

## ESOTERIC BUDDHISM IN THE WORKS OF JUAN VALERA

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In 1887, Juan Valera (1824-1905) writes a letter entitled “El budismo esotérico” to his friend Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo (1856-1912).<sup>1</sup> In this letter he talks about Theosophy, a doctrine with which he had come into contact during his recent journey to the United States, where it was fashionable at the time. He also declares his purpose to write a novel in which supernatural elements would play a major role. Although this novel was written twelve years later, the author’s interest in esoteric knowledge and Theosophy was clearly apparent in many of the works that he produced in the meantime.

Valera became familiar with Theosophy in the two years he spent working for the Spanish Embassy in Washington. Those two years were difficult for numerous reasons: the depression and illness that he experienced following his son’s death, the loneliness he may have felt far from his friends and relatives, and an unfortunate incident involving Katherine Lee Bayard, a young woman who fell in love with him and committed suicide on the Embassy’s gate. I do not wish to imply that Valera sought consolation in Theosophy. Probably the reasons for his curiosity were that he shared many interests with those who adhered to this doctrine, and that he felt attracted by the aura of paranormal phenomena that surrounded the group.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Theosophy was a spiritual development similar in some ways to what is now called *New Age*. Its founder, Helena Petrovna Hahn (1821-1891), also known as Madame Blavatsky, was born in the Ukraine and since childhood believed herself to be endowed with supernatural powers. She married at 17, but being restless and rebellious left her husband and started an unconventional and rather nomadic existence. In 1873 she went to the United States, where she became well known as a medium. Blavatsky claimed that she had trained in Tibet for seven years and said that she kept in touch with her “mahatma”

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<sup>1</sup> Juan Valera, “El budismo esotérico,” in *Obras completas*, vol. 3 (Madrid: Aguilar, 1958), p. 646.

either telepathically, via the materialization of writings, or by means of the mahatma's spiritual apparitions.<sup>2</sup> Besides the usual communications with the beyond, people could witness acts of levitation, clairvoyance, telepathy and the materialization of objects during her séances.

During a séance in 1874, Blavatsky met Henry Steel Olcott, a former colonel of the United States Army who held a degree in law and agronomy and published occasional newspaper articles dealing with spiritualism. Soon after, Blavatsky and Olcott moved in together to a house they called *Lamastery* where, helped by the messages supposedly sent by Blavatsky's mahatma, they began to write *Isis Unveiled* (1877).<sup>3</sup> Prior to the publication of this book, which was a best seller, Blavatsky, Olcott and a group of their followers founded the Theosophical Society, a universal brotherhood that did not distinguish between races, ethnic origins or religions. Its goal was to promote the study of Aryan writings and various religions and sciences, and claim the importance of the ancient Eastern literatures and philosophies, especially those of the Brahmans, the Buddhists and Zoroaster. They also intended to investigate the deep mysteries of Nature in every aspect, including psychic and spiritual powers among humankind.

In 1882, Olcott and Blavatsky traveled to India and established the society's headquarters in Adyar. Three years later, Blavatsky left India, settled in London and published *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) and *The Key to Theosophy* (1889). Olcott stayed in India where he opened new theosophical centers, wrote a Buddhist catechism, which is still in use today, and contributed to the renaissance of Buddhism in the Far East.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The term Mahatma means a "great soul" in Sanskrit, but the popular connotation of the term as used by Theosophy had to do with a sort of saintly guru imbued with an occult wisdom. Mme Blavatsky used to say that the source of her knowledge originated in two Tibetan mahatmas (Koothoomi and Morya). By the same token, her detractors claimed this statement as proof she was lying, since at that time the term Mahatma was not even known in Tibet.

<sup>3</sup> A "lamastery" or "lamasery" is a monastery of Lamas. The fact that Blavatsky gave such a name to the house in which she settled down with Olcott reveals her wish to link her doctrine to Oriental religions, in particular to Buddhism, and to create a connection with Tibet.

