

TRANSLATION OF THE SONNETS  
OF VICENTE GAOS

Translated into English Verse  
by  
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## VUELO AL CIELO

Tu aéreo soneto, buen Vicente,  
Me ha elevado a mí también al cielo  
En verdadero mas tardío vuelo,  
Soneto tuyo de un ideal luciente.

He padecido con “niñez poniente”  
la soledad penosa de tu anhelo  
de hermosura, en nubes de desvelo,  
siempre con esperanza vehemente.

El peso llevo yo, Vicente Gaos,  
Que en tus postreros años frente al caos  
Llevabas con tesón y dignamente.

Cual hermano mayor yo te recuerdo,  
en paz espero de un final Acuerdo:  
Tu vida en tu soneto bien luciente.

## PREFACE

In 1996, facing imminent retirement and that most chilling of birthdays at threescore and ten, I had about decided to finish my (understandably) massive anthology of the Spanish sonnet in English translation and say farewell to Spanish scholarship. However, while I was rereading several of Vicente Gaos's sonnets already done for the anthology, I became fascinated with another, then another, then another, until I was truly hooked. Surely hiding from the possible ghostly emptiness of retirement and with inspiration still to prove, I have in a fever of creation brought forth this modest volume of sonnets in a solid three months. I suppose we are always competitive: very late I was much impressed to learn that Unamuno wrote his *Rosario de sonetos líricos*, toward 200 sonnets, in *five* months. In any case, the sonnets of Vicente Gaos bear a meaningful relation to the *Sonetos espirituales (Spiritual Sonnets)* of Juan Ramón Jiménez, which I am proud to have recently translated and published. There is a special attraction in translating a book of sonnets with a closely organized theme.

I was introduced to Vicente Gaos by two minor articles of great intensity. For the briefer, the great poet Vicente Aleixandre dedicated one of his *Encuentros* (or "Encounters") to Vicente Gaos, a generation or more younger than Aleixandre. Beginning with the visual aspect of his subject, Aleixandre focusses on his profile as being sharp, incisive, his total appearance as a "diurnal bird of prey." And, though Gaos is from Valencia, semi-tropical seacoast with its soft, colorful "garden," Aleixandre declares that Gaos indeed has "a clarity of the marvelous sea," but it is "the brightness of the powerful sierras and their asphixiating blue," place where the haughty eagles dwell, not the gulls of Valencia's seacoast. Aleixandre concludes that Vicente Gaos has a "hub of intelligence and two burning eyes that will gleam like two coals of ideal thought." It is this final phrase that I would emphasize: even in an age when most poets wallow in crass realistic detail, Vicente Gaos holds suspended a shining ideal, which is admittedly unreachable but nevertheless of great value.

The other article, called "Permanencia del soneto" ("Permanence of the Sonnet") is by the great critic Dámaso Alonso, who read it as the introduction to a public reading by Vicente Gaos

of his sonnets, in the early years of his career. We are, says Dámaso Alonso, about to embark on the "Great Adventure," the adventure of poetry. Alonso begins with the importance of the sonnet, beginning with Dante and Petrarch. "All's mystery/In poetry" declares Dámaso Alonso; why is it that the sonnet, with its meter and the double-cuadruple, double-triple rhymes, has endured so tenaciously? Even in the 20th Century, the major Spanish poets--Unamuno, Machado, Jiménez, Lorca, Guillén, even Aleixandre--have been challenged by the sonnet. Alonso goes on to emphasize that reading the sonnet *aloud* effectively is very, very difficult; in fact someone has declared that the sonnet appeared as a new form *to be read privately and silently*, in contrast with the older song, a more public or choral form. In my discovery of the sonnets of Vicente Gaos, therefore, I have in a fashion again embarked upon the "adventure" of translating a consistent body of sonnets into English verse.

