

Introduction:

Alberto Arvelo Torrealba (1904-1971) was a Venezuelan poet, teacher, lawyer, and diplomat. He is best known for his poems, based on regional folklore, of the Llanos, the "Great Plains" of Venezuela. Florentino y el Diablo is his masterwork, a poem based on the traditional contrapunteo, or singing duel, of the guitar and harp-playing cowboy musicians of the Llanos. In this poem, Florentino is challenged by the Devil to a duel of poetic improvisation; the pair exchange boasts, threats and insults all night long in front of their audience.

Influences on Arvelo Torrealba

Arvelo Torrealba was born into a family of poets - his mother Atilia Torrealba de Arvelo was well-known as a poet in Barinas. His paternal uncle Alfredo Arvelo Larriva was quite famous and still anthologized in books of Venezuelan poetry. Another uncle, Enrique Arvelo, was also a poet.

In his youth, Arvelo Torrealba was inspired by the 19th century Venezuelan poet and scholar, Andrés Bello (1781-1865), whose romantic "Ode to the Agriculture of the Torrid Zone" (1826) celebrated life in the New World. Bello was a leading patriot of the War of Independence, and not only helped to define New World literature, but also wrote monumental works on international law and Spanish grammar. He founded the University of Chile.

Arvelo Torrealba became part of the Vanguard Generation, influenced by the European Generation of 1918 - which became well known in Venezuela with the 1924 publication of "Espero" by Antonio Arraiz. The main influence on Arvelo Torrealba was Francisco Lazo Martí (1869-1909), whose book "Silva criolla" (1901) started the Criollismo movement among writers and artists of Venezuela. The Criollismo, or Nativist, movement was a modernist reaction against the neoclassical romanticists; they believed poetry, music and art should be deeply rooted in geography; so, in Venezuela, there should be a specific poetry of the spirit of the Llanos or plains, of the mountains, the valleys, and the coast. The land and Nature should be the poet's muse, and literary Criollismo should also function as the social conscience of the land.

The Vanguard generation of writers were modernists, often also nativists, and stood in opposition to Juan Vicente Gómez, the "Tyrant of the Andes" who ruled Venezuela from 1908-1935. It is often said that Venezuela didn't enter the 20th century until Gómez's death. Political opposition was ruthlessly oppressed by him. In his poems of the llanos, Arvelo Torrealba expresses a deep patriotism, a loyalty to the land and the people.

Understanding The Legend of Florentino

Rómulo Gallegos, probably Venezuela's most famous novelist, was also president of the country from 1947-1948. He quoted directly from the traditional song of Florentino throughout his novel "Dona Barbara". The conflict between Dona Barbara and the more civilized Santos Luzardo is echoed at the different times that the song is quoted. In a later novel, Cantaclaro, Gallegos wrote more directly about Florentino. (I haven't read this -- I have to read it in Spanish since it isn't translated yet).

Florentino y el Diablo was a traditional legend of the llanos, and a song frequently sung or quoted by the copleros, the poets and singers who would have duels of poetic improvisation accompanied by the music of the joropo. These duels are called contrapunteo,

counterpoint. Various versions of Arvelo Torrealba's "Florentino" have been recorded in Venezuela and by other Latin American music groups. The cowboys of the plains - the llaneros -- still have these contrapunteo duels, and quote lines from Florentino. It is considered to be a work that expresses the soul or spirit of Venezuela.

Central to understanding the poem is understanding the geography of the llanos. The llanos are a plain in the interior of the country, so level that, during the rainy season, they become almost completely flooded. The most common use of the land is as pasture for cattle, which have to be driven to high ground in the rainy season. In Dona Barbara and in Florentino the llanos are presented as a land of opposites; wild, unpredictable, barbaric, passionate and violent. The lines describing the start of the rainy season, just before the poetic duel, contrast the violent, uncontrollable storm outside, with the civilized inside of the ranch house, and the order imposed on the world by the music of the joropo. Outside, the storm howls, inside, the music is deftly woven; outside, the land's breast is muddy, flooded by the storm's chaos, inside, the heart of the cedar-wood cuatro is beating in an orderly rhythm.

