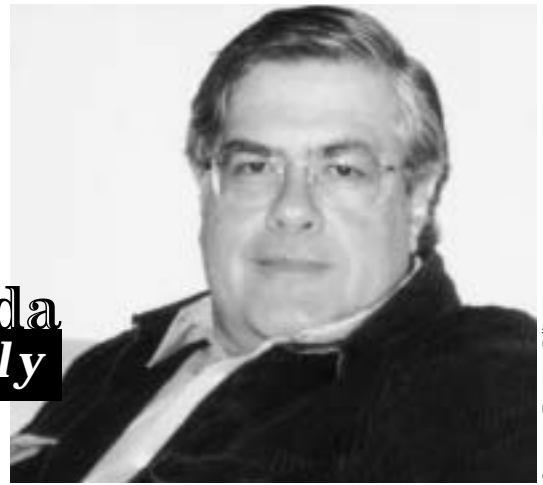


Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda

traces of his poetic melancholy

JOSÉ MIGUEL OVIEDO



Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda

Courtesy, Tusquets Editores

BEGINNING WITH HIS FIRST BOOK, *Consejos para sobrevivir* (1974; Advice for survival), Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda has brought to Colombian poetry a new yet perfectly recognizable style tangentially linked to the literary tradition of his homeland and one of uncommon intensity. It can easily be said that throughout his abundant poetic production, collected in *Todos los poetas son santos* (1987; All poets are saints), he has been faithful to a style that bears a touch of colloquial speech yet maintains the precise musical cadence, conceptual rigor, and luminous images that only poetry can express.

Along with his creative output, Cobo Borda (born 1948) has produced an equal and no less extensive body of criti-

imate classification in view of the number of poems in the collection that deal with the theme of love, but such a label can be misleading. The majority of the selections are inspired by amorous love, but not all are actually “amorous” tributes. In fact, the poems that predominate, the most painful of the collection, are much the opposite: they are “anti-love” poems, testimonies of tormented relationships, of the bitter fruit of deception, breakups, abandonment, and betrayal. More than celebrating love’s completeness, these poems are elegies to love’s loss and absence, to that critical moment at which amorous feeling disappears and is replaced by ferocious hatred and disdain. Viewed from this perspective, love is a senseless

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cism—both in literature and the arts—that has contributed to a profound reexamination of the same tradition to which I have alluded. If one carefully reads his works of criticism, such as *Historia portátil de la poesía colombiana, 1890–1995* (1995; Portable history of Colombian poetry, 1890–1995); his verse anthologies; his studies on Gabriel García Márquez, Álvaro Mutis, Germán Arciniegas, and Jorge Luis Borges; as well as his countless articles and journalistic pieces, it becomes clear that with Cobo Borda, as with other creative minds, the art of criticism represents the flip side of the coin of poetic art, with both sides coming together to form a perfect whole.

All this is clearly confirmed by the publication of Cobo Borda’s recent verse collection, *La musa inclemente* (2001; The inclement muse), which can be considered not only one of his best works but also one of the most notable within the Spanish language. To call it a “book of love poems” is an easy and legit-

trap, an awkward illusion, a worn-out lie that has repeated itself for centuries.

Expressing regret for lost ideals, Cobo Borda’s texts are filled simultaneously with melancholy, lucidity, and anguish, for nothing is as it seems and the only recourse is to accept the failure of an impossible dream. Here, the distressed, embittered soul recalls faces and incidents that it now wants only to disavow or despise. In reading certain poems by Cobo Borda, one thinks of the great love-hate poem “Las furias y las penas” (Rage and pain) by Pablo Neruda for its unsettling atmosphere and dark visions, evoked by the thought of the woman who is the object of the poet’s love.

La musa inclemente is divided into four parts. The first re-creates images of Greece (where the author served as a diplomat for a time) and its ancient myths, as can be found in the poems “En la casa de los Átridas” (In the house of the

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Atrides) and “Ulises vuelve a casa” (Ulysses returns home).

In the second section, we find the most serene and tender—even domestic—love poems, such as “Canción para que duerma una niña” (Song to make a young girl sleep). Here, love represents a “state of grace,” a supreme form of harmony and reconciliation with the world, linked by the creative act. In “Un poema cada día” (A poem a day), love and poetry take on the task of reclaiming “ese despojo que es la vida / y su estricto margen de ganancia” (the spoils that are life / and its narrow margin of profit).

The third section is the most representative of the collection and contains texts in which love gives way to hatred and cynical disenchantment. It is revealing that Cobo Borda introduces this section under a tortured epigraph from Dostoyevsky, in which he compares love to a voluntary form of tyranny. The first poem in this group, “Un mal día” (A bad day), one of rare perfection, is cited below in its entirety:

De tanto afán, entrega, encanto;
tanto fuego, promesas y raptos
no subsistirán ni estos versos malos.
Insulsos como charla de abogados
o conversación amorosa
cuando el amor se ha esfumado.

(Such anxiety, surrender, enchantment;
such passion, promises, and outbursts
not even these bad verses will survive.
Inspid as they are like the prattle of lawyers
or amorous conversation
when love has vanished.)

The final section of the volume is more miscellaneous in nature in that it collects anti-love poems, harsh visions of Colombian reality, snapshots of foreign landscapes, homages to great masters of painting, but also perhaps the most moving and beautiful text of the entire collection, “Exhorto” (Summons). A fervent plea to a beloved woman, the poem begins: “Amor: / dame la mano / para salir / del tortuoso laberinto / donde te aguardo” (Love / give me your hand / to escape / the tortuous labyrinth / in which I await you).

What the poet tells us here is an essential truth: that everything in human existence is childish and ridiculous (both key words in his vocabulary), from the illusion of love to the irremediable resentment that extinguishes it. In the poem from



Cover of Cobo Borda's *La musa inclemente* (Tusquets, 2001)

which the collection takes its title, one reads: “Aprendí contigo / lo vano del entusiasmo. / Lo pueril de una carta. / Lo cotidiano de la muerte / y sus desengaños” (I learned with you / the vanity of enthusiasm. / The childishness of a letter. / The mundanity of death / and its disillusion). What most stands out in *La musa inclemente* is this philosophical and stoical acceptance of human existence as a form of defeat as well as the precise and transparent voice that expresses it. The poet's diction is unmistakable for the luminous intelligence with which it examines the smallest details of passion, for the ironic and skeptical sensibility of one who is conscious of living in an age of decadence,

and for its powerful concision of direct, unadorned images. There is in Cobo Borda's poetry a learned and elegant style similar to that found in Constantine Cavafy, Luis Cernuda, Álvaro Mutis, and Jorge Luis Borges. At times, the epigrammatic flavor of Cobo Borda's verse recalls the ancient Catullus, another poet of decadence who, like the Colombian, is capable of addressing the subject of love from a sentimental as well as a resentful perspective. In Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda, there is an underlying torment that seeks to resolve itself through serene resignation—that of a man who hopes for nothing and, with a sense of melancholy, puts words together to fill his emptiness and to deceive himself with the promise of immortality. **WLT**

Philadelphia

Translation from the Spanish

By David Draper Clark

Editorial note: Special thanks to Tusquets Editores, publisher of *La musa inclemente*, for their permission to reprint the verse selection “Un mal día” (www.tusquetseditores.com).

JOSÉ MIGUEL OVIEDO (born 1934, Peru) is a literary critic, essayist, and novelist. His many publications include *Antología crítica del cuento hispanoamericano del siglo xx* (2002), the four-volume *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana* (1995–2001), and his critical study *Mario Vargas Llosa: La invención de una realidad* (1970). A frequent contributor to the newspapers *El Comercio* (Lima), *El País* (Madrid), *La Jornada Semanal* (Mexico City) and to numerous international journals and magazines, including *World Literature Today*, he is Trustee Professor of Spanish Language and Literature Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania.