# READING JUAN RAMÓN IN ENGLISH

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In the short space we have, we are going to step through the looking glass, like Alice in Wonderland as it were, to see what Juan Ramón Jiménez looks like, or, rather, sounds like on the other side of the Spanish-English mirror. It is obvious that time and space must impose constraints on such a task, and the first will be that we will look at only poetry, not prose. And secondly, that although a number of translators, I don't know how many, have rendered Juan Ramón Jiménez into English, many of them poets in their own right, only seven of them will be represented here.

We might ask ourselves what the poet himself, or perhaps the Spanish reader, would hope has been transmitted to the English readership of Juan Ramón Jiménez's poetry. Ricardo Gullón, in the introduction to one anthology of Juan Ramón Jiménez's poetry, speaks of "ideas... expressed with fluency and exactness" of "verbal economy and the sobriety in the use of adjectives", of his "dialogue with nature", of his many poetic devices — "internal rhymes, images in series... alliterations, the play of antitheses, enumerations and reiterations...", of the unity of his ethic and aesthetic, and many other aspects and qualities of Juan Ramón's verse.[1]

The Pulizer Prize-winning poet Louis Simpson observes that poetry such as that of John Donne and other visionary and metaphysical poets, who use "astonishing imagery and remarkable turns of wit, can be translated without much loss — the ingenuity remains," but that translation is much more difficult in the case of "naked poetry", like Juan Ramón's, "which consists of emotion expressed in plain, conversational words." [2]

And, finally, an American writer and translator, Rachael Frank, in an article in *Poetry* magazine, also speaks of the difficulty of translating Juan Ramón Jiménez's verse: "...his poetry is such a fine sieve that matter slips through its meshes. What remains is a quality which itself quietly half slips through the meshes as if it, too, were about to disappear. It is almost impossible to translate such poetry without violating cadence, tone, and all the minute impetuosities and hesitations which make it so discreetly alive."[3]

So, it appears impossible, you will agree, to transmit everything, though different translators will succeed, to a greater or lesser degree, in giving a partial picture; and, of

[1] Juan Ramón Jiménez: *Three Hundred Poems, 1903-1953,* introd. Ricardo Gullón, trans. Eloise Roach, Austin-Texas, U. Texas Press, 1974[2].

[2] Juan Ramón Jiménez: *Invisible Reality,* trans. Antonio T. de Nicolás, introd. Louis Simpson, New York, Paragon House, 1987, p. xvii.

[3] Rachel Frank: "Juan Ramón Jiménez: the Landscape of the Soul", *Poetry* (1953), LXXXII, 4, p. 225.

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course, the extent of the sampling available to the reader will also be a measure of how much of the original work can been communicated.

And perhaps even more important, there is, from the beginning, a cultural barrier to be crossed. The American poet, Robert Creeley, reviewing two anthologies of Spanish literature in translation, presents this problem: when he says, "...I wonder how simply a reader will find their materials (i.e., the materials of these anthologies) available, lacking much acquaintance with either literature or the peculiar characteristics of the national temper of which it is the form. (...) So then the background for this literature is... a problem, and we are left with what references we can manage, wherewith to take hold of this work"[4] (He then goes on to recommend some background reading prior to reading the poetry). It is true that Creeley wrote this in the U.S. in 1958, and that Spanish culture is much more widely known there now than it was then, but the fact remains that the comprehension and enjoyment of Juan Ramón Jiménez's poetry, or that of any poet in translation, must be conditioned by the English-speaking reader's degree of understanding of the source language culture.

With regard to the translations themselves, you might ask: Why choose certain translations, out of the many available, to include here? As we look at the examples, we can think more about this, but one of the deciding factors was where the translation appeared, that is, whether the poem appeared in an anthology of Spanish poetry or Spanish literature in general, or whether it was published in an anthology given entirely to Juan Ramón Jiménez's poetry in English, of which there are several. And within both of these categories, whether the anthology was monolingual or bilingual. In the case of the general anthology of Spanish poems or literature, the interest was also in what three or four or five poems the anthologist felt were representative of Juan Ramón Jiménez's work. I was also interested in seeing how various translators rendered the same poem and so, in two cases, included a poem in the version of two or more translators.

The fly leaf of one anthology published in the U.S. says this: "...Before the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to Juan Ramón Jiménez in 1956 he was known to comparatively few Americans, but those few recognized his pre-eminence as a writer and cultural leader." (And probably what is said about Americans is equally applicable to other English speakers; poetry does not normally attract a large readership, even less so when the poetry is in translation.) Nevertheless, years before the Nobel Prize, Juan Ramón Jiménez's poems had been included in English-language anthologies; in 1951, J. B. Trend had already published a book of English translations of poems by Juan Ramón, *Fifty Spanish Poems*, and in 1953, the prestigious review, *Poetry*, dedicated its entire July issue to translations of his poetry and some of his aphorisms or "*crítica paralela*", as "...a homage to that most distinguished of living Spanish poets, Juan Ramón Jiménez ...".

With the award of the Nobel Prize in 1956, as is often the case, the poet's work enjoyed a rather brief blaze of popularity through existing translations or new ones, and then was once again relegated to history, to be read in English only sporadically by poetry lovers and scholars.

[4] Robert Creeley: "To Build Castles in Spain", *Poetry* (1958), XCIII, 3 , p. 189.

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One more thing to consider is that we have two main types of reader, with regard to language — one group that knows little or no Spanish at all, and another with some knowledge of Spanish, for whatever reason, but not a high level of fluency. Both of these groups have access to Juan Ramón Jiménez's poetry through English translations, but the latter group, those who have some knowledge of Spanish, can reap the benefits of bilingual English-Spanish editions, while those who know no Spanish must rely completely on the translator, be it in bilingual or English-only editions (Those who know Spanish well can fend for themselves).

Without more preamble, then, we can go on directly to a few translations to see how Juan Ramón Jiménez comes across in English. The first poem we will consider is *"Dejad las puertas abiertas"*, chosen here, especially, because it seems to be a favorite among translators.

The first version on the handout appeared in 1953 in the magazine *Poetry,* together with twenty-eight others by the same translator and six by another translator, a selection of thirty-five poems in all; the original Spanish texts were not included with the translations. The translator is a poet himself, a young poet at the time this translation was done (he still publishes regularly in English magazines), whose command of Spanish was probably, at least then, not outstanding.

The second translation on the handout, much more recent, was done in the mid-1980s. The translator, Antonio T. de Nicolás, is part Spanish and lived in Spain as a child, so he has a natural feeling for the cultural and literary background of Spain, though apparently he moved to the U.S. fairly early, and his English is the standard English of a native speaker. He translated, and published in an English-only edition, the whole of *La realidad invisible*, from which this translation is taken

The third version, done by J. M. Cohen, comes from *The Penguin Book of Spanish Verse*, a bilingual edition, in which the English versions, all done by Cohen, are simply literal prose translations of the poems, meant only as backup for the English-speaking reader of Spanish.

As we look at these translations, I will try to point out some of the aspects that may hinder the communication of the original poem to the English reader, while you, as speakers of the original language, can evaluate for yourselves to what extent the communication is successful. With each translation there is an indication of whether it is taken from a bilingual or a monolingual edition and whether it is from a general anthology or from a collection exclusively of Juan Ramón's work.

| ***DEJAD LAS PUERTAS ABIERTAS*** | ***OPEN ENTIRELY*** |
|---|---|
| *Dejad las puertas abiertas* | Leave the doors open, |
| *esta noche, por si él* | this night, so that he, |
| *quiere, esta noche, venir,* | if he wish, this night, may come, |
| *que está muerto.* | who is dead. |
| *Abierto todo,* | Open entirely, |
| *a ver si nos parecemos* | to see if we may resemble |
| *a su cuerpo; a ver si somos* | his body; to see if we are |
| *algo de su alma, estando* | something of his soul, being |
| *entregados al espacio;* | given up to space; |


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*a ver si el gran infinito*
*nos echa un poco, invadiéndonos*
*de nosotros; si morimos un poco aquí; y*
*allí, en él*
*vivimos un poco.*

*¡Abierta*
*toda la casa, lo mismo*
*que si estuviera de cuerpo*
*presente en la noche azul,*
*con nosotros como sangre,*
*con las estrellas por flores!*

to see if the great infinity may throw us a
little, invading us,
of ourselves; if we may die
a little here; and there, in him,
if we may live a little.

