The Book, Behind the Dune
Andrés Sánchez Robayna

The Book, Behind the Dune

translated
from Spanish by
Louis Bourne

Shearsman Books
What do we expect nowadays from those who write, paint or compose music, or from those who revive tragedies from other centuries on the stage? Regarding the world’s present state, that ship which is dislocated and perhaps ends up sinking, is it better for us to hear unceasingly, in texts and images, only the breaking apart and the cracking of the shipwreck, or is it better to face the storm? Now then, this determination can only be taken by those that keep in their memory the fundamental necessities of existence, its simplest aspirations, conscious that life always partakes of death but also of birth, always has despair but also resurrection. And so it is those few who should speak, in the same way that it is they whom it is essential to listen to. Without a shadow of doubt, it is necessary to announce the danger, foresee the coming disaster, but not with words of mere fright, uselessly repeated, but from the deep, still living, totality of the man and woman of our time, scared, confused, but continuing to be attached to daily existence on an earth that, even today, preserves the largest part of its mysterious beauty.

This voice, as much positive as negative, with even more positivity than negativity on being able to preserve the kindnesses of hope, constitutes, at least in poetry, the first, as well as the most difficult, of tasks to which those who write should devote themselves. And therefore the most authentic poets of this period of crisis may be those who separate themselves from the fascination that languages increasingly exercise—language in itself, owing to the fruitless games its signifiers allow—because they know that words only have reason for being and value by evoking a reality that transcends—with all their infinite and, at the same time, immediately perceptible, depth—the merely superficial signifieds that are the obligatory effect of conceptual thought. Poets, those that deserve this name, can, without any doubt, resort to images, even the most daring, gratuitous and disconnected ones, at a glance, from the evidence of the earthy site, be it in the desires and affections of the particular existence which is the only reality as well as a criterion for truth.
Great poetry not only goes beyond the mirages that never stop stirring up—darkening—the partial representations involved in our analytical languages, but they also go as directly as possible to the flower blooming, the daybreak dawning, the child playing, the misfortune striking, the joys that give strength.

For this reason, I am delighted to see this work by Andrés Sánchez Robayna translated into French.¹ I do not know much Spanish, but, yes, enough to have been able to appreciate from the first day, some time ago, now, that Andrés Sánchez Robayna feels comfortable in poetry, that he knows what ‘the new time’ expects of us which Rimbaud foresaw as ‘very severe’; and this makes him one of those minds that both reflection as well as creation can count on in the debate that now, more than ever, sets poetry up against simple literature. I am delighted to be able to read The Book, Behind the Dune better, on having the original text at hand, and I even promise myself, one day not far off, to take advantage of this beautiful poem to reflect on poetry under the patronage that Sánchez Robayna himself has, moreover, wanted to present.

At the beginning of his work, he indeed quotes some verses by Wordsworth from his Prelude, one of the greatest works of Western poetry, one of those that help poetry lovers recognize themselves in it. And how better, perhaps, to understand what is poetically true and worthwhile in life than to listen with him to those words that remind us that we only have a place and destiny on earth in ‘infinity’, in the ‘hope that can never die’ and in this ‘something evermore about to be’, which is surely what poets of every century have been trying to reach, pledging their desire, their effort, their always frustrated and always recovered beliefs? Sánchez Robayna offers us a poem, but he also incites us to question the poetic in this century, and this double contribution in the same work is, in itself, a proof of its quality, timeliness and importance for us.

Yves Bonnefoy

*(translated by Louis Bourne)*

¹This preface was originally written for the French translation.
whether we be young or old,
Our destiny, our being’s heart and home,
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.

—W. W., *The Prelude*, VI, 603-608
To
M. and A.

SAMPLER
Note

As much for its nature as for the demands of its theme (centred, in good part, on my formative years), *The Book, Behind the Dune* contains some quotations from various classical and modern texts. Because of their length and their unquestionable importance in the structure of one of the fundamental motifs of the poem, I only would like to mention here the quotation in fragment XI from Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* (Eleventh Book, Chapter 27) in the well-known translation by Father Ribadeneyra.

A. S. R.
June 25th, 2001

Note to the Second Edition

On the suggestion of some readers and friends, I have decided to include, under ‘Notes’, a fuller account of the quotations and main references the poem contains.

A. S. R.
February 26th, 2003
I

Ahora,
en la mañana oscura del desceñido octubre,
en que, umbroso y en calma, yace el mar
entregado a la pura aquiescencia del cielo,
al deslizarse de las nubes blancas
que un gris ya casi mineral golpea,
marmóreo, dilatado,
ahora,
mientras el tiempo gira
a punto de ser siempre alumbramiento,
sin dar a luz más que el instante cierto
y siempre tembloroso,
y damos vueltas en su vientre ciego,
y entrega solamente
un puñado de arena
que vemos escurrirse entre las manos,
mientras un niño juega,
después de echar los dados,
ahora,
sólo ahora,
el comienzo
comienza.

