



Valera's *Morsamor* as Anti-Orientalist Fiction

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A recent study of *Morsamor* (1899) maintains that Valera's last novel is anti-Muslim, anti-African, and anti-Hindu and contains a large quantity of trendy, negative "Orientalismo" calculated to justify a resurgence of Spanish imperialism over African and Eastern peoples (Torres-Pou 21–31). According to this interpretation, *Morsamor* is a "regenerationist" text intended to inspire a restoration of national pride through depiction of Spain's military prowess during the Ages of Conquest and Exploration and the proposition that European cultural "superiority" was due to the alleged Hegelian-type accumulation of possibilities inherent, but lamentably truncated, in its Oriental origins (22–23). Thus *Morsamor* (Miguel de Zuheros), a frustrated monk magically converted into the globe-trotting knight errant of his dreams, leads a Portuguese crew in a Spanish galleon to victories over Muslims, Persians, Hindus, and Mongols. As the author of the study concludes, "resulta evidente que la exposición ario-semítica que expresa la novela la alinea con el europeísmo orientalista del que nos habla Edward Said en *Orientalism* y que, según el autor palestino, en el siglo XIX buscaba razones históricas y culturales que excusaran el orientalismo occidental en Oriente" (30).

Let it be said that Said offers a variety of definitions of Orientalism, and Torres-Pou never quite specifies which of these he applies to Valera. The present study assumes that he refers to the following points in Said's discussion: "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological distinction between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (2). It is also "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). This concept is a process by which "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3). It is "more particularly a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is a veridic [sic] discourse about the Orient . . ." (6). Orientalism and Orient are, therefore, "semi-mythical" constructs (xviii). Obviously, words like "Oriental," "Orientalism," and "orientalist" are centuries older than Said's negative use of the terms and reflect the nomenclature not only of literature aimed at titillating bored European dilettantes, but also serious studies about the East carried out with "the most refined scientific methods" and possessing a "wide,

varied, and eclectic range of opinions” that were learned from practitioners in the East itself (Curtis 7, 15–16). This study, nevertheless, is generally content to accept and utilize Said’s composite definition of Orientalism; because I believe, however, that the term requires a far wider latitude if it is to have even minimal application to Valera, I will from time to time take issue with both Said’s focus on a revisionist definition and Torres-Pou’s dependence on it.

The present essay attempts to re-explore and redirect the tenets of Torres-Pou’s stated thesis, based as it is on a partial and largely decontextualized reading of Valera’s novel. The study does not address the complex legal and historical issues of whether the opening of Eastern cultural and commercial routes by Spain and Portugal benefited the East as well as the West and whether such routes were responsible for the eventual creation of international declarations and mandates involving the institution of universal law and the protection of human rights (Arroyo 90–91; Barrañón 104). The mere existence of this study does presuppose a willingness to explore Curtis’s (and many others’) premise that Western commentators and re-creators of Eastern societies “can discuss and interpret them without being biased or racist” or “linked to the desire to impose power” and that an examination of a European novel like *Morsamor* could yield an artistic conception of Eastern peoples largely free from the allegedly “simplistic” and “reductionist” arguments offered by adherents to some currently popular theories (Curtis 1, 6).

