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AN INTERVIEW WITH DON JUAN BOSCH*

By Sherezada Vicioso

VICIOSO: Julia de Burgos spent two years in Cuba, from 1940 to 1942, and I understand that during part of that time she shared a home with you and your then companion.

BOSCH: They lived in the same house, at 107 Joveyar, she and Juan Isidro, the two of them, she and Dr. Jimenes Grullón. That's where I lived. She spent little time at home—she was there only for meals and to sleep—because she was attending the university. She started studying at the university towards the end of that period. The university was very close by. You could walk to it.

They lived there for a while. I left for New York to organize the Dominican Revolutionary Party, in June or July of 1942, and Julia followed, a few months later, a week or so before I returned to Havana.

VICIOSO: Had you known Julia before you met her in Cuba?

BOSCH: I already knew her, since in Puerto Rico I had immediately joined the intellectual milieu. I gave several lectures at the Ateneo in San Juan. People knew of me. When I arrived in Puerto Rico, I found that people knew me because my stories, some of my stories, had been published there, and also because soon after I arrived I began working as director of the project to transcribe Hostos' works. Then I had to go to Cuba in 1939 to oversee the edition of the complete works, because the Hostos Centennial Committee (Puerto Rico was going to celebrate the Hostos centennial on the 11th of January 1939) had organized a contest for the publication of the works and the winning press had been the Moderna Poesía de la Habana. So they sent me to Cuba to take charge of the edition. I worked on it throughout 1939 and also in 1940.

I met Julia almost as soon as I arrived in Puerto Rico. Shortly after I arrived, I started moving in writers' circles, joining Luis Llorens Torres, the poet Luis Palés Matos, and various other writers and poets, all of whom knew Julia. She had already published her verses in her country.

I was introduced to her on a sidewalk; we were crossing a street, and she was standing on the opposite sidewalk, waiting for something, maybe an automobile, or a taxi. I was introduced to her by Llorens Torres, who was with me.

* This interview appears in Sherezada Vicioso's *Algo que decir: Ensayos sobre literatura femenina (1981-1991)*, published in Santo Domingo, DR, by Editora Búho in 1991.

Then we saw each other several times at the Ateneo, in various meetings of intellectuals; and when I left Puerto Rico, she already had some sort of a relationship with Jimenes Grullón, with whom I saw her at least twice. Jimenes Grullón had arrived in Puerto Rico in mid-1938 from New York.

And naturally I saw a lot of her after she arrived in Havana, because Jimenes Grullón had arrived before her and had come to live in my house, at 107 Joveyar in Havana, very near the university. Julia arrived later.

For some time, I can't be very precise about how long, Julia came and went with Juan Isidro, but spent a lot of time at home. Later she enrolled at the university, and since the house was nearby, she walked there every day, except for Saturdays and Sundays.

At this time I was working at the Cuban Biological Institute as a medical representative, and I found a job there for Juan Isidro, as manager for the Oriente province, where he would travel at least once a month, for a week or so, visiting doctors and pharmacists.

In 1942, it must have been around July or August, I left for New York to found the Dominican Revolutionary Party, and was there when Julia arrived, very distressed, very distressed, because Jimenes Grullón used to throw huge scenes of jealousy. He had done a lot of that in the house, in my house. I never intervened in that because they were very personal matters, but I witnessed, at least as a listener, Jimenes Grullón's scenes of jealousy.

After that I never saw her again. I learned three or four years later that she had died and was told that she had taken to drink, and I explained that to myself as the result of the pain inflicted by the breakup of her relationship with Jimenes Grullón.

VICIOSO: How would you describe Julia? What impressed you the most about her?

BOSCH: Julia was a very discreet woman, and very balanced. She would not take part in conversations unless she was asked something. She listened very attentively. She had very correct manners. Always very clean. She was an elegant woman, tall, with a good bearing and cinnamon skin, a good reader and student, because she spent long hours reading in the house, the books she . . . brought home from the university.

She was very interested in the news. We were then in the midst of the Second World War, and although she was not fervently interested—she was very discreet—she always made a point of listening to the radio; and when I arrived with the newspapers, immediately after I finished reading them, she would pick them up to read the news of the Second World War.

She was a supporter of independence for her country, Puerto Rico, very partisan, but she was vehement about nothing, not even about that. She would often spend, I repeat, long hours reading a book, or locked in her room, but I never heard her chatting idly or using any expression that was not in good taste.

When we made the trip to Trinidad—I invited them both, but it was because of her, because Julia had heard about Trinidad at the University and wanted to visit. I had been there before, and everytime she asked me, and she asked me several times, I

would tell her about it, telling her what it was like; I would describe things to her, and she wanted very badly to go . . .

