

Rhythm and Meter in the Early Juan Ramón Jiménez:
The Case of “¡Silencio!” of *Estío*

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¡SILENCIO!

No, no digáis lo que no he dicho.
Tu luna llena me lo tape, cielo inmenso,
en la noche solemne;
tú, río que lo sabes, sigue hablando
como quien no lo sabe, paralelo 5
en tu huir infinito
a mi secreto pensamiento yerto;
aunque lo cantes, pájaro,
yo solo sepa desde dentro
que lo cantas cual yo en abril te lo cantaba; 10
tú, rosa última, guárdalo en tus pétalos
como en mi corazón; llévalo tú,
y déjate, viento . . .

¡No, no, no lo digáis!
Siga todo secreto 15
eternamente, mientras gira el mundo
soñando, nunca dicho ya por nadie,
con mi silencio eterno.
(from *Estío*, Edición del Centenario)

No, do not say what I have not said.
May your full moon cover it for me, immense sky,
in the solemn night;
You, river who knows it, continue talking

as if you did not know it, parallel 5
 in your infinite fleeing
 to my secret motionless thought;
 even if you sing it, bird,
 may only I know from within
 that you sing it as I sang it to you in April; 10
 you, last rose, keep it in your petals
 as in my heart; take it, you,
 wind, and let it go . . .

No, no, do not say it!
 May everything continue 15
 eternally secret, while the world spins
 dreaming, now never to be said by anyone,
 with my eternal silence.¹

The literary trajectory of Juan Ramón Jiménez is often divided into two stages. According to this scheme, during the first period the poet uses traditional forms, both popular and cultured, while the second period begins with the publication in 1917 of *Diario de un poeta recién casado*.² In this work the poet abandons ordinary regular versification to write what he himself terms “verso libre” ‘free verse.’ However, as is well known, the poems written before 1917 are not mere formal exercises, but rather often reveal a complex structure, sometimes quite subtle, that enhances and supports their semantic content. In this respect, “¡Silencio!” the last poem of *Estío* (1915), written immediately before *Diario*, is pivotal. It presents various elements of nature that had appeared in Juan Ramón’s earlier poetry, but in a new context, clearly anticipating in form and content what was to be Juan Ramón’s next poetic enterprise. As we will see, its base is a traditional form—the *silva*—but this underlying structure is highly stylized. Juan Ramón breaks the traditional measure of the *silva* in order to create his own version. The structural base is still recognizable, but the poet imposes a new variant.³ Thus, this poem acts as a bridge between the more structured poetry of the earlier years and the less traditionally structured poetry and prose poetry of the later books. The thematic content supported by this frame also functions transitionally. One of the differences accepted by critics between the first and second stages of Juan Ramón’s work is that there is a more concrete presentation of the poet’s surroundings in the first stage and a tendency toward more metaphysical expression in the second, with an intense interest in the relationship of the poet to his creation and the possibility of transcendence through that creation.⁴ This division into two stages,

though useful, is clearly an oversimplification of a very complex process and many of the poems written prior to *Diario* reflect the poet's metaphysical inquiry. "¡Silencio!," the transformed *silva* studied here, is key in this transitional process.

The analysis of this new structure reveals its support of the semantic meaning of the poem. Beginning with the very title, the concept of silence, or the absence of words, is emphasized. This is an idea that is fundamental for Juan Ramón, and he gives it special importance in this poem through a careful control of rhythm and meter. Silence and the "lo" 'it,' regarding which the poet requests silence, acquire their meaning in the poem through the poet's adroit use of these two poetic devices.

In order to demonstrate the effectiveness of the poet's manipulation of rhythm and meter, I have used some of the concepts developed by the Russian scholar Yury Lotman. In his *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, Lotman, following Saussure, adopts a structuralist and semiotic position, according to which each communicative system has an invariable structure (*langue*) that has variants in different texts (*parole*) (19). In their artistic realization (*parole*), the variants themselves create new systems. One consequence is that the perception of any possible meaning or "message" of a work of art is not automatic; all levels of language enter into the sense of the message. That is, the content of a literary text is modified by language and all its structural elements. These elements become as important an aspect as the lexical meaning of the words, and we must pay them as much attention. The information of a certain work may be communicated *only* through that particular arrangement of the language (xv).

It follows that in the study of a poem it is necessary to examine each structural level in order to understand the piece fully. Among the general characteristics of poetry, one may examine rhythm and meter, which have a relationship analogous to that of text and system: the meter is invariable; rhythm is the variant or realization of the meter. Lotman proposes a theory of opposition of rhythm and meter. He argues that "[t]he empirically given text is perceived against the background of an ideal structure that is realized as rhythmic inertia, as 'structural expectation'" (66-68). Through the system of expectation, the perception of meter becomes automatic, but the "variety introduced into meter by rhythmic variants disrupts the automatism of the perception" (xix). This system of expectation can be based on the traditional use of a particular meter to which that of the line refers or it can be created within the poem itself. For example, a line may break the expectation of a traditional meter by being a variant of it. But at the same time, it creates an expectation for the rest of the poem and is converted into another invariant.

Approaching the problem of rhythm from another angle, Lotman gives two definitions. It is either a) "the cyclical repetition of different elements in identical positions with the aim of equating the unequal or revealing similarity in difference" or it is b) "the repetition of the identical with the aim of revealing the false character of this identity, of establishing differences in similarity" (42). Rhythm, then, has a semantic function. Taking this reasoning even further, not only do metrical systems influence the semantics of a poem; they also may themselves "assume a semantic value" when certain types of meter are associated with a certain type of poetry (xix).

Fernando del Pino follows this path when he sets himself to investigate "lo acústico en cuanto eco (o productor) de lo semántico" 'the acoustic aspect as an echo (or producer) of the semantic aspect [of a poem]' (557). He points out a number of characteristics of regular and irregular rhythm particular to Spanish verse that are useful in a study of "¡Silencio!," Especially pertinent to the analysis of this poem is del Pino's observation that the effect of contiguous accents is that emphasis falls on the first accent, thus creating meaning in the semantic realm.

In a first reading of the poem, we see that the poet establishes a connection with Nature, and we observe a demand that Nature not give away the secret of a mysterious "lo" which the poet has confided to various natural elements. For Michael Predmore, the mystery of the "lo" in this poem is illuminated in the context of all the preceding poems in Juan Ramón's *oeuvre* in the sense that the elements of nature (and even the reader of the poet's work) have access to a secret, the direct articulation of which he himself has been able to avoid, precisely through symbolic poetic language. Predmore sees this "lo" as the neurotic fears of the poet (184). However, the "silencio eterno" 'eternal silence' of this poem that is identified with various elements of nature points to a different interpretation of the "lo." Allen Phillips has pointed out that even in the earlier poetry, Juan Ramón's use of nature was more than a device to create emotional or spiritual states:

Se trata de una relación amorosa, no exenta tampoco de cierta voluptuosa sensualidad; mediante ella, el joven poeta buscaba una pervivencia a pesar de su conciencia de la fugacidad de las cosas.

This is an amorous relationship, not exempt from a certain voluptuous sensuality; through it, the young poet was searching for a permanence in spite of his awareness of the fleeting nature of things. (112)

By the time Juan Ramón wrote *Estío* and “¡Silencio!,” his relationship to nature had lost some of the “voluptuous sensuality” of the earlier poetry, but the idea of permanence, or rather, transcendence of time and space, is still very present. In “¡Silencio!” the poet identifies transcendental qualities that he finds within himself with the various elements of Nature, thus anticipating the totality of being that he seemed to achieve in his later works. The “lo” is therefore symbolic of the ineffable essence of the poet himself, and as the poem progresses it becomes symbolic of the fusion of that essence with Nature. A close analysis of the rhythmical and metrical structure of the poem reveals the very effective system that supports the transformation of the “lo.”

