

# “Northientalism”: Contrasting Latin and North America in “Ariel”

Jordan B. Jones

---

“That city is only great whose spirit’s barriers extend far beyond the mountains or the seas, whose very name pronounced illuminates for posterity an epoch of human thought, a horizon of history” (132). These are the words of the Uruguayan writer José Enrique Rodó in his famous essay “Ariel,” published at the turn of the twentieth century. In this essay, he discusses Latin America’s past and future, and in doing so compares it to other areas of the world—the United States in particular. Rodó, who never visited the United States, spends some time praising North America but devotes most of his time criticizing it. Interestingly, though “Ariel” was written decades before Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, the two have some striking similarities. After providing a brief explanation of what Orientalism is, I will analyze “Ariel” to show that Rodó engages in what I will call “Northientalism”—looking at North America using the same tactics Westerners use to assert their superiority over Orientals.

In order to proceed with our analysis of how Rodó Orientalizes North America (which in this paper I will use synonymously with “the United States”) when comparing it to Latin America, we need to understand what Orientalism itself is. In his book *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Edward Said states that Orientalism is the tendency for Westerners to draw distinctions between themselves and those who live in the Orient. This phenomenon was exacerbated by Orientalists (Westerners who studied the Orient), who took it upon themselves to enlighten other Westerners as to the culture and customs of Orientals. Said points out, however, that the descriptions provided by Orientalists were often exaggerated in order to solidify the supremacy of Western ways of thinking and acting: “Their great moments were in the past; they are useful in the modern world only because the powerful and up-to-date empires have effectively brought them out of the wretchedness of their decline and turned them into rehabilitated residents of productive colonies” (35). By looking at Oriental countries as depraved and barbaric, Western countries further developed a sense of superiority and entitlement. Said goes on: “The argument, when reduced to its simplest form, was clear, it was precise, it was easy to grasp. There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power” (36). Said develops this idea further when he states that the Oriental is seen as being “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (40). Said wishes to reduce the exaggeration and bigotry inherent in this way of thinking by emphasizing the fact that “the Oriental lived in a different but thoroughly organized world of his own, a world with its own national, cultural, and epistemological boundaries and principles of internal coherence” (40). Despite this goal, however,

he recognizes the common tendency for Western thinkers and writers to elevate their own ideals over Oriental ones. They choose to see only how they are better than Orientals and how Western ways of thinking and acting constitute the “right” way to do things.

Said is careful to point out, however, that this does not mean that Orientalism is simply a “structure of lies or of myths” that would disappear if only the truth were told (6). Said recognizes the complexity of the issue and asserts that Orientalism happens for economic, political, social, and other reasons, and makes the crucial statement that “Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (12). Said suggests that at its roots, Orientalism is less about putting Oriental countries down than it is about building Western countries up. Although Orientals are criticized and ostracized as a result of Orientalism, this is not the ultimate goal; it is a means to an end. This idea will be important to our analysis of Rodó’s essay.

Having provided a brief introduction to Said’s theories, we turn to looking at “Ariel” to see how it exemplifies Orientalist qualities. Rodó begins his essay by introducing the “wise sage” Prospero from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, and it is through this voice that Rodó speaks throughout the rest of the essay. Rodó does this because he recognizes the need to establish credibility in order for his ideas to be accepted. Orientalist writers often assert themselves as authorities on the Orient by relating their firsthand experiences there or by invoking other authorities on the subject—ancient historians in particular. Because Rodó has never been to the United States, he cannot provide convincing personal experiences to bolster the credibility of what he is about to say. Though Prospero is not a historian, he is a manifestation of William Shakespeare, who is widely respected and trusted. It is for this reason that Rodó invokes the wise sage—doing so gives him the impression of possessing great experience and wisdom, thereby encouraging the reader to give more credence to his words. After considering the statue of Ariel in his room, this authoritative figure begins a lecture to his students in which he discusses the development of other civilizations and the future of their own. From the very beginning, this essay is grounded in the context of a stark binary: Ariel vs. Caliban. Prospero describes the difference between the two thus:

Ariel embodies the mastery of reason and of sentiment over the baser impulses of unreason. He is the generous zeal, the lofty and disinterested motive in action, the spirituality of civilization, and the vivacity and grace of the intelligence;—the ideal end to which human selection aspires; that superman in whom has disappeared, under the persistent chisel of life, the last stubborn trace of the *Caliban*, symbol of sensuality and stupidity. (4)

In reading this description, we immediately gravitate towards Ariel as the ideal to emulate, and we are repulsed by Caliban’s lack of morals. Anyone familiar with *The Tempest* remembers the behavior of these two characters in the play—Ariel’s behavior being noble and moral and Caliban’s being base and repugnant. We do not immediately learn that Ariel represents Latin America and that Caliban represents the United States, but here Rodó is subtly setting the stage for his argument. As in Orientalist writings, the author

assumes an air of authority on and comprehension of the issue being presented. Being intimately aware of the positive qualities of Ariel and the negative traits of Caliban, Prospero begins to teach the rising generation about the issue, and we are subtly grouped in with his young students, who listen avidly in the hope of learning from their great teacher. Since we have no personal experience with Ariel or Caliban, we rely upon Prospero to enlighten us. Said describes a similar phenomenon when he describes how Arthur James Balfour claims that he can accurately speak for the Egyptians: “If [Balfour] does not speak directly for the Orientals, it is because they after all speak another language; yet he knows how they feel since he knows their history, their reliance upon such as he, and their expectations” (34). Similarly, we trust that Prospero understands Ariel and Caliban, and we therefore pay attention to what he says; through him Rodó presents what he knows (or at least what he thinks he knows) about American civilization and culture to his fellow countrymen, most of whom presumably do not speak English and have not been to the United States. The irony in Rodó’s argument is that he has never been to the United States himself, but as stated before, his use of Prospero causes all but the careful reader to forget this crucial detail and believe the argument being presented.

By referring to Ariel and Caliban, Rodó introduces the issue of moral decay. He spends the first half of the essay describing the moral and political ideals that Latin Americans should emulate, and though this is interesting it does not fall within the scope of this paper. We will therefore skip to the second half of the essay, in which the Ariel-Caliban binary Rodó establishes in the beginning is now overtly applied to the United States. One of the first concepts the Uruguayan writer brings up is that of utilitarianism. He states that “the utilitarian conception as the idea of human destiny, and equality at the mediocre as the norm of social proportion, make up the formula which in Europe they call the spirit of Americanism” (89). He considers the United States to be the “incarnation” of the concept of utilitarianism, which he later criticizes as being shortsighted and base (89).

After introducing utilitarianism, Rodó acknowledges the positive aspects of the United States, but he does so with the caveat that “our *mania for the North*” should be kept within the bounds of reason and sentiment (91). Immediately after this, he states, “I see no good in denaturalizing the character of a people—its personal genius—to impose on it identity with a foreign model to which they will sacrifice the originality of their genius” (91–92). This is reminiscent of Said’s idea that “there are Westerners, and there are Orientals” (36). Rodó echoes this sentiment and says, in effect, “there are North Americans and there are Latin Americans,” suggesting that Latin Americans should recognize and appreciate the difference and avoid trying to recreate themselves in the image of North Americans. He develops this idea explicitly when he says that “we Latin-Americans have an inheritance of Race, a great ethnic tradition to maintain, a sacred bond which unites us to immortal pages of history and puts us on our honour to preserve this for the future” (93). Rodó thus calls for Latin Americans to divorce themselves from North Americans, suggesting that it is their duty to “preserve our original character; that which differentiates” (93). Inherent in this appeal for Latin Americans to stay true to their heritage is the concept that this heritage is better than that of the United

States. This kind of differentiation and aggrandizement is at the heart of Orientalism, and is clearly echoed in Rodó's process of "Northientalism."

After emphasizing the importance of preserving those things that set Latin America apart from the United States, Rodó enumerates several of those qualities. He once more gives a momentary nod to North Americans' accomplishments, but he proceeds to repeatedly assert the superiority of Latin American ideals. Balfour's speech, quoted in *Orientalism*, makes a similar move—it states, "Is it a good thing for these great nations—I admit their greatness—that this absolute government should be exercised by us? I think it is a good thing" (33). Just like Balfour, Rodó gives a ceremonial bow to the country being Orientalized and then proceeds to criticize it extensively. As part of this bow, Rodó credits the United States for having "been the first to evoke our modern ideal of liberty" and having "revealed completely the greatness and dignity of labour" (96–97). With this praise, however, Rodó includes a sly undercut when he says, "Their culture, while far from being spiritual or refined, has an admirable efficiency so far as it is directed to practical ends and their immediate realization" (99). He downplays the United States' accomplishments by focusing on their shortsightedness and impatience, only seeking for things that can be accomplished immediately.

This statement begins a new section of what appears to be praise—but is actually criticism—of the United States. In these passages, Rodó repeatedly dismisses North American economic and industrial advances. He chronicles the United States' achievements and claims that "the growth of their greatness and power will astonish future generations," but not long after that he compares this greatness to that of ancient Rome (100). This appears to be a compliment, but it is better understood when compared with his mention of Rome just a few pages later; he claims that the Roman Empire was characterized by "the tyranny of the Caesars" and ended in "the ruin of liberty" (118). Rodó makes similar moves throughout the essay, and eventually reveals his true feelings toward the United States when he poses a series of questions:

Does that society realize, or at least tend to realize, the ideal of such rational conduct as satisfies, to the heart's desire, the intellectual and moral dignity of our civilization? Is it there that we shall find the most approximate image of our perfect State? That feverish unrest which seems to centuple in its bosom the movement, the intensity of life—has it an end that is worth while and a motive sufficient for its justification? (104)

In considering these questions, Rodó clearly indicates his belief that North America is not providing satisfactory answers to these questions—else why would he bring them up? He confirms this idea when he claims that the United States engages in "the ceaseless seeking for well-being when it has no object outside of [itself]" and that it creates a sense of "insufficiency" and "emptiness" (106). In this section of "Ariel," Rodó exemplifies yet another important aspect of Orientalism. Said states that Orientalism identifies the "strength of the West" while looking at "the Orient's weakness—as seen by the West" (45). The key part of this statement is the importance of perspective. Rodó knows that an economic comparison between Latin America and the United States would not be flattering to his people, so he focuses on moral sensitivity, strengthening in his readers' minds the association between Caliban and the United States (and between

Ariel and Latin America). In doing so he identifies the strength of Latin America and what he perceives to be the moral emptiness of the United States.

Implicit in his argument that the United States cannot respond to the questions posed earlier is the idea that Latin America can. Just as Ariel is morally superior to the base Caliban, Latin America's ideals are higher than North America's. Rodó says as much in the following comment: "But in the ambient of America's democracy there are no heights so lofty as to escape the climbing of the flood of vulgarity, and it spreads and extends itself freely as over a level plain" (109). The United States "makes a chaos of all that pertains to the realm of the ideal," whereas Latin America represents the high ideals that preserve society (109). In this section, as in others throughout the essay, the United States is constantly "Northientalized" in order to differentiate between North and Latin America. Over and over again, Rodó employs the same tactic that Orientalist writers use to intrigue their readers and solidify their conception that Western ways of thinking and acting are superior to Oriental ways of doing these things; the difference is that he exalts Latin American ideals over North American.

Having established the similarities between Orientalism and Rodó's tactics in "Ariel," we come to an important question: Why does Rodó "Northientalize" throughout his essay? In the preface to his translation of "Ariel," F. J. Stimson states the following: "We live in a time when Caliban seems to have the upper hand. The desires of Caliban, the judgments of Caliban, the hunger and thirst of Caliban, seem now to fill the world. And some of us are losing heart" (x). Though Stimson made this statement in 1922, it is certainly representative of Rodó's opinions on the subject of North American morality at the time he published his influential essay. Rodó believes that Latin Americans are "losing heart" in the face of their challenges, and he wants to help them to maintain their pride and their sense of moral decency. When Rodó wrote "Ariel," these young nations were far behind the United States in terms of economic progress. Rodó seems to have genuinely valued morality over economic progress, but we could also interpret "Ariel" as an attempt to provide a compensatory narrative for the fledgling Latin American countries. In the absence of commercial progress, Rodó latches onto ideals and morality as their common heritage. Rodó isn't degrading the United States in an attempt to compete with them economically; as Said remarks, Orientalism is "a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (12). Similarly, "Ariel" is less about criticizing the United States than it is about creating a sense of Latin American identity.

Stimson identifies the circumstances in which Rodó was writing, and which he tried to help Latin America overcome:

South Americans have sometimes thought themselves unfortunate that they were so far removed from the great material movements of the day. . . . They have valued personal dignity as they have valued courtesy; personal liberty as much as State power; less interested in machinery than in the art of life; they have placed '*la joie de vivre*' above the making wholesale of 'utilities fixed and embodied in material objects.' And possibly some of them have repined that they

were weak countries, not strong materially, not bristling with navies or great armies. They have not seen—nor does the world yet see—what a rare role they have to play. Of all the quarters of the world, this alone has been able to keep tranquilly burning the torch of civilization. (xiii-xiv)

In this passage, Stimson summarizes Rodó's ideological mindset in writing "Ariel." Rodó recognizes that some Latin Americans are discouraged because they think they are weak when compared to other countries. He thinks that this sense of failure is the result of not recognizing their moral superiority. Rodó wants his readers to believe that they have great potential and that they don't need economic strength to be a beacon to the world. This is one of the great underlying reasons for the "Northientalism" so prevalent in "Ariel." Rodó sees Latin America as the embodiment of the statue of Ariel in Prospero's office, "about to soar into the sky, there to vanish in a lightning flash" (4). In *The Tempest*, Ariel is bound in servitude to Prospero for years before he is finally freed and allowed to flourish independently. Similarly, Rodó knows that Latin American countries have been set free from Spanish rule and now need to seize this opportunity to grow and flourish. Rodó ends his essay with a charge to the young people of Latin America:

Can you not picture to yourselves the America we others dream of? Hospitable to things of the spirit, and not only to the immigrant throngs; thoughtful, without sacrificing its energy of action; serene and strong and withal full of generous enthusiasm; resplendent with the charm of morning calm like the smile of a waking infant, yet with the light of awakening thought. Think on her at least; the honour of your future history depends on your keeping constantly before your eyes the vision of that America, radiant above the realities of the present like the rose window above the dark nave of a cathedral. (137)

It is the pursuit of this vision that causes Rodó to "Northientalize" so frequently. He criticizes the United States not simply for the sake of disparaging others; he does it to build up Latin American pride and identity. In "Ariel," Rodó is providing the compensatory narrative he believes is necessary to make the "America [he and] others dream of" a reality (137).

## Works Cited

- Rodó, José Enrique. *Ariel*. Trans. F. J. Stimson. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1922. Print.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Stimson, F. J. Prefatory Essay. *Ariel*. José Enrique Rodó. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1922. Print.