At that time Jimenes Grullón had still not started working at the lab. I had proposed it to him several times, but he hadn't wanted to. He believed it was demeaning to his person to go around selling medicines. So I invited them both, and we spent three days in Trinidad, one of them at the beach, and the next day we returned to Havana.

VICIOSO: You must have certainly spoken to Julia about poetry; you knew her well as a poet. What do you think of the insistence in classifying her as an "intuitive" poet?

BOSCH: The poet who is not intuitive is not a poet. Dr. Jimenes Grullón's problem is really that he had a 19th century mentality, and because of that he believed that poetry should include demonstrations of scientific capabilities, or things like that, as in the late 19th- and early 20th-century poetry, particularly that of Spain, the poetry of Núñez de Arce, for example, or Campoamor's poetry—that's what he believed poetry was.

No, poetry was not that. Poetry is like the song of a nightingale. The nightingale says nothing when it sings, but its celestial music is beauty itself.

It is now in the twentieth century, in the Spanish language, beginning with César Vallejo, and naturally after Neruda, that poetry has come to be what it should have been before, that is, pure poetic creation, without any intervention from knowledge of any sort.

So poetry *is* intuitive; and if it is not intuitive, it is not poetry.

VICIOSO: Why then the contemporary insistence that every poet must know the classics?

BOSCH: The classics could be interesting from the point of view of knowing what, let's say, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, or Santa Teresa de Jesús, or Lope de Vega, thought and wrote; to know how they thought, what things stirred their interest, but not to follow them poetically, because life nowadays has nothing to do with the times of Lope de Vega or Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

VICIOSO: When Neruda met Julia, he foretold that she would be one of the great poets of America, however . . .

BOSCH: But he met her at my house, that's where he met her, at 107 Joveyar. Neruda came there to lunch with me. Jimenes Grullón was there, and Julia, naturally. Nicolás Guillén brought him over, since it was Nicolás Guillén who had told me that Neruda wanted to meet me. So I invited him to lunch, him and Neruda, but Nicolás had a previous engagement at noon that day and brought Neruda, dropped him off, and left.

See here, Neruda mentions me by name in a poem about Santo Domingo, that is, Neruda knew who I was when he got to Cuba; that was in 1942, I think that was also in the year 1942.

That is when he met Julia, when he first knew Julia's poetry. I had asked Julia to copy some of her verses so that he could read them. Neruda read them. The next day he had a reading in Havana, at the Municipal Hall. I went to the recital, so did Julia, and Jimenes Grullón—the three of us went, and there I asked him what he had thought of Julia's verses; and he said that Julia was called to be a great poet of America.

VICIOSO: Julia, however, did not reach that dimension, at least while she was alive . . .

BOSCH: No, for one simple reason: because she didn't publish, she didn't publish.

Not even Jimenes Grullón got interested in that, in her publishing. He never made any effort to make Julia's verses known in Cuba. He did nothing; that was probably a part of his jealous nature.

VICIOSO: But she had already published in Puerto Rico her "Río Grande de Loíza" and *Poema en veinte surcos* . . .

BOSCH: Yes, but Puerto Rico is a very limited space from that point of view. The Puerto Rican intellectual that never left the island never became known, like the Dominican; that's why Julia never became known. But Julia had those exceptional qualities, and one has to realize that this was forty-five years ago, that is, when Gabriela Mistral was the fashion as a woman poet. Gabriela Mistral's poetry is a poetry closely bound to the poetic formulas of the time, its beauty notwithstanding, because she did it with great beauty, but Julia did not allow herself to be influenced by her.

VICIOSO: As we know, in Puerto Rico the struggle for independence is going through a very difficult period, a period of backlash, let's say. It is now, however, that Julia's poetry has become the standard-bearer . . .

BOSCH: Precisely because of that . . .

VICIOSO: I would like you to analyze that phenomenon: why does it seem that in difficult moments poetry becomes the banner?

BOSCH: But a banner, see here, a banner to the degree that it embodies leadership—because the flag may represent the nation, but that does not mean that the flag always embodies leadership. It could be fixed on a spot and remain there, and whoever sees it may be reminded of something, but that is not the case when it embodies leadership. When the flag leads the battle, the struggle, then it embodies leadership. In this case, precisely because there is a backlash in the Puerto Rican pro-independence struggle, Julia de Burgos' poetry frames the contours of the banner, of the banner of leadership. That's why her poems are reprinted so often; that's why supporters of independence with sensibility and true patriotic feeling turn to Julia. That is, it is Julia's rebirth. She is reborn through her poetry.

VICIOSO: Which says something about the function of poetry, the social function of poetry . . .