For the text of the sonnets of Vicente Gaos, I have gone to what have been two volumes of "complete poems," his *Poesías completas (1937-1957)*, and a second *Poesías completas (1958-1972)*. Throughout his career Gaos has given special attention to the sonnet, but at the same time he has also used other traditional forms and occasionally free verse. During the time of his career, of course free verse which the common reader could understand was the prevailing form. In the early part of his career, Gaos seized upon the sonnet with special intensity, for his first important book, and perhaps his best, *Arcángel de mi noche (Sonetos apasionados) [Archangel of My Night (Impassioned Sonnets, 1943)]*, is entirely in this form. Although Unamuno, Antonio Machado, and even Jiménez had experimented with looser forms of the sonnet, Vicente Gaos consistently preferred the two most traditional patterns of the Petrarchan sonnet, the one with the sestet rhyming cdc,dcd, or cde,cde.

The poetry of Vicente Gaos (especially his sonnets) I find to be closest to that of Juan Ramon Jiménez, the Jiménez of the *Spiritual Sonnets*. Moreover, there is a certain closeness to San Juan de la Cruz, Antonio Machado, and Jorge Guillén, surely because Jiménez in ways was related to these poets. Jiménez declared himself still to be a Platonist of sorts, and Gaos seems to spring from a certain ideal, a position beyond mere physical reality. That Gaos projects a certain ideal in many sonnets is obvious, for he contemplated publishing a volume to be called *Sonetos a la Hermosura (Sonnets to Beauty)*, finally scattering these sonnets in other books. A typical sonnet is entitled "My Lofty Sky," another is



called "Heavenly Bodies," another "Star Mine." Two of his favorite rhymes are *cielo* and *vuelo*, "sky" and "flight." Thus the poet of these sonnets is usually looking upward, and often in the starry night. There is much "night" in the sonnets, a night which usually has the double meaning of the "night" of St. John of the Cross.

Thus the poetic world of Vicente Gaos is a concentrated one, even a limited one, a world in many ways similar to the neo-Platonic world of the poets of before. Gaos is never totally lost in the hell-hole of consciousness of many modern poets, nor is he dedicated to the social theme then arriving of the *pueblo*, the people. While he grew up in the terrible years of the Civil War, he has only a trilogy of sonnets on Spain, and in these "eternal Spain, mother of beauty" is cast in sweeping perspective. Like Jiménez, Gaos is a poet somewhat intimate, but never confessional, never sexually provocative. Above all, he deliberately remains above personal episode or detail.

But Vicente Gaos, even as an idealistic poet, in the 20th century must ultimately face "eternity," or time and Nothingness. As did Jiménez before him, Gaos faces God and eternity with a certain amount of equanimity. Jiménez imbued the very poetic *moment* with a kind of eternity; he also created a poetic God "desired and desiring," from which at least a poetic eternity is presumed. While never reaching such an elaborate system, Gaos struggles meaningfully with eternity and Nothingness. In fact, two of his sonnets are entitled "Eternity" and "My Eternity." The poet's ambiguity threatens to engulf us in the latter of these, whose last lines read: "You are my eternity, my high, profound/ Sky, for in you I find the place for me." For the neo-Platonic poet, the "Tú" is the Beloved, for the religious poet, of course God, but for Gaos the Beloved is never firmly established, and God serves in other roles. In "Tú eres tú," the "you" may be read as the beloved, but it can also be read as Nature or the exterior world. In "I Love You and Tell It to You," the case is the same: the language can be read as elements of nature, or elements of nature as metaphors referring to the beloved. In the later sonnet "Eternity," the eternity seems to be reduced to the lastingness of the beauty of Nature. In the sonnet "More Than Eternal" the poet asserts, then questions: "I'll be immortal. Will I peace acquire?/ Eternity will be, then, provident?" The answer is that of modern man the rebel: "No, later, I'll ever, ever, more require." In fact the "Tú" sometimes seems to refer to the poet's better Self, his reason for life, his thought, that is, his poetry. Thus Vicente Gaos, again like Jiménez, remains something

of a “pure” poet, for his sonnets cannot be reduced to clear, unquestionable prose statement.

In this same section of poems the poet finally reaches Nothingness in the sonnet “Nothingness,” from Unamuno onward and important theme, and this theme is of course closely associated with God. In this pattern God, not a God of love but of “eternal rancor,” is the provider, not of eternity, but of death. “Enough I have with one day’s light ashine,” bravely declares the poet, but in the next breath he is wanting to repose in God, now confused with death. Throughout these poems the poet remains delicately suspended between the glories of the sky, of things in flight, but at the same time death and Nothingness hover everywhere. In “Moment,” in the manner of Jiménez, Gaos suspends us in a world of timeless loveliness:

The world in its own justice finds redress  
Of total light. Each thing, how luminous!  
Upon man God is sweetly raining now.

But in “Beauty Incomplete” (with ominous title), the entire sonnet is a series of “if” clauses, all beautiful possibilities, but the final clause subtly brings us back to reality: “If the world deceives...” In “Let us Praise Him” the poet’s final lines could not be clearer: “You, merciful,/ You, perfect Creator of Nothingness.” In “Head” the poet vividly remembers “the things of loveliness,” including the “head in quietness” of the title, and how the river (of time) sends back the blue on high “in cold, bright clarity.” Then he somewhat stoically directs himself to God: “No, let me without yearning there you eye./ Not asking if one thing belongs to me...” The prosaic flatness of one of his final sonnets is revealing: “Well, this is life, I then said suddenly...” The poet goes on. “I guessed it mortal.” Then he concludes: With step of gravity/ I toward the depths advanced just to see you,/ I reached the door and then I turned the key.” Thus Gaos in maturity is an existential poet, struggling to make a life in his brief time, but he generally prefers not to scream from the hell-hole of consciousness.

In translating the sonnets of Vicente Gaos into English verse I have followed my usual practice of following him very closely in both syntax and rhyme. Since in vocabulary and manner of expression his sonnets are rather traditional, I have generally found him to be pleasant and easy to translate. As I remembered with Lope de Vega, Gaos has many beautiful lines expressed in a simple but elegant fashion, and I am well pleased with how they could be

translated into English. Gaos's only example of stretching the Petrarchan form of the sonnet is "To My Father, Dead." In the sestet, he prefers to two most traditional patterns, cde,cde, and cdc, dcd. This latter form, with double-triple rhyme, a favorite with Gaos, imposes a burden upon the translator, but I have generally followed his pattern exactly, because this repeated rhyme establishes a forcefulness in the conclusion that lighter forms cannot match. Since in his syntax run-on lines are an exception, I have usually attempted to follow his exceptions, though sometimes not in exactly the same fashion. If my choice of rhymes and phrases seems a bit monotonous, the reader should be aware there certain phrases and rhymes keep reappearing in Gaos. In rereading my translations of Vicente Gaos, I have been pleased (even a bit awed) at how easily and beautifully and faithfully they translated into English, whereas, say, the sonnets of Blas de Otero in their specificity proved often to be quite difficult.

Presenting these sonnets of Vicente Gaos in English verse may well be my last "Great Adventure" into this particular realm of poetry. By now I am going toward 1600 sonnets, almost all of them in Petrarchan form. Thus I have about matched even Lope de Vega (in numbers at least!), and long ago I passed Wordsworth and even the modern Jesse Stuart in English. Certainly over the years I have improved in skill and speed, and, what is pleasing to me, with these sonnets my level of inspiration remained high, else I would have quietly abandoned the project. As the reader may well see, many of these sonnets show no evidence of forced inversion, substitution, or padding. I trust that out there somewhere there is still a young or an old lover of verse who can respond to these sonnets as I did.

(Doña Enriqueta Ariño de Gaos and her daughter have graciously given their permission for us to publish this volume.)