

SYNGE'S *RIDERS TO THE SEA* TRANSLATED BY JUAN RAMÓN AND ZENOBIA JIMÉNEZ

The Nobel Prize-winning Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez finished his life teaching at the University of Puerto Rico during the Franco regime thanks primarily to his half-Puerto Rican, half-Catalonian wife Zenobia Camprubi Aymar. He willed his personal library and many unpublished papers to that institution. Among them is an annotated copy of John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (Boston, John W. Luce, 1911), which has not previously been studied in detail.

The most specific published information is within an article by Fernando Ibarra, "Juan Ramón Jiménez e Irlanda," *Romance Notes*, 17.3 (Spring 1977), 241-46. From interviews published by Juan Guerrero Ruiz in his book *Juan Ramón de viva voz* (Madrid, Insula, 1961; p. 38), we know that Jiménez planned to translate Synge as early as September 15, 1915, and in fact obtained exclusive rights to do so. However, this did not happen until his marriage to the totally bilingual Zenobia on March 16, 1916. Prior to meeting her, he had concentrated on translation of French. Zenobia truly deserved the joint byline when the Spanish translation was published in 1920 (Madrid, El Jirasol y la Espada), as closer examination of the evidence will prove.

Shortly thereafter, in spring 1921, the first performance of the play took place at the Ritz Theater of Madrid, directed by Rivas Cherif, and the playwright Federico García Lorca was in the audience. A significant body of scholarship and criticism does exist comparing García Lorca's play *Bodas de sangre* with Synge's *Riders to the Sea*—the atavistic forces of Nature, the fatalism of the main characters, water as the prominent symbol, dignity and relief at the end.¹ But the crucial role of the Jiménez translation in opening this rich vein of inspiration is never mentioned.

The working methods of Juan Ramón and Zenobia as translators can be mapped accurately through the materials preserved in Puerto Rico. Juan Ramón marked with an x in pencil the words in the English text which he did not understand and could not find in English-Spanish dictionaries, inevitably Irish Gaelic words such as *poteen* (p. 30, homemade moonshine liquor), *curagh* (p. 39, hide-covered round boat of ancient origin), *Samhain* (p. 42, pagan Celtic

¹ Jean J. Smoot, *A Comparison of Plays by John Millington Synge and Federico García Lorca: The Poets and Time*, Madrid, José Porrúa Turanzas, 1978, summarizes more than twenty discussions, beginning with Patrick O. Dudgeon, "Lo universal en la poesía popular europea: J. M. Synge y Federico García Lorca," *Cursos y Conferencias*, 15 (1939), 765-91. See also John D. Ayala, "Similarities between J.M. Synge's *Rider to the Sea* and F.G. Lorca's *Blood Wedding*," *CLA Journal*, 28.3 (March 1985), 314-25.

autumn festival). He also placed ink in the margins of passages he particularly liked, such as the mother's speech at the very end as she faces life having lost her last son to the sea. Zenobia produced a straight-forward, nearly literal Spanish interlinear translation, and then her husband rewrote it in his own poetic manner, with particular attention to rhythm. The scholar who has studied Juan Ramón Jiménez's contact with literature in English most, Howard T. Young, cites this letter from Zenobia: "Mr. Yeats is correct in supposing that I will myself translate the works and these will be revised by my husband as has been the case with my translations of Sir Rabindranath Tagore's works."² Juan Ramón's contribution was by no means negligible. Rhythm is a salient aspect of Synge's poetic prose. Uwe Stork has devoted an entire book to the subject, *Der sprachliche Rythmus in den Bühnerstücken J.M. Synge's* (Salzburg, U Salzburg, 1980). Lorna Reynolds deems Synge's rhythm chiefly "trochaic," rather than the typical iambic speech rhythm of English, in her article "The Rhythms of Synge's Dramatic Prose," *Yeats Studies*, 2 (1972), 52-65. Later this particularly noteworthy achievement of Juan Ramón will be examined more closely.

