

Joaquín O. Giannuzzi *A Complicated Mammal*

Joaquín Giannuzzi was born in 1924 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and died in 2004. His ten collections of poetry, written while working as a professional journalist, established his reputation as one of the most admired and influential Spanish-language poets of his time.

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Joaquín O. Giannuzzi
A Complicated Mammal

selected poems

translated by Richard Gwyn

C *editions*

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Preface

In the hermetic and self-regarding universe of poetry, there exist certain heroic figures, international ringmasters and innovators as famous for what they do as for what they write; and then there are the quiet types, the poets who operate behind closed doors – or from within a locked room – whose writing seeps into public consciousness after others pass by the window and glance in. Their fellow poets are often the first in singing their praises because they nourish some lack in the reader, making him or her, in turn, want to write. They are, overwhelmingly, writers who occupy themselves with the existential weather of their times and the semiotics of the everyday, and as with all art that toils in solitude, grafting quietly at the soul of things, these poets repay particularly close scrutiny.

Joaquín O. Giannuzzi (1924–2004) was a poet absorbed by the world of objects, documenting and questioning the hierarchies implicit in natural and manmade phenomena. It could even be said that Giannuzzi was obsessed by the notion of objects possessing consciousness or will – an almost animistic sense of volition that binds mankind to animals and to things – *las cosas de la tierra*, or ‘things of the earth’. And yet, despite the metaphysical flavour of these notions, he returns, again and again, to a flatly materialist vision of the world: a pervasive sense of transience and decrement that reflects the absolute failure of theology. Indeed, one of his best-known poems is titled ‘Theologian at the window’ – many of Giannuzzi’s poems are set looking out from a window, or from within ‘a locked room’ – a characteristic self-portrait of the solitary individual who can only conclude:

There are a million windows and each one suffers
its failed theologian, confronted by the only possible reality . . .

Of what that ‘only possible reality’ consists we need have little doubt, since Giannuzzi is a poet of remarkable consistency. Over the ten books of poems published during the years 1958–2008 there

is extraordinary fixedness of intent, and very little stylistic variation, other than a discarding of the longer poems that he attempted early in his career, and an accompanying economy of expression. Throughout the oeuvre there is never any compromise with our inevitable mortality ('isolate in its solitary mortal dimension') as the poem 'Symmetries' reminds us. Here, as the critic Leonor Fleming observed, was a poet who faced death head on.¹

Some of Giannuzzi's most memorable work had already appeared by the period now known in Argentina as 'the last military dictatorship' (1976–83), in which all poetry of substance took a dive underground. But if Giannuzzi's poetry was not known to the wider reading public, he was already gaining a reputation among his peers, and he began to emerge, towards the end of the 1980s, as one of the most significant and influential Spanish language poets of his time. Quintessentially a poet's poet, he cast a powerful influence over two subsequent generations of Argentinian writers, for many of whom Giannuzzi represents a kind of model, his understated, pessimistic, yet always humane poetry contemplating the tumultuous and, for Argentina, often ruinous second half of the twentieth century. His legacy honours the quotidian quality of his subject matter, described with painstaking attention, as well as his stoical adherence to the task of interrogating those essential relationships between the individual and the world. As Jorge Fondebrider, one of his principle advocates (and editor of the *Complete Poems*), writes, 'Giannuzzi wrote poetry with words and ideas. He did not limit himself to a mere piling up of images that might offer a fanciful sense of beauty, he didn't rely on big bangs for effect nor seek to astonish with an ingenious final twist.'²

Giannuzzi was born into a family of southern Italian immigrants of peasant stock who worked as carpenters and builders. The poet's identification with his ancestry finds occasional expression in pieces such as 'La Abuela' ('Grandmother') (who 'crossed the sea directly to the kitchen'), a poem whose tenderness typically finds focus in the woman's hands, a reminder that – just as the men made their living through their hands and the tools they wielded – the grandmother's

hands cared and cooked for the whole tribe. The young Joaquín, however, chose journalism rather than the construction industry, and remained in that profession almost all his life. (Such a path, incidentally, seems to be far more common in Latin cultures, the combining of journalism with the more 'elevated' art of poetry not incurring the derogation – based no doubt on ancient class prejudices – that it might in the Anglo-Saxon world.) His poems inhabit the middle-class ambience of the suburbs, neighbourhoods that are neither too rough nor especially privileged, the kinds of neighbourhood reflected in the poem 'Sunday afternoon', where 'Behind walls, life seems to have exhausted its final opportunity' and 'Human endeavour has made of itself a mockery'.

And yet this apparent pessimism finds its antidote in a persistent curiosity, a relentless interrogation of the spaces or interstices between the individual and the material world; or to put it another way, the relationship (or lack of it) between subject and object. This was a topic that for long exercised Samuel Beckett's attention also, so that he might, as one critic has put it, 'state the space that intervenes between him and the world of objects; he may state it as no-man's-land.'³ Similarly, the novelist Sergio Chejfec writes in an elegant study of Giannuzzi: 'In the poems he distances himself from the things he describes, distances himself also from himself, as when he chooses to represent himself in front of a mirror, or a window, in a photograph, facing a being of another species (insect, fruit, plant or animal), or when [as he sometimes does] he refers to himself by his initials.'⁴ Elisa Calabrese, another astute critic of Giannuzzi, refers to his 'fascination before objects, his stillness, his remoteness [which] conforms to a radical disengagement. This insurmountable distancing establishes the sharp distinction between domains, *that of perceptive consciousness and that of things*' [my italics].⁵ Meanwhile Chejfec (in a later essay) finds it difficult to reconcile himself to the idea of Giannuzzi merely as a poet of disengagement and the objective gaze: to him Giannuzzi is an essentially intimate poet fluctuating between confession and speculation.⁶ Revealingly, he adds: 'Often Giannuzzi's

poems hang between these paradoxes: the ordinary is transcendent and the transcendent contains the commonplace.⁷

Giannuzzi's ironic manner, his distancing of the speaking self, intentionally subverts the simulation of an intimate space between the poet and his reader which very early on became the typical mode of address in his poetry – and already familiar in Argentinian poets of the period such as César Fernández Moreno and the somewhat younger Juan Gelman. And an important effect of this subversion of the conversational mode by a quizzical, self-deprecating voice is raised by Fondebriker, who writes: 'Giannuzzi lived uncomfortably and has done everything possible to make us uncomfortable.'⁸

The casual reader might be discouraged by such an invitation to discomfort, but for the fact that again, rather like Beckett, the ironic humour and linguistic inventiveness – without ever becoming distractions – keep the reader engaged; unsettled perhaps, and occasionally horrified (notably in poems like 'The Promise' and 'Intensive Care'), but fascinated still. We find we have become as curious as the poems' narrator to see how he is going to interact with whatever it is that nature, or the phenomenal world, throws in his path. Moreover, the writing is of a consistent and unerring quality, making the choice of poems for an introductory English selection a difficult one. Giannuzzi's first book, *Nuestros días mortales* (Our mortal days, 1958) begins very much in the vein in which he intended to continue, with a still life describing (but so much more than describing) a bunch of grapes. When I first decided to translate Giannuzzi, and began to read through the *Complete Poems*, I kept finding words repeated, and decided to keep a tally. In his first book I listed *desdichado* (unhappy, unfortunate), *podredumbre* (rottenness, corruption), *secreto* (secret), *silencioso* (silent), *amarga* (bitter), *tinieblas* (darkness). From the second book, *Contemporáneo del mundo* (Contemporary of the world, 1963), we find *estupor* (astonishment, stupor), *inútil* (useless), *veneno* (poison), and *sepelio* (burial); and from the third, *Las Condiciones de la época* (Conditions of the epoch, 1967): *fetido/fetidez* (fetid/stench), *fracaso* (failure) and *época* (epoch). However, after much

deliberation and in spite of the excellence of many of the poems from the first three books, I decided to begin this selection of translations with his fourth book, *Señales de una causa personal* (Signs of a personal cause, 1977). It was this collection, with such poems as 'Garbage at daybreak', 'Coffee and apples', 'Self-criticism' and 'Poetics', which had alerted Jorge Fondebriker, as a young man, to the presence of Giannuzzi as a major force in Spanish poetry:

The discovery of Giannuzzi's poetry was, for me, a kind of revelation. I did not know that in Argentina there was someone who wrote like this. Then, I thought, what had surprised me so many times in poets like Eliot or Montale could also be done in Castilian, in the Castilian that we spoke: Giannuzzi had done it. But, moreover, he had done it in a voice that . . . is perfectly recognisable to . . . the inhabitants of Buenos Aires.⁹

As a reader, coming to Giannuzzi for the first time (the first poem of his I discovered was 'Coffee and Apples', while standing in a makeshift bookstore in Granada, Nicaragua), I at once fell for the immediacy of his diction, and the prevalence of what I think of as *thingitude* in his poems. Things and animals, of course. Unfortunately the restrictions of space mean that only a few bestial encounters have made it through the filtering process. Cue another list: first, there is a perplexing recurrence of flies as a theme; dogs come next, followed by horses, vultures, pigeons, seagulls, chickens, swans, toads, dragonflies, wasps, miscellaneous unspecified insects and beetles, cockroaches, snails, spiders, not forgetting a solitary giraffe. Add to these his recurring favourite topics: breakfast, roses, grapes, apples, the smell of coffee and tobacco, garden rain, and numerous dahlias, his flower of choice.

There are sounds too. We need to remember Giannuzzi's love of music: Handel, Mozart and Chopin come in for special mention as well, of course, as Argentina's national musical idol, Carlos Gardel. But more specifically there are other sounds, perhaps most memorably the clicking that occurs in the wonderful poem *Mi hija se viste y sale* ('My daughter dresses and goes out', p.37):

Then she turns
on the axis of the mirror, immersed
in the contemplation of an absolute present.
A sweet disorder is immobilised around her
until the click of bracelets closing
signals that all my options are now results.
She leaves the room, enters
an evening of incessant music
and everything that I am not goes with her.

The finality of that sound of the 'click of bracelets' lingers long after the poem's close.

And while discussing sounds we mustn't forget the several references in Giannuzzi's poetry to *el otro lado del pared* – the other side of the wall. In one example ('On the other side', p.57) it is to report that a neighbour has died, and in another – one of two versions of *Este momento* ('This moment', p.35):

Who will survive
the truth that explodes on the other side of the wall,
its confusion of breakdown and gunshots?

Here, the 'other side of the wall' hints at something concrete, even political, unusually for Giannuzzi invoking a specific reference to the terror of a police state, or the horror of a disappearance. More generally, of course, the other side means the neighbours (hell, after all, is other people) but also, and more suggestively, whatever it is that awaits us on the other side of anything: what Artaud heard as 'the rustling behind the curtain'.

Giannuzzi referred to himself as a 'jovial pessimist'.¹⁰ He didn't militate actively in politics, but considered himself 'a man of the people'. This wasn't mere posing: it was how he regarded himself, as a man and a poet. A preferred term was 'standard', the adjective actually used in the Spanish version of the poem I have translated as 'The Average Poet' (p.67), a sardonic self-portrait:

The little poet
wakes in a state of alarm:
the words that stacked up during the night
have become impossible to hold back
and, as dawn breaks, he hurries to his desk.

This representation of the 'little poet' scurrying off to work inevitably hits the hard forge of self-awareness, in the lines, 'a creative frenzy, / if of dubious artistic substance' – and the poet is left to reflect ruefully on the lasting worth of his output. 'I am a minor poet in all the anthologies, including in my own,' he said.¹¹ Or: 'Gelman and Lamborghini are great poets: I do what I can.'¹² Whatever the seriousness with which such proclamations were made, this was not the opinion of other writers, including the same Leónidas Lamborghini, who wrote: 'He was one of the most important poets in our language and a universal poet of the stature of Ungaretti, for example.'¹³ Or Jorge Aulicino: 'The poems of Giannuzzi might serve us as a mental map of the terrors and anxieties of a man of the middle classes who lived in Buenos Aires for much of the twentieth century.'¹⁴ And again, the commendation of Fabían Casas, who, quoting Louis-Ferdinand Céline from another context, referred to Giannuzzi as a man 'without collective importance, that is, an individual'.¹⁵

This self-effacing side of Giannuzzi comes over also in his poems, and is corroborated by an anecdote in which Jorge Fondebriber recalls his early attempts at interviewing Giannuzzi, and how his subject fell apart in front of the microphone. 'At once he displayed to me one of the dominant aspects of his character: he said he felt very honoured, but admitted that he was incapable of abstract thought . . . [and] all he could do was stutter painfully in front of the recorder and did everything possible to dishearten me . . . However, when he applied his intelligence to the description of concrete problems, he would talk as well as could be hoped for.'¹⁶ (The ambiguity in that final qualification is itself worthy of note).

To place Giannuzzi within his proper context, we should recall that until the mid-1980s J. L. Borges (1899–1986) and Julio Cortázar

(1914–84) were indisputably the best-known Argentine authors internationally, and both of them were highly accomplished poets, although – perhaps unfairly in Borges’ case – more celebrated as writers of fiction. However, it would not be controversial to claim that along with poets such as Juan Gelman, Alejandra Pizarnik, Enrique Molina, Olga Orozco, Roberto Juarroz, Leónidas Lamborghini, Juana Bignozzi and Susana Thénon, Giannuzzi represents a pivotal figure in the Argentinian poetry of the second half of the twentieth century, his work standing apart from the transformative experimentalism of Gelman and the intense, subjective fabulism of Pizarnik, pacing the no-man’s-land between the speaking subject and the things of the world, his poetry imbued with a ‘speculative and metaphysical realism . . . sustained by a metaphoric system as austere as it is imaginative.’¹⁷

And what of this project, the turning of a very Argentinian poet into English? Although Giannuzzi’s name might be new to readers of English, in my own conversations with Argentine poets and writers of all ages – including Juan Gelman, whose enthusiasm was contagious, dispelling any doubts I might have had – the idea of an English ‘Selected’ has met with widespread approval among his fellow writers, and a sense that bringing Giannuzzi’s poetry to an international readership was long overdue.

But aren’t there already too many poets, too many books? Don’t we already suffer from a surfeit of voices, and from summaries and anecdote and repetition of things written and repeated and laid down in poems and fictions and in essays like this one? Perhaps we have truly had a bellyful of poets and their translators and dissectors? And then sometimes, it seems to me, the opposite is true. If a poet, even on a few occasions, transcends the local or parochial, and speaks to a universal audience – that, by definition, is a poet whose work deserves to be shared beyond the confines of a particular language or moment in history.

If the declamatory assertion of masculine liberties at the start of the poem ‘For some reason’ (p.15) evokes a disappearing world,

sepia-tinted and smoky, it still draws one in unerringly, with its smell of dark tobacco and polished wood under morning sunlight:

I bought coffee, cigarettes, matches.
I smoked, I drank
and faithful to my personal rhetoric
put my feet on the table.

And what follows, as though in covert allusion to Walter Benjamin’s tide of history,¹⁸ elicits a universal yearning that pursues the dreams of gamblers and penitents, lovers and losers, the dogs of dawn, their snouts in the black bags of our inexplicable refuse, and the new-born foal struggling to stand, having stumbled in on the wrong world. These poems speak for all those who are both captivated and confused by the phenomenal world, who sense a terrible ambivalence towards their fellow creatures, and fear that the view from the window offers ‘only alternatives of an indistinct appearance / made of tremulous fragments, doubtful colours / and a suffering of something darkly tangled up in itself’.

Richard Gwyn
Cardiff, May 2012

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- 2 ‘Memoria de una causa personal’ in Giannuzzi, J. O. *Poesía completa*, edited with prologue by Jorge Fondebrider, 2009, p.12 (Sevilla: Sibila).
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- 16 'Memoria de una causa personal' by Jorge Fondebrider, in Giannuzzi, J. O., *Poesía Completa*, 2009, p.11.
- 17 'Un criterio de objetividad en la nueva poesía argentina' by Martín Prieto, in *Breve historia de la literatura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2006) and in Fondebrider, J. (ed) 2010, p.309.
- 18 Walter Benjamin writes that there is an angel who remembers the whole of history. His face is turned towards the past. He would like to pause and piece together everything that was smashed in the ongoing catastrophe of human affairs but there is a wind blowing from paradise and it is so strong that it gets caught up in his wings and he can no longer close them. The storm (which we call progress) drives him helplessly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of rubble grows higher and higher. (Benjamin, W. *Gesammelten Schriften* 1:2. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974.)

Translator's Note

The Spanish text used for these translations was the *Poesía completa de Joaquín O. Giannuzzi*, edited with a foreword by Jorge Fondebrider, Sevilla: Sibilina, 2009. The poems are arranged in the order of their publication.

Note to the poem 'Reduction' (p.29): In Argentina, as in other Catholic countries, the bones of the deceased may be exhumed and cremated after a specified interval. This is an account of the process involving the remains of the poet's father, twenty years after burial.

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A Complicated Mammal

Basuras al amanecer

*Esta madrugada, en la calle
dominado por una especie
de curiosidad sociológica
hurgué con un palo en el mundo surrealista
de algunos tachos de basura.
Comprobé que las cosas no mueren sino que son asesinadas.
Vi ultrajados papeles, cáscaras de fruta, vidrios
de color inédito, extraños y atormentados metales,
trapos, huesos, polvo, sustancias inexplicables
que rechazó la vida. Me llamó la atención
el torso de una muñeca con una mancha oscura,
una especie de muerte en un campo rosado.
Parece que la cultura consiste
en martirizar a fondo la materia y empujarla
a lo largo de un intestino implacable.
Hasta consuela pensar que ni el mismo excremento
puede ser obligado a abandonar el planeta.*

Garbage at daybreak

At dawn today, out in the street,
possessed by a kind
of sociological curiosity,
I rummaged with a stick in the surreal world
of garbage bins.
I realised that things don't die but are murdered.
I saw outraged papers, fruit peel, glass
of an unknown colour, strange and tortured metals,
rags, bones, dust, inexplicable substances
that life rejected. My attention was caught by
a doll's torso, with a dark stain,
a sort of rosy meadow death.
It seems that culture consists in
the thorough tormenting of matter
and pushing it through an implacable intestine.
Almost a comfort to reflect that not even this excrement
is obliged to abandon the planet.

Café y manzanas

*Café y manzanas en la tarde de junio.
En un tibio rincón civilizado
mis sentidos abarcan una situación ligeramente abstracta.
El mundo se ha vuelto hospitalario,
como una tregua en medio de la historia.
Las manzanas despiden en resplandor amarillo,
el café entrega su humo íntimo.
Para mi fracaso de individuo contemporáneo
todo esto parece suficiente,
el frío interno de las manzanas,
el calor inestable del café,
dos razones de la naturaleza que escapan a mi dominio.
Así que estoy con mi trasero desparramado
en un aposento adecuado a mi clase social.
Puestas a buen recaudo las cosas suaves
allí se cierran las puertas al tumulto general.
Pero a veces estalla una bomba en el piso bajo
y la policía acude para saber quién es quién en este mundo.*

Coffee and apples

Coffee and apples on an afternoon in June.
In a lukewarm civilised corner
my senses take in a faintly abstract situation.
The world has become hospitable,
like a truce in the middle of history.
The apples give off a yellow radiance,
the coffee offers up its intimate steam.
In terms of my failure as a contemporary individual
all this seems sufficient,
the inner chill of apples,
the unstable heat of coffee,
two details from nature that escape my dominion.
So here am I with my sprawling backside
in some chamber adequate to my social class.
Gentle things put in a safe place,
shut away from the general tumult.
But at times a bomb explodes on the ground floor
and the police show up to find out who is who in this world.