

Twentieth-Century  
Literary Criticism

TCLC

231



Volume 233

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers  
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,  
from the First Published Critical  
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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# Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

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# Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Gale Literature Product Advisory Board xiii

<b>Jorge Guillén 1893-1984</b> .....	1
<i>Spanish poet, critic, and essayist</i>	
<b>Katherine Anne Porter 1890-1980</b> .....	103
<i>American short story writer, novelist, essayist, nonfiction writer, and poet</i>	
<b>Raymond Queneau 1903-1976</b> .....	271
<i>French novelist, poet, essayist, scriptwriter, playwright, editor, and travel writer</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 359

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 473

TCLC Cumulative Nationality Index 489

TCLC-233 Title Index 495

# Jorge Guillén

## 1893-1984

(Full name Jorge Guillén y Alvarez) Spanish poet, critic, and essayist.

The following entry provides an overview of Guillén's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *CLC*, Volume 11.

### INTRODUCTION

Guillén was a noted member of the Generation of 1927, an influential group of writers that rose to prominence in Spain during the 1920s and included such figures as Federico García Lorca, Pedro Salinas, Rafael Alberti, Luis Cernuda, and Vicente Aleixandre. Like many of his contemporaries, Guillén was deeply affected by the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War, which devastated Spain's artistic community, and he exiled himself to the United States following General Francisco Franco's subsequent rise to power. Guillén is best known for the joyful and life-affirming sentiments expressed in the poems of his first major work, *Cántico* (1928), which reflect the influence of the French Symbolist poet Paul Valéry, particularly with regard to Valéry's concept of "pure poetry." Although he explored themes related to mortality and the horrors of war in his subsequent works, including the three volumes that comprise the *Clamor* series (1957, 1960, 1963), Guillén is generally remembered as a poet who celebrated the harmony of life and the universal themes of human existence, such as love, art, and nature. While his work has been overshadowed in the English-speaking world by the accomplishments of his friend and contemporary Lorca, Guillén has maintained a prominent position in Spanish letters and is often regarded as one of the masters of modern poetry in that country. Andrew P. Debicki has observed that "Guillén constantly offers us works which combine the vivid particulars and the absolutes, the immediate and the universal. Based on events which could have been fleetingly insignificant and on themes which could have become sterile abstractions, his works turn these materials, instead, into full and cohesive single realities, into good poems—poems which will, in their combined immediacy and universality, remain accessible to readers in centuries to come."

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Guillén was born to Esperanza Alvarez Guerra and Julio Guillén Sáenz on January 18, 1893, in Valladolid, Spain, where the author spent much of his childhood. His fa-

ther was a businessman and a board member for the local newspaper, *El Norte de Castilla*, and Guillén enjoyed a peaceful and protected upbringing in a middle-class household. From 1909 to 1911 he lived in the Maison Perreyve of the French Fathers of the Oratory in Fribourg, Switzerland, where he was first exposed to French language and culture. At the age of eighteen Guillén began attending the University of Madrid, where he studied literature and philosophy and spent much of his time in the Residencia de Estudiantes, a meeting place for intellectuals and writers. During this time, he was greatly influenced by the poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, as well as the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, whose perspectivist philosophy of "vital reason" was instrumental in the formation of Guillén's artistic vision. In 1913 Guillén completed his master's degree in literature at the University of Granada and spent a year in Germany, where he became aware of the major trends in art and literature. He continued to pursue an academic career in the years that followed, and from 1917 to 1923 he lectured in Spanish at the Sorbonne in Paris.

During this time Guillén became acquainted with Paul Valéry, who exerted a notable influence on the technical and formal elements of his poetry. In 1919, while in the French seaside village of Tregastel, Brittany, he began writing the poems of *Cántico*. In 1921 Guillén married a French woman named Germaine Cahen, and their first child was born in Paris a year later. In 1924 he received his doctorate from the University of Madrid and the next year completed exams for a professorship in Spanish language and literature. He then served as a professor of Spanish literature at the University of Murcia from 1926 to 1929. Guillén published the first edition of *Cántico* in 1928, which was comprised of seventy-five poems. Three editions of the work followed in subsequent years, the final version of which was over five hundred pages long and contained three hundred and thirty-four poems.

During the late 1920s Guillén briefly lectured at Oxford University, before leaving in 1931 to teach at the University of Seville, where he remained until 1938. Political turmoil marked this period of Spanish history. Guillén, along with many other intellectuals and artists, supported the Second Spanish Republic that had been established in 1931, after the Bourbon king, Alfonso XIII, was ousted. In 1936, however, the Spanish Civil War began as Franco led a revolt against the republic,



which resulted in the death of many innocent victims, including Guillén's close friend Lorca. In 1936 and 1937 Guillén was temporarily imprisoned as an enemy of the insurgents. After Franco came to power in Spain, the author moved to the United States, where he lived in exile until the late 1970s. He taught briefly in Vermont and Montreal, before taking a position at Wellesley College in Massachusetts in 1940, where he remained for the next seventeen years.

