

Poesías de Rafael Pombo by Rafael Pombo; Traducciones poéticas de Rafael Pombo by Rafael Pombo; Fábulas y Verdades de Rafael Pombo by Rafael Pombo

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Poetas de RAFAEL POMBO (Edición oficial hecha bajo la dirección de Don Antonio Gómez Restrepo). Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional. 1916—1917. 2 vols. 8vo. xxxix + 379 pp. xii + 342 pp.

Traducciones poéticas de RAFAEL POMBO (Edición oficial hecha bajo la dirección de Don Antonio Gómez Restrepo). Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional. 1917. 8vo. xxxiv + 300 pp.

Fábulas y Verdades de RAFAEL POMBO. Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional. 1916. 8vo. 387 pp.

The name of the Colombian poet Rafael Pombo deservedly occupies a conspicuous place in the literary history of Spanish America. His verses, hitherto dispersed in periodicals not always easy of access, are now for the first time collected in book form; the original lyrics occupy two large octavo volumes, a third volume contains interesting translations in verse, and in the fourth are fables and apologues—original or otherwise—which reveal a characteristic aspect of Pombo's many-sided talent. This issue is published in accordance with an act passed by the Colombian Congress in 1912, not long after the poet's death (it may be remarked incidentally that public funds have often been put to less noble uses in various South American countries). To the Colombian Academy the law assigns the duty of supervising the publication; that Academy has been well-advised in deputing the editorial work to one of its most eminent members—D. Antonio Gómez Restrepo, a scholar of established repute who, as happy chance would have it, was likewise Pombo's executor. It may be said without hesitation that the result is extremely satisfactory. Sr. Gómez Restrepo aims at completeness, and by arranging the poems in chronological order, he exhibits the progress of Pombo's intellectual evolution: as the editor puts it, we are enabled to 'follow more easily the trajectory described by the poet's mind.' Thanks to the wealth of material and to the dates supplied, we are at last in a position to estimate Pombo's powers as a craftsman, to strike the true balance between his merits and defects, and to differentiate the period of his zenith from that of his occultation. The test is severe, but Pombo survives it. He had something to say, was often a master of his instrument, and had no paralyzing respect for artistic traditions which, though still paramount, were in truth (as he perceived) exhausted. It must, however, be admitted that his taste was not impeccable and that he tends at times to extravagance. These four large volumes help us to form a clearer image of a poet whose work indicates the direction of the literary currents prevalent in South America during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Every literary work, as we are told, is essentially autobiographical. Assuredly this saying holds true with respect to Pombo. He told the Spanish-speaking world what he was and what he felt, and to his impulsive, ingenuous candour we owe a record of mental phases, patently inconsistent but unquestionably sincere. The abundant chronological details furnished by Sr. Gómez Restrepo are so illuminating that we

could wish a date were attached to every poem in the collection; such information is invaluable to the critic and the biographer.

It appears that Pombo began writing verses at the age of thirteen, and it is worth noting that his three earliest poems are inspired by patriotism, love and mistrust of society. These three themes never lost their interest for him: on them his emotional existence was based. At eighteen he underwent the first of his innumerable disillusion: he fell in love and was not taken seriously. On November 7, 1853, he wrote a poem to commemorate his twentieth birthday; here he speaks of his life as a 'blank book in which you can read only the number of the pages,' and describes himself as one 'who has not died, neither has he lived.' During this year, while travelling in New Granada, he gave the first intimation of his defiant attitude to the established order; in a famous poem, *La Copa de Vino*, he champions a lady who, owing to slander, had been sent to Coventry 'by unjust society, that market of crime.' As far back as 1854 he manifests a liking for long alexandrines and hexameters, for the rippling chimes of *esdrújulos*, as well as a weakness (of which he was never to be wholly free) for gongoresque conceits and obscurities. In the autumn of 1855 Pombo journeyed to New York where he made acquaintance with poets and composers of diverse nationalities. Here, shortly after his arrival, he conceived an imperious passion which left a permanent impress on him, and though, as he informs us, his attachment never ceased to be platonic, his Egeria (whose name escaped him in a moment of juvenile indiscretion) thought it wiser to go northward out of range of the flame which he had unintentionally kindled.

Pombo's best love-poems, which are known and have made him known from New York to Buenos Aires, were composed at this stage of his passionate pilgrimage. *Edda*—a series of poems purporting to be the confidences of a woman whose love was unrequited—is dated November 3, 1855. Though *La Hora de Tinieblas* is not, strictly speaking, a love-poem, the note of a baffled passion is audible above its gusts of wild despair; those stanzas, dated September 16, 1855, and cast in the popular form of *décimas*, are redolent of Byron and Espronceda: Pombo once more inveighs against society and life, refurbishing immemorial texts on the vanity of the world and the absurdities which encompass us. At this moment he was apparently prepared to 'remould the very scheme of things entire.' He recanted later. He clung steadfastly to his belief in the invisible, and, in 1857, when his wounds began to heal, wrote *Alpha y Omega*, as though impelled to proclaim the basic formulae of his creed. To Sr. Gómez Restrepo he confided that *La Hora de Tinieblas* was the outcome of 'a crisis of exasperation due to physical disease.' This is easy to believe. The accents of despair do not characterize Pombo's most typical utterances. The strenuous stridency of his invective fails to overwhelm. His temperament was not fundamentally insurgent. When success came to him in his later years, his political ideals were those of authority, order and tradition; his mutinous instincts displayed themselves solely within the sphere of prosody. As the end drew nearer and it became evident that the trees in the orchard no longer bowed to

proffer the ambrosia of their empurpled fruit¹, he accepted uncomplainingly fate's decree and penned a sonnet which ranks amongst the best of its kind in any language.

Critics, in dealing with Pombo's conception of nature, have classified him as a Romantic. This is too indefinite to be satisfying. Being what he was, and living when he did, Pombo was naturally in spiritual communion with the leaders of Romanticism. Nevertheless, he cannot be regarded as a 'descriptive' poet. Though his attitude to the physical world varied from time to time, the fact emerges that, when he found nature irresponsible to human grief, his sympathy withered. Speaking generally, it may be said that he was much less interested in the external aspects of the mute disdainful universe than in the relations between human beings. This is exemplified in *El Niágara* where we might expect an attempt at word-painting. Pombo does not even try to suggest the appearance of what he calls an 'unfathomable sea'; the huge waterfall serves as a pretext to develop the poet's philosophic views on the world, on the destiny of man and his inherent perfidy. Recalling his personal sufferings, Pombo denounces the 'monster' man—that 'viper poisonous to body and soul.' Nature is transformed into 'a child, eternally innocent and frank, the best nurse bestowed on man by heaven.' And, before leaving the cataract, Pombo perceives the vision of the one woman whom he seems to have loved. Much as he professed to spurn the human race, man had for him an undying fascination. With incomparable zest he describes our acts, our natural relations, our incurable imbecilities, our rare heroic deeds; the serener, immutable manifestations of nature are treated more perfunctorily. This appears in *Las Americanas en Broadway*, in *Bembuco*, a poem commemorating the charm of the popular music of the native Colombians, and in *La Casa del Cura*, a *genre* painting no less faithful than delicate. A philosopher in essence, Pombo is more akin to Leopardi than to Coleridge or Wordsworth. In his poems he is chiefly concerned with his personal raptures and woes; he could, however, render with a fine tenderness and consummate effect, the joys and sorrows of his fellow-creatures (especially when these fellow-creatures were women). Bachelor though he was, few poets who have written in Spanish have depicted with equal insight, certainty of touch and sensitive sympathy, the happiness of married life. That he was no less successful in transcribing the tragedy of bereavement is proved by his *Elegía* on the death of Antonio Ospina.

B. SANÍN CANO.

LONDON.

Russian Poets and Poems. By N. JARINTZOV. Vol. I. Classics. Oxford: B. H. Blackwell. 1917. 8vo. xxxix + 318 pp.

Readers of Madame Jarintzov's earlier books, *Russia—the Country of Extremes* and *The Russians and their Language*, will be prepared for something unconventional and interesting, if not 'academic,' when she

¹ Los gajos del pomar ya no diblegan
Para mí sus purpúreas ambrosias.. (1890.)