
115TH ANNIVERSARY: Nicolás Guillén: the cultivated and the popular thing

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115 years after the birth of the National Poet, his poetry remains one of the pillars of Cuban literature of all time.

Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989) was born with the abused republic and marked a good part of his work with the deep and committed page. Life confronted him with challenges too early. In full adolescence, his father was murdered by soldiers in a political riot. His loss faced him up with the need to fight for daily survival.

Son of a lower middle-class family from Camagüey, with considerable cultural level, the boy had to work to help his mother, a woman who kept the unity of the family with firmness and affection.

Guillén graduated from junior high school in Camagüey and earned his living as a typographer, establishment employee, local newspaper reporter... until he enrolled in the University of Havana's Law School. He quitted it early and devoted himself to journalism and poetic creation very soon.

The publication of his poem "Motivos de Son" (Motives of Son) on the pages of Diario de la Marina newspaper in 1930 was a literary event. Guillén became a celebrity soon, because his poems caused an intense controversy. Such a determined approach to all popular heritage from poetry had hardly been seen before. Poet Emilio Ballagas, from Camagüey too, was very impressed with the texts and this meant the beginning of their lasting friendship.

A year later, Guillén won a lottery prize and decided to use the money to publish his first book, “Sóngoro consongo”, where he included texts from “Motivos....” and other new poems. The approach to the topic of race was not superficial or hasty, like those from so many contemporaries... His reflection, without being didactical or evidently militant, was much deeper.

In 1937, he joined the Communist Party. He travelled to Mexico along with another outstanding communist intellectual, Juan Marinello, to take part in the congress organized by the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists. His stay in that country broadened his horizons. He joined frontline creators, such as Silvestre Revueltas, José Mancisor, Diego Rivera, Alfaro Sequeros...

That same year he was invited to participate at the 2nd International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, in Barcelona, Valencia and Madrid. Spain was living its civil war, and progressive intellectuals were on the side of the Republic. There, Guillén met Manuel Altolaguirre, who edited his book “España. Poema en cuatro angustias y una esperanza” (Spain. Poem in Four Anguishes and a Hope), Antonio Machado, Miguel Hernández, Pablo Neruda, Ilya Ehrenburg, Rafael Alberti, César Vallejo, León Felipe, Juan Chabás, Octavio Paz, Tristán Tzara, Anna Seghers... and resumed friendship with Ernest Hemingway, who he had met in Cuba.

Back in Cuba, he witnessed the strong political instability until the 1940 Constituent Assembly, in which communists participated for the first time. Guillén was one of the most outstanding voices from the revolutionary left. He travelled across all continents, took part in international congresses, and of course, made a lot of poetry.

Batista’s dictatorship made him an exile. He was in Buenos Aires when the Revolution triumphed in 1959. He returned immediately and joined the construction of a new society.

In 1961, Havana housed the 1st National Congress of Writers and Artists of Cuba, in which Guillén was elected president of the new Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC). He headed the organization until 1985, years full of both creative activity and moments of strong incomprehensions and disagreements...

His significance was already universal and he could have delighted in his fame, but decided to work in pursuit of the development of a new way of supporting creation.

Throughout his life, his literary production moved from postmodernism, avant-garde experiences, until crystallizing into an authentic “black” or Afro-Antillean poetry.

His scholarship and language command were extraordinary. His range of topics was very wide, but his poetic production moved around two great edges: the exaltation of the black and the social situation. But he also has beautiful poems of love.

Nicolás Guillén died on July 17, 1989 in Havana, after a long illness. Cuba cried the man who was declared National Poet, for his unquestionable contributions to the poetic body of the nation.

He knew how to combine the cultivated and the popular thing, basis of the most authentic and comprehensive culture.

Translated by Jorge Mesa Benjamin / Cubasi Translation Staff
