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The Evolution of the Rose:
From Form to Flame

by Kathryn Hart Patton

"The heirs of Symbolism are today more prominent in the annals of literary history than those who founded the Symbolist school," states Anna Balakian, who names among those respected inheritors two recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature, W. B. Yeats (1923) and Juan Ramón Jiménez (1956). Devoted to poetry, although they also wrote in prose, both the Irishman and the Spaniard tirelessly revised their work over the years, always seeking perfection.

In 1916, the year before Yeats' marriage, Jiménez went to the United States to marry Zenobia Camprubi Aymar. With this voyage across the sea, the poet of Modernism (a literary movement greatly influenced by French Symbolism and Parnassianism) set out in a new direction of poetic style. The sea was to become one of his most important symbols, and the movement of the water inspired the poet to experiment with new rhythms, free verse, poesía desnuda or "naked poetry." Zenobia it was who developed in him a great interest in the poetry of England, the United States, and Germany. Later the Spanish Civil War caused the couple, like many other important Spaniards, to leave their country, and again they went to the United States, this time to make their home. There Juan Ramón continued his poetic development, lectured at the University of Miami, Duke, Vassar, and the University of Maryland, and did translations from English, including some of Yeats' poems.²

According to Paul R. Olson, Yeats' poem, "The Rose of the World," was the source of the title, Con la rosa del mundo, that the Spanish poet chose for the anthology in which he planned to collect his poems on the rose, one of his favorite symbols.³ Unlike Yeats, who, after a time, discarded the rose as symbol, Jiménez gave it an im-

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important place in his verse throughout most of his life. Probably the influence of Yeats ended with the title and the idea of a collection of poems on the rose. In spite of some similarity of significance in their traditional symbol, the rose poems of Jiménez and Yeats differ. Jiménez's symbol gained originality and profundity with the development of thought and style in his later periods of writing. Even his early poems could never be confused with those of Yeats.

Heirs of French Symbolism both poets were. However, the rose was not part of their legacy from the founders of the movement. Barbara Seward considers the rose, among those French poets, "conspicuous by its neglect." Even Mallarmé "fails to uproot the flower wholly from earthly soil."

As might be supposed, love is one meaning of the rose for both Jiménez and Yeats. In Yeats' "The Rose of Peace," the love is that of earth, rather than a remote ideal, and is regarded as a means of ending the battle between heaven and hell, body and soul, dream and reality. For this reason, Seward considers the poem "happier" than the others. "The Secret Rose" implies, among other things, Ireland, closely associated in the poet's mind with Maud Gonne, the woman he loved so hopelessly. In his rose poems, the beloved and the flower are one. At times, the woman becomes a rose; in other instances, the flower has human traits. Sometimes the loved one is given physical form; sometimes she is spirit.

Although the joy of love in Juan Ramón's early poems is frequently passionate, the rose also quite often suggests a spiritual love. In one poem, this amor puro is like a rose that was left behind on the path, and the poet longs for purity as the key to his destiny: "rosa que pudo ser clave de mi destino!" (PLP, 1098). No doubt, the joy of

5 Ibid., pp. 96-97.
youth and love is best shown in the following stanza from “Balada de la mañana de la cruz,” with the additional delight of the rhythm:

Dios está azul. La flauta y el tambor
anuncian ya la cruz de primavera.
¡Vivan las rosas, las rosas del amor
entre el verdor con sol de la pradera!

(PLP, 739)

God is bright blue. Now the flute and the drum
announce the coming of the cross of spring.
Long live the roses, the roses of love,
flecked with the sunlight of the meadow’s green.

(Roach, 27)

In verses of his more mature period, the poet channels his affection towards one woman, Zenobia, who is beauty in the most profound sense of the word.

Through the eyes of Juan Ramón one sees nature anew, for he views it with all the wonder of a child. He had none of Yeats’ interest in magic, but he found in nature another kind of magic, and his poetry shows the deep effect which its beauty caused. However, the more one is moved by beauty, the greater is the anguish at its passing. In a poem from La soledad sonora, the poet tells of the sadness which a sense of time lends to his verse. He calls his hand a lily of five petals and says that it caresses verses, flowers, and the tomb: “Sobre el libro amarillo, mi mano está violeta / entre las rosas del día que se derumba . . .” (PLP, 915), “Upon the yellow book, my hand is violet / among the roses of the day that perishes . . .” Jiménez’s obsession with death, beginning when his father died, was so overwhelming that he often had to seek the help of a doctor. In spite of the fact that he sometimes banished Death from his poetry, the fear never completely disappeared. A. Sánchez-Barbudo attributes much of the melancholy of the verse to this sickness, pointing out the fact that the poet’s sadness is usually sincere, regardless of how typical melancholy is of the lyrics of his time.  

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As for Yeats, the cold eye with which he later looked on death is absent in the early poetry; time stirs the heart to despair. He who loves beauty is doomed to suffer, since in this world of ours it soon vanishes. Yeats lacked any real hope of ever escaping from the maze of time in which man must wander; to solve the conflict of time and eternity seemed an impossibility. Allen R. Grossman states, "To be reunited to the Rose is Yeats' symbol of gnosis. It is the knowledge of origin, dreams of which are defeated until time is ended and the lost relation from which time alienates the mind is recovered."9 Deeply disillusioned with life, Yeats yearned for a better world than this, a world "where Time would surely forget us" and grant freedom from the stresses and conflicts of life, from "the rose and the lily, and fret / of the flames," as he expresses it in "The White Birds."

Along with recognition of fleeting beauty, youth, and life itself, goes the desire for the eternal and for beauty that will not fade, for "las rosas inmortales, las estrellas eternas..." (PLP, 1192), "the immortal roses, the eternal stars..." For Jiménez, woman, star, and rose are the forms of greatest beauty: "la mujer con la estrella y la rosa, / las tres formas más bellas del mundo!" (LP, 1264).

Essence is the term chosen by Olson for "being' made timeless." The roses' perfume is their essence, which lingers after they have shattered. This perfume is often associated with memory, that which gives permanence to the past, as shown in the following poem translated by Olson:"10

¡Rosas, rosas al cuarto
por ella abandonado!
¡Que el olor dialogue, en esta ausencia,
con el recuerdo blanco!

(LP, 1101)

Roses, roses for the room
which she has abandoned!
Let the fragrance have dialogue, within this absence,
with the white memory!

In 1943, Juan Ramón wrote from Washington to Luis Cernuda, in reference to poetry, "I make essence. Let him who can, capture it. I am,

10 Circle of Paradox, pp. 5 and 85–86.
was and shall be a Platonist. Winged, graceful, divine expression, and nothing more, nothing less.” In the same letter he says, “It has always been my hope to be more and more the poet of ‘what remains.’” This assertion calls to mind the German poet, Hölderlin, a favorite of Juan Ramón’s German teacher in Madrid. According to Juan Ramón in the letter to Cernuda, in *La corriente infinita*, his teacher inspired him to read the poetry of the man who wrote, in “Remembrance,” “But that which remains, is established by the poets.” The influence is obvious. In Martin Heidegger’s study, “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” can be found these statements: “Poetry is the establishing of being by means of the word. Hence that which remains is never taken from the transitory.” And later, “We now understand poetry as the inaugural naming of the gods and of the essence of things.” Of names, Jiménez says:

Creemos los nombres.

Derivarán los hombres.
Luego, derivarán las cosas.
Y sólo quedará el mundo de los nombres,
letra del amor de los hombres,
del olor de las rosas.

Del amor y las rosas,
no ha de quedar sino los nombres.
¡Creemos los nombres!

(LIP, 287)

Let us create the names.
They will determine men.
Then, they will determine things.
And there will remain only the world of names,
words of the love of men,
of the fragrance of roses.

Of love and roses
there will persist only the names.
Let us create names!

(Roach, 46)

In *Eternidades*, the poet asks for the gift of the exact name of things, one which will be his own creation and yet understood by others. Guillermo Díaz-Plaja calls this his “most important poetic manifesto.” In this poem can be seen an example of the poet’s simplification of the Spanish spelling system; when a *g* is pronounced as the *j* is, he substitutes the *j*.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{¿Inteligencia, dame} \\
\text{el nombre exacto, y tuyo,} \\
\text{y suyo, y mío, de las cosas!}
\end{align*}
\]

(PE, 142)

Intelligence, oh give me
the proper name, and your name,
and theirs and mine, for all things.

(Trend, 69)

Often Juan Ramón’s poetry depicts some natural form reflected in water. Is the reflection only illusion? In a sense, it has more reality than the form it duplicates, for it sometimes represents the eternal within the temporal. In *Eternidades* is a poem in which a rose is reflected in moving water; the essence of the flower lasts while the stream flows on and the real rose withers. Olson gives a translation of this poem on page 88 of *Circle of Paradox*.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Estás, eterna, en su inmanencia,} \\
\text{igual en lo sin fin de tu mudanza,} \\
\text{en lo sin fin se su mudanza,} \\
\text{cual el sol que una rosa} \\
\text{copiara sólo de ella en la corriente.}
\end{align*}
\]

(LP, 638)

You are, eternal, in its immanence,
the same within your endless change,
within its endless change,
like the sun which a rose
might copy from itself in running water.

Jiménez’s poetry offers a variety of symbols of the eternal with the ephemeral.

Despite “la nostalgia perfumada de las rosas” (PLP, 866), “the

perfumed nostalgia of the roses,” which fills much of his verse, Juan Ramón derives some comfort from a sense of unity within time. The past disappears, but it then joins the present and even the future, which it helps to develop. This unity of time draws life into a circle, with death making the perfect form complete. The rose signifies the circle of eternity. In the rose anthology, the periods of Juan Ramón’s writing were to have been arranged in the following form: 7, 5, 3, 1, 2, 4, 6, which Olson considers “a symmetry containing an intrinsically implied circularity.”

One of the principal suggestions of Yeats’ rose symbol is the eternal beauty of the spiritual and ideal seen in the loveliness of the temporal world. It is a generally accepted fact that Maud Gonne, the “Rose of the World,” is both the beauty that “passes like a dream” and that which is infinite: “Under the passing stars, foam of the sky, / Lives on this lonely face.” The influence of Plato and Shelley on Yeats’ idea of Intellectual Beauty has often been discussed. In “The Secret Rose,” the poet seeks the Ideal, is willing to live and die for the Rose, which is incredibly remote: “Far off, most secret, and inviolate Rose, / Enfold me in my hours of hours.” George Bornstein remarks, “What they [of the Middle Ages] called God, the Platonists called the anima mundi, and the early Yeats called the Rose.” Yeats, like Jiménez, pursued the immortal, and yet neither man could imagine finding real happiness in complete relinquishment of the earthly. While the Yeats of these early poems usually chooses the realm of spirit, he is also pulled towards the opposite within him. In “The Rose of Battle,” the poet says to the “Rose of all Roses,” “Beauty grown sad with its eternity / Made you of us, and of the dim gray sea.” According to Richard Ellmann, the Rose seems to want to be human. At least, it desires nearness to mortals. The flower of Yeats’ poetry, especially when blooming on the cross, becomes the symbol of “unity of being,” which William York Tindall, in his article “The Symbolism of W. B. Yeats,” identifies as “the integration and harmony of self, world and spirit.” Unfortunately, as shown in “The

14 Circle of Paradox, pp. 129 and 146-47.
16 The Identity of Yeats, p. 73.
Rose of Battle," this state is attained only in death. Yeats himself called rose and cross a union of "religion and beauty, the spirit and nature, and the universe of spirit and of nature in magic," 18 which calls attention to the well-known fact that the Irishman sought in such organizations as the Rosicrucians a way to resolve his conflicts.

Of Jiménez, Howard T. Young writes, "His quixotic desire was to unite the physical and spiritual worlds." He goes on to say that Yeats' lines, "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / . . . unless / Soul clap its hands and . . . louder sing," express tradition, but that Jiménez's disbelief in his soul's ever finding a better home than his body is "a unique cry, one that stamps his entire work." 19 While aspiring to ideal beauty and seeing in the transitory beauty of a flower the presence of something of greater worth than its fragile form, "'Todas las rosas son la misma rosa, / ¡amor!, la única rosa" (LP, 909), Juan Ramón nevertheless needs the rose that he can see and touch, too: 20

¿Igual es una rosa que otra rosa?
¿Todas las rosas son la misma rosa?
Sí (pero aquella rosa . . .)

(Is any rose like any other rose?
Are all the roses just the selfsame rose?
Yes (but that rose . . .)

Being torn between the pull of body and spirit, earth and sky, Jiménez cries out the anguish of the human condition: 21

Mis pies ¡qué hondos en la tierra!
Mis alas ¡qué altas en el cielo!
—¡Y qué dolor
de corazón distendido!—

18 Ellman, The Identity of Yeats, p. 66.
20 Olson, Circle of Paradox, pp. 93–96.
If Jiménez and Yeats had ever met, they would undoubtedly have found a conversational topic of mutual interest in the Indian philosopher-poet, Sir Rabindranath Tagore. Yeats, who considered the Indian a friend, wrote an introduction for a volume of Tagore’s poetry. One of the things which drew Yeats, and probably Jiménez, to the verses of this man was the harmonious blend of passion and purity, body and spirit. Loving life, Tagore felt certain that he would also love death.  

Juan Ramón and his wife, delighted with this poet who came from a tradition of the fusion of poetry and religion, translated much of Tagore’s work into Spanish. For both the Irishman and the Spaniard, art was a form of religion, the only one, really, that they had. One of the few values that he could find in life, it was Yeats’ means of trying to unify body and soul.

In the introductory poem, “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” the flower is a muse. As Tindall notes, it is not only the Rosicrucian rose that, joined to the cross, represents union with Divinity, but “the power of the creative imagination and occult philosophy too.”

Realizing that poetry must not lose contact with the reality of earth,—in Jiménez’s words, “Raíces y alas. Pero que las alas arraiguen / y las raíces vuelen” (LP, 210); “Roots and wings. But let the wings grow roots / and the roots fly” (Roach, 88)—Yeats at one point experiences fear of this Rose and asks it to leave him “A little space for the rose-breath to fill! / Lest I no more hear common things that crave.”

Although the Irish poet does not usually succeed in harmonizing in the rose symbol those contrasts which torment him, Barbara Seward regards the early symbol as worthy of more respect than it has generally received and considers a study of it useful in understanding the development of modern symbolism.

Both Ricardo Gullón and A. Sánchez-Barbudo have noted Juan

22 Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, pp. 54 and 183.
23 Young, Juan Ramón Jiménez, pp. 25–27.
Ramón’s desire at times to become a part of the loveliness seen in nature, beauty that renews itself in an eternal return. He feels “un deseo inefable de perderme en las rosas” (PLP, 1412), “an ineffable desire to be lost in the roses.” Gullón offers the following example of the symbol of eternity, given here in the version of Poesía, the one chosen by Roach for her translation:

A veces, siento
como la rosa
que seré un día, como el ala
que seré un día;
y un perfume me envuelve, ajeno y mío,
mío y de rosa;
y una errancia me coje, ajena y mía,
mía y de pájaro.

(LP, 846)

At times I feel
like the rose
that I shall be, like the wing
that I shall be;
and a perfume shrouds me, alien and mine,
mine and a rose’s;
and a wanderlust grips me, alien and mine,
mine and a bird’s.

(Roach, 139)

Juan Ramón lacked faith and yet he continued to seek a way of salvation. His final solution was to “deify” the beautiful and, since beauty dwells in the mind of the sensitive poet, he himself became a kind of god by identification with the loveliness in the world, which needs the poet’s consciousness for expression and which is needed, in turn, by the poet. The result for Jiménez was a kind of mystic union in his mind with beauty. The book that expresses this experience is Animal de fondo. Obviously, his mysticism is not the usual kind. His term cuerperialma (the three words, “body and soul,” merged into one) shows how unorthodox was his “religion.” No true mystic would have given body and soul equality. His was a god of what Young calls

"the vast capabilities and transcendentalizing urge of the human mind. All former symbols, rose, love, woman, star, even the sea itself, were merely surrogates for this final divinity."  

Once Jiménez told Ricardo Gullón, "Poetry is an attempt to draw near to the absolute, by means of symbols. What is God but a trembling that we have within us, an immanence of the ineffable?" Poetry is perhaps his main theme, since even the themes of time, death, and a search for eternity lead to poetry, through which he could hope for a form of immortality.

¡Palabra mía eterna!  
¡Oh, qué vivir supremo  
—ya en la nada la lengua de mi boca—,  
oh, qué vivir divino  
de flor sin tallo y sin raíz,  
nutrida, por la luz, con mi memoria,  
sóla y fresca en el aire de la vida!

(Immortal word of mine!  
Oh, what a supreme living  
—when the tongue in my mouth is nothingness—  
oh, what a divine living  
of flower without stem and root,  
nourished by light, with my memory,  
alone and fresh within the breath of life!

(As the ideal, the rose is also poetry, for Jiménez's ideal is perfection in his art. In a poem of only two lines, Juan Ramón expresses his wish to achieve the perfect poem, which must have gone through revisions, but never to such an extent that the rose becomes artificial: "¡No le toques ya más, / que así es la rosa!" (LP, 695), "Do not touch it any more / For that is how a rose is!" (Hays, 87). Such beauty as the poet desires is very elusive:

Mariposa de luz,  
la belleza se va cuando yo llego  
a su rosa.

28 Juan Ramón Jiménez, pp. 44–45.  
30 Olson, Circle of Paradox, p. 96.
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Corro, ciego, tras ella...
la medio cojo aquí y allá...
¡Sólo queda en mi mano
la forma de su huída!

Butterfly of light
beauty suddenly flies when I arrive
at its rose.
I run blindly after it...
I almost catch it at times here and there...
In my hand remains only
the form of its flight

As has been noted, Jiménez's search for perfect beauty is also an effort to find the "soul" of things. In 1956, he wrote, "Poetry is making divine what we have at hand, the beings and the things which we have the good fortune to possess, not as ideals to be pursued but as substances which contain essences" (Hays, 252). Basilio de Pablos chooses these lines to illustrate the essence of poetry: 31

Te deshojé, como una rosa,
para verte tu alma,
y no la vi.
Mas todo en torno
—horizontes de tierras y de mares—,
todo, hasta el infinito,
se colmó de una esencia
inmensa y viva.

I stripped you of petals, like a rose,
to look at your soul,
and I did not see it.
Yet everything around
—horizons of the land and of the sea—
all things, far as the infinite,
brimmed over with an immense
sharp and vivid fragrance.

The “rosa de llama” (rose of flame) of Jiménez’s later poetry prepares the way toward Animal de fondo.

—¡Cójela, coje la rosa!
—¡Que no, que es el sol!
La rosa de llama,
la rosa de oro,
la rosa ideal.
—¡Que no, que es el sol!
—La rosa de gloria,
la rosa de sueño,
la rosa final.
—¡Que no, que es el sol!
¡Cójela, coje la rosa!

Gather it, gather the rose!
But no, it is the sun!
The rose of flame,
The rose of gold,
The ideal rose.
But no, it is the sun!
The rose of glory,
The rose of dreams
The final rose.
But no, it is the sun!
Gather it, gather the rose!

(Hays, 135)

Although it is flame, rather than rose, that is associated with the divine in that final book, the rose is not absent:

Un corazón de rosa construida
entre tú, dios deseante de mi vida,
y, deseante de tu vida, yo.

Heart of a rose constructed
between you, god desirous of my life,
and me, desirous of yours.

(LP, 1334)

(Roach, 225)
"Only man," remarks H. T. Young, "can realize and define beauty. In loving awareness, man measures the beauty of his world; that is the human attribute which makes him divine. . . . Heidegger said that the poet establishes reality; Jiménez would reply that he beautifies it." In a note in Animal de fondo, Juan Ramón explains his poetic progress:

The evolution, succession, becoming of my poetry has been and is a succession of encounters with an idea of god. . . . If in the first period it was ecstasy of love, and in the second avidity for eternity, in this third it is the need for an inner consciousness . . . of the beauty that is within us and without also and at the same time. (LP, 1341–42)

The rose plays an important role as symbol in each of the stages of his poetic development, increasing in depth of significance as the poet approaches his goal in the final book. The rose suggests love, the longing to eternalize fleeting beauty, and the poet's own desperate need for immortality; it is symbolic of perfect beauty and of poetry, which is the creative result of the poet's mystical union with a god of beauty.

Thus, Juan Ramón Jiménez makes of the rose a more complete circle than does Yeats, who, never reaching the point of resolving his conflicts in the rose, set it aside at an early stage of his poetic career to change to the sphere itself as symbol in his later work.

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82 The Victorious Expression, pp. 122–23.