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RINCÓN de TRADUCTORES

Song of Being and Nonbeing

by Santiago Alba Rico

translated by
Carolina Finley Hampson

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Introduction

Santiago Alba Rico [1960] is a Spanish author and essayist. He has a degree in philosophy from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. In the 1980s he worked as a screenwriter for the innovative Spanish TV program *La bola de cristal*. He has published more than twenty books on politics, philosophy and literature, as well as three children's books and a play, among which are: *Las reglas del caos* (1995 finalist for the Premio Anagrama), *La ciudad intangible* (2000), *El islam jacobino* (2001), *Vendrá la realidad y nos encontrará dormidos* (2006), *Leer con niños* (2007), *Capitalismo y nihilismo* (2007), *El naufragio del hombre* (2009), *Noticias* (2010) and *Penúltimos días* (2016). Since 1988 he has lived in the Arab world and he has translated the Egyptian poet Naguib Surur and the Iraqi novelist Mohammed Jydair into Spanish. For many years he has taught literature courses at the Cervantes Institute. His most recent works are *Ser o no ser* (2017), and *Nadie está seguro con un libro en las manos* (2018). In 2019 his radio collaborations with the program *Carne Cruda* were published as *Última hora*. He is a regular contributor to broadcast and print media in Spain.

"Romance del ser y no ser" (presented here as "Song of Being and Nonbeing") was written for the *European Philosophical Song Contest* (a theater work by Massimo Furlan and Claire de Ribaupierre). The underlying concept of the "contest" was to take philosophy and intellectual thought out of the university and bring it to people in a popular form. The theater work premiered September 2019 at La Comédie de Gèneve in Switzerland and went on to tour twelve European cities. Further performances are scheduled for 2021.

Alba Rico's piece is a metaphysical poem in which the poet uses a Spanish form par excellence, the *romance*, traditionally used for narrating tales of love and war. (During the baroque era Lope de Vega wrote some of the most beautiful and well-known examples, and in the twentieth century García Lorca wrote his *Romancero Gitano* [Gypsy Ballads].)

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Santiago Alba Rico has intentionally made use of the incongruity between this poetic form and the metaphysical content, with the purpose, one might say, of philosophizing with the body. The title references a long poem written in 1973 by the Spanish philosopher Agustín García Calvo "Sermón de ser o no ser", but the poem itself is different in both rhythm and substance. The first stanza of Alba Rico's poem does call to mind the beginning of Luis de Góngora's best-known work, *Soledades*.

The first half of "Romance del ser y no ser" describes the immanence of Being, which is both Being itself and its opposite, as Being cannot do away with itself without prolonging its Substance. In stanza thirteen, all of a sudden, the possibility of transcendence materializes in the form of Love –a conflict which Hegel and Kierkegaard both addressed. In Santiago Alba Rico's poem, pain creates an opportunity through which the possibility of truth as earthly transcendence can enter. Being cracks while the possibility of a liberated eventuality arises in Nonbeing: kisses, birds, verses themselves.

The translation presented here focuses on conveying the immediacy of the language and the intense feeling the original poem evokes from the struggle of Being.

About the translator

Carolina Finley Hampson is an author and a Spanish to English translator. She has an undergraduate degree from Northwestern University where she studied History of Art and Philosophy and a postgraduate degree in Literary Translation from the Universidad Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. Her published works include: *Art of the Far North*, *Aboriginal Art of Australia*, and *Art of Japan*. She lives outside of Madrid in the city of Toledo and specializes in translating Castilian Spanish literature.

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SONG OF BEING AND NONBEING

1
It was the season flowering
with love and lilies
and solitary Being, in the abundance
melted with grief

2
Being walked in May
on the banks of the Tiétar[1]
and on his path he only found
what remained of his work

3
Being was all beings
he was so many things so much
the dog the sun the olive tree
even the mud and the bees

[1] A river that flows westward from the surroundings of Madrid through the provinces of Toledo, Ávila and Cáceres.