The metaphors of the poem are all plants, animals, and other features of the llanos; of birds, flooded rivers, deserts, flowering thornbushes, palm trees; of canoeing, cowherding, horseback riding, and especially of cockfighting.

The casting of the Devil as a dark-skinned, tattooed Indian of the plains, and Florentino as the hero with fair coloring, we can only think of today as racist. The same racism is still reflected in much of the Venezuelan media, and in the rest of Latin America; different shades of mixtures of black, native American, and European ancestry are named in a spectrum of different categories with their own stereotypes. However, the traditional idea of the llanero is that of a mestizo or pardo, dark-skinned; these llaneros have been romanticized and glorified in both popular legend and in histories as rough and tough, independent-minded cowboys who fought fiercely in the War of Independence.

Arvelo Torrealba published three versions of "Florentino": one, quite short, in 1940; this version, in 1950; and a version over twice as long as this one, in 1957. He said late in life that the 1950 version was his favorite. I think that, as he wrote and rewrote this one theme for much of his life, he must have struggled with his own devil. Lazo Marti dwelled on the themes of melancholy, doubt, and despair, Arvelo Torrealba faces evil, despair, and mortality, but puts forth a hero, a common man, who fights against these devils with all his strength, using his "baquia" or local cunning and know-how.

I admire the poem for itself, but also because it has perfectly bridged that line between poetry as it is in this country -- academic and isolated from most people's daily lives -- and popular song. It stands alone as a poem and yet is still known and sung by people who may not even be able to read. I can't think of any poem, especially not one this long, that does the same in English.

The tradition of contrapunteo

Florentino y el Diablo is sung to the music of the joropo - a Venezuelan musical form traditional in the llanos, and descended from Spanish flamenco. It has a syncopated 3/4-6/8 rhythm. Its instruments are the arpa, the Venezuelan harp, providing a sweet and complicated melody; the cuatro, a double-corded, four-stringed guitar, strumming out a fast, driving beat; and maracas, seed-filled gourds shaken in an insistent, repetitive rhythm. There are many different variations of the joropo in major and minor keys; pajarillo, seis por derecho, gable, corral, golpe, etc.

"Joropo" also refers to the traditional dance performed to this music.

In the contrapunteo, two singers improvise octosyllabic, rhyming couplets, taking turns

in a rapid-fire exchange of poetry. The last line of one singer's couplet (or verse) is repeated by the second singer, becoming the first line of his verse. It's not just that the line is repeated; the idea of the line or the riddle posed in the preceding verse must be answered. The duelists, called copleros or contrapunteos, display their mastery of rhyme and meter, and their quick wits, as they boast and posture in a similar way to the African-American tradition of "signifying" or "doing the dozens".

Other notes and references

In translating "Florentino" I have been helped greatly by my father Dean Henry, who was born and raised in Venezuela, and who worked as a llanero in the 1960's, on a ranch just across the river Apure from Hato el Frio, which is mentioned in the poem. I also have a list of references for the more obscure words used. On CD I have a musical version of Florentino recorded by Los Olimareños - (this is the version I think is the most well done).

The poet, translator and critic Jaime Tello said in his introduction to Contemporary Venezuelan Poetry that it is impossible to translate the vigor and freshness of Arvelo Torrealba's "Florentino" into English. I hope he would approve of my attempt!

Notes on the poem:

(a lot of these notes are working notes for use during translation - they aren't all needed)

duel singer: coplero is someone skilled at improvising couplets, taking turns with an opponent in a form of joropo called contrapunteo, counterpoint

plains: The llanos of central Venezuela are like a flat-bottomed basin.

Desolation: Desamparo could be a place name but I can't find it. There is a town called Amparo, which means shelter or protection; it's in the state of Apure, on the north bank of the Arauca. I have interpreted Desamparo as a somewhat joking reference to being in the middle of Nowhere. It could be a reference to Pilgrim's progress or even the Bible, I would have to check.

at six in the evening: Golpe de seis is a Venezuelan idiom for "around the hour of six" according to Lisandro Alvarado, Glosarios del Bajo Espanol en Venezuela. The significance here is that it is late afternoon, near nightfall.

veiled black with past fires: In the llanos, there is a rainy season and a dry. During the rainy season, the flat basin of the Llanos floods. During the dry season, it gets very hot and dry, and the tall thorny growth of the prairie is difficult to pass through. At the end of the dry season, the dry grass is burned off in fires which leave the earth covered with a dusty black ash. This allows easier travel and makes room for new growth. "Enlutada" can mean wearing a mourning veil. So the prairie is veiled with black ash, mourning.

dry marsh: It's the end of the dry season, all the marshes are dry cracked mud. This could be translated as "buried in clods of earth" or something like that. The idea of death and burial is running strong here.

herons: Garza can mean a heron or egret, or similiar wading bird.

