

**WRITING JAPAN: INTERTEXTUALITY IN ENRIQUE GÓMEZ
CARRILLO'S AND ARTURO AMBROGI'S TRAVELOGUES**

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In his book, *Sensaciones del Japón y la China* [Sensations of Japan and China], the Salvadoran writer Arturo Ambrogi (1875–1936) describes the nights of Tokyo with these words:

All Tokyo goes to the shores of the Sumida-gawa and from the Yoshiwara, the “City without night, “from where I was returning after taking a walk among rows of almost empty gilded cages, and from the quiet “*hikité-tchayas*” of Naka-nocho – the great luminous artery – “*oiranes*,” “*geishas*,” “*maikos*” and “*hokanes*.” In other words, all the joy of the incomparable district hurried to enrich the overflowing fluvial joyfulness with the trilling of their laughter, the pulsations of his “*biwas*” and “*samisenes*,” and the warbling of his “*tankas*” and his “*utas*.” (Ambrogi 17, my translation).¹

As Raimundo Lazo mentions about Ambrogi's prose, his portrait of Tokyo nights is a clear example of his use of acoustic effects and arbitrary personal style to produce an impressionistic picture (251). True, but how do we really know what Ambrogi is saying if we do not know the meaning of the Japanese

¹ Author's Note: I will transcribe the original text for a better understanding of the different authors' techniques and styles: “Todo Tokio acude a las riberas del Sumida-gawa. Y del Yoshiwara, de la ‘Ciudad sin noche’, de donde volvía, después de pasearme por entre las ringlas de doradas jaulas casi vacías y de las silenciosas ‘hikité-tchayas’ de Naka-nocho, la gran artería luminosa, las ‘oiranes’, las ‘geishas’, las ‘maikos’ y los ‘hokanes’, es decir, toda la alegría del barrio incomparable, habían volado a enriquecer con el trino de sus risas, las pulsaciones de sus ‘biwas’ y ‘samisenes’, y el gorjeo de sus ‘tankas’ y sus ‘utas’, la desbordante alegría fluvial.” (Ambrogi 17). Romanization in this paper is based on Spanish pronunciations.

words he uses? Who would understand the text in his time and day? To what kind of readers could *Sensaciones del Japón y la China* be addressed? These questions can only be answered by considering the role played by Japanese aesthetics (*Japonisme*) and the taste for Japan art (*Japonerie*) in Spanish-American society at the turn of the century.

Scholars agree about the difficulties of establishing, with certainty, when the influence of Japan in nineteenth-century European art began.² However, they all concur that, “japonisme was a shift of Copernican proportions, marking the end of Eurocentric illusionism and the beginnings of a new, modern way of seeing and recording the world” (Hokenson 17). It was not only a change in plastic arts, but also in literature. As Jan Walsh Hokenson points out about French literature: “Yet even in some of the most doctrinally Naturalist texts the Japanese allusions, if examined closely, cohere in deeper ways to invoke a contrastive aesthetic that challenges the protagonists’ facile assumptions and informs the narrative optic and structure” (18). Naturally, Spanish-American literature was no exception since it was deeply influenced by French literature.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, *Japonerie* was an international fashion among upper classes, of which Spanish-American texts frequently reflect the appreciation. In fact, turn of the century Spanish-American and Spanish writers, such as Lucio Vicente López, Eugenio Cambaceres, Julián del Casal, Rubén Darío, Juan Valera, and Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, all introduced Japanese allusions and topics in their works. These entailed more than mere decorative descriptions: they reflected the importance that Japanese aesthetics had in the Hispanic world and the curiosity of Hispanic writers for Japanese culture. Edmond Goncourt’s monographs about Japanese painters, Lafcadio Hearn’s collection of Japanese legends and studies on Japan, and the incredible success of Pierre

² The most relevant works for the diffusion of Japanese art were Louis Gonse’s, *L’Art Japonais* (1883), William Anderson’s, *The Pictorial Art of Japan* (1886) and Edmond Goncourt’s (1822–1896), *Utamaro. Le peintre des maisons vertes* (1891) and *Hokusai. L’Art japonais du XVIII siècle* (1896). Paris International Expositions were also a decisive factor. The Paris International Exposition of 1867 had an exhibit of Japanese art, but the one celebrated in 1878 and particularly the 1900 International Exposition, offered more comprehensive exhibits of Japanese (and Eastern) aesthetics and culture.