The poem is composed of two stanzas, with a total of 18 lines. In a preliminary examination, we see that it is a modified form of the traditional *silva*. According to Antonio Quilis, the *silva* is “una serie poética ilimitada en la que se combinan a voluntad del poeta versos de siete y once sílabas, con rima total o consonante, aunque muchas veces se introducen versos sueltos” “an unlimited poetic series in which the poet combines at will seven- and eleven-syllable lines, with complete or consonant rhyme, although odd lines are often introduced” (164).

Other poets had already introduced new elements in the form. Rubén Darío and Miguel de Unamuno, among others, used, in addition to heptasyllables and hendecasyllables, other meters of nine or fourteen syllables. The *silva arromanzada*, with assonance in the even lines, was also introduced. Unamuno went so far as to abandon the *romance* form in order to utilize eleven-, seven-, and five-syllable lines and, as Tomás Navarro Tomás describes it, “una variedad de rimas asonantes libremente dispuestas” ‘a variety of freely placed assonant rhymes’ (389). Juan Ramón goes a step further in “¡Silencio!” There is assonance that at first glance might seem freely arranged, but there is more variety than in earlier authors in the types of meters used. The hendecasyllabic and heptasyllabic lines are the constants, but one also finds lines of nine, ten, thirteen and fourteen syllables.

A more detailed analysis reveals a high level of organization in the rhythmic structure. First, the predominant rhyme is the assonant /e/ - /o/, and it appears in almost half the lines and in internal rhymes. In the first stanza this rhyme avoids the heptasyllables; it is always at the end of a longer line, with the notable exception of the last line of the stanza. Then in the second strophe, this rhyme occurs only in the heptasyllables. Thus, the last line (heptasyllabic) of the first stanza creates a link with the heptasyllabic lines in the second stanza, a device that lends unity to the poem and makes the division into strophes more subtle. In the semantic sphere, the effect of this device is to blur the distinction between the more

specific elements of nature in the first strophe and the more general "mundo" 'world' in the second strophe. The poet confides in nature in its various manifestations, then as a whole.

Rhyme itself presents a different problem, somewhat separate from that of rhythm. However, here it serves as a support of a rather complicated rhythmic system which is the structural base of the poem. The first line is an exposition of a tripartite metric theme that is then developed and reappears throughout the poem, like a musical theme. The accents are distributed in the following manner:

No, no digáis lo que no he dicho.	(óóó óóó óóóó)
A B C	(A B C)

No, do not say what I have not said.

The line opens with two contiguous accents and an atonic syllable; it continues with a dactyl then ends with two trochees. The three parts of the theme are indicated in the diagram by A, B, and C. Immediately the poet develops the theme. We shall examine the parts in reverse order. The second verse has a base of trochees, although it is not altogether trochaic. It seems that the trochaic element has been transformed into a combination of tetrasyllabic clauses, in which the first and third syllables are accented (óóóó), or, alternately, only the third (ooóó). Andrés Bello, in his *Principios de la ortología y métrica de la lengua castellana*, studies the use of the trochaic tetrasyllable in a poem by Iriarte (156). Such clauses were used later, especially by the *modernista* poets. Here the second line could be read as follows:

Tu / lúna lléna / me lo tápe / ciélo-inménso
o / óóóó / ooóó / óóóó

May your full moon cover it for me, immense sky

In the third line, after an anacrusis of two atonic syllables, a dactyl appears. The fourth line begins with two contiguous accents, followed by three atonic syllables and then three trochees. Thus an expectation established in the first line is being met, reinforced by a parallel expectation: beginning with the second line, all the sixth syllables are accented, with the exception of line thirteen.

But let us follow the established metric theme. Repetitions of part C of the theme are distributed throughout the poem. Besides the second line, lines seven, sixteen and seventeen are trochaic, and line nine

contains trochees. Also, there is a noted preference for the trochaic rhythm in the predominance of *llano* or paroxytonic words at the end of the line.

Less frequent, but just as important structurally, is the dactyl—part B of the theme. After the first line, this meter appears in ten other lines. Its position is regular within the lines, since in five of these the dactyl begins on the third syllable. Also, the dactyl appears three times in the only Alexandrine line in the poem (line ten) and in all the heptasyllabic lines, with the possible exception of line thirteen where “*déjate*lo” lengthens the dactyl (óooo) and we return to the tetrasyllables of the trochaic theme C.