<sup>4</sup> To this day the Society of Theosophy has its headquarters in India, where both its philosophy and the Centers themselves attracted from their

Valera had always felt attracted to Vedic literature and to the origins of languages and religions.<sup>5</sup> Like many others of his time, he believed in the Aryan origins of the Indo-European nations and argued that the key to modern Western civilization was to be found in the old Eastern cultures. Also, he confessed to Menéndez Pelayo that he was mesmerized by any doctrine and amused and enchanted by all sorts of spiritual mysteries. Therefore, it is not surprising that he should find a friend in the Theosophists, many of them influential people and famous intellectuals. At a time when science was at the intellectual forefront, the paranormal was a subject of profound interest and spiritualist séances abounded, attracting people from all social classes and backgrounds.

Valera tells Menéndez that he has many friends among Blavatsky's followers and that, out of respect for them, he refrains from characterizing the so-called prodigies of the lady theosophist as a scheme. Some people thought that this attitude indicated feelings that went beyond friendship. Regarding this, Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1923) says:

I would not say that Valera – whose great judgment I respect – believed in those legends of Indian Mahatmas that Theosophist and dubious miracle worker Madame Blavatzky disseminated throughout Europe. However, I do think they had a profound impact on his imagination and his thinking. To my criticisms Valera always responded with a “who knows?” that question usually presented in defense of the imagination that longs to free itself from reality.<sup>6</sup>

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inception those wanting reforms or opposing the Raj. Olcott founded several Buddhist schools in Sri Lanka and he is still recognized there as a defender of Oriental cultures and as someone who campaigned enthusiastically to spread Buddhism to other parts of the world.

<sup>5</sup> In a letter from Russia dated March 5, 1857 Valera writes to his friend and superior, Leopoldo Augusto Cueto (1815-1901), that some fanatic Russian sects were closely tied to the ancient Oriental religions and then goes on to write about his interest in Hindi and Vedic texts. See Juan Valera, *Cartas desde Rusia* (Barcelona: Laertes, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> In Emilia Pardo Bazán, “Don Juan Valera: la personalidad, el crítico, el novelista,” *La lectura*, VI, 3, 1906, p. 289.

The fact is that Valera was considered an expert on the subject and he was eventually commissioned to write the entries on “Theosophy” and “Magic” in the *Diccionario enciclopédico Hispanoamericano* (1887-1898).<sup>7</sup> In addition to this and the aforementioned letter “El budismo esotérico,” Valera wrote a long note on Blavatsky and Theosophy in his book *La metafísica y la poesía* (1891).<sup>8</sup>

In spite of Pardo Bazán’s observation and Valera’s statement that he treated this subject “with impartiality, without approving or disapproving, without being positive or ironic,”<sup>9</sup> his writings at times seem insincere, with a tone of irony and mockery.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the treatment given to this subject in *Morsamor* (1899), the supernatural novel to which he had referred in his letter “El budismo esotérico,” is clearly a parody.<sup>11</sup>

*Morsamor* is a confusing novel within Valera’s literary corpus, one which would be impossible to understand if the author had not expressed his intention to write a novel with a supernatural theme. *Morsamor*’s plot involves an elderly monk living in a Spanish sixteenth century monastery who feels bitter about having wasted his life. Another monk is able to restore his youth through a magic spell and, under his old name of Morsamor, he is allowed to return to his life as a knight-errant. He travels to Asia, where he participates in several military campaigns, falls in love with numerous women and makes a journey around the world with the purpose of becoming the first man to arrive to Europe traveling from the

<sup>7</sup> Juan Valera, *Obras desconocidas de Juan Valera* (Madrid: Castalia, 1965).

<sup>8</sup> Juan Valera, *La metafísica y la poesía* (Madrid: Saénz de Jubera, 1891).

<sup>9</sup> Valera, *Obras desconocidas*, p. 551.

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note the hint of mockery Valera conveys in the following excerpt from his article on Theosophy destined to the *Diccionario enciclopédico Hispanoamericano*. He is referring to Blavatsky’s marriage and says:

Although it escapes our understanding, it seems that in the course of the wedding night the lady got so upset with the general that she lost control and hit him with a silver candlestick knocking him unconscious. Then, believing the man was dead, Blavatsky got on a horse and rode into the night. The general survived the attack but refused to get back together with such a dangerous partner, and from then on both spouses lived apart. (347)

<sup>11</sup> Juan Valera, *Morsamor*, in *Obras completas*, vol. 1.

East. At the end of his adventures, Morsamor is the victim of a shipwreck and as he is about to drown, suddenly wakes up to find himself back at the monastery.

This plot is obviously quite extravagant and critics, not accepting Valera's claim that he did not have anything in mind but to entertain, have occasionally tried to find a deeper meaning in the novel.<sup>12</sup> However, the novel only seeks to distract, even if such a distraction centers on a journey through Eastern beliefs and ends with the pseudo-ancient Theosophical doctrine and a discussion on the essence of religions. In other words, Valera entertains but teaches at the same time, and invites his readers to reflect on things that are far from superficial.

Morsamor's journey starts in Melinda, a city on the African coast where the protagonist finds a group of people of Persian origin whose religion goes back to Mazdeism. In Ceylon the narrative voice reflects on the virtues and errors of Buddhism and in India it deals with Brahmanism. Finally, in the Himalayas, the protagonist gets to know a strange society of long-lived mahatmas who talk to him about Theosophy.

In each encounter with a new religion, Morsamor studies the strong and the weak points of those beliefs. He always seeks to establish a parallel with Christianity, with the intention of discovering a link between Christian dogma and ancient Eastern doctrines. Such a similarity would be based on the supposedly common origin of the Indo-European nations, whose doctrine, according to Valera, evolved into new creeds alienated from the truth the religion possessed in ancient times. Theosophy is thus presented as the highest degree of such a religious deviation.

To understand Valera's point it is necessary to place his novel in the context in which it was written. Theosophy had appeared at a moment when scientists were debating the origins of man and when it was believed

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<sup>12</sup> The novel was published shortly after the end of the Hispanic-American war, when the Spanish government had been forced to accept the loss of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and its colonies in the Pacific. This loss meant that Spain was no longer one of the great European powers. Thus the general tendency among writers of the time was to produce texts in which they offered words of advice aimed toward the revival of Spain. This was probably why the critics, in spite of Valera's prologue stating that the Spanish *Regeneracionismo* was a matter to be left to politicians, insisted on interpreting *Morsamor* as an allegorical novel that depicted the Spanish situation.

that the key to the mystery of life was soon to be discovered.<sup>13</sup> Blavatsky and her followers were self-proclaimed initiates in the occult. They promised in their books a revelation that, after pages of allusions to legends, myths, history and beliefs, ended on a more fictional note than a real one, and of course short of the revelation that they had announced. As Valera put it, Theosophists had been initiated, but only a little:

It is evident that Madame Blavatski does not know a tenth of what the Reverend Mahatma Koot-Hoomi does, and to whom Sinnet dedicates his work *El mundo oculto*.

I confess that I have not read Madame Blavatski's book by the title *Isis sin velo*, but I have read a book by her disciple Sinnett called *El budismo esotérico* and it seems to me that any mahatma knows as much as they do, and furthermore, they don't say much of what they know and leave us half way through their knowledge. Of course, that is their way to make initiation a must. Were they open to divulge what they know, an initiation would certainly be useless.

Theosophical societies do not promise to automatically make a wise man out of an initiated. On the contrary, they preach the need to work diligently, to prepare oneself, to do penance and to purify oneself in order to attain, finally, what purports to be the first degree of initiation.<sup>14</sup>

Following this line of thought, in *Morsamor*, Valera tries to present the fallacy of the theosophical religion, and consequently he offers us a parody of a conversation between an initiate and someone who is not.