Las Animas: A place name, a dry arroyo. Las Animas means "The Spirits".

chestnut tree: The castano is *Pachira insignis*, a tropical tree with a spreading shady crown. In Spain it means chestnut, though. This could be translated as "cottonwood" to give the American reader the right idea, of a tree that grows in a dry river channel and indicates the presence of water just underground.

glint of water: A jaguey is a drinking hole or a deep well in a dry river channel.

drinking horn: Made from cattle horn, on a long leather thong to dip water from a well.

cabin: A caney is a thatched hut or the bunkhouse of a ranch, sometimes with a roof but no walls; the ranch hands sling their hammocks here. This could be Florentino's individual home or maybe he is a ranchhand on a big hat.

cowboy hat: A pelo e' guama is a felt hat made from beaver fur, with a wide brim. Literally hair of the guama; a guama is an edible tree pod covered with a soft brown fuzz.

Santa Ines: Santa Ines is a town in the state of Barinas, north of Rio Apure, between Rio Santo Domingo and Rio Paguey; it's northwest of Nutrias.

nightfall: Night falls quickly and dramatically near the equator. I picture this scene like the gathering of ghostly, ominous dark storm clouds. The demonic cowboys accompany the Devil and are referred to later, perhaps, as the "Zamuros" or black vultures, part of the audience of the duel.

savanna, savanna: Florentino addresses the llanos, describing it and himself in terms of opposites; a trackless field yet with endless possible routes, a land that can be flooded completely or dry as a bone.

challenge: The black rider has formally challenged Florentino to a singing duel.

singing-duel: The rules of the contrapunteo are that the singers improvise verses, with alternate lines rhyming, and lines must be octosyllabic. The end rhymes are kept the same for as long as possible. The ending line of one singer's verse is repeated by the second singer as the start of his new verse.

violent thunderstorm: The rainy season has started; the scene shifts to the ranch house of Santa Ines.

lively rhythms: a chipola is a style of joropo. Chipola can mean the chirping of an insect.

maracas: capachos are hard black seeds of *Canna edulis*, used in maracas, a gourd instrument shaken rhythmically in the joropo.

bass string: The other instruments of the joropo are the arpa, a tall harp; and the cuatro, a small 4-stringed (double-corded) guitar.

joropo: A musical form and a style of dancing, popular in the Llanos; the cuatro strums rhythmically, the arpa plays a complicated melody sometimes joined by the cuatro, and the maracas provide more rhythm. There are many different styles of joropo; seis por derecho, chipola, gaita, etc.

Indian: At the time, and even now, there were many Arawak Indian tribes still living in the Llanos (list names of indian tribes) In the long 1957 version of the poem, the Indian is more completely described; he is covered in tattoos.

Nutrias: Nutrias is a fair-sized city on the north bank of the Apure, in the state of Barinas. It is named after the nutria, an animal like a muskrat or otter.

Las Brujas: Las Brujas is presumably the name of a river channel. It means "The Witches".

carefree redhead: quitapesares means "one who eases cares". catire is a term to mean a pale person with red or blond hair. A catire has the reputation of being unusual, standing out, maybe being unusually smart or somehow fey. Jose Antonio Paez, the llanero general of the War of Independence, was a famous catire.

fight: this verse is talking about cockfighting, a common pastime of the Llanos.

good if he slashes with his spurs: literally, throws a kick, throws his foot - a double meaning, since Florentino changes the meter in these lines. In cockfighting, razor-sharp spurs are tied to the roosters' feet.

bites his enemy's proud tail feathers: An awkward rendition; the idea is that, rather than wounding the other rooster directly, it is good to humiliate him by biting his feather, ie, wounding his vanity or dignity. A sly dig at the devil.

lance's thrust: Llaneros traditionally carried a short-hafted lance. In Romulo Gallegos's novel Dona Barbara, the father killed his son with a traditional lance, which he leaves sticking into the wall of his bedroom until the day he dies.

if you never drink water: Florentino is implying that the Devil can't drink water, because he lives in the fires of hell.