BOSCH: Ah, of course, of a poetry like hers, of good poetry, since the other poetry, the poetry of exaltation of personal values, the poetry of the beloved woman, that one says nothing; it is but the expression of a feeling that could be beautiful, but personal, always personal.

VICIOSO: I have some information about Julia's participation in the Dominican exile, although it is limited. I know that she wrote a poem against Trujillo, that she dedicated a poem to her best friend, Dominican Thelma Fiallo de Cintrón, which I was able to recover, and that she perhaps participated in an artistic soirée against the Trujillo dictatorship; but that is the only information I have been able to gather. Do you remember any event or activity in which Julia took an active part?

BOSCH: No, because Julia, as I told you, was very discreet. She always took a back seat so that Jimenes Grullón could have the limelight. She was extremely discreet. When there was some activity, if she attended, she remained in the audience, but it was always for the same reason: she did it so as not to overshadow Jimenes Grullón.

VICIOSO: And what about her participation in the struggle for independence while in Cuba?

BOSCH: There she established contact with Albizu's wife. She met several times with Albizu's wife, who spent several months in Havana with her son Pedrito. She met with her at various times, and on one occasion Pedrito came by the house with a message. I was present when he arrived. But in Cuba there were no others involved in the independence struggle. On one occasion an activist from Albizu's party came through and stopped by to see her, but not publicly.

VICIOSO: When I returned to the country, in 1981, Julia was practically unknown here; very few people knew of her, at least among people of my generation, not to mention among younger people. That's why I want to ask you how you would define Julia's contribution to women's affairs in this country? What can Julia teach us?

BOSCH: In the Dominican Republic, in the last twenty-five or thirty years, there has been an economic development that has opened roles for women, women who have become professionals not only through university careers but through other activities, women painters, for example, poets, highly placed business executives, secretaries. That was unknown here fifty years ago: there were perhaps one or two women secretaries, but there are tons of them nowadays. And naturally this activity of women in daily life leads to something akin to a stone thrown into a pond, a widening wave growing in circles, growing in circles.

Julia's role had been that even before I met her in the year 1938, since Puerto Rico

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had then a level of development close to what we have today, like that we have reached in the last thirty years, to what we have come to know thirty years after Puerto Rico.

Then, Julia's role was not that of being secretary to a business executive, it was not that of being a schoolteacher . . .

VICIOSO: Although she was; Julia graduated and taught . . .

BOSCH: Yes, she graduated, but that was not her role; her role was that of being the poet she has been. She created a poetry unknown then among Puerto Rican women, and I would say even in any other Latin American country. She was ahead of her time in that respect, and it is now that women poets of her caliber are beginning to appear here. That is to say, forty-two years after her death, because that is the distance, the historical distance from the point of view of social development, of economic development (and with economic development come other consequences), between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.

VICIOSO: Julia was also very complex because she was a poet, because she was committed to the political process. Julia didn't practice bourgeois morality as it is normally understood, least of all as it was understood at the time when it was a lot more unyielding than now . . .

BOSCH: Yes, but the very fact that she felt so keenly the need for independence for Puerto Rico, with the force and depth with which she felt it, tells you that Julia was an exceptional woman. She was not only an exceptional poet but an exceptional woman, and I can tell you because she lived in the same house I did, and it was not a big house. The house had but two rooms, the one occupied by her and Jimenes Grullón, the one I occupied, the dining room, the living room, and a hallway. In a space that small we came to know each other.

VICIOSO: Just as I found people moved by Julia's poetry and life, I also encountered some resistance to the dissemination of her work here because she was Puerto Rican. I attribute that to a lack of understanding of our common history as nations, and our common destiny as islands of the Caribbean.

BOSCH: Yes, but it is because here Puerto Rico is not considered to be part of Latin America. It is very difficult for a person that has not lived or studied in Puerto Rico to consider Puerto Rico a part of Latin America.

VICIOSO: But that is almost to accept the North American position on Puerto Rico. . .

BOSCH: It is to accept the North American position on Puerto Rico. And there is one thing I want to tell you now as we are about to end this chat: that Julia grows as the

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years go by. Julia is no longer simply a Puerto Rican poet; Julia is already at least a Caribbean poet, known in the Caribbean, and with time she will be known throughout America because her poetic work gives her the right to be known, and it is inevitable that her work will continue to disseminate.

See here, there are some words of a priest from a small Peruvian village that have always deeply impressed me, perhaps because of the very existence in a small Peruvian village of someone capable of saying what that priest said to Bolívar.

It can be applied to Julia, without it meaning that one is comparing Julia to Bolívar, since Bolívar's work was political and military and Julia's was poetic. This is what the priest said to Bolívar when he went through his town:

Your name will grow with the centuries like the shadows deepen as the sun sets.

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert