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The Painter, the “Sad Clown,” and the Poet: An Inquiry of Watteau and Pierrot’s Linkage in Tablada’s Poetry*

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Abstract

This study examines the poem “Comedieta” by the Mexican writer José Juan Tablada. As its title indicates, the poem narrates the light comedy of a specific character Pierrot from the *commedia dell’arte*, a commonly improvised theatre which gained its popularity in Europe between the 16th and the 18th century. Along Pierrot, Tablada mentions other characters from this theatrical expression, but the most notorious allusion is to Jean-Antoine Watteau, a painter from the 18th century who represented this spectacle countless times. The reference to this visual artist poses the questions of how and why he relates to this emblematic character. To understand the linkage between the painter and the character I inquire two artistic expressions that Tablada incorporates in his composition: the pictorial and written. First, I compare the poem to the primary sources, the paintings by Watteau depicting Pierrot and other members of the *commedia dell’arte* to establish the setting in which the poetic narrative occurs. Then I transition to discuss 19th century French writers who based on Watteau’s work and theatrical performances manufactured the psychological image of Pierrot, marked by emotional and physical suffering. As an admirer of Watteau and an avid reader of French literature, Tablada synthesizes in this poem the transformation of Pierrot as a character: from being situated in

charming settings with a hint of melancholy to a more saddened and even mortiferous behavior.

Keywords: Watteau, Tablada, Mexican Poetry, French Painting, *Commedia Dell'arte*

The moon peeks out from behind the clouds. Under the pale light, a troupe¹ attentively listens to the melody of guitar player, Pierrot dressed in white. These are some of the words that superficially describe Jean-Antoine Watteau's *Love in the Italian Theatre* painted ca. 1716-1717 (fig. 1). Watteau, a 18th century painter, produced an infinity of scenes depicting the stock characters from the *commedia dell'arte*, an improvised theatre that originated in mid-16th century Italy and spread to the rest of Europe. From Watteau's representations about this spectacle, Pierrot stands out from the rest of the characters for his constant recurrence and emblematic appearance.

One example that recapitulates all of these tendencies is Watteau's grand *Pierrot* (fig. 2), previously known as *Gilles*² and now housed in the Louvre Museum. Centrally positioned in the foreground, Pierrot is dressed in all white: halo-like hat, layered ruff, button-down jacket, long sleeves scrunched up at the elbow level, three quarter leg pants, and shoes with pinkish laces. He also poses statically and rigidity while he looks directly at the audience. His face timidly expresses ambiguous feelings, especially through his sleepy eyes.

Since Watteau produced multiple images of Pierrot, writers and art critics from the 19th century solidified the linkage between the painter and character. By the end of the century, Watteau and Pierrot became synonyms of each other. An example of this connection is "Comedieta,"³ a poem by the Mexican writer José Juan Tablada⁴ whose career spans from the

late 1880s through the 1940s. Similarly, to *Love in the Italian Theatre*, Tablada sets one of the many stories starring Pierrot in a parkland setting under the moonlight. As other literary examples from that time, the Mexican poet presents Pierrot as the melancholic and tragic “sad clown.” Therefore, in this essay, I argue that Tablada did not only depend on the charming paintings by Watteau, but also includes the emotional state of being that 19th century French writers infused into Pierrot’s spirit. This way Tablada presents a text that connects one century to another and narrates poetically the changing image of this character.

Starting with the first line of “Comedieta,” Tablada alludes to Jean-Antoine Watteau’s motifs. The poem begins with a precious vocabulary that refers to a park painted by Watteau with beautiful flowers and an opalizing plenilune.⁵ This painter is famously known for *Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera* (fig. 3), an artwork that served as his entry piece to the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1717. From this same painting, the pictorial genre *fête galante* originated and it commonly illustrates aristocratic figures dressed finely, posing in idyllic spaces, and engaging in courtly and amorous acts. Therefore, the poet’s descriptions of the park recall the exterior spaces that Watteau painted in his *fêtes galantes*. With this delicate description of the setting, the reader acts as the narrator who is about to raise the curtain and unveil the scenography of a theatrical performance.

Regarding the *commedia dell’arte*, it already existed centuries prior to Watteau, specifically since the mid-16th century when it was formed in Italy. To be more specific this theatrical genre developed in the marketplace, a public place that attracted, interested, and retained a large crowd (Rudlin 23). Another factor that allowed the formation of this *commedia* was the carnival, a popular celebration whose period ends one day before Lent starts with the

abstinent habits of consuming red meat or sexual pleasures (34). From the carnival, the mask also originates, an accessory that once worn on the face, the person traditionally strips away from their own identity and assumes another one; similarly in the *commedia dell'arte*, the actor takes the mask's persona (34). These are some reasons that established the link between this theatrical genre and the Dionysian celebration since it presents different aspects of the human condition from joy to tragedy.

In 17th century Paris, France, there was a troupe called *Comédie-Italienne* that derived from the Italian tradition. However, in 1697, King Louis XIV prohibited the spectacles and expelled this group from the city since they would presumably perform a play⁶ that would tarnish his secret wife's reputation, Madame de Maintenon. During the *comédie's* absence, Watteau joined Claude Gillot's workshop, a master who passionately captured this spectacle multiple times. It is believed that Gillot's works could have served as examples for Watteau to produce his own interpretations. It was until 1716, during the Regency of Philippe II, Duke of Orleans, that the *comédie* could return to Paris, allowing Watteau to witness it and easily disseminate it.

With his interpretations of the *commedia dell'arte*, Watteau gave this spectacle the gallantry and flirtatiousness of the Rococo style that would later be developed in the century. He rarely located the stock characters on a stage or scaffold. The majority of those images illustrate the characters set on an exterior space with wooded backgrounds, similar to a *fête galante*. Even at a certain level, various paintings of the *commedia dell'arte* by Watteau have been categorized as *fêtes galantes* since they include individuals dressed finely, playing instruments, and courting. For example, in *Pierrot content* (fig. 5), the protagonist is seated and

accompanied by two women and two men. The woman, to his right side, plays a guitar, an instrument associated with Pierrot. Emotionally, he seems happy and looks laughingly to us, the observers.⁷

Other indications of the pictorial character in “Comedieta” can be found in two lines: “In a meadow of the garden” and “What a pastoral color!” (*El florilegio* 47, 48). These words related to nature evoke the idyllic spaces that Watteau painted in the *fêtes galantes* and clearly in bucolic scenes, for example, *The Shepherds* (fig. 6), produced ca. 1717, depicts a group of shepherds dancing, playing, and courting while their flock of sheep rest in the grass.

“Comedieta” is one in a series of poems that allude to Watteau. Out of those the eponymous sonnet published in 1894 “Soneto Watteau” stands out for establishing the strongest connection to the French painter and his masterpiece *Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera*. By the time Tablada published that short sonnet, he had not visited Europe, more specifically the French capital. In 1903, for the first time, he traveled to Paris but without elaborating much literary production; he returned from late 1911 to early 1912 and wrote in other styles, such as chronicles (Mata & Goodbody 35). Tablada’s temporal and physical distance to Watteau suggests that his knowledge of this artist came through the eyes of others, for example, visual and written reproductions.⁸ After visiting the Louvre Museum in 1912, he confessed using engravings, photographs, and literature from French writers as the basis to learn about Watteau’s *Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera* (*Los días* 72). Besides this explicit reference, by the time I wrote this essay, I have not encountered other remarks made by Tablada about any specific artwork by the French painter. However, the lack of painting’s names or descriptions does not diminish Tablada’s knowledge for this artist. Instead, it

contributes to the mystery of his affinity for the plastic arts, which has encouraged research, such as this is one.

Returning to “Comedieta,” the poem unfolds with a theatrical lexicon, suitable for a performance. Some of those words include operatic genres, such as the *farsa* and *sainete*; and even a physical location, the Grand Guignol in Paris.⁹ Another highlight is *comparsa* which translates to troupe and includes *commedia dell’arte* characters, such as Pierrot, Columbine, Harlequin, Pulcinella, and Cassandra. Typically, Pierrot’s sad nature derives from his commitment to court Columbine, a servant who is instead interested in the love of Harlequin. For his part, Harlequin is a *zanno*, or servant who reciprocates his love for Columbine, causing annoyance and suffering on Pierrot.¹⁰ Pulcinella, on the other hand, is one of the *vecchi*, or old men, distinguished for his bulky hunchback and stomach. Meanwhile, Cassandra indicates a feminine name such as the Trojan priestess of the god Apollo. In the Casamarciano manuscripts from Naples,¹¹ different *scenari* that were written around 1650-1700 include a woman named Cassandra with a changing identity: in one *scenario*, she is Tartaglia’s wife and in another, she is Pulcinella’s adoptive mother (*The Commedia dell’Arte in Naples* 120, 435). Another possible origin of the name Cassandra can be a variant of the French name Cassandre that belonged to a masculine character. During the late 18th century, in the French adaptations, the character Pantalone, one of the old men, was rebaptized Cassandre (Rudlin 157). Even in some representations, Cassandre is Columbine’s father and Pierrot’s master (Toepfer 581). Since there is a lack of gender adjectives in the poem, it is unclear if Tablada refers to Cassandra as the Neapolitan woman or a man with French origin.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Pierrot stands out from the rest of his troupe. His presence in Tablada's poetry begs the question of how this writer knew about him. Watteau's oeuvre could have been one possibility, but it is not clear if the poet knew of any artwork depicting this character. Because of this, another chance is French literature. Out of the writers that Tablada enlists in his chronicle, Paul Verlaine wrote a poetry book titled *Fêtes galantes*, inspired by Watteau's paintings and includes Pierrot in different occasions. Meanwhile, Hugo Méndez-Ramírez believes that Tablada possibly also knew of Jules Laforgue's work since this writer also published countless poetic and theatrical pieces¹² in which Pierrot is the central character. Méndez-Ramírez even insinuates that poems such as "Mascarada" and "Comedieta" could have been based in one of Laforgue's poems, "Locutions des Pierrots" because of their thematic and formal similarities (1066). During his second visit to Paris, Tablada met Leopoldo Lugones, one of the leading exponents of Modernismo and on writing, the author of "Comedieta" equated the Argentinian writer with Jules Laforgue, as the only two poets that allow him to reach a "sixth sense" (*Los días* 46). In a 1914 newspaper article¹³ about the painter Ángel Zárraga, a close friend living in Paris, Tablada indicates one of Zárraga's habits, recalling by memory the poetry of someone only identified by their surname Laforgue and as "the exoteric poet of the "Pierrots"" (*Obras VI* 225). The identity of this person could be Jules Laforgue after considering his extensive work about Pierrot. Even though those references to Laforgue were made years after the publication of "Comedieta," they point to Laforgue's popularity over Latin American writers and a likely influence on Tablada by the end of 1890s.

Now that I have identified another possible origin for Pierrot in Tablada's poetry, I can continue with the poetic narrative of "Comedieta." Besides the poem's clear images drawn

from Watteau's paintings, there is an underlying and contrasting state of being, which is presented by dividing the poem into two scenes: the first six stanzas compose one, and the rest of the stanzas, the second. Since the *commedia* is related to celebration, there is an atmosphere of joy, for example in the "one hears 'die' virtue" (*El florilegio* 47) line, to reject any modesty and instead enjoy the bacchanal excess of a carnival. Cassandra personifies this excess since they "Has drunk three bottles," and in inebriation, imagines that the fireflies are fallen stars. Also, there is a moment when Columbine kisses Pierrot holding his lute, indicating affection or even some sexual energy between them. Amid this joy, a melancholic tone is foreshadowed. In the second stanza, the baudelairean term "spleen" common in 19th century poetry that denotes sadness or a feeling of depression that produces disinterest for life, serves a specific purpose; in other words, it is there to be rejected and substituted by the joy of life during the carnival. In Pierrot's case, he could personify spleen because many times, almost like a cliché, he is portrayed verbally and visually as a taciturn and immobile lover who suffers when Columbine does not share the same feelings.

In the seventh stanza of the poem, there is an inflection point to the narrative mode when the troupe hears "A sob of bitterness / After a laughter..." (*El florilegio* 48). The contrast is notable since the laughter is characteristic of the *commedia*, but it is changed by sadness and pain. As a result, Columbine "Asks the restless audience: / Do you want me to reveal the mystery?" Her question is addressed to the troupe, but also is directed to the reader who acts as an observer of this seriocomic story with theatrical style. She immediately unveils the secret of this comic nonsense, "It is a dumb thing; / Pierrot always without fortune / Wants to strangle himself with my garter / In a moonbeam!" (49). Once again, the garter has a double meaning.¹⁴

As an accessory to hold the stockings on the thigh, the garter connotes a woman's eroticism and sensuality. From this, it can be inferred that an amorous or sexual encounter between these two characters could have happened and fits perfectly with the joy and laughter from the last line of the seventh stanza. On the other hand, the garter also interrupts the passion or the interest in pleasures of the flesh since it is used as an instrument of strangulation. Even though it is a ridiculous and impossible act, at a lower level, making an attempt on his own life demonstrates Pierrot's tedium.

Another element that highlights the emotions of the poem is the moon. Tablada creates a nocturnal atmosphere where the moon illuminates with clarity the place where this troupe is located. He also marks a contrast between the sun and the moon with the lines, "Changing the spleen for the farsa / And the moon for the sun (*El florilegio* 47). The word order equates the spleen with the moon and the farsa with the sun; therefore, a sad and cold atmosphere turns into a joyful and warm one. Then by the end of the poem, Pierrot tries to commit suicide under a moonbeam, which accentuates the dark side to this celestial body.

Through those celestial bodies, we can also start to see the changing image and spirit of Pierrot through the centuries. If there was a hint of *ennui* in the visual representation of Pierrot from the 18th century, it was until the mid-19th century when he was transformed into the true "sad clown" that we know today. By that time, the *commedia dell'arte* was primarily performed in the pantomime, a spectacle that expresses the narrative through gestures. One example is Théâtre des Funambules where in multiple plays Pierrot had the starring role and the actors gave the character their own individuality. Some of the most notorious Pierrots were Jean-Gaspard Debureau who was succeeded by his son Charles Debureau, a dandy and a man about

town, and Paul Legrand, popular for his melancholy and portrayal of Pierrot as “a sufferer in love, a martyr to the caprice of woman” (Jones 27). Through the performance these actors, Pierrot gained his spirit infused with melancholy and an obsession with the moon since under its paleness and coldness, he felt the missing company of humans.

Similarly, to Pierrot, Watteau’s image suffered a similar fate during the 19th century. Writers from the Romantic period constructed Watteau’s myth, which Julie-Anne Plax describes “as the grand, suffering poet of the eighteenth century, and his works are characterized as vague, dreamy and melancholy” (37). As part of the Rococo revivals in France, Watteau was decontextualized from his time and consequently, his oeuvre and persona were readapted to the current sensibilities, for example Romanticism, a period that strongly instilled individualism, solitude, and sentimentality. Along these lines, Judy Sund argues that posthumously and anachronistically Watteau was bounded with Pierrot since the painter “was cast as a sad clown . . . and sentimentalized as laughing on the outside, crying on the inside, and bravely chronicling *joie de vivre* as he faced down death” (321). Even if there was a pre-existing connection between Watteau and Pierrot after considering the large number of images of this character, by the Romantic period, the link became unbreakable.

To appreciate the linkage between Watteau and Pierrot, I have used Luisa E. Jones’ book *Pierrot-Watteau: A Nineteenth Century Myth*, in which there is a great focus in Pierrot’s transformation from the naïve character to the tragic. Jones first presents “Pierrot-Watteau,” since it “embodies charm, fantasy, [and] caprice” (48). With this label, Jones refers to the character from the pantomime, but obviously paintings like *Pierrot content* served Jones as the basis to make this distinction since those images illustrate Pierrot in pastoral spaces where he

might interact with other individuals, especially women to whom he plays his guitar. However, during the 1860s and the later decades, the perspective for this character changed. The “Pierrot-Watteau” of “pastel sunshine gaiety” gradually transformed into “Pierrot-Lunaire,” one marked by “the pale brilliance of moonlight” (Jones 10). Even “Pierrot-Watteau” had moments of melancholy in the pantomimes, but the “Pierrot-Lunaire” ended his scenes with “a macabre combination of murder and martyrdom” (10). As mentioned before, the celestial bodies, the sun and moon, were symbolic emblems used by writers to depict Pierrot’s state of being.

The transition from “Pierrot-Watteau” to “Pierrot-Lunaire” can be easily read in “Comedieta.” The beginning is marked by a Watteau painting where the story will take place; at the same time, the allusion of Watteau recalls those multiple images by Pierrot where he sometimes looks happy with a hint of melancholy. In the middle of those descriptions, there is also the equation of the moon with the spleen and the sun with the farsa. But Pierrot’s happiness is not stable, even after Columbine gave him a kiss, or he is holding her garter. Instead Pierrot dramatically tries to strangle himself. This way Tablada equates Pierrot with the moon like other writers did because under its light, this character lacks color and warmth, which are the symptoms of a fading life.

I began this essay with a very superficial description of Watteau’s *Love in the Italian Theatre*. The visual components of this painting immediately reminded me of Tablada’s “Comedieta.” Although Tablada does not cite this specific artwork in the poem or somewhere else, there are some clear similarities: a *commedia dell’arte* troupe located under the moonlight while Pierrot plays a string instrument.¹⁵ Those similarities demonstrate Watteau’s

impact over the visual representation of the *commedia* since he gave this spectacle the enchantment and the gallantry that later will be interpreted as melancholic.

Tablada's intention with this poem was to paint with words Pierrot and his company under the moonlight. To do so, he designed scenography, which is typical of a theatrical performance, based on a Watteau painting. Even though the poet never explicitly references an exact representation done by the French artist, his exquisite and delicate language allows the connection between the verbal text and plastic image. Then throughout the poem, Tablada presents the different emotions felt by the characters, especially Pierrot, the "sad clown," who is hopelessly in love with Columbine. Once again, the poet does not textually cite a French writer, but Pierrot's mood swings, from laughter to sobbing and then trying to commit suicide, indicate the consensus that writers from the 19th century associated to this character. Therefore Tablada, as a great admirer of French culture, created a poetic bridge between 18th century painting with the performing arts from the 19th century.

End Notes

* This study stems from my bachelor's honor thesis, "La obra pictórica de Jean-Antoine Watteau en *El florilegio* de José Juan Tablada [Watteau's Pictorial Oeuvre in José Juan Tablada's *El florilegio*]."

¹ Some of the figures are easily identifiable, for example, Mezzetino holding the torch that lights the space or next to Pierrot, Harlequin masked and dressed colorfully. The identities for other figures are still debatable. Based on their attributes, I have identified some of them. For example, the man next to the woman with the golden dress could be il Dottore, one of the *vecchi* who is distinguished for his black hat and garments which are constructed by a white ruff collar. Another character that could be identified is the man at the far right whose black beret resembles Scaramouche's.

² Gilles, another stock character from the *commedia dell'arte*, gained his highest popularity during the 18th century. But he was commonly mistaken with Pierrot because of their comic character and costume.

³ In its first publication in *Revista Moderna* (Mexico), first fortnight of December 1900, the poem was titled "Comedietta," which is a light farcical comedy. This poem was later published in the second edition of *El florilegio* (1904).

⁴ Tablada's early career is categorized within the Latin American movement, Modernismo derived from the French schools, Parnassianism and Symbolism. His literary production reflects a decadent and aestheticized language. Then he later transitioned to the later more avant-garde and experimental manifestations, such as the practice of the calligram.