Once again we notice the anomaly that line thirteen is. We have seen that the rhyme of this line (/e/ - /o/) has an indispensable role in forming the connection between the first and second strophes. Now, in the domain of rhythm, it is evident that in this last line of the first strophe the rhythmic expectations established in the earlier lines are broken. It is an exception to at least two of these expectations: the accentuation of the sixth syllable and the appearance of a dactyl in the heptasyllabic lines. The disintegration of rhythmic expectations emphasizes all the more the return in the second strophe to precisely the same expectations. At the same time, this line creates tension because the rhyme and the last paroxytonic word (“*viento*”) do follow the established expectations; this tension is then resolved in the last strophe with a return to the earlier rhythms (the invariants created at the beginning of the poem). In the semantic domain, this rhythmic device supports again the subtle division, and then blurring of that division, between the various separate elements of nature and the more general “*mundo*” ‘world’ of the second strophe.

Parts B and C of the theme are within the traditional norms of Spanish poetic rhythm. For this reason, the more noteworthy part of the metric theme A stands out, precisely because it does not occur frequently in poetry written in Spanish. This first part of the theme consists of two contiguous accents plus an atonic syllable in the first line. It is repeated in lines four, eleven and fourteen, with the addition in line fourteen of a third contiguous accent. Fernando del Pino affirms that “*ante todo el acento contiguo es siempre una anomalía rítmica que puede ser un refinamiento poético, una necesidad . . . con eco estridor en el campo semántico*” ‘more than anything contiguous accents are a rhythmical anomaly that can be a poetic refinement, a necessity . . . with a strident echo in the semantic domain’ (566). According to this critic, accents in contact with each other have a double effect: acoustical and gnoseological. The consequences of two contiguous accents is that the second accent “*podrá producir . . . un tiempo vacío*” ‘can produce . . . an empty space

in time' or "un alargamiento de la sílaba precedente" 'a lengthening of the preceding syllable.' Thus, there is produced "una estasis rítmica, una parada en el primer acento" 'a rhythmic stasis, a lingering on the first accent' (566). The examples of "¡Silencio!" would follow this scheme:

... di lo que he		
	cho	
No, no gáis no di		l. 1
... o que lo bes, gue ha		
	do	
tú, rí sa si blan		l. 4
... sa tima, dalo en tus		
	(ta)los	
tú, ro úl guár pé		l. 11
..... lo di		
	(...)	
¡No, no, no gáis!		l. 14
No, do not say what I have not said		l. 1
you, river that knows it, keep talking		l. 4
you, last rose, keep it in your petals		l. 11
No, no, do not say it!		l. 14

In the first three examples it may be said that the effect of the second accent is to prolong the first, and thus create a suspenseful, lyric moment, but without interrupting the rhythm except to draw attention to the arsis. This is particularly effective in the lines that begin with "tú" 'you.' Thus, when the poet addresses himself to the river ("tú, río que lo sabes, sigue hablando") and to the rose ("tú, rosa última, guárdalo en tus pétalos"), the intimacy of the secret that he has confided in them is emphasized. The fourth example is somewhat different because of the three contiguous accents. The acoustical effect, however, is nearly the same. The second accent prolongs the first; the third prolongs the second. The resulting accentual model is very similar to that of the first line. It is almost a repetition of the metric theme: it has A (the contiguous accents), B (the dactyl) and C (if the last accent of "digáis" is counted as arsis plus thesis, according to traditional norms). The repetition has a circular effect. This technique, along with the return to trochaic lines in the last stanza, closes the poem. However, since it is not an absolute repetition of the first line,

the differences between the two lines are noteworthy. Line fourteen is exclamatory. It is the semantic center of the poem. Here, “lo” has already acquired meaning; it does not have to be explained, as in the first line. Because of this, the reader’s attention is focused on the idea of “no digáis” (“no decir”) ‘to not say,’ which already is emphasized by the insistent repetition and accentuation of “no.” Lotman’s hypothesis is again useful in understanding the operation effected by Juan Ramón Jiménez: a “difference in that which is similar” is established through the use of rhythm. We could add as well that the very title of the poem, the exclamation “¡Silencio!,” acts as a command directed at Nature, thus anticipating and reinforcing the idea of “no-decir.”

