

Claudio Rodríguez

By Claudio Rodríguez in Spanish:

Don de la ebriedad

Conjuros

Alianza y condena

Poesía 1953–1966

El vuelo de la celebración

Desde mis poemas (ed. Claudio Rodríguez)

Casi una leyenda

Hacia el canto (ed. Claudio Rodríguez and Luis García Jambrina)

Poesía completa (1953–1991)

La otra palabra: Escritos en prosa (ed. Fernando Yubero)

Aventura (ed. Luis García Jambrina)

Poemas laterales (ed. Luis García Jambrina)

Collected Poems / Poesía completa

1953–1991



CLAUDIO RODRÍGUEZ

Translated and introduced by
Luis Ingelmo and Michael Smith

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To Irene

To Charo and Andrea, as always,
and to W. Michael Mudrovic—fine scholar and better friend

THE POETRY OF CLAUDIO RODRÍGUEZ

AN INTRODUCTION

I

Claudio Rodríguez was born on 30 January 1934 in Zamora, then a very provincial, almost parochial, town, and for many people permanently overshadowed by the gilded-stoned and university glory of Salamanca. Rodríguez's family was middle-class, both financially—they owned some land and properties—and historically, and their convictions and principles reflected those of the *petit bourgeoisie*. Although a child during the Spanish Civil War, Rodríguez was only incidentally affected by it and never so consciously as for it to become a part of his own self. All the memories—an execution by firing-squad, the air raid sirens, and so on—he would later recall, seem to be tinted by later reflections, always through a haze of confusion and re-creation.

Rodríguez's daily life passed in Zamora, where he studied in that town's primary schools, but he spent his holidays in the family's country house. There he was in direct contact with nature, with a sense of a rhythm in life that originated from observing the cultivation of the fields, the steady and yearly sowing, watering, fertilizing, growing and harvesting of grain. Critics agree that these early formative years were of crucial importance in the development of the poet's symbolic and poetic consciousness, so closely linked to his Castilian landscape.

Slowly but surely, Rodríguez's relationship with his parents, and particularly with his mother, became tense, a situation compounded by the fact that his twin sisters were of no great help in this matter, being eleven years younger. So, the young man resorted to getting away from both his family and the town into the countryside, where he felt more at ease. Within time, what began as a means of flight from family conflicted with a search for peace of mind and this turned into a habit, something the poet himself referred to as his 'walking craze'. This activity intensified after his father's death, when the poet was only thirteen years old, and the family came to ruin and were forced to sell off their properties. Nature and keenness in walking—a founding duality in Rodríguez's poetry—was also part of his temperament and his view of life.

Little did I know then, nor now, that contemplation, that is thought, entails morality, and that my long walks through the

fields in my homeland were shaping and, at the same time, modifying my appreciation of things and of my own life.¹

Those were also the years in which the poet started reading from his father's bookshelves, rich in the Spanish classics and contemporary authors, but also, unusually, filled with philosophical treatises and French poetry—mostly the symbolists: Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry—exceptional for a provincial library. One should not regard these early readings as merely a minor curiosity in Rodríguez's life, for they accompanied the poet not only in those early years, but throughout his intellectual and artistic life. Luis García Jambrina, one of the most knowledgeable scholars who, besides being a close personal friend of the poet, has devoted his academic research to the work and person of Claudio Rodríguez, claims that

. . . out of those who spend their days studying and writing, Claudio Rodríguez admired, above all, philosophers who seek their own roots in Greek thought and classical philologists, for they are the closest to the origin and heart of our culture and our language.²

At the same time, Rodríguez's studies of Latin, French and literature at school led him to develop a taste for metre and the sense of an inner beat, which later appeared in the choice of verse in his first book, *Gift of Inebriation*, written in hendecasyllabic verse, the truly Castilian poetic pattern: the walking beat, the metre of the innermost communion of man and earth. Not for nothing, Rodríguez insisted not only that his first book of poems had been written while walking—he learned it by heart—but also that he had

written almost all [his] poems while walking. Never on a worktable. The physical act of walking can influence even the poem's rhythm. That was very clear in Antonio Machado's

¹ Claudio Rodríguez, 'A manera de un comentario', preface to *Desde mis poemas*, ed. C. Rodríguez (Madrid: Cátedra, 1984), p. 15. This, and all other translations in this introduction, are by Luis Ingelmo and Michael Smith.

² Luis García Jambrina, 'Conferencia inaugural', in *Aventura*, No. 1, Proceedings of the II Jornadas on Claudio Rodríguez ('Claudio Rodríguez y la traducción de poesía', Zamora, November 30 and December 1–2), ed. Seminario Permanente Claudio Rodríguez (Zamora, 2007), p. 15.

poetry—it is not quite the same to contemplate things while walking than at great speed.³

The 1950s is the decade in which Rodríguez made his poetic debut, and it is also the time when he moved to Madrid to study Philosophy and Letters at the Universidad Central. In addition it was when he met two decisive people in his life: Clara Miranda, who became his friend, his companion and, in time, his wife, and Vicente Aleixandre, with whom he at first shared an epistolary relationship that turned into a life-long personal friendship. It was Aleixandre who received the manuscript of *Gift of Inebriation*, to his great surprise and delight, a joy that was increased when the book was granted the *Adonáis* Prize for Poetry in 1953. José Hierro, one of the members of the panel of judges, admitted about the book:

He spoke to us about something which is within arm's reach—chair, shirt, beam . . . —but somehow it was as if he was pulling our leg. And yet, he refers to something deeper, more intense. He is a magician, talking about something and then turning it into a symbol. He has an incredible gift. He is a rare, unique poet. Claudio does not have distinctive traits, but everything in him is distinctive.⁴

It is most likely that the Madrid of the 1950s did not supply Rodríguez with what he had left behind in the Zamoran countryside, that is, the community of men and land, the living pulse felt through the regeneration of the fields and the cycle of birth and death. Madrid must have been an opportunity to make contacts with other poetic figures of the time, but granted the lack of association with any literary generation, Rodríguez's acquaintance with those men must have functioned at a personal rather than an aesthetic level, even though critics tend to assign him to the so-called '50s generation, which will be deliberately left here with a lower-case 'g' in order to point out the absence of a common thread that would

³ 'Claudio Rodríguez o la influencia de todo: Entrevista de Federico Campbell', in Claudio Rodríguez, *La otra palabra: Escritos en prosa*, ed. Fernando Yubero (Barcelona: Tusquets, 2004), p. 226.

