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Jorge Guillén, Poet of Being

With Federico García Lorca, Jorge Guillén is one of the greatest Spanish poets of the century. He was born in Valladolid on January 18, 1893. After his B.A., he spent two years in Switzerland in order to perfect his knowledge of French (1909-1911). The next two years were spent in Madrid, at the Residencia de Estudiantes, where he made friends with Federico García Lorca, Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel. In 1913, he obtained his M.A. in literature at the University of Granada. From 1917 to 1923, he was an Assistant in Spanish at the Sorbonne. In 1921, he married a French girl, Germaine Cahen. Their two children, Teresa and Claudio, were born respectively in 1921 and 1924. Guillén wrote his first poems in Paris: they were strongly influence by the great Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío. It was in Brittany, in the small beach resort of Trégastel where he was vacationing, that he undertook the creation of his masterpiece, Cántico. In Paris, he had made friends with Paul Valéry. In 1924, he obtained his doctorate in literature at the University of Madrid, with a thesis on the poetry of Góngora. He then taught Spanish literature at the University of Murcia (1925-1928), at Oxford (1928-1930), and at the University of Seville (1931-1938).

1936 marked the beginning of the Spanish civil war. Guillén and his wife were arrested in Pamplona by Franco’s partisans, held prisoners between September 5 and September 9, and narrowly escaped execution by firing squad, as their friend García Lorca had been a few days before. Guillén’s father knew some influential figures among Franco’s partisans, and he managed to get them freed. Guillén was able to return to Valladolid, then to Seville, but the new government took away his professorship. Guillén’s wife was Jewish, which did not please the new masters. Guillén decided to leave Spain as soon as he could get the necessary documents. He would not see his native land again until after Franco’s death. He never could have accepted living under the dictatorship of the caudillo and his Falange. He found refuge in the United States and in Canada, where he taught Spanish literature at Middlebury College, at MacGill University, and at Wellesley College, where he resided for seventeen years, from 1940 to 1957, the year when he was officially scheduled to retire. However, since Harvard invited him to be Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry for 1957-58, he accepted. Other offers were to follow, and he thus lectured at many prestigious universities: Yale, Colegio de México, Berkeley, San Diego, Puerto-Rico, and Bogotá. His wife had died from cancer in 1947. In 1961, in Bogotá, he married Irene Mochi Sismonde de Sismondi, a descendant of the celebrated Italian historian Sismonde de Sismondi.

Jorge Guillén was awarded many major literary prizes: Premio della Città de Firenze (1957); Premio de Poesía Etna-Taormina (1959); Grand Prix International de Poésie (1961); Premio San Luca (Firenze, 1964); Bennet Prize for Poetry (New York, 1975); Premio Miguel de Cervantes (Madrid, 1976), Premio Internazionale Feltrinelli (Roma, 1977); Premio Alfonso Reyes (México, 1977). From 1928 to 1950, Jorge Guillén had published one work only, Cántico, but each edition (there were four of them, in 1928, 1936, 1945 and 1950) had been significantly larger than the previous one. Cántico was followed by Clamór, which comprises three parts: Maremágnun (1957), ...Que van a dar a la mar (1960), A la altura de las circunstancias (1963). Another collection, Homenaje, came out in 1967. Aire nuestro (1968) contains Cántico,
Clamór, and Homenaje. "Obra completa" is the title of the final poem of Homenaje: with this work, Guillén had reached his life’s goal as a poet. He was, however, to publish other collections: Y otros poemas (1973), et Final (1981). Guillén also published translations of works by Paul Valéry, Paul Claudel, Jules Supervielle and Jean Cassou, as well as several scholarly works, notably Lenguaje y poesía (1962). He was entrusted with the task of editing the Obras completas of his friend Federico García Lorca, for which he wrote a long preface which is one of the best critical study of Lorca’s poetry. He also devoted a major book to the memory of his friend, Federico en persona (1959). It was only when King Juan Carlos ascended the throne, after Franco’s death, that Guillén returned to Spain. In 1977, he settled in Malaga, where the climate is warmer than in his native Valladolid. This is where he died on February 6, 1984, at the age of ninety-one.

I made the acquaintance of Jorge Guillén, Don Jorge, as we called him, at the end of 1951. I had just been appointed Assistant Professor of French at Wellesley College, where he was also teaching, and from 1951 to 1957 I had many occasions to see him. Many occasions, I said: in truth, not enough. I had little time, alas, since I was burdened with work, as is often the case with young teachers who, before tenure, are saddled with all kinds of responsibilities: lectures to prepare, office hours spent advising students, committee meetings and departmental duties of all kinds, not to mention research. Still, I did spend some good moments in Don Jorge’s company. He spoke with humour of some figures of his past. One anecdote stuck in my memory. Valéry, when people questioned him about the meaning of his poems, answered with a joke: “La Jeune Parque? une fille qui a ses premières règles.”

Don Jorge had given me one of his recent publications, El Encanto de las sirenas, a poem published in México City in 1953 and illustrated by Adolfo Halty. He had inscribed it: “A René Galand, entre los peligros de las sirenas. Con toda la amistad de Jorge Guillén.” I was not married at the time (I married only six years later), and the sirenas jokingly mentioned by Don Jorge were the young women whom I occasionally dated, not very often, truth to say, for lack of time. I had translated the poem into French, and Don Jorge was kind enough to tell me he liked it. I have also attempted an English translation which appears below.

A true poet, for Guillén, does not escape reality to seek refuge in the Romantics’ dreamworlds of the or in the Symbolists’ imaginary castles. Mallarmé’s characters, Hérodiade or Saint Jean, turn their back on life. This is also the behavior of Axel, the protagonist of Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s drama which bears his name as a title. All of them seek beauty in the realms of Nothingness. Guillén refuses to abandon the realms of Being. Picasso wondered that a human body does not melt in his bathtub like sugar in a cup of coffee. Guillén, like his countryman, discovers miracles in everyday life. The siren is a false idol. The poet’s duty is to lay bare her illusory magic and to show that the true wonder is none other than a flesh and blood woman. The poet must not use his art to create imaginary worlds, but to celebrate the beauty of the real world, to give Rimbaud’s “réalité rugueuse” the radiance of myths, to make the reader hear “the tender harmony / Suddenly surprised at the heart of this world”. This is the lesson taught in El Encanto de las sirenas.

When the poet encounters the world, as all living beings must, he finds a universe full of harmony. Poetry, according to Guillén, must be a celebration of Being in its most elementary forms: air, daylight, a flower, a woman. Some critics have concluded that Guillén is no more than
a XXth century Doctor Pangloss. Nothing could be farther from the truth: unlike Voltaire’s character, Guillén has looked at the monsters of history square in the face. If the poems of Cántico are hymns to the beauty of the world, the poems of Clamór show the reverse of the picture. Guillén has seen and recognized evil. He is aware of the fate of Anne Frank, the figure of martyred innocence. He has seen a black child lost in the slums of an American city, “Standing / Outlined against the light, doomed / From birth / Although he could yet see / Neither shadows nor walls.” He has known men who had been forced to flee their country, starving and dead tired in their worn out coats, in order to escape the death camps. He has known the Dictator who climbed on piles of corpses to rise higher than God. He has understood the spirit of Evil, the spirit “der stets verneint”, the spirit of Nothingness. He has seen its embodiment in the mid-level manager, the man of Nothing for whom Nothingness was the ultimate Power: this lowly technician had only to press a button to destroy the world. Eichmann was such a man: he was just an ordinary individual, a model employee who performed his job well, but his job was to send millions of men to the gas chamber without ever thinking about what he was doing, like a cog in a machine. Evil, for Guillén, is the diabolical negation of Being, the negation of Love.

