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**Neruda in Asia/ Asia in Neruda:  
Enduring traces of South Asia in the journey  
through *Residencia en la tierra***

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**Neruda in Asia/ Asia in Neruda:  
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**by**

**Roanne Sharp, B.A.**

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## Abstract

**Neruda in Asia/ Asia in Neruda:  
Enduring traces of South Asia in the journey  
through *Residencia en la tierra***

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

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Even the title *Residencia en la tierra*, one of the early masterworks of Chilean Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda, suggests a subject who stands alone in a world that is his by happenstance, in which he does not permanently dwell and to which he does not naturally belong. Stylistically and politically, too, among Neruda's work *Residencia* seems to stand alone. Before *Residencia*, Neruda's poetry was deeply personal and, compared to what came later, profoundly standard for its time and place; after the *Residencia* poems were completed—though before they had all been published—Neruda's poetry would take a turn for the political that would remain with him more or less for the duration of his career. Indeed, the series presents a paradox for critics: a pivotal moment in his poetic development—what Emir Rodríguez Monegal calls Neruda's first truly creative work—but also a work seemingly out of sync with Neruda's later writings and vehemently rejected by the author himself only a few years after its publication. In sum, it is a work that refuses equally to be incorporated or to be ignored. This essay will attempt to carve out a more stable place for *Residencia en la tierra* in the critical understanding of Neruda's poetic trajectory precisely by returning it to the place of its genesis. By

retracing Neruda's experiences in South Asia during his sojourn in Burma [Myanmar] and Ceylon [Sri Lanka] as a diplomat in the late 1920s, the place where the enduring symbolism and ethical framework of the *Residencia* series were born, I will suggest new modes of reading *Residencia* that shed light on both why this book is so different from his others and the ways in which they are profoundly linked.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Why not Asia? .....	6
An entry into Asia .....	11
Enchantment and disenchantment.....	20
The Ensimismado and social engagement .....	34
Conversion and Rejection .....	41
Conclusion .....	43
Bibliography .....	45
Vita Roanne Sharp .....	46

## Introduction

Even the title *Residencia en la tierra* [Residence on earth], one of the early masterworks of Chilean Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda, suggests a subject who stands alone in a world that is his by happenstance, in which he does not permanently dwell and to which he does not naturally belong. Stylistically and politically, too, among Neruda's work *Residencia* seems to stand alone. Before *Residencia*, Neruda's poetry was deeply personal and, compared to what came later, profoundly standard for its time and place; after the *Residencia* poems were completed—though before they had all been published—Neruda's poetry would take a turn for the political that would remain with him more or less for the duration of his career. Indeed, the series presents a paradox for critics: a pivotal moment in his poetic development—what Emir Rodríguez Monegal calls Neruda's first truly creative work (Rodríguez Monegal 1988, 269)—but also a work seemingly out of sync with Neruda's later writings and vehemently rejected by the author himself only a few years after its publication. In sum, it is a work that refuses equally to be incorporated or to be ignored. This essay will attempt to carve out a more stable place for *Residencia en la tierra* in the critical understanding of Neruda's poetic trajectory precisely by returning it to the place of its genesis. By retracing Neruda's experiences in South Asia during his sojourn in Burma [Myanmar] and Ceylon [Sri Lanka] as a diplomat from 1927 to 1930, the place where the enduring symbolism and ethical framework of the *Residencia* series were born, I will suggest new modes of

reading *Residencia* that shed light on both why this book is so different from his others and the ways in which they are profoundly linked.

In his foundational book on Neruda, *Neruda: El viajero inmóvil*, Emir Rodríguez Monegal sums up the complex interweaving of Neruda's aesthetic and political trajectories in the following manner:

A partir de la guerra civil española, Neruda participa cada vez más en la lucha política: se adhiere al Frente Popular en Chile, 1937; es consul chileno para la emigración española, 1939; se convierte en poeta del Segundo frente de ayuda a Rusia, 1942-1944; en senador comunista, 1945; en acusador público del presidente chileno, don Gabriel González Videla; en perseguido político y combatiente clandestino, mientras termina el *Canto general*, 1948-1949; es Premio Stalin de la Paz, 1950.

[After the Spanish Civil War, Neruda participates more and more in political action: he joins the Frente Popular in Chile, 1937; he is the Chilean consul for Spanish emigration, 1939; he becomes the poet laureate of the second assistance front in Russia, 1942-1944; he becomes a communist senator, 1945; a public denouncer of the Chilean president, don Gabriel González Videla; he is politically persecuted and a secret combatant, all while finishing *Canto general*, 1948-1949; He wins the Stalin Peace Prize, 1950.] (Rodríguez Monegal 1988, 11)<sup>1</sup>

The birth of Neruda's political engagement, then, is coeval for Rodríguez Monegal with his book of poetry *España en el corazón*, its development tracks along the third *Residencia* and the move toward a naturally emplaced sense of self immersed in a political history of the Americas in *Canto general*. But what is conspicuously missing from these timelines is a notion of the connection between this Neruda and the one who came before, the writer of *Residencia I* and *II*, or the connection between that Neruda and the even younger poet who wrote about love in rhyming verses in *Viente poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*. Even more puzzling is the idea that Neruda's consular work

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<sup>1</sup> All prose translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Translations from *Residencia en la tierra* come from the New Directions facing English/ Spanish edition translated by Donald D. Walsh.

in 1939 is “political” but his consular work in 1927 is somehow not. Although the third part of *Viajero inmóvil* addresses Neruda’s poetry chronologically in an attempt to at least suggest continuity in his large and diverse poetic oeuvre, it does so with no particular theoretical power.

Indeed, major scholarship on Neruda is torn by the very vastness of the corpus from which it draws, and this rupture is perhaps most acutely felt in relation to *Residencia*. The four critics on whose work I will draw most heavily in the course of this study neatly exemplify various strategies to deal with this disjuncture. Amado Alonso, a major touchstone for all Neruda criticism to follow, focuses on Neruda’s aesthetics to the almost absolute exclusion of biographical details. It was also published in 1940, before the political turn in Neruda’s work could be considered a major trend, and of necessity deals exclusively with the pre-1936 poetry that Rodríguez Monegal’s analysis largely disregards. On the other extreme, Hernán Loyola writes a series of critical interventions based on an excruciatingly detailed examination of Neruda’s biography, and happens, either out of preference or to preserve a sense of unity, to limit himself to Neruda’s childhood and earlier collections. Rodríguez Monegal in *El viajero inmóvil* and Enrico Mario Santí in *Pablo Neruda: The Poetics of Prophecy* each seek a middle ground, but find it in significantly different places. Rodríguez Monegal ambitiously suggests continuity throughout all of Neruda’s work, but manages to make it cohere only by severing with the everything before 1936. Santí’s project is more modest from the start, suggesting a prophetic “mode” that can serve to explain a single among many trajectories

in Neruda's work, one beginning in *Residencia en la tierra* and running through a handful of other collections not otherwise connected in time or space.

All four of these critics have suggested that Neruda's dislocation in space during the early *Residencia* years is related to the unique character of the collection. But only to a point. They admit that Neruda's dislocation from South America was important to his poetic growth, but only inasmuch as it gave him the time, space and solitude he needed to transform himself. Most characterize Neruda's work of the period as "hermética" [self-enclosed] (Amado Alonso), an "exploración de ser" [an exploration of the self] (Emir Rodríguez Monegal), "both self-referential and self-destructive" (Enrico Mario Santí) and all join an even bigger host of critics in describing the Neruda of *Residencia* as "ensimismado" [self-absorbed], as if the only person Neruda encountered in all those years were Pablo Neruda. In the same vein, Asia for these critics is not a place in itself, but simply a blank space, a sort of prison (Neruda, Santí), or hell (Rodríguez Monegal), as if the poems of *Residencia* were nothing more than hatch marks counting down the days on the vast white expanse of an indifferent cell wall.

But a fresh examination of *Residencia* will clearly show that Asia was a vibrant environment eliciting a strong reaction from Neruda. Focusing on Neruda's time in South Asia (consular assignments in British colonies Burma and Ceylon as well as stints in Calcutta, New Delhi and Madras) and the poems written there, I will argue that Neruda's reaction to Asia is far more complex than mere self-absorption: Asia was not incidental

but intrinsic to the development of a symbolic system and a mode of burgeoning social commentary that distinguishes the *Residencia* series from Neruda's other styles. By accepting the influence of Asia on *Residencia*, this paper will also suggest a place for Neruda criticism within an emerging body of scholarship on Latin American Orientalism. Critics in this field have not tended to consider Neruda's work as Orientalist perhaps for the same reason that Neruda specialists have overlooked Asia in his work: Although Neruda's reaction to Asia is strong, it is also overwhelmingly negative. In general this line of scholarship has tended to view Latin American Orientalism only as a positive phenomenon of enchantment and identification. By incorporating Neruda's *Residencia* series into the field, we open this line of criticism to the dark side of Orientalism: disgust, disenchantment and alienation. A return to the source of theories on Orientalism will show that enchantment and disenchantment are not simply opposites—they are opposing sides of a larger, single phenomenon.

## Why not Asia?

Before we embark on a journey to reclaim the Asian in *Residencia*'s symbolism, it is essential to look more carefully at the reasons this line of criticism has not been taken up seriously before. There have been books, notably Edmundo Olivares' *Neruda en el Oriente* that treat the biographical details of the diplomatic period, but even these adamantly conclude that there is no Asia in Neruda. Other critics who focus on the *Residencia* era from a more literary point of view are quick to come to the same conclusion, even when it runs counter to all likelihood. For instance, when theorists like Alonso and Loyola try to explain Neruda's symbolism in *Residencia*, they almost invariably connect it back to his childhood in Chile. Never does Asia feature as a source for these symbols, except when Loyola claims that we can account for them by looking at the English literature Neruda read during his time there!<sup>2</sup> But how can it be that symbols like trains, cattle, and poppies are *only* Chilean objects if they are hardly ever mentioned until *after* Neruda departs for Ceylon? Why would generations of critics automatically assume that these symbolic objects had no relationship whatsoever to Asia?

The answer comes from Neruda himself. A passage from his memoir *Confieso que he vivido* [Memoirs—I confess I have lived] does not so much suggest as insist that such a line of inquiry is unacceptable. Critics have taken this passage as a *carte blanche*

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<sup>2</sup> Loyola and Santí both devote significant space to tracing Neruda's English reading list in the *Residencia* years. Most notably in their findings are links to T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, and Romantic poets like William Blake. Neruda probably had the best access to these works while living in Ceylon within borrowing distance from the personal library of a well-known Ceylon intellectual of Dutch extraction named Lionel Wendt.

to ignore Asia, or as a “keep out” sign warning the errant inquirer to turn back. I will suggest instead that “the poet doth protest too much”—a more careful reading of the passage in question and the historical circumstance in which it was written will yield a very different interpretation.

Neruda writes:

He leído en algunos ensayos sobre mi poesía que mi permanencia en Extremo Oriente influye en determinados aspectos de mi obra, especialmente en *Residencia en la tierra...* digo que me parece equivocado eso de la influencia.

Todo el esoterismo filosófico de los países orientales, confrontado con la vida real, se revelaba como un subproducto de la inquietud, de la neurosis, de la crisis de principios del capitalismo. En la India no había por aquellos años muchos sitios par alas contemplaciones del ombligo profundo. Una vida de brutales exigencias materials, una condición colonial cimentada en la más acedrada abyección, miles de muertos cada día, de cólera, de viruela, de fiebres y de hambre, organizaciones feudales desequilibradas por su inmensa población y su pobreza industrial, imprimían a la vida una gran ferocidad en la que los reflejos místicos desaparecían.

Casi siempre los núcleos teosóficos eran dirigidos por aventureros occidentals, sin faltar americanos del Norte y del Sur... Esa gente se llenaba la boca con el Dharma y el Yoga. Les encantaba la gimnasia religiosa impregnada de vacío y palabrería.

Por tales razones, el Oriente me impresionó como una grande y desventurada familia humana, sin destinar sitio en mi conciencia para sus ritos ni para sus dioses. No creo, pues, que mi poesía de entonces haya reflejado otra cosa que la soledad de un forastero transplantado a un mundo violento y extraño.

[I have read some essays about my poetry which suggest that my stay in the Far East has influenced certain aspects of my work, especially *Residence on earth...* I declare that this claim of influence strikes me as wrong.

All the philosophic eroticism of those Eastern lands, when confronted with real life, are revealed to be a byproduct of the nervousness, the neurosis, the crisis of the principles of capitalism. In India in those years there wasn't much space for deep navel gazing. It was a life of brutal material exigencies, a colonial condition cemented by the harshest abjection, thousands of death every day, from cholera, from measles, from fevers and hunger, feudal organizations put out of balance by the immense population and industrialized poverty, all of this impressed upon life a great ferocity that in which mystic reflection simply disappear.

Almost always at the heart of theosophy were Western vagabonds, not to mention residents of both North and South America... Those people spoke only of Dharma and Yoga. They were enamored with religious gymnastics full of emptiness and blathering.

Thus, the Orient has always struck me as a great, wretched human family, without any space in my mind for its gods or their rites. I don't believe, in the end, that my poetry has reflected anything more than the experience of a guest who finds himself in a strange and violent world.] (Neruda 2000, 85)

I have selected such a large passage precisely because it seems to me most critics have excused themselves from dealing with Asia by using such a small one. Although Neruda says explicitly in the first paragraph that he does not give credence to critics who propose an Asian influence on his work, it becomes clear as we continue reading that he is defending himself against a very particular kind of Asian influence: New Age spiritualism. We must recall that Neruda wrote his memoirs in an era when interest in South Asia revolved almost exclusively around this kind of spiritual tourism—just think of the Beatles in Rishikesh—in which even other Latin American intellectuals like Octavio Paz were getting swept up.<sup>3</sup> He cements this distinction as he goes onto denounce the “aventureros occidentales” with their fascination with Dharma and “gymnasia religiosa.” The concluding portion of this section, not included here, hammers home the point with a story about an American hippie whose free-love new-age philosophy results in the death of his wife. Such an orientalism of enchantment, which Neruda reports having abandoned even in his earliest writings from South Asia, would certainly have remained unattractive to him later in life (Loyola 2006). For Neruda, the “vida real” of Asia is one made up of suffering and poverty, one where the “esoterismo filisófico” that enchants westerners is nothing but garden variety Marxist false consciousness. In fact, this is very close to the “disenchanted” orient whose traces we can see clearly in *Residencia*.

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<sup>3</sup> Gita Metha's *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* is a succinct explanation of this trend.

Even if one were to ignore this distinction and take Neruda's statement as it has generally been taken, at face value, we would do well to proceed with caution in trusting Neruda's analysis of his early life and feelings in *Confieso* and other late works. We must recall that Neruda began to denounce his poetic project in *Residencia* almost as soon as the final volume came out in print. Rodríguez Monegal quotes Neruda's letter to a friend and critic, Alfredo Cadona Peña, in 1950 "Contemplándolos ahora, considero dañinos los poemas de *Residencia en la tierra*. Estos poemas no deben ser leídos ... Son poemas que están empapados de un pesimismo y angustia atroces. No ayudan a vivir. Ayudan a morir. [Looking back at them now, I consider the poems of *Residencia en la tierra* to be harmful. These poems must not be read... They are poems which are soaked in atrocious pessimism and anguish, they do not help you to live, but to die.]"<sup>4</sup> (Rodríguez Monegal 1988, 13). But this paper will argue that even by the mid-1930s, long before his ultimate rejection, Neruda had begun to turn away from the feelings and beliefs that underpin the early *Residencia* series. It is difficult to imagine that Neruda could accurately represent the way he felt *during* a period of artistic exploration from which he ultimately distanced himself so completely. While examining the development of a symbolic language in *Residencia I*, more specific evidence will be mustered to reveal the gaps between Neruda's recollections in the 1970s and his likely experiences in the 1930s.

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<sup>4</sup> Translation from Adam Feinstein's *Pablo Neruda: A Passion for Life*.

Concurrent to and interrelated with his artistic evolution, Neruda experienced an intense politicization directly after *Residencia II* and the communist philosophy he began to engage with in the mid-1930s is quite obvious in his portrayal of the dichotomy between Oriental religion and Oriental reality. Although it is obvious from contemporary letters and passages of *Residencia* itself that Neruda never held much sympathy for Buddhism or Hinduism, his observation above is clearly influenced by a worldview that was not relevant to the young Neruda who first arrived in Burma.

