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PLAY THE DEVIL



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Review

Florentino and the Devil

Alberto Arvelo Torrealba

translated by Timothy Adès, with Gloria Carnevali

(Shearsman Books, ISBN 9781848613485, 116pp.)

How did Venezuela shape Caribbean oral traditions? For instance, could old forms of Spanish poetry, such as those popular in Los Llanos, have influenced neighbouring Trinidad's penchant for parang, extempo, calypso and all that was to come? Did a Spanish sensibility cross the Gulf of Paria, drifting like the seeds of trees dropped along the Orinoco, into English-speaking terrain? For readers, such questions loom over Timothy Adès' recent translation of the classic Venezuelan poem *Florentino and the Devil* by Alberto Arvelo Torrealba. First appearing in 1940, an oral tradition almost certainly underlined the original Spanish text.

At the moment, poetry might not be Venezuela's most pressing concern. Nonetheless, I've encountered anecdotal evidence suggesting *Florentino and the Devil* is known, remembered, recognised by people who live there today, as well as migrants who have long since moved away. The work, however, is not generally known in Venezuela's closest neighbour, Trinidad, as well as the English-speaking world. According to the publishers of this 2014 edition, it is the first time the poem has been translated into English. The results are intriguing.

The legend goes that Florentino was the epitome of the *llanero*: handsome, a great rider and cattleman, a Casanova who sang and spouted poetry. His improvisations (*contrapunteos*) were so stinging The Devil became jealous and challenged him to a duel, a night of singing. At stake is Florentino's destiny. If he loses, he goes to Hell. If he wins, he finds Paradise on earth. So the poem, which is its own story, is less about any particular plot and more about the dialogue between two singers; two figures for whom language is a special intercourse.

Music, motion, song—literary forms dance to such beats. In this relationship, in this *joropo*, forms like the ballad roam, change shape, change colour, chameleon-like, matching wherever they land. Even when individually written, the destiny of such writing is to be communally composed, through collective memory, through the process of oral rendering. So in Spanish tradition, there is the *copla*, sung in four verses, colloquial, direct, ripe for comic or lascivious *double entendre*, but leading one poet to remark:

Until the folk sings them

coplas are not *coplas*,

and when the folk sing them

By then, no one knows who wrote them.

Also sung is the *romancero*, a ballad with a heroic feel. On the other hand is the *corrido*, a ballad concerned with daily life. Florentino and the Devil fits into this world but through call and response, through its impromptu counterpoint, *contrapunteo*, through man-on-man, quick fire contests it also feels like a gesture to what would today be called a spoken-word clash.

But Torrealba was also from Barinas, the heart of Los Llanos and his poem is very much tied to the psychogeography of that region. There's a strong sense of the land, of something beyond the confines of the poem being, nonetheless, transmitted to those who bear witness to the exchanges between these two characters.

In this regard, a translation can only paper over the mysteries at the edge of the text. And that is most evident here when we consider the rhyming.

Adès is a prize-winning poet-translator, who has worked from French, Spanish, German; notably producing translations of Robert Desnos, Victor Hugo, Jean Cassou. Here, he faced, as all translators do, an uphill battle. He fights valiantly to render some of the magic. Inevitably, some is lost.

Whereas in the original there are powerful incantations of repeated rhymes, varied sometimes abruptly for strategic effect, in the English translation this is dissipated. The truth is, it is harder to rhyme in English. In the Spanish text, every line is rhymed, whether through the same vowel or vowel pattern, for long stretches. But in the English text this breaks down. It would be impossible to maintain the sound without the sense. An awkwardness ensues. So, line 230 onwards:

To play counter-question

So skillful of speech!

Watch out for the fourth:

Who quickens his course,

without whip or spur,

on what sires no horse

but a mule it may sire?

This loses the rhyming of the original, loses the effect when that rhyming is broken:

Juega con le repregunta

Defiéndase de la cuarta

Si tiene tanta facundia:

¿Quién sin látigo ni espuela,

jinete, la marcha apura

sobre el que no da caballo

pero sí puede dar mula?

The loss distracts from the veering between heroic glamour and grit, between romance and realism, the interplay of registers. The mind wanders.

And yet, in that wandering, embers begin to smoulder. Through some kind of conflagration, the translation, despite itself, mesmerises. Suddenly, there's space for thinking about these two men not through the parameters of the poem, of the tradition shaping their engagement, but through imaginative reading. Two men battling it out, with one being the embodiment of evil, the other a symbol of wholesomeness—there is something homosocial. The mind segues into “what if” territory.

What if the real nature of this couple is hiding in plain sight?

What if this whole thing is a coded reference to the navigations, negotiations of sexuality, queer or otherwise?

It turns out the power of this work is in the failure of translation. Or rather: what is translation if not communal, individual recovery and re-imagining, much in the way people in the country singing songs might add their own peculiar twists? If we permit ourselves to so roam, surely we must leave Los Llanos and end up in Trinidad, the island where thousands of Venezuelans have found refuge today and to which, for centuries, they have been travelling.

The ties between both places manifest when we consider our food (*pastelles*, a kind of *tomale*), our people (so-called *cocoa panyols* came to work on estates), our literature (for example *Canaima* by future Venezuelan president Rómulo Gallegos), our music (*parang*) and our history (Spanish colonialism).

To this list of overlap we should add a rich tradition of *ex tempore* culture. Just as Venezuela has its *contrapunteos*, Trinidad has extempo, a Carnival artform, and calypso – which itself involves a degree of on-the-spot creativity. Remember calypsonian Chalkdust's famous ability to add a new verse every Dimanche Gras night? A penchant for playing things by air is something that floats in the ether over both lands.

Therefore, Trinidad's spoken-word movement (Two Cents Movement, True Talk No Lie, the NGC Bocas Lit Fest) may look to North America for inspiration, but could it also glance across the Gulf of Paria?

Trinidad, too, could be part of the landscape referred to in the original text. Indeed, the Trinidad was once connected to the mainland before sea levels rose. While today much is made of the “invasion” of Venezuelan migrants and refugees, this completely disregards the strong cultural and historical ties between both spaces. In addition to the aforementioned are facts like:

Trinidad's iconic Angostura Bitters was first made in Venezuela. Both Trinidad and Venezuela were at one stage Spanish colonies. History records that "Trinidad", a word that alludes to the Christian tradition of the Trinity, was also Simon Bolivar's middle name. So we would do well to examine how texts like *Florentino and the Devil* tell us more about what we have in common than the boundaries between us.