Florentino and The Devil
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Translated by Timothy Adès
with Gloria Carnevali

Florentino y el Diablo

Shearsman Books
About the Texts

The poetry in this book, Spanish and English on facing pages, is the work of three people. The Spanish is by Alberto Arvelo Torrealba, the English is by the translator-poet Timothy Adès, a specialist in rhyme and metre. Gloria Carnevali knows the country and customs of the great plains, the quality of the people, the splendour of the flora and fauna. Her advice, unstinting and indispensable, enabled the translator to create this English text.

The Author

Alberto Arvelo Torrealba was a lawyer, educator and poet. Born 4 September 1905 in the city of Barinas, he was a schoolboy there and went on to the Liceo in Caracas where he took his bachelor's degree in 1927. He studied law in the Central University of Venezuela, qualifying as an Advocate and, in 1935, as a Doctor of Political Science.

A poet in the tradition of the “Bards of the Plains”, he published his first volume of verses, Música del Cuatro, in 1928. A dedicated teacher, he taught Spanish Language and Literature in various Colleges and Liceos of the Metropolitan Zone, 1935-6: Sacred Heart of Jesus College, Sucre College, Polytechnic Institute, Liceo Caracas, Andrés Bello and Fermín Toro. He became Technical Inspector of secondary education in the Federal District, and of primary education in Barinas and Apure, in 1936, and was appointed Secretary of the Government of Portuguesa State, 1937, and President of the Technical Council for Education, 1940. In the same year he published his Glosas al Cancionero, a model of poetry with popular roots which also contained the first version of his poem Florentino y el Diablo. In 1941-44 he was President of the State of Barinas. While in office, he had the riverbeds of the Pagüey and the Masparro dredged, and restored the trading routes in the Western Plains region. A member of the Court of Appeal, 1948, Ambassador of Venezuela in Bolivia, 1951-2, and in Italy, 1952, he was then Minister of Agriculture and Stockbreeding, 1952-5. Retiring from politics, he devoted himself to his profession and his literary calling. He published a
The principal works of Arvelo Torrealba include: *Caminos que Andan; Cantas: Poemas; Florentino y el Diablo; Lazo Martí: Vigencia en Lejanía; Música de Cuatro*; and *Obra Poética*. In 1974 Orlando Araujo published a book on Arvelo Torrealba called *Contrapunto de la Vida y Muerte: ensayo sobre la poesía de Alberto Arvelo Torrealba*.

**The Translator**

Timothy Adès is a British translator-poet who works with rhyme and metre. He won the *Times Literary Supplement* Premio Valle-Inclán Prize for his version of *Homero en Cuernavaca* by the Mexican poet, Alfonso Reyes, and has awards for translations of the French poets Victor Hugo, Jean Cassou and Robert Desnos. Volumes of these poets are published or forthcoming. He translates from German and Greek, especially the poems of Brecht and Sikelianós. He is in demand at festivals and poetry nights, and runs a bookstall of poetry in translation.

**The Venezuelan Consultant**

Gloria Carnevali, formerly a curator at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Caracas, director of the Galeria de Arte Moderno Jesús Soto at Ciudad Bolívar in Venezuela, a research fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge and Cultural Attaché at the Venezuelan Embassy in London, has written two books on the philosophy of art, and translated for the Cambridge University Press. She has travelled throughout Venezuela studying the folklore, customs and music of the people, and coordinated programmes on the Venezuelan *llanos* for BBC radio and television. She now lives and writes in England.

Thanks are due to the Arvelo family, and to Sacven.
“…Florentino the Araucan, the great Singer of the Plain who expressed everything in verse, and whom even The Devil himself could not vanquish in the contest to see which could improvise the most, one night when he came disguised as a Christian: Florentino’s voice was giving out, but his well of inspiration was still running over, and when it was almost time for the cocks to crow, mentioning the Holy Trinity in a stanza, he drove his opponent back into Hell, head over heels with his rattle and everything.”

—Rómulo Gallegos, *Doña Bárbara*
(Rómulo Gallegos became President of Venezuela.)

