commonplace is the expression "chinerias," a somewhat pejorative term used to describe Darío's, as well as other Latin American poets' interest in Oriental cultural manifestations. The term "chinerias" is clearly used to imply that Darío's interest in the Oriental is limited to a superficial one, and that this does not have any relation to the central meaning of his poetry.

It would be interesting to relate those manifestations to Darío's predilection for a syncretic world view, manifested from his earliest writings, in which "he links Socrates with Christ and envisions Christ, Vishnu, Buddha, and Brahma as a spiritual unity which is being destroyed by the forces of reason."³

To Reason

On contemplating you, Augusta, I venerate you
 On seeing your light, my heart ignites
 To the brilliance of your radiant flame,
 The face of the entire world trembles

 Faith fell with its terrible privilege

Already your voice spills out everywhere:
 Christ, Vichnu, Budha and Brahma vanish
 and the nations go along your path

It would also be interesting to observe his interest in the doctrine of reincarnation, with a more objective and less eurocentric critical approach. Darío's interest in reincarnation is often depicted as a result of his interest in the esoteric, and understood as a "pecadillo" of his young age. Enrique Anderson Imbert, one of the most widely respected Latin-American literary historians, whose text-books are widely used in North-American universities, states that "Darío imagined a metaphysical time. His theosophical, esoteric and occultist readings initiated him in the idea of pre-existence and reincarnations, and in cyclical times as well as eternal returns"⁵. He assumes that Darío's interest in reincarnation comes from his esoteric and occultist readings, failing to even visualize the possibility of Darío's direct interest in Buddhism. Cathy Login Jrade states that "Oriental religion and Pythagoreanism often became fused in derivative esoteric sects as well as in the poetic imagination of other writers of the period"⁶. It is clear to us that Anderson Imbert was content in accepting Darío's interest in reincarnation as something secondary, something that the poet read in some of those "derivative esoteric sects" writings, instead of observing his poetry as a fusion of Buddhism and Pythagoreanism in his poetic imagination.

We cannot see, for instance, in his poem entitled "Reincarnations", written when he was 23 years old a mere youthful exercise in esoterica. In its simplicity, we hear the poetic voice coming to recognize its previous existences "by putting them in contact with the permanent ego, the "by putting them in contact with the permanent ego, the *ánima divina*, for something of each personality survives, as it leaves its eternal impress on the incarnating permanent self"⁷:

Reincarnations

I first was coral,
 later beautiful stone,
 later I was a green and hanging ivy of the forest,
 then I was an apple,
 lily of the field,
 a young girl's lip,
 a lark singing in the morning;

and now I am a soul
 who sings to the wind
 like a palm of God's light⁸

The coral, the stone, the ivy, the apple, the lily, the girl's lip, the singing lark, are the successive incarnations of the self. The self reached the threshold of divinity, and has escaped the cycle of incarnation, becoming a spark of divine fire (the palm of light).

Ruben Darío's syncretic world view as well as his belief in reincarnation are found, as we said, already in his early poetry, and are clearly present throughout his extensive poetic work. It seems to us that his syncretic world vision definitely includes a Buddhist component, and that his belief in reincarnation, if taken seriously, as we take seriously his poetry (one is expressed in the other), shows a direct relation to Buddhism.

We have briefly examined how literary critics have failed to see the authentic interest of Tablada and Darío in Oriental cultural manifestations. We have also pointed out that even when this interest is seen as Orientalism, critics proceed to attribute it to escapism, exotism, as something without relation to their central poetic thought.

But Tablada and Darío are not the only ones whose Orientalism has been misunderstood by our critics. There are several others whose Orientalism has been either misunderstood or simply ignored. Let us take, for example, the case of the Cuban Julián del Casal, one of the most important Modernista poets. In referring to his poems of Japanese motives ("Kakemono" and "Sourimono") a literary historian states that

His exotism and yearning for evasion brought him to the cult of everything Japanese, and his bedroom was filled with articles of that country, including his bathrobe and bedspread. It is the period of his great admiration for ivory, sandalwood, crysanthemum and of his poems "Kakemono" and "Sourimono"⁹

In this quotation we can clearly see first: his orientalism is not taken seriously, and it is unjustifiably, reduced to aspects of furnishing or ornamenting a room; second, Casal's poems are enumerated in the same series with material objects of oriental origin, thus diminishing their value as work of art, to the extreme of naming the poems immediately after Casal's bathrobe and bedcover. At this point it is also necessary to observe that this

historian finds delight in teaching us the influence of many French or Spanish or other European poets:

Casal's initial book is *Hojas al viento* (1890), a mixture of Romantic and Parnassian hues; of Spanish and French influences. There are reminiscences of the Spaniards Zorrilla, Bécquer, Betrina, Campoamor, Núñez de Arce together with [the French] Gautier, Baudelaire, Goppée. . . There is a hint of [the German] Heine and [the Italian] Leopardi in these beginning verses.¹⁰

The profusion of European poets cited by this historian goes too far: it includes not only important French, Spanish, German and Italian poets who, in reality, influenced Casal's poetry, but also some poets quite unknown, even for specialists in the field. This demonstrates the deep knowledge that the historian has of European poetry. On the other hand, when the historian finds poems with Japanese motives, he diminishes their importance, clearly demonstrating his ignorance of Japanese culture and poetry. The historian is unable to name just one Japanese poet. As professor García de Aldridge did with the poetry of Tablada, it is necessary to find a critic able to recognize the influence of Oriental poetry and culture in Casal's poetry, a critic who has at least a minimal knowledge of Oriental literature. This situation represents, in our view, another barrier which we, Latin American critics, need to overcome in order to seriously study the Orientalism of many of our poets.

A minimal list of poets whose Orientalism needs to be studied must include, of course J. J. Tablada, R. Darío and J. del Casal. The list must also include several others: Efrén Rebolledo, a Mexican poet who wrote three books with Oriental motives: *Japanese Rhymes* (1909), *Nikko* (1910) and *Bamboo Leaves* (1920)¹¹; the Argentinian Leopoldo Lugones who included a beautiful poem entitled "Japanese print" in his book *Las horas doradas* (1922); and the Colombian Guillermo Valencia who translated and paraphrased Chinese poems from the VIII to the XX century in his book *Catay* (1929).

As we said, Tablada introduced Haiku to Latin American poetry¹², but several poets followed him. Among them, the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges, and three Mexicans: Carlos Pellicier, Xavier Villaurrutia and José Gorostiza.

Several South-American poets have also written a significant amount of work inspired by Oriental motives or as a result of their Oriental experiences.

The Ecuadorian Jorge Carrera Andrade published *Microgramas* in 1940, a book entirely devoted to the study and anthology of Haikus; we can see a very great influence of Oriental philosophies on the Chilean Nobel Prize winner, Pablo Neruda, in three consecutive books, all translated into English under the title *Residence on Earth* in 1973.¹³ These three books represent a profound change in Neruda's poetic vision from a neo-romantic extroverted erotic chant to a totally introspective poetry: one in which the poetic voice describes, stage after stage, what we can call the interior trip, or the search for the inner self. Another Chilean, Efraín Barquero, published in 1973 his book *The Wind of the Kingdoms*,¹⁴ entirely devoted to his Chinese experience, showing a deep and honest effort to understand and communicate with Oriental philosophies, as well as a sense of veneration for them. This book, as in Neruda's case, represents a turning point in Barquero's poetic production.

Last, but not least, we must briefly refer to the poetic (and essayistic) work of the Mexican Nobel Prize winner, Octavio Paz. As he states in his books *Puertas al campo*, he firmly believes in the Asiatic origin of the native American: this explains the numerous similarities between Chinese and American civilizations,¹⁵ as well as the deeply rooted Orientalism that we find in his poetry. From the Buddhist concept of the symbolic leap to the other shore that we find in his poem "The other shore", to the image of the garden which "flourishes in the collection of poetry entitled *Ladera Este*"¹⁶: "It could be said that the tacit intention or if one prefers, the underlying intuition, rests on the confrontation of two natures or cultural landscapes — the Oriental and the Mexican — both wise, prestigious and secret. Paz has consciously grasped his condition as a man of two worlds and he has given his answer" "There are no more gardens than those we carry inside"¹⁷.

As he believes in the Oriental origin of the native American, in his poetic imagery he depicts "the struggle between the opposition and affinity of two elements" because in his view this "duplicates the rhythmical separation and union in the cosmological perception of the Universe from Ancient China"¹⁸

A final — and more optimistic — word about the state of research on the Oriental influence in Latin-American poetry. We have severely criticised the Eurocentric mentality of literary historians and critics, and we have also stated that our ignorance of Oriental culture has driven us to diminish the importance of Oriental elements in our poetry, in the same manner in which our traditionally profound knowledge of European culture has driven us to overestimate the impact of that culture in our poetic production.