In 1957 Guillén was offered the Charles Norton Eliot Poetry Chair at Harvard, a year-long appointment, after which he officially retired from Wellesley College. The first volume of *Clamor* appeared that same year under the title *Clamor I: Marmágnum*, which was followed by *Clamor II: Que van a dar en la mar* in 1960 and a third volume, *Clamor III: A la altura de las circunstancias*, in 1963. During the 1960s the author traveled throughout Europe and Latin America, continued to write, and served as a visiting professor at several universities. His next major work, *Homenaje*, was published in 1967, and in 1968 his collected works appeared under the title *Aire nuestro*. When Franco died in 1975, Guillén returned to Spain and set up a permanent residence in Málaga, where he remained for the rest of his life. He was awarded the most prestigious Spanish literary prize, the Premio Cervantes, in 1977. On February 6, 1984, Guillén died of pneumonia, surrounded by his family, in Málaga.

## MAJOR WORKS

*Cántico*, underwent several major revisions and was expanded after its initial publication, in 1936, 1945, and 1950, the last being the most complete edition of the volume. Often described as a "hymn to being," the collection in its various incarnations privileges clarity, consciousness, and wholeness, and depicts light, air, and the earth as life-sustaining and nurturing forces. The speaker of the poems acknowledges that he is a part of the intricate harmony of nature, searches for his place within that order, and praises the world in which he has been created. The perfect and spherical nature of the universe is an important trope in the work, which Guillén communicated, in part, through the use of traditional poetic forms, such as the *décima*, the sonnet, and the quatrain. This harmonious vision is expressed in one well-known poem of the collection, "Perfection," in which the poet states: "The firmament is curved, / Compact blue, over the day. / Splendor's roundness: noon. / All being is cupola."

In various poems of *Cántico* the speaker attempts to penetrate the essence of everyday objects, in an effort to more fully appreciate his connection to the material world. In "Naturaleza viva," for instance, he contem-

plates a walnut tabletop, which still contains the essence of the forest. Rebirth and awakening are also important themes in *Cántico*, as demonstrated in the poem "Más allá," the initial work in most editions of the collection. Comprised of fifty quatrains arranged in six sections, the poem rejoices in the rebirth associated with waking at the beginning of each day. Another important poem in the volume, "Salvación de la primavera," treats the subject of love. In nine sections, also composed of quatrains, Guillén celebrates the mystery and transcendent capacity of love, which allows the soul to go beyond its normal limitations. Beginning with the third edition of *Cántico* Guillén started including poems that addressed the chaos of civil war and the horrors of World War II. Although life-affirming themes remained predominant in the collection, moments of disillusionment and suffering appeared in later poems integrated into the work, such as "Los balcones del Oriente" and "Cara a cara." In the 1950 edition of the volume Guillén also incorporated several poems about domestic life, such as "Familia" and "Infante."

The theme of chaos, as well as the threat of destruction and annihilation, briefly touched on in *Cántico*, is more fully explored in the three volumes that comprise Guillén's second major work, *Clamor*. In the first volume, *Marmágnum* (which translates as "confusion"), Guillén abandons the "pure poetry" of his previous collection and comments on the tumultuous state of the world. With references to politics, history, and social criticism, the poet addresses the evils of the world and its trajectory of self-destruction. The thematic emphasis on chaos is also reflected in the formal construction of the volume. While Guillén still employed some traditional forms in the work, he also included free verse and prose poems. Atomic destruction is frequently alluded to in the work, as seen in the poems "Guerra en la paz," ". . . Que no," and "Aire con época." This first volume of *Clamor* also includes the poem "Potencia de Pérez," a satirical portrait of Franco, in which the leader is characterized as having built his regime on the dead bodies of his victims. Franco recognized the allusion to himself, and as a result Guillén was unable to return to Spain until after the leader's death. The poet also introduced a new form in this collection, the *tréboles*, or "clover leaves," which are brief rhymed poems that are often ironic or gnomic in nature.

