

ALONE WITH YOU,
MEDELLÍN

By Gonzalo Arango

[Translated by Jacob Lagnado]



INTRODUCTION TO TRANSLATION SPANISH-ENGLISH OF "MEDELLÍN A SOLAS CONTIGO" DE GONZALO ARANGO.

I began translating the following essay in the Casa del Traductor in Tarazona, Spain along with a selection of other stories, essays and manifestos from the Gonzalo Arango collection *Obra Negra* (Plaza y Janes 1987). Literary translation throws up an enormous challenge: to what extent should literal meaning be sacrificed in order to convey what the translator judges to be the personality of the author's writing? I tried as best as possible to retain Arango's poetic style. But how could this be achieved when an expression could not convey the same quality in translation without altering the meaning?

An example of this problem can be found in the expression in the final line: "Amor mio, hueles a diablo" (see footnote). I tried to compensate for moments like this where the translation fails to adequately capture poetic form or content by adding rhythm where a word for word translation left the English sounding dull and weighted. An example of this would be "With a cigarette in my mouth and hands in my pockets, I saunter happily..." for "Desciendo fumando cigarrillo, feliz con las manos en los bolsillos..."

To translate local terms in this essay and other writings of *Obra negra* I found particularly useful *Lexicon de Colombianismos* by Mario Alario Di Filippo (2nd edition, Banco de la República, Bogotá 1983).

I chose the essay because I feel it retains freshness and relevance to the city of Medellín today. "*Medellín a solas...*" was written in 1963 (in *Sexo y Saxófono*), but read today it seems to have captured the initial phase of an accelerated drive towards the construction of a concrete sub-Los Angeles metropole, as reflected most recently in aggressive and aesthetically dehumanizing structures such as Parque San Antonio and the Edificio Inteligente. We meet Arango the poet in parks and on the night-time walks, seeking space for activities which are not at the service of production

and consumption. But each time the city closes in on him, denying him the time and place. His protest is shrouded in metaphysical appeals to Spirit and Soul, reminding us of 19th century Romantic in their artistic reaction against industrialization in Europe. But on other levels the essay belongs to the present it was written in, and even the future. Here, and in the Nadaist movement in general, we find a peculiarly Colombian reflection of the "revolt against work" which characterised the rebellions of the 1960s in the industrial consumer societies which Medellín tries to copy ("No has tenido tiempo de aprender y vivir, solo trabajar y morir"), and supported on a theoretical as well as a practical level by tendencies such as the French Situationists and the Italian Autonomists. And today, his critique of the ideology of the progress (and thus logically development) finds echo in the more serious sectors of the environmental movement, with their opposition to road-building and hydroelectric projects for example.

Every movement contains its own antithesis, and Arango ends the essay by rejoicing in the antithesis to the city's dehumanizing tendencies in the shape of his master Fernando Gonzalez, and upon hearing poetry flow naturally from the lips of a street vendor. The Medellín with whom the converse turns out to be the birthplace of both humanizing and dehumanizing forces. His is a cry against the shaping or stereotyping of the city inhabitant in the image of latter: the paisa as the obsessive but blind worker, producing and making money at the expense of all else.

Since the 1960s the dehumanizing tendencies have multiplied within the cities heart: the industry whose growth Arango commented on has since stagnated, and the fight for economic survival makes the critique of work itself less easy, if ultimately just as valid today. The confrontations he experiences in the essay seem innocent in comparison with those which the city generates today. Nevertheless the alter ego (antithesis) which Arango celebrated rears its head in multiple forms, from poetry festivals to street protests, which directly or indirectly serve to break the incessant movement or traffic and trade unleashed by the city fathers.



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"In Medellín a solas..." Arango states that he cannot love the city because its beauty is perfect ("el corazón necesita ausencias para aumentar el deseo") This translation equally seeks to attain some of the beauty of the original, with not pretensions of perfection.

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A bus leaves me halfway there. I get fifteen minutes of landscape for thirty centavos. I climb the hill, getting breathless in the heat before reaching the top. An avenue of roses, buds bursting under the afternoon sun, leads me to the house. My flesh captures the scent of nature's coitus still hanging in the air.

The city looks splendid from these heights. This would be the perfect environment for mystics, but the people who live here are Antioquian industrialists.

I still haven't tasted anything, and yet I feel drunk. The voluptuous air intoxicates my senses. I turn down a drink because I want to be able to savour this fascinating landscape, which so resembles glory itself. A blackberry juice will do to start.

Marina teaches me the names of the plants in her garden: gardenias, wallflowers, chrysanthemums and sunflowers. What a feast! Every colour and smell is present. The scandalous excesses of a land where miracles are born from the love given by the heart and hands of a woman.

How I wish I could live in the midst of this splendour of sunshine, energy, and poetry. Then again, perhaps not. The violence it unleashes would end up killing me, it's so inhuman. My soul also loves poverty, aridity and the bare rocks. Excess ruins my pleasure. And this beauty is perfect. Happiness would find it's nirvana here, but would then suffer a dismal death. The heart needs absences to foment desires.

Installed in the library, we drink a dry, provocative liquor and feel good. Behind the glass panels there's a terrace of pine trees which resembles a balcony wobbling on the edge of a cliff. Below, the city!

Its neon lights sparkle, anchored in the darkness. The trees sway in



the wind. The sky gently twinkles. I feel stripped of my spirit, empty of ideas, conscious only of a drunken euphoria inside me.

A sense of joy gradually takes me over as the night falls. My being is reconciled with the world. Tonight I only exist to say yes, to give consent. I have no doubts. Not even the murderous thought of death. Perfect fulfilment in the world and in my soul: a stony peace, boundless joy.

The library smells of eucalyptus and roses. I tell myself that it's the good smell of knowledge, of an innocence written only in the air, and beyond, in the stars.

When I step out onto the terrace at midnight I see the city all lit up and happy on this fresh summer night.

Oh, my beloved Medellin, city of my sufferings, where I have died so many times! My thoughts turn to tragedy in your high mountains, in the half dark shadows cast over your parks, in your mad chase for money. But I love your skies, clear like the blue eyes of a gringa.

You banished me from your mechanical heart into a night of exile beneath your towering chimneys, where the only sounds are your steel lungs pumping, your industries wheezing, and the whispering of the rosary behind your walls.

Under these divine skies you forced me to live the hell of crushed hopes. But I still couldn't live you at the mercy of merchants who work for spiritless gods in plate glass temples.

I admit I never liked your philosophy of action, and instead I chose poetry. That was the price I paid for my pride and indifference.

Your mornings are the most beautiful of any city. But I refused to give up contemplation in exchange for your bureaucratic offices. No, Medellin, I preferred to await your mornings in a bar or an

empty park, so you could vomit freely over my drunken heart under the radiant warmth of the sun.

That's why you called me "lazy", because I was never mean with your beauty. But you were never generous with my insanity. I adored you and gave you all my love. But you almost destroyed me for loving you so much.

I fled from your beauty and your glories so as to conquer my own, because you didn't seem honoured to receive my praise. You treated me like a bastard son because I didn't follow the rest: recite the rosary, get married, work like an animal and then die.

At night I was faithful to you. I was the sleepless witness who justified your beauty. I assured you a kingdom in my mind and joy in my impassioned heart. But you could never appreciate the humble glory in having a poet wander your deserted heart, treating you like my lover and my homeland.

You are much more pragmatic, and preferred to sleep with managers and tradesmen. You are a tyrant who loves servitude and reigning over the resting place of the defeated and the dead.

Pure and alone in your inhuman glory. Misery with your majestic beauty. You give yourself to nobody because you've killed anyone you could give to. Medellin, the murderer, with your heart of gold and bitter bread.

Why do you devote yourself to killing the Spirit? I know: because the glories of the Spirit rival your power.

Producing isn't everything, Medellin. Not-producing is also creative, because Man cannot live from production alone. Lawrence said, "I prefer to have no bread than no life". But your fanaticism for work doesn't leave you time to take in other philosophies of life. You haven't had time to learn how to live, you only know how to work and die. I'm telling you this because you know hardly any-



thing, my love. You aren't even aware of your own wonders. You strive for the Power without the Glory. From time to time you flirt with the Spirit, but your materialism weighs you down too much for you to be great without nobility or soul.

You can neither feel nor see the gardenias which surround me, the lotuses upon the lake, these intoxicating aromas or the carnal joy this silence brings me. Your innocence is perverse, because you kill the souls of flowers, because your chimneys pour out vomit that ruins the skies, and because your mass production lines rob sleep of its silence.

There's one product you don't make: food for the heart. You don't have even the tiniest factory which produces that. Your institutes and universities just vomit out bureaucrats, pawns, heads of personnel and thousands of accountants for your powerful economic machine, your electronic brain, your Black Market.

Spiritual eunuchs! You're not fools: that much I know. Quite the opposite. You're messianic idealists, heirs of conquistadores. But you're terribly frustrated.

You're incapable of producing a spiritual leader, or even a martyr. Because before the Enlightened one has had half a chance to give his message of salvation, you've found him a nice little job in the Antioquian Commercial Bank, and you conquer his mind so that he continues to fly your flag, member of the Venerable Congregation of Fabulous Per Capita Incomes and Knights of the Holy Tomb.

That's how you coerce the free, creative, rebellious spirit. You're devilishly astute when it comes to keeping up your idiotic traditions. Nothing can move your powerful concrete heart. The only thing that arouses your passions is money and the prices of bags to go on supermarket shelves.

None of that would be so bad if you remembered that apart from

your delirious productivity you also have a soul. But you spend all your spare time oiling the powerful machinery that obeys day and night your philosophy of Production.

At times you smell of gasoline and soot, my little Detroit. When you overwhelm me with your disgusting smells I pity your senseless lack of self-respect. There's not one tiny corner of your monstrous mechanical heart where a pretty flower, the useless flower of Poetry, is allowed to grow.

And that's how... your beauty allowed me the bitter taste of death. Instead of taking me aback, your disrespect gave me courage and an incredible ability to conquer the skies, the seas, impossible loves and even my very own self, which was lying dead in the midst of nothing.

In spite of your very nature, I owe what I am to you because I would have been nothing had I not been born under your sky. Your traditions inevitably set me off on the path of rebellion. Your demerital productivity cast me into the oven of creative passion and contemplation.

I've learnt to respect myself as much as you disrespect me. I embraced solitude because you threw me out of your temples, your factories and your cemeteries, in which I refused to embrace death. You closed every door in my face, until, left alone, I was forced to look up at the sky and down into the depths of my soul. I kissed the angry face of failure in your streets. I silently prayed and begged you on nights when your beauty seemed infinite, but you didn't understand my language. I had to soften you up with a hammer, hitting you with sacrificial blows to make you see sense and to penetrate that concrete head of yours, that boiler-hard soul, and the iron pipe arteries that pump oil into your heart. Oil, not blood, which is why you're less sensitive than a shoe.

Your soulless indifference made me overcome my fiercest enemies: those ghosts inside me who were crucifying my flesh with



the terrible nails of self-destruction. I was screaming silently in the very heart of your rejection.

I was tormented most of all by a burning desire to kill myself. I tried terrible poisons at the feet of your petulant skyscrapers, I devotedly took part in horrendous orgies in sordid brothels with old women, ragged beggars and prostitutes young enough to be my daughters.

But it was all in vain. I'm a difficult one to crucify. Twenty years ago (you made a child brave) when hunger drove me to assault your mountain tops. With the first guavas I stole from you I turned into an invincible and rebellious poet.

Do you remember how much you frightened me that afternoon when you sent the police to that desolate green hill from where the statue of our Saviour overlooks the city?

My girlfriend and I were sprawled out in the sun, reading a book of poems with our arms modestly around each other. You pointed a revolver at us because according to your morals it was a sin for us to be alone with the blue sky blessing our faces. You insisted that we were two just delinquents "profaning" the statue of our beloved Jesus Christ. But you didn't stop to think that love between two living creatures is the most holy thing God created. And anyway, you were wrong, as we were being very pure, reading Walt Whitman and waiting for darkness to fall before crawling into some bushes to... well, that's none of your business you old gossip.

You were intent of inventing a crime and locking us up, and would have done so had I not bribed you with my fondly remembered Parker pen to prevent you from committing such a barbarity with my friend. Inside the gloomy mobile coffin you stuffed us into like two shady criminals, she cried with pain and felt like a hideous prostitute.

I'll never forgive you for those tears. Cruel Medellín, you took away

my girl's animal innocence...

And like the pious pharisee that you are, you even deny us the cheap pleasure of the green bed that God offers to poor lovers, who out of sheer decency refuse to go to the brothels where you bless the degradation of souls, and even issue i.d. cards which legalise poisoned love.

There's no room in your morbid imagination for two pure children of the sun or the night, because you condemn them with your fiendish inquisitor's morality.

Frankly, Medellín, you're dangerous. You buy souls quicker than the devil himself, although you condemn them not to Hell but to Not-being.

Don't get angry dear, for I love you more than you think. After all, it was you who brought me into existence. It's true you've given me nothing but solitude and a painful dose of poverty. But to you I owe the infinite and humble richness of my being, which I wouldn't change for all the gold in your banks.

After all, you perform miracles. You make possible the impossible, you can even produce a mad idealist like myself. Bless you! Your lack of understanding has made me into a new man, different from the men you mass produce along with tons of fabric, dead bodies and bottles of rum.