Finally, in this passage Neruda betrays an anxiety about being misunderstood that is particularly urgent at the end of life. Because he does not wish to be caught up in the trends of the moment, Neruda spends an inordinate amount of time addressing them. But the very particular picture of Asia he was reacting against was hardly prominent before the 1960s, nor has it remained uniquely relevant in the present time. We must be willing to see the opinions of *Confieso* as a product of their time in order to escape their overwhelming influence, and we must dare to suggest connections beyond those Neruda directly acknowledges, even exploring the ones he directly rejects.

## **An entry into Asia**

According to the work of Hernan Loyola, most of Neruda's *Residencia* poems can be dated with significant precision (Loyola 2006). For him, the poem that opens Neruda's time in Asia is "Colección nocturna", written, he claims, on the boat between Singapore, the first stop on Neruda's Asian tour, and Burma, his first diplomatic post. This would make it one of the first handful of poems in the *Residencia* series. But "Colección nocturna" was also one of the *last* poems to be completed in the first *Residencia*, and Loyola concedes it was most likely edited at the same time Neruda was writing "Significa sombras" (Loyola 2006, 429). Such a temporal layering would also suggest the possibility of an experiential layering, and this section will use examples from "Colección Nocturna" to suggest how the resonance of several experiences coexist simultaneously in one of Neruda's most potent symbols.

The symbol I wish examine is one whose associations are multiple and contested, even before my own intervention: the amapola, or poppy. The word "amapola(s)" is mentioned more than a dozen times in the *Residencia* series, especially in the first and second books written during and just after Neruda's time in South Asia; they appear only once in all of his previous poetry. Although Neruda frequently makes reference to other flowers such as liliás (lilies) and jazmines (jasmynes), each of which has its own specific

resonance in South Asia, the significance of poppies is profoundly different no matter what its origin.

Alonso, in a purely textual analysis, concludes that poppies are a flexible symbol: “Unas veces son rojas heridas, otras el sueño y los sueños, como flor de adormidera, otras violenta pasión amorosa, otras bocas apasionadas. Es frecuente asociar este símbolo con la noche o con el crepúsculo, sugiriendo a la vez lo apasionado, el color rojo y el reinado del sueño.” [Sometimes they are red wounds, other times they are sleep and dreams, the sleep-inducing flower (another name for poppy), other times a violent amorous passion, or a passionate mouth. The symbol is frequently associated with night or twilight, suggesting both passion, the color red and the realm of sleep.] (Alonso 1997, 261) Among these associations, the one that is important for our analysis is the poppy as a representative of sleep, the symbolic mode of the flower that Alonso directly connects with “Colección nocturna.” But one of the limits of Alonso’s criticism is that, so strictly tied to the textual realm, it often fails to suggest *why* certain object has been given their particular symbolic resonance. The case of poppies is no exception.

In his biographical criticism, Loyola offers more fixed and concrete meanings for Neruda’s *Residencia* symbols, although he does allow for the possibility that the poems as a whole may have multiple points of reference. Poppies, in particular, are related to a sort of primal scene from Neruda’s childhood, his encounter with a “jardín secreto” [secret garden] or “patio de las amapolas” [poppy patio] filled exclusively with poppies

(Loyola 2006, 62-63). In Neruda's description, there is an inherent connection between these flowers, "marinas como anémonas" [aquatic like anemones], and the ocean, but also to the air, its petals like "grandes mariposas" [huge butterflies] or "palomas" [doves].

As we will see below, associations with sea and sky appear together in "Colección nocturna" alongside poppies, but Loyola's analysis of the poem does not account for their juxtaposition. Instead, he connects "colección nocturna" very concretely to an experience Neruda recounts in one of his contemporary essays to *La Nación*, entitled "El sueño de la tripulación" (Loyola 2006, 306). In the article, Neruda describes the strange feeling of being awake on a boat in which a motley crew of other passengers are all asleep, and imagining through their posture what they might be dreaming, and what their waking lives might be like. This, for Loyola, accounts for the opening line of the poem "He vencido al ángel del sueño" [I have defeated the angel of sleep/dreaming] and the work's nautical references, and I do not wish to discount this reading. But Loyola fails to provide an organic explanation of how this situation connected with the symbols used to describe it, and why those symbols appear only after 1927 as Neruda leaves Chile and the *patio de las amapolas* behind. In the case of Loyola, just as with Alonso, the question why remains unanswered: If this is a scene from Chile and from childhood, why does it take so many years and such a long journey to reappear?

It is because poppies have a *third* resonance that is particular and exclusive to the Asian context in which Neruda re-encountered them: they are the base crop for opium, and Burma, where Neruda was first stationed, was then and continues to be one of the

largest opium producers in the world. Neruda's experiences smoking opium are the missing link that connects poppies to the "realm of sleep", and reading "Colección nocturna" as an opium dream can therefore provide a convincing the narrative arch for the poem.

We know Neruda experimented with opium in part because of accounts in his own memoirs. Neruda devotes a chapter to opium in *Confieso*, giving a rich omniscient description of opium dens and their inhabitants. When it comes to his own (purportedly two) experiences with the drug, however, Neruda downplays any influence opium had on him. The first time he smoked it he fell violently ill, the second time he experienced a dull but addictive dreaming. "*Después de entonces*" he writes "*no volví a los fumadores... ya sabí... ya conocía... ya había palpado algo inasible... remotamente escondido detrás del humo...*" [After that, I never returned to the opium dens... I already knew... I had become familiar... I had touched something beyond reach... hidden deeply behind the smoke] (Neruda 2000, 89-90). That is, he has experienced opium enough to gain authority over it, but has not been seduced. In the memoir, self-control wins out, yet, if we look at Neruda's letters, a different story emerges. At the bottom of a letter to his friend and famous correspondent Héctor Eandi in January 1929, Neruda's traveling companion Álvaro Hinojosa writes a postscript indicating that "Pablo duerme, se tira una caña de opio y despierta justamente para cumplir sus deberes oficiales." [Pablo sleeps, smokes an opium pipe and only wakes up to take care of official duties] (Neruda 2008, 45). This note seems to suggest that Neruda smoked opium in his own home where

Hinojosa could see him (rather than in a den). Thus, contrary to the indication given by Neruda's confession about the opium dens, that is, of a man who tries opium a few times and makes the rational decision to give it up, opium smoking seems to have been a part of Neruda's regular habits during the time he lived in South Asia.

We can trace the presence of opium on "Colección nocturna" from the opening where we encounter the "angel del sueño." (1) The first four stanzas of "Colección nocturna" comprise an initial appraisal of the "angel del sueño", his tools and their effects on the speaker, seemingly alone in the world. The angel is "perfumado de frutos agudos" (4), "un vino de color confuso" ( 9), "un paso de polvoriento de vacas bramando" (10) [perfumed with sharp fruits; wine of a confused color; the dusty passing of bellowing cows]. These three characterizations are all reflections of Neruda's own description of opium smoke from *Confieso*. Like the angel's sour smell, opium's odor is "*extrañamente repulsivo y poderoso*," [strangely repulsive and powerful] the color of its smoke "*caliginoso*" [hazy] and "*lechoso*" [milky], indicating both the indeterminate color of the wine (another intoxicant) and the thick, light-colored dust kicked up by the "vacas bramando". His "sustancia"[substance] and "alimento profético propagada tenazmente" (20) ([his prophetic food he propagates tenacously], as well as later reference to his "frutos blandos del cielo" (40) [bland fruits of the sky] in stanza seven all seem to refer to a comestible substance associated with an altered state of consciousness beyond mere sleep. More concretely, this substance is described as arriving to the speaker in a "canasto negro" (11) [black hamper], evoking the particular physicality of opium which is

generally a dark brown or black resin transported in large, dark casing. The image of “*uvas negras, inmensas, repletas*” (60) [immense black grapes, swollen] in stanza ten reinforces this idea: a large dark shell that holds an even darker seed. The physiological effects of opium smoking also appear, as when the angel “*galopa en la respiración y su paso es de beso*” (15) [gallops in the breath and his step is kisslike], which indicates the duality of smoking as both nauseating and enticing, just as Neruda later described it.

In the second section of the poem, starting in the fifth stanza, we meet other dreamers in the speaker’s world. These are no ordinary sleepers, but very obviously recognizable according to the descriptions of opium eaters we often find literature, but particularly in Neruda’s *Confieso*. In his memoirs, Neruda describes opium eaters in a haze between rest and sleep, saying “*Los hombres adormecidos no hacían movimiento ni ruido...soñaban con los ojos entrecerrados... viviendo una hora sumergidos debajo del mar*” [The drowsing men make no movement or sound...they dream with eyes half open... living for an hour submerged in the ocean] (Neruda 2000, 89). In the poem, this imagery is expanded but clearly recognizable: “*a cada cuerpo/ la palidez del distrito letárgico acude:/ una sonrisa fría, sumergida,/ ojos cubiertos como fatigados boxeadores/ una respiración que sordamente devora fantasmas.*” (50-54) [to each body/ hastens the pallor of the lethargic district / a cold smile, submerged/ eyes hooded, like weary boxers/ breath that dully devours ghosts] Notice the recurrence of marine imagery in the lines “*sumergidos debajo del mar*” and “*una sonrisa fría, sumergida*”—we’ll come back to this later. For now it is most important to note the similarity of “*ojos entrecerrados*” and “*ojos*

cubiertos como fatigados boxeadores”: eyes that are not fully closed in sleep, but slitted or hooded, an eye that is dreaming, and possibly also a racialized Asian eye.

It is also important to note that these dreamers inhabit a particular place, a “distrito letárgico.” In Neruda’s description, the opium den environment is spare, opaque, still and silent. “*No tenían nungún lujo, ni tapicerías, ni cojines de seda... Todo era tablas sin pintar, pipas de bamboo y almohadas de loza china*” [there was no luxury, no tapestries, no silk cushions... Just unpainted slats, bamboo pipes and stoneware pillows.] (Neruda 2000, 89-90) This rundown environment is echoed in the room where the dreamers lie together “cerrada como una bodega, el aire es criminal:/ las paredes tienen un triste color de cocodrilo.” (56-57) [closed like a wine cellar, the air is an criminal/ the walls have a sad crocodile color] In this place the speaker and his dreamers “debemos cenar vestidos de luto,” (64) [we must sup dressed in mourning] again invoking a connection between consumption and dreaming in a sad, stripped-down environment, while “el enfermo de malaria guardará las puertas.” (65) [the malarial patient will guard the door] The “enfermo de malaria” for me cements the idea that this poem takes place in Asia because Neruda constantly evokes fevers, chills and “malaria” in *Residencia I* as a metonym for the misery of Asian existence, as we shall see in following chapter.

It is in the second section that Neruda’s speaker actually begins dreaming at the very moment when he consumes the “luz de amapola” [poppy light] of other dreamers around him. Significantly, this consumption is directly related to “delirio” [delirium], an

absolutely clear connection between the artificially induced sleep of opium and the symbolic use of the poppy. Having consumed the poppy, Neruda begins to speak in plural: “qué ciudades opacas *recorremos*” [what dark cities *we* travel through] (emphasis added). Again, opaque here refers to the texture of opium smoke. The crew of dreamers at first consumes “frutas del cielo” in the form of birds and other denizens of the sky. Later, the dreamers become sailors sleeping on a ship, and the sound of a “gong de muerte” [gong of death/ dead gong] surrounds and buffets them like the sea. These two situations both recall images born of the *patio de las amapolas*, poppies as birds and poppies as ocean creatures or the ocean itself, even as they are marshaled to describe a distant reality. But sound also has a fascinating role to play here in a way that suggests one final connection to the opium den.

At the end of the opium chapter in *Confieso*, Neruda travels to a second den so poor that “*No había muebles, alfombras, nada... nada más sino el silencio y el aroma del opio.*” [there was no furniture, pillows, nothing... nothing but the silence and the scent of opium]. In this description, the silence becomes a chimera-like but definite presence just like the smoke, “opaco” and “caliginoso”. Its very presence seems to overtake the space where “muebles” and “almohadas” might otherwise have been. This overpowering silence reappears in “Colección nocturna” as the angel’s “opaco sonido de sombra” (7) [an opaque sound of shadow], the “mudos cerrojos” (63) [mute lock]; it becomes a feature of opium itself as the “substancia sin ruido” (19) [soundless substance]. Moreover, in Neruda’s memoirs this silence is connected specifically to the environment

“*debajo del mar*” [under the sea]. Thus, to be surrounded by silence is to be surrounded by water, and we need only think of the deadening of sound under water to corroborate this. Hence the “sonrisa... sumergida,” [submerged smile] but also the image of the “gong de muerte” (47) [gong of death] whose sound becomes water as a metonym for silence. Santí points out paradox inherent in the repeated image of a “dead sound” in *Residencia I* when he explicates the collection’s first poem, “Galope muerto.” For Santí, the title refers not to a gallop, but to a striking, as of a bell or gong. Thus, a “galope muerto” would be the strike of a bell that makes no sound, probably also what Neruda meant by the term “gong de muerte,” although the later “gong” has is another element that places us particularly in Asia. The sound of a “dead gong” or “death’s gong” is the solid silence that drowns the opium den.

## Enchantment and Disenchantment

Not long after he arrived in Burma, Neruda wrote to a friend about his experience of Burmese culture: “todo es encantador la primera semana. Pero las semanas, el tiempo pasa.” [everything is charming the first week. But then the weeks pass, time goes by] (Loyola 2006, 304) As I mentioned in the introduction, scholars of Latin American Orientalism have tended to focus exclusively on enchantment, but this is a feeling that abandoned Neruda in the first weeks of his diplomatic career. Even in the opium den, we begin to see a disjuncture between what Neruda expected or wanted from Asia and what he found there. In *Confieso* he recalls the reason he initially wanted to smoke opium: He “ought” to smoke it because it is the province of writers and poets like Colridge who detailed his opium dreaming in *Kublai Khan*. His own experience immediately disappoints: “*aquello no podia ser todo... tanto se había dicho, tanto se había escrito... El opio no era el paraiso de los exotistas que me habían pintado*” [That could not be all... so much had been said, so much had been written... Opium was not the paradise the exoticists had painted for me.] (Neruda 2000, 89-91). Yet is this disjuncture between the Orient as it is written and as it is experienced that typifies Orientalist writing, not just Coleridge-style enchanting descriptions of the Orient. Said calls this a “textual” experience of the Orient and gives multiple examples of writers who begin by describing Asia as it exists around them, only to retreat to a textual description of its glorious past or its esoteric religious practices as a kind of redemption from Asia’s sordid reality.

Other Orientalist writers, and I include Neruda here, focused their attention onto the “reality” of Asian squalor, expressing a “quality of disappointment, disenchantment or demystification”(Said 1979, 181). Rodriguez Monegal’s characterization of Neruda’s time in Asia as an “infierno” follows this line of thought: “ ...a partir del viaje al Oriente (1927), la residencia en la tierra se convierte en infierno, la angustia del infierno, la locura del infierno... Por eso, *Residencia en la tierra* es un libro volcánico. Su naturaleza es el fuego.” [After the voyage to the Orient (1927), the residence on earth becomes a hell, the anguish of hell, the madness of hell... That is why *Residencia* is a volcanic book. Its nature is fire.] (Rodríguez Monegal 1988, 270)

But again here, by not fully accounting for the Asian context, Rodríguez Monegal misses a crucial piece of the puzzle. Perhaps *Residencia* is not simply volcanic because Neruda conceives of it as a figurative hell, but because of the way he was bedeviled by the actual *heat* of South Asia. Writing to a friend, Neruda finds himself so sweltering that his mind literally overtaken by heat: “cada vez veo menos ideas en torno mío, y más cuerpos, sol y sudor.” [At every turn I see fewer and fewer ideas around me, and more bodies, sun and sweat]. (Rodríguez Monegal 1988, 80). Again and again heat and fever reappear in *Residencia I*, as in “Sistema sombrío” where the days are “abiertos por el sol como grandes bueyes rojos” (2) [opened by the sun like great red oxen] and in “Juntos nosotros”, where the speaker’s face is white but “hecha para la profundidad del sol” (18) [made for the sun’s depth], which has made the speaker’s skin “dorado” [golden] and, in

Diurno Doliente, made his skin “parecido al oro” (8) [like gold] (, ie, given him a tan). Heat causes thirst, as we see in “Serenata”, and are also the source of diseases indicated by fever, the “fiebre fria” (7) [cold fever] and the speaker’s icy forehead, a “vacío de hielos” (25) [wasteland of ice] in “Arte poetica” and the frequent fevers suffered by the speaker in “Tango del viudo”. Sometimes, as in “Colección nocturna” and “La noche del soldado”, the fever is even identifiable as “malaria”, a disease that, for Neruda, is associated particularly with Asia. In certain cases, heat is connected not only with the daily realities of South Asia, but even with religious practice and ideas of the afterlife. In “La noche del soldado” and “Entierro en el este”, Neruda makes reference to flaming cadavers, which connote both the every-day practice of cremation typical of Buddhist and Hindu traditions in Burma and Ceylon, but also evoke ideas of a Christian hell and heat itself as a kind of secular hell.