At the same time we have cited recent works that seriously undertake

the task of studying these matters, like the works of García de Aldridge and Kushigian. Both are excellent examples of a new trend. We are just beginning to open an entirely new chapter in the study of Latin-American poetry, and we can already observe that it is going to be a very important one.

Notes

1. Tablada's Orientalism can be studied in four of his books: *El Florilegio* (1899), *Li-Po y otros poemas* (1920), *Un día* (1919) and *El jarro de flores* (1920).
2. Adriana García de Aldridge: "Las fuentes chinas de Juan José Tablada". *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, vol. LX (1983), 109-119.
3. Cathy Login Jrade: *Rubén Darío and the Romantic Search for Unity. The Modernist Recourse to Esoteric Tradition*. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1983), 108.
4. Rubén Darío: *Poesías Completas*. Madrid: Ed. Aguilar, 1967. The English translation is ours. The original Spanish version follows:

Al contemplarte augusta, te venero; al ver tu lux, mi corazón se inflama, pues al fulgor de tu radiosa llama, se estremece la faz del mundo entero.

Cayo la fe con su terrible fuero. Ya tu voz por doquiera se derrama: se hunden Cristo, Vichnu, Budha y Brahama, y las naciones van por tu sendero

5. Enrique Anderson Imbert: *La originalidad de Rubén Darío*. Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de America Latina, 1967. The English translation of the quotation is ours. The original Spanish version follows:

Darío se imaginaba un tiempo metafísico. Sus lecturas teosóficas, estoéricas, ocultistas lo habían iniciado en la idea de preexistencias y reencarnaciones, de tiempos cíclicos y eternos retornos.

6. Cathy Login Jrade, op. cit., 56.
7. Cathy Login Jrade, op. cit., 55-56.
8. Rubén Darío: *Poesías Completas*, ed. cit. The English translation is ours. The original Spanish version follows:

Reencarnaciones

Yo fui coral primero,
después hermosa piedra,
después fui de los bosques verde y colgante hiedra;
después yo fui manzana,
lirio de la campiña,
labio de niña,
una alondra cantando en la mañana;

y ahora soy un alma
que canta como canta una palma
de luz de Dios al viento.

9. Orlando Gómez-Gil: *Historia Crítica de l Literatura Hispanoamericana*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968), 416. The English translation of the quotation is ours. The original Spanish version follows:

Su exotismo y ansia de evasión lo llevó al culto de todo lo japonés, y su habitación estaba llena de artículos de ese país, incluyendo su bata de casa y la sobrecama. Es la época de su gran admiración por el marfil, el sándalo, el crisantemo y de sus poemas *Kakemonoy Sourimono*.

10. Orlando Gómez-Gil, op. cit., 416. The English translation of the quotation is ours. The original Spanish version follows:

El libro de iniciación de Casal es *Hojas al viento* (1890), mezcla de matices románticos y parnasianos; de influencias españolas y francesas. Hay reminiscencias de los españoles Zorrilla, Bécquer, Batrina, Campoamor, Núñez de Arce junto a las de Gautier, Baudelaire, Goppée. . . Hay también en estos versos del comienzo algo de Heine y Leopardi.

11. *Rimas Japonesas* (1909), *Nikko* (1910), and *Hojas de bambu* (1910).
 12. We recommend two articles: the one by García de Aldridge already cited, and "Formas de escritura ideográfica en *Li-Po y otros poemas* de José Juan Tablada", by Klaus Meyer-Minnemann (*Nueva Revista de Filología Hispanica*, vol. 36, No. 1, 1988), 433-453.
 13. *Residencia en la tierra I-II* (1935); *Tercera residencia* (1947).
 14. *El viento de los reinos*. Santiago, Ed. Nascimento, 1973.
 15. In this page in which we briefly discuss O. Paz's Orientalism, we are following Julia A. Kushigian's Doctoral Dissertation: "Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition: in Dialogue with Borges, Paz and Sarduy", to be published by University of New Mexico Press in 1991.
 16. Kushigian, 120.
 17. Martínez Torrón: *Variables poéticas de Octavio Paz*, 199. Cited by Kushigian.
 18. Kushigian, 164.

