



NICOLAS GUILLÉN: POET AND PARTISAN

Nicolás Guillén shared his name (old Spanish for William) with another celebrated poet, Jorge Guillén, from Spain. "What's in a name?" yet another William asked, but if you open the three-volume Larousse anthology of Spanish and Spanish American poetry, published in Paris in 1968, you will find a photo with a caption that says "Jorge Guillén." But the face above it that launched a thousand jeers is that of a mulatto. It is not Jorge, it is not even Velásquez's Juan de Pareja, it is, yes!, Nicolás Guillén.

This ethno-editorial error might have been the secret doing of the other famous Spanish-American Communist poet, Pablo Neruda. He used to distinguish between the two Guilléns by referring to Nicolás as "Guillén el malo," the bad Guillén. Neruda and he had a long-standing feud. In fact, it seems, on their having been Stalinists together. But Neruda, of course, had the last laugh. Stalinist or revisionist: He beat Guillén to the Nobel Prize. What Neruda and Guillén (Nicolás) did have in common was history, especially the 1930s.

The thirties was a dear decade in Cuba, but it began auspiciously for Guillén. It was then that he published his first book, *Música de son*, based on the *son*, a Cuban sound and song that became internationally famous, and that he met Federico García Lorca, who was taking a Cuban vacation from the rigors of the New York winter. Lorca, more than a mere influence, became Guillén's guide in the art of fusing his poetic concerns with popular poetry and music.

Also during that time, Guillén quit his job as censor for the dictator Gerardo Machado and came to write his

best poems. He visited Spain (briefly) at the beginning of the Civil War and also joined the Cuban Communist party, itself fresh from having made peace with Machado's successor, Fulgencio Batista. The Communists promptly elevated Guillén to the category of Grand Master in their political chess game. A bilingual party wag was heard to exclaim at the time: "The *son* also rises."

If you read Guillén's complete poems, you can see how his art swiftly became craft and how later his poetry became indistinguishable from party propaganda. Sometimes he comes off as a hack, as in his poem to the glories of Stalin (written after the Great Purge), where he used what he knew (very little) of *santtería*:

*¡Stalin!
¡Que te proteja Changó
Y Yemayá te cuide!*

Stalin!
May Changó protect you
And Yemayá take care of you!

Stalin gave him the Lenin Prize. But Guillén was not a real Stalinist. He was a cowardly literary lion, an insecure man for whom Soviet-style Communism was a comfortable niche.

I met him when I was a boy, in 1942, at *Hoy*, the party newspaper where my father worked as a journalist. Guillén always behaved like a poet in residence. The revolution made him a poet laureate, and he was happy, but

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