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4
Being wept and wept
without finding new essences
in fact his own tears
increased his own essence

5
Oh! Being, who continued to be
having come forth to be, remains to be
on the banks of the Tiétar
melting with grief

6
He does not want to be this being
he wants to have been born farther yet
and every time he becomes angry
he sheds squirrels and planets

7
Being goes weeping and weeping
along the rough ground of the Tiétar
and while emitting falcons
he strikes himself and despairs

8
The blows are seashells
the gashes great swans
he cuts his four arteries
while a forest grows on him

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9

As much as Being bleeds
his wounds are his veins
if he were to lose all his blood
all his blood would remain

10

He found a flower on the hillside
his hip's open sore
and taking hold of the green stem
he counts the petals there

11

He saw a flower on the hillside
and says my beautiful flower
give me the petal missing
between One and its Love

12

I have not what you want
the crimson flower answered
odd and even I have
which are sorrows and pleasures

13

Being continued on his way
pulling out mares
bleeding profusely from sorrow
amid the Tiétar's lavender

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14

Being continued on his way
expelling deer and liana
and at the bottom of the last hill
he met Almudena[2]

15

Who are you, crying bulls?
the maid spoke
who are you, sweating tender doves
and bleeding oaks?

16

Who are you, who are so much?
the maid continued
and Being, astonished, asked her
who are you, who are so beautiful?

17

I had been to Talavera[3]
a tryst with my gypsy beau
on the way back I drowned
three days ago

[2] The Virgin of Almudena is one of the patron saints of Madrid and the city's cathedral is named for her.
[3] A city west of Madrid between Ávila and Toledo.

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18
My face is now ashen
the dead woman's pallor
yet my lips are red
because my blood still remembers

19
Being, entranced, beseeches
give me death, Almudena,
for I am not eclipsing, nor waning
rather a moon, forever beaming

20
Give me death, sweet girl, please
for this plenitude terrifies me
and I want a last crack
to open in the faraway wind

21
Being strikes his chest
and a thousand dragonflies burst out
the girl, watching him,
replies thus:

22
If you give me the beingness I yearn
I will give you what you crave
a bouquet of nonexistence
if you return color to my face

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23
Being and nonbeing embrace
on the banks of the Tiétar
fishes, snakes and winged creatures
tangle together and linger

24
Would nonbeing return to being
beneath Being holding her so tight?
red warm wild
Almudena brought back to life?

25
Or the other way, Being not being
would find the crack
through which to slip
the dead woman's breath?

26
Fishes snakes and winged creatures
half lit intermesh
while the river softly rocks
their glistening cold flesh

27
Until the break of dawn
the struggle goes on
the being, having been, we are
the nonbeing, not being, might be

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28

Have you killed me yet, sweet girl?
Have you killed me, Almudena?
For I feel a sweet abyss
climbing up my hillside

29

One doesn't cease to be being
water does not dry seas
the girl answered
while her mouth kissed his

30

Have you killed me yet, my child?
have you killed me yet, gazelle?
For a gallop of silences
is falling down my fell

31

One is not less being more
flame does not put out fires
the girl sighed
biting his poplar grove

32

Red warm wild
Almudena returns to life
but the kiss that bestirs her
that kiss condemns her

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33
So suddenly I have been,
so much you have been to me, she said
that I have gone beyond being
and come back from life to be dead

34
So much without limits I have been,
the maiden's voice fades,
so much without limits you have been
that I have crossed the riverbank

35
From the river one sometimes returns
but one cannot return to being
death kills not beings
in truth happiness does

36
The slayer Being watches
the twice dead girl
collapse in his arms
without fulfilling the promise

37
Oh! Being, who continued to be
having come forth to be, remains to be
on the banks of the Tiétar
lost in grief

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38
As much as being bleeds
his wounds are his veins
if he were to lose all his blood
all his blood would remain

39
But being has an emptiness
that is neither death nor a planet
it is desire without a mouth
for the kisses of Almudena

40
being has a futility
an empty capacity
and from his seed of dawn
shoots up a foreign thorn

41
being goes on his way
along the banks of the Tiétar
now called Manuel
he cries for Almudena

42
Fishes snakes winged creatures
through the opening the kisses plied
emerged into the open air
from Being to the other side

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