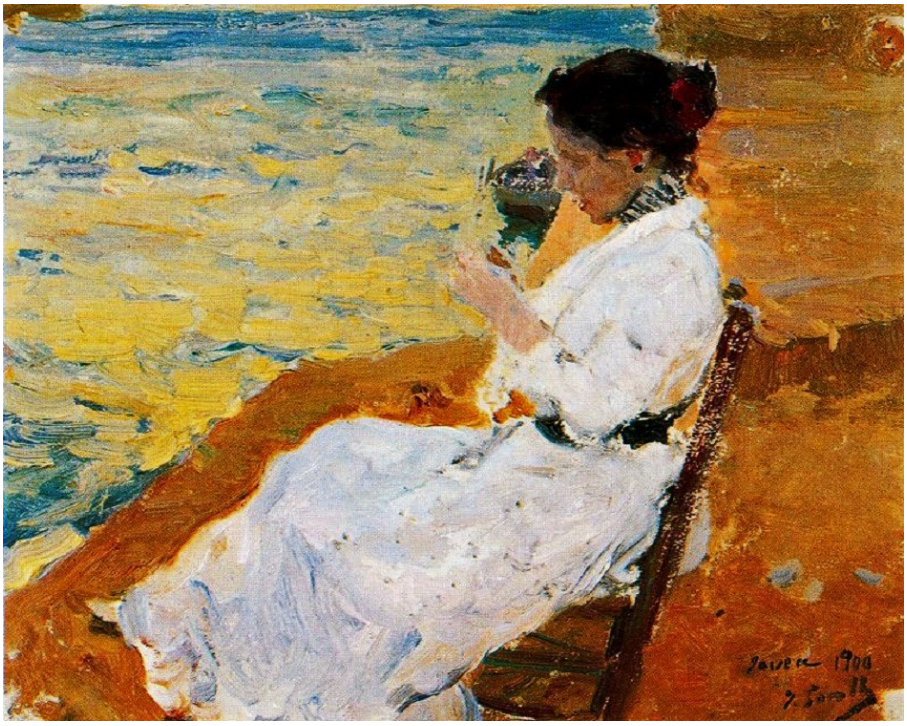
Spanish Siren

by James Como (March 2018)



Concha en Jávea, Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, 1900

One of my most satisfying professional moments came when I was inducted as an honorary member into the International Spanish Honor Society. The special guests were the Spanish consul in New York and his mother, who spoke no English. In my toast, I thanked the Society and the consul and then reminisced. I described how as a child, living in the James Weldon Johnson Housing Projects in East Harlem, I was surrounded by Spanish-speakers, preponderantly Puerto Rican. I would be drawn to the glowing eyes of the girls, admiring of the dignity of the boys' bearing, and enjoy the clipped music of the language. The good lady cried, not least because she discerned that it was all true. That linguistic allure continued, I would major in Spanish.

Owing to Irwin Glick, a wonderful high school teacher (and a stand-up fellow besides), my Spanish was already strong, my enthusiasm even stronger. I took Spanish lit courses as a sixteen-year-old freshman, reading large chunks of *El Poema del Mio Cid* and *Don Quijote*, all of *Fuenteovejuna* by the great Lope de Vega and *La Vida es Sueño* by Calderon de la Barca. Eventually I reached some of the Romantic poets—Espronceda, Larra, the Duque de Rivas, Jose Zorilla—and then Becquer, Perez Galdos, and Pio Baroja of the Generation of Ninety-Eight. Next came *La Barraca* by the Nobelist Blasco Ibanez and *El Tunel* by Ernesto Sabato (my introduction to Existentialism).

Then came my Waterloo. The professors who had stewarded me were wonderful: Señorita Mas Lopez and the distinguished scholar Chang-Rodríguez. But a prideful lout who shall go unnnamed did me in.