⁴ Jesús Hernández, 'Acedémico, cumplidor y defensor de la lírica', in *La Opinión*, July 23, 1999, p. 14. Quoted by M. Antonia Mezquita Fernández in *William Blake y Claudio Rodríguez: Visiones luminosas* (Salamanca: Instituto de Estudios Zamoranos 'Florián de Ocampo', 2006), p. 24.

link those traditionally included in that group: José Hierro, Blas de Otero, Carlos Bousoño, Ignacio Aldecoa, Francisco Brines, José Ángel Valente, Ángel González, Carlos Sahagún, Luis Rosales, Leopoldo Panero. Finally, in 1957 Rodríguez obtained a degree in Romance Philology and, once again, packed his bags, this time for England.

Nottingham first, until 1960, then Cambridge, until 1964, were the two university towns that welcomed a young language assistant who became familiar with the English language and its writers. Soon after arriving in Nottingham, *Conjurings*, Rodríguez's second book, was published. It was a collection that had gestated while he was still on Spanish soil: full of the fields and the people of the Castilian landscape, but already a poetry turned to the objects, the activities of men, the matter of things, less metaphysical than *Gift of Inebriation*. It was also, according to the poet, a book written with an 'exclamatory tone—to conjure is to ask for things exclaiming.'⁵ We should also take into account that conjurings, that is, spells or incantations, were an amalgam of 'ancient science, witchcraft arts, Christianity and superstition'⁶ ('Witches at Middyay' will be the first poem of Rodríguez's third book, which is somehow the link that gives continuity to his second and third books), a mixture found in the Anglo-Saxon herbaria and recipe books collecting remedies against ailments and other illnesses. Conjuring is, then, a means of naming things as they are, of bringing back those things by naming them.

A great deal of contemporary poetry—and not only Spanish, for that matter—doesn't quite ring as true, or useful, and not only due to its absurd naming as 'free verse', but also because of the essential distance between language and things. Things that warned me, walked along with me, lit up my way and blinded me: 'the eagerness of daring to say *apple* or contemplating, like St. Teresa of Jesus, *water for a long time*'. . . . The form of matter, of its activity that grows calm or suddenly starts beating, like an attack that has to be struck, hatched. What man ignores. And it is necessary that the dark bulk of becoming has a specific location.⁷

Thus, England, and especially Cambridge, proved to be the right atmosphere for Rodríguez's inspiration and for the composition of his

⁵ 'Claudio Rodríguez o la influencia de todo', p. 225.

⁶ Cf. *Beowulf y otros poemas anglosajones. Siglos VII–X*, ed. and trans. Luis Lerate and Jesús Lerate (Madrid: Alianza, 1986), p. 171.

⁷ Claudio Rodríguez, 'A manera de un comentario', pp. 16–7.

third book, in which the influence of the English poets was obvious even to himself:

English poetry, for instance, has been influential to me in the rigour of its structures, in the way it approaches the poem. In Spanish poetry the poet usually starts writing in an uncontrolled fashion, thoughtless of the boundaries or the fabric of the poem. The poem, then, will inevitably untack, it's just like a shirt—it can be well or badly made. But that rigour doesn't deny magic or fantasy or a harmonious madness. There can be harmony within madness.⁸

One could easily argue that *Alliance and Condemnation* (1965) was written by two hands, those of Rodríguez and Aleixandre. It is well known that Rodríguez took very much into account the advice given to him by the Nobel Laureate regarding the composition of this book, from the arrangement of the poems, through a tentative new classification of the poems into 'whispered' and 'cursed', and to the point of the apparition of the word *alliance* within the title. Regarding this matter, Rodríguez had a few words of explanation:

When in my most recent book I say 'alliance and condemnation', I do not allude to alliance as a concept. There is condemnation within alliance, just like there is alliance within condemnation. It is a—let's say it with a very pretentious word—dialectic process.⁹

Throughout all that time in Cambridge, it was Aleixandre who kept Rodríguez's spirits high when his confidence and faith in his verse started to flag.

Back in Madrid, Rodríguez worked as a professor of Spanish Literature in several teaching institutions, including the Universidad Complutense.

The following years were difficult ones for Rodríguez on a personal level. Two mournful events mark that time: both his mother and one of his twin sisters died, the first in 1974 and the latter a little more than a year later. These deaths predominate in his next book, *The Flight of Celebration*, despite its apparent festive title. In his own words, the poems dealt with

⁸ 'Claudio Rodríguez o la influencia de todo', pp. 221-2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

. . . celebrating what opens up or what closes down from all vital possibilities: the figure of things, the power of feelings that can end up in fertility or in drought. It is like a 'liveliness' that recreates, fleetingly, what startles and shapes us, and polishes, and improves us. Celebration as knowledge and as remorse. As servitude, giving to this word the most perceptive of meanings: human fate, with all its adjectives.¹⁰

As for remorse, the poems in this book return to a more spiritual territory. They lack the exclamatory quality of the former conjurings, and have left behind the dualism of all things in life (the nearby and the remote, building and annihilation, the fascinating and the terrible, alliance and condemnation) in order to move on into a more pensive tone. Remorse, therefore, should be understood as a cleansing process, as a way to clarify what was previously obscure or deeply hidden within ourselves.

From this time on, Rodríguez became one of the most outstanding poets of his generation, not only widely read among students and scholars, but also invited to many symposia around the world, and that is clear in the type of institutions that invited him to participate in readings—they include the Modern Language Association in Houston, Texas, in 1981 and the Spanish Institute of New York City, in 1982.

In 1983 he was awarded the National Prize for Poetry, and in 1986, the Castile and León Prize for Letters. From 1987 onwards he wrote for the newspaper *ABC*, mostly dealing with literary matters, but also printing some of his previously unpublished translations of T. S. Eliot, an undertaking that had begun back in his days at Cambridge and continued after his return to Madrid. It remained an unfinished task because, due to his perfectionism, Rodríguez never found adequate time to deal with Eliot's *Four Quartets* and the commissioning Spanish publishing house grew so impatient as to drop the project altogether.

On December 1987 he was elected a full member of the Spanish Royal Academy of Language, filling the position vacated by the death of Gerardo Diego.

1991 was the year of the publication of Rodríguez's fifth, and final, book of poems, *Almost a Legend*, which was given a warm reception by both critics and readers; it was awarded a number of literary prizes.

¹⁰ Claudio Rodríguez, 'A manera de un comentario', p. 21.

Life is like a legend, therefore the title—it is as if what's past had not occurred, or was very confused. I wanted to start the book with a revised quote by Dante, though I later decided not to: '*si che la vista pare e non par vera*' (*Paradise* XIV, 72). I modified it by changing one word: '*si che la vita pare e non par vera.*' That's the motivation, not only for the book, but for all my poetry. I feel as if I'm confronting a legend and not a story.¹¹

Institutional positions, awards and appointments followed: the Prince of Asturias Prize for Letters, and the Queen Sofia Prize for Latin-American Poetry (both in 1993); Patron of the Cervantes Institute (1995); member of the Castile and León Academy of Poetry (1996); Castile and León Academy Prize for Poetry for his poetic career (1998). In addition, several universities and schools devoted courses and seminars to his work.

He died on 22 July 1999 in Madrid, after suffering a very serious illness. He is buried, at his express wish, in the cemetery in Zamora. His death was, then, just a return to his beginnings, going back to where he started, one more stage in his continuing adventure. He left unfinished a folder with the semi-arranged manuscript of what he wished to become his next book of poems, a book that would have had the most revealing of titles: *Aventura*.¹²

¹¹ 'El hombre no puede ser libre. Entrevista de Juan Carlos Suñén', in Claudio Rodríguez, *La otra palabra*, p. 237.

¹² A large format facsimile edition of the many manuscript poems, at several stages of their development, was published by Luis García Jambrina in book form: Claudio Rodríguez, *Aventura*. Salamanca: Ediciones Témpera (Tropismos), 2005. There is also a small-format limited edition volume of the non-canonical, so-called 'side' poems—never included by the poet in his books—collected by Luis García Jambrina: Claudio Rodríguez, *Poemas laterales*. Teguiise, Lanzarote: Fundación César Manrique, 2006.

II

It should be said at the start that Claudio Rodríguez is not a nature poet in the sense that that nomenclature has in the corpus of English poetry, from the Old English 'Seafarer' to the poetry of, say, Thomas Hardy, Dylan Thomas, Ted Hughes or Seamus Heaney. Even the pantheistic nature poetry of Wordsworth or Shelley has a contextuality that eliminates most difficulties of comprehension. So, too, the ambiguity of the nature poetry of Robert Frost or Elizabeth Bishop. It is generally true to say that nature poetry in English almost invariably has a specificity, a kind of concreteness of imagery, that is a core element of nature poetry in English. It is a sort of poetic empiricism and possesses a kind of palpable referentiality. Even if we take a pantheistic poem such as Shelley's 'Ode to The West Wind', one can still see one's way through its mystical nebulosity.

Romantic 'nature poems' are in fact meditative poems, in which the presented scene usually serves to raise an emotional problem or personal crisis whose development and resolution constitute the organizing principle of the poem.¹³

Perhaps it was the poetry of Shelley and Keats that had the greatest appeal for Claudio Rodríguez. He is not, however, a Spanish version of an English romantic any more than Vicente Aleixandre was a Spanish Milton. For some peculiar reason, often remarked on by the Argentinian Borges, English poets tend towards realism as opposed to nominalism, using these terms in their Thomistic sense. And this poses problems for the modern translator. Despite all the lip-service given to the greatness of the poetry of William Blake—perhaps England's greatest mystical poet—many English readers experience a certain uneasiness with his poetry, and this is despite the fact that not only Blake but also the 17th century poet Thomas Traherne produced a large body of mystical nature poetry. In fact, an interesting comparison could be made between Traherne's poetry and that of Rodríguez. One would, of course, have to take into account Traherne's religious preoccupations. But here is a brief description of Traherne's poetry by Anne Ridler, Traherne's editor:

¹³ M.H. Abrams and Jack Stillinger, 'The Romantic Period: 1798-1832', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2, General ed. M.H. Abrams (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986, 5th ed.), p. 8.

Traherne is a master of the Affirmative Way, which pursues perfection through delight in the created world. Every emphasis in his writings is on inclusive love, and one has only to read the *Centuries* alongside other religious writings of his time . . . to see how unusual he was in his lack of emphasis on sin. The affirmations of the *Centuries* may seem to diverge from the central theme of mysticism, as expressed by St. John of the Cross, that the soul must free itself from the love of created beings, for Traherne boldly says ‘Never was any thing in this World loved too much’.¹⁴

One wonders why some translator has not yet got around to putting Traherne’s poetry into Spanish. It would have been an ideal undertaking for Rodríguez. And this leads one back to a comment Borges made in his essay on Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’. In that essay, Borges discusses the problems he perceives English critics have with Keats’s poem:

. . . one can state of the English mind that it was born Aristotelian. For that mind, not abstract concepts but individual ones are real; not the generic nightingale, but concrete nightingales. It is natural, it is perhaps inevitable, that in England the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ is not understood correctly.¹⁵

He further elaborates on this comment with the following:

Please do not read reprobation or disdain into the foregoing words. The Englishman rejects the generic because he feels that the individual is irreducible, inassimilable, and unique. An ethical scruple, not a speculative incapacity, prevents him from trafficking in abstractions like the German. He does not understand the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’; that estimable incomprehension permits him to be Locke, to be Berkeley, to be Hume . . .¹⁶

One may think that think Borges’ judgement here is rather flawed by his generalisation of ‘the English mind’, but he has a valid point about the empiricism of English culture, notwithstanding the many exceptions

¹⁴ Thomas Traherne, *Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings*, ed. Anne Ridler (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. xvii.

¹⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Nightingale of Keats’, in *Other Inquisitions*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), pp. 127–30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.130.

one can find, such as Blake and Traherne, to mention just two names. And it is this empirical cast of mind that often acts as a block to the appreciation of cultures of a more idealistic nature.

Rodríguez's poetry has a cosmic vision. Sun and Earth are viewed in an interdependent relationship, the sun the source of all living things, present in all their manifestations. Dawn is not dawn in the ordinary sense of the word, not simply daybreak, but the sun's renewal of all that lives. The seed scattered by the wind must not only find earth in which to germinate, but needs the benediction of the sun to realise its corporeality. And it is this process of realisation that seems to be the focus of Rodríguez's poetry rather than the concrete manifestation of things. This process of the sun has, of course, its reality: but in Rodríguez's poetry it has a beatification of a mystical nature. It should not be confused with traditional pantheism, which is also mystical, as, for instance, in Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'.

It's easy enough to see how Shelley's poem can bear some comparison with many of the poems by Rodríguez. But the mystical dimension of Rodríguez's poetry is of a different order that seems to be part of the Spanish tradition, and rather alien to the English tradition.

This is not to say that English poetry has no mystical dimension. In Old English there is Caedmon, and there is the 17th century poet Henry Vaughan, and there is William Blake, and there is Gerard Manley Hopkins, and there is also T.S. Eliot, whose poetry Rodríguez translated while in Cambridge. But this mystical dimension of English poetry is rare enough and usually approached by readers of English poetry cautiously and even apologetically, as something rather alien. Furthermore, it usually has a fairly conventional religious contextuality and an anthropic centrality that facilitates accessibility.

My poetry has a religious undertone, but I am not of the confessional type. I have been more of a pagan—I always liked to enjoy myself. But poetry has something holy to it, it looks for the secret, it is a celebration of life: of the joyful and the festive, but also of the poignant and of suffering, of all realities of human life. And, in this sense, it is an act of faith. The poet is like a priest who opens up the tabernacle in order to look inside. . . . Perhaps that is why the great poets sound as if they were praying, like a prayer or an imprecation.¹⁷

¹⁷ 'Yo no puedo escribir poemas adrede: Entrevista de Miguel Mora', *El País*, December 15, 1998, p. 40. Quoted by M. A. Mezquita Fernández in *William Blake y Claudio Rodríguez*, p. 25.

William Blake was mentioned and linked to Rodríguez not so much for the latter's mysticism but for the fact that he liked to think of his poetry as some kind of prophecy, in the sense of a product that both is created by a divine consciousness or imagination ('inebriation', in the sense of rapture) and has a certain impact on the forthcoming readers, so as for them to be able to grasp what was said in the past as a message that contains a clear voice directed to the present. The poet, therefore, would stand in front of his peers not so much as a saviour but as an angel (a messenger, etymologically speaking), a creature destined to bring the word that would help to unveil a hidden and truer reality to the semi-blind human beings. Particularly in his first works, the poetry of Rodríguez also showed some mystical overtones: the word comes from above, clear and clean, to reveal what one alone cannot see. If this makes Rodríguez a visionary poet or not, it would depend on one's concept of the relationship between contemplation and knowledge. More importantly, the kind of knowledge to which Rodríguez seems to subscribe is one that can only be attained through contemplation, be it in a child-like manner, through the senses, or thanks to a sudden gust of inspiration, a Joycean epiphany, so to speak.

Claudio Rodríguez's poetry plays the role of epiphany, which in theological terms represents a perceptible manifestation of the divinity, but here is a creation that is revelation and, at the same time, a definition that completes what has been revealed. . . . Epiphanic poetry is the result of a revelation and, besides, it is the most suitable means for the encouraging of that revelation—what poetry has revealed can be recognized in it, and its meaning is included in it and only in it. What poetry reveals is its own possibility of revelation and the act of revelation, and no explanation or interpretation can give a report of what has been revealed.¹⁸

Inebriation, therefore, would stand for rapture, but also for a celebration of life itself, the consciousness of life as a never-ending adventure, the conviction that 'poetry is adventure—culture. Adventure or legend, like life itself. A myth and a sign'.¹⁹

But what finally distinguished Rodríguez's poetic voice from that of the Romantics is its lack of individualism, an individualism present in his

¹⁸ Antoni Marí, 'Asombro y contemplación', foreword to Claudio Rodríguez, *Poesía completa 1953–1991* (Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores, 2004), pp. 13–4.

¹⁹ Claudio Rodríguez, 'A manera de un comentario', p. 17.

work, the lack of faith in a human mind that had gradually replaced the dehumanising mechanistic rationalism of the 18th century. Neither is Rodríguez searching in his poetry for the Romantic notion of unlimited understanding, of infinite ambitions and goals, and thus his moral code is not to be found within the boundaries of what can or cannot be violated: his is an ideal art, a true *poiesis* in the Aristotelian sense of the term—creation out of nothing.

The poet needs, although he may not know it, to give up his own personality and, indeed, his own originality. He would like to be involved, to be identified with the object of his contemplation in order to newly be born in it, to see himself in it.²⁰

The poetry of David Gascoyne poses some of the problems that one encounters with that of Rodríguez. Both poets were much influenced by French surrealism, Gascoyne more deeply than Rodríguez. Although less concerned with nature, Gascoyne nevertheless probes for transcendence in the world of nature and in the human quotidian. But there is an anguish in the poetry of Gascoyne, a profound longing for human fellowship that ultimately drove him toward religion, whereas for Rodríguez the world of nature seems to offer a preferred alternative, and in this he has greater kinship with Dylan Thomas. In all three poets, however, there is a mystical quality that drives their language into areas that baffle the reader, and despite Thomas's immense popularity in his lifetime, frustrated incomprehension was a frequent response to his work. This is the price that poets who strive to go beyond the conventionally empirical have always had to pay. Christopher Smart was considered mad, as was Blake and even the more sober nature poet, John Clare, who ended up in a mental asylum. What, for instance is the empiricist to make of Gascoyne's

..... Reveal
The immaterial world concealed
By mortal deafness and the screen of sense,

World of transparency and last release
And world within the world. Beyond our speech

²⁰ Claudio Rodríguez, 'Poesía como participación: Hacia Miguel Hernández' in *La otra palabra*, p. 134.

To tell what equinoxes of the infinite
The spirit ranges in its rare utmost flight.²¹

For the mystic, and it is arguable that Claudio Rodríguez was a mystic, albeit in a secular sense, the crucial difficulty is how to express experience that seems immediately betrayed by any attempt to express it, certainly in concrete images. Although of a different order, intuitive experience poses a similar problem: the mind, functioning intuitively, moves so fast that it arrives at its insight without conscious memory of its journey there, thus creating the problem of how to explain and justify the insight to others. The mystic attempts to express the normally or at least conventionally inexpressible, but is as convinced of its reality as of anything in the world of commonsense.

The poet needs to be abducted by things, but yet he has to remain active, within the tension between the subject and the object—he has to forget about himself and plunge into the territory of intelligence, of intuition (inspiration). But not without the skill, not without the knowledge of his trade. That is why it is absurd to speak about visionary or enlightened poets as if they weren't, also, great technicians. I very much let myself be taken over by inspiration (or intuition), but not without losing sight of my own trade. Inspiration is not blind.²²

To turn now to a specific poem by Rodríguez, 'Espuma', possibly one of his best-known poems. The Spanish word can mean in English 'froth' or 'foam'. It can mean something light, something frolicsome, a kind of playing with the surface of things. But it would be the wrong word to use in translating Rodríguez's poem. Now how does the translator arrive at such a decision, how does he or she distinguish between *froth* and *foam*? Lexically the words are pretty well identical in English. But *foam* has a slightly greater sense of lightness, of fragility, than *froth*.²³

²¹ David Gascoyne, 'Mozart: Sursum Corda', in *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 53.

²² 'Claudio Rodríguez: El hombre no puede ser libre', p. 235.

²³ The English term *froth* has its origin in the Greek *prēthein* ('to blow up') and from here it derived into the Old Norse *frotha*, akin to the Old English *āfrēoþan* ('to froth'), from which the Middle English word was formed, such as it is still used nowadays. On the other hand, *foam* is related to the Latin terms *spuma* ('foam') and *pumex* ('pumice'), although its origin goes back to the Old English word *fām*, akin to the Old High German *feim* ('foam'), which evolved into the Middle English *fome*, from which the present term was originated. Both words

More importantly, the context of Rodríguez's poems is more suggestive of the sea. That, of course, is a subjective judgement of the translator, and could easily be the subject of debate, depending on the associations the reader of English has for both words. But there is a real vulnerability in the making of such decisions.

This is a key poem in his work, not simply because of its accessibility, but because it seems to position the poet relative to the society in which he lives. For all the lip-service given to poets in modern times, they are mostly outsiders (at least usually the best of them) since poetry as a serious medium has become marginalized. For some poets this is understandably a painful condition. Whatever their inner turmoil may be, they are members of their society; and yet their role, whether as witnesses of what is happening in society or as explorers of human consciousness, and yet their role is such that they so often find themselves looking in rather than participating. The poem from which the following quotation is taken was written by the Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh. He, too, like Claudio Rodríguez, was a nature poet with a mystical view of the world. In this poem he describes a visit to a local dance. He has a longing to participate in the festivities just like the speaker in 'Agathas' Dance'. It is titled 'Innishkeen Road: July Evening'. Having described a local rural dance at which he was a mere onlooker, he continues

I have what every poet hates in spite
Of all the solemn talk of contemplation.
Oh, Alexander Selkirk knew the plight
Of being king and government and nation.
A road, a mile of kingdom, I am king
Of banks and stones and every blooming thing.²⁴

are used as synonyms in relation to the frothy substance of fine bubbles that is formed in or on the surface of a liquid (by agitation or fermentation, for instance) or in salivating or sweating, and also in the figurative and informal sense of being angry (as in 'He's got foam at the mouth'), although *froth* is used in the sense of something insubstantial or of little value, even of idle talk or ideas, whereas *foam* is applied to chemical agents, such as soaps, shaving creams, foam for the bath, the one used in fire-fighting, and also for padding or packing. Likewise, *foam* is used, for poetic purposes, when referring to the sea. All of these particulars, which we're presenting here as a mere example, need to be taken into account when deciding on which term to use for a translation, especially when it comes to dealing with the work of a poet such as Claudio Rodríguez, so precise and unique in his usage of words, be they in a traditional way or in a completely new and unexpected manner.

²⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 15.

Despite Kavanagh's sense of social estrangement, of not being a participant in ordinary social activity, in which there is doubtless some pain, he turns affirmatively and triumphantly to the gift of poetry, a gift that gives him access to the larger world of nature. And it is a gift that he offers the reader to share in. For such gifts one should be grateful. Claudio Rodríguez undoubtedly had such a gift. And like Kavanagh, he, too, possessed the capacity to share in ordinary humanity and its concerns. The contemporary poet may be an outsider but he also acts as a constant reminder of the importance of the ordinary. To take into consideration another poem, Rodríguez's 'Agathas' Dance'. It is a beautiful celebration of the extraordinary ordinariness of the world. The dance of the poem is not simply that of the Agathas at the village fiesta: it is the dance of life itself.

Even death was accepted by Rodríguez as part of the process of living. In that sense, his poetry is remarkably free of morbidity. As he says in 'What is not a Dream',

Let me speak to you, at this time
of grief, with happy
words.

That poem reminds one of Dylan Thomas's splendid 'And Death Shall Have No Dominion'. Here is the first stanza of that poem:

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.²⁵

These lines seem to express the affirmative and celebratory attitude of Claudio Rodríguez toward his own life and that of life in general. In this he is more like Dylan Thomas than David Gascoyne. And in a spiritually bankrupt age such as the present one, which for so many often ends in a

²⁵ Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1952* (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 77.

despair that no material affluence can ultimately alleviate, it is a healthy reminder that life is about more than the acquisition of commodities or the purely sensual life. It is the ‘old wisdom’ to which he refers to in the above-mentioned poem:

Let me, with an old
wisdom, say:
in spite, in spite
of everything
and though it may be very painful, and though
it may at times be revolting, always, always
the deepest truth is happiness.

What Rodríguez most admired in Dylan Thomas’s poetry was the Welshman’s capability to generate a delirious and ecstatic poem built within a very original geometry: ‘There is a great deal of control and an immense harmony within that craze.’²⁶ There seems to be a common thread in Rodríguez’s poetics, one that links Thomas’s poetry—which he read later on in his life—with his younger reading, especially of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s poems:

Wordless ideas,
meaningless words,
chords with neither
rhythm nor measure; . . .

Madness that exalts
and weakens the spirit
divine inebriation
of creative genius.

Such is inspiration.
. . .

Intelligent hand
that links
in a necklace of pearls
intractable words;

Harmonious rhythm
with cadence and number,

²⁶ ‘Claudio Rodríguez o la influencia de todo’, p. 222.

enclosing fugitive notes
in a definite measure; . . .

Such is our reason.²⁷

Rodríguez admittedly let pass larger amounts of years between the publication of his books, since he found himself taken up by his own innermost lyrical life, feeding himself off his everyday life, to the point of being unable to distinguish one from the other. A sediment being slowly built within the poet, it may mysteriously rise up and become words.

And that is precisely what makes Rodríguez's poetry so valuable and so courageous. Its transcendence of the empirical, referred to earlier, may make for difficulties for the translator working in English, but the overcoming of these difficulties seems to be, in the end, a worthwhile effort. At least that is the judgment of the present translators.

LUIS INGELMO
Zamora, 2008

MICHAEL SMITH
Dublin, 2008

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²⁷ G.A. Bécquer, poem III (42), *Collected Poems (Rimas)*, bilingual ed., eds. Luis Ingelmo and Michael Smith, trans. Michael Smith (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2007), pp. 33 and 35.

DON DE LA EBRIEDAD

[1953]

A mi madre

GIFT OF INEBRIATION

[1953]

To my mother

LIBRO PRIMERO

I

Siempre la claridad viene del cielo;
es un don: no se halla entre las cosas
sino muy por encima, y las ocupa
haciendo de ello vida y labor propias.
Así amanece el día; así la noche
cierra el gran aposento de sus sombras.
Y esto es un don. ¿Quién hace menos creados
cada vez a los seres? ¿Qué alta bóveda
los contiene en su amor? ¡Si ya nos llega
y es pronto aún, ya llega a la redonda
a la manera de los vuelos tuyos
y se cierne, y se aleja y, aún remota,
nada hay tan claro como sus impulsos!
Oh, claridad sedienta de una forma,
de una materia para deslumbrarla
quemándose a sí mismo al cumplir su obra.
Como yo, como todo lo que espera.
Si tú la luz te la has llevado toda,
¿cómo voy a esperar nada del alba?
Y, sin embargo –esto es un don–, mi boca
espera, y mi alma espera, y tú me esperas,
ebria persecución, claridad sola
mortal como el abrazo de las hoces,
pero abrazo hasta el fin que nunca afloja.

II

Yo me pregunto a veces si la noche
se cierra al mundo para abrirse o si algo
la abre tan de repente que nosotros
no llegamos a su alba, al alba al raso
que no desaparece porque nadie

FIRST BOOK

I

Clarity always comes from the sky;
it is a gift: it is not found among things
but very high up, and it occupies them
making that its own life and labours.
Thus day dawns; thus night
encloses the great dwelling of its shadows.
And this is a gift. Who makes beings
less created each time? What high vault
contains them in its love? It is already coming
and though still early, already it comes round
in the manner of your flights
and it hovers, and goes away and, still remote,
there is nothing so clear as its drives!
Oh, clarity thirsty for a form,
for a matter to dazzle it
burning itself on completing its work.
Like me, like everything that waits.
If you have taken all the light away
how am I to expect anything of the dawn?
And yet—this is a gift—my mouth
waits, and my soul waits, and you wait for me,
inebriate pursuit, clarity alone
deadly like the embrace of sickles,
yet an embrace till the end that never slackens.

II

Sometimes I wonder if night
closes on the world to open itself or if something
opens it so suddenly we
do not reach its dawn, the dawn out in the open
that does not vanish because no one

la crea: ni la luna, ni el sol claro.
Mi tristeza tampoco llega a verla
tal como es, quedándose en los astros
cuando en ellos el día es manifiesto
y no revela que en la noche hay campos
de intensa amanecida apresurada
no en germen, en luz plena, en albos pájaros.
Algún vuelo estará quemando el aire,
no por ardiente sino por lejano.
Alguna limpidez de estrella bruñe
los pinos, bruñirá mi cuerpo al cabo.
¿Qué puedo hacer sino seguir poniendo
la vida a mil lanzadas del espacio?
Y es que en la noche hay siempre un fuego oculto,
un resplandor aéreo, un día vano
para nuestros sentidos, que gravitan
hacia arriba y no ven ni oyen abajo.
Como es la calma un yelmo para el río
así el dolor es brisa para el álamo.
Así yo estoy sintiendo que las sombras
abren su luz, la abren, la abren tanto,
que la mañana surge sin principio
ni fin, eterna ya desde el ocaso.

III

La encina, que conserva más un rayo
de sol que todo un mes de primavera,
no siente lo espontáneo de su sombra,
la sencillez del crecimiento; apenas
si conoce el terreno en que ha brotado.
Con ese viento que en sus ramas deja
lo que no tiene música, imagina
para sus sueños una gran meseta.
Y con qué rapidez se identifica
con el paisaje, con el alma entera

creates it: nor the moon, nor the clear sun.
Neither does my sadness come to see it
when the day is manifest among them
and it does not reveal that at night there are fields
of intense and hurried daybreak
not in seeds, in full light, in albino birds.
Some flight will be burning the air,
not for being passionate, but for being distant.

Some limpidity of a star burnishes
the pines, it will finally burnish my body.
What can I do but go on placing
my life at a thousand lance-strokes of space?
And so at night there is always a hidden fire,
an aerial gleam, a futile day
for our feelings, which gravitate
upwards and neither see nor hear downwards.
As calmness is a helmet for the river
so pain is a breeze for the poplar.
Thus I am feeling that the shadows open
their light, open it, open it so much,
that the morning rises without beginning
or end, eternal since sunset.

III

The holm oak, which preserves a ray
of sun more than a whole month of Spring,
does not feel the spontaneity of its shadow,
the simplicity of growth; it scarcely
knows the terrain in which it has sprouted.
With that wind which in its branches leaves
what has no music, it imagines
a great tableland for its dreams.
And with what haste it identifies itself
with the countryside, with the entire soul

de su frondosidad y de mí mismo.
Llegaría hasta el cielo si no fuera
porque aún su sazón es la del árbol.
Días habrá en que llegue. Escucha mientras
el ruido de los vuelos de las aves,
el tenue del pardillo, el de ala plena
de la avutarda, vigilante y claro.
Así estoy yo. Qué encina, de madera
más oscura quizá que la del roble,
levanta mi alegría, tan intensa
unos momentos antes del crepúsculo
y tan doblada ahora. Como avena
que se siembra a voleo y que no importa
que caiga aquí o allí si cae en tierra,
va el contenido ardor del pensamiento
filtrándose en las cosas, entreabriéndolas,
para dejar su resplandor y luego
darle una nueva claridad en ellas.
Y es cierto, pues la encina ¿qué sabría
de la muerte sin mí? ¿Y acaso es cierta
su intimidad, su instinto, lo espontáneo
de su sombra más fiel que nadie? ¿Es cierta
mi vida así, en sus persistentes hojas
a medio descifrar la primavera?

IV

Así el deseo. Como el alba, clara
desde la cima y cuando se detiene
tocando con sus luces lo concreto
recién oscura, aunque instantáneamente.
Después abre ruidosos palomares
y ya es un día más. ¡Oh, las rehenes
palomas de la noche conteniendo
sus impulsos altísimos! Y siempre
como el deseo, como mi deseo.

of its luxuriance and of myself.
It would reach as far as the sky if it were not
because its season is still that of a tree.
There will be days it may reach. Meanwhile it listens
to the noise of the birds' flight,
the delicate one of the linnet, that of the full wing
of the bustard, alert and clear.
Just so am I. What holm oak, of wood
maybe darker than the oak's,
raises my happiness, so intense
some moments before twilight
and so bent now. As oat seeds
that are scattered and it doesn't matter
if they fall here or there if they fall on the earth,
the contained ardour of thought
is infiltrating things, half-opening them,
to leave its splendour and
to give it a new clarity in them.
And it is certain, for what would the holm oak know
of death without me? And maybe
its intimacy is certain, its instinct, the spontaneity
of its shadow more faithful than anyone? Is my life
so certain, in its persistent leaves
with spring half-deciphered?

IV

And so desire. Like dawn, clear
from the top and when it halts
touching what is concrete
recently dark, although instantly.
Then it opens noisy pigeon lofts
and already it is one more day. Oh, the hostage
pigeons of the night holding back
their highest impulses! And always
like desire, like my desire.

Vedle surgir entre las nubes, vedle
sin ocupar espacio deslumbrarme.
No está en mí, está en el mundo, está ahí enfrente.
Necesita vivir entre las cosas.
Ser añil en los cerros y de un verde
prematureo en los valles. Ante todo,
como en la vaina el grano, permanece
calentando su albor enardecido
para después manifestarlo en breve
más hermoso y radiante. Mientras, queda
limpio sin una brisa que lo aviente,
limpio deseo cada vez más mío,
cada vez menos vuestro, hasta que llegue
por fin a ser mi sangre y mi tarea,
corpóreo como el sol cuando amanece.

V

Cuándo hablaré de ti sin voz de hombre
para no acabar nunca, como el río
no acaba de contar su pena y tiene
dichas ya más palabras que yo mismo.
Cuándo estaré bien fuera o bien en lo hondo
de lo que alrededor es un camino
limitándome, igual que el soto al ave.
Pero, ¿seré capaz de repetirlo,
capaz de amar dos veces como ahora?
Este rayo de sol, que es un sonido
en el órgano, vibra con la música
de noviembre y refleja sus distintos
modos de hacer caer las hojas vivas.
Porque no sólo el viento las cae, sino
también su gran tarea, sus vislumbres
de un otoño esencial. Si encuentra un sitio
rastrillado, la nueva siembra crece
lejos de antiguos brotes removidos;

Watch it rise among the clouds, watch it
without occupying space dazzling me.
It is not in me, it is in the world, it is here up ahead.
It needs to live among things.
To be indigo on the hills
and a premature green in the valleys. Above all,
like the seed in its pod, it stays
heating its impassioned brightness
to manifest it later briefly
more beautiful and radiant. Meanwhile, it stays
clean without a breeze to fan it,
a clean desire more and more mine,
less and less yours, until it comes
to be finally my blood and my task,
corporeal like the sun when it dawns.

V

When shall I speak of you without voice of man
never to end, as the river
does not end relating its grief and has
uttered more words than I myself.
When shall I be well outside or well in the depth
of what around is a road
limiting me, just as the copse to the bird.
But, shall I be capable of repeating it,
capable of loving twice, as now?
This ray of sunshine, that is a sound
in the organ, vibrates with the music
of November and reflects its different
ways of making living leaves fall.
Because not only does the wind make them fall
but also its great task, its glimmers
of an essential autumn. If it finds
a raked place, the new seed grows
far from its ancient, displaced buds;

pero siempre le sube alguna fuerza,
alguna sed de aquéllos, algún limpio
cabeceo que vuelve a dividirse
y a dar olor al aire en mil sentidos.
Cuándo hablaré de ti sin voz de hombre.
Cuándo. Mi boca sólo llega al signo,
sólo interpreta muy confusamente.
Y es que hay duras verdades de un continuo
crecer, hay esperanzas que no logran
sobrepasar el tiempo y convertirlo
en seca fuente de llanura, como
hay terrenos que no filtran el limo.

VI

Las imágenes, una que las centra
en planetaria rotación, se borran
y suben a un lugar por sus impulsos
donde al surgir de nuevo toman forma.
Por eso yo no sé cuáles son éstas.
Yo pregunto qué sol, qué brote de hoja
o qué seguridad de la caída
llegan a la verdad, si está más próxima
la rama del nogal que la del olmo,
más la nube azulada que la roja.
Quizá, pueblo de llamas, las imágenes
enciendan doble cuerpo en doble sombra.
Quizá algún día se hagan una y baste.
¡Oh, regio corazón como una tolva,
siempre clasificando y triturando
los granos, las semillas de mi corta
felicidad! Podrían reemplazarme
desde allí, desde el cielo a la redonda,
hasta dejarme muerto a fuerza de almas,
a fuerza de mayores vidas que otras
con la preponderancia de su fuego

but always some strength climbs up in it,
some thirst of those, some clean
nod that is divided once more
and gives a scent to the air in a thousand feelings.
When shall I speak of you without voice of man.
When. My mouth only reaches the sign,
only interprets in great confusion.
And so there are hard truths of continuous
growing, there are hopes that cannot manage
to overcome time and convert it
into a dry spring of the plain, as
there are lands that do not filter mud.

VI

The figures, one that centres them
in a planetary rotation, vanish
and rise to a place by their impulse,
where they take shape on emerging again.
That's why I don't know which ones these are.
I ask what sun, what burgeoning leaf
or what certainty of the fall
achieves the truth, if the walnut tree branch
is closer than that of the elm,
the bluish cloud closer than the red one.
Perhaps, village of flames, the figures
arouse a double body in a double shade.
Perhaps some day they'll become one and that'll do.
Oh, royal heart like a hopper,
always classifying and grinding
the grains, the seeds of my brief
happiness! I could be replaced
from there, from the heavens around,
until I'm left dead by dint of souls,
by dint of lives greater than others
with the preponderance of their fire

extinguiéndolas: tal a la paloma
lo retráctil del águila. Misterio.
Hay demasiadas cosas infinitas.
Para culparme hay demasiadas cosas.
Aunque el alcohol eléctrico del rayo,
aunque el mes que hace nido y no se posa,
aunque el otoño, sí, aunque los relentes
de humedad blanca . . . Vienes por tu sola
calle de imagen, a pesar de ir sobre
no sé qué Creador, qué paz remota . . .

VII

¡Sólo por una vez que todo vuelva
a dar como si nunca diera tanto!
Ritual arador en plena madre
y en pleno crucifijo de los campos,
¿tú sabías?: llegó, como en agosto
los fermentos del alba, llegó dando
desalteradamente y con qué ciencia
de la entrega, con qué verdad de arado.
Pero siempre es lo mismo: halla otros dones
que remover, la grama por debajo
cuando no una cosecha malograda.
¡Árboles de ribera lavapájaros!
En la ropa tendida de la nieve
queda pureza por lavar. ¡Ovarios
trémulos! Yo no alcanzo lo que basta,
lo indispensable para mis dos manos.
Antes irá su lunación ardiendo,
humilde como el heno en un establo.
Si nos oyeran . . . Pero ya es lo mismo.
¿Quién ha escogido a este arador, clavado
por ebria sembradura, pan caliente
de citas, surco a surco y grano a grano?
Abandonado así a complicidades

putting them out: so to the pigeon
the retractile of the eagle. Mystery.
There are too many infinite things.
There are too many things to blame me.
Although the electric alcohol of the lightning,
although the month that builds a nest and doesn't perch,
although autumn, yes, although the night dew
of white dampness . . . You come through your only
imaginary street, despite going upon
I know not what Creator, what far-off peace . . .

VII

Just once let everything give
again as if it didn't ever give so much!
Ploughing ritual in the very mother
and the very crucifix of the fields,
did you know? It arrived, as in August
the causes of the dawn, it arrived giving
undisturbedly and with what a science
of surrendering, with what a truth of plough.
But it's always the same: it finds other gifts
to be turned over, the underground grass
or else an unsuccessful harvest.
Trees at the bird-washing river bank!
In the spread-out clothes of the snow
there's still purity to be washed. Tremulous
ovaries! I can't achieve what suffices,
the bare essentials for my two hands.
First its lunar month will go burning,
humble like hay in a barn.
Should they hear us . . . But it doesn't matter
anymore. Who chose this ploughman, pierced
by an inebriated sowing, bread hot with
appointments, furrow by furrow and grain by grain?
Abandoned himself to complicities

de primavera y horno, a un legendario
don, y la altanería de mi caza
librando esgrima en pura señal de astros . . .
¡Sólo por una vez que todo vuelva
a dar como si nunca diera tanto!

VIII

No porque llueva seré digno. ¿Y cuándo
lo seré, en qué momento? ¿Entre la pausa
que va de gota a gota? Si llegases
de súbito y al par de la mañana,
al par de este creciente mes, sabiendo,
como la lluvia sabe de mi infancia,
que una cosa es llegar y otra llegarme
desde la vez aquella para nada . . .
Si llegases de pronto, ¿qué diría?
Huele a silencio cada ser y rápida
la visión cae desde altas cimas siempre.
Como el mantillo de los campos, basta,
basta a mi corazón ligera siembra
para darse hasta el límite. Igual basta,
no sé por qué, a la nube. Qué eficacia
la del amor. Y llueve. Estoy pensando
que la lluvia no tiene sal de lágrimas.
Puede que sea ya un poco más digno.
Y es por el sol, por este viento, que alza
la vida, por el humo de los montes,
por la roca, en la noche aún más exacta,
por el lejano mar. Es por lo único
que purifica, por lo que nos salva.
Quisiera estar contigo no por verte
sino por ver lo mismo que tú, cada
cosa en la que respiras como en esta
lluvia de tanta sencillez, que lava.

of spring and oven, to a legendary
gift, and the haughtiness of my hunt
fencing in the pure sign of heavenly bodies . . .
Just once let everything give
again as if it didn't ever give so much!

VIII

I won't be honourable just because it rains. And when
will I be so, at what moment? Between the pause
that separates one drop from the next? If you arrived
all of a sudden and with the morning,
with this crescent month, knowing,
as the rain knows about my childhood,
that arriving is one matter and another one altogether
when I come around since that time, for nothing . . .
If you arrived all of a sudden, what would I say?
Every being smells like silence and quickly
the vision always falls from very high peaks.
Like the humus in the fields, it's enough,
a light sowing is enough for my heart
to give itself away completely. It's also enough,
I don't know why, for the cloud. What efficiency
that of love. And it's raining. I'm thinking
that the rain has no salt from tears.
Perhaps I'm a little more honourable now.
And it's due to the sun, due to this wind that raises
life, due to the smoke in the scrublands,
due to the rock, in the even more exact night,
due to the distant sea. It's the only thing
that purifies, for which it saves us.
I'd like to be with you, not to see you
but to see the same things you see, every
thing in which you breathe as in this
rain of such simplicity, that washes.