

Ota, Seiko. *José Juan Tablada: su haikú y su japonismo*. México D.F: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2014. Impreso. 216 pp.

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José Juan Tablada: su haikú y su japonismo, is Seiko Ota's own Spanish translation of her doctoral thesis, which was originally published in Japanese in 2008. While there have been several books and articles written over the last century that discuss José Juan Tablada's various contributions to Mexican and Latin American literature, this study intends to fill a long-standing void in the analysis and valuation of the Mexican writer's haiku production in particular. As Ota indicates in her prologue, this is an area of investigation that is lacking in Japan despite the existence of numerous studies on haikus in languages other than Japanese. There is also a shortage of extensive studies on the haiku's influence on Spanish and Latin American poetry by Hispanists. For these reasons, and in light of the fact that Tablada is commonly hailed as the first poet to write haikus in the Spanish language, Ota's project is relevant and, indeed, a necessary addition to academic scholarship on this topic. However, the success of the author's approach and presentation has yielded mixed reactions.

In order to better understand Tablada's haikus, Ota extends the scope of her study to include his Japonism —that is, his passionate interest in all things Japanese. Therefore, Ota's process is one that draws from the Mexican author's biographical accounts, anecdotes, and experiences as well as his critical essays and epistolary exchanges. To this end, she also examines his poetic production before and after his two collections of haikus, *Un día...Poemas sintéticos* (1919) and *El jarro de flores: Disociaciones líricas* (1922). Ota believes that these surrounding factors are critical elements to consider as she employs them to demonstrate Tablada's evolving concept of "Japan" and how this changing image contributed to his progression from a *modernista* poet towards a vanguard *haijin* (haiku poet).

Between a short prologue and a brief conclusion, Ota presents her investigative work divided into five chapters, which are then further broken down into smaller subdivisions varying in quantity from as little as three to as many as twelve sections. The purpose of the first chapter is to establish a relationship between Tablada (the man) and the Japanese haiku.

It begins by giving an overview of Tablada's life, followed by a presentation of his principle poetic works separated into three major phases of his aesthetic production—*modernismo*, *vanguardismo*, *mexicanismo*—before trying to ascertain when Tablada first encountered the Japanese haiku. In these sections, Ota's diligence as a researcher truly shines. Through meticulous archival work and careful, exhaustive readings of his diary and other texts, she is able to determine which books Tablada was consulting when he began to discover and develop his understanding of the haiku. The second half of the chapter focuses on establishing Tablada's natural affinity for nature (particularly insects), his interest in and talent for painting, his genuine love and yearning for Japan, and his ability to observe and describe (in prose) what Ota calls "the world of the haiku" —before he ever tried his hand at writing one. All of Ota's efforts in this chapter to connect Tablada to Japan aim to forge a link between the Mexican poet's cosmic outlook and the mindset of the Japanese haijin.

In the second chapter, however, this resonance is undermined when the orientalism and exoticism of an idealized Japan is revealed in the poems from his *modernista* phase. Moreover, the chapter begins with an unsupported judgment of "occidentals;" in her analysis of Tablada's pre-haiku poems related to Japan, Ota states that "these [*japonista*] poems are not commented anywhere except in the work of Atsuko Tanabe because they are difficult for occidentals to understand since they are linked to Japan in some way" (63, translation mine). This sentiment and the division between occidentals and a Japanese "we" with whom she aligns herself resurface several times throughout the study. This casts a disappointing shadow over what began as not only a promising opportunity to recognize the contribution of the haiku genre to Latin American poetry and modernist poetics in general, but also as a chance to properly reevaluate a poetic form that many critics of Latin American poetry have continuously relegated to the category of subpar. In spite of this divisive tone, Ota does make a significant contribution to the analysis of Tablada's poem "*El poema de Okusai*"; in reviewing many prints by the famous Japanese wood block painter, Katsushika Hokusai, that were in Tablada's possession Ota manages to match the scenes depicted in several of these prints to various individual stanzas of the poem.

The third chapter, situated halfway through the book, examines Tablada's first collection of haikus, *Un día...Poemas sintéticos*. In the first sections of the chapter, Ota methodically discusses the prologue to *Un día...*, the collection's origins, and Tablada's decisions to use titles for his haikus and to call them "synthetic poems." For the remaining

parts, Ota turns to Tablada's original sources, the English and French translations of famous Japanese haikus by George Aston, Basil Hall Chamberlain, and Paul Louis Couchoud, and compares those poems to the Spanish language ones composed by Tablada, pointing out the influence of the former by identifying direct and indirect echoes in the latter. Despite these resonances, Ota proclaims that Tablada's work is highly original, signaling his innovative use (at least in the Latin American tradition) of animals such as the toad and the swan as examples of the novelty of his compositions.