The second volume of *Clamor*, *Que van a dar en la mar*, focuses on the themes of memory and death. The title of the volume alludes to a line of poetry written by the fifteenth-century poet Jorge Manrique: "Our lives are rivers that will end up in the sea, which is death." Guillén revisits memories from childhood in the collection, in such poems as "Aquellas ropas chapadas," "Patio de San Gregorio," and "Del trascurso," but much of the melancholic tone in the work is a result of the poet's contemplation of his own mortality, and in particu-

lar his thoughts regarding the death of his first wife, Germaine. *A la altura de las circunstancias*, the final volume of *Clamor*, is sometimes described as a bridge between *Cántico* and the first two volumes of *Clamor*. While the work maintains the meditative qualities of the preceding volumes, *A la altura de las circunstancias* also returns to the joyous celebration of life expressed in Guillén's first major work. Faith in humanity and the future of Europe is a predominant theme in the collection, which is demonstrated in such poems as "Afirmación humana," inspired by the surviving diary of Holocaust victim Anne Frank, and "Despertar español," which specifically reflects on the poet's faith in Spain's survival.

Guillén's next collection of poetry, *Homenaje*, contains personal reminiscences as well as ironic commentaries. Many of the poems reflect on well-known writers of various nationalities and time periods and are gathered under the heading "Al margen de . . .," or "On the Margin of. . . ." While many of these poems express appreciation, some also contain satirical notes. The volume includes pieces dedicated to Guillén's deceased friends and colleagues, including Salinas and Lorca, as well as a collection of translated poems by Valéry, Rainer Maria Rilke, Ezra Pound, Eugenio Montale, and others, which are grouped under the heading "Variations." Some of Guillén's most admired love poems appear in *Homenaje*, including the long poem "Amor a Silvia." While these love poems are more explicitly erotic than his previous works, they nevertheless connect physical love with a deeper understanding of the self.

Injustice, the horrors of war and slavery, consumerism, and the threat of a nuclear holocaust are important issues treated in *Y otros poemas* (1973), Guillén's next major collection. An ironic tone characterizes many of the poems that address social and political themes in the work, although other pieces, including "De Senectute," a reflection on old age, express melancholy and nostalgia. Poems that deal with poetic creation also comprise a significant portion of the work and emphasize the poet's faith in poetry as an affirmation of the wonder of creation. Guillén continued to affirm life in his last major volume, *Aire nuestro: Final* (1981), but also treated themes related to old age and mortality. Other poems in this late collection focus on artistic creation, social injustice, violence, and the negative consequences of war.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Guillén enjoyed critical acclaim during the late 1920s and early 1930s with the publication of his initial major work, *Cántico*. As with many Spanish artists, however,

his literary career in Spain was cut short by the Spanish Civil War, followed by his self-imposed exile to the United States. While Guillén developed an appreciative following among academics during his exile in America, even being honored by the American Academy of Letters, his poetry was not widely read in the English-speaking world. Moreover, his work was also frequently eclipsed by that of his fellow members of the Generation of 1927 Lorca and Salinas. Guillén's relative neglect prompted scholar Ivar Ivask to comment in 1969, "of all the talented poets" of the Generation of 1927, "it is, in our opinion, Jorge Guillén to whom the place of honor next to Lorca belongs." Ivask concluded that "Guillén's life work in poetry, *Aire Nuestro*, is an achievement of such durable quality and unflagging inspiration that it deserves to be more universally known." In 1977, after his return to Spain, Guillén was honored with the Premio Cervantes, the most prestigious award for Spanish-language writers.

Recent studies of Guillén's literature have primarily focused on the thematic and formal attributes of his two major works, *Cántico* and *Clamor*. In charting the poet's treatment of chaos and order in these works, Martha LaFollette Miller has noted how Guillén "intensifies his insistence on formal symmetry when chaotic historical and personal events come to the fore in his work." Miller concludes that Guillén's "art thus not only reflects the elements of order and chaos that he sees in the world beyond the poem, but also serves as a positive force in the ordering of experience and as a bulwark against chance and confusion." In a similar vein, Elizabeth Matthews has emphasized the "value of structural control" in Guillén's poetry, declaring that "everything concerning his poetry . . . constitutes an effort to create form, order and harmony."

Other scholars have explored the poet's concern with the relationship of art and reality in his work. Fernand Verhesen has maintained that Guillén does not attempt to describe reality in his verse but offers "a mental atlas where reality finds itself caught in the trap of prismatic vision, embodying and recreating what is brought to it." In his study of *Cántico* Alfonso Cervantes has explored "the constant and close relationship" between empirical observation and speculative thought, as two approaches to comprehending reality, in Guillén's poetry. And Margaret H. Persin has asserted that "perhaps all of Jorge Guillén's poetry is metapoetic, since the poet attempts to transform all reality, both the conceptual and the tangible, into poetic expression. For Guillén, life is art. His world view is that of artistic creation, no more or less. And in his poetry he not only describes a work of art, but also creates a poetic experience in which the reader may share."

