

SPANISH SONGS OF EXPERIENCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES NOLAN

Susan Ballyn

Susan Ballyn: How did you come into contact with Jaime Gil de Biedma's work and what was it in the work that made you decide to translate it?

James Nolan: I first came to live in Spain as a Fulbright professor at Barcelona's Universidad Central in 1979, during the "transition", when the cultural energy of the resistance was still alive even if the reason for it, thankfully, was dead. I came to know a group of poets of my generation, mostly Catalans, for whom Gil de Biedma was a legendary figure. And they inspired me to read his work as a focal point of resistance literature. At first, frankly, I didn't like Gil de Biedma's poetry because it didn't seem very "Spanish" to me: no castanets and wailing gypsies. I arrived, of course, with the Losada edition of García Lorca under my arm, looking for *la España negra*, and what I found in Gil de Biedma was a modern European voice rather than the folkloric element I associated with Spanish poetry. Later I recognized aspects of the Anglo-American tradition in his poetry, and took a closer look. I began to translate it in 1985 when I went back to live in San Francisco, realizing that I had brought a lot of North American culture to Spain but little of Spain to the United States. I wanted to make a cultural round trip. When Lawrence Ferlinghetti visited me here in Barcelona in 1990 and asked about contemporary Spanish poets, I gave him a copy of *Las personas del verbo* along with my handful of initial translations and he encouraged me to continue. This resulted in the City Lights edition.

S.B.: You have said that you made contact with young Catalan poets who introduced you to his work but what kind of influence, if any, has Gil de Biedma had on literature in Catalan?

J.N.: In terms of stylistic influence, I really can't say, but I think that Gil de Biedma and other poets of the "Barcelona School" were their contact with modernity during the long night of the dictatorship, an opened window in the prison through which they could see the sky. He represented a cosmopolitan, multilingual figure who stood up to Franco, and this inspired them toward Paris and London, connecting Barcelona to the outside world. I'm thinking specifically about Pere Rovira and Nieves Samblancat, whose house I lived in at that time, of Àlex Susanna and their generation.

S.B.: Why is it that the post-civil war poets remain largely unknown to the English-speaking world and have not been extensively translated?

J.N.: To my knowledge, the only previous translation of the post-war poets in English is in an anthology of 20th century Spanish poetry called *Roots and Wings*, edited by Hardie St. Martin, in which there are two selections from each poet. Also the Penguin anthology of 20th century Spanish poetry footnotes English paraphrases of several of these poets. In either case, not much. One of the reasons for this lack of attention, of course, is the exile and censorship of the Franco years. Juan García Hortelano published his landmark anthology *El grupo poético de los años 50* in 1978, three years after Franco's death, and it was not until the early 80's that there was any consensus in Spain about the general direction and composition of the group. Several had been living in Switzerland and the United States, and were finally allowed to return. Many of their books, censored here, were published in small, out-of-print editions in Mexico or Buenos Aires not available in Spain. So how could the group be promoted abroad?

There's another reason, I think, for this lack of international attention. Carlos Barral's publishing house was the center of resistance literature in Spain, and so Barcelona was the place where much of this action took place. Just as a general consensus about post-war poetry was forming, along came the *normalización lingüística* of 1983, in which the Catalan government decided not to promote or support literature written here in Spanish, as though this entire major literary movement in Barcelona had never existed. So the Barcelona poets of this generation, such as Gil de Biedma, Barral, and Goytisolo, have become lost in a linguistic no-man's-land between Madrid and Barcelona. In Madrid they are considered Catalan poets and in Barcelona, because they wrote in Spanish, they have been kicked out of Catalan culture. The subtleties of these regional rivalries are lost on most foreign readers, and because the essential identification between a writer and his place is broken, we wind up never hearing about them. In the endless hype about Barcelona during the Olympics, I never heard one word connecting the city to this literary group. On the other hand, you can't be in San Francisco or in Granada ten minutes before someone will tell you all about the Beat poets or about García Lorca: these have become cities of cultural pilgrimage *because* of their native poets. Poor Jaime Gil. His house in Ultramar is not going to be preserved, there's no plaque. And in October of 91, just two months before Barcelona's Olympic year, I participated in a weeklong conference on Gil de Biedma at which there were scholars from all over the world, from New York, Peru, Italy. Did it take place in Barcelona? No, it took place in Zaragoza, where they showed us film-clips of Montjuich and the Ramblas!

S.B.: In your introduction to *Longing* you mention writers whose voices and preoccupations find an echo in Biedma's work: Auden, Eliot, Williams, among others. Elsewhere you have mentioned your recognition of Lowell and Plath in his verse. How resonant are these echoes?

J.N.: For the post-war poets Auden, particularly, was an important model because he was a committed Loyalist sympathizer and a great cosmopolitan. Auden is so resonant in Gil de Biedma's poetry that one of his poems, "At Last the Secret Is Out", is in fact a translation of Auden, though few suspect this because it blends in so convincingly with the rest of his work. Gil de Biedma was looking for a way to incorporate the lyricism of

Cernuda and Guillén while avoiding the romantic rhetoric of post-war *Garcilismo*. One way was to frame his romantic lyricism with irony, much as Auden did.

From Eliot, Gil de Biedma appropriated the idea of the cultural collage, in which the voice is not wholly personal but rather a collective literary consciousness speaks through a mask. Almost every other line in Gil de Biedma's poetry is a borrowing, an adaptation or an outright theft from another source, which is ironically reinterpreted in the new poem, exactly as Eliot did. The difference is that to read the polyglot *Wasteland* you need a volume of notes, whereas Gil de Biedma is able to weave these quotations seamlessly into his conversational rhetoric without calling attention to them. This immediate conversational voice is reminiscent of W.C. Williams, not to mention the typographical spacing, yet I'm not sure to what extent there is a direct influence.

Amazingly, Gil de Biedma was writing his final volume, *Poemas póstumos* (1968), during the same era when Lowell and Plath were publishing *Life Studies* (1959) and *Ariel* (1966). All three are public literary suicides, scenes from a remembered life in which a *maudit* Baudelairean persona, sick unto death, tells all, with much booze, betrayal, vomit on the carpet and lacerating self-satire. In Lowell's case, it's obvious that Gil de Biedma, from an upperclass Barcelona family, had the same ambivalent political and social perspectives during a revolutionary era as Lowell, from a Boston blueblood background. Compare, for instance, "Barcelona ja no és bona" with Lowell's "For the Union Dead" (1964), in which both politically radicalized poets survey the seedy public monuments that represent their family history, a glory gone sour. I'd be hesitant to trace influences here, but the self-dramatizing style of the North American confessional poets is certainly recognizable in Gil de Biedma's later poetry, particularly the way they all break through the boundaries of formal poetry with a kind of colloquial . . . cry.

S.B.: You know, it is extraordinary the way the beginning of "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock", and later the depiction of the urban landscape, seems to have been lifted out of Eliot because it echoes through Gil de Biedma's poetry so often.

J.N.: Yes, I purposely put in lines from Eliot to catch that echo so that an English reader can hear the resonance. For example, in "Idilio en el café" he writes "Ven. Salgamos fuera (...)", which I translate as "Come. Let us go then (...)" to incorporate the Eliot echo. Or in "Pandémica y Celeste" he writes "Oh noches en hoteles de una noche", which I translate as "O nights in one-night cheap hotels" so that the allusion to Eliot doesn't disappear in English translation, as it could in a more literal version.

S.B.: Neruda's famous manifesto "Sobre una poesía sin pureza" in *Caballo verde de la poesía* was to be taken up by Alberti and later by a number of the 50's generation like Blas de Otero and Hierro. What was the measure of his influence on Jaime Gil de Biedma?

J.N.: It's interesting that these are the two poets that I've translated into volumes, even though they are diametrically opposed voices. After Neruda's conversion to Marxism during the Spanish Civil War, when he took up the committed persona of an "amor americano", his poetry becomes representative of a New World voice linked to

Whitman. Gil de Biedma represents an Old World voice linked to Eliot, ironically a North American expatriate, in which all poetry is a quotation of the past. There is none of this in Neruda, who like Adam has to name a new world, name the “unnamed lands”. For a poet like Gil de Biedma, living in a country in which everything has been named for centuries —and especially during the Franco regime, when public language was corrupted and everything was named with a lie— language is used to reframe the cultural past with irony, as Eliot did. Language is “defamiliarized” —made purposefully strange or shocking— to shake up a numbing tradition. Even Gil de Biedma’s colloquialism is a stylism that he consciously adopted, an imported rhetoric that he used to break through another rhetoric, that of declamatory Spanish poetry. To use Schiller’s distinction, Neruda is a “naïve” poet and Gil de Biedma a “sentimental” one. Of course, Neruda did influence the “social poets” of the 50’s generation, and in *Compañeros de viaje*, Gil de Biedma’s first book, he tried to be a “social poet” and identify with the masses, but it was a pose, he knew it was and he treated it with refreshing honesty in his second volume, *Moralidades*. So no, he never was a Nerudean, “naïve” or impure poet, and his work is literary in the most European sense of the word.

S.B.: Is it sheer chance, then, that you moved from translating Neruda to Jaime Gil de Biedma, two diametrically opposed voices?

J.N.: Well, they represented two different eras for me. I translated Neruda when I was living in Popayán, Colombia, and it was a way to connect with Latin America. And I translated Gil de Biedma while living here, as a way of getting under Spain’s skin. Both are part of the wide range of Hispanic poetry. They’re the voices of innocence and experience, my own, no doubt.

S.B.: Speaking of innocence, you have remarked elsewhere that Gil de Biedma and his generation are the Bob Dylans and John Lennons for a younger generation who are, as you say, “(...) yearning for sometime more meaningful”. How do you see Biedma’s work fulfilling this role and what will be his legacy to future generations of poets?