Thus abandoned I gathered the strength to fight, and refused to honour you with death and resignation. And I'm grateful to you most of all because your talent for giving birth to "monsters" gave me my master, saint Fernando Gonzalez. Let me bless you once more for him, who suffered because of you and loved you so much.

This morning a sweet calm has filled the air. The sky has dissolved into a breeze of stars, whose light scatters beatitude across the



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immense Aburra Valley. In the clearest part of the sky I can make out an elephant, with wings formed by enormous feathers of cloud. The elephant looks like an angel resting before it flies into the deep blue of the night. Then it shatters into a constellation of lights. I think I'm drunk.

Somewhere not too far from this hill a woman sleeps, wrapped in innocent dreams alone. Or are they desperate dreams? Years ago I loved that woman. I can still hear her love songs, her sensual, provocative voice. The heart is ungrateful and in its youth digs graves that it later forgets. At first it waters them with love, kisses, tears and flowers. And then with indifference.

What happened to that woman to whom I once devoted my life, but now am unable to honour with a recollection, a desire, or anything this indifference hasn't destroyed?

Silences join forces for a wonderful party in the library. Outside everything has gone silent, even my tumultuous heart. In the sky above everything turns to calm: the telltale signs of the city, the wind and the willows, while the night silently navigates across this pure and forgetful universe. My heart feels so much love that its pulse stops to let your glory take control of it. Oh, sacred sky!

I feel the pure pain of pleasure on this deserted night, bereft of love, of a phone with which to call God, left alone with my solitude, which doesn't know where to find you, my lost love, my holy one.

Oh soul of mine, how bitter is beauty!

Dawn breaks.

My friend wants to drive me back down the hill, but I decline the offer. The sky dissolves into stars, a thousand smells, a flowerbed of fog ends, the dew. A cool wind clasps my skin like a lover.



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With a cigarette in my mouth and hands in my pockets, I walk contentedly down a lonely road under the light of a full moon. The danger doesn't bother me.

But as always just when I think I'm out of trouble's reach, you then turn up to interrupt my ecstatic union with nature, trying to run me over in a van. A most categorical police officer gets out and demands to see my identity papers.

"Hands up!" you say, and then search me for knives or other weapons. I'm caught like a rat. So, I show you an identity card in which I look like a juvenile delinquent. That photo was to be my downfall. "What are you doing out here at this time?" you ask.

"Nothing", I reply, "Just walking... existing..."

It was the absolute truth. What else could I tell him?

"Ha... ha. Did you hear this idiot? He says he's existing, ha ha ha." Can't you see? You laugh at me because I exist, because I'm a poet, and once again you declare me guilty because I'm not producing kitchen rags, or sleeping "like everyone else". Then you shove me into your disgusting van and leave me in a revolting cell full of shit and dopeheads.

Unfortunately that night I didn't even have any cigarettes on me to win you over with, to offer you a deal - the only language that moves you.

You wanted to turn me into a delinquent at whatever cost, and to be honest I don't know why I'm not one after you left me scarred for life by guilt. My tormented poet's face always amounted to a crime in your eyes.

My brother Jaime gets up at dawn and pays to get me out, feeling most pious about it. Whilst doing so he gives me a sermon of the "Made in Medellín" variety, along with a packet of cigarettes.



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On the way out I defend myself by telling him, "Look, I swear to you I'm innocent. The problem is I look like a damned poet".

The morning after this reoffender went to your market place to eat oranges. I'm happy again after my misadventures, and I adore your contrasts. How beautiful, pure and strong your Antioquian people are!

Just imagine, a troubling salesman makes us gather around his junk, and then says that some of us "members of this respectable audience" are damned. He promises to banish the devil from our bodies with a miraculous ointment available for the modest sum of one peso. Raising his hairy arm like a preacher he exclaims:

"Don't be scared my friends... I'm not going to rob you... This arm is honest, I only use it to caress gorgeous women and tame bears." And yes, I wanted to hug that dirty muscular salesman. And you know why, Medellín? Because you're capable of making a conman come out with a phrase that would have made Don Miguel de Cervantes immortal.

It goes without saying that the atheist philosopher Gonzalo Arango was the first one the little jar of miraculous ointment to banish the devil from his body. But it doesn't give much hope, because every time I put it on my girlfriend says, "My love, you smell like the devil"¹.

NOTAS BIBLIOGRAFICAS

¹ Wordplay impossible to translate perfectly. "You smell like the devil" is a Spanish language expression meaning "You smell terrible".

NOTAS SOBRE EL TRADUCTOR

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