

Translations of Three Alberto Girri Poems
(from *Poemas Elegidos*)
Cody Deitz

Alberto Girri (1919–1991) was an Argentine poet, journalist, and translator. Beyond the prolific body of his own poetry spanning some thirty volumes, Girri is perhaps best known for translating many of the towering figures of Anglophone poetry into Spanish, including T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. Like that of the English-language poets he translated, Girri’s poetry works often in a metaphysical realm—the landscapes of his poems are populated with strange, often abstract images that explore the workings of the mind as well as the heart. Girri earned a reputation as a poet’s poet, an intellectual force, and I think this is a fair assessment, though there is often a potent physicality beneath the more ephemeral, abstract explorations that dominate the lines.

Girri’s work is especially interesting to me as a translator because, despite the poetic energies shared with American and European modernists of the same period and his contribution to South American poetry more broadly, his work is all but unknown to English speakers in the U.S. And even for Spanish-speaking U.S. poets or scholars of South American poetry, his work seems overshadowed by that of figures like Pablo Neruda or even other Argentine poets, like Alfonsina Storni and Jorge Luis Borges. Girri feels, in other words, like a minor poet, but his work is anything but *minor*.

from *Trece Poemas* [Thirteen Poems] (1949)

En La Oscuridad

Los hombres turbados por sus pequeñas traiciones,
los hombres abandonándose en insomnios,
los hombres, banderas flojas
y efímeros que ambicionan el mármol,
apenas los conozco.

El corazón entristecido por los moradores de la justicia
pasados a cuchillo,
los cedros constantes, el paisaje de la nostalgia
adulando hincado en el olvido,
apenas los conozco.

Busto de mujer joven, mi subversion es llamarte.
Prodigio del muro, ¿qué verdad oprime tu urgencia?
Cuando descendes, los cuerpos son aldabas,
y por precepto del amor los cuerpos se abren paso
en silencio.

Busto de mujer joven diluido en la vigilia,
mi pensamiento es amargo y se exalta.
Búscame, cércame en todo lo que apenas conozco,
no me volveré.

[In the Dark

Men troubled by their little betrayals,
men who abandon themselves in insomnia,
men, loose flags
and ephemera who aspire to marble,
I hardly know them.

The heart saddened by inhabitants of justice
put to the knife,
constant cedars, the landscape of nostalgia
flattering driven into despair,
I hardly know them.

Bust of young woman, my subversion is to call you.
Prodigal wall, what truth oppresses your urgency?
When you descend, bodies are door knockers,
and by precept of love bodies make their way into silence.

Bust of young woman diluted in the wake,
my thoughts are sour and exalt.
Find me, encircle me in everything I hardly know,
I will not return.]

Ante un Espejo

Ya que aprendes los gestos de la emoción
y su vaguedad en medio de otros dones,
ya que recuerdas y en los que recuerdas
eres préstamo vil, sólo bruma y polvo,
ya que conspiras y saludas y te nutres,
y hace tiempo aceptaste lo que pronto,
pronto serás aunque tal mudanza no desees,
ya que prosperas en tu validez de hombre,
considerate asimismo vacante y condenado,
hasta que doblando la rodilla encuentres
la encerrada, maliciosa tórtola del corazón.
Al ceñir su cabeza estarás libre y apresado
advirtiendo milagros en cada una de tus partes,
y entonces, más que en la razón
preferirás vivir con un temblor,
o una cinta dormida en la muñeca.

[Before a Mirror

Now that you learn the gestures of emotion
and its vagueness among other gifts,
now that you remember and in those you remember
you are a vile loan, only mist and dust,
now that you conspire and greet and nurture yourself,
and long ago you accepted that soon,
soon you'll be, even if you don't desire such change,
now that you prosper in your validity of man,
consider yourself likewise vacant and damned,
until kneeling you meet
the locked up, wicked turtledove of the heart.
Clinging to its head you will be free and caught
warning miracles in each one of your parts,
and then, more than in the reason
you'd prefer to live with a shaking,
or a sleeping ribbon on your wrist.]

from *Propiedades de la Magia* [Properties of Magic] 1959

Mendigos

La imaginación se equivica,
nos representa pasivos,
incorpóreos
como espectros de animales
acurrucados en establos,
y en rigor
lo que hacemos es adiestrarnos,
poner en juego tácticas
y pruebas para intimidar
con el principio de la bondad,
con las parábolas de la bondad,
con ese espurio lirismo del afligido,
y cuando harapientos, desdeñosos
de la insolación y de los inviernos
incitamos al amor,
a la obra de la limosna
como toque de amor,
por dentro juramos
que las cabezas gachas,
el pie vacilante,
la mano abierta,
son el ordinario disfraz
del golpe de vista del ratero,
del hacha del Verdugo entre los dientes.

[Beggars

Imagination is wrong,
it shows us impassive,
intangible
as spectral animals
huddling in stables,
and strictly speaking,
what it does is train us,
to put into play tactics
and tasks to intimidate
with the law of kindness,
with parables of kindness,
with that spurious lyricism of the afflicted,
and when ragged, disdained
by sunstroke and by the winters
we urge to love,
to the work of charity
as the touch of love,
on the inside we swear
on the bowed heads,
the hesitant foot,
the open hand,
they are the ordinary disguise
at thief's first glance,
the axe of the executioner between teeth.]