Loti's books *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887) and *Japoneries d'Automne* (1889) made Japan a destination that only a few Spanish-American writers could reach. The Argentinian writer Eduardo F. Wilde (1844–1913) spent two months in Japan, from March 16 to May 22, 1897; the Mexican poet José Juan Tablada (1871–1941) stayed longer than Wilde, between 1900 and 1901. Another Mexican, Efrén Rebolledo (1877–1929), lived in Japan from 1907 to 1914, while the Central Americans, Arturo Ambrogi (1875–1936) and Enrique Gómez Carrillo traveled across the Far East including Japan. All of them wrote their experiences and impressions in different literary works. Wilde wrote an extensive travelogue, *Por mares y por tierras* (1899). Tablada, in addition to his travel book, *En el país del sol* (1900–1901), wrote *Hiroshigué, el pintor de la nieve y de la lluvia, de la noche y de la luna* (1914), a book in the line of Edmund Goncourt's studies on Japanese painters Utamaro and Hokusai. Enrique Gómez Carrillo wrote several books, such as *De Marsella a Tokio. Sensaciones de Egipto, la India, la China y el Japón* (1906), *El alma japonesa* (1906), *El Japón heroico y galante* (1912), and many editorials published first in journals and later collected in his many works. Finally, Rebolledo wrote a brief narrative based on his visit to the temples of Nikko, while Ambrogi chronicled his experiences in the aforementioned *Sensaciones del Japón y la China* (1915).³

Apart from Wilde's travelogue which is the work of both a man of letters and a scientist (Wilde was a physician), the texts produced by these travelers present a sketchy narrative which reveals the strong influence of previous readings. Therefore, while Wilde tries to give an exact portrait of Japan's society by providing a detailed description of places and habits, as well as the expected personal considerations of a traveler facing an exotic culture, the narratives of the other travelers lack the immediacy expected from a travel narrative. In other words, if we compare Wilde's text to those

³ It is worth mentioning that Tablada's and Gómez Carrillo's journeys to Asia have been frequently questioned. It was said that Gómez Carrillo wrote his columns on Japan in his Paris apartment. However, in the *Marsella a Tokio* prologue, Rubén Darío reproduced a letter sent by Gómez Carrillo from Japan and today Gómez Carrillo's trip tends to be fully accepted. However, not everyone agrees that Tablada actually went to Japan. In fact, José Pascual Buxó, author of the 2006 edition of *En el país del sol*, argues that Tablada's trip is more than doubtful, since it has not been possible to find his name in any of the arriving passenger records to Japan (12).

of other Spanish-American travelers, it is possible to establish that he avoided focusing on well-known places and looked instead for surprises and adventures in new venues where he could learn about the different cultures. Many other writers, in turn, traveled to merely verify and confirm what they already knew.

It is true that Tablada, Gómez Carrillo and Ambrogi wrote with a specific reader in mind: someone who, familiar with the descriptions of Far Eastern cultures, was expecting a recognizable narrative presented with an original variant. In Zweder von Martels' words, these readers "seek confirmation of old values dressed with a certain amount of novelty" (xvii). Writers, therefore, faced a strong dilemma: if they did not want to disappoint their readers they had to confirm the existence of a Japan that was familiar to their readers but that no longer existed or had never even existed, while at the same time presenting it through a new approach. The situation is especially interesting in the works of Gómez Carrillo and Ambrogi. Therefore, I will focus on the analysis of their texts.

The first obstacle that these two writers encountered was the fast transformation of Japan during the Meiji Era (1868–1912), from a traditional isolated culture into a modern and vibrant society. As it is well known, after the victories over China (1895) and Russia (1905), Japan entered a period of accelerated industrialization and territorial expansion. Japan no longer responded to the picturesque image that French artists created after admiring *ukiyo-e* scenes. It is true that the Japan depicted by the popular Lafcadio Hearn was the same Japan seen by Ambrogi and Gómez Carrillo, but how could they experience Hearn's Japan during their short journey not knowing a word of Japanese? Loti's fictional Japan, however, was easier to verify, criticize, deny or imitate, and, because Loti was more familiar to Hispanic readers than Hearn, quoting Loti was much more effective in describing Japan. Thus, Loti became the model and reference for other authors.

One aspect all of them could attest without risk of contradicting their predecessors was the disappearance of the colorful Japan of the floating world scene.⁴ Consequently, when encountering in Japan the same modernity

⁴ The great Japanese painters that were a sensation in France in the 1860s, Shraku, Utamaro, Hokusai and Hiroshige, died more than half a century before Ambrogi and Gómez Carrillo visited Japan, expecting to find the same Japan depicted in their paintings.

from which they thought they had escaped, their reactions were not unlike those of the romantic writers who searched for a more authentic society in the Far East only to see that progress had beaten them to it. Theirs was the feeling of belatedness discussed by James Buzard in his work *The Beaten Track*.⁵ It was necessary though not to disappoint their readers and keep up with the expectations of a travel account. Hence, following Loti's example, despite their complaints about the modernization of Japan, their narratives did not miss the familiar leitmotifs used to describe this land such as the ubiquitous image of Japan under the rain as popularized by Hiroshige with the scene of the *Sudden Shower Over Shin-Ohashi Bridge in Atake* (1857).

The parallel between Loti's and Ambrogi's description of Japan on a rainy day is evident. For example, Loti writes: "The next day the rain came down in torrents, regular downpour, merciless and unceasing, blinding and drenching everything -a rain so dense that it was impossible to see through it from one end of the vessel to the other...What wrecked weather for a first landing" (12).⁶ Moreover, Ambrogi enlightens us: "Tokyo under the rain. You must see it...this watery dust that falls for hours and hours, and covers the vast city in a humid muslin. A distressing landscape for those who wake up early, almost at dawn and, as any good tourist, lean out from their hotel room window. Brave prospect!" (Ambrogi 33, my translation).⁷ Both authors seem to make reference to a Hokusai painting and through their subtle use of intertextuality prove to readers the authenticity of their trips to Japan. Nevertheless, Ambrogi decides to swerve from Loti by accusing him of falsifying Hokusai's Japan in his novels (34). Contrary to Loti (and other writers), Ambrogi states that although Japan is in fact in a process of

⁵ See James Buzard's book *The Beaten Track. European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to 'Culture' 1800-1918*. (110) for a complete analysis of "belatedness."

⁶ "Il pleuvait par torrents, le lendemain; une de ces pluies d'abat, sans trêve, sans merci, aveuglante, inondant tout ; une pluie drue à ne pas voir d'un bout du navire à l'autre...Un vilain temps pour mettre pied à terre une première fois..." (Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, 28).

⁷ "Tokio bajo la lluvia. Hay que ver lo que aquello es... Y aquel polvo de agua que se cierne durante horas y horas, y envuelve la inmensa ciudad en una húmeda muselina... Paisaje hartamente desconsolador para quien, muy de mañana, casi con el alba, como buen turista, deja el lecho y se asoma a la ventana de su cuarto de hotel. ¡Valiente perspectiva!" (33).

modernization, it still is and will ever be the eternal Japan. He declares himself in the position to attest it, because he can actually see the Japan around him, unlike those who approached it having already decided what they were going to encounter (35). In other words, Ambrogi seizes the authoritative voice, until then held by those who insisted on a picturesque and colorful Japan, and seems to deny its existence. But his position is only apparent, because he cannot and will not disappoint his readers and ends by giving them the expected conventional image of Japan. Thus, the chapter of his book devoted to Japan bears the title “*El Japón pintoresco*” (“Picturesque Japan”).

Gómez Carrillo resorts to the same strategy of denying Loti’s authority by affecting a comprehensive understanding of Japanese culture (and even of its theater), something difficult to believe from someone who did not know the language. Obviously, Gómez Carrillo’s Japanese cultural knowledge had to be based on what he had read in France or what he read during his journey to Japan. As a matter of fact, even his curiosity for Japanese sexuality reveals more literary or pictorial fantasies than truly lived experiences.

In *Erotic Japonisme: The Influence of Japanese Sexual Imagery on Western Art*, Ricard Bru examines how the West was surprised by Japanese drawings with explicit sexual images. From 1571 until 1630, dates in which the port of Nagasaki was open to commerce, these drawings (*shunga*) were exported along with other products to the Hispanic world and its demand was such that the Inquisition had to intervene (Bru 26). In the nineteenth century, particularly after the 1867 and 1878 Paris International Exhibitions, Japonerie reached great popularity and the *shunga* enhanced the idea of Japan as an erotic region of the world. Japanese society was viewed in opposition to a Western sense of decency. In Japan, where men and women shared naked public baths and the practice of prostitution was accepted, there were entire districts dedicated to the pleasures of the flesh; a man could even buy himself a wife by the day. It is to this Japan that Pierre Loti, who was already popular by his romanticized relations with exotic women, traveled in 1885 to find inspiration for new romantic stories.⁸ His journey was, as Michel Butor would say, traveling in order to write (*Je voyage pour écrire*, 9). The outcome was *Madame Chrysanthème*, a novel in which Loti relates his ephemeral marriage to a Japanese woman.

⁸ See Loti’s novels *Aziyadé* (1879) and *Le mariage de Loti* (1880).

Gómez Carrillo, who also knew that a touch of sexuality was the key to selling texts easily, went to Japan with Loti's same intention. His is not, however, the story of an ephemeral marriage. What he presents as the culminating experience for anyone who actually wants to understand the Japanese soul is a night of intercourse with a Yoshihara prostitute.⁹ As I discussed in a previous article, Gómez Carrillo, who was not a citizen from a country with imperialist objectives over the Orient, and who was even critical of the European colonial policies in Asia, has, nevertheless, the same colonial rhetoric of appropriation, aestheticization, and debasement of the other noted by post-colonial studies.¹⁰ Gómez Carrillo's is a Eurocentric turn-of-the-century discourse, and it could not have been otherwise since he was in Paris, writing for a cosmopolitan European and Europeanized group of readers.

In light of the aforementioned commercial and aesthetic reality, the importance of previous readings and the weight of readers' expectations is evident in the work of these two Central American authors. It is undeniable that travelers carry with them preconceived visions, but the question is whether those preconceived visions (and readers' expectations) could allow Gómez Carrillo and Ambrogio to describe a genuine impression. Could they actually "see" Japan? Did they describe their actual impressions or did they mimic what others had already said? In fact, at the time of the publication of Gómez Carrillo's works on Japan, Rubén Darío asked Ambrogio these same questions and he replied:

Enrique's Japan? Do you want me to speak freely, Rubén?
 Enrique's Japan seems to me a Japan product of a reading.
 A Japan of reflection, more than a Japan of emotion, of
 personal impression. A Japan certainly obtained, with
 artistry and talent, with charming amenity, from reading
 Chamberlain, Mitford, Lafcadio Hearn, Ludovico Nadeau,

⁹ To present the vulgar brothel scene as an enriching cultural experience, Gómez Carrillo tells that his visit to the Yoshihara was encouraged by a respected Kyoto professor, who proclaimed that without having been at the Shimabara and without drinking a glass of sake with a Japanese prostitute, it was not possible to understand Japan (255–256).

¹⁰ For my analysis of Gómez Carrillo's colonial discourse see my article: "El discurso colonial en las crónicas sobre el Japón de Enrique Gómez Carrillo."

Aston, Tresmin Tremolière, and mainly from la Mazelière. There are also splashes of Pierre Loti (and indeed, among the different Japan descriptions to be found all over the world, Loti's is the most false). My dear Rubén, in spite of the proverbial British seriousness of the author of *Lettres du Japon*, even Rudyard Kipling's Japan suffers from serious flaws. The real Japan, the unpolluted one, is Lafcadio Hearn's, and maybe, maybe although not quite, those versions by Ludovico Nardeau and Luigi Barzini. I do not know what happens with Japan but it is a general problem.

When one arrives, when one sees it closely, the idea that one has after reading travelogues, the idea one has embraced during a long time and to which imagination has given a little touch, undergoes a tremendous setback. The disappointment is immense. From the dreamed image to the real sight, to what you feel, to what you can finally examine, there is a good distance. Nevertheless, when one is about to leave, the primitive idea, the legend, superimposes itself to your recent impression and erases it completely, in the manner of a palimpsest. It is then that one writes those enthusiastic pages, in which the real Japan, the one that we just saw and left, appears disguised in a delicious manner among orgies of colors and lights (Crónica, 15–16).

Indeed, Gómez Carrillo's Japan constantly reveals the influence of what he read about Japan. Nevertheless, Ambrogi also falls under the same influence. A first reading of *Sensaciones del Japón y de la China* can make us think the opposite, but the difference between Gómez Carrillo's and Ambrogi's travelogues does not reside in their lack of influence from previous texts, but in the difference of each one's preconceived image of Japan, coupled with a lack of similarity of purpose, and an altogether different group of readers.

The titles of Gómez Carrillo's books (*De Marsella a Tokio*, *El alma japonesa*, *El Japón heroico y galante*) make it clear that these are travel descriptions with an informative penchant. Thus, Gómez Carrillo talks not just about his journey to the Far East, but of a wide variety of topics related to Japanese culture: he mentions the strength of tradition and the menace of

modernization, goes over the main points of Japan's history, writes of literature, religion, theater, plastic arts, and habits. He also inserts short stories and anecdotes, talks about the samurais and the Japanese veneration of swords, the rigorous sense of honor, the importance of hara-kiri, the Japanese sense of humor and laughter, and particularly he writes about the Japanese women and he doesn't shy away from narrating his own sexual encounters. In a few words, as Ambrogi said to Darío, Gómez Carrillo creates his own Japan in the light of his previous readings. He produces a Spanish version of a preexisting Japan created in other languages by other authors and he even rewrites texts in French to explore more commercial and international audiences. Therefore, his texts were aimed at Hispanic readers familiar with *Japonisme* but also at an international audience always enthusiastic for books about Japan. Briefly, although his texts had an apparent cultural intention, they were fundamentally commercial venues.

On the contrary, Ambrogi travels with the purpose of questioning what others said and with the intention to describe what others missed. He wants to offer his personal impressions, but not in order to add a new Japan to the list of the already existing ones. Consequently, in his writings, he tries to avoid all historical references, all comments on religion, art or Japanese culture. Like the impressionists, who were so profoundly influenced by Japanese paintings, Ambrogi does not want to produce a realistic portrait but to generate an array of sensations in the readers. Accordingly, he refuses to recreate Japan in the light of what had been said by other travelers, and instead writes his sensations based on what had been painted.

Therefore, his work has a more refined Hispanic reader in mind, more refined and exclusive than the public to whom Gómez Carrillo addresses his texts. Ambrogi's readers must have been aware of the complexities of Japanese art and were capable, when needed, of perceiving a reference to Japanese images. As can be seen in the following fragment, such a difficult task is not possible by just inserting Japanese terms and the name of the inspiring artist has to be mentioned:

It is on the Sumida-gawa sleepy surface, a dazzling parade of 'ko-bune' of 'sampane' of 'fudo': of minuscules 'shosene' filled with lanterns and light balloons, like Christmas trees. – Hokusai! The name of the magician, the extraordinary painter of the Japanese life, arises in my memory, emerges in my lips. Yes, yes, Hokusai. The purest Hokusai!

And I remember, one by one, all his illustrations, reviewed enthusiastically, with patience and devotion, at the displays of the Uyeno Museum and in the portfolios of the traders of 'curios' of Ginza stores, close to the Imperial, or in the huge 'shima-jins' of Singho in the all sacred Kyoto. And just like in Hokusai's images, in the middle of the shadows of the summer night, there is the long, gentle parade of the 'so' marching like lively coals, among the music of 'biwa' and 'shamisen', the roar of laughter, the commotion of voices and the explosion of colorful firecrackers and fireworks (*Sensaciones*, 16–17).¹¹

As can be noted, the mentioned paragraph does not show a genuine discovery of Japan, but rather a perception through a previous image. It is true, however, that Ambrogi's reflection is based on Japanese images and not on European concepts of Japan as it is the case with Gómez Carrillo. In this sense, the Salvadoran author is closer to those French writers who tried to find in Japanese art a way to renew literature (Goncourt, Mallarmé, Zola, Baudelaire), abandoning the realm of realism in order to obtain in their works the same effect achieved by the impressionist painters. As a matter of fact, I have no doubt that Ambrogi read the works of those writers and became familiar with their methods to provide descriptions with fewer objective details but with more feeling. Note the enormous similarity between the images from Zola's *L'Oeuvre* ["il n'y eut plus sur leurs têtes que cette

¹¹ "Es, sobre la superficie dormida del Sumida-gawa, un deslumbrante desfile de 'ko-bunes', de 'sampans' de 'fudos' de minúsculos 'shosenes' cundidos de linternas florecidos de globos de luces, como árboles de Noel. —;Hokusai! El nombre del mágico, del portentoso pintor de la vida japonesa, surge en mi memoria, apunta en mis labios. —Sí, sí! Hokusai purísimo! Y voy recordando, una a una, una tras otra, sus estampas, revisadas con entusiasmo, con paciencia y devoción en las vitrinas del Museo de Uyeno, y en los portafolios de los comerciantes de 'curios' de los tenduchos de Ginza, a un paso del Imperial, o en las grandes 'sima-jinas' de Shingo, en la sacratísima Kyoto. Y tal como en Hokusai, en medio del claro-oscuro de la noche estival, es el largo, lento desfile de las 'so', como ascuas, entre la música de las 'biwas' y de los 'shamisen', el estruendo de las risas, el vocerío estrepitoso y el estallar de los cohetes de colores y fuegos artificiales" (*Sensaciones*, 16–17).

poussière d'eau embrasée" (129)] and Ambrogi's *Sensaciones...* ["y aquel polvo de agua que se cierne durante horas y horas" (33)]. The image of "poussière d'eau," "polvo de agua" (watery dust) is too original to doubt that Ambrogi did not borrow it from Zola. Naturally, the difference between Zola's work (a determinist French novel) and Ambrogi's (a brief travelogue) distances one text from the other to the point that a parallelism or an influence are difficult to detect, but the use of *Japonisme* to renovate prose is evident and places both authors on the same literary coordinates.

It is possible to conclude then that the alluded actual discovery of Japan may not have been a lived experience, but a literary strategy. Ambrogi claims to perceive the real Japan while he shows (as he might see it) Japan through the lens of *Japonisme*. However, this perception of Japan, tainted with admiration towards Japanese paintings, is somehow obsolete. At the time of Ambrogi's journey, the work of Hokusai was no longer appreciated in Japan. The *ukiyo-e* school, in which Hokusai had been its maximum representative, had been a revelation in Paris more than fifty years before, while in Japan it was already starting to be surpassed by the *yōga* school which, at the time of Ambrogi's trip, was, along with the traditionalistic *nihonga*, at the peak of development. Also, many of the European artists that had admired Hokusai's, Hiroshige's and Utamaro's artwork were already dead, as was the impressionist movement that owed so much to Japanese art.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that the "Japanese sensation" of Ambrogi's is totally sifted through the *Japonisme* of French writers. Therefore, his work is as much influenced by Western literature as Gómez Carrillo's. Like Gómez Carrillo (who boasted knowing Japanese theater yet considered Sadayako -a former geisha performing in European shows and displaying a European repertoire when in Japan-, the best Japanese actress), Ambrogi deceptively perceives Japan only through the images of a Japanese art that had become a European cliché, an aspect of Japan's past that had nothing to do with the real Japan he seemed incapable of seeing and appreciating. In other words, both Ambrogi's and Gómez Carrillo's descriptions of Japan reveal a strong Japonist influence differing only in the intention. Gómez Carrillo writes for a bourgeois public eager for exotic scenes and sensations from the East, while Ambrogi does it for a reader more familiarized with *Japonisme*, its terminology and painters. His prose is unquestionably more experimental and innovative than the one employed by Gómez Carrillo, but both recreations of Japan are equally inauthentic, mirroring a conception of Japan developed in the West through a distant

interpretation of Japanese culture and a profound Eurocentric sense of Otherness.

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