

INTRODUCTION

JUAN RAMÓN JIMÉNEZ (1881-1958): A PERSPECTIVE

Howard T. Young
Pomona College

Centennials invite the long view. A slice of one hundred years implacably demands an historical approach. From the perspective of changing conventions and forms, and at our present moment on the jagged graph of literary tastes, looking back on the career of a poet who called himself the Universal Andalusian and then went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1956, one is impressed by the steadfastness of his purpose, delighted by the quality of his best voice, and surprised by the current warm recognition of much of his work in Spain and Latin America.

The extent of Juan Ramón Jiménez' contribution to Spanish literature has always been clear. Although the year 1981 does, in a way, mark a revival of interest in Juan Ramón in the Iberian Peninsula, his enduring importance in Hispanic letters has never been open to question. Juvenile filter of a highly sentimental form of fin de siècle decadence (much of which persisted for an uncomfortably long time, especially in unpublished works), sensitive transmitter and adapter of Verlaine's style of symbolism, continuer of Bécquer: these are the stages that led to the triumph of 1916. The *Diario de un poeta recién casado*, written as a result of its author's wedding in New York City in March of that year, exerted enormous influence on subsequent Hispanic poetry. It stands between the towers of Bécquer's *Rimas* (1871) and Lorca's *Romancero gitano* (1928) as one of the indisputable landmarks in the field of the modern Spanish lyric. The *Diario* transformed the style and content of Spanish language poetry, and during a ten year period, fledgling poets had to assimilate Juan Ramón and then struggle to find their own voice.

Leaving aside the prose descriptions of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, the content matter of the *Diario* tended to be pellucid and metaphysical, the style stripped down to a minimum of adjectives, the verse form free, unrhymed and brief. The imagists had introduced *vers libre* to the United States at about that time, and Juan Ramón

reacted with his version called *verso desnudo*, a short stanza of free verse that had a considerable impact on younger poets.

In the *Diario* the characteristic mature tone of Juan Ramón is set. Highly self-referential but less hermetic than Mallarmé, he began in this book his long series of poems, starting with *Eternidades* and ending with *Belleza*, that seek to describe epiphanies. In so doing, he calibrated (and I use the quantitative term consciously) the manifold aspects of a mind artistically perceiving the indifferent beauty of the world. Pebbles, petals, grains of sand on the one hand and the vast grey slate of the sea and sidereal distances on the other were the fragments of his surroundings (Ortega's *circunstancia*) that Juan Ramón's *yo* sought to appraise, reconnoiter, and finally to possess. In the last analysis, his would be the mystical purpose: to join the thought with the object.

It is these minute, occasionally hermetic vignettes of perception, that must figure prominently in any account of Juan Ramón's achievement no matter how brief. But for many readers in the Hispanic world, he is the author of only one book: *Platero y yo*, recently characterized by Rosa Chacel in a suggestive phrase as "The second first novel,"¹ a Cervantine allusion that is justified when one thinks of the vast number of readers *Platero* has had and the impressive number of translations it has enjoyed.

A pastoral prose poem, *Platero y yo* reveals many layers of meaning and nuance. The somberly clad poet with his Nazarene beard and broad black-rimmed hat rides the donkey Platero through the village of Moguer and out into the countryside to watch the sunset, gather flowers, and shun human company. A love of nature comparable to that found in English literature marks this book and sets it aside from much of Spanish literature which, nurtured in a hard dry land, does not yield many green thoughts in green gardens. However, nearly everyone overlooks the presence of suffering and death: the veterinarian whose laughter inevitably turns into tears as the release of emotion reminds him of his dead daughter; Anilla, who liked to dress up as a ghost, and who became one, blackened in her death by a lightning bolt; the village idiot; filthy gypsy children. A careful reading of *Platero y yo* mutes the pastoral tone; these are songs that range as do Blake's (one of Juan Ramón's favorite poets) from innocence to experience.

This great decade in Juan Ramón's life (1916–1926) contains an encounter between the poet and death that in its literary form has been little noted. The anecdotal approach that insists on emphasizing Juan

Ramón's neurotic fear of dying has obscured the literary triumph he achieved over his morbid obsession. Indeed, Juan Ramón's conviction of the daily imminence of death, his concern that he would not live to complete his *obra* does loom large in any biographical account, and is comparable to a similar neurosis in Proust. At the age of thirty-eight, fourteen years before pneumonia claimed him, Proust undertook the final version of *A la recherche du temps perdu* convinced that his arteries were deteriorating and that a stroke was imminent. Juan Ramón required a doctor constantly on call and attempted to persuade legions of listeners about his weak heart (in reality, robust), always concluding woefully that his *obra* would remain unfinished.