Valera’s last novel, despite its rich exposition of Eastern history, religion, and records of Western exploration of the East, is based on literary models that Valera’s work takes liberty to question and even parody. In other words, it is not primarily a work of erudition but of imagination and thus constitutes a free combination of multiple genres and textualities. There are, for example, many passages in *Morsamor* inspired by details of the sea voyage depicted in Cervantes’s *Los trabajos de Persiles y Segismunda* (1617), “the first modern Spanish work of fiction to dedicate half of its narrative to travel by ship” (Domínguez 193). In fact, writing in 1899, the critic *Andrenio* notes in passing that the novel reads somewhat like “*un nuevo Persiles*” (Amorós 332). Like the voyage in *Morsamor*, the trip represented in the *Persiles* is imaginary. Cervantes could have filled his narrative with reports of actual battles already mentioned in his own correspondence and others’ fictional romances, but such events “are not echoed in the novel” (Domínguez 201). *Persiles* and *Segismunda*, to be sure, “live at the edge of a mythic or semi-mythic archipelago peopled by Barbaric nations or Protestant heretics,”—this is the historical mimesis that grounds the novel—but Cervantes does not go into these matters, nor, for that matter, does he belabor the failure of Philip II’s motto, alluded to in the narrative, *Non sufficit orbis* (201-02). As Domínguez concludes, the *Persiles* “makes the designs of man a failure and those of God largely inscrutable” (202). Since both the Cervantine paradigm and the Valerian narrative depict an eastward voyage—on the Mediterranean and the world’s three oceans respectively—toward places of great religion (Rome, India, China), one might ask why Valera, echoing his Cervantine model, would question Eastern spirituality. In Valera’s novel, the Pope himself seems to have summoned Father Ambrosio, the magician, eastward to Rome, and the priest rather parochially views the location as befitting a world capital (Valera 718–19). With comic hyperbole, in Chapter 6 throngs of Italian visitors turn out to see the Portuguese emissary on board *Morsamor*’s ship (722). Clearly Valera realized that Christianity itself was an Eastern religion merely

codified in the West, and he made sport of that westernized codification in the depiction of Roman approval as a necessity for the success of Morsamor's expedition.

Morsamor also roots itself in explorer Fernão Mendes Pinto's quasi-biographical *Peregrinação* (1614), which tells of its author's travels in the East from 1537 to 1558 and speaks of Christian atrocities, as warrior missionaries like Saint Francis Xavier force their religion on Asians already possessing a deeper sense of the spiritual than their would-be conquerors. Mendes Pinto's odyssey concentrates its strongest venom on the Portuguese treatment of Muslims, which reveals the critical basis for the type of satire of Portuguese and Castilian hypocrisy portrayed in Valera's novel. Many of the same toponyms occur (Cape of Good Hope, Eritrea, Goa, various cities of China, Japan, and Indonesia), but there are also many others not appearing in *Morsamor*. Like Morsamor himself, Mendes Pinto returns to Lisbon and lapses into the obscurity of his former life (Catz 501–506). Barletta points out that *Peregrinação* eventually became so popular that seventeen editions were published in Castilian alone.

Far more than the *Persiles* and *Peregrinação*, however, *Morsamor* takes its direction from Camões's *Os Lusíadas* (1572), often mentioned in Valera's text. The Portuguese epic makes reference to many of the same lands mentioned in *Morsamor*: Rome, Persia, Ethiopia, and India, and it also casts aspersions—as does almost any Christian work of its time—on Eastern peoples not professing the “true” faith (Valera 9, 14). Therefore, Camões's poetic voice variously justifies the institution of Portuguese mercantilism and refers stereotypically to “o Mouro astuto” (21), the “gentes enojosas de Turquia” (22), the “falso Mouro” (25), the “Indianas gentes belicosas” (25), the “pérfido adversário” (29), the “belicosos Mouros” (30), the “bruta gente” (31), the “infiel e falsa gente” (39), and to the “mouros enganosos” (39), just limiting ourselves to sections of the first two cantos. In Valera's novel there are also many proper names and actions with strong similarities to those of Camões's epic, and Ares Montes speculates that Valera felt called upon to include these in his novel amid the premature euphoria of the “iberista” movement in the middle and late nineteenth-century (55, 60–64). It is a very plausible thesis, especially when added to Valera's conviction, reflecting that of Oliveira Martins, that *Os Lusíadas* forges both the Portuguese and the Castilian (i.e., the “Iberian”) sense of identity and pride better than any other work (53–56).

Morsamor, similar in many details to Camões's immortal poem—though significantly, presented to the very different public of another era with other cultural values already in place—represents the priest Father Ambrosio in anachronistic sympathy with Crusader-like projects of traipsing to Mecca in order to burn the Kabba and then to Jerusalem in order to “rescue” the tomb of Christ (722). Two chapters later the text speaks of the need to defeat the Turks (732). Later, there is boasting of Divine Providence's decree that Aragon, Castile, and Portugal have no peers on earth (743), that they will conquer the world (757), pummeling the faith of Mohammed—deemed inferior to that of the long discredited Zoroaster (766–77)—a faith whose practitioners deserve the worst epithets (772). Chapters 22 and 23 speak derogatorily of all Muslims' alleged fetish for direct descent from Mohammed (783–88), an inversion of Spanish “New” Christians' declared superiority over the families of Eastern immigrant converts. These anti-Islamic statements permeate the first two-thirds of the novel, sometimes reflecting the thoughts of Morsamor

or his companion Tiburcio, and sometimes those of Brahmans and other Eastern holy men, whose nebulous reasoning and incomprehensible mysticism Valera clearly satirizes, just as he does the lucubration of Morsamor and his fellow monks and those of the North American theosophist, Madame Blavatsky, who had mixed the tenets of Buddhism with smatterings of modern science (Amorós 335, 340). Clearly, these anachronistic statements in 1899 intend to parody both Camões's values and those of contemporary Westerners. This parody of the West is particularly strong because *Morsamor* consistently privileges what Phelan calls "narrator functions"—those that proceed from the personality and vantage point of prejudiced, diegetic narrators, such as Morsamor and Padre Ambrosio—over "disclosure functions"—which proceed from the implied author's need to reveal the "facts" of his story (1–30). Much of the time, Ambrosio and Tiburcio are Morsamor's narratee and vice versa, producing a series of dialogues in which each collaborates in the creation of an ethical world committed to the same hermetic values.

In Part 1, Chapter 2, the combined principal narrator/implied author retrospectively admits that both Spanish and Portuguese dreams of conquering the world were grotesque fantasies that are valid only in fairy tales (717–18). In Part 2, Chapter 3 this narrator, again retrospectively, foretells Portuguese and Spanish cruelty to Oriental peoples (744). In Part 2, Chapter 16, he overtly attempts to correct a blanket misinterpretation of these remarks by giving praise to Muslim peoples and their achievements (772). Whether this paraliptic erasure of his previous remarks constitutes a double-edged statement remains open to debate. In Chapter 18, the principal narrator contrasts the apparently glorious conquest of Goa by the Portuguese with a blistering criticism of their alleged skin-deep achievement of empire (775–76). In Chapter 19, he casts Tiburcio's negativity toward Muslims as the tirade of a minor devil (which Tiburcio ultimately is revealed to be) and unreliable narrator (778–79), a revelation repeated in Part 2, Chapter 36, and in Part 3, Chapter 5. In Chapter 21, the presence in India of Christian prostitutes from Seville undermines Morsamor's alleged Christian asceticism (781), an echo of the knight-adventurer's amorous conquests in earlier chapters. In Chapters 23–27, in his indirect, free depiction of the passive maiden Urbasi, the double-voicing narrator parodies the literary phenomenon of beautiful, seductive Oriental princesses and their bloodthirsty suitors, a combination invented in the Spanish *novela morisca* and carried on in its many literary imitators of the romantic period. This is the model of the Oriental woman later made famous by Flaubert in which "[S]he never spoke of herself [and] never represented her emotions, presence, or history" but seemed to exude a certain "carelessness" about her destiny (Said 6, 33, 187). In such a prejudicial characterization, the woman never voices her own views—as she assuredly does in many segments of Valera's own fiction—but has a false presence that is filtered through the voicings of one or more male narrators, a shortcoming of much of nineteenth-century European fiction.

In a segment occurring four chapters later, the heterodiegetic narrator overhears Indian sages stating that European scholars are incapable of understanding Eastern sacred texts, a reflection of the type of ethnocentrism exhibited by Europeans against Asians (802). The diegetically narrating sages and their Western counterparts are guilty of four of the major types of unreliability detected by Phelan: misreading, misevaluating, underreading, and underregarding (51–65). In Chapter 32, the text mirrors the same reverse criticism of Europeans by mentioning the alleged racial prejudice of Asians (805). Throughout all of

