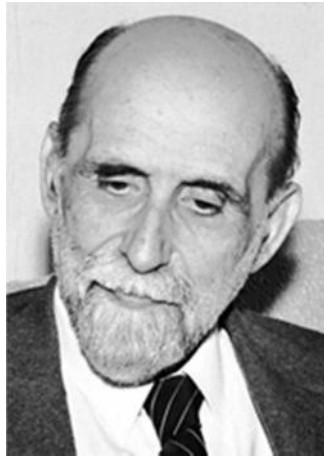


Nobel Prize in Literature 1956



Juan Ramón Jiménez

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1956 was awarded to Juan Ramón Jiménez "for his lyrical poetry, which in Spanish language constitutes an example of high spirit and artistic purity".

A long life consecrated to poetry and to beauty has been honoured this year with the Nobel Prize in Literature. He is an old gardener, this Juan Ramón, who has dedicated half a century to the creation of a new rose, a white mystical rose, which will bear his name.

Jardines lejanos (Distant Gardens), 1904, is one of his books from the beginning of the century. In the southern parts of Andalusia, far off the route from Jerez to Seville well known to Swedish tourists, the poet was born in 1881. But his poetry is not a strong and intoxicating wine, and his work not a grandiose mosque turned into a cathedral. It makes you think, rather, of one of those gardens circled by high, whitewashed walls which you see marking a landscape. He who stops a moment and goes in with his camera runs the risk of being deceived. There is nothing singular or picturesque here, only the usual things: fruit trees and the air which vibrates on passing through them, the pond that reflects the sun and the moon, a bird singing. No small minaret has been transformed into an ivory tower in

this fertile garden planted in the soil of Arab culture. But the visitor who lingers will notice that the passivity within the walls is deceiving, that the isolation is only of the circumstantial and transitory, of what pretends to be present. He will not fail to observe that the rose has a radiance which demands sharper senses and a new sensibility. There is a beauty which is more than the play and delight of the senses; in front of the visitor the silent gardener suddenly appears like a strict director of souls. At the entrance of the Juanramonian garden the tourist ought to observe the same rules as on entering a mosque: wash his hands and rinse his mouth in the fountain for ablutions, take off his shoes, etc.

The year in which Ramón Jiménez began to publish his melodious verses was, in the history of Spain, a year for an examination of conscience. On December 10, 1898, in Paris, was signed the treaty with the United States by which Spain lost Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, as well as what remained of its navy and its prestige. By a stroke of the pen the remnants of a whole colonial empire were eliminated. In Madrid a group of writers took up the pen to reconquer, in their fashion, the world within the boundaries of Spain. Some of them ultimately attained their goals. The Machado brothers, Valle-Inclán, and Unamuno were among them. The "modernists", as they called themselves, had in turn grouped themselves around their leader, the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío, visiting in Spain. It was Darío also who, at the beginning of the century, sponsored the first book of verses of the new poet, Juan Ramón Jiménez, a book which bore the scarcely martial title, *Almas de violeta* (Souls of Violet), 1900.

He was not an audacious creator who would present himself on stage in full light. His song arrived, timid and intimate, from a penumbral background, and spoke of the moon and of melancholy with echoes of Schumann and Chopin. He wept with Heine and with his countryman, inspired by Heine, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, the exquisite poet to whom some short-sighted admirers gave the name, "golden-haired Nordic King". In the manner of Verlaine he murmured his *Arias tristes* (Sad Arias), 1903, in a half-voice. When, little by little but with sure step, he had freed himself from the gentle, captivating arms of French

symbolism, the characteristic features of music and intimacy would remain forever impressed on him.

Music and painting - we can note that, in Seville, the young student also studied to be a painter. Just as we speak of the blue and rose periods of Picasso, who was born in the same year, as the historians of literature have called attention to the predominance of different colours in the work of Ramón Jiménez. To the first period belong all the poems in yellow and green - the famous green poem of his disciple Garcia Lorca has its origin here. Later, white predominates, and the nakedness of white characterizes the brilliant, decisive epoch which includes what has been called the second poetic style of Juan Ramón. Here we witness the long period of plenitude of a poet of light. Far off are the melancholy mood-pictures, far off also the anecdotal themes. The poems treat only of poetry and love, and of the landscape and the sea which are identified with poetry and love. A formal asceticism carried to perfection, rejecting every exterior embellishment of the verse, will be the road that will lead to the simplicity that is the supreme form of art, the poetry that the poet calls naked.

This "second style of Juan Ramón" reaches its full development in *Diario de un poeta recién casado* (Diary of a Newly-Wed Poet) in 1917. In this year the newly-wed poet made his first trip to America and his diary is full of an infinite feeling for the sea, full of oceanic poetry. His books *Eternidades* (Eternities), 1918, and *Piedra y cielo* (Stone and Sky), 1919 mark new stages toward the longed-for identification of the "I" with the world; poetry and thought have the purpose of finding "the exact name for things". Gradually the poems become more concise, naked, transparent; they are, in fact, maxims and aphorisms of the mystical poetics of Juan Ramón.

In his constant zeal to surpass previous achievements, Ramón Jiménez has made a clean slate of his earliest production and has radically modified old poems, gathering those meriting his approval into extensive anthologies. After his volumes *Belleza* (Beauty) and *Poesía* (Poetry) in 1923, in his zeal to experiment with new forms, he abandoned the publication of his works in book form and often published without title or author's name, in

the form of sheets or leaflets scattered by the wind. In 1936 the civil war interrupted the projected edition of his works in twenty-one volumes. *Animal de fondo* (Animal of Depth), 1949, the last book from his period of exile, is, if read by itself, a sample of a work in progress. Today, therefore, it is still premature to discuss this phase which, in literary history, will perhaps carry the title "the last style of Juan Ramón".

Far away, in what was the colony of Puerto Rico, he is afflicted today by an immense sorrow. It will not be possible for us to see his thin face with its profound eyes and to ask ourselves if it has been taken directly from a painting by El Greco. We find a less solemn self-portrait in the delightful book, *Platero y yo* (Platero and I), 1914. There, dressed in mourning, the poet passes with his Nazarene beard, riding his little donkey while the gypsy children shout at the top of their voices: The madman! The madman! The madman! ... And in truth it is not always easy to distinguish a madman from a poet. But for like spirits the madness of this man has been eminent wisdom. Rafael Alberti, Jorge Guillén, Pedro Salinas, and others who have written their names in the recent history of Spanish poetry have been his disciples; Federico Garcia Lorca is one of them, and so are the Latin American poets, with Gabriela Mistral at their head. I cite the statement of a Swedish journalist on being informed of the Nobel Prize in Literature for this year: "Juan Ramón Jiménez is a born poet, one of those who are born one day with the same simplicity with which the sun's rays shine, one who purely and simply has been born and has given of himself, unconscious of his natural talents. We do not know when such a poet is born. We know only that one day we find him, we see him, we hear him, just as one day we see a plant flower. We call this a miracle".

In the annals of the Nobel Prize, Spanish literature has been one of the distant gardens. Very rarely have we cast a glance inside. This year's laureate is the last survivor of the famous "generation of 1898". For a generation of poets on both sides of the ocean which separates, and at the same time, unites the Hispanic countries, he has been a master - the master, in effect. When the Swedish Academy renders homage to Juan Ramón Jiménez, it renders homage also to an entire epoch in the glorious Spanish literature.



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