Chapter 2

Jorge Guillén’s Radiant Matter: A Sensational Knowledge

For Jorge Guillén the paradigm-altering advances in science brought no estrangement between science and the arts. In *El argumento de la obra* (The Argument of the Work), the poet recognizes the high level of intensity that poetry has achieved in the last 150 years since romanticism, and contradicts those who predicted an even greater divide between science and the arts (105, 1969 ed.). The traditional split between science and the arts, which in 1959 C. P. Snow called the two cultures, does not find a supporter in Guillén for whom the same creative energy infuses works in both fields. He also finds that there is harmony between imagination and discipline and between rhythm and what he calls mathematics of the image. He even identifies a way of focusing on numbers, which instead of obstructing passion, energizes it. This *pasión cifrada* (coded passion), as Guillén calls it, has its strongest exponent in his own work *Cántico* (Canticle).¹

As Cano Ballesta notes, Guillén’s own generation took *Cántico* to be “the quintessential expression of a new poetic sensibility that was oriented toward the delectation of external objects and wonder at the marvels of the concrete world” (“Jorge Guillén and the Young Poets” 136). Guillén’s magnum opus represents the intensity in poetry that he himself identified in the *zeitgeist* of the period (*El argumento* 137), an intensity that left romantic subjectivity behind and focused on physical reality. Most critical studies of Jorge Guillén’s *Cántico*, among the daunting number that this work has generated, focus on this poet’s view of reality as a realm of harmonious interrelations among different elements in a present time of plenitude. This spectacle of reality

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holds such fascination that this poet turns his speaker/observer into a *raptor*, a kidnapper of the plethora of sense-impressions the world presents. With an attention Guillén describes as “courteous” because it is not rushed—a regard that seeks to recover some of the lost ideal of *otium* (leisure time)—his poetic observer looks at reality with Ruskin’s innocent eyes, discovering and recreating each experience; in turn, reality reciprocates such courteous attention with *esplendidez* (magnificence) and *candidez* (simplicity). This gracious exchange, between the observer and the observed, gives proof of the “coded passion” or harmonious combination of imagination and discipline. As was the case with his friend Pedro Salinas, Guillén’s agency of perception seeks the beyond or *trasrealidad* (beyond what is real) in things, what Ortega y Gasset calls a *trasmundo* (beyond the world) of the thing (*Obras Completas* I, 335–336) or its essential dimension. Under his acute and focused regard, matter assumes the quality of “radiance,” which, in turn, brings forth in the observer a multiplicity of sensations. It is the convergence of radiant matter and sensations that constitutes reality for this poet. This chapter reads Guillén’s poetry in analogical relation to the work on sensations and visual science developed by Austrian physicist Ernst Mach (1838–1916).

Mach, whom Einstein called the forerunner of the theory of relativity, rejected Kant’s notion of “thing-in-itself” as superfluous for the pursuit of knowledge because it could not be observed. Instead, he asserted that what we see as “bodies” or objects are made up of complexes of sensations whose interdependence should be the goal of scientific investigation. Discarding the old notion of causality, Mach proposed the mathematical notion of *function*. In his seminal work *The Analysis of Sensations*, Mach studies sensations as *functional relations*, the dependence of experiences on one another. Very much influenced by Mach’s ideas, *The Grammar of Science* by British statistician Karl Pearson (1857–1936; the first book Einstein asked his study group *Olympia-Academy* to read) further developed the field of perception with an analysis of stored and immediate sense-impressions. These changes in the science of visuality and perception were precedents for the theory of relativity and the research on light and energy. Light in physics refers to the kind of radiant electromagnetic energy that is associated with vision; it includes the entire range of radiation known as the electromagnetic spectrum. Mach’s focus on the interdependence of sensations on one another is directly linked with Maxwell’s theories about the electromagnetic field.

The central role of perception in Guillén’s work fits well within a tradition stemming from the dismantling of the hierarchical worldview