J.N.: I meant people in their 40’s who were the generation that came of age during the resistance, who, as we all know, are now running the government and universities of Spain. For them the legends of the resistance are extremely important. I remember Joan Barril’s eulogy in *El País* after Gil de Biedma’s death, in which he wrote that as a student in the 60’s it was impossible to go to a leftist political meeting without hearing quotations from Gil de Biedma, or to get laid without quoting a few lines from his love poems. This was the role Dylan’s and Lennon’s songs played in the 60’s in the United States when I was a young student with, I might add, the same interests. Generationally, Gil de Biedma’s is a landmark voice.

For the present younger generation, those who still read, he is influential as a member of a bridge generation who roots them to their own cultural history, a poet who is both modern and one who knew the civil war and the dictatorship. Spain has finally reconnected with the modernity denied it during Franco, yet many young people are fed up with publishing-house fads and throw-away art, a programmed cultural amnesia. Gil

de Biedma is a poet who lived through a meaningful historical experience denied them, the resistance. Last week I went to a performance by the poet José Agustín Goytisolo and the singer Paco Ibáñez, both strongly identified with the resistance, and the theater was filled to the rafters—not with nostalgic *ex-progres* but with twenty-two year olds, who seemed to know the words to the songs, all of them written by poets.

S.B.: In discussing the translation of Gil de Biedma's work, you say that it fell almost naturally into English, as if coming back to its own inspirational sources. This makes your task as his translator sound much easier than it must have been. What difficulties have you encountered in this particular work?

J.N.: In poetry, translating the words is the least difficult. Translating the poetry itself is much more difficult, and reconstructing a consistent voice is a real challenge. Yet even more challenging in Gil de Biedma's case was to translate the secret codes imbedded to escape censorship. He was a gay poet and a leftist poet writing—and publishing, amazingly enough— autobiographical poetry during a puritanical dictatorship that fastidiously censored everything. As a political and love poet, many of his poems are heavily coded, and the decoding presented difficult decisions. For example, "Noche triste de Octubre, 1959" ends with the line: "con las primeras Letras protestadas". A "Letra protestada" is simply a notification that you have defaulted on a payment. However, this was written during a political movement in Catalonia that encouraged people to write the letter "P" on factory walls for "protesta". A general strike was called for June of that year, and when it failed to materialize the protest went underground. The "Letra protestada", therefore, is the subversive letter "P" that he is referring to. How do you translate that? What I did was to incorporate both meanings into the English: "everything churning together, / the first protests with the missed payments". Another instance would be the poem title "Loca", which literally means "crazy woman" but in argot means an effeminate homosexual, or "queen", the title I chose because this is what the poem describes. Again, in "Pandémica y Celeste" he speaks of his lover in the third person: "sus piernas", "su piel", and so on. In English, of course, there's no gender-neutral third person so, knowing he was a homosexual, I decided to use "his" instead of "her", in a sense "outing" Gil de Biedma in the English translation. He moved in two clandestine worlds, the resistance and the discrete homosexual circles in Barcelona of the 1950's, and this coding is the most difficult aspect of the poetry to translate.

S.B.: Neruda or Gil de Biedma: who was the easier to deal with? And which has had more influence on your own poetry?

J.N.: As a North American I cut my teeth on Whitman, and because Neruda was also an American poet greatly parallel to Whitman, I could hear this torrential American voice in my head as I read Neruda's poetry, although speaking to me in Spanish. Gil de Biedma perhaps speaks to me more in English, but with a British accent, which I find harder to capture in my American English. Also Gil de Biedma is a complexly-layered poet, whereas Neruda is probably one of the least ironic poets ever to write. With Gil de Biedma the challenge is the ironic subtlety of voice, the tone, and with Neruda it is the

musicality, the crystalline sound and flow. Neruda has been a great influence on my poetry, I rediscovered Whitman translating him, and as for Gil de Biedma, time will tell. Perhaps working with him I've rediscovered Eliot and Auden, poets I read early on at the university. The end of all our travels, Eliot says, is to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time.

S.B.: What motivates you to translate a particular work, the desire to give it a wider readership or the desire to absorb it yourself?

J.N.: Translation is betrayal, not only the inevitable betrayal of the original's purity but of the translator's tastes, envies and assumptions. Any poet who translates—Baudelaire, Neruda, Pound, Stevens or Gil de Biedma—says as much about himself and his own culture in the choice and style of the translation as he does about the poet of the original. A translation is a collaboration, in this case between a Spanish poet influenced by the Anglophone tradition and a North American poet captivated by the Hispanic. We meet each other half-way, in the borderless country of modern poetry. As a North American writer living in Spain, who continues stubbornly to write in English, doing this translation was one way to engage myself with the language I live in, short of writing a book of poems in Spanish myself. And also because, as one of the masters of 20th century Spanish poetry and perhaps the country's first thoroughly "Europeanized" poet, Gil de Biedma deserves to be known in the English-speaking world, whose knowledge of Spanish literature ends with the Civil War. You know, blood and gypsies, wine and sunshine: What else is down there, right?

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James Nolan recently published in English translation, and with his own introduction, Jaime Gil de Biedma's *Longing: Selected Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1993.