“…I found the most beautiful lands in the world. I arrived there one day before noon, and seeing this verdure and this beauty, I decided to cast anchor and to see the inhabitants…”

—Christopher Columbus in 1499, referring to territory now occupied by Venezuela, which he called *Tierra de Gracia.*
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El reto

El coplero Florentino
por el ancho terraplén
caminos del Desamparo
desanda a golpe de seis.
Puntero en la soledad
que enlutan llamas de ayer,
macolla de tierra errante
le nace bajo el corcel.
Ojo ciego el lagunazo
sin junco, garza ni grey,
dura cuenca enterronada
donde el casco da traspié.
Los escuáldidos espinos
desnudan su amarillez,
las chicharras atolondran
el cenizo anochece.
Parece que para el mundo
la palma sin un vaivén.
El coplero solitario
vive su grave altivez
de ir caminando el erial
como quien pisa vergel.
En el caño de Las Ánimas
se para muerto de sed
y en las patas del castaño
ve lo claro del jagüey.
El cacho de beber tira,
en agua lo oye caer;
cuando lo va levantando
se le salpican los pies,
pero del cuerno vacío
ni gota pudo beber.
Vuelve a tirarlo y salpica
The Challenge

Florentino, poet and singer, 
at the sixth peal rides again 
down the trails of Misadventure 
on the broad unflooded plain. 
Cattle-herd of the lonesome vastness, 
clad in black by the flames that charred, 
loose earth at his horse’s footfall 
rises up in a dusty cloud. 
A sightless eye is the lochan, 
no heron nor herd nor reed:
with clods the ground is littered 
to trip the stumbling steed. 
The sorry buckthorn bushes 
are faded and bare and stark, 
the drone of crickets weighs heavy 
on the gathering ashen dark. 
It seems that the world has halted, 
no breeze in the palm is seen: 
all alone is the craftsman of verses, 
in his lofty pride serene, 
travelling over the wild lands 
as if in a garden green. 
At the runnel of Las Ánimas 
he has halted, dying of thirst: 
he sees the foot of his chestnut horse 
in the shining pool immersed. 
His drinking-horn he has lowered, 
in the water he hears it fall; 
he draws it up, and it spatters 
his feet, dripping sweet and small: 
yet from the empty vessel 
he can drink no drop at all. 
Again he throws, and clear water
el agua clara otra vez:
ávido sorbo susurran
los belfos del palafrén;
dulce rosario destila
del empapado cordel;
mas sólo arena los ojos
en el turbio fondo ven.
Soplo de quema el suspiro,
dobladas espigas sin mies,
lá sabia ardiendo en la imagen
de nunca reverdecer,
mirada y rumbo el coplero
pone para su caney
cuando con trote sombrío
oye un jinete tras él.
Negra se le ve la manta,
50 negro el caballo también;
bajo el negro pelo’e guama
la cara no se le ve.
Pasa cantando en romance
sin la mirada volver:
“En negra orilla del mundo
se han de hallar de quien a quien
aquél que ve sin mirar
y aquél que mira sin ver.
Cuando esté más hondo el río
aguárdeme en Santa Inés,
que yo lo voy a buscar
para cantar con usté.
Soy retador de juglares
desde los siglos del rey.
Le sobra con esperarme
si me quiere conocer.”

Mala sombra del espanto
cruza por el terraplén:
hacia mármoles de ocaso
70
spatters him once again:
the dry lips of the palfrey
hum with a thirsty refrain.
Sweet rosaries of droplets
drip from the well-drenched string;
when he gazes deep in the vessel,
sand, sand is the only thing.
His brow and his breath are burning
like wilted stalks with no grain,
the very sap boils, you imagine
it will never grow green again.
To his home and cabin the Rhymer
has turned his course and his mind,
when he hears the sinister hoofbeat
of a horseman trotting behind.
Black to behold is the poncho,
black is the horse withal;
under the black sombrero
the face was not seen at all
The horseman goes singing a ballad,
he does not turn his eye:
‘On the world’s black edge we must measure
man against man, you and I.
One of us sees without looking,
one looks but he does not see:
At Santa Inés, when the river
is deep, pray wait for me.
I would seek you out to try you,
and with you I would sing.
I have contended with jesters
from the centuries of the king.
Attend me there, you shall know me,
you shall have your reckoning.’