Who slakes his thirst without water: The Devil is restating his previous question.

in the heart of the desert: A medanal is an area of bare sand.

verse: The romance is a form of poetic ballad.

If you look for me and find me: The Devil changes the rhyme in this verse.

pavita: The pavita is a bird, *Thamnophilus doliatus*, or Pavita Hormiguera, the Barred Antshrike. The cry of the pavita, a shrill "pi pi pi" is said to be an ill omen. In *Buenas y Malas Palabras en el castellano de Venezuela*, Angel Rosenblat quotes a traditional saying:

Si la pavita canta	If the pavita sings
alguien se muere.	someone will die.
Esto no sera' cierto	This isn't certain,
pero sucede.	but it happens.

rearing up and flapping your wings: Blowing hot air, talking big; the metaphor is of a rooster who isn't fighting but is just making a lot of noise.

your horse will start acting up: Your beast will start bucking. The word bicho can be a bit rude.

Catch this top: This is a challenge that kids yell when they throw their spinning top in the game of trompos. Each player throws their top to the ground, sometimes in a drawn circle; you want your top to knock others out of the ring, and to be the last one up and spinning.

barn owl: Lechuza de campanario, *Tyto alba*.

When the night is this ugly: The Devil changes the rhyme in this verse.

damned to hell: Florentino is staking his soul on the result of the duel.

O Rhymer that sings and plays: These four lines are in bold face in the original poem. I think this is because it is a direct quote from the traditional song of Florentino. I think that Romulo Gallegos quotes this verse in *_Dona Barbara_*, but I have to check.

only if it suits you: The Devil changes the rhyme in this verse.

sweet cakes and honey: Bunuelos are like sweet doughy buns. Miel de aricas is particularly sweet honey of the arica, a wild stingless bee.

bitten by a snake: The macagua, *Bothrops colombiensis*, is a highly aggressive and venomous snake that lurks in tree branches.

a hanging vine: A bejuco can be any kind of hanging vine or creeper. It also is the name of a harmless green snake that lives in trees. This could be translated either way, as harmless snake, or hanging vine.

a ragged old fighting cock: Jiro, or giro, is a term for a fighting cock of mixed colors, black, yellow and red. Cocks are classified by color, as giros, zambos, jabados, talisayos, etc. It suggests a sort of tattered, wandering gypsy, "atravesao", vagrant; not an opponent to be feared. The Jiro is also a traditional dance of the Llanos, whose performers wear a multicolored costume.

throwing stones at hopscotch: Paraparas are the hard seeds of the tree *Sapindus saponaria*, they are a couple of centimeters across, and are used by kids in playing hopscotch and in other games.

the Southern Cross in the sky: The Cruz de Mayo is the Southern Cross, the brightest constellation in the southern hemisphere.

sparrowhawk: Gavilan can refer to various kind of hawks. The sparrowhawk is common in the Llanos.

red owl: A mochuelo is a kind of owl.

alcaravan: The Charadriidae family of birds, lapwings and larks. The alcaravan is *Vanellus chilensis*. It is known for its loud song while it's flying -- it also has the reputation of warning other birds or animals of approaching danger.

tricky rainbow trout: A guabina is a carnivorous fish, known for its agility; it is strong and can writhed out of one's grasp. The word is also used to refer to a person, a politician, who is so evasive they are impossible to pin down on any issue.

a savage gator: A caiman, known for being ever-alert.

a dandy that rides english-style: A patiquin is a city slicker, a dude who dresses well and needs a fancy saddle to ride. The word is local to Venezuela.

If you go to sleep in the dirt: The Devil changes the rhyme in this verse.

Vultures of La Barrosa: The zamuro is the black vulture. The Devil is addressing the spectators of the duel here. Zamuro also refers to a person who is dark-skinned or black. La Barrosa is a place name, meaning "Muddy road". The next four lines are in bold face in the original poem. They are quoted in

Dona Barbara in Chapter _____. The Devil is also invoking or addressing his sinister demons, the ghostly cowboys who accompanied him earlier.

shady grove: An alcornocal, in Portugal or Spain, is specifically an orchard of cork trees. In Venezuela, it refers to a grove of tall shade trees, planted near a ranch.