Heat is just one of the very obvious traditionally Orientalist symbols Neruda invokes in *Residencia I*. Among these, the most sustained references to Asia include “Entierro en el este,” [Burial/ funeral in the east], “El joven monarca” [the young monarch], and “mazón de mayo” [May monsoon], whose Asian themes are explicit enough to feature in their title. Yet, although “La noche del Soldado” is not quite so explicit, it contains modes of understanding South Asian religion, bodily adornment, plastic arts and arrangement of space that are typical to the point of being trite. The poem contains references to “mercaderes mahometanos” (17) [Mohammedan merchants] “gentes que adoran la vaca y la cobra” (17-18) [people who adore the cow and the cobra]

“grandes vegetales” (20) [great vegetables], “el lomo de las bestias feroces” (21) [the backs of fierce beasts], “lágrimas del viento monzón” [tears of the monsoon wind], and, of course “muchachas de ojos y caderas jóvenes...ellas llevan anillos en cada dedo del pie, y brazaletes, y ajorcas en los tobillos, y además, collares...” (35-39) [girls with young eyes and hips... they wear rings on each toe and bracelets and bangles on their ankles, and besides necklaces] who, under caresses from the speaker, become “estatuas” (41) [statues]. To claim that here there is no Asian influence is a folly.

Yet it is in the descriptions of Neruda’s Burmese lover Josie Bliss where we begin to see most clearly how Orientalism operates in the world of *Residencia*. We must recall that, although they lived together intensely for several months, Josie Bliss is utterly absent from Neruda’s contemporary correspondence—he seems to have had nothing to say about their daily life together while he was living it. Instead, the picture we have of Josie comes from sections of *Residencia* and from *Confieso*, at which point a very definite Orientalist narrative about her emerges. She is in every way Said’s prototypical “Oriental woman.” Such a woman has several features, many of which can be identified as either “enchanted” or “disenchanted”. In her mode as an enchantress, the Oriental Woman is compliant, docile, graceful, sexually open and “wise” with an attendant appearance of peak fertility, but paradoxically intellectually innocent to the point of naiveté or even stupidity. In her more wicked incarnation, she is animalistic in her hygiene and living arrangements, actually barren despite all the signs of her fertility, and emotionally volatile leading to outbursts of violent, masochistic and “fatal” behavior. Her

models are “such female figures as Cleopatra, Salomé and Isis,” all of whom mix their sensual attractions with a whiff of death (Said 1979, 180-86).

Patricia Vilches has written an exploration of Josie Bliss as an Orientalist fantasy, “‘La más bella de Mandalay’: Construcciones orientalistas de la feminidad en *Residencia en la tierra* de Neruda.” Her study, however, limits itself to Neruda’s flattening of Josie’s character through the application of positive attributes, that is, Josie the enchantress. She supports her argument largely through a close reading of the sexual encounter in the second half of “La noche del soldado”, suggesting that the speaker’s gaze turns the woman (here, as often, presumed to be Josie) into a sexual object so completely that she becomes “una estatua”, totally devoid of independent agency. But if this is a form of Orientalism, then what differentiates it from Neruda’s general fascination with statues of women, as evidenced by his truly enormous collection of female statues in the house on Isla Negra, most of which are not Asian in origin?<sup>5</sup> Vilches does not sufficiently distinguish Orientalism here from a more global misogyny.

One of Vilches’ more compelling interventions is the contrast she highlights between the fantasy woman Neruda constructs for his sexual encounter and “la tia, la novia, la suegra, la cuñada del soldado” (9) [the aunt, the bride, the mother-in-law, the sister-in-law of the soldier] who die of isolation and disease at the beginning of the poem.

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<sup>5</sup> For a generous sampling of these, see the photography collection *Las Cosas de Neruda* by Miguel Rojas Mix.

The abject reality of these women's lives and the ignobility of their fiery burial contrasts both with the enticingly statuesque women the speaker lusts after and the cool, unsullied alabaster angels who escort the soldier's female relatives to heaven. Implicit in Vilches' criticism is the assertion that these women typify the sordid reality of Asian life for Neruda, as we can see by returning for a moment to the idea of heat. In "La noche del soldado", Neruda erects a clever play between the heat of Asia, the literal heat of fever, and the longed for coolness that can only be achieved in death. After dying of malaria, he suggests, the women of the soldier's family both become physically cold as life leaves their bodies, and, he imagines, retire to a glacially cool heaven. At the same time their souls "irán custodiados por ángeles alabastrinos" (13-14) [will go guarded by alabaster angels], their dead bodies become "cadavers de fuego" (13) [fiery corpses] surrounded by "la llama y la ceniza" (14) [the flame and the ash]. Everything about these deaths is particular to South Asia: the angels are made of alabaster not only because its smooth white surface connotes frozenness, but because the idols Neruda saw in temples were so often made of this material. Their earthly funerals, too, are specifically Buddhist or Hindu cremations. In this way, Neruda touches on both aspects of Oriental womanhood even when Josie is only implicated on the side of the ideal. Only in "Tango del viudo" will Neruda finally unite these two aspects of the Oriental Woman in her image.

In "Tango del viudo" we see the savage, animalistic and violent Josie first, her association with animals playing out in her characterization of another woman related to the speaker, just as all the speaker's women suffer the same fiery fate in "La noche del

soldado”: “habrás insultado el recuerdo de mi madre,/ llamándola perra podrida y madre de perros.” (2-3) [you must have insulted my mother’s memory/ calling her rotten bitch and mother of dogs] The natural environment, and heat in particular, are in league with her to make the speaker’s life miserable with “mis enfermedades” (6) [my illnesses], and “las venenosas fiebres que me hicieron tanto daño.” (9) [the poisonous fevers did me so much harm] These things, taken together, indicate an unhygienic atmosphere full of danger. The theme of a fatal woman deepens as the speaker reveals the whereabouts of a kitchen knife that he buried “por temor de que me mataras” (20) [for fear you would kill me]. But we must pause here to emphasize that the speaker’s fear is a *perception* of Josie’s capacity to harm him rather than a direct threat. The same is true of her curses – we never hear from her directly, only what the speaker imagines she *would* do. Yet this threat and barbarity is inextricably mixed, for him, with the parts of Josie that he desires, so evident in the stanza where he praises different parts of her body: “tus piernas/ recostadas como detenidas y duras aguas solares,/ y la golondrina que duermiendo y volando vive en tus ojos, y el perro de furia que asilas en el corazón,” (29-31) [your legs/ curled up like still and harsh solar waters/ and the swallow that sleeping and flies living in your eyes/ and the furious dog that you shelter in your heart] each part connected with animals and nature. A stanza later he even goes so far as to pine for the sound of her urination, reducing her to her most animal qualities. He makes a similar connection in his memoirs, calling her “especie de pantera Birmana” [A species of Burmese panther], a name that suggests both sensuality and a type of animality associated with extreme danger. More than the bangles and toe rings, the alabaster statues, the coils of hair hung

with flowers and the sweet little feet Neruda praises in “La Noche del Soldado”, “El Joven Monarca,” and “Tango del Viudo”, this *perception* of barbarism is what fits Neruda’s treatment of Josie Bliss into the notion of Orientalism.