The spectre’s evil shadow
sweeps over the mighty plain:
long as a cypress it stretches
se alarga como un ciprés. 
Jinetes de lejanía 
la acompañan en tropel; 
la encobijan y la borran 
pajas del anochecer. 
Florentino taciturno 
coge el banco de través. 
Puntero en la soledad 
que enlutan llamas de ayer 
caminante sin camino, 
resero sin una res, 
parece que va soñando 
con la sabana en la sien.  
En un verso largo y hondo 
se le estira el tono fiel, 
con su América andaluza 
en lo español barinés:  
“Sabana, sabana, tierra 
que hace sudar y querer, 
parada con tanto rumbo, 
con agua y muerta de sed. 
Una con mi alma en lo sola, 
una con Dios en la fe; 
sobre tu pecho desnudo 
yo me paro a responder. 
Sepa el cantador sombrío 
que yo cumplo con mi ley 
y como canté con todos 
tengo que cantar con él”.
to the bloodshot dying sun.
Riding abroad with the spectre
goes a troop of horsemen afar:
by slivers of night they are hidden,
in the dusk they disappear.
Florentino silent and brooding
turns his course away to the side.
Cattle-herd of the lonesome vastness,
clad in black by the flames that charred,
a man of the road, but of no road,
a herdsman without a herd,
it seems that he goes dreaming,
the savannah is in his brain:
he sings a song, tuned truly,
a long and a deep refrain
of his Andaluz America,
of Barinas, language of Spain:
‘Savannah, my savannah,
land sweated for and loved,
unmoving in all directions,
watered and water-starved:
one with my soul in aloneness,
one in the faith with the Lord:
on your naked breast I have halted,
this answer I record.
Let him know, the shadowy singer,
I am a man of my word:
I who have sung with all men,
with him shall my voice be heard.’
Santa Inés

Noche de fiero chubasco
por la enlutada llanura,
y de encendidas chipolas
que el rancho del peón alumbran.
Adentro suena el capacho,
afuera bate la lluvia.
Vena en corazón de cedro
el bordón mana ternura.
No lejos asoma el río
pecho de sabana sucia.
Inmóviles carameras
pávidos brazos desnudan.
Escombro de minas lóbregas
el trueno arrastra y derrumba.
Más allá coros errantes,
ventarrón de negra furia.
Y mientras se duerme el son
en las cuerdas vagabundas
el rayo a la palma sola
le tira señeras puntas.
Canta una voz sabanera
por el pensamiento pura,
por la ilusión cristalina,
por el aguardiente turbia:
“Piqué con la medianoche
cimarroneras en fuga:
le eché soga a un orejano
y enlacé la media luna.
“Después cruzando sediento
sobre la arena desnuda
vide la tierra estrellada
con lirios de primer lluvia.
“Y como si todo fuera
por caprichos de fortuna,
le abrí mi lazo al amor:
Santa Inés