In such a context, the series of poems on death in *Poesía* and *Belleza* bear remarkable witness to art's powers of sublimation. Juan Ramón finally discovered with Rilke that a proper celebration of death could magnify life, and in poem after poem he explores the convoluted yet starkly simple relationship between living and dying. A coveted tone is won: assurance based on enduring struggle, the humanist's battle with never a favorable outcome. "How can I fear thee, Death?" ("¿Cómo, muerte, tenerte miedo?") leads us straight to John Donne. And the pin that can collapse our bag of flesh and bones ("La mano contra la luz") recalls Richard II's solemn remark: Death comes "... and with a little pin / Bores through his castle-wall, and—farewell king!"

The refusal to become a disciple of his disciples that characterized Yeats also defines the later Juan Ramón. Disinclined to rest on the laurels gained for compression and intensity in the decade from 1916 to 1926, he probably saw in the political trouble brewing in Spain one way of breaking with the past. When the Spanish Civil War began in 1936, Juan Ramón fled his country to confront a new future that would see some radical changes in his verse. Having long been in inner exile, to use Paul Ilie's suggestive distinction,² outer exile may have been less disquieting for Juan Ramón than for many of his contemporaries who also took refuge in the new world. His neurasthenia receded enough to allow him some periods in which his personality bloomed; he came out of his shell to lecture and turned on occasion into a kind of public man, including striking up a friendship with Vice-President Henry A. Wallace.

Florida reminded him of Andalusia and for awhile he settled there. Motor trips to the Everglades and the flat open land triggered a series of reminiscences about his past. The result was the much admired *Espacio* (in three parts: 1941, 1942, 1954). For the poet who

had wagered his all on the card of brevity, *Espacio* was an audacious experiment with problems inherent in the long poem. Perhaps inspired in part by Eliot's solution of similar problems in *The Four Quartets*, Juan Ramón abandoned his *verso desnudo* for the pell mell openness of *Espacio*. Octavio Paz's admiration for Juan Ramón's willingness to turn discourse into an examination of the possibilities of language may be excessive, but one cannot fail to recognize *Espacio*'s experimental venture into the form of the long poem, and in this sense, as Paz says, it belongs in the company of Neruda's *Las alturas de Macchu Picchu* and Gorostiza's *Muerte sin fin*.³ Contingency, the confluence of the past in the present, memory, spiritual versus carnal love, destiny, and finally mortality: these are some of the themes of this piece that, appearing to consist of heterogeneous material, is actually as carefully structured as a sonata.

There remained the problem of God to deal with, and *Animal de fondo* (1949), which Ezra Pound in a letter to Juan Ramón called a "fine book," takes up the task. Predictably, divinity will be, along the lines suggested by symbolism, the artistic process itself, and the artist a true Nietzschean hero, a man above other men. *Animal de fondo* is an apocalyptic book: the arrival of God is announced, his presence is celebrated, and the world is rearranged. It also brings to an end the tradition that runs from Blake to Mallarmé of the artist as seer. Juan Ramón is visited by a god that is both within and without, a *dios deseado y deseante*, the active and passive participles pointing to the always present wish to join subject and object, the contemplator and that which is contemplated. On this note of apodictic humanism, with "all the clouds ablaze," the best of Juan Ramón's work concludes. Although he will write more, his jottings on the blank void of paper will add nothing substantial to his *obra*.

Ever since the *modernista* excesses of *Ninfeas* and *Almas de violeta* in 1900, Spanish literature has, as pointed out above, always had to deal with Juan Ramón. His poetry attracted a large group of followers in Spain and Latin America, but after the Spanish Civil War, his books served as a negative model: roses and epiphanies did not seem relevant to poetry that had the earmarks of social realism. Finally, in the late fifties, his work began to find new readers in Spain (José Ángel Valente, Ángel González, Ángel Crespo and lately young critics like Arturo del Villar and Ignacio Prat).

An international congress at the University of La Rábida from June 22 to 27, 1981, marked Spain's official recognition of its Nobel laureate. As the number of special issues flowed from the presses and

members of the Real Academia endorsed the celebration centered around the poet's birthplace in Moguer and the monastery of La Rábida that sheltered Columbus, it was easy to forget the long stretch of years in which Juan Ramón was to his countrymen who wrote poetry a *persona non grata*. A generation of poets like José Hierro, Blas de Otero, Victoriano Crómer, and Gabriel Celaya found in Antonio Machado a more congenial model, one whose integrity in defeat struck them as the best of liberal Spain. During the censorship of literature in the early days of the Franco dictatorship, the so-called social poets managed a muffled criticism of life in Spain, and it is natural that they found nothing in the Juan Ramón of the twenties that they wished to emulate. Their need to reject him was based on the strength of their conviction that poetry should communicate with as large an audience as possible, whereas Juan Ramón had always proclaimed himself a poet of the elite (*la minoría selecta*).

The centennial occasion offers an opportunity to modify this attitude and to point out Juan Ramón's clear commitment to the Republican side of the Spanish conflict, his awareness of political events, and his desire to be involved as a poet and to contribute within that context whatever he could to the cause of the Spanish Republicans and later of the Allies.

It was not a man divorced from politics who went to see the editor of *The New Republic* on September 14, 1939, to urge the magazine to seek and publish reliable information about the troubles of Spain's constitutional government. Malcolm Cowley's reply is worth quoting in full:

Dear Señor Jiminèz [sic]:

I hope that something comes of our cablegram to the Spanish government. A capable press agent in this country could do a great deal to counteract the unfavorable impression built up by the lying dispatches that a great many correspondents have been sending from Spain. One very simple method would be to have a man sit at a short-wave radio and transcribe and translate all the news from Madrid, so that it could be shot to the newspapers here immediately.

The address of George Seldes, in case you should care to get in touch with him, is Woodstock, Vermont. It was a great pleasure to have you and Señora Jiminèz [sic] visit us at The New Republic. My great regret was that we did not have a chance to talk about literature in general and of your own work in particular.⁴

Three days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Juan Ramón wrote to Richard Pattee in the State Department offering the services of a fifty-nine year old poet to the United States. "I believe," he said, "that every 'free man' is obliged to assist in the defense of the great ideals of the mind, now threatened by especially dark disasters. In addition, I am indebted to the United States for its generous hospitality that has allowed me to make a living here."⁵ The letter had its effect and Juan Ramón was invited to prepare a series of lectures on Hispanic and North American poets to be broadcast to Latin America by the Voice of America radio.

None of this meant that politics should enter into his poetry. He reproached Antonio Machado for writing a sonnet to the communist major Enrique Lister,⁶ but he did allow the tragedy of individuals affected by the war to be remarked in his poems. "Generalife," to Lorca's sister, expresses grief over the assassination of her brother; two moving elegies on the death of his nephew, who died fighting on the Nationalist side, appear in *Romances de Coral Gables*.

All in all, Juan Ramón's ivory tower had more than one window opening to the outside, and one can search in vain, for example, in Paul Valéry's poetry to find similar echoes of World War I.⁷

From the viewpoint of today's readers, prolixity offers a more serious impediment to enjoyment of Juan Ramón's achievement. Several hundred aphorisms, scores of poetry books, half a dozen volumes of prose, a staggering amount of unpublished poetry, translation of twenty Tagore titles: it is an overwhelming output, and it is, of course, uneven and above all repetitious. The early morbid treacle, the typical decadent mixture of sex cum religion, and the cloying melancholy were violently rejected by Juan Ramón himself. Nevertheless, sheer bulk can be discouraging; one finds it difficult to know the Juan Ramón canon the way one does that of Antonio Machado or Bécquer.

The modern reader faces another obstacle in his appreciation of Juan Ramón. "Imagination applied to the whole world," said Wallace Stevens, "is vapid in comparison to imagination applied to detail."⁸ The lucidity of *Eternidades*, *Piedra y cielo*, and *Belleza* is so compressed, so attached to generic objects (tree, stone, flower) that the lack of detail, especially in translation, may suggest the quality Stevens was deploring. But if one follows the symbolist injunction and allows suggestion to fill in the empty spaces, the result is more than satisfying and on occasion the balance between mind and the world is perfect and delicate.

The enormous creative energy behind the prolixity that tends to overwhelm the reader is also no doubt partially responsible for the strong sense of optimism that, despite personal suffering, imbues much of Juan Ramón's work. The commitment to the task of poetry in this aphorism fittingly serves as a final emblem: "There are those who are convinced that everything has already been done; that norms exist which we cannot avoid. I, on the contrary, believe that every moment beauty waits to be born all over again."⁹

NOTES

1. "La segunda primera novela," *Estudios sobre JRJ*, ed. Pilar Gómez de Bedate (Mayagüez: Univ. of Puerto Rico, 1981), pp. 143-153.
2. *Literature and Inner Exile: Authoritarian Spain, 1939-1975* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 1-10.
3. "Una de cal. . .," *Papeles de Son Armadans*, 47 (1967), 189-190.
4. Sala Puerto Rico. Reprinted by permission of Malcolm Cowley.
5. Coral Gables, December 10, 1941. *Selección de cartas* (Barcelona: Ed. Picazo, 1973), p. 132.
6. Germán Gullón, "El compromiso literario de JRJ. (Una polémica con José Bergamín)," *Peña Labra*, 20 (verano 1976), 34-35. See also Angel Crespo, "'Guerra en España': La actitud política de JRJ," *Insula*, año 36 (julio-agosto 1981), núms. 416-417, p. 11.
7. C. M. Bowra, *Poetry and Politics, 1900-1960* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 73-74.
8. *Opus Posthumous*, ed. S. F. Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957), p. 176.
9. *Estética y ética estética*, ed. F. Garfias (Madrid: Aguilar, 1967), pp. 277-278.