Critics, Vilches included, have almost utterly failed to question Neruda’s negative portrayal of Josie Bliss. In fact, some, most notably Loyola, have gone so far as to corroborate Neruda’s descriptions with evidence gleaned from other Orientalist works! At various points Loyola make the generalization that all Burmese women are of “temperamento terrible y dominante” [terrible dominating personality] based on a the authoritative observations of Neruda’s traveling companion Hijonosa about his unkind Burmese girlfriend; the portrayal of a concubine in a fictional account of Western life in Burma, *Burmese Days* by George Orwell; and the tenacity shown by Burmese women as exemplified by the political activist Aung San Suu Kyi!<sup>6</sup> Yet based on this scant evidence, and the fact that Josie, unlike Neruda, cannot represent herself in print, we are lead to believe that the situation described in “Tango del viudo” constitutes the truth. Only Rodriguez Monegal tentatively suggests a limit to our credulity: “Tal vez la verdadera Josie Bliss no esperó tanto.” [Perhaps the real Josie Bliss didn’t wait so long]. But he immediately returns to valorizing Neruda’s style of fictionalization, saying “la que aqui importa (la que realmente importa al poeta) es la Josie Bliss de sus recuerdos, y de

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<sup>6</sup> It is hard to overstate the absurdity of some of Loyola’s claims regarding Josie as he attempts to engage with Neruda’s Asian context. To cite just one example, Loyola suggests that Josie might have wanted to commit a ritualized murder-suicide with Neruda based on the similarity his name bears to a South Asian religious concept of bliss, the Sanskrit word *Niruddha*. He corroborates the connection between bliss and death using a quote from Kabir, a sixteenth century Hindu poet (Josie was Buddhist) writing in Avadi, a north-Indian dialect of pre-modern Hindi spoken *over 1000 miles* from Burma.

su autobiografía, esa Enemiga de sus poemas, la Desdichada que continua esperando desde la imborrable cicatriz en el pecho del poeta. [What really matters here (what really matters to the poet) is the Josie of his memories, of his autobiography, that Enemy of his poems, the Hopeless one who kept waiting inside the indelible scar on the poet's chest] (Rodríguez Monegal 1988, 90).

Perhaps no other single Orientalist gesture in Neruda's work is as offensive as his portrayal of Josie Bliss, but we must also be aware of critics' damaging tendency to unquestioningly consider Neruda's portrayal of Asian themes "true", where, as in the case of Josie, they are even recognized as Asian. We must guard against the habit of some critics to equate Neruda's disenchanted portrayal of Asia in *Residencia* and elsewhere with "authenticity" as do both Loyola and Rodríguez Monegal.

Having familiarized ourselves with the paradoxes inherent in the two sides of the Oriental Woman, we are equipped to look more deeply into the other paradoxes that fascinate Neruda in *Residencia I* (Santi' 1982). The same features Neruda ascribes to Josie can be seen writ large on the Asian environment as a façade of cyclical births and deaths – an appearance of fecundity – that masks an eternal and unchanging reality – barrenness.

When Neruda wrote to Eandi that *Residencia* "es un montón de versos de gran monotonía, casi rituales, misterio y dolores como hacían los viejos poetas... algo muy uniforme, como una sola cosa comenzada y recomenzada, como eternamente ensayada

sin éxito,” [It is a pile of verses that are profoundly monotonous, almost ritualistic, mystery and pain like the stuff of the ancient poets... something very uniform, like a single object begun over and over again, like elaborated eternally without success.] (Neruda 2008, 55) he was inspired not only by his own dull and unchanging lifestyle in Asia but also quite probably his particular understanding of Asia itself. Whether or not we choose to label it “Orientalism”, we can certainly see the feature of repetition as an assimilation of Buddhist cosmology and its sense of time.

Both Santí and Rodríguez Monegal have used the idea of repetition to guide their own analyses of *Residencia I*. Santí, for instance, claims that

What strikes one immediately about these statements is the recurrence of such key adjectives as “same”, “uniform”, “single”, and “insistent, all of which convey the idea of...tonal uniformity that links the various parts of the book and provides it with an overall coherence. They describe an external integrative principle, a cycle, which functions at the broadest level of the book as a unit. Yet the same terms imply as well an internal cyclic principle that concerns the representation, within individual poems, of objective circular structures. Both external and internal cyclic principles coexist in these statements and both could be said to structure the form of *Residencia en la tierra*. (Santí 1982, 47)

The “principle” that Santí lays out here is sound, as I referred to earlier in reference to the “galope muerto” / “gong de muerte”, but his choice of repetitious terms is, if anything, too narrow. While analyzing “Galope muerto” in another section, Santí focuses on the image of plums that “se pudren en el tiempo, infinitamente verdes” (10) [rot in time, infinitely green] To him, this image is significant for the paradox it evokes,

one that connects it to the paradoxical deadened ringing of the title. What Sentí fails to illuminate, even in a chapter called “Vision and Time”, is that this paradox is *temporal*. Plums that rot before they are even ripe, plums that are “infinitely” green and will never ripen, these are indicators of a time that is at once always moving in cycles of birth and death and at the same time stuck in a single, unchanging moment.

It is a quality of timelessness that, Said would suggest, is particular to Western descriptions of the Orient, and one that Neruda uses to describe particularly Oriental elements in his poetry. In “Monzón de mayo”, for instance, there is a pervading sense of disappointed hopes, of moments in time that should be climactic or unique but are not, as in the image of the “cola de traje de novia triste” (19) [a sad bridal train], which is both literally the shape and texture of rain clouds and figuratively the promise of fertility already betrayed. The final question “Donde está su toldo de olor, su profundo follaje,/ su rápido celaje de brasa, su respiración viva?” (26-27) [Where is its fragrant awning, its deep foliage/ its swift cloud-piercing light, its living breath?] shows us more explicitly what is hoped for-- the freshness of a change of season and the novelty promised by the rapid movement of clouds. This, too, is another aspect of disenchantment—the reality of the monsoon runs into and contravenes his expectations of it. Instead of change, the season of rain brings another kind of monotony, indicated by words like “imóvil” [still] (28) “suspendido” (21) [suspended] and “sedentario” (25) [sedentary]. This same disappointment with the monsoon recurs in “La noche del soldado”. “Los meses no son inalterables, y a veces llueve” (18-19) [the months are not unalterable, and sometimes it

rains] the speaker says, but the very anemia of his description seems to indicate the opposite. At the end of the paragraph this rain has been absorbed into a “sola estación” [a single season] whose hours “ruedan a mis pies, y un día de formas diurnas y nocturnas está casi siempre detenido sobre mí.” (32-33) [roll at my feet, and a day of diurnal and nocturnal forms is almost always suspended over me]. That is to say that time itself moves forward and changes, but changes nothing around it. At the end of the poem, Neruda’s speaker is covered by the accumulation of a “polvo temporal” [dust of time] waiting for the “dios de substitución” [god of substitutions] to dispatch and replace him.

In “Trabajo frio” it is a series of quotidian objects that endlessly wither and repopulate “Aumento oscuro de paredes,/ crecimiento brusco de puertas,/ delirante población de estímulos,/ circulaciones implacables.” (10-12) [dark increase of walls/ the brusque growth of doors/ delirious population of stimuli/ implacable circulations] Ultimately, everything is included in this auto-generative principle: “Alrededor, de infinito modo/... el espacio hierve y se puebla.” (14-16) [Roundabout, infinitely/ ...space seethes and peoples itself]. While these lines address cycles of creation, the following lines address the constant destruction and monotony that comes with them. In this “carrera de los seres” (19) [rush of being], Neruda says, time and therefore death, will always win. “Sistema sombrío”, too, contains a similar image of stagnation among repetitions: “mis rostros diferentes se arriman y encadenan/ como grandes flores pálidas y pesadas/ tenazmente sustituidas y difuntas.” (12-14) [my different faces gather and make chains/ like great pale flowers, pale and weighty / tenaciously replaced and dying]. Like

the plums before them, these flowers are constantly changing yet always already withered. The particular image, moreover, of a chain of flowers recalls the constantly replaced garlands placed around idols and especially pictures of the dead— themselves “difuntas”—in South Asia. The connection of these images to notions of gods and their worship is far from incidental—for Neruda, the endless cycle of constant regeneration that results in paradoxical monotony is at the heart of the Buddhist and Hindu cosmologies that surround him.<sup>7</sup>

Although Neruda always stands firm in his antipathy to these religious philosophies, antipathy is not the same, in his case, as ignorance. We can tell that Neruda was familiar with the life and philosophy of the Buddha from one of his letters to Eandi in which he encloses a photograph of the “extraño Budha hambriento, después de aquellos inútiles seis años de privación.” [strange hungry Buddha, after those six years of senseless deprivation.](Neruda 2008, 35, 40) The cycles described in many of the poems, then, may be read as reflecting the cycles of *maya* (wordly attachment) from which Buddhists and Hindus endeavor to escape into *moksha* (release/ nirvana), or at least the Asian landscape in which such beliefs would tend to thrive. In at least one poem, “Significa sombras”, the concept of cycles of *maya* is absolutely clear: It is unquestionably the cycle of reincarnation that places the angel wings on Neruda’s speaker such that the path toward death is not a the length of a single lifetime but rather

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<sup>7</sup> Loyola identifies the philosophy in “Significa sombras” with Schopenhauer’s “World as will and idea”, but we must recall that this text itself is based on a Western assimilation of Hindu/Buddhist tensions between *maya* (wordly attachment) and *moksha* (release into nirvana).