⁵ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. “In a park by Watteau / Covers with roses June / And a clear plenilune / With its light opalized” (*El florilegio* 47).

⁶ The play’s name is *La Fausse Prude*, or *The False Hypocrite*. Watteau even painted this event in a work, *Departure of the commedia dell’arte in 1697*, now lost, but still exists in an engraving done in 1729 by Louis Jacob (fig. 4)

⁷ Over time the painting’s pigments have deteriorated and obscured, especially the right side where the foliage background is. The only way to know what Watteau intended to depict is through engravings also titled *Pierrot Content*. In those images, hidden in the foliage, Harlequin and another individual lurked with their gaze Pierrot and his company.

⁸ The 19th century marked a recuperation of the 18th century through the plastic arts. Multiple writers produced works based on specific visual representations, including Watteau’s masterpiece *Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera*. Charles Baudelaire wrote “Un Voyage à Cythère [A Voyage to Cythera],” in which the mythical island turns into a rotten and decadent place. On the other hand, Latin American writers such as the father of Modernismo Rubén Darío also wrote a poem titled “Marina” in which he mentions two islands related to the goddess Venus, Cythera and Cyprus; the writers Théophile Gautier and Paul Verlaine; and of course, Watteau.

⁹ The name for the Grand Guignol originates from the French puppet Guignol created in the early 19th century. When Tablada recounts his visit to the Grand Guignol, he even mentions the origin of this puppet that multiple times was accompanied by a *commedia dell’arte* character, Pulcinella: “The abrupt and blunt outcomes of the infantile “Guignol,” with the blow with a stick by the *gendarme* and Pulcinella’s final *couic*, are transposed to the “Grand Guignol”” (*Los días* 17).

¹⁰ These three characters also appeared in another poem by Tablada titled “Mascarada [Masquerade].” It narrates the clash between Pierrot and Harlequin to win Columbine’s heart. At the end Pierrot is victorious, which differs from the typical representation of Pierrot as a sad character.

¹¹ Those manuscripts were prepared by Annibale Sersale, the Count of Casamarciano at the end of the 17th century. In 1896, Benedetto Croce, donated two volumes of *commedia dell’arte scenari* to the National Library of Naples, from which the translations to English were possible (Goodrich Heck 12).

¹² Two poetry books, *Les Complaintes* [The Complaints] (1885) and *L’Imitation de Notre-Dame là Lune* [The Imitation of Our Lady the Moon] (1886), and also a play published posthumously *Pierrot Fumiste* [Pierrot the Cut-Up] (1892) are evidence of Laforgue’s affinity for this figure.

¹³ Originally published in *El Mundo Ilustrado* (Mexico), on February 1st, 1914.

¹⁴ At the beginning of Tablada’s “Mascarada,” Columbine removes her velvet corset, satin mask, and golden garter (*El florilegio* 44). The act of undressing emphasizes Columbine’s seductive and erotic nature, which causes two men, Pierrot and Harlequin, fight and win her love and body.

¹⁵ In the poem, Tablada wrote: “Pierrot tunes his lute” (*El florilegio* 47).

Figures



Fig. 1. Watteau, Jean-Antoine. *Love in the Italian Theatre*. ca. 1715-1717. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin. *Pinterest*, i.pinimg.com/originals/46/5c/76/465c765c4c4ea8106ce8f8c91c37ae80.jpg.



Fig. 2. ---. *Pierrot*. ca. 1718-1719. Musée du Louvre, collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010059617.



Fig. 3. ---. *Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera*. 1717. Musée du Louvre, collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010061995.



Fig. 4. Jacob, Louis, after Jean-Antoine Watteau. *Departure of the commedia dell'arte in 1697*. 1729. Musée du Louvre, carteles.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl020552264.



Fig. 5. Watteau, Jean-Antoine. *Pierrot content*. ca. 1712. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/artists/watteau-jean-antoine/pierrot-content.



Fig. 6. ---. *The Sheperds*. ca. 1717. Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin. [Wikimedia Commons, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Antoine_Watteau_027.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Antoine_Watteau_027.jpg).

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