The course was in Spanish-American lit, with this instructor's claim to fame being the anthologist whose book we used. He was a pretentious teacher, for example alluding to poets far outside our ken. He would have us write a good deal, and with those essays I was running a solid B: could have been higher, but tough graders were not unknown to me. Then, one day, he decided to read a "monologue." It rang a bell (though now I cannot recall what it was). I remembered it as a soliloquy and asked if it were. He became angry. "They are the same," he insisted, "'mono' being the Latin for 'alone', 'soli' being the Greek." I responded that I knew that (which I did) but, in theatrical terms, they differed substantially and presumed to explain how. He was clearly embarrassed. "May I continue?" he asked, and that was that, until the grade on my next essay: D.

Now, this Little Man had a protocol for visiting his office. If his door were open one could walk right in; if closed, *do not even bother to knock*. But if it were half-open one would could tap on the door and enter *without waiting for a response*. That's what I did. And I beheld a sight for the ages—at least for a sixteen-year-old boy in 1963. He was seated behind his desk. On the desk were four items: a bottle of wine, two half-filled glasses, and the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, naked from the waist up, perched on the edge of the desk.

She turned toward me, smiled, and—made absolutely no effort to move or to cover herself, bless her heart. He, on the other hand, was livid, screaming for me to leave. And that really *would* be that. I began getting Fs. When I went to Señorita Mas Lopez for advice she answered that he was notorious for his philandering, would not forget my offense and was vindictive, and that I simply could not avoid him if I were to remain a major. I might report him to the chairman (Chang-Rodríguez in fact) but it would do no good: he had heard it all before. Such were the days. I switched to English and found happiness. As we say in Spanish, *Dios escribe derecho en renglones torcidos*—God writes straight in crooked lines.

How straight? Owing to my Spanish, I was the only friend of a Spanish-speaking woman with whom I worked: she had no English. Long story short, she midwifed a blind date with a roommate (who now remains the most beautiful woman I've ever seen). This was risky business for me—riskier than for most young men (I had just turned eighteen) because I simply did not date. As it happens, this girl—really, to me a woman—was Peruvian. Her English would prove to be much stronger than my Spanish. (Her father had been a diplomat, a journalist, an explorer, a congressman who was one of the first public figures in South

America to condemn Hitler, an exile who had written for the *New York Times*, and an envoy who had met Churchill and de Gaulle: another story.)

Now as it happened, I had learned that the president of Peru was at that time Fernando Belaunde Terry (whom I would meet at the presidential palace sixteen years later and whom I would come to admire greatly). There, in the back seat of my cousin's car (Alexandra insisted upon a double date, which was fine with me), I sat silently, and she said, "so, tell me *something*." So out of the blue, I said, "what do you think of your president Belaunde?" She was astonished and told me that her step-father had been the local chairman of Belaunde's party in Southern Peru. That was fifty-three years ago. Since then I've made innumerable trips to Peru, have lived there with my own family (our children were raised virtually bi-culturally), have written on the country, and I love it still.

Anyone can imagine how convenient it is to be able to speak Spanish; it is especially so if the speaker is not obviously Hispanic. The ability has served me in my teaching and in this or that neighborhood, especially in New York City. Hispanic people are especially gratified to hear it spoken well by someone who doesn't look the part. "Where are you from?" "New York, born and raised, *ni una gota de sangre Latina*"—not a drop of Latin blood (allowing myself the vexing mis-use of that adjective). The compliment that usually follows is satisfying. *Muchisimas gracias, Señor Glick* (who was emphatic about proper pronunciation).

Speaking the language was convenient, too, when communicating with my in-laws, who spoke no English. Convenient, but also at first risible. Sure, Cervantes would not have smiled when I

referred to socks as *calcetines*, a bedroom as *alcoba*, and a trip as *jornada*. But Maria Lopez-Montero de Aicardi did, though never to embarrass me.

Over the span of four decades, my Hispanophilia has been stirred by a dozen trips to Spain. Along the way I had, in a desultory way, "kept up" with Spanish political and social developments, and I fixedly recall the brave act of the new king, Juan Carlos who, after the death of Franco, faced down a coup attempt with "you'd better kill me here, for if I leave this room you are all done," or words pretty close.

My favorite city is Granada, where I first read *Tales of the Alhambra* by Washington Irving (for a spell he was our ambassador to Spain): he got it right, or so it seemed on our first visit, when we were . . . alone in the palace. The solitude was enchanting, as were the architraves, pool, columns, and the arched windows through which one could gaze upon the whole city below. The sun was more intense than any I've known (including Kenya's) and its color on that stone a golden yellow.

That charm extended to the city, too, which carried remnants of its graceful Moorish past. And to the people—well, to the women. Cordoba, Malaga, and Sevilla each conveyed the distinctive Andalucian romance, heightened when we drove country roads languorously in a Seat 600 and stopping now and then for some bread, cheese and *jamon serrano*. (Not so by-the-way, "Malagueña," "Valencia," and "Granada" are three of the greatest songs every written.)

We would vacation in Mallorca (beyond expectations) and visit Barcelona, Valencia (another dual language city, like Barcelona, Catalan being the spoken language), Segovia (its Roman aqueduct astonishing), and, for several days, up in the northwest, Santiago de Compostela, a visit nothing short of numinous. I was reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* at the time (in English).

On our first day we ate in the plaza: *langostinos* that are the stuff of dreams. The hotel was *El Hostal de los Reyes Catolicos,* a historically preserved landmark built by Ferdinand and Isabella in the fifteenth century to house the pilgrims who had walked the route of St. James. The room seemed cavernous, the fireplace nearly taking up an entire wall, and by the bay window was a sofa on a platform extending from the window; it could be enclosed by a velvet curtain. That is an *alcoba,* I thought, but not actually a bedroom, rather an *alcove* in which a person customarily slept.

On the second day, the feast of St. James, we walked across the plaza to the Cathedral. The large open space was unusually crowded: pilgrims who had walked the *camino* of St. James had arrived for Mass. A giant censer was lowered from the ceiling from very high above, maybe sixty feet. It was silver, taller than the height of a tall man, broader than a wide door to an apartment. Aided by pulleys, men tugging on chains on the right side of the church began to swing the device; its drop was such that when it finally was horizontal against the ceiling, it nearly touched the wall. Thus it swung from wall to wall, at its perigee only a few feet from the ground. It whistled and wooshed. We were transfixed by sight, sound, and smell, and by the drama. This went on for some time. Then, at one point, when it was at its lowest, a man in robes leapt upon a railing surrounding the middle of the censer and

acually rode it, floor to ceiling, wall to wall, until it lost its momentum and stopped. The man dismounted, and I wondered, Does he ever miss? The liturgy went on and we (I on my Saint's day) felt especially blessed.

On a different trip we visited the Prado in Madrid, a great museum. When we entered a hall with a Dalí exhibit, there was a clump of people gazing at one of the master's more obscure paintings (which one might not think possible). In the middle of the clump two items were evident. One was a striking blonde woman rising a head taller than anyone around her; the second was *voice*—Spanish from a man who, trying to impress the beauty, was pontificating on the masterpiece.

Utter nonsense, I thought. Not only were his interpretations quirky but his assertions about the creation of the piece seemed random, and I whispered as much to my wife. Then the clump moved on past the woman and the speaker, who turned out to be . . . *Dalí.* (On another trip, this event was superceded when, owing to very unusual circimstances, we flew from Spain in First Class. The flight was delayed, so there, in the very first row, a very old man opened his guitar case and began to play sublimely: it was the great classical master Andrés Segovia himself.)

I would see a change in Madrid following the death of Franco, who is under-appreciated as a dictator who managed a succession—to democracy!—without nary a wrinkle. (Yes, the right side won the Spanish Civil War.) For himself, he would have nothing of dynasties. The changes were a mix: a much freer press, a heightened café society, more commerce, and more international comings and goings. And much more casual pornography, political posturing, and incivility (though

nothing to compare to what one routinely hears in America). The place was not yet meretricious. The late-evening dining, lively theater, and stirring *zarzuelas* (operettas) remained, with no denigration of cultural pieties or norms. The city stays brighter later even than Paris.

Next week we return to Madrid and its environs for a week. We'll visit Toledo, finally, and see a *zarzuela*