“un violento vuelo comenzado desde hace muchos días y meses y siglos.” (8) [A violent flight begun many days and months and centuries ago] If Buddhist practice is meant to liberate humans from this cycle, Neruda wants nothing to do with it:

Ay, que lo que soy siga existiendo y cesando de existir,  
Y que mi obediencia se ordene con tales condiciones de hierro  
Que el temblor de las muertes y de los nacimientos no conmueva

El profundo sitio que quiero reservar para mí eternamente.

Sea, pues, lo que soy, en alguna parte y en todo tiempo,  
Establecido y asegurado y ardiente testigo,  
Cuidadosamente destruyéndose y preservándose incesantemente,  
Evidentemente empeñado en su deber original.  
(14-21)

[Ah, let what I am go on existing and ceasing to exist,  
and let my obedience be ordered with such iron conditions  
that the tremor of deaths and of births will not trouble  
the deep place that I wish to keep for myself eternally.

Let what I am, then, be in some place and in every time,  
An established and assured and ardent witness,  
Carefully destroying himself and preserving himself incessantly  
Clearly insistent upon his original duty.]

The second half of his poem is set out in the subjunctive tense almost like a prayer that asks perversely for the opposite of what his deity offers, that is a desire to continue in an endless *maya* cycle of deaths and rebirths eternally attached to his ego. If we consider the *Residencia I* as a piece of Neruda's being, then placing “Significa sombras” as a cap to the collection is a way of ensuring that his wish will be fulfilled.

## The *ensimismado* and social engagement

In the previous section we have established a relationship between the Asian environment in which Neruda was living when he began to write *Residencia en la tierra* and the symbolism and structures that characterize that work. The question remains, however, what is the purpose of these symbols and structures? What message are they attempting to send? In this section I will argue that *Residencia*, for all of its sense of isolation, nevertheless contains the seeds of social engagement that will come to the fore in *España en el corazón*. Thus, although Neruda forcefully rejects much of *Residencia* and its poetics by the late 1930s, we must also acknowledge the continuities between these two periods in his writing; although the *manner* of social engagement will change radically by the end of a decade, the *matter* of social engagement has its roots firmly in *Residencia I* and in Asia.

In *Confieso*, Neruda describes feelings intensely isolated from Asian culture but trusting that “más allá de las víboras y de los elefantes...había centenares, millares de seres humanos.” [beyond the vipers and the elephants... there were hundreds, thousands of human beings. ]The difficulty lay in discovering how to connect with those thousands of human beings “sin ser considerado un enemigo” [without being considered an enemy] like the British with whom he was forced to associate by profession, a group of people whose relationship to native South Asians was openly hostile. Poetry laden with

symbolism, a style I shall be calling “lyric” for reasons described below, seems to have occurred to Neruda as a mode of both expressing his alienation and transcending it. Returning for a moment to “Colección nocturna”, Loyola writes that we can see in this poem Neruda’s first attempts to reach outside “los límites egocéntricos de su poesía” [the egocentric limits of his poetry] by connecting his own psychological condition to “el soñar de los otros.” [the dreaming of others]. The “dreamy” nature of his symbolism in this poem and the ones that follow in *Residencia I*—whether natural or chemically induced—allows Neruda to negotiate the purpose of poetry so that it is oriented toward action (Loyola 2006, 304). It is for this reason that, even within the recondite symbolism of the *Residencia* series when Neruda’s isolation within himself seems most extreme, both Loyola and Alonso recognize movements in *Residencia* from the specific self toward a general or universal experience.

For Loyola, ever the biographer, this means that Neruda uses the plural to talk about his singular, personal experience both in order to maintain a sense of privacy and to make his writing more accessible to his audience. According to this reading, in “La noche del soldado” the phrase “muchachas de ojos y caderas jóvenes” [girls with young eyes and hips] does not refer to several sexual partners, but particularly to Josie Bliss (Loyola 2006, 346-47). Alonso, on the other hand, sees the slippage as going both ways: while objects and ideas take on human traits in the phrases like “la mañana herida” [the wounded day], Neruda’s own feelings and experiences are alienated or objectified, such

that he speaks of “vagas leguas” [vague leagues] instead of “mis vagabundajes” [my wanderings] (Alonso 1997, 289).

It is this uneasy space between the absolutely personal and the totally generic that Theodor Adorno identifies as the heart of lyric poetry, and it is from this precarious position that the most intimate and personal of poetic styles is, for him, the *most* politically engaged. In “Lyric Poetry and Society,” Adorno argues that the very expression of alienation from society, even the retreat into the natural and the emotional that *implies* alienation, is powerfully social because it manages to indicate societal problems without over-determining the reader’s reaction to them through ideology. Because the lyric poet forces the reader to work through the connection between the poem’s aesthetic qualities and its meaning for himself, he has created a social space between himself and the reader where the latter is free to think beyond any meaning the poet may have originally intended: “a thought once set into motion by a poem cannot be cut off at the poet’s behest” (Adorno 2000, 213). In this formulation, it is ironically the version Neruda who talks about preserving his egotistical sense of self against the onslaught of the world in “Significa sombras” who is more socially engaged than the one who directly urges the reader “Venid a ver la sangre por las calles” [Come see the blood in the streets] in “Explico algunas cosas”. That is because lyric poetry merely wields the personal in order expose aspects of the general “not yet recognized as such.” The power of the lyric poet to expose the truth of the world is precisely what Santí refers to as the “poetics of prophesy.” For Santí, Neruda’s prophecy is not a prediction of the future but

an expression of the “absolute”, ie, of absolute truth (Santi’ 1982, 14-15). It is Neruda’s privileged position as a “prophet” to see and to express a “general” or “absolute” that is not yet accessible to the rest of the world.

We can see the power of an individual reaction to reveal general truths by returning to a further examination of Neruda’s attitude toward Buddhist religious belief in “Significa sombras”. Neruda’s central claim is one that will fit easily into his future embrace of communist ideology: Buddhist philosophy is a false consciousness that yields both “desamparo y inteligencia.” (3) [helplessness and intelligence] Yet Neruda does not insist his readers agree with his conclusions; he simply presents his own personal, visceral reaction to it (“Sea, pues, lo que soy, en alguna parte y en todo tiempo”) and that is sufficient for prophecy.

Yet the risk of playing in the interstice between self and other becomes evident to us as we follow Neruda through *Residencia II*, which, according to Santí “dramatizes the consequences of the poet’s submission to his monstrous creation.” This submission is effected in several ways, each of which brings us closer to Neruda’s ultimate rejection of his symbolic system in *España*: They are 1) a suggestion that symbols are being transformed from physical objects into mere sounds—this is literally the process of writing them into words in poetry, but also the process of evacuating their “substance” and thus meaning; 2) Conversely, a proliferation of the symbols as mere objects—they appear in clumps, in outpourings, in multiples, and their power is not to make meaning,

but to obliterate the space for it; 3) Limits to the speaker's agency based explicitly on symbolic language.

“Un día sobresale”, the first poem of *Residencia II*, illustrates how Neruda conceives of his poetic system even as it contains the seeds of its undoing. In the first four stanzas of the poem, “lo sonoro” [the sonorous] and “el sonido” [sound], different manifestation of the aural, yield a host of typically symbolic objects including “amapolas”, “palomas” and “campanas” that we will recognize from as early as “Colección nocturna”. Yet because they exist in sound, these objects can also be eradicated by the silence that takes over the second half of the poem and continues to haunt the speaker in the subsequent poem, “Sólo la muerte”. The aquatic imagery that soaks all of *Residencia* roars as it approaches the speaker, but turns to silence and death as it overtakes and drowns him—this relationship becomes metonymic of all symbolism within *Residencia*.

We see this “drowning” acutely in the middle poems of *Residencia II* as the potent symbols of the first volume become mere objects, but objects in a space that demonstrates what Santí calls “the horrible spectacle of the growth of things in time.” (Santí 1982, 69). In “Walking around”, we follow a man who is haunted not only by piles of “anteojos” “ascensores” (5), “dentaduras”, “paraguas” (39) [glasses, elevators, dentures, umbrellas] and other quotidian objects, but even the “pies”, “ojos” and “uñas” (10, 40) [feet, eyes, nails] of his own body which have become indistinguishable from the foreign objects that pile up around him. Whereas the Neruda of *Residencia I* celebrated

the divide between his body and the outside world in poems like “Ritual de mis piernas”, the Neruda of *Residencia II* has seemingly lost himself to the world. His potent symbols, too, have begun to disintegrate into soulless objects. This is the fate of one of his favorite symbols, the dove, in the evocative opening of “Desespendiente”: “La paloma está llena de papeles caídos, / su pecho está manchado por gomas y semanas, / por secantes más blancos que un cadáver, / y tintas asustadas de su color siniestro.” (1-4) [The dove is filled with split papers / its breast stained with erasers and weeks/ with blotting papers whiter than a corpse/ and inks frightened by their own sinister color] Here, instead of sound, the symbol dissolves into pens, papers and erasers—the objects of writing. But perhaps the “horrible spectacle of growth” is most evident in “Enfermedades en mi casa”. Here objects not only pile up, but each list implies longer lists through the use of the word “tanto/as” [so many], multiplying exponentially: “*tantos* trenes, / *tantos* hospitales con rodillas quebradas, / *tantas* tiendas con gentes moribundas.” (31-33)[so many trains, so many hospitals with broken knees/ so many stores with dying people] In the end, the of the world itself, represented by the “rio” [river], the “oceano” [ocean] and the “cielo” [sky] (50-53) must exist “entre” [between/among] proliferating objects, squeezed out until the objects leave no room at all, as implied by phrases like “no hay sino ruedas y consideraciones, /alimentos..., nada más que la muerte” (37-41) [there are only wheels and considerationss, nourishment... nothing but death].

Finally, although Neruda’s objects have gained power in the world at their speaker’s expense, the speaker is still perversely bound to express himself through them,

as we see in “Oda con un lamento”: “Sólo puedo quererte con besos y amapolas,/ con guirnaldas mojadas por la lluvia,...Sólo puedo quererte con olas a la espalda, entre vagos golpes de azufre y aguas ensimismadas...”(10-14) [I can only love you with kisses and poppies/ with garlands wet by the rain... I can only love you with waves at my back, amid vague sulphur blows and brooding waters]. Here we see a crazy accumulation of symbols, swept along, once again, in Neruda’s pervasive and deadly waters. But beyond the accumulation of increasingly meaningless “symbolic” items, I want to draw our attention to the speaker’s claim that he can “only” express his love through these means—his agency is not increased but severely limited by the symbolic tools at his disposal. Most importantly, the water that flows through all of *Residencia* is, here, explicitly “ensimismado”. That is to say, no matter where it flows, Neruda’s symbolism never actually allows him to transcend the self. The promise floated at the beginning of “Colección nocturna” is here finally and definitively sunk.

## Conversion and Rejection

In the mid-1930s Neruda experienced the brutalities of the Spanish Civil War, an event that immediately, profoundly and permanently changed the relationship between his poetry and political engagement. If *Residencia II* showed a progressive loss of faith in the power of lyric poetry to truly transcend the personal, then the war in Spain provided a potent way out, exemplified best in the tonal shift in “Explico algunas cosas”. Santí calls “Explico algunas cosas” one of Neruda’s “conversion poems”, implying the reflection on a previous mode of existence and its rejection from a point in the future when the world has become comprehensible (Santi’ 1982, 89).

The opening of “Explico algunas cosas” rejects the matter and the mode of *Residencia* with an explicit reference to its symbolism developed in Asia: “Preguntaréis: Y dónde están las lilias?/ Y la metafísica cubierta de amapolas?/ Y la lluvia que a menudo golpeaba/ sus palabras llenándolas/ de agujeros y pájaros?” [You will ask: And where are the lilacs?/ And the metaphysical blanket of poppies?/ and the rain that often struck/ your words filling them/ with holes and birds?] Not only do these lines invoke the typical *Residencia* symbolism in order to dispose of it, but they do so in the form of an apostrophe, directly addressing an audience who has been almost uniformly ignored in the lyric mode. Yet in the following stanza we seem to have returned to the same narrative mode of *Residencia II*, with the single difference that the speaker is reporting to

us in the past tense: “Yo vivía en un barrio/ de Madrid, con campanas,/ con relojes, con árboles.” [I lived in a quarter/ of Madrid, with bells/ with clocks, with trees]. This is followed by lists of objects typical of *Residencia* and, a few stanzas later, with a street scene that pushes the speaker through it, rather than allowing him to walk according to his own volition; except for its general pleasantness, this street could be the same one in “Calle destruida” or “Walking around.” But the principle of a speaker at the mercy of his surroundings, which holds true of all street scenes in the *Residencia* series, serves a very particular purpose here: the street was not inherently alienated but robbed from the speaker by a *particular* actor, Franco’s army who have made it burn. Neruda ends “Explico algunas cosas” asking explicitly how lyric poetry could possibly address such a situation, again using a parody of his previous work: “Preguntaréis por qué su poesía/ no nos habla del sueño, de las hojas,/ de los grandes volcanes de su país natal?” [You will ask, why does your poetry/ not speak to us of sleep, of the leaves/ of the great volcanoes of your native land?] and he responds, with urgency, “Venid a ver la sangre por las calles!” [Come and see the blood in the streets].

## Conclusion

Elements of Neruda described in this paper are deeply at odds with the ardent communist and the poet laureate of the global third world he was on his way to becoming by the time he wrote “Explico algunas cosas”. The first half of my analysis might be understood to paint Neruda of the *Residencia* years as one who took advantage of significant white and male privileges, someone deeply complicit with British colonialism and its racist underpinnings. It is precisely for these reasons that I have chosen to pair these criticisms with an emphasis on *Residencia*'s incredible aesthetic legacy and nascent social consciousness. Roots within the series itself, and not later writings, can be used not just to condemn but also to redeem *Residencia* and its author. I do not believe Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ali Sardar Jafri and a whole generation of progressive South Asian poets who looked to Neruda as a model for their own work were duped by an attractive ideological glaze belatedly slapped onto an ugly history. Instead, I hope to have shown that the same “bodies, sun and sweat” which can be marshaled to capture the ugliness of Neruda's conception of Asia sometimes simultaneously express his most poignant ethical sympathies. Indeed, this particular encapsulation of Asia comes from an early expression of Neruda's longest-lasting ethical positions, privileging the “human family” over the realm of “ideas” and false consciousness. When we look with a wider lens on the same

quote this is clearly visible: “La historia, los problemas ‘del conocimiento’, como los llaman, me parecen despojados de dimension. ¿ Cuántos de ellos llenarían el vacío? Cada vez veo menos ideas en torno mío, y más cuerpos, sol y sudor.” [History, epistemological problems, so called, seem to me to lack depth. How many of them could fill the void? At every turn I see fewer ideas and more bodies, sun and sweat.] (Rodríguez Monegal 1988, 79-80)

What stands out in this investigation, and most potently as we move into Neruda’s political awakening after 1936, is that *Residencia* stands at odds from the poetry that follows because it truly does come from a different hermeneutic, ethical and most importantly physical place. Our job as his readers and critics is to make adequate space for these differences without isolating *Residencia* completely from what was to come. In this way we defy Neruda’s definition of *Residencia* as poems of despair, poems that can only teach us how to die. Returning them to the warm embrace of the tropical sun, nourishing them with the waters of the monsoon rain, breathing the air of Asia back into them, we transform the poems of *Residencia* into a testament to the life Neruda lived there.

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## Vita

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