Open
all the house, as though
he might be in body
present in the blue night,
among us as blood,
with the stars for flowers.

Translator W.S. Merwin (1953)
English-only text (JRJ only)

***TONIGHT LEAVE THE DOOR***

Tonight, leave the door
open in case he wants
to come, tonight,
though he is dead.

Open everything,
see if we resemble his body;
see if we become something
of his soul, surrendered
as we are to space; see if the great infinite throws
something of us upon ourselves,
invading us; see if we die
a little here; and there, in him,
see if we live a little.

Leave the whole house
open, as if it lay in state
in the blue night,
with us as its blood
and for flowers the stars!

Translator Antonio T. de Nicolás (1986)
Bilingual text (JRJ only)

***LEAVE THE DOORS OPEN TONIGHT***

Leave the doors open tonight, in case he who is dead wishes to come tonight.

Let all be open to see if we look like his body; to see if we are something of his soul, being delivered over to space; to see if the great infinite will throw us something, infusing us with ourselves; if we may die a little here, and live a little there, in him.

Let the whole house be open, as if his body were laid out in the blue night, with us like blood and with the stars for flowers.

Translator J.M. Cohen (1956?)
Bilingual text (general anthology)

Merwin, the first translator, apparently tries to communicate the flavor of the Spanish text by respecting not only its literal meaning but also its structures, and even the punctuation, that is, he seems to have translated using the system that García Yebra, quoting Schleiermacher on the two possible ways of translating, describes as *"ajustar lo más posible a las construcciones del original el texto de la lengua terminal"*,[5] a method mostly fallen into discredit nowadays.

This produces a distractingly choppy text in English. Added to this are the slight changes, perhaps misinterpretations of the original — the use of the modal verb *may* in

[5] Valentín García Yebra: *Teoría y Práctica de la traducción,* Madrid, Gredos, 1982, p. 40.

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the second stanza: "to see if we may resemble / if the great infinity may throw us a little ... / if we may die / may live".

And consider his translation of *"esta noche"* and *"de cuerpo presente"* as "this night" and "in body present". At least in the first case, I find it hard to believe that Merwin did not know that *"esta noche"* means "tonight", so if he says "this night", is he purposely trying to lead the reader into the Spanish thought process? If so, when he says "in body present", not an English funerary expression, is he trying to bring the reader as close as possible to the original text, to the forms of the Spanish language? If that is the case, he has not succeeded in conveying the meaning of the expression.

But perhaps I am underestimating the translator's knowledge of Spanish as well as his poetic talent: he may very well see an ambiguity in Juan Ramón Jiménez's use of *"esta noche"* as "tonight" but also as "this particular night" and *"de cuerpo presente"* as the body lying in state but also as the person present not only in spirit but in body also, i.e. actually there. In any case, the funeral sense of the expression is lost in the translation.

Unfortunately, there are other misreadings that put Merwin's command of Spanish, and therefore the translation itself, in doubt. In the first stanza he translates *"por si él quiere venir"* as if it said *"para que él pueda venir si quiere"*: "so that he, if he wish, may come". At the end of the poem, *"con nosotros como sangre / con las estrellas por flores"*, he translates *"con"* as "among", so that it reads "that he might be present among us as blood", though he translates it in the next line, *"con las estrellas por flores"*, correctly as "with".

The second translation, by de Nicolás, who is part Spanish, seems to have a better grasp on the whole idea, except for the last stanza, in which, for some reason, the translator understands *"lo mismo que si estuviera de cuerpo presente"* as referring to the house. He too, not surprisingly, has trouble with *"de cuerpo presente"*, using the expression "lie in state", which is a correct translation of *"de cuerpo presente"*, but is used in the context of a public funeral for an important person. Cohen, in the prose translation, says "as if the body were laid out", in colloquial register; English has no good equivalent of the Spanish term as it is used here, and each translator has found a different solution.

Apart from lexis, at the beginning of the poem de Nicolas puts "tonight" in initial position, "tonight, leave the door open", thus changing the emphasis, and, in my opinion, spoiling the effect of the opening command *Dejad las puertas abiertas*. Perhaps to separate the two uses of "tonight", he puts them in lines one and three, unlike Juan Ramón and Merwin, who put the two uses of the expression closer together, in lines two and three.

Cohen's translation, which only attempts to give the literal meaning of the Spanish text, is quite straightforward. He, like Merwin, also uses modal verbs in the second stanza ("if the great infinite will throw us something / if we may die a little here"). And at the end he says "with us *like* blood", *("con nosotros como sangre")* an incorrect translation that does not really mean anything.

Comparing the three translations produces some interesting points: in the second stanza, the expression *"a ver si"* is repeated three times. As Merwin and Cohen trans-

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late it, it tells why the doors should be left open ("to see if..."). For de Nicolas, and, I think, for Juan Ramón, it represents a challenge.

De Nicolás also, I feel, captures better than the other two the meaning of *"a ver si somos algo de su alma,' estando entregados al espacio"*. Merwin and Cohen say: "being given up to space / being delivered over to space". De Nicolas says: "surrendered *as we are* to space", i.e. see if we become something of his soul considering that we are part of space.

And finally, *"a ver si el gran infinito nos echa un poco, invadiéndonos de nosotros"*. Merwin and de Nicolas separate *"invadiéndonos"* from the rest ("invading us"). Cohen reads it, incorrectly, I think, following the Spanish punctuation: "will throw us something, infusing us with ourselves".

| ***LA VERDECILLA*** | ***GREEN*** |
|---|---|
| *Verde es la niña. Tiene*<br>*verdes ojos, pelo verde.* | Green was the maiden, green, green!<br>Green her eyes were, green her hair. |
| *Su rosilla silvestre*<br>*no es rosa ni blanca. Es verde.* | The wild rose in her green wood<br>was neither red nor white, but green. |
| *¡En el verde aire viene!*<br>*(La tierra se pone verde).* | Through the green air she came.<br>(The whole earth turned green for her.) |
| *Su espumilla fuljente*<br>*no es blanca ni azul. Es verde.* | The shining gauze of her garment<br>was neither blue nor white, but green. |
| *¡En el mar verde viene!*<br>*(El cielo se pone verde).* | Over the green sea she came.<br>(And even the sky turned green then.) |
| *Mi vida le abre siempre*<br>*una puertecita verde.* | My life will always leave unlatched<br>a small green gate to let her in. |

Translator J. B. Trend (1951)
Bilingual Text (JRJ only)

Trend's translation of *La verdecilla* is interesting because of the deviations from the original text, especially the change from present tense to the past, and in the last stanza from present to future. The present tense throughout the translation, following the original, would have been perfectly acceptable, while the tense change does not add anything of poetic value. Then Trend makes a translator's decision in dealing with *"su espumilla fuljente"*, which may or may not express the original correctly. (Rachael Frank considers that "...the price of this transformation is the entire sense of the girl's separation from the sea",[6] but the mention of the sea comes after that stanza, so the relation *"espumilla / mar"* is not all that clear.)

Apart from this, Trend seems to have cast Juan Ramón Jiménez's poem in the form of an old English ballad, or perhaps one from the 16th or 17th century (Compare "Who is at my window? Who? Who? / Go from my window! Go! Go! or Shall we go dance

[6] Rachel Frank: art. cit., p. 230.

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the hay, the hay?"). This is a creative translation and, in my opinion, it comes off rather well, though it is not the immediate, concise verse of Juan Ramón Jiménez.

***QUISIERA QUE MI LIBRO***

*Quisiera que mi libro*
*fuese, como es el cielo por la noche,*
*todo verdad presente, sin historia.*

*Que, como él, se diera en cada instante,*
*todo, con todas sus estrellas; sin*
*que niñez, juventud, vejez quitaran*
*ni pusieran encanto a su hermosura inmensa.*

*¡Temblor, relumbre, música*
*presentes y totales!*
*¡Temblor, relumbre, música en la frente*
*—cielo del corazón— del libro puro!*

***I WISH MY BOOK MIGHT BE***

I wish my book might be
as is the sky at night,
all present truth, without history.

That, as the sky, it might give itself
at every moment, with all its stars; nor
should childhood, youth, old age detract
or add in charm to its great beauty.

Tremor, flash of light, music
present and total!
Tremor, flash of light, music in the mind
– heaven of the heart – of the pure book!

Translator ELOISE ROACH (c. 1974)
English-only text (JRJ only)

***I WOULD THAT ALL MY VERSES***

I would that all my verses
could be such as the sky is in the night-time:
truth of the moment – now – without history.

That, like the sky, they would yield at every instant
all things, with all their streaming stars, and
neither childhood, nor youth, nor age could rob them,
nor cast a spell on the immensity of their beauty.

A thrill, a bright flash, music
before my eyes and upon me!
The thrill, the bright flash, the music, right between my eyes,
– the whole sky in my heart – the naked book!

Translator J. B. TREND (1951)
Bilingual text (JRJ only)

Trend's translation of *Quisiera que mi libro*, however, does not fare quite so well; the change from *"mi libro"* to "all my verses" is perhaps what the translator feels Juan Ramón Jiménez would say about all of his poetic work, but the poem is actually the envoi published at the end of the *Segunda Antolojía poética.* The end of the second stanza would read more correctly with the preposition "of" after "rob them": "nor age could rob them of, nor cast a spell upon the immensity of their beauty". The third stanza of the translation is much more physical than the original, and the expression "right between my eyes" is so often used to describe one person punching another that it sounds out of place and even comical here.

Eloise Roach's translation stays much closer to the original. Roach published a book of three hundred of Juan Ramón Jiménez's poems and had previously translated

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*Platero y Yo,* a translation which Juan Ramón saw and gave his blessing to. My one disagreement with this translation is the preposition "in" at the end of the second stanza; it means nothing; it is superfluous and, really, incorrect here. Roach could have used something else if she felt meter so required, for example "detract or add one bit of charm to its great beauty".

And here, getting off the subject a moment, I would like to make a stand in favor of female translators, like Roach, who were translating in the pre-feminist days. Let me read you part of a review of Eleanor Turnbull's *Ten Centuries of Spanish Poetry* by Warren Carrier:

> Eleanor Turnbull, a lady translator who has already damaged Unamuno and Salinas more than their poetry deserved, has turned her talents to less deserving targets. Nearly half the poems in the collection have been transmogrified by Miss Turnbull, the next largest number by the star to whom she is epigone, Henry W. Longfellow. Longfellow and Turnbull make every Spaniard sound alike, from Anonymous to Jiménez, and all like Longfellow who sounded like a lady translator to begin with.[7]

| ***EN UNO, CIELO O MAR, EL MAR Y EL CIELO*** | ***THEY WILL BE ONE, SKY OR SEA, SEA OR SKY*** |
|---|---|
| *En uno, cielo o mar, el mar y el cielo,* | They will be one, sky or sea, sea or sky, |
| *cual tú, corazón mío,* | like you, my heart, |
| *y el amor.* | and love. |
| *Pero, ¿se tienen ellos?,* | But do they have each other?, |
| *di, ¿se sienten?* | please, tell me, do they feel each other? |
| *El cielo ¡corazón! nada es del mar* | The sky, heart, has nothing in common with the sea |
| *aun cuando haga ola su llanto.* | even when its cries make waves. |
| *El mar ¡amor! nada es del cielo* | The sea, love, has nothing in common with the sky |
| *aunque le ponga sueños, blancos* | even when it gives dreams to it, white |
| *o negros como nubes.* | or black, like clouds. |
| *En uno, para ti, corazón mío,* | They will be one for you, my heart, |
| *mar y cielo.* | sea and sky. |
| *En uno tú, mi amor, conmigo, para ellos,* | You and I will be one in me, for them, my love, |
| *cielo y mar.* | sky and sea. |

Translator Antonio T. de Nicolás. (1986)
Bilingual text (JRJ only)

In *En uno, cielo o mar, el mar y el cielo,* we have another translation by Antonio T. de Nicolás (who, by the way, also translated *Platero y Yo*, some years after Roach's translation). This translation alters the original slightly: it situates the verse in time by adding a verb in the first stanza, it adds the emphasis of "please" in the second. And there is a slight *"machista"* cast to the last stanza because of the use of a simple preposition, "in": "you and I will be one in me, ...my love", where the original says *"En uno tú, mi amor,* conmigo". All considered, this is a competent translation which will reach the English reader easily.

[7] Warren Carrier: "Some Versions of Lorca", *Poetry* (1955), LXXXVII, 5, p. 307.

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***PIRINEOS***

*Al entrar en España, va cayendo la tarde...*
*En los picos, el sol se eleva eternamente.*
*El mundo se abre. Y los techos de pizarra*
*se quedan en el foro de los pueblos franceses.*

*La torre de Sallent repica allá en el fondo.*
*Es domingo. La brisa juega en las peñas verdes.*
*El ocaso es más puro cada vez. Huele el sur*
*más. Es más claro el ondear de las mieses.*

*Por los prados, con flor, en una paz de idilio,*
*mugen, echadas, mansas, vacas rosas de leche.*
*El habla del zagal nos toca el corazón.*
*La patria va alejando, maternal, a la muerte...*

*Ventura, soledad, silencio. Las esquilas*
*llenan, cual las estrellas el cielo, el campo alegre.*
*Silencio, soledad, ventura. El agua, en todo,*
*canta entre el descendente reír de los cascabeles...*

***PYRENEES***

The evening is falling, as we arrive in Spain...
Upon the peaks, the sun does perch eternally.
The world opens wider. And in the stage setting
of the French villages, the roofs of slate remain.

Off there in the background the Sallent tower tolls.
It is Sunday. Upon the green crags breezes play.
The sunset's ever purer. The south more perfumed.
The ripening grain sheaves are brighter as they sway.

In the meadows in bloom, amid idyllic peace,
lie placid cows lowing, rose-hued, with milky breath.
The speech of the shepherd lad touches the heart.
The homeland fades away, maternal, unto death...

Contentment, silence, solitude. The cow-bells' call,
like the stars in the sky, the happy meadow swells.
Silence, seclusion, joy. The water, over all,
sings with descending laughter of the tinkling bells...

Translator Helen Wohl Patterson (1965)
Bilingual text (General anthology)

We can look briefly at *Pirineos;* here, perhaps, is an example of the "lady translators" who so irritated Warren Carrier. The translation comes from an anthology of modern Spanish poetry (1965) selected and translated by Ms Patterson, in which she includes this and two other poems by Juan Ramón. Patterson uses complete rhyme, here and in translating other poets in her anthology, where the poet uses either rhyme or, as in this poem, assonance, and this, of course, conditions the whole translation. Apart from that, her lexicon is literary and, more than that, artificial ("Upon the peaks, the sun does perch eternally" in the first stanza; "placid cows lowing, rose-hued" in the third). And in the third stanza, the last verse is incorrectly translated. On the other hand, her fidelity to literal meaning produces jarring expressions like "in the *stage setting* of the French villages". This same fidelity would allow Patterson's version to serve as a line-by-line literal translation, though Cohen's prose translations in *The Penguin Book of Spanish Verse* serve the same purpose better and less pretentiously.

***SONG OF THE LOSER***

Lonely hawk who carry
the match of your far
shadow;
your fixed cry names you.

Your far match,
my shadow more than my shadow,
Far.
My high cry names you.


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Because I wished to fly,
your shadow is my shadow.
Far.
Your sharp cry names me.

Hawk; I, a man, carry
the match of my shadow
far.
My long cry names me.

Translator Rachael Frank (1953)
English-only text (JRJ only)

The last poem on your handout, *Song of the Loser* appears in English only (I was unable to locate the Spanish original). Nevertheless, it is included here so that you can experience it as the non-Spanish-speaking English reader would. The poem reads well and achieves an emotive effect. The use of *"match"*, to be sure, creates some confusion for the reader; is it in the sense of *"pareja"*? *"igual"*? It would be an interesting exercise to try a retrotranslation and then compare it with the original if you have it.

To sum up, all in all, I think it is fair to say that there is, if not an abundance, at least a considerable body of acceptable translations of Juan Ramón Jiménez's work in English, and we can hope that the centenary of the *Generación del 98* will stimulate English-speaking readers to search them out and discover or rediscover them.

Before I close, I would like to suggest three topics for research in literary translation that have occurred to me in preparing this talk:

One is a complete study of the English translations of Juan Ramón Jiménez's work.

The second is a study of the translations of English language poetry into Spanish by Juan Ramón Jiménez and by the poet together with his wife, Zenobia.

And finally, a study of the role and the responsibility of translators and of the editors of various types of anthologies in how the poetry and the culture of a particular language are presented to the reader who is not familiar with them.

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