Even after publication of his own creative work, Juan Ramón never stopped revising it. So, too, in this translation, he has sometimes changed his mind. *Samhain* was originally translated "noviembre," but later he wrote "Los Santos," meaning All Saints' Day or Halloween, in the margin, and instead of "oraciones" he preferred "plegarias," making it more obvious that prayer is referred to (p. 53). At the beginning of his literary career, he had rejected his Jesuit education, but in the last decades of his life, he devoted poems to God and became increasingly mystical, as in *Dios deseado y deseante* (Madrid, Aguilar, 1964). As time went by, the beliefs of the Irish Aran Islands must have seemed less pagan to him. Synge, a Protestant, merely wanted to represent the beliefs of the islanders, which he probably perceived as a mixture of Catholic and pagan. Other changes are the addition of personal pronouns that intensify: "¡Todos se me fueron ya!" ("They're all gone *from me* now!" p. 52) and "¡esto se ha acabado!" ("This has ended *completely!*" p. 56); or the change from the preposition *en* to the more comprehensive *por*: "queden vivos *por* el mundo." ("left living *throughout* the world," p. 57). At the end of the translation appears this very modest note: "Si el lector atento cree que algo puede ser mejorado en esta traducción —el menor detalle; ninguna falta es pequeña— le agradeceremos mucho que nos haga saber franca y honradamente —como siempre debe hacerlo la crítica." This is precisely what this presentation aims to do.

The first obvious item of comment must be the title of the translation, *Jinetes hacia el mar*. Why was the sea not made feminine, as is usual in

² *The Line in the Margin: Juan Ramón Jiménez and his Readings in Blake, Shelley, and Yeats*, Madison, U of Wisconsin, 1980; p. 112. June 13, 1918, Archivo Histórico Madrid, Caja 4. 10/50.

Spanish poetry? Perhaps the sea was being depicted as an impersonal force, to enlarge its Symbolic possibilities and its changeable nature. The most obvious preposition to render *Riders to the Sea* is *a* ("to"), not *hacia* ("towards"). *Hacia* does not preserve the ambiguity of the meaning in English –people whose lives are lived in rhythm *with* the sea, their livelihood, as well as people irresistibly attracted *to* the sea, despite its history of destruction to their families. Significantly enough, the first section of *Diario de un poeta recién casado* (1916) has the subtitle "Hacia el mar." Juan Ramón was undertaking an ocean voyage for the first time to the New World, in order to marry Zenobia in New York, in the presence of her American relatives. This was his first attempt at free verse, and according to Young, universally recognized as the first book of symbolic poetry in modern Spanish literature.³ The fourth section of the *Diario* contains even more powerful images documenting the return journey to Spain. The editor A. Sánchez Barbudo calls the following passage from "Mar de vuelta," CLXVIII, lines 15-21, "un temor metafísico": "...De repente, te vuelves/ parado, vacilante,/ borracho colosal y, grana,/ me miras, con encono/ y desconocimiento/ y me asustas gritándome en mi cara/ hasta dejarme sordo, mudo y ciego..."⁴ An earlier editor, Ricardo Gullón, interprets it in more personal terms as "ritmos del amor y el mar," considering the *Diario* Juan Ramón Jiménez's best, most innovative work.⁵ But on the very next day Juan Ramón sees the sea as feminine, CLXXVI, "DÍA ENTRE LAS AZORES: ¡ADIÓS!: "Así 'Las Musas aclamando al Genio mensajero de luz' de Pubis de Chavannes, femeninas olas blancas de una mar ideal." (p. 211). Michael Predmore has located a mural of this title in the Boston Public Library from Zenobia's diary entry for March 11, 1916 (Madrid, Alianza, 1991). Having been trained as a painter himself, he frequently sees the world through the eyes of twentieth century painters.⁶ Both masculine and feminine aspects seem combined four days from the first passage quoted, June 18, CLXXXV, "VIDA": "Tu nombre hoy, mar, es vida.[...] ¡mar vivo, vivo, vivo, todo vivo y vivo solo,/ tan solo y para siempre vivo, mar!" (lines 1-9). Synge's *Riders to the Sea* may have added conceptualizations to the *Diario*, and the personal experience embodied therein no doubt influenced the translation of Synge which Juan Ramón later completed with his wife Zenobia.