The Enchantment of Sirens

How remote the silence of each porthole!
Nothing reaching my ear, except
The rhythms of the swell,
Of wave after wave offering its sound
As an initiation to the tender harmony
Suddenly surprised at the heart of this world
(Although on occasions I confuse it with chaos).
Everything, on the earth or the sea so agitated,
Was squabbling.
Everything? Without a doubt... Minus
This large stable ship, speedy profile, which ploughed
The breasts of the sea - ocean sounds too male - all of
Venus herself reborn from the depths
For I know not what nuptials.
I thought: Scent of the sea, of woman!
It was not an invocation. And yet,
Would you believe me if I told you what transpired?
I saw, I saw... I do not hide
My surprise, nor do I heap
Mystery over this instant.
Let speech throw out
My tale like a most real life story!
I saw ... Oh, almost nothing,
A form suddenly looming,
- Emerging from what night, from what life? -
Through the innocent ring of the open porthole.
Some lady passenger
Swimming without permission
Crowned with moonlight,
Did she see a conquest in my wonder?
No... Too complete
Was this nudity which she offered me
Almost down to the waist.
Nor was it an omen from the heavens.
If my eyes stopped
As though by accident - albeit with intent -
On the dual curve,
Was it not at her request?
The woman tendered me her sweetness.
Who, this apparition? Without the slightest clue
To guide me - who? - I yield to adventure.
The leaf of desire
Still trembles within me.
Nothing was more incredible:
My best past pleasure lost all flavor.
How small my yesterday!
I did not cry out.
She said - she said to me - this woman ...
Did she speak or sing? I did not understand the sentence
As melodious as a song which would delineate
The murmurs of a summer
Resounding at distances carried in the hand,
To the beat of dawns with the rhythm of fate:
My destiny from then on
Which would require much skill from me.
This mysterious speech
Had an alien, unknown sound,
Like the spring
Of some surviving Eden.
Did she call me? The eyes, green, grey
- They had the bland quietness of oysters,
A languor learned in what countries? -
For sure, they challenged me. You do not dare, you elude
The prodigious risk of coming to my arms?
Like a submarine magnet,
The long mane displayed its appeal...
I did not hesitate. Like a miner descending into his mine,
I rushed toward her mouth,
Between her look and her smile, supreme.
What grace in the greatest beauty! I yielded.
Like one who reaches
The goal of his desire
I had to abandon myself. - We shall go away!
Thus sang this mane.
- Such felicities will find
In you their perfections, ah! faultless one!
The song triumphed. But ... already so close the incline
Of the wave, and its coolness, and its grim violence,
I drew back. Why? Perhaps it was
Pure instinct.
Does not everything find in it end and beginning?
Dragging this burden
So distinctive in all its charms
And therefore
More feminine in its mystery
I imposed my will upon the woman, so light,
This tender Argonaut,
Fallen victim to her adventurous quest.
A thud on the carpet! I was almost ashamed.
She, so weak. I, so virile. More: a bear.
Oh, believe me! I do not appeal to your credulity.
I tell what I lived, - superior
From this peak of truth - to any dissolving forgetfulness.
On the floor a damsel quivered,
A creature down below ... yes, a marine one,
Thighs, ankles? Nothing but a vile scaly mass,
All the more repugnant in its closeness.
A woman, a fish? A siren.
And suddenly I was struck with this most hideous truth:
It leads us to the ultimate let-down:
Horror!
An agonizing horror
Also pervades the lost one,
With a supplicating fear.
From above I felt lord and master.
Where is this harmony
If out of the waves it shows us but its void,
Without a chant to enchant us?
Overcoming my nausea, I seized in my hands
The moaning shape. The horror is mutual!
And through
The porthole I threw away my vain thoughts.
Vanities, silence!
Sirens seen face to face are atrocious.
So shouted my fright.
Silence! Silence mine, solitary - and merciful.
And suddenly ... A greater mercy?
Wait. It did happen ... I tell, I do not sing.
Did the shadow in my mind wait for something else?
Someone, below the lintel, was watching. Such beauty!
Smiling, she watched. Had she seen everything?
I said only: - Oh!
Silent, reserved,
She tendered a look
Of welcoming anticipation.
- Madam!
I closed the door. Good!
A lady, obviously a lady, blonde queenliness.
One did not
Have to ask: Who
Is this belle? Beauty is always in the right,
Blonde queenliness of the light blue eyes!
From some Nordic light came this lady,
So real for me aboard this ship.
United already, seated
On the narrow bed,
We smiled, without drama.
Peace - comforting peace -
Tenderly advanced toward dawn.
Fullness of beauty in nudity! Look without any blindfold
At reality in all its legend.

Jorge Guillén. El encanto de las sirenas (México, 1953).
(English translation by René Galand)