II

Todo comienzo es ilusorio.
Todo comienzo es sólo un enlazarse
del principio y del fin en la cadena
del tiempo, es el instante
en que creímos ver el nacimiento
y el nacimiento es sólo un acto
de lo incesantemente renacido
I

Now, on the dark morning of October unleashed, when the sea lies shady and calm, delivered to sky’s pure acquiescence, on sliding down from the white clouds that an almost mineral grey pounds, marmoreal, extensive, now, while time turns on the verge of always being illumination, giving birth to nothing but the sure and always trembling instant, and we turn around in its blind womb, and it delivers only a handful of sand we see slipping away in our hands, while a boy plays, after throwing dice, now, only now, the beginning begins.

II

Every beginning’s deceptive. Every beginning’s only a linking of beginning and end in the chain of time: the instant when we believed we saw birth and birth as only an act of what is unceasingly reborn—
—es decir, estas líneas semejan un comienzo
pero el comienzo surge a cada instante,
como la lluvia que esta tarde
vi caer sobre el mar
y esta tarde es tan sólo una tarde del tiempo que renace
en un eterno recomienzo
y la lluvia y la tarde se han hundido en el tiempo
en el que ruedan siempre las nubes agolpadas
sobre los mármoles celestes

y la línea inicial es un comienzo
y la línea final será un comienzo.

III

Allí, en aquella parte
del libro que se abre
de mi memoria, escucho
un rumor de arboledas, un barranco interpuesto
entre laderas altas en las que recorría
las piedras, las veredas,
la tarde en la que, solo, me alejé de la casa
y grabé en una piedra,
bajo los cielos cómplices,
la inicial de mi nombre
para dejar señal
del nombre y su secreto.

Y los cielos copiaban
el color de la tierra.
that is, these lines resemble a beginning
but the beginning springs up at every instant,
like the rain I saw
this afternoon falling over the sea,
and this afternoon’s just an afternoon
in an eternal restarting of time
and rain and afternoon have sunk into the time
in which crowded clouds always roll
on celestial marbles

and the initial line is a beginning
and the final line will be another.

III

There, in that part
of the book opening
in my memory, I listen
to a rustling of groves, a cliff intervening
between high slopes on which I crossed
the stones, the paths,
the afternoon when, alone, I left the house
and etched on a stone,
beneath colluding skies,
the initial of my name
in order to leave the name’s
sign and its secret.

And the skies copied
the colour of earth.
Me seguía un perrillo hambriento y fiel. Yo era fiel también a sus pasos, y no sabría decir, ahora, quién seguía a quién. Y exploraba con mi hermana, o con algún amigo, y muchas veces solo, los pasajes del fuego sediento, el verano en las bellas laderas, o los felices charcos del otoño insular. En lo más alto de los árboles hice un mirador sobre la casa y sobre los caminos que hasta ella llevaban, la camisa manchada por el níspero de julio y con tierra en las manos, descalzo sobre la tierra húmeda y rojiza.

¿Podré decir, así, que el cielo como manto allá arriba protegía con su extendida claridad mis pasos? Amada tierra de esplendor, cavé desde entonces en ti, y en ti me acogerás.

Cada día, una página del desplegado libro de la luz se entregaba a mis ojos. ¡Fulgurante blancura pisada por los pasos del niño que corría sobre los médanos solares! Luego, sobre la hierba, restañaban las heridas manantes.
IV

A little dog followed me, hungry and faithful. I, too, was faithful to his steps, and wouldn’t know how to say now who followed whom. And I explored with my sister, or with some friend, and many times alone, the thirsty fire’s passages, the summer on the lovely slopes, the island autumn’s glad puddles. In the trees’ highest perch I made a lookout over the house and the roads that led up to it, my shirt stained by July loquats, with dirt on my hands, barefoot on the moist, reddish earth.

May I say, then, that the sky like a cloak there above protected my footsteps with its sprawling brilliance? Beloved earth of splendour, I have dug since then in you, and in you you’ll welcome me.

V

Each day, a page from the unfolded book of light offered itself to my eyes. Radiant whiteness trampled by the footsteps of a boy who ran over solar sand dunes! Later, on the grass, running wounds stopped bleeding.
Oh renacida claridad,
aprendí pronto a amar, cerca de los naranjos,
la pedrería de la luz, el sol
cortado por las hojas en la hierba,
multiplicados soles diminutos
en el agua sencilla, en el estanque
y en las claras acequias. Aprendía.

VI

Los pies desnudos en la tierra, sobre
las uvas para el vino de noviembre,
sobre las piedras del barranco seco,
sobre la luz y su deshacimiento.

El pie dejaba
su huella por los mundos, se manchaba
con el limo solar. En las acequias
se lavaba tan sólo
para poder ser uno con el sol.

Pisaba el pie la luz.

El sol tenía
la anchura del pie humano.

VII

El rumor de los árboles
y su texto infinito se escribían
con negros caracteres en el ojo
del sol. Y desde allí,
en remolino prieto, resbalaban
cayendo en la mirada como una fundición
O reborn brightness,
I soon learned to love, near the orange trees,
the precious stones of light, the sun
sliced by blades in the grass,
tiny suns multiplied
in simple water, in the basin
and in clear water channels. I learned.

VI

Bare feet on earth, on
grapes for November wine,
on stones of the dry ravine,
on the light and its undoing.

The foot left
its print on worlds, stained
with solar slime. In the water channels
it was washed only
to be one with the sun.

The foot trod the light.

The sun had
the width of a human foot.

VII

The rustling of trees
and their infinite text were written
with black characters in the sun’s
eye. And from there,
in a dark, tight swirl, they slipped
into my gaze like a melting
de oro y hojas exactas
sobre el punto del iris.

Oh desasida claridad,
echado sobre el césped contemplaba
la avalancha solar, el aluvión
suave de nuestra luz
abrazando los mundos. Yo habitaba
en las torres del sol.

VIII

¿Era Sirio o Capella, Vega o Pólux?

Cuántas veces la vi temblar, arriba,
tras las montañas que tomaba
la espesura nocturna, entre las hojas
vibrátiles de abril, o echado yo,
las manos en la nuca,
por la arena de agosto,
sobre la lenta duna que aún guardaba el calor,
y cuántas veces quise
penetrar por su nombre en el secreto
silabario del cielo,
y saber la palabra que escribían
las luminarias renacientes, claro
secreto escrito en el fulgor supremo,
en la curva estelar del cielo tembloroso.

IX

Rosa carnal del risco, oscuro nudo
de pétalos que abrazan los soles y las lunas
of gold and precise leaves
on the dot of the iris.

O brightness loosed,
stretched out on the grass, I pondered
the solar avalanche, our
light’s soft flood
embracing worlds. I dwelled
in towers of the sun.

VIII

Was it Sirius or Capella, Vega or Pollux?

How many times I saw it tremble above,
behind the mountains, taking on
the thickness of night, among April’s
quivering leaves. Or I stretched out,
hands beneath nape,
along the August sand
on the sluggish dune still holding diurnal heat.
And how often, through
its name, I wanted to delve into the secret
syllabary of heaven,
and know the word written
by renascent lights, a bright
secret inscribed in the supreme glow,
in the trembling sky’s stellar curve.

IX

Carnal cliff rose, dark knot
of petals hugging suns and moons
y los aires que soplan desde el mar atezado,
aparca que reposa: mira pasar a un niño.

Tú que fuiste mirada y que gobiernas
las horas y los días y las noches
en lo invisible que renace, mira
a un niño abandonar tu paraje aterido.

Míralo despoblar tu reino absorbo,
dejar tu compañía para siempre,
el grácil contubernio. Un niño deja
el exento país entre el gorrión y el góngaro.

X

Comenzaba a saber
(pero sólo del modo en que ignorarlo
es una forma de conocimiento)
que, al igual que el silencio
ha de ser una parte del decir, que al igual
que la visión del cielo
forma parte del cielo,
una nube interior, muy parecida
ta que fluye quieta en la mañana
hecha de transparencia entrecruzada,
se alza hasta la visión
de la nada que somos, y que es todo.
Y la visión humana
se llega a transformar en la experiencia
de esta nada que está en ninguna parte.
Es una nube. Sólo
años después sabría que su nombre,
entre otros nombres justos que la llaman
y el nombre conseguido de los nombres,
and breezes blowing from the bronzed sea, animal in repose: behold a boy walking by.

You who were a gaze governing hours, days and nights in the invisible and reborn, behold a boy abandoning your frozen spot.

Look at him leaving your entrancing kingdom, forsaking your company forever, the happy cohabitation. A boy leaves the open country between sparrow and spike.

X

I began to know (but only in the manner that not knowing is a form of understanding) that, just as silence must be a part of speech, just as the vision of heaven forms part of it, an inner cloud, so similar to the one flowing quietly in the morning made of interwoven transparence, rises toward the vision of the nothingness we are, that is everything. And human vision manages to be transformed into the experience of this nothingness that is nowhere. It’s a cloud. Only years later would I know its name, among the other right names we call it and the name obtained from all names,