Jorge Guillén - Entry 1

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not only the tales of the so-called Four Branches of the Mabinogion proper, namely Pwyll, Branwen, Manawydan and Math, but also the Arthurian and other romances found in the Red Book of Hergest, such as The Lady of the Fountain and The Dream of Rhonabwy.

The title Mabinogion is notoriously a mistake on the part of Lady Charlotte, who wrongly adopted, perhaps because -ion is a common Welsh plural ending, what seems to have been a scribal error which occurs only once in the whole of the original text. The correct form is, in fact, Mabinogi. The meaning and origin of the term itself is still in dispute by Welsh scholars, but it seems to indicate the story of a hero’s maturation, the word obviously being cognate with mab, the word for son, boy or youth.

The tales of the Mabinogion are tales of wonder and fantasy, which have their origin in a long oral tradition. Though the Red Book of Hergest dates from the late 14th century, the tales are certainly of much earlier origin, perhaps the mid-11th century, while the tale entitled Culhwch and Olwen is earlier still. Apart from their enduring fascination as literature, these tales are also remarkable in the canon of medieval literature for being couched in prose, rather than verse, which would have been the normal medium for imaginative expression.

Lady Charlotte’s translation was highly influential during the Victorian period. It was a direct and acknowledged source of inspiration both for Tennyson’s Idylls of the King (1856) and for Matthew Arnold’s Lectures on Celtic Literature (1865). Lady Charlotte undertook no further translations, however. In later life, after her second marriage in 1855, when she became Lady Charlotte Schreiber, she concentrated her manifold energies on her extensive collections of art objects, publishing two books inspired by these. She also kept a lively and fascinating journal throughout her life, leaving a record of a formidable Victorian Englishwoman who performed a valuable service to the culture of Wales in her time.

Further Reading

Katie Gramich

Jorge Guillén 1893-1984
Spanish poet

Biography
Born in Valladolid, 18 January 1893. He was first educated in Valladolid; he spent two years after secondary school in Switzerland (1909-11), was a student in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at Madrid University (1911-13) and received his first degree from the University of Granada in 1913. He spent the next year in Germany, then returned to live in Spain until 1917. He taught Spanish as a lector at the Sorbonne in Paris (1917-23) and at Oxford University (1929-31). In 1936 he had political problems arising from the circumstances of the Spanish Civil War; Guillén found it impossible to compromise with dictatorship and finally was imprisoned in Pamplona. After his release the Ministry of Education prevented him from holding teaching posts of any kind – so in 1938 he left Spain for North America, where he taught Spanish literature until 1958, with frequent trips to South America and Europe. After receiving many literary prizes, awarded by both European and American bodies, and after his second marriage (1961; his first wife had died in 1947) he returned to Spain. In 1976 he was awarded the Cervantes Prize (1977). He died in Málaga, 6 February 1984.
The poets of Jorge Guillén’s generation were concerned with achieving exact forms of expression: technical ability was sought after, for it was necessary to express ideas with clarity and precision. Guillén was careful to make clear, however, that here was no “empty formalism”. His use of Spanish metres did not arise through mere imitation but was the result of detailed study and comprehension of the significance of certain verse forms and literary devices. In particular, the cultivation of the metaphor was of supreme importance in Guillén’s poems. He had a strong faith in the power of words, not merely to give aesthetic pleasure but to communicate. He always rejected “pure poetry” in favour of “el poema con poesía y otras cosas humanas” (the poem with poetry and other human things) and it is this human dimension and his positive attitude to the world that are characteristic of the whole of his work. There is little or nothing of conventional religious belief in his poetry, but there is notable reference to the natural world and to human beings.

His basic poetic production consists of Cántico [Canticle], eventually subtitled “El de vida” (i.e. a document that proves one is alive – a proof of existence), which took him about 30 years to complete and was published in 1928, with enlarged editions in 1936 and in 1945, and a complete edition in 1950; Clamor [Clamor], with the subtitle “Tiempo de historia” [Time of History], in three volumes published in 1957, 1960 and 1963; and Homenaje [Homage], subtitled “Reunión de vidas” [Reunion of lives] (1967). These three were published together in 1968 as Aire nuestra [Our Air]. His last two major volumes were Y otras poesías [And Other Poems] (1973) and Final [Finale] (1981). After 1936 Guillén’s work was published outside Spain, but in the late 1970s, with the involvement of the Barral publishing house of Barcelona not only in Final but in the re-publication of the four previous main volumes of Guillén’s poetry, full recognition of the great poet began. In 1976 (Franco had died in 1975) the first official Spanish homage to the internationally honoured Guillén was paid, with the award to him of the Cervantes Prize.

Canticle has been the most translated volume of Guillén’s poetry. Italian translations are very numerous in comparison with those in French, English and German. Canticle is a hymn of praise, of joy, to the natural world of creation and its essential goodness. There is a “dialogue” between man and the world and man uses his senses and intellect to participate creatively in that dialogue. Guillén exalts man and his relationship to the natural world. If the vision of man in Canticle is ideal, the vision of man in Clamor is realistic but positive; here chaos and disorder appear as part of man’s existence. The principal theme of the poem is embodied in an exhortation “to be human”; in being human we find our salvation. Homage, as the title implies, is a homage to the creative writers and philosophers who have contributed to man’s existence by means of the written word.

None of Guillén’s volumes of poetry has been translated in its entirety; translations are based on anthologies and selections of his poetry. In Language and Poetry (Guillén, 1961) the author himself provides the reader with comments on and translations of his poems and gives an excellent summary of his poetic aims. He also wrote an introduction to the translation of the selection from Canticle by di Giovanni (1965) and to the Anthology by Palley (1968).

Turnbull’s translation (1945) of a selection from Canticle is close and accurate, respectful of the source text; it has Spanish originals and reminiscences of the poems by Pedro Salinas. Gibbons and Geist’s Guillén on Guillén (1979) was assembled out of several hours of tape recordings of Guillén reading an anthology, selected by himself, of poems from the books then available, with commentaries by him. The Spanish text of both poems and commentaries is translated into English with a succinct and stimulating introduction.

Matthews’s translation (1985) of 12 major poems from Canticle and Clamor provides the reader with a substantial example of these two first books of poetry. She does not introduce unnecessary interpretation, seeking always to render the Spanish as directly as possible, with occasional changes in word order according to the requirements of English syntax. She does not translate the titles.

EVA NÓÑEZ MéNDEZ

Further Reading
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