Tablada's second collection of haikus, *El jarro de flores: Disociaciones líricas* is then examined in the fourth chapter. Ota begins by reviewing the book's prologue, in which Tablada calls his synthetic poems "hokkus" or "haikais" for the first time and demonstrates his disappointment in *Un día's* reception, lamenting that no one understood what his poems were or his great contribution to the Spanish language. After that, she analyzes Tablada's new impression of haikus as "lyrical dissociations," and then searches for influences of Japanese haikus in Tablada's poems. She subsequently categorizes Tablada's haikus from this collection into two types: metaphorical and visual. Once more, Ota makes a distinction between the preferences of occidentals and Japanese when she comments that the metaphorical haikus tend to be more appealing to the occidentals because they are easier for them to understand (148). Ota also examines the relationship between Tablada's haikus and painting, but at no point does she mention the Japanese tradition of *haiga*, the practice of painting and composing haikus that complement one another.

The last four sections of this chapter do not seem to belong to the previous grouping nor do they fall into any logical order among each other or in conjunction with the rest of the book. In one section, Ota compares the Western perspectives of Chamberlain and Aston, scholars who considered the haiku to be a low form of poetry, to that of Couchoud, who highly regarded and valued the haiku's expressive capabilities, while in the next section, she explains what a *keigo* is (a seasonal word required in traditional Japanese haikus). Afterward, Ota presents Octavio Paz's vision of the haiku along with his evaluation of Tablada's haikus and then ends the chapter by positing her theory that the reason Tablada did not continue to write haikus exclusively, but rather returned to longer forms of poetry later in life was because he probably felt that he had reached the limit of Spanish language haikus. Ota then attempts to make a case for why Japanese language haikus do not reach a limit of production, while haikus in other languages do (168). In my opinion, this is another

unfortunate and unfounded assertion; I would have liked to see a less narrow view of the haiku's potential to evolve (in any language) and more of an emphasis on the haijin's agency and ability to create and renovate the poetic form.

The last chapter is the shortest and the least developed. Here, Professor Ota selects a handful of haikus by four Mexican poets that were influenced by Tablada's haikus —Carlos Gutiérrez Cruz, Rafael Lozano, José Rubén Romero, and Francisco Monterde García-Icazbalceta— before returning to the figure of Octavio Paz and his haikus. Ota is able to show how these followers of Tablada's style dialogued with his haikus through their own work, paying homage to their master while looking for new ways to depict the themes explored in Tablada's poems. In yet another strange twist, the final section of this chapter shifts its focus to the poetic production of two French haijins who were contemporaries of Tablada: Paul Louis Couchoud and Julien Vocance. Though their contribution to Tablada's own understanding and appreciation of the haiku is indisputable, the placement of this section at the end of this chapter is awkward and anachronistic as an end point for the book.

There are numerous areas of Seiko Ota's scholarship that should be recognized and commended: her thorough and resourceful archival and comparative research, her original contributions to the evaluation of Tablada's haikus and previous lyrical production, her comprehensive examination and detailed explanation of how Tablada's lifelong love of art and nature contributed to his ability to understand and compose haikus, and her translation of ideas in scholarly articles only available in Japanese. However, there are many other aspects of her work that prove to be problematic.

In the first place, the material is not arranged in a cohesive, logical order; this creates a chaotic timeline that appears scattered and interrupts the flow of information to the reader. The work also reads like a thesis rather than a book: fragmented and unpolished. Moreover, while Ota discusses much of Tablada's poetic production before and after his two collections of haikus, there is only one small reference in the entire book to *Li-po y otros poemas* (1920), his collection of poetic ideograms —a combination of words and images where the words are arranged in such a way that the form they produce reflects the content of the poem—, which was published between the two collections. Considering the emphasis Ota places on Tablada's interest in painting and her admiration of the visual quality of his haikus, not discussing the importance of this middle collection or mentioning the practice of *haiga* with respect to the illustrations that Tablada created to accompany each of his synthetic

poems in *Un día...* seems like a glaring oversight. Additionally, and perhaps most significantly, although Ota praises Tablada's talent and considers many of his haikus to be successful, this assessment is always made by determining how closely Tablada's haikus adhere to the criteria of traditional Japanese haikus—a set of formal and stylistic rules that, while never disclosing them to the reader in their entirety, the author implies to be static or unchanging, thus failing to convey to her readership that some of the greatest haikins like Matsuo Bashō and Yosa Buson had differing, even opposing, views on haiku composition and themes.

The problem with this attitude, which is directly related to the divisive language employed by Ota with respect to a “we” that signifies the Japanese people and an opposing group labeled “occidentals” that denotes everyone else, is twofold: first, Ota does not make a distinction between the centralized European perspective and the peripheral perspective of Latin America; furthermore, this approach perpetuates the previous, outdated critical judgments of Latin American haikus as failures, trivial, or unworthy of further analysis by not acknowledging that through adaptation, experimentation, and creolization the form could be freed from the rules of the Japanese original and surpass the task of mere imitation to take broad steps toward true innovation. Unfortunately, Ota is trying to find Japanese haikus in the work of a Mexican haikin; something that, if found, would surely constitute the least interesting, if not the most unoriginal examples of Tablada's production. While I find this project's subject to be an essential topic for both Japanese and Latin American literary studies, I feel that the execution of the task falls short of its greater purpose and leaves plenty of room for further investigation and re-evaluation by future scholars.