

Translation of «Cántico» from José Luis Martín Descalzo's *Testamento del Pájaro Solitario*

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Testamento del Pájaro Solitario by José Luis Martín Descalzo is a long poem divided into four parts. «Canticle» is the opening poem of part one. As the poet explains in the prologue or «Razón de Ser», this book is the most autobiographical, the most private, of all he had written. Poetry, he continues, neither requires nor begs explanation, the reader must discover more through his sensibility than his intelligence. However, he does state that both the focus and the structure of Testament follow in the footprints of St. John of the Cross.

In order to reproduce the effects of Spanish sensibility in the English language and in an English sensibility, I have stayed as close as possible to the Spanish original, at the risk of incurring the charge of literalness.

The volume proved to be a «testament», as José Luis Martín Descalzo died in 1991, shortly after its publication.

Cántico
en el que el pájaro
se pregunta
por su existencia.

Cuando, al fin, entendí que sólo era
un manojo de plumas,
una canción que, porque nace, muere,
o tal vez la memoria de un beso en un espejo,
¿cómo creer que has sido, que has amado?

Por pura gracia
alguien pasó sus dedos por mis plumas
y me dio la verdad de la existencia.
¡Haber sido querido por Ti,
por Ti, que haces que un pájaro
hasta pueda llegar a creerse que ha vivido!

Al cabo de los años
¡mira el tesoro de todos tus vacíos!
Aquí y allá fuiste dejando algo parecido a una huella;
decían tu nombre, lo escribían incluso,
contaban que algún día cantaste en una rama iluminándola,
pero tú bien sabías
que eras sólo una torre de nadas, viento, viento.

En el antiguo álbum, los retratos
reproducían todos el mismo rostro:
un óvalo vacío, alguien dormido,
alguien que se sospecha que, con algún esfuerzo, hasta pudo llegar a vivir,
mas no lo hizo.

Un mirlo
que cantó una vez en una rama,
sin que la rama, ni el pájaro, ni el canto hayan existido jamás.

Canticle
in which the bird
questions
his existence.

When, at last, I realized that I was only
a bunch of feathers,
a song that once born must die,
or perhaps the memory of a kiss in a mirror,
how to believe that one has been, that one has loved.

It was an unwonted grace
when someone passed his fingers over my feathers
and gave me the truth of my existence.
To have been loved by You,
by You, who makes even a bird
begin to believe that he has lived!

Now, after all these years,
look at the treasure of all your vacuums!
Here and there you went leaving behind something like a mark;
they spoke your name, they even wrote it,
they told how one day you sang from a branch, illuminating it,
but you knew well
that you were only a tower of nothings, wind, wind.

The pictures in the old album
all reproduced the same face:
a vacant oval, someone asleep,
someone who, we suspect, with a little effort, could even have lived,
but he never did.

A blackbird
who sang once on a branch,
without the branch, or the bird, or the song ever having existed.

Y, sin embargo, sí había un árbol,
un árbol de la vida, frondoso,
con millones de ramas preparadas.
Sí, Tú estabas allí,
un árbol verde, sin otoños
porque el amor no amarillea nunca.

Pero ¿qué sabes, qué sabes, hombre, tú de amor?
Si te hubieras posado en esa rama
que estuvo preparada para ti,
¿habrías entendido?
Ah, el mendigo cruzó con su escudilla miserable
y si alguien le hubiera arrojado la moneda de oro
¿la habría distinguido de una hoja de otoño volada por el viento?

Yo recogí mendrugos
que apenas si sabía masticar
con mis pobres dientes de papel.
Llegué, lo más, a chupetear el gozo:
recuerdo aquellos senos blancos
y la gran confusión del amor con un desajuste.
Nos refamos mucho. Los relojes del whisky
bajaban tambaleándose las escaleras de la noche
mientras las estrellas miraban asombradas desde el cielo.

Y Tú, Amor, ¿dónde estabas?
Te veo en todas las encrucijadas de las horas perdidas, gritando:
«Necesito repartir transfusiones de vida»,
mientras ante tus pies desfilaba el entierro
de todas las palomas asesinadas aquella misma noche.

And yet, yes, there was a tree,
 a tree of life, leafy,
 with millions of branches prepared.
 Yes, You were there,
 a tree green, with no autumns
 because love never turns yellow.

But, what do you know man, what do you know, you, about love?
 If you had perched on the branch
 that was prepared for you,
 would you have understood?
 Ah, the beggar passed with his mean plate
 and if someone had tossed him a gold coin
 would he have known it was not an autumn leaf lifted on the wind.

I collected stale crusts
 that I could hardly chew
 with my poor paper teeth.
 In time, I was able, at best, to suck pleasure:
 I remember those white breasts
 and my great confusion of love with a water drain¹.
 We laughed a lot. The clocks in the disco
 reeled down the stairways of the night
 while the stars looked down in wonder from above.

And You, Love, where were You?
 I see You at all the crossroads of lost hours, screaming:
 «I have to give out transfusions of life»,
 while before Your feet filed the funeral
 of all the pigeons² assassinated that same night.

1. These two verses are a literal translation: However, the ambiguity of the Spanish is lost in English. *Seno*, os signifies breast, bosom; concavity, hollow. By extension a sink or basin; by association «desagüe»: drainage, outlet, waste.

2. «Palomas» in Spanish slang corresponds to the English; pigeon: a person easily fooled; dupe.

¿Y yo? ¿Y mi pájaro?
 No sé si por temor al mundo o por amor a Ti
 yo revoloteaba sobre tus hombros.
 Me posaba, incluso, sobre ellos.
 Y no decía que sí.
 Y no decía que no.
 Y ni siquiera «tal vez».
 O decía: «Me gustaría cantar»,
 pero nunca quería acabarme de enterar de que cantar no es hilvanar soni-
 dos,
 sino sangrar. Mi pájaro
 tenía siempre demasiadas razones
 para seguir jugando a dos barajas.

A veces hasta llegaba a pronunciar tu nombre,
 pero no era de Ti de quien hablaba,
 sino de tus suburbios,
 y así, mientras Tú, ciervo perseguido,
 cruzabas la pradera incandescente
 en la que yo me carbonizaría
 si llegara a pisarla siguiéndote, mi pájaro
 hacía encaje de bolillos teológicos
 y estaba cerca de Ti,
 pero jamás en Ti, contigo.

Y, si alguna vez mi cántico y el tuyo parecían juntarse
 el ayer tentador se me volvía
 celoso, asegurando
 que elegirte a Ti era como quedarse sin casco ni velamen:
 «Dios sólo tiene noche», me decía.
 Y yo, cobarde pero lúcido, sabía que eso era cierto
 y gritaba:
 «Flores, cubridme;
 adormecedme, músicas;
 y tú, Beatriz, distiende la miel de tu melena,
 y lograd, entre todos, que este celoso dios se aleje
 o que pase de largo, persiguiendo piezas mejores.
 ¡Ah, bien quisiera apostar por los dos!
 Mas, si es inevitable elegir, ¡dame, oh Mundo, tu lecho!

And I? And my bird?
 I don't know if it was fear of the world or love of You
 but I fluttered about Your shoulders.
 I even perched there.
 And I didn't say yes.
 And I didn't say no.
 And not even «perhaps».
 Oh, I said: «I would like to sing»,
 but I never wanted to discover that to sing is not stringing sounds,
 it is to bleed. My bird
 could always find a reason
 to bet on both sides³.

At times he went so far as to pronounce Your name,
 but it wasn't of You that he spoke,
 it was only of Your suburbs⁴,
 and so, while You, hounded deer,
 were crossing the incandescent prairie
 where I would be charred
 should I dare to follow You, my bird
 crocheted theological lace
 and was near You,
 but never in You, with You.

And, if at times my canticle and Yours seemed to join
 that tempter yesterday, grew
 jealous, assuring me
 that to choose you would be like being left without hull or sails:
 «God only has night», he told me.
 And I, a coward but rational, knew that it was true
 and screamed:
 «Flowers, cover me;
 loll me to sleep, music;
 and you, Beatrice, let down your honey colored hair⁵,
 and, between you all, force this jealous God to retreat
 or to pass by without stopping, in His pursuit of better game.
 Ah, how I would like to bet on both!
 But if choosing is inevitable, give me, oh world, your refuge.

3. Literally: play to two decks of cards, i.e. to hedge ones bets.

4. «Suburbs» as used in this verse is as unusual in Spanish as it is in English. Therefore, I have translated it literally. See St. JOHN of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, Trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers, Garden City, New York, Image Books, 1961, Stanza XXXI: «Dwell in the outskirts And desire not to touch our thresholds».

5. See *Ibid.*, Stanza XXII «By that hair alone.../...thou wert captivated...», Intro. pág. 18: «She takes her God prisoner in the golden mesh of her fair hair».

Pero un día, todo cambió.
No fue que yo despertase,
ni es que cayeran rodando por los suelos mi indecisión y mi ceguera,
es que El,
el Halcón,
se derrumbó en picado sobre mí,
escudriño mi corazón y mis riñones,
y, con sus dulces garras, me atenazó
diciéndome: «Tú serás mío, porque eres mío»;
me engendró,
me poseyó
como un hombre a una mujer
o como una espada el cuerpo que atraviesa.

Y yo no tuve nada que decir ni explicar: Existía.
Existía ya casi tanto como Tú.
Iba volviéndome amor.
Ibas limpiando mi sangre de su escoria,
poniendo verdadera alegría donde sólo hubo fuegos de artificio,
dándome el misterioso «vino adobado» de tus besos,
dejándome amar ya todo sin hacer distinciones,
sin saber siquiera muy bien si «Amor» se escribe con mayúscula o no.

Y ya los dos picoteábamos del mismo Pan
y mamábamos del seno misterioso de tu Madre
y «mi caballería
a vista de las aguas calladas descendía».
Ya no conté mis años: esperarte y amarte era lo mismo,
juntos pastábamos la soledad del mutuo amor herido,
bebíamos «el mosto de granadas», y el silencio
de estar solos y acompañados en la feria del mundo.

But one day everything changed.
 It wasn't that I had awakened,
 or that my indecisions and blindness had fallen off, rolling about the
 ground,
 it is that He,
 the Falcon,
 plunged headlong over me,
 piercing my heart and my kidneys⁶,
 and, with his sweet claws, seized me
 saying: «You will be mine, because you are mine»;
 He begot me,
 He possessed me
 as a man a woman
 or as a sword the body it pierces.

And I had nothing to say or to explain: I existed.
 I existed now almost as much as You.
 I was being transformed into love.
 You were cleansing my blood of its scoria,
 putting true joy where their had only been fireworks,
 giving me the mysterious «mulled wine»⁷ of your kisses,
 allowing me now to love all with no distinctions,
 without even knowing for sure if «Love» is written with a capital or not.

And now we both pecked at the same Bread
 and suckled at the mysterious breast of your Mother
 and «my cavalry
 at the sight of calm waters descended»⁸.
 I no longer counted my years: to wait for You and to love You was the same,
 together we pastured on the loneliness of our mutual wounded love,
 we drank «the new wine of pomegranates»⁹, and the silence
 of being alone and together in the worldly fair.

6. José Luis Martín Descalzo's renal insufficiency was diagnosed in 1984.

7. SAN JUAN, *op. cit.*, *Second Redaction*, *Stanza XXV* «At the touch of a spark, at the spiced wine...».

8. *Ibid.* Stanza XXXIX «...And the cavalry came down at the sight of the waters».

9. *Ibid.*, Stanza XXXVI «...And taste the new wine of the pomegranates».

Y, si ahora me voy, será igual que si me quedo.
Y, si canto, mi voz será de otro.
Y, si late eso que llaman corazón,
no sabré dónde late, ni de quien es.
¡Oh Halcón! ¡Oh pájaro! ¡Oh Amor sin apellidos ni riberas!

And, if now I leave, it will be the same as if I stay.
And, if I sing, my voice will be another's.
And, if that which they call heart should beat,
I would not know where it beat, nor whose it was.
Oh Falcon! Oh bird! Oh Love with neither name nor limits!