this, we find constant references to Camões and his epic poem, whose details and place names provide a regular reminder of the “realities” of the sixteenth century that, unfortunately, are still alive in the nineteenth-century West. Valera, or his narrator/implicit author, goes so far as to play with this notion by having the narrative voice claim that *Os Lusíadas* is merely a plagiarism of his present account (809). Finally, in Chapter 43, Morsamor himself, dreading his return to Portugal, openly declares that European culture is in steep decline, having definitively passed its brief period of world superiority (825). This is clearly an anti-“Orientalist” perspective, since the purpose of Orientalism is to make the West permanently superior by depicting the East as congenitally incapable of advancement (Said 32–42). The diegetically voicing protagonist, Morsamor, has therefore evolved to an ideological position that is congruent to that of his satirical and often openly critical implicit author. Until this point, the novel’s text continues its rehearsal of parallels with sixteenth-century texts and their later patriotic commentators.

Os Lusíadas, following Vasco da Gama’s voyage to the East and augmented by details gleaned from Almeida Garret and Oliveira Martins, supplies a great part of the initial maritime, cultural, and ideological mapping of Valera’s novel (DeCoster 154; Amorós 340). We might well ask of a modern commentator like Torres-Pou what gives today’s retrospectively critical reader the right to demand that the blind, seventy-five year old novelist, in search of details with which to amalgamate a well-known version of history and his own almost magical-realistic explanations of it, have enough left over from his once prodigious memory to additionally prune away the now-dated and objectionable Camõesian, Mendesian, and Oliveirian details from the boilerplate portions of the composite text, dictated to his faithful amanuensis (Romero Tobar 5). It seems more likely that he would leave most of these details and perspectives in his manuscript, with the hope that his reader might accept his own fantastic interpolations as equally “real”—in the mythopoetic sense of the word—as Camões’s classic song and its later exegetical commentaries. Indeed, as Phelan has shown, unmistakable unreliability (i.e., poetry, fictionality) “is itself one of the means of highlighting the mimetic component of [. . .] narrative” because the underlining of merely “subjective truth is far more important [. . .] than literal truth” (Phelan 73). Valera thereby broadcasts and defends the egregious “license with literal truth” (74) upon which the discursive and rhetorical flow of his ethically charged novel depends for its believability. It is necessary to return once more to Valera’s sources, this time to show how he subverts them.

Ricardo Padrón has recently shown how sixteenth-century Castilian mapmakers created the concept currently known as the Pacific Rim in order to justify Spanish expansionism in the East (1–28). In short, Spanish cartographers allowed maps to circulate among foreign viewers in order to convince them that the Orient was a mere stone’s throw from America and that Spain was its heir apparent. The 1519 Spanish expedition under the Portuguese captain Magellan, however, taught all Europe that the Pacific Ocean was, in truth, “unexpectedly broad” and “surprisingly empty,” an exposition that “blew [Spain’s] proto-Pacific [claims] out of the water” (8, 10). The Spanish maps thereafter “had to employ a full arsenal of rhetorical weapons” in an effort to legitimize Castilian claims, going so far as to plant an imaginary Spanish flag over the territory of China (12–13). I submit that the massive detailing of voyages in *Morsamor* was more likely satirizing these

“utopian aspirations” (Padrón 20)—which went so far as to depict evangelizing Japan—than it was engaged in justifying any future Spanish imperialism in Asia or Africa. It will be recalled that Don Luis de Vargas in Valera’s *Pepita Jiménez* (1874) likewise dreams of evangelizing Asia, particularly Japan, like some new Saint Francis Xavier, and that Valera’s text resoundingly lampoons him. The same situation recurs in *El Comendador Mendoza* (1877), where Mendoza is a failure when he tries applying the Europe-centered ideas of the French *philosophes* to life in the Orient and America.

Valera seems to have picked up a lot of information about the Iberian voyages of exploration, and he shows this knowledge beginning in Part 1, Chapter 2, of his novel (716, 718), where he begins to explore the fantasies in the future Morsamor’s mind. The magician, Father Ambrosio, recalls the Pope’s vain attempt to settle Portuguese and Spanish disputes by drawing his Line of Demarcation on a map, an occurrence that parallels the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas in its failure to anticipate the actual size of the world (724; Padrón 11). In Chapter 10, the ignorant Fray Santarén naively praises the Pope’s defective line, which repeatedly had to be moved west, alleging that it was Portugal’s only defense against Castilian tricks and bogus claims (760). Valera’s novel thus guides the reader to see its intention to satirize the notion that the two Iberian, Christian nations displayed harmony and spirituality in some sort of mutual quest to gain America and all of Asia for Christ. As in the case of the limitless Pacific that created the Iberian exploratory confusion that is discussed by Padrón, Morsamor and Tiburcio are unable to navigate the vast ocean west of China (811, 813). Eventually, their Portuguese ship fortuitously passes the Spanish vessel of Magellan and Elcano circumnavigating the globe in the opposite direction, equally confused (814–15). These details of *Morsamor* highlight the type of skill and courageous activity recorded by Camões and the many Iberian explorers (Trimble 114; Franz ii–iii), but also throw into relief the chaos and luck that attended the creation of a myth about European superiority over peoples like the Chinese, whom Morsamor takes pleasure in noting are incapable of navigating beyond their own coast (811).

There is clearly a degree of demythologizing going on in Valera’s text, and therefore critical judgments, like that of Amorós, who declares that *Morsamor* represents “un canto a los descubridores españoles y portugueses” (329), tell only half the story. Indeed, throughout his life, Valera expressed remarkably inconsistent views about the merits of Portuguese achievements, the primary focus of *Morsamor*, and even sometimes with regard to the achievements and status of Spain (Mayone Dias 95–99; Trimble 9). It is important to recognize and ask why, when Morsamor is returning home from his patriotic voyage, he suddenly feels depressed and refuses to believe that his convictions of heroism and Iberian superiority over other world cultures mean anything. His perspective, of course, is an example of what Genette termed *paralepsis*, an expression of more than what the character, anchored firmly in the sixteenth century, could reasonably conclude, and it prods us to discover the actual historical vantage point of which the suspicions serve as viable projections. In other words, we must find a way to naturalize the primary narrator/implied author’s puzzling synthesis, and, in order to do this, we must return briefly to a closer version of the real author on whom significant parts of the implied author are based.

It was Valera himself, a somewhat fictionalized “Valera” to be sure, who, in the dedication of *Morsamor* to the “Excelentísimo Señor Conde de Casa Valencia,” insisted that his novel had no didactic purpose, pointing out that he simply threw into the work everything he had ever “heard” about the East (714), an East about which he clearly took pains to know a great deal. The mere semi-truth and levity of the second statement calls into question the seriousness of the first. At the same time, it sets a tone that disguises the pointed messages that the narrative will present in an ironic framework and with incidents intended to be “algo bromistas y deliberadamente superficiales” (Mainer 529). Valera cleverly hints at the satirical intent of his narrative details later in his dedication: “creo que el mejor modo de obtener la regeneración de que tanto se habla es entretenerse en los ratos de ocio contando cuentos” (713). We need to ask ourselves how Valera, after openly admitting his lack of direct contact with the East, could even attempt anything historical or seriously patriotic, that is, anything other than satire, including a satire of himself, in his apparent exposé of a Westerner’s assimilation of the East. Valera here openly acknowledges the kind of ludicrously “textual” (i.e., bibliographic) contact between the East and Orientalism—between the East and himself—that Said (52) would censure in the Orientalist genre as a whole. The dedication’s advice to amuse ourselves by telling and listening to “Oriental” stories is not only another appeal to Valera’s idealist commitment to the uplifting and ennobling functions of art, but also—perhaps even primarily—a clever way of stating that the focus of his novel embodies a great deal of the opposite: an important critical, albeit camouflaged, statement about the true, corrective path to his nation’s future wellbeing. Some of this, as Amorós (342) and others (for example, Franz iii) already have pointed out, has to do with the need to change attitudes that will have to be carried out if Spain is to recover from the “Disaster” of 1898. Here we need to acknowledge that Torres-Pou’s diagnosis of a “regenerationist”—perhaps more accurately a “partially-regenerationist”—text is correct. However, we also need to acknowledge that Valera’s text puts forth as part of this appeal for a regeneration of Spain and all Europe, a need to recontextualize Spain’s and Europe’s identities honestly, within an international context.

As is typical of Valera’s work, its narrative voice makes frequent metafictional observations. These comments highlight the metadiegetic seriousness surrounding incidents, insinuations, and comments made in a jocular tone. This latter playfulness of tone masterfully conceals a serious message. The message is very cleverly imbedded so as not to violate a surface adhesion to the author’s lifelong idealist esthetic. A clear example of this metadiegesis occurs at the beginning of Part 2, Chapter 28: “Rarísimo personaje era Morsamor. Tal vez los que lean esta historia calificarán de inverosímil su carácter, pero a menudo parece inverosímil lo más verdadero” (815). The novel’s many anachronisms—a criticism of nineteenth-century Spanish music in Part 2, Chapter 15 (770), an allusion to contemporary European skepticism in Chapter 21 (782), the discovery of nomadic Mongols with modern Spanish surnames in Chapter 28 (792), the locating of a European-style rest home for the elderly in Chapter 30 (800)—continue Valera’s use of levity in order to focus on contemporary signs of decadence, dehumanization, indirection, absurdity, and cultural disintegration in Spain and, arguably, the West as a whole. DeCoster states that *Morsamor* illustrates Valera’s belief, in old age, that post-1898 Spain should renounce the global ambitions that had heaped ignominy upon her and thereby learn to accept a more modest position in the world

(153). This type of limited allegorical interpretation may have some validity, but it fails to consider the work's implications for all of Europe, which exceeded most of the things that the first twentieth-century Spanish intellectuals—even amid their contradictory echoing of Nordau and brief Europeanizing campaigns at the turn of the century—dared to suggest openly until Spengler issued *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* between 1918 and 1922.

It thus appears that *Morsamor*, applying to it once more Said's primary definition, is anything but Orientalist in its perspective, despite the fact that Valera clearly knew of the genre and recognized that his various Eastern-style narratives would become linked to and unavoidably be interpreted in accordance with it (Torres-Pou 22–23). As Ganivet and Baroja would do only a few years later, *Morsamor* satirizes Western ethnocentrism and its colonialist mentality. Valera's satire of Iberian perspectives demands comparison with such antipodal phenomena as the sentimentalized Moorish prisoner in Espronceda's "La cautiva" (1840); the Romantic patriotism of Alarcón in *Diario de un testigo de la Guerra de África* (1859–1860); Pardo Bazán's gothic allusion to a Moroccan infidel locked in a dungeon in *Los Pazos de Ulloa* (1886); Galdós's depiction of Almudena, the mystic from El Sus, in *Misericordia* (1897); and Blasco Ibáñez's damnation of "sangre moruna" in *La barraca* (1898). Though *Morsamor* acknowledges the limits and inaccuracies of Eastern views of the West, while tipping its hat to the courage of the Portuguese and Spanish explorers, it strives to single out the limitations, injustices, and cruelties that Western "heroes" like Miguel Zuheros foisted upon the peoples of the East. The novel focuses on a wide variety of Eastern peoples—Persians, Arabs, Ethiopians, Indians, Mongols, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesians—but it takes special pains to expose prejudicial European attitudes with respect to Islam.

Although Said never specifically says that his definition of Orientalism includes Western literary attempts to criticize the West's own attitudes by means of satirizing similar thoughts set in the East, his discussion of Flaubert, Renan, T.E. Lawrence, and Maurice Barrès, implies distaste for such a literary device (114–15, 207, 244). This is one of only two ways in which Valera's technique might be said to be "orientalist," the other being his tendency to depict Eastern appearances as somewhat "exotic," a characteristic of Orientalism that practically every post-Said commentator of European literature points out (see, for example, Charnon-Deutsch 250–70) and Said finds inevitable in all international assessments.* This practice of criticism via hyperbolic, perhaps even mildly "esperpentic" reflection would, however, be only natural, affirmative, and decidedly anti-Orientalist for a globetrotting Spaniard like Valera, an educated Andalusian who likely recognized at every new diplomatic post the grotesquery inherent in his country's historical marginalizing of its most significant cultural inheritance. The French Romantic commentator Pierre Leroux (1797–1871) expresses Valera's attitude when he explains the degree to which many nineteenth-century European intellectuals were compelled to admire the extent to which the practices of their own culture were anticipated and conditioned by those of the East:

[L]a Bible et l'Évangile viennent pour nous se fondre dans le ciel oriental, don't elles étaient des étoiles détachées.

