

“Estudio” by Carlos Pellicer

—A Translation and Analysis—

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“Estudio” by Carlos Pellicer is a poem written in Spanish at the time of the Mexican Revolution, a period of great social struggle and political turmoil, as evident in internationally well-known works by compatriots, writer Octavio Paz and artist Diego Rivera. Yet the focus Pellicer provides for understanding human nature is praise of Nature Herself, instead of the quotidian concerns of his contemporaries, albeit an equally intense and essential search.

The aim of this paper is to translate and analyze the poem, focusing on the place of Pellicer’s poetry in Mexican and international literature. Part I contains the original and the translation. Part II includes the introduction and the tone of “Estudio.” Part III discusses the use of the five senses in his poetry. Part IV analyses similar imagery in other works. Part V examines the terminology Pellicer employs. Part VI explains the title. Part VII Compares Pellicer and Octavio Paz. Part VIII Compares Pellicer and Diego Rivera. Part IX concludes this analysis.

Part I. The Original Poem and the Translation: “Estudio”

El corazón nutrido de luceros

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ha de escuchar un día
el signo musical y el ritmo eternos.

Y el ojo que endulzó lágrima pura
ha de mirar un día
el agua danzarina de la gracia desnuda.

Sobre el labio de orilla bulliciosa
ha de caer un día
la voz de una palabra portentosa.

El sinfónico oído de colores
ha de escuchar un día
la melodía de otros horizontes.

La mano que tocó todas las cosas
ha de tocar un día
proporciones sutiles, sombras de alas gozosas.

Y el brillo de la angustia sobre el alma
ha de tornarse un día
en mirada divina y en gozo sin palabras.

Englekirk (p. 621)

“A Study”

The heart nourished by star-like brilliance
had better listen some day
to the eternal musical symbol and the eternal rhythm.

And the eye that highlights the pure tear
had better look some day
at the gracefulness of the nakedly dancing water.

About the lip of the turbulent bank
had better fall some day
the voice of an extraordinary word.

A symphony heard in colors
had better listen some day
to the melody of other horizons.

The hand which touched all the things
had better touch some day
delicate proportions, shadows of delightful wings.

And the brightness of the anguish about the soul
had better turn into some day
a divine look and pleasure words cannot describe.

Part II. The Introduction and Tone of “Estudio”

In post-Emperor Maximilian Mexico (1864–67), Carlos Pellicer was born, just in time for the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. Born in 1899, Pellicer grew up during the revolution, which was from 1910 to 1940. Reasons for the war are many. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of World History*:

“The roots of the revolution can be traced to the demographic, economic and social changes that occurred during the rule of President Porfirio Diaz from 1876 to 1911. The regime became increasingly centralized and authoritarian, favoring Mexico’s traditional and newly emerging elites, but failed to incorporate growing urban middle-class and labour groups into national politics.” (p. 410)

One reason the work of Pellicer is so attractive is the dream quality and escapism of his poetry, seemingly in another time and place, despite being written at the time of the war. Englekirk (1968) on Pellicer states that:

“... his vision is clear and precise; his world is luminous with health and joy; and his poetry is vibrant with the color and music and passion of the tropics.” (p. 621)

In the above description of the poetry of Pellicer, as well as

throughout other works of Pellicer, there is no mention of any struggle, save the struggle of the soul for divine enlightenment through the appreciation of Nature. While others were fighting for representation in the Mexican government, he chose a different view of the struggle of the human condition.

The overall tone of the poem is one of grandfatherly concern for the humbling of the human ego. This is partially due to the grammar Pellicer employs in the refrain. His rhyme scheme has an uncommon construction: “. . . ha de . . .” This looks to be the verb *haber*, which is an auxiliary verb in the compound tenses. Barron’s (p. 99) says that “ha” is the archaic form meaning “there,” used in combination with “is” or “are.” It is usually “is supposed to” or “to be to.” (Kendris p. 528) It is more than a suggestion. It is a patronizing construction, as if the author knows better than us. In this paper the author has interpreted it as “had better.”

Throughout the text, specific human qualities are sighted, then compared to Nature.¹ For example, in the first stanza, Pellicer talks about a beautiful human heart. Then he follows up saying that indeed that is beautiful, but it is temporary. The heart has a rhythm, but there is a greater rhythm available when humans are ready to listen and feel. He also implies that Nature has been around longer than any human beauty. According to Pellicer, any beauty found in humans is transient. It cannot compare to that of Nature.

Finger-shaking advice is given to humans who think they are perfect or complete without considering the value of the Nature which God has created, and subsequently, adoration of God. Via the study of life and Nature, admiring Her, we may learn how to live more beautifully. It is a hopeful mood that people will take heed and find the same beauty the author has found in Nature.

There are religious allusions, including the Christian belief in the Glory of Creation and in comprehensible beauty in the fact that God has created all and is able to render man able to enter heaven, and therefore become an angel. The delightful wings he refers to are those of an angel, who became an angel

the way Pellicer recommends. His joyful words have a strong impact.

It might be better said that this particular pleasure is not possible to put into human words. This is a Catholic reference to straying from the Church and returning through the rituals of the Church, namely confession, where the person who has done wrong is absolved of that wrong after a period of repentance. It is a natural and inevitable return to God, and it is phrased “some day” or “one day.”

Part III. The Use of the Five Senses in Pellicer’s Poetry

All of the five senses are alluded to in this poem: vision, hearing, speaking, taste, and touch. “Estudio” begins with Pellicer bidding us to listen, to look at Nature consciously and intentionally in the first two stanzas.

Pellicer personifies the heart, which has been nourished by good things, like happiness and some fortunate blessings. The person with the good heart must listen—with attentive ears—for a rhythm new to him. In fact, that is the eternal rhythm Pellicer praises.

Next he elucidates the eye with the pure tear. It must behold the loveliness of the waterfall and the naturally, nakedly dancing waters. This eye seems to belong to a male reader, and the naked water is female. An occurrence, he informs us, that is totally natural. Human purity must understand the purity of Nature. It is more pure, and therefore more perfect.

The babbling brook is a metaphor for those who speak a great deal about anything. The turbulent lip is a double entendre of the river bank and the mouth which produces disquieting words and sounds. Another voice will be heard, which will be that of God.

The ear is the organ utilized next, listening to man-made music. God-made music is highly suggested for us to listen to by Pellicer.

The next sense he highlights is touch. He discusses the imminent touch by the hand of God. This is done to man, at the time decided by God.

The soul is also personified through the anguish it feels. The religious enlightenment, which follows the soul in anguished search for it, is so fantastic that words cannot describe it.

Part IV. Similar Imagery in the Works of Other Artists

In “Estudio” we have a religious, clear image of angels and a beautiful forest and stream. This poem is reminiscent of “Kubla Khan” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, written after a dream in 1797. His themes include the bounty of sacred nature, God, woman, love, dancing rocks, music, symphony. There is an overall tone of luxuriance, as well as a dreamlike quality, and aspirations to immortality. Indeed, “Estudio” and “Kubla Khan” share a great deal of imagery. However, no evidence could be found that Pellicer had studied Coleridge’s works.

In addition, “Estudio” evokes images of sir Peter Paul Rubens painting *Adam and Eve*, (López-Rey p. 64) in the soothing and content tone, bright and energetic with robust health.

The sinuous line of the composition and the frieze-like disposition of the figures furnish an example of the dominant emphasis on rhythm sometimes to be observed in painting, when a fictitious musical character is given to both design and colour, just as in the art of ballet, where drawing, modelling, colour and sound are combined. (Sánchez Cantón p. 209)

Part V. The Terminology

In the first stanza, the human who thinks he or she is truly happy should stop focusing on the micro happiness of the

human heart and, when the time is right, listen instead to the eternal rhythms of Nature and, eventually, to God. Through this we understand that Pellicer wants us to understand and praise human beauty, but also look beyond mere humans. The pure tear of an innocent human is beautiful, but not as beautiful as the nakedly dancing waters.

A list of sample vocabulary Pellicer uses in various poems is included in the following: water, food, music, tears, looks, nakedness, voice, words, symphony, shadows, wings, brilliance. Verbs he utilizes include: to nourish, to listen to, to shine, to touch, to dance, to look, and to return to. The combination of all these words evoke a paradise-like image. In stark contrast, at the very same time, his countrymen were fighting for freedom and stability.

Part VI. The Title

The title, “Estudio,” has been translated as “A Study.” In Spanish it is not uncommon to drop the indefinite article in a title or a newspaper headline, as is often done in English. Therefore, “Study” is feasible. “Study” is defined as a survey, research, an investigation, a musical composition. (*Collins* p. 312)

It could also be the first person singular conjugation of the Spanish verb “to study,” *estudiar*. It would then be translated as “I study.” (*Random House* p. 160) This could be his personal view of what and how he studies in life, in order to reach his goal of spiritual enlightenment. It is necessary to note that this poem is not the only one of his works with this title. He has written several poems that are similarly entitled.

Another poem called “Estudio” was written when Pellicer was 20 years old, regarding an island vacation with exotic scenery. It has the names of famous artists sprinkled throughout the text. That particular work was all written in the future tense. He often writes on the topic of the value of poetry itself and the importance of it for the liberation of the soul: for

example, “A la Poesia” (“To Poetry”), written in 1929.

In addition, Pellicer wrote “Estudios” in the same year, 1927, as the focus of this paper, “Estudio.” In “Estudios,” Pellicer refers to clocks, music, the uselessness of the concept of time in the tropics, the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, and that dreaming leads to perfection. At the conclusion of this poem one is left with the impression that living in or visiting tropical climes is one step toward the necessary dreaming, which is a specification for human perfection.

Part VII. Octavio Paz and Carlos Pellicer

This leads to an important underlying theme throughout the work of Pellicer. He tells the reader that it is important to turn away from reality intentionally and solitarily, in order to transcend the everyday struggle. In contrast, his contemporaries and compatriots became so well-known for expressing being among other people inside the struggle. One of them is Octavio “Paz. As Englekirk (1968) explains,

“Paz reveals his preoccupation with man’s tragic groping for identity and for meaningful communication with his fellowman.” (p. 636)

Winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990 with “The Labyrinth of Solitude,” Paz describes the Mexican psyche and the communication patterns on a daily basis with:

“The Mexican is always remote, from the world and from other people. And also from himself.” (p. 29)

The two writers view the Mexican struggle in their own ways. Perhaps Pellicer saw such pain in everyday life that he refused to acknowledge it and chose instead to celebrate the beauty of the human imagination. Paz, on the other hand, said that:

“... speech becomes a creative activity dealing with realities, that is, a poetic activity. Through magic the child creates a world in his own image and thus resolves his solitude. Self-awareness begins when we doubt the magical efficacy of our

own instruments.” (p. 203)

In contrast, Pellicer never doubted the “magical efficacy” of his own poetry.

This discussion then begs the question, why then was it Octavio Paz who became so internationally well-known instead of Carlos Pellicer? One perspective on why the writing of Paz has such broad international appeal is in the above quote, specifically the portion on how “speech becomes a creative activity when dealing with realities.” Paz is talking about the painful or difficult realities. The creativity is in the choosing of the words and the decision, conscious or subconscious, of just how much reality is acknowledged.

There is also creativity involved in trying to understand what the reality means to different groups of people, and here, at the time of the Mexican Revolution and shortly afterward, the definition of reality of society varied greatly among the races and the classes. This perspective of how reality will be represented is of great interest to all cultures. This psychological self-analysis of Mexican culture was so clearly expressed in such a detailed manner, it had universal appeal. While reading about Mexico through Paz, it was natural that the reader would compare Mexican culture with his native culture. Further, many can identify with the following from Paz:

“The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian or a Spaniard. Nor does he want to be descended from them. He denies them. And he does not affirm himself as a mixture, but rather an abstraction: he is a man. He becomes the son of Nothingness. His beginnings are in his own self.” (p. 87)

While not a completely universal concept, anyone can probably quickly think of five countries where this concept of being something original and new is appealing.

Part VIII. Diego Rivera and Carlos Pellicer

Artist Diego Rivera, compatriot and contemporary of Carlos Pellicer, was according to Andrea Kettenmann:

“... a political militant and an eccentric spirit of his age. He was love and hatred, admiration and disgust, legend and abuse.”
(p. 7)

In common with Pellicer, “he saw art as an organic human function, not only useful but life-supporting, like the consumption of bread and water or the breathing of air.”

Yet in contrast to Rivera, Pellicer was not focused on the masses. As Edward Lucie-Smith put it:

“... Diego Rivera had great enthusiasm for public art ‘belonging to the populace’.” (p. 33)

Pellicer was concentrated on the eternal and the deep admiration, almost worship of Nature, which would take him there.

Part IX. Conclusion

In conclusion, the reader of Pellicer’s poetry might follow his advice with this poem and others and become spiritually enlightened through avidly admiring Nature as he does. Others may read his work for pure enjoyment and luxurious, bubble-bath escapism. In either case, his work should be valued for the social benefit it affords us, just as works which represent social movements and change history are valued because they are putting into writing what people are already feeling.

The literature of Pellicer takes us to another plateau of human imagination and encourages us to use rose-colored glasses as often as possible.

Note

1. The capital letter “N” is utilized here to show how strongly Pellicer feels about his love of, and perhaps worship of, Nature.

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