Despite their different interests, most commentators agree that the primary qualities of Guillén's verse are his joyous affirmation of life, his enduring optimism,

and his faith in humanity, which he sustained throughout his career, even during war and his exile in the United States. Although he has not yet achieved the status of some of his better-known contemporaries, Guillén remains a respected figure of Spanish letters for his treatment of universal themes and his life-affirming poetic vision. As Sara F. García-Gómez has declared, "the capacity for wonder is central to Guillén's poetic experience," adding that "the most impressive thing" about the poet "is his characteristic manner of poetically being in the midst of things, that is to say, his special way of sensing them as wondrous revelations of a living totality."

### PRINCIPAL WORKS

\**Cántico* (poetry) 1928; revised and enlarged editions, 1936, 1945, and 1950

*Paso a la aurora* (poetry) 1944

*Variaciones sobre temas de Jean Cassou* (poetry) 1951

*El encanto de las sirenas* (poetry) 1953

*Huerto de Melibea* (poetry) 1954

*Clamor I: Maremágnum* (poetry) 1957

*Lugar de Lázaro* (poetry) 1957

*Viviendo y otros poemas* (poetry) 1958

*Federico en persona* (essay and letters) 1959

*Clamor II: Que van a dar en la mar* (poetry) 1960

*Historia natural* (poetry) 1960

*Language and Poetry* (criticism) 1961

*Según las horas* (poetry) 1962

*Clamor III: A la altura de las circunstancias* (poetry) 1963

*Suite italienne* (poetry) 1964; revised and enlarged edition, 1968

*Tréboles* (poetry) 1964

*Selección de poemas* (poetry) 1965; enlarged edition, 1970

*Homenaje* (poetry) 1967

*Affirmation: A Bilingual Anthology, 1919-1966* (poetry) 1968

†*Aire nuestro: Cántico, Clamor, Homenaje* (poetry) 1968

*Poemas de Castilla* (poetry) 1968

*Obra poética* (poetry) 1970

*Y otros poemas* (poetry) 1973

*Aire nuestro: Final* (poetry) 1981

*Horses in the Air, and Other Poems* (poetry) 1999

\*This work was partially translated into English and published as *Cántico: A Selection* in 1965.

†This work includes the volumes *Cántico*, *Clamor*, and *Homenaje*. *Aire nuestro* was partially translated into English and published as *Our Air* in 1997.

### CRITICISM

#### E. R. Curtius (essay date 1951)

SOURCE: Curtius, E. R. "Jorge Guillén." In *Essays on European Literature/Kritische Essays zur europäischen Literatur*, translated by Michael Kowal, pp. 429-36. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1951 as his introduction to a German edition of Guillén's poetry, Curtius describes the poet's verse as "a song of praise" and an "affirmation of being," claiming that "the poetry of Guillén is self-sufficient utterance" which "needs no philosophical commentary, although it might well serve the philosopher as a text for his meditations."]

Between the two world wars there were three poets whose work I was inspired to translate: Paul Valéry, T. S. Eliot, and Stephen Spender. After many years Jorge Guillén is the fourth. One translates not what one wants to but what one must. There are poems that appeal to one like women. But there are appeals that die without an echo. They fade into the unspoken. They heralded possibilities that were not realized. Jorge Guillén in one instance employs the antithesis of existing and persisting. More than a mere appeal is required if the gulf is to be bridged. The appeal must strike again and again, must penetrate deeper and deeper, persist, draw us out. Then the dams will burst. Related elements embrace, recognize, affirm each other. Thus and thus only do I conceive the activity of translation. It is the response to the challenging power of creation. It is the most valid form of assent.<sup>1</sup>

Jorge Guillén (born in Valladolid in 1893) has taught Spanish literature in Paris, at Oxford, in Seville, and more recently in the United States, where he still lives. He is to be found among the contributors to the *Revista de Occidente*, the review founded by Ortega in 1923. A prose meditation under the heading of "Air—Breath" ("Aire—Aura," October 1923) perceives in the atmosphere the beginning of transcendence ("the air is not human; the air is heaven") and illustrates this distinction with the image of Christ's ascension. Then poems appear in the *Revista*, as well as the translation of Valéry's *Cimetière marin* (June 1929). The poems are collected in 1928 as *Cántico* (seventy-five pieces); augmented editions follow in 1936, 1945, 1950. This last edition contains 334 pieces and is described as the "first complete edition." Guillén is the creator of a single work, and that work a single "song of praise." As presently available, it encompasses the results of three decades of creation.