Night of a fearsome cloudburst
over the black-garbed plain:
candles burn in rough holders,
lighting a humble domain:
indoors, the sounding maracas,
outdoors, the pounding rain.
The harp is heart-vein of cedar,
its burden is low and sweet.
The river bathes the savannah,
cleansing its breast of the dirt.
The rooted trees have antlers
that are terrified arms, stripped bare;
the thunder disturbs dark tailings,
hurling them everywhere.
There’s many a moaning chorus,
black fury of storms that stray;
The wandering harpstrings slacken,
the music has died away,
and the lonely palm is stricken
with bolts of the lightning-ray.
A voice of the savannah
sings, pure in thought, transparent,
crystal-clear in suggestion,
rough and raw with liquid spirit.
“At midnight I have herded
the runaway cimarrón:
aimed my rope at a beast unbranded
and captured the bright half-moon.
“I journeyed then dry-throated
on the bare sandy plain:
I saw the land star-studded
with lilies of fresh first rain.
“It may be our fortunes are settled
by a fate that’s whimsical:
I cast my lasso for loving,
sólo enlacé la amargura.
“Desde entonces en mi libro hay no más que dos pinturas: el chaparro en la candela y el pimpollo en la garúa.
“Por eso sé distinguir en los ayes que te cruzan, montaña de Santa Inés, clamor de la gente tuya: Fusileros federales en godas cabalgaduras anunciando la pelea: la del siempre con el nunca.”
Súbito un hombre en la puerta: índio de grave postura, ojos negros, pelo negro, frente de cálida arruga, pelo de guama luciente que con el candil relumbra, faja de hebilla lustrosa con letras que se entrecruzan, mano de sobrio tatuaje, lunar de sangre en la nuca. Un golpe de viento guapo le pone a volar la blusa, y se le ve jeme y medio de puñal en la cintura. Entra callado y se apuesta para el lado de la música. Dos dientes de oro le aclaran la sonrisa taciturna. “Oiga, vale, ése es el Diablo” la voz por la sala cruza. Fíjese cómo llegó, sin cobija ni montura, planchada y seca la ropa, con tanto barrial y lluvia
caught bitterness, that was all.
“From that day on, two pictures are all that my book displays:
the bud of a flower in the drizzle,
the evergreen oak ablaze.
“That is how I distinguish, when I hear the clamours warring on your high ground, Santa Inés, your own true people’s cheering:
The Federals firing volleys as the Gothic cavalry charges, proclaiming the struggle’s fury:
Forever against Nevermore!”
See now, a man at the door!
An Indian, grave his bearing, swarthy his eyes and skin,
his brow furrowed with cunning.
In the light of the candles the man’s sombrero glitters:
on his waist-sash, shiny buckle and interlacing letters.
On his neck a mole of blood, sober tattoo on his hand:
then up flies his blouse with a strong gust of wind, revealing at his belt a dagger, nine inches long.
Silent he enters, and stands where the music beckons to song.
A couple of golden teeth lighten his taciturn smile.
“Look, man, it’s the Devil” the word goes round the hall.
“Think of how he arrived, no poncho and no steed:
his clothes are pressed and dry, for all the rain and the mud:
alpargatas nuevas,
relucientes de negrura.
Dicen que pasó temprano,
como quien viene de Nutrias,
con un oscuro bonguero
por el paso de Las Brujas”.
Florentino está silbando
sones de añeja bravura
y su diestra echa a volar
ansias que pisa la zurda,
soy menor de soledades
que los dedos desmenuzan
cuando el indio pico de oro
con su canto lo saluda:

**EL DIABLO**
Catire quita pesares,
contésteme esta pregunta:
¿Cuál es el gallo
que siempre lleva
ventaja en la lucha
y aunque le den en el pico
tiene picada segura?

**FLORENTINO**
Tiene picada segura
el gallo que se rebate
y no se atraviesa nunca,
bueno si tira de pie,
mejor si pica en la pluma.

**EL DIABLO**
Mejor si pica en la pluma.
Si sabe tanto de todo diga
¿cuál es la república
donde el tesoro es botín
sin dificultad ninguna?
with new little espadrilles
polished black, he’s neatly shod.
They say he came here before,
as if from Waterdog City,
with a shadowy boatman
by way of the Pass of Witches.”
Florentino is whistling
songs of old bravery:
his right hand soars with yearning,
his left plucks pensively:
his fingers shred his longing
in the mournful minor key,
when the Indian accosts him,
golden-tongued, with melody:

THE DEVIL
Lily-face, Jovial Jack!
Now, answer me back:
What fighting-cock
takes a trick in the ruck,
the cock of the walk:
though struck in the beak,
he makes a good peck?

FLORENTINO
He makes a good peck,
the cock who tracks back
and doesn’t lash back,
keeps his feet, or still better
he pecks the cock-feather.

THE DEVIL
He pecks the cock-feather.
If you’re such a know-all,
say, what’s the republic
whose treasure is nobbled
without any trouble?