The most unusual achievement of the translation is its capturing of the syntax in Anglo-Irish speech. Synge wanted his own language to reflect the original Irish spoken by the Aran Islanders. For some time Synge was criticized for artificiality in his diction, for instance by St. John Irvine, who accused

³ *Ibid.*; p. 218.

⁴ Madrid, Visor, 1995; p. 203.

⁵ Madrid, Taurus, 1982; p. 9.

⁶ Further examples in Ángel Crespo, *Juan Ramón Jiménez y la pintura*, Rio Piedras, Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1974. Predmore (ed.), *Diario*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1998; p. 240.

him of being “a faker of peasant speech” in *Some Impressions of My Elders* (p. 201). But many years later Synge was vindicated by Declan Kiberd when the latter published letters in Irish Gaelic that had been sent to Synge and then incorporated almost word for word into his plays. An obvious example is the final speech of the mother Maurya, so admired by Jiménez: “No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied,” taken from “caithfidh muid a bheith sásta, mar nac féidir le aon nduine a bheith beo go deo.” (“We must be satisfied, for no man at all can be living forever.”)⁷

Students of the Celtic languages are familiar with emphatic constructions achieved by placing a word at the front of the sentence with a relative clause, whereas English would resort to intonation, italics, or additional intensifying words. For instance Micheál Ó Siadhail, in the best known textbook of modern Irish, gives the following illustration: “Tá an fear ag caint le Cáit anois.” (“It is the man who is talking to Cáit/Kate now.”)⁸ In *Riders to the Sea*, Cathleen asks her sister: “What is it you have?” (p. 18), and this is translated literally into Spanish by the Jiménez couple as, “¿Qué es lo que traes?” (p. 13). Another sentence in this construction which would not be standard English speech is Nora’s telling Cathleen about the clothes washed up on shore further North: “We’re to find out if it’s Michael’s they are.” (*Ibid.*). In Spanish this reads, “Hemos de averiguar si es que son de Michael.” (p. 14). When the fatal news inevitably arrives, Maurya consoles herself with a proper burial, “it’s a deep grave we’ll make him.” (p. 23), and the more flexible Spanish syntax allows an equivalent word order: “va a ser un hoyo hondo el que le hagamos.” (p. 21).

The avoidance of the verb “to have” in the traditional Celtic languages by means of the construction “to be” plus the preposition “with” is illustrated by Ó Siadhail’s sentence, “Is le Cáit an teach seo.” (p. 107, “Is with Cáit/ Kate the house,” meaning “Cáit owns the house.”). Maurya mourns when all her breadwinners have been lost at sea, “What way will I live and the girls with me?” (p. 25), meaning, “How will I survive, since I have two girls to support?” The Spanish follows the Anglo-Irish, “¿Cómo viviré yo, y ellas conmigo?” (p. 25). Describing the vision of her dead son on a gray horse, Maurya says: “And there was Michael upon it—with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet.” (p. 37). The Spanish mirrors this construction: “Y Michael iba montado en ella, con sus buenas ropas encima y sus zapatos nuevos en los pies.” (p. 45).

The Irish narrative style of joining clauses with “and” plus the present participle instead of periodic subordination with a specific conjunction “when,” “while,” is illustrated by Ó Siadhail’s “Bhí an bosca ansin is mé ag tíocht

⁷ “J.M. Synge: ‘A Faker of Peasant Speech’?” *Review of English Studies*, 30.117 (February 1979), 61; reprinted in *Synge and the Irish Language*, London, MacMillan, 1993. Irvine, London, 1922.

⁸ *Learning Irish*, Dublin, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1996; p. 199.

abhaile." (p. 207, "The box was there and I was coming home."). This is seen in *Riders to the Sea* when Cathleen asks her mother, "Why wouldn't you give him your blessing and he looking round the door?" (p. 26), meaning "when he looked round the door." The Spanish says likewise, "¿Y él volviéndose a mirarte!" (p. 27). At one point, however, the Jiménez translators have misunderstood the causal connection. When Cathleen comments: "It's a long time we'll be, and the two of us crying." (p. 20), she means, "We'll take a long time, because we'll be crying while we do it." But the Spanish puts the crying after the task: "y, luego, los dos llorando." (p. 16).

