



Riding on a Streetcar (and a Hearse) around the World

COMPLETE WORKS, Volume I,
by Oliverio Girondo, translated
from the Spanish by Hugh
Hazelton. Wolsak and Wynn,
2018. 340 pp.

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Summary: Oliverio Girondo (1890-1967) continues to be widely read in Argentina as a relevant, current poet, even after so many years. That is why

the issuing of his *Complete Works* for the first time, in bilingual format, by the Canadian publisher Wolsak and Wynn, translated into English by Hugh Hazelton, is of such vital importance. As one of the main representatives, along with Mário de Andrade, Vicente Huidobro and César Vallejo, of the impact of the European vanguard on the Spanish-speaking literary world, especially on Latin American, poetry Hazelton's translation will, at last, open the gates of Girondo's universe to new readers all over the world.

Keywords: Oliverio Girondo. Argentinian poetry. Latin American avant-garde movements.

Resumo: Oliverio Girondo (1890-1967) continua sendo amplamente lido na Argentina como um poeta atual e relevante, mesmo depois de tantos anos. É por isso que a publicação de seus trabalhos completos, pela primeira vez, em formato bilíngue, pela editora canadense Wolsak e Wynn, traduzidos para o inglês por Hugh Hazelton, é de vital importância. Como um dos principais representantes, junto com Mário de Andrade, Vicente Huidobro e César Vallejo, do impacto da vanguarda europeia no mundo literário de língua espanhola, especialmente na América Latina, a tradução da poesia Hazelton finalmente abrirá os portões do universo de Girondo para novos leitores em todo o mundo.

Palavras-chave: Oliverio Girondo. Poesia argentina. Movimentos de vanguarda latino-americanos.

Oliverio Girondo is, I dare say, one of the most important and beloved Argentine poets of the twentieth century.

As an Argentine myself, I know this statement comes with a great responsibility that I am prepared to bear. Before writing this review, I wanted to know, needed to know, whether my colleagues, Latinists, linguists, specialists in Latin American literature, and so on, loved Gironde as much as I do. So I asked. And the answer was unanimous — yes. The words that came up in that conversation, I think, help define his figure and his writing: Oliverio Gironde continues to be widely read in Argentina, not as a relic, nor a thing of the past, but as a relevant, current poet, even after so many years. That is why the issuing of his *Complete Works*, the first ever, in bilingual format by the Canadian publisher Wolsak and Wynn and translated into English by Hugh Hazelton is of such vital importance, since Gironde and his work remain so vibrant and surprising.²

Oliverio Gironde was born in Buenos Aires in 1890, and would die in 1967 in the same city. His body of work includes six collections of poetry, two short pieces of prose, and articles he wrote for magazines and reviews, such as the renowned *Martín Fierro* — the literary magazine created by Evar Méndez, Jorge Luis Borges, Oliverio Gironde, Pablo Rojas Paz, and others, that

featured so many important writers and artists of the 1920s. As Hazelton states in the preface to the *Complete Works*, Gironde's poetry falls into two periods. This first volume presents the books from his early period (*Twenty Poems to Read on the Streetcar*, 1922; *Decalcomanias*, 1925; and *Scarecrow*, 1932, as well as the two prose works, *Letterheads and Interlunation*), while the second volume will consist of his last three works (*Persuasion of Days*, 1942; *Our Fields*, 1946; and *In the Uttermostmarrow*, 1956).

Gironde studied in England and France, and travelled widely in Europe and North Africa during his youth, maintaining strong connections with emerging avant-garde movements. In his classic comparative study of Oswald de Andrade and Oliverio Gironde, *Vanguardia y cosmopolitismo en la década del veinte* (1983), Jorge Schwartz employs two key terms to place Gironde within the context of his contemporaries: avant-garde and cosmopolitan. While a love for speed and movement that could be related to Futurism and an interest in calligrams that might connect him to Cubism can be seen in two outstanding works included in this volume, *Twenty Poems to Read on the Streetcar* and *Scarecrow*, there are

other elements that place Gironde closer to Surrealism or even Dadaism: his sense of humour, his wit, his love for the absurd and the contradictory, his search for the abolition of hierarchies, his quest to desacralize the language and themes of literature, his wish to name in poetry what others may frown upon — and laugh.

As one of the main representatives, along with Mário de Andrade, Vicente Huidobro and César Vallejo, of the impact of the European vanguard on the Spanish-speaking literary world, especially on Latin American poetry, it is surprising that Gironde's complete works had to wait this long to be introduced to the English-speaking public. Hazelton's translation will, at last, open the gates of Gironde's universe to new readers, a task that is by no means simple, either in extent or complexity. The fact that Gironde never ceased to experiment, never abandoned his will to reinvent himself and never settled for a fixed style or poetic vocabulary presents specific challenges in translation. Each of the eight books comprising his complete works demands that the translator find new ways of recreating Gironde's writing, scrutinizing his own language and its potential, just as the poet did at every turn.

Instead of imitating or mirroring European movements, Gironde devours them to produce something new, suited to the literary landscapes of Argentina and Latin America. With this striking concrete poem, for instance, he opens *Scarecrow*:

I don't know anything
You don't know anything
He doesn't know anything
She doesn't know anything
They don't know anything
We don't know anything.

The disorientation of my generation has its explanation in the direction of our education, whose idealization of action was – without question! – a mystification, in contradiction with our propensity for meditation, contemplation and masturbation.

(Guttural, as guttural as possible.)

I believe that I believe in
what I believe that I don't
believe. And I believe that I
don't believe in what I
believe that I believe.

"Song of the Frogs"

A A Is Is A A
nd nd it it nd nd
I I the the I I
go go re? re? go go
up down It It up down
the the 's 's the the
sta sta not not sta sta
irs irs he he irs irs
ab be re re ab be
ove...! low...! !... !... ove...! low...!

How far we are from the optimism and gracefulness found in Apollinaire's calligrams, from the elevated themes and words long devoted to poetry, and how much closer to the shaking of institutions and challenging of the establishment! This poem sets the tone for the entire book, in which comedy arises from the clash between lyric passages and everyday observations, the delicate or ethereal

and the mundane and bodily, the high and the low and even the impossible. All in all, *Scarecrow* is perfectly coherent with its own ceremonial release, one of the most memorable book launches in Argentine history. The artist José Bonomi, who would later design the covers of *El Séptimo Círculo*, a collection of detective novels originally directed by Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, created the illustration for the cover of *Scarecrow*. Based on that image, “Girondo constructed a nine-foot-high *papier mâché* statue of his *scarecrow*, an academic-looking dandy in a black coat, white gloves and a top hat, complete with a pipe and monocle (...) He then went to a funeral parlour and hired a six-horse carriage piled high with funeral wreaths, together with two coachmen and a footman in livery, placed the figure within it, and arranged to have it driven around downtown Buenos Aires for several weeks in order to announce the book to all. At the same time, he rented a shop staffed by young women to sell the book in the city centre. Within a month, all five thousand copies of the book had sold out” (Hazleton, *Complete Works*, I, xxxii). The subtitle of *Scarecrow* was *Within Everyone’s Reach*, and this performance was inarguably

directed against the museum and the library — and the ivory tower.

As impossible as it may seem, however, the best of Girondo is yet to come. I cannot help but look forward to the second volume of these *Complete Works*, since it will include his last poetry collection, *In the Uttermostmarrow* (*En la masmédula*), in which Girondo takes his exploration to its limits, combining both experimentation, in the lexical and syntactic aspects, and tradition, in the fixed but skilfully hidden rhythm the whole book carries. Here, Girondo tackles the playfulness, plasticity, the morphological productivity of Spanish. I know that working with *In the Uttermostmarrow* is one of the toughest challenges a poetry translator can meet, because Girondo fashions a language of his own, filled with neologisms and signifiers loosely tied to the signified. And so, how do we, as literary translators, face the recreation of a created language? How do we appeal to our readers, so that these half-invented words can be intelligible without losing their poetic power and their capacity to evoke new images and nuances of meaning, thanks to the infinite possibilities and combinations of the limited set of

elements there are in a language? And I also know and can say in advance — since I saw, several years ago at the residency program in literary translation in Banff, the drafts that Hazelton was preparing for *In the Uttermostmarrow* — that the translator addresses this challenge with zeal and mastery.

Notes

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- ² This is also acknowledged by the fact that this book has been published within the framework of the “Sur” Translation Support Program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship of the Argentine Republic.