Morsamor and his men go deeply into the Himalayas and, after a long journey, arrive in a valley where they are greeted by an old man who has the capacity to read their thoughts and transmit his own to them, thus

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<sup>13</sup> In the prologue to his *Leyendas del antiguo oriente*, Valera insists on the common Asian origin of the religions and the languages that shaped European civilization. No doubt, he is under the influence of Friedrich Max Muller (1823-1900), a professor of Comparative Theology at Oxford University, frequently quoted by Valera, who would insist on a common origin of all civilizations.

<sup>14</sup> Valera, *La metafísica*, p. 235.

communicating without the need for words.<sup>15</sup> This old man takes them to a retreat for men and explains that, thanks to a diet based on herbs and a strict practice of hygiene, the inhabitants of the valley enjoy longer lives than the rest of the world, counting their years in dozens instead of decades. In spite of the Asian location and the allusion to the longevity of the Tibetan people, the place has nothing to do with Buddhist monasteries but, with its automatic baths, health food and exercise regime, it closely resembles a nineteenth century American spa like that of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1943), the *Battle Creek Sanitarium*, frequented at the time of Valera's visit to the United States by the rich in search of physical and spiritual well-being.

At this retreat, Morsamor is introduced to Sankaracharia, an elderly man who stood out among his peers as a talented writer who produced volumes to impart knowledge to laymen. However, he warns Morsamor that this knowledge is not intended to reach Europeans since they are not mature enough to grasp their true meaning. Morsamor then asks him how he can justify the occult side of a science that he supposedly intends to divulge, and Sankaracharia answers that the essence of his knowledge cannot be transmitted. It can only be reached once the soul is purified and accesses the sanctuary of supreme conscience, something that requires several reincarnations and opens the doors to Nirvana. Morsamor wants to know more about Nirvana, but the old man tells him that he cannot say more since, in order to do so, it is necessary to have reached a particular stage and he himself still needs a couple of additional lives. He goes on to say that even at that perfect stage an explanation would have not been possible since no human words could relate such an ineffable experience. Morsamor, astonished by the advanced technology and the way of life of the inhabitants of the valley, asks the mahatma why, if they are actually so

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<sup>15</sup> The legend of a valley hidden deep in the Himalayas, made popular in the twentieth century by James Milton (1900-1954) in his novel *Lost Horizon* (1933) and subsequently by the films based on the novel, was not new in Valera's time. The first information we have in the West concerning this valley is found in the chronicles of a Jesuit priest from Portugal by the name of Estêvão Cacella (1585-1630), but it must be noted that Buddhist texts such as *Zhang Zhung* and *Kalachakra* already mention the mythical kingdom of Shambhala. Nazism believed that in this kingdom they could find a Nordic race that antedated Buddhism and Hitler sent seven expeditions in search of it.

concerned about the welfare of humanity, they do not share their knowledge with the rest of the world instead of keeping it to themselves. Sankaracharia replies that Morsamor is wrong, that although they do not leave their community, they have kept and still keep in contact, either telepathically or by way of soul traveling, with a great number of chosen followers, while they all await the future coming of a woman who will spread the knowledge in the Western world:

It is prophesied that this woman will come to us, will captivate us, will learn many of our secrets, and will reveal them in enlightening treaties that will teach a science modestly called Theosophy. That will be just the foundation of our discipline, but even so, the world will be taken aback by what she will have to say, and will read her books, and theosophical schools will appear in every nation.

You likely have guessed by now that Sankaracharia, even if he does not call her by name, is referring to Madame Blavatsky.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, as previously mentioned, Blavatsky bragged about her trip to Tibet, which by then was considered a forbidden kingdom, and claimed to have remained there for seven years, that is, the period of time required of lamas in order to be initiated. It is impossible to prove or disprove the things her theosophical biographers claim about their leader, but the most impartial research casts doubt on these claims and considers such a trip highly improbable.<sup>17</sup>

The dialogue between Morsamor and Sankaracharia goes on with the account of the Aryan origin of the mahatmas, who are described as spirits that, after a series of reincarnations, refused to be reborn in the bodies of black men, Chinese or Mulattos and thus became the first white men. This group was supposed to have established their headquarters in the Tibetan valleys and from there they had spread to the rest of the world,

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<sup>16</sup> Valera, *Obras completas*, vol. 1, p. 256.

<sup>17</sup> It must be noted that Tibet kept its frontiers closed to the British from 1792 to 1904. Several explorations were carried out by groups from different nationalities, but there is no proof that Blavatsky took part in any of them. She could have tried to get in disguised as a Hindi, but this is not very probable. The first woman known to have arrived in Tibet was the missionary Annie Taylor in 1892.

leaving behind only one untouched community in the hidden region where Morsamor found these old men. The absurd story about the origins of humanity alludes to Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*, the book in which Blavatsky links the Aryans to the dwellers of the lost continent of Atlantis and which was later used to support Nazism, in spite of the universality of races it proposes.

In the end, the mahatma tries to explain the laws of Karma, the characteristics of the seven elements configuring the human body and the purpose of white magic or rajah yoga. The protagonist does not make much out of these explanations and when he asks his attendant his opinion about the wisdom and power of the mahatmas, the attendant only smiles and says he does not believe the old man's knowledge is based on any of that. However, he does not elaborate further and never reveals what he really thinks. In other words, in the face of theosophical claims, skepticism and confusion prevail.<sup>18</sup>

It is evident that Morsamor's episode in the Himalayas probably reproduces Valera's questions in the United States and the disappointing answers he received from his friends within Theosophy. In fact, the dialogue between Morsamor and Sankaracharia is described by Valera with the term "interview" in English, a usage which contextualizes it clearly within his own experience in the United States. The scrubs and mechanical brushes in the mahatmas' monastery, the cinematographic technique to show from the Himalayan valley Morsamor's Spanish monastery, and the flying machine used by Morsamor upon his departure, all point to Valera's experience with modernity and Theosophy during his stay in America. Thus, this combination of magic and technology seals Valera's story which in turn vents the author's feelings of surprise before the technological innovations he found in the different cities he visited and the hotels where he stayed. Moreover, he is reacting to the paranormal phenomena and the spiritual beliefs based on Eastern doctrines he had witnessed in a society which, overwhelmed by modernity, had the need to take refuge in a spiritual

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<sup>18</sup> Morsamor's servant personifies mistrust and malice in the novel and very often the protagonist identifies him with the Devil. Nonetheless, throughout the story, he shows great deal of prudence in acting to restrain the outlandish behaviors of Morsamor. His disbelief, followed by silence, as the protagonist tells him about the Mahatmas' wisdom, thus seems to suggest that Valera felt that the prodigies of Theosophy were not to be trusted.

haven. The fast pace of transformation, contrary to common belief, was not significant in Valera's eyes and thus he ends *Morsamor's* path among religions with the following statement:

But in essence, is there any progress...? I suspect the opposite is true. In ancient times men were often right in their assumptions because they were closer to the original revelation, or because their minds, free from the heavy load of experience and observation, were better able to reach higher spheres and attain an inspiration that partook of the innocent and almost of the divine. Today, by too much thinking and too many subtleties, the human mind is accelerated and distorted. There is no progress, just a perversion.<sup>19</sup>

In his letter to Menéndez, Valera states that Madame Blavatsky's miracles and doctrines, as well as those of her followers, whether they were true or not, constituted a unique and memorable example of the fin de siècle mentality. It is this feeling common to the end of the nineteenth century that Valera recreates in his novel, achieved by lending a voice to those who question progress and understand the terrible disorientation and confusion experienced by humanity as it moves farther and farther away from the Truth and from Nature. That is to say, from God.

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<sup>19</sup> Valera, *Obras completas*, vol. 1, p. 810.