Creating the perfect tense by means of a periphrastic construction consisting of the preposition "after" plus the verbal noun, instead of the regular conjugation, is even more frequent in modern Welsh than in Irish today.⁹ This is parodied in "stage Irish," and it certainly occurs over and over in Syngé. Nora says of the clothes washed up: "The young priest is after bringing them." (p. 18). This time the construction cannot be translated literally into Spanish, but the translators prove they have understood correctly when they write in perfect tense, "Lo ha traído el curita." (p. 14). Helen Casey attributed this unnatural word order and high frequency of present participles in Syngé's characters to a "dramatizing instinct of the race,"¹⁰ but a sheerly structural explanation can be objectively shown.

"Curita" could mean "young priest" or "little priest," the second implying that the priest is ineffectual, resented, thinking only of the "bandaid" approach. This ambiguity in the Spanish translation fits a line underlined by Juan Ramón in Edward J. O'Brien's introduction: "the latent power of suggestion is almost unlimited." (p. x). Critics have hotly debated the religious attitudes the play embodies, and Syngé's religious attitudes in general. In the original the priest assures Maurya that God would not leave her without sons (p. 37), and he is proven wrong, but the Spanish translation "hijo" (p. 45) does not designate the sex of the children necessarily, so in Spanish the priest is not proven wrong—she still has her daughters.

Nevertheless, the semantic level was more troublesome to the translators than the seemingly more obscure syntactical patterns. The non-literal translation of nouns into Spanish can usually be explained as an attempt to find a cultural equivalent, in order to avoid a long circumlocution or a footnote that cannot be read by a theater audience. The Dutch word "hooker" was x'ed by Juan Ramón. It is a double-sailed fishing boat used only in Ireland and drawn by Jack B. Yeats in the copy of Syngé's *The Aran Islands* (Boston: John W. Luce, 1911; p. 51) owned by Jiménez, now at the University of Puerto Rico. In Spanish the word "falucho" (p. 19) has been used, a single triangular-sailed,

⁹ J. Morris Jones, *A Welsh Grammar: Historical and Comparative*, Oxford Clarendon, 1931, rpt. 1970; pp. 140, 213.iii (2).

¹⁰ "Syngé's Use of the Anglo-Irish Idiom," *English Journal*, 127 (November 1938), 774.

smaller Mediterranean fishing boat, mentioned in *Platero y yo* (1917; Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 3rd ed. 1991; p. 194). Its motion is more precarious than that of a hooker, and so it is described in the Spanish translation. Nora says flatly, but ominously, "the hooker's tacking from the East." (p. 22). Somersaults are added: "¡El falucho viene portevante, dando unos tumbazos!" (p. 19). "Poteen" (p. 30) is rendered "aguaardiente" (p. 33), very close to the etymology of one of the best known Irish words borrowed into English, "whiskey," from *uisce bé* ("water of life"). Juan Ramón must have understood the uniquely Celtic "curagh," since he penciled beside its description in his copy of *The Aran Islands*, "rude canvas canoe." (p. 32). The Spanish word used in *Jinetes hacia el mar* is "lancha," a word for boats that are usually bigger. The peat fuel still cut out of the sod in Ireland has been changed from "turf" to "cisco" ("coal," p. 18), whereas the exact word in Spanish would be "turba." The Irish idiomatic expression for the black cormorant bird, *cailleach dhub*, "blackhag" (p. 32), is translated literally into Spanish as "bruja negra" (p. 37), where it is even more suggestive.

There is just one serious cross-cultural misunderstanding in the translation, already noted by Jean Andrews in her Nottingham doctoral dissertation.¹¹ The popular proper name for Saint Bridget in Irish, "Bride," has been understood in Spanish to be "la novia" (p. 42), so her vision of a dead man holding a child is even more cruel. Nevertheless, this mistake proved richly suggestive to García Lorca for his tragic bride in *Bodas de sangre*.

That Spanish language and culture are prone to more exaggeration than the English of the British Isles, is itself an understatement. In Synge this litotes is the outward manifestation of underlying tragic stoicism. Countless passages in the Spanish translation go beyond the original English. Most obvious is the use of exclamation points not in Synge's published text, implying a different delivery for the actor. There are rhetorical repetitions not in the original, such as "flotando y flotando hasta el norte, tan lejos," (p. 37) for "floating that way to the far north." (p. 32). Traditional *o* assonance has been substituted for traditional English and Irish alliteration in *f*, and the greater length of the phrase in Spanish dramatizes the meaning even better. "Herself does be saying prayers half through the night," (p. 19) becomes prolonged until dawn in Spanish: "ella se lleva rezando hasta la madrugada." (p. 15). "Six fine men" (p. 38) become heroically "seis hombres que daba Gloria verlos" ("six men it gave glory to see," p. 46). "A track to the door" (p. 39) becomes a rivulet, "un requero hasta la puerta" (p. 48), emphasizing the theme of the play. In the Spanish translation, we frequently feel ourselves in a world of Golden Age tragedy. When Maurya says: "What more can we want than that?" (p. 45), she has reconciled herself to a clean burial for her son. But the Spanish, "¿Qué más vamos a pedir?" (p. 57) shows an exasperation that there may be still more unhappiness

¹¹ *Spanish Reaction to the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival*, Lampeter, UK, Edwin Mellen, 1991; p.74.

in store. Synge wanted the keeners to kneel at the front of the stage, so that the grief is represented by visual symbolism in a quiet way (p. 39). The stage instructions in Spanish have the keeners kneeling "al fondo" (p. 48), at the back, and the verbal lines must carry emotion. The language Synge imagined was the opposite. Juan Ramón underlined the passage in *The Aran Islands* where Synge says: "there is no language like the Irish for soothing and quieting." (p. 180).

The Jiménez translators were not insensitive to Synge's very special diction. They use both literary and colloquial elements. This odd fusion has been praised by some Synge critics, in both his plays and lesser known poems.¹² Juan Ramón and Zenobia seem to have been ahead of their time in its appreciation. They write in their preface: "Escribe una especie de dialecto personal, casi invento suyo—mezcla del inglés bíblico de los tiempos de Rey Jaime, y del galaico [ms.gaélico] del oeste de Irlanda—, rico de un singular encanto imprevisto; cuyo acento—lo esencial en toda traducción—hemos procurado conservar en ésta de RIDERS TO THE SEA." Although the Spanish does not have obvious archaisms, the hyperbolic expressions lend a rhetorical quality that reminds one of the era of King James and the translation of the Bible. Howard Young has noted a similar heightening in literary register within the translations the couple made of the Anglo-Indian Rabindrinath Tagore.¹³

There were at least two unrealized schemes to reprint *Jinetes hasta el mar*, first as a series of translation pamphlets in 1933, and then as part of the projected complete works.¹⁴ It has attracted little attention, yet its influence on Spanish literature through Lorca's own dramas and the new style of poetry it helped engender within *Diario de un poeta recién casado* has been profound. The strangeness of Synge's syntax has usually been retained in Spanish. This was not merely fortuitous, but consciously striven for. The translators' understanding of Anglo-Irish was better than that of many native English-speakers.

The symbolism of the sea assumed great personal significance to Juan Ramón Jiménez. It was irresistibly attractive, but fraught with the dangers of an unknown New World he would not have explored without Zenobia. For him it had a happier ending than for Synge.

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¹² J.L. Styan, *The Elements of Drama*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1967; p. 257. Francis Warner, "A Note on the Poems of J.M. Synge," S. B. Bushrui (ed.), *Sunshine and the Moon's Delight: A Centenary*, Gerrard's Cross, England, Colin Smythe, 1972; pp. 141-52.

¹³ "The Invention of an Andalusian Tagore," *Comparative Literature*, 47.1 (Winter 1995), 46.

¹⁴ Howard Young, "In Loving Translation: Zenobia and Juan Ramón," *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 49 (December 1996); 490, Archivo Histórico Madrid, caja 29, number 273/39; "Juan Ramón, Traductor Alerta," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 69 (1992), 148, Sala Juan Ramón and Zenobia Jiménez, University of Puerto Rico, 121.9.