El Frio: Frio refers to Hato el Frio, a ranch on the north bank of the Apure, near El Saman. Hato el Frio is now a nature preserve.

Flamingos of Banco Seco: Nengueres. Banco Seco, Dry Bank, is a place name. Florentino is mocking the Devil's verse where he addresses the vultures.

Ibises of Pionio: Taro-taros are ibises, which flock to the Llanos in huge numbers during the wet season. The tarotaro is probably *Cercibis oxycerca*, the Sharp-tailed ibis. Pionio is a place name. A pionio is a tree with a hard red seed that is polished and used by the indians for jewelry.

a farmer in a bottomland shack: "Veguero" - farmer, or dirt-grubber - is a very insulting thing to call a horse-riding llanero.

el trueno y el desafio: Trueno is a clap of thunder, but is also used to describe a dramatic exit, or the moment when all bets are called in and must be paid up in gambling. This seems like a significant double meaning, so I have tried to show it in the translation.

the spirit of poetry: "Romance", the devil claims to be a master of the poetic ballad.

as I pierced the nostrils of maverick bulls: Naricear is to cut a hole in the nose of a bull and pierce it with a ring or a rope, to subdue the animal. A cimarron is a runaway -- in this case, the half-wild cattle, turned loose on the prairie, to be rounded up later.

Sangrado los rendidos: Bleeding the ones who surrendered, the docile cattle. Sangrando could refer to castrating, notching ears or other marking, or just cutting their throats.

how to stop running away and end their verses: A corrio is a verse of a poem, but it also means running away. An amusing double meaning.

yearlings: Mautes is the word in the Llanos for yearlings; bulls between one and two years old; at this age they are separated from their mothers, but aren't yet fully grown. Florentino is saying that rounding up yearlings may be easy, but he isn't a yearling.

a 50 foot canoe: Bonguero is a wide bottomed boat or dugout canoe. A vara is a somewhat archaic term in Venezuela for the distance from the tip of a man's middle finger, up the top of his arm to his neck.

cambiarle el pie: A triple meaning. The Devil has just made a line of 9 syllables instead of the normal 8, so he is changing the meter. It also could mean he is now on foot, looking for a shortcut. But it also means a change of stance in fencing.

Black vultures of La Barrosa: This is bold face in the original version. Also part of the traditional song, and quoted in Gallegos.

act high and mighty: se alza el copete, literally, raise your hackles.

I can change it too: Florentino changes the rhyme here to words ending in an

accented "a", a more challenging rhyme to match. He also varies the meter here.

Whatever rhyme, meter or accent: Los graves are the words accented on the last syllables. Los agudos are accented on the next to last syllable. Los graves y los agudos was an influential book by a venezuelan poet, I have to look up his name.

timeless nothingness: Nunca y jamas, "never and nevermore". A loose translation.

cowboy know-how: Baquia is a word used in the llanos to mean the knowledge of the llanos; knowing what the weather will do, how animals behave and how to track them, where to ford a river, etc.

mimic and tame nightingale: Mockingbird, and troopial, icterus icterus, an oriole that is easily tamed and that has a sweet song. Cacicus cela, or yellow-rumped cacique, is an arrendajo, but I think mockingbird is appropriate.

the wind goes out of your sails: Or, your sail falls or comes down; or, your soul falls into hell.

Get me out of here with God's grace: Florentino has just said in a previous verse that he never begs for help. Yet here, he finally has to turn to the real captain - God. He calls on God, the saints and the Virgin Mary as worshipped in various local towns, to delay until dawn.

In a ringing silence: This is in parentheses because it is spoken by the poem's narrator.

The dawn raises its head: This is an odd construction, and I can only think that it's a quote from, say, a translation from Greek, something equivalent to "dawn with her fingertips of rose" -- a formulaic line about the dawn. I would need to look at a spanish translation of Homer or find someone to ask about this. If it is from Homer then I would choose to translate more freely and use a line from Fitzgerald that people might recognize as being a quotation.