As we have seen, another function of rhythm is to “equate the unequal or reveal similarity in difference,” which is what Juan Ramón does with the two equally accented apostrophes: “tú, río” ‘you, river’ and “tú, rosa” ‘you, rose.’ These become paradigms—or variants, if we wish—of something more general, “la naturaleza” ‘nature.’ The poem is thus a dialogue between the poet and Nature; or rather a monologue directed to Nature. The four lines are united by the notable contiguous accents. As Fernando del Pino points out, the repetition of an order of accents creates a marked rhythm that can reproduce a theme in a phonosymbolic manner. This is precisely what occurs here. The theme of “no-decir,” that is, of keeping a secret, contaminates the theme of Nature and vice versa. Between the poet’s secret (the “secreto pensamiento yerto” ‘secret motionless thought’) and Nature an acoustical and semantic fusion occurs. Not only is there union among the four lines with contiguous accents, but also this implies a union between the strophes, creating a sense of closure for the poem.

Del Pino also notes that the classic norms did not accept more than two atonic syllables between the accents (562). In lines four and thirteen we find three contiguous unaccented syllables. In line eleven there is an even more surprising anomaly—a series of *esdrújulo* or proparoxytonic words with four atonic syllables together. These atonic syllables serve to accelerate the diction and bring the line closer to spoken language (del Pino 562). (This anticipates the prose poetry that Juan Ramón was to write, beginning with *Diario*.) With the succession of proparoxytonic words a different meter is created, with an echo in line thirteen (“déjate!” ‘let it go’). However, after these experiments, the poet returns to the established expectation, with very marked rhythm. The second stanza has the most rigid structure of the whole poem.

Having observed in detail the rhythmic and metric form of the poem, we return to the title and theme, “¡Silencio!” The structure we have analyzed is a very subtle one, but nevertheless extremely important in a

complete reading of the poem. It is significant that the most unusual segment of the metric theme—that is, part A, the use of contiguous accents—appears in the strong negative imperatives and in two of the apostrophes to elements of Nature. The poet thus establishes acoustically the important link between Nature and the mysterious “lo,” about which he demands silence. G.G. Brown has asserted that:

Juan Ramón ansiaba creer que tras la apariencia de las cosas hay una esencia absoluta y eterna que existe independientemente de la conciencia humana, y que el Poeta puede poseer el privilegio de tener intuiciones de esta esencia inmanente en los avatares de su experiencia cotidiana.

Juan Ramón longed to believe that behind the appearance of things there is an absolute and eternal essence that exists independently of human consciousness, and that the Poet may possess the privilege of having intuitions of this immanent essence in the reliving of his everyday experiences. (143)

This critic is describing a desire, typical of many of the *modernista* poets, to perceive a pantheistic manifestation of an absolute essence. However, in “¡Silencio!” Juan Ramón goes beyond a mere longing for this perception of an essence outside his own being. He affirms a communication between himself and Nature, but this communication exists for the purpose of expressing an essence within the poet himself. He has confided his “secreto pensamiento yerto” ‘secret motionless thought’ to Nature and has found a corresponding element in the “cielo inmenso” ‘immense sky,’ the “río” ‘river,’ the “rosa última” ‘last rose,’ the “pájaro” ‘bird,’ and the “viento” ‘wind.’

The idea of “silencio” ‘silence’ is a very important one for Juan Ramón. This particular poem is one of a series of allusions to the absence of words in the presence of an ineffable essence. Of course, in order to suggest this palpable silence, the poet must use words, but the thrust of the entire poem analyzed here is toward silence. Rogelio Reyes Cano has pointed out the importance that the “palabra callada” ‘silenced word’ has for Juan Ramón (469-83), and Leo R. Cole has suggested the importance throughout the poet’s work of the “theme of silence as the true experience of the ineffable and the need for solitude” (166). Mervyn Coke-Enguíanos, in a comparative study of Stéphane Mallarmé and Juan Ramón, notes that the Spanish poet connects the “concept of absolute Time, the timelessness of eternal Time, with the ideal of silence,” and concludes that this poet “conceives silence—the unwritten page or book—as a goal” (228-

29). This is a transcendental silence, the “silencio eterno” ‘eternal silence’ with which this poem ends. In “¡Silencio!” the poet expresses the communication with Nature of his inner essence through the evocation of a precious silence, a silence that for him is the ultimate goal of poetry, since the “palabra verdadera” ‘true word’ is the “palabra muda” ‘mute word’ (Reyes Cano 479). Here the emphasis on silence and secrecy enhances the suggestiveness of the mysterious “lo” that, even in its inception, was “callado” ‘silenced’: “No, no digáis lo que *no* he dicho” ‘No, do not say what I have *not* said.’

None of the critics just mentioned refer to this poem in their commentaries. Yet it is germane to their arguments and is a pivotal composition in Juan Ramón’s work. In “¡Silencio!” the poet begins to crystallize his relationship to both Nature and poetry itself. Beginning with *Diario*, he introduces the sea, which, with the sky, becomes the essential manifestation of Nature, of the eternal quality of Nature and of the poet’s fusion with Nature, including that eternal quality. One thinks, for example, of the frequently cited “No sé si el mar es, hoy” ‘I do not know if the sea is, today,’ in which the poet’s heart and the sea are indistinguishable for him:

Entran, salen
uno de otro, plenos e infinitos,
como dos todos únicos.

They come in, they go out
each from the other, replete and infinite,
like two unique totalities. (*Páginas escojidas* 138)

In the end, though, it is only in his poetry that Juan Ramón can achieve this all-encompassing totality. In “El nombre conseguido de los nombres” ‘The name acquired from the names,’ from *Animal de fondo* (1949), he is finally able to say, “ahora yo soy ya mi mar paralizado, / el mar que yo decía” ‘now I am my paralyzed sea, / the sea of which I spoke’ (*Páginas escojidas* 211); but he can say this only because of the first lines of the poem: “Si yo, por ti, he creado un mundo para ti, / dios, tú tenías seguro que venir a él” ‘If I, because of you, have created a world for you, / god, you were sure to come to it’ (211). This “dios” ‘god’ is at once poetry itself and the eternal essence that the poet seeks (including a fusion with Nature), available only through his writing. The germs of this idea are in “¡Silencio!,” in its affirmation of an absolute essence expressed in such a highly—though subtly—structured poem.

The assumption of a "secreto pensamiento yerto" 'secret motionless thought' within the poet that can find a communication with Nature and that must be kept secret, implies an ultimate order. Thus, not only in its details, but also as a whole, the poem's form implies its content. The sense of circularity and closure in the last stanza suggests the keeping of the secret. At the same time, we must note that the poem's structure is not obtrusive and is highly innovative. "¡Silencio!" is a poem of transition, as *Estío* is a book of transition. Juan Ramón still clings to traditional models to a great extent. However, the creative variant of the *silva* form that we have seen here (as well as the semantic content that this form supports), anticipate the poetry he was to write in *Diario de un poeta recién casado* and his later works.

Notes

1. This and all other translations are mine.
2. This generally accepted premise is set forth by a number of critics, including Enrique Díez-Canedo, *Juan Ramón Jiménez en su Obra* and Graciela Palau de Nemes, *Vida y obra de Juan Ramón Jiménez*; and most clearly by Antonio Sánchez-Barbudo, *La segunda época de Juan Ramón Jiménez* and Michael P. Predmore, *La poesía hermética de Juan Ramón Jiménez*.
3. Guillermo Díaz-Plaja, in *Juan Ramón Jiménez en su poesía*, states categorically that, apart from the sonnet, the poet does not use classical verse forms, including the *silva* (56). This is not the case, however; "¡Silencio!" is a clear example of Juan Ramón's adaptation of the *silva* form.
4. See, for example, Palau de Nemes' description of the "poeta nuevo" 'new poet' that appears after 1916 (209-15).

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