

Book of the Cold

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Book of the Cold

ANTONIO GAMONEDA

Translated by

Katherine M. Hedeem &

Víctor Rodríguez Núñez

WORLD POETRY BOOKS

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I am cold beside the springs. Climbed until my heart was weary.

Black grass on the hillsides and violet lilies in the shadows, and
still, what am I doing facing the abyss?

Immensity is short on meaning below the silent eagles.

I hear the shepherd's cry amid manure and lightning.

There's still light beyond the sparrowhawk wings and I go down
to the damp bonfires.

I have heard the snowbell, I have seen the fungus of purity, I have
created oblivion.

Before the winterscorched vineyards I think of fear and light (just
one substance within my eyes),

I think of rain and distances moved through by the ire.

2 *The Snowkeeper*

In his drunkenness he was surrounded by women, shadow, police,
wind.

Lodged veins in the purple heather, vertigo in the purity; the
furious frost flower opened blue in his ear.

Roses, snakes, and spoons were beautiful so long as they settled
in his hands.

Kept watch over the serenity stuck to the shadows, the circles
where burnt flowers settle, the tilt of the vine shoots.

Some afternoons his sibylline hand led us to the nameless place,
to the melancholy of forsaken tools.

3 *Still*

Black sheet in the mercy:
your tongue in a bloodied language.

Sheet still in the ailing substance,
it cries in your mouth and mine
and, moving sweetly through sores,
ties my bones to your human bones.

Don't die more in me, flee my tongue.

Give me your hand to go into the snow.

I loved all the losses.

The nightingale still echoes in the invisible garden.

Love, you lasting on my lips:

There is a disheartened honey beneath the helixes and the
shadows of great women and in the summer anguish it drops
like mercury until it reaches the blue heart sore.

Love, you lasting on my lips: cry between my legs,
eat the disheartened honey.

Your tongue is here; in my mouth

like a fruit in the melancholy.

Take pity on my mouth: sip, lick,
my love, the shadow.

5 *Saturday*

The animal weeping, before it turned yellow it was in your soul;
the animal licking the white wounds,
blind in mercy;
the one sleeping in light and wretched,
near death in the lightning.

The woman whose heart is blue and tirelessly nourishes you,
she is your mother within the ire;
the woman who doesn't forget and is naked in the silence,
she was music in your eyes.

Vertigo in the stillness: bodily substances move into mirrors and
doves burn. You draw judgements and storms and wails.

Like this is the old age light, like this
the white wound apparition.

There is a wall before my eyes.

In the density of air there are invisible signs,
grass whose threads move into the heart full of shadow,
lichen in love residue.

Incest and light. Think about the lens coming before piety, think
about the waters:

if I could move through nonexistence the fountains of mercy
would open

and the blind's great hands would work sweetly,

yet cowardice is beautiful in my mother's hair and on that wall
silence is written.

Weeping in lucidity, concave truths:

"No vale nada la vida, / la vida no vale nada."

Remember this song before you look at my eyes;

look at my eyes in the snow instant.

6 *Cold of Limits*

*...the symbol that was reality,
reality that would become
the symbol in the face of
death.*

Herman Broch*

* *The Death of Virgil*, translated by Jean Starr Untermyer

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Translator's Note
& Acknowledgments

Translating Radical Reality

*There are writers ... who are interested in reality
and turn to verisimilitude or realism.
They are confused; both are artifice.*

Antonio Gamoneda¹

*

ANTONIO GAMONEDA WAS BORN IN Oviedo, Asturias, Spain in 1931. One year later, his father—a poet connected with the Modernista literary movement—died suddenly and Gamoneda moved to León with his mother, where he grew up in the working-class neighborhood, El Crucero. There, in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, he witnessed first-hand the repression brought about by the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, in power from 1939 to 1975. He taught himself to read with his father’s poetry and abandoned his schooling completely by age 14, taking a job as a messenger at a bank to help the family. He continued to work at the bank in different capacities over the next 24 years. Gamoneda was fiercely opposed to Franco’s dictatorship and, during this time, became deeply involved in the resistance movement. While his first book, *Sublevación inmóvil*, was published in 1960 (shortlisted for the Adonais Prize), his next, *Descripción de la mentira*, would only come out in 1977, after Franco’s death. It wasn’t until 1985 that Gamoneda’s work began to receive critical attention, after he was awarded two prominent prizes, the Castilla y León Poetry Prize that same year and the National Poetry Prize in 1987. In 2006, he was awarded the two highest honors a poet can receive in the Spanish-speaking world, the Reina Sofía Poetry Prize and the Cervantes Prize, one of few writers to receive both in the same year.

Despite such honors, Gamoneda is not an “establishment” poet, one concerned with maintaining the status quo or accommodating the reader. Self-taught, working-class, insurgent; all this has

¹ *La pobreza*, p. 19. All translations are the responsibility of the author unless otherwise noted.

peration of human dignity” while it “denounced the dissolute, noisy, disparate, wild, immoral, materialistic energy radiating from new texts” (Bennett, *Workshops* 23–24). A description that is shockingly similar to the “loudmouthed, vulgar” avant-garde writers the poets of experience opposed.

In *Transgressive Circulation*, Johannes Göransson examines the role of the creative writing workshop in creating an aesthetics hostile to certain literary expressions of otherness, and particularly literary translation. He focuses on the influence of the mottos “write what you know” and “find your voice” as manifestations of “a profoundly regionalist model urging writers not to stray into the strange world beyond their home, not to subject themselves to ‘foreign influence’” (21). Instead, Göransson states, they encourage the writer to “communicate this interior essence [...] it is natural, it comes from within, it is not artifice and it is not foreign” (21). In this scenario, what is “other” is simply impossible: how can you write what you don’t know? More to the point, why would you ever want to? The consequences of such an aesthetics for literary translation are, as Lawrence Venuti reminds us, readers—and I would add writers—who are “aggressively monolingual [...] accustomed to fluent translations that invisibly inscribe foreign texts with English-language values and provide readers with the narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other” (15).

IF GAMONEDA’S POETRY CAN BE seen as an alternative to poetry of experience’s “excellent literature,” I would offer up translating *Book of the Cold* into English as a way to challenge similar trends in the U.S. In this way, it is an instance of what I have called, in an earlier essay, strategic positionality.³ There, I argue for choosing to translate Spanish American poets who refuse to follow the conventions of how U.S. Americans want them to write as a way to disrupt the neo-colonialist unidirectional circulation of ideas from North to South back to North again (if the North deems it necessary). Translating a Spanish poet complicates—and ultimately unsettles—this mapping. On the one

3 See my essay “Nuestra América: Strategic Positionality and the Politics of Translation,” <https://actionbooks.org/2020/09/nuestra-america-strategic-positionality-and-the-politics-of-translation-by-katherine-m-hedeem/>.

hand, it motions toward a reconfiguration of the geographical confines of “Peninsular” vs. “Spanish American,” which prevail in the academic field of Hispanic Literatures. On the other, it tips its hat to moments in Spanish-language literary history when those same borders have blurred. Tellingly, they are moments of profound experimentation as well as solidarity, like the intense collaboration between the artists of the historical avant-garde or the exile of Spanish artists to Spanish America in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War.

Gamoneda has often affirmed, “I only know what I think when my own words have told me. It follows that my language, my own language is the creator of consciousness and knowledge. In other words, I only gain knowledge afterwards” (qtd. in Del Piego and Fisher). This is what he calls “poetry’s reality.” He places it in opposition to “poetic realism,” which “degrades poetry,” reducing “the semantic field of poetic language” and supposing “an ignorance of poetry’s possibilities and its potentialities”. Such openness, such plurality of meaning, such lack of fixity might seem like an impossibility for the translators of Gamoneda’s work, and no doubt it is a challenge. Still, I would venture that poetry’s reality is actually quite apt for translation. By its nature, it contradicts the illusion of accuracy and authenticity. The very essence of translation *is* artifice. This, of course, explains why it is often invisible, veiled beneath the words. In what other kind of writing are reality and meaning so explicitly mediated, so much always and already an interpretation? To put it a different way, where better but in translation to reject the “reactionary” idea that “the word says what it says and nothing more”. Indeed, this poetry creates—as a root hidden below the surface, an uprising—a radical reality.⁴

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4 “Realidad radical” is a term coined by Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. Gamoneda uses a similar term “realismo radical” (radical realism) in an essay from 1999, “¿Poesía en los años 2000?” *La alegría de los naufragios*, no. 1–2, Huerga and Fierro, pp. 25–28.

The Author

ANTONIO GAMONEDA was born in Oviedo, Asturias, Spain in 1931 and grew up in León. Gamoneda was deeply involved in the resistance movement opposed to the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, in power from 1939 to 1975. His first book was published in 1960 and short-listed for the Adonais Prize. He did not bring out another book until 1977. His work only began to receive the attention it deserved after he was awarded the Castilla y León Poetry Prize in 1985 and the National Poetry Prize in 1987. In 2006, Gamoneda received the two highest honors a writer can receive in the Spanish-speaking world, the Reina Sofia Poetry Prize and the Cervantes Prize. Self-taught and prolific, a unique voice in post-Civil War Spanish poetry, he continues to be a vital and powerful poetic presence in Spain and throughout the world.

The Translators

KATHERINE M. HEDEEN is a translator, literary critic, and essayist. A specialist in Latin American poetry, she has translated some of the most respected voices from the region. Her publications include book-length collections by Jorgenrique Adoum, Juan Bañuelos, Juan Calzadilla, Juan Gelman, Fayad Jamís, Hugo Mujica, José Emilio Pacheco, Víctor Rodríguez Núñez, and Ida Vitale, among many others. Her work has been a finalist for both the Best Translated Book Award and the National Translation Award. She is a recipient of two NEA Translation grants in the US and a PEN Translates award in the UK. She is a Managing Editor for Action Books. She resides in Ohio, where she is Professor of Spanish at Kenyon College.

VÍCTOR RODRÍGUEZ NÚÑEZ (Havana, 1955) is one of Cuba's most celebrated contemporary writers, with over fifty collections of his poetry published throughout the world. He has been the recipient of major awards in the Spanish-speaking region, including, in 2015, the Loewe Prize and most recently the Manuel Alcántara Prize. His poems have been translated into Arabic, Chinese, French, English, German, Hebrew, Italian, Macedonian, Serbian, Swedish, and Vietnamese and he has read his poetry in more than forty countries. In the last decade, seven book-length English translations of his work have appeared in the US and the UK. He divides his time between Gambier, Ohio, where he is currently Professor of Spanish at Kenyon College, and Havana, Cuba.