L'étude de l' Orient a pour ainsi dire décomposé la Bible, comme le prisme décompose la lumière. [. . .] La Genèse a son pendant dans le Zend-Avesta des Persans; la Pentateuque a ses analogues dans les lois de Manou et les Védas. Job, dans sa sublimité, c'est le chant éternel de l'Arabe, depuis les poésies antiques du désert jusqu'au Coran réformateur (Viard 95).

(The Bible and the Gospel come to us as parts of an Oriental sky, from which they became two detached stars.

The study of the Orient—to coin an expression—has diffused the Bible, as a prism diffuses light. [. . .] Genesis has its counterpart in the Zend-Avesta of the Persians; the Pentateuch has its analogues in the laws of Manu and the Vedas. Job, in his sublimity, is the eternal chant of the Arab, following the ancient poems of the desert right up to the reforming presence of the Koran.)

Said, interestingly, echoes Leroux's assertions in reverse when he speaks of Islam's borrowings from and dependency upon Christianity (74).

This is the type of ambiguity and reversal upon which so much of *Morsamor's* pointed satire plays, as Clementson insinuates when he speaks of the novel's creative embrace of a bilateral empire that creates a dialectic involving “ambos mundos/a Oriente y Occidente” (24). Valera, throughout his literary career, placed in minds of his narrators and other characters innumerable thoughts that suggested the opposite of what these personages' surface discourse seems to say. Valera was notoriously ambivalent both within his texts and between them. He praised books in his reviews at the same time that he ridiculed them in his letters. It has been shown that the voice of the writer exaggeratedly sang Portugal's praises in the press while more privately alleging that Spain's great maritime neighbor was a perennial third-rate entity (Mayone Dias and Morillo 9ff), here in hopes that his epistolary correspondent would smile at his indirect but equally pointed mockery of Spain. This is another part of the Iberian criticism that becomes more generalized as a segment of a larger Europe-wide exposé in *Morsamor*. An apparent criticism of the East is, in this context, also a likely criticism of the West.

As DeCoster points out, beginning in 1867 Valera at various moments started the composition of four other novels having an Eastern setting, and all of them share some features with *Morsamor* (149–50). Reading through *Lulú, princesa de Zabulistán* and *Zarina*, two works that were to comprise parts of his so-called *Leyendas del Antiguo Oriente*, we find gracious writing that speaks with equanimity of all Oriental peoples and that fascinates the reader with its scholarly details of the many similarities between Eastern and Western languages and cultures (898–99, 903–4, 934)—all of this without lumping Eastern peoples together, as Said's anti-Orientalist exposé laments of Western writers in an age of Colonialism and Empire (38). The prologue to the *Leyendas del Antiguo Oriente*, speaks of “las razas civilizadoras y singularmente los arios” (Torres-Pou 22) and is best seen in this context as the expression of a quasi-novelistic prologuist whose opinions communicate as much unreliability as the narratives themselves possess an obvious degree of mystification.

We might think here of the framing and content of many narratives of Borges and Said's reiterated statements that European writers often were more interested in the sophistication of their art than in the very different nature of the facts at their disposal. The fragmentary text of Valera's later narrative, *Elisa la malagueña*, depicts Europeans, Assyrians, Persians, and Mesopotamians on an equal footing, while speaking tongue-in-cheek of certain Christians' boasting of belonging to the one true church (1020–36). Indeed, Valera appears in all of this as a relative exception in a period when “nearly every nineteenth-century writer [. . .] was extraordinarily aware of empire” and productive of literary echoes that reflected powerful “hegemonic systems” (Said 14). It was, it finally seems, for very good and defensible reasons that some of Spain's post-98 reformers (the youthful Unamuno, Valle-Inclán, and Pérez de Ayala, though clearly not Baroja or Antonio Machado) felt drawn more to Valera than to somewhat younger writers of his century. The latter figures allegedly had long surpassed Valera through dealing realistically, directly, and even horrifically with the social issues of the day, but it turns out that they had generally failed to consider wider and more global issues that continued to impact Spain's acknowledged prostration. Valera would appear to deserve much retrospective credit for what he achieved in *Morsamor*.

The sophisticated, internationally-focused Valera, of course, took considerable interest in his age's discoveries of an historical, anthropological, and linguistic dimension being made in the Near and Far East. Conte recently spoke of him as “experto en budismos, orientalismos y filosofías varias” (11). Many other Europeans, as Said continually demonstrates, interpreted these discoveries in uninformed and unscrupulous ways in order to produce convictions of superiority and justifications for imperialism on the part of the West. The fact that Valera was familiar with such prejudicial depictions does not mean that he could not see beyond them, as a careful reading of *Morsamor* demonstrates. It is illogical to place *Morsamor* within Said's negative definition of Orientalism simply because the novel uses Near and Far Eastern settings and either creates Near Eastern and Far Eastern characters or makes references to real, historical personages from these two regions at the precise moment of his own work's artistic creation, a moment that happens to coincide with the apogee of Said-type Orientalism in expository and creative writing.

Let us avoid reasoning via the old dictum *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* and attributing to Valera a motivation running parallel to that of many of his creative predecessors. Said himself absolves numerous European writers of ignorance, prejudice, and excessive stereotyping (a simplified system of classification that the Palestinian-American writer finds unavoidable to some degree in all cross-cultural writing, including his own) in their depiction of Eastern cultures. He does not take up any Spanish writers outside his three-sentence tribute to the textual playfulness of Cervantes, which is alarmingly interesting in view of Spain's unique identity—in the current essay microcosmically represented by Valera and his creative vantage point—in the total Orientalist equation. Said half acknowledges this when he admits the absence from his study of any consideration of Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, and Russian understandings of the East, which he deems “crucial” to a full appraisal of his subject (17). As Curtis hastens to point out, Goya's series of etchings on bullfighting titled *La Tauromaquia* is but one example that “nine centuries of Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula [. . . were] integral rather than alien to the Spanish national identity”(10). Marx's claim that nineteenth-century

Spanish government represented Asian rather than European forms of organization is another case (Curtis 255). Nunley sums up this situation best:

The riddle of Spanish orientalism [. . .] proves resistant to interpretive formulas. What is, however, quite clear is that the predilection for seeing the non-Western other at home constitutes a significant departure from the general European practice of associating the Orient with geographical separation, and that this point of differentiation was already well-established in nineteenth-century Spanish discourse. (130)

In sum, despite what Torres-Pou, quoting liberally from Said, has alleged about Valera's text, it appears that, if we could bring Said—an acknowledged expert in comparative literature—back to life, present him and his followers with a copy of Valera's last novel, and give them the evidence presented in this study, they might want to consider avoiding any serious censure of *Morsamor* as an “Orientalist” offender.

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Notes

- * Charnon-Deutsch, following both Said and more recent, specifically feminist, commentators on Orientalism, finds a great deal of sexism in nineteenth-century Spanish portrayals of Eastern women, revealed in voyeuristic and prurient ways by illustrations published in magazines of the period. I do not deny that Valera could be sexist, as his correspondence and the details of his life make abundantly clear, but he totally lacked an artistic ability to create a sensual appreciation of the women he invented or simply described. Thus, even the famous sexual encounter between Don Luis and Pepita in *Pepita Jiménez* is hidden from the reader, while the adjective most often used to describe his heroine is “discreta.” Likewise, Rafaela’s behavior in *Genio y figura* (1897) is only summarized or filtered through others. Valera’s attitude toward the literary depiction of sexuality is best revealed in an open letter he wrote in 1888 to Enrique Gómez Carrillo upon reading the latter’s novel *La Suprema voluptuosidad*: “Todas las porquerías que un hombre y una mujer puedan ejecutar acostándose juntos y en cueros, están descubiertas ya y no hay el menor misterio en ellas” (Trimble 145). Valera had no interest, either, in describing postures, the sensuous draping of cloth, or the sounds made by a woman’s garments. He hated romanticism in almost all of its manifestations.

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