According to Aristotle, all poetry is originally either praise or blame. Goethe too determines poetry as "mankind's song of praise, which the Godhead loves to hear."

The literature of the last one hundred years cultivated blame in all its sub-species rather than praise. Indeed, the neutral concept of blame may be used to cover all the accusations which each of twenty or thirty naturalisms, expressionisms, existentialisms of all countries and continents have brought together as an indictment against man, life, existence. The sum of these depositions represents the evidence for that European nihilism diagnosed by Nietzsche: "You must either eliminate your venerations—or yourselves." Modern literature has discharged its historical mission by eliminating all veneration. Twenty years ago Gottfried Benn drew up a balance-sheet, "nach dem Nihilismus" ["after nihilism"]. It was premature; for the "revolution of nihilism" followed on the heels of his account. Since then the problem has not been reformulated.

Naturally Aristotle's classification is somewhat primitive. Literature, like life, cannot be subsumed under a system of neat disjunctions. Such a system fulfills its purpose if it serves as a provisional means of sifting and sorting. The literature of nihilism becomes interesting at the point where "praise" blossoms out of negation and despair, like the vernal flower out of the rubble of our cities. Lyric poetry sometimes springs from ruins, and we have seen hymns sprout like lilies from disease wards—precisely in the poems of Benn.

But it seldom happens that a work of twentieth century poetry is, like Jorge Guillén's, a song of praise and nothing else. Here everything is played in a major key, everything exults and rejoices in the sun. Here are no dissonances, no neuroses, no "flowers of evil." The inconceivably lofty works are glorious as on the first of days. Some readers will first have to accustom their eyes to these cataracts of light. Here is a region without tragedy, without bitterness, without accusation. Where else can it be found in modern poetry? Stefan George sounded this note one time only:

Hegt den Wahn nicht: mehr zu lernen  
Als aus staunen überschwang  
Holden blumen hohen stern  
Einen sonnigen Lobgesang.

[Do not cherish the illusion: to learn more than from  
excess of wonder, gracious flowers, high stars, a sunny  
song of praise.]

George was aware of this possibility but his law directed him to other paths; he had to follow them. Valéry consecrated a hymn to dawn and extolled the mathematical beauty of Greek columns:

Nous allons sans les dieux  
À la divinité.

[We go forward without the gods toward divinity.]

But his serpent addresses the sun as a blemish:

Soleil, soleil! . . . Faute éclatante

[Sun, sun! . . . brilliant flaw]

and extends this indictment to the entire realm of being:

Que l'univers n'est qu'un défaut  
Dans la pureté du Non-Être.

[That the universe is only a defect in the purity of non-being.]

Of course, it is the perspective of the serpent. But that of M. Teste, Valéry's intellectual hero, is not very different.

In blazing contrast is Jorge Guillén's affirmation of being. It is sole and singular in modern literature. Maurras once decreed that "poetry is ontology."<sup>2</sup> Should this statement be correct, Guillén's poetry would be a striking example of it. But fortunately it is as independent of every philosophy as it is of every passing intellectual fashion. Not even the Essentialism that is currently being brewed on the left bank of the Seine, now that Existentialism has been consumed, will be able to change that. The poetry of Guillén is self-sufficient utterance. It needs no philosophical commentary, although it might well serve the philosopher as a text for his meditations.

"Beyond" ("Más allá") is the title of the poem that opens the carefully planned composition of the *Cántico*. The situation out of which it grows is a morning awakening. To the intrusion of the light of the rising day, the soul responds with joyous wonder. It is the sensuous and intellectual astonishment at the fact that something *is* ("that not rather nothing is," as Scheler put it). This invasion of being carries with it a blissful assurance that knows nothing of care or existential anxiety. It summons the soul to concord and harmony with thousands of voices. Its will to being responds to the being of the universe. A movement of rejoicing ascends, rises higher and higher, surpasses all bounds. "Further on"—this is the literal translation of the title. Can a single lifetime, a single age satisfy such a hunger for being? The soul demands more ("La Florida"): astral dimensions, ageless presences, mountains of raw eternity:

Yo necesito los tamaños  
Astrales: presencias sin años,  
Montes de eternidad en bruto.

The matutinal awakening to the world is a theme for which Guillén constantly finds new melodies ("Der Morgen kam," we hear in Goethe; "Der junge Tag erhob sich mit Entzücken . . ." ["The morning came; The young day rose with delight . . ."]). Awakening in the soft darkness of the night . . . then a tearing, a shock, a vertical intrusion . . . and, already, vertiginous delight in the restored world. World and soul have attuned themselves once more to the same pitch: