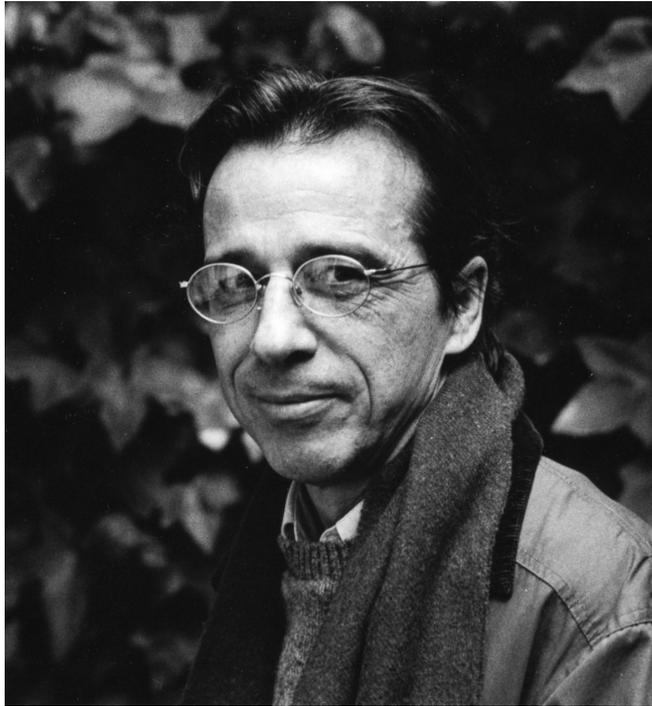


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IN THAT LUMINOUS DARKNESS



Vicente Pascual Rodrigo in 2005

# IN THAT LUMINOUS DARKNESS

*Selected Poems by  
Vicente Pascual Rodrigo*

Spanish-English Edition

*Translated from the Spanish by*

William Wroth and  
Susana Marín



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## INTRODUCTION

In this book we want to introduce the reader to the work of a Spanish poet who, although highly regarded in his native land, is little known in the English-speaking world. At a time when much poetry lacks meaning or means of access, Vicente Pascual Rodrigo's work is refreshing in its contrast to more superficial verse and refreshing in the sense of revitalizing—a refreshment to the spirit and the soul. In Pascual's work one may find a teaching which contemplates the most elemental questions of life, love, and death—yet it is neither didactic nor sectarian. His verse does not give final answers to these questions—for who can presume to do so?—but vividly presents them to the reader. Through his evocative and musical language he communicates these timeless human issues which concern all of us regardless of language or culture.

Vicente Pascual Rodrigo was born in 1955 in Zaragoza, Spain. He began his career as an artist, studying at the Escuela de Artes of Zaragoza and at the Escuela de Bellas Artes of Barcelona. From 1970 to 1988, he worked and exhibited his work with his brother Ángel Pascual Rodrigo in the two-man collective, *La Hermandad Pictórica*. After a journey through Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India in 1974-75, Pascual established his own studio first in Aragón (1975) and then in Majorca (1981). In 1992, he moved to the United States and lived there until 2003 when he moved back to Spain. He died in Zaragoza in 2008. His work is held in many public and private collections in both Spain and the United States.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pascual's work is in numerous international collections including The Hispanic Society of America in New York; Calcografía Nacional in Madrid; George Washington University, Washington DC; Indiana University Art Museum; Museu d'Art Modern i Contemporani, Palma de Mallorca; Museo Pablo Serrano, Zaragoza; and La Caixa, Barcelona.

During the last decade of his life he began writing poetry and published several volumes in Spain. In 2006 his book of poems and paintings, *Las 100 vistas del Monte Interior: En Recuerdo de los Antiguos Locos*, was published by the Government of Aragón, in collaboration with Olifante Ediciones de Poesía. It was followed in 2007 by *A la Vida, a la Muerte y a mi Bienamada: Cancioncillas y cancionejas* (Papeles de Trasmoz, Olifante Ediciones de Poesía). A third book, *De la Nada Nada Viene*, was published in 2010 (Colección Veruela Poesía de Olifante). In 2009 a major retrospective exhibition of his paintings was mounted in Zaragoza, accompanied by a catalogue raisonné of 240 pages.<sup>2</sup> This catalogue includes, in addition to scholarly essays on his work, a selection of 45 of his poems.

His book *A la Vida, a la Muerte y mi Bienamada* has a prologue by the renowned Spanish poet José Corredor-Matheos (winner of the Premio Nacional de Poesía in 2005), and was edited by another leading Spanish poet, Ángel Guinda. Concerning Pascual, Guinda suggests that

Vicente Pascual, in addition to being an ineffable painter, has always been a worthy and exemplary secret poet. His paintings enclose an atmosphere of profound and transcendent lyricism. The secret of his poetry was only revealed when his precarious physical health obliged him to paint with words, leaving us poems of exquisite simplicity, depth and spirituality.<sup>3</sup>

The power and beauty of his verse places Pascual within the great

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<sup>2</sup> *Vicente Pascual 1989/2008: Opusculum*. Zaragoza: Palacio de Sástago, Diputación Provincial de Zaragoza, 2009. Other recent exhibitions in Spain include: 'Vicente Pascual: Imago Silenti', Galería Edurne, Madrid, 2007; 'No Hay Vino Si No Hay Agua', Centro Cultural Mariano Mesonada, Utebo, Zaragoza, 2008; and 'Vicente Pascual: Pinturas y Dibujos, 2000 - 2008', Museo Salvador Victoria, Rubielos de Mora, Teruel, Aragon, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Ángel Guinda, 'Vicente Pascual, poeta secreto' in *Vicente Pascual 1989/2008: Opusculum*, 195: 'Vicente Pascual, además de pintor inefable, ha sido siempre un poeta secreto, digno y ejemplar. Su obra plástica encierra una atmósfera de lirismo profundo, trascendente. El secretismo de su poesía sólo se vio roto cuando la precariedad física, que no intelectual, le obligó a pintar con la palabra, dejándonos poemas de una sencillez, hondura y espiritualidad exquisitas.'

tradition of Spanish poetry. José Corredor-Matheos, in his introduction to *A la Vida, a la Muerte y mi Bienamada*, favorably compares his verse to that of the sixteenth-century Carmelite friar, San Juan de la Cruz:

‘The vision of the visible world, and, if I may say so, of the invisible—which in poetry must always be made visible in one way or another—and the tremor and glow of his verse have the flavor of the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz: ‘Like that doe among the crags. / Such is/ the lullaby of my beloved.’ But we know that the great mystic poet, one of the most sublime of world literature, is part of a long tradition of understanding poetry as a manifestation of a sacred feeling, relating, on some level, with Sufism....’

One can also see influences from masters of the past century, such as the sparing lyrics of Juan Ramón Jiménez, or Antonio Machado’s powerful and riveting verse. Machado was well aware that the essence of true poetry is ‘the deep pulse of the spirit’:

I thought that the substance of poetry does not lie in the sound value of the word, nor in its color, nor in the metric line, nor in the complex of sensations, but in the deep pulse of the spirit; and this deep pulse is what the soul contributes ... with its own voice, in a courageous answer to the touch of the world.<sup>4</sup>

In Pascual’s work, as Corredor-Matheos suggests, there is a quality that transcends nationality, a spiritual directness that goes to the heart of the matter. Pascual found sustenance for both his visual work and his poetry in several religious and aesthetic traditions. In the introduction (which he titled ‘Obligatory Warning’) to his first book, *Las 100 vistas del Monte Interior*, he wrote in typically self-

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<sup>4</sup> Antonio Machado, *Soledades, Galerías y Otros Poemas*, Madrid, 1917. ‘Pensaba yo que el elemento poético no era la palabra por su valor fónico, ni el color, ni la línea, ni un complejo de sensaciones, sino una honda palpitación del espíritu, lo que pone el alma... con voz propia, en respuesta animada al contacto del mundo.’

deprecating manner about the variety of influences which inform his work:

I have copied the Pre-Socratics, the Neo-Platonists and the songs of the Native Americans.... I have imitated the Taoists, the Hindus; I have drawn upon those, like Rumi and Nizāmī, who understood the coherent beauty of the formulations of Sufism. I have imitated the Spanish Carmelites, the Fideli d'Amore, the medieval Rhenish mystics....

The range of sources he enumerates here suggests the depth of his devotion to the inner search for understanding, for knowledge, for a path that would draw closer to God. His spiritual search began in earnest in the early 1970s when he lived among traditional peoples in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan whence he embarked on a life-long devotion to study of the spiritual traditions enumerated in his statement above: Greek philosophy and Neo-Platonism, Taoism, Hinduism, Sufism and medieval and later Christian mysticism.

He was equally inspired by the oral and material expressions of indigenous peoples. In a preface to the catalogue for a 1994 exhibition of his paintings, he wrote of his admiration for the Tuaregs of Africa, the Native Americans, and the Mongolians, whose artistic expressions have

shaped my work for the last few years ... what arouses my interest is not the customs of any particular ethnic group, but the universal element which they have in common. This is what produces an echo in my being and rebounds in a form of expression which is shaped by my artistic development, a European education, by a set of experiences and memories. As Basho might have said: 'I do not follow the ancient nomads, I am looking for what they were searching for.'<sup>5</sup>

Clearly he was searching for and trying to express in his work the 'universal element' which all these traditions, appearing so varied on the surface, share in common.

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<sup>5</sup> Essay for his *Nómadas* exhibition catalogue. Madrid: Galería Edurne, 1994.

His painting during a career of more than thirty years went through a slow process of change as he gradually shed reliance on the exterior world of objects and landscapes, simplifying his vision, yet at the same time maintaining a consummate mastery of forms and colors at their most elemental levels. In the 1994 preface cited above he wrote: ‘my paintings have been stripped of the veil, the landscape’s forms which covered them.’

This process of essentialization also took place in his poetry. It is the verbal expression of the changes taking place within himself. The gradual deepening of his understanding of the nature of reality and the place of human beings in this world found expression in his verse. For Pascual poetry could not be a mental game or shallow self-revealing: his words hit home because they are real.

Meanings such as those conveyed in Pascual’s verse raise questions unanswerable by rational thought—otherwise poetry would not differ in any significant way from prose discourse. Poetry is heightened language that embodies levels of significance that take the reader or listener beyond the mundane world. Sound is the form and the means by which meaning is conveyed: the music of the poem is redolent with meanings. The music of the poem evokes feelings in the heart of the reader, feelings that in turn evoke meanings because they come as words. To reach the heart, such music must come from the heart. Pascual summed it up thus: ‘*Ab Intra Ad Intra.*’ The translator and scholar Bill Porter (Red Pine) noted regarding Chinese poetry: ‘The original meaning of the Chinese word for poetry (*shih*) was “words from the heart.”’<sup>6</sup>

Words from the heart of the poet to the heart of the reader. In Pascual’s work, heart must be understood in a deeper sense than merely the place of the emotions. The heart in many religious traditions is the center of the being and as such is the locus where

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Porter, *Zen Baggage*, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009, p. 26. Bill Porter has further elaborated on the act of creation: ‘Poetry is not simply “words from the heart.” A poet doesn’t make a poem so much as discover a poem.... In poetry, we go beyond ourselves to the heart of the universe, where we might be moved by something as small as a grain of sand or as great as the Ganges.’ (‘Dancing with the Dead: Language, Poetry, and the Art of Translation’ in *Cipher Journal* [http://www.cipherjournal.com/html/red\\_pine.html](http://www.cipherjournal.com/html/red_pine.html)).

understanding takes place. Understanding, knowledge in a full sense, must of course include the emotions. 'Know thyself' means to know fully one's own heart. For the poet words from the heart bring forth something deeper than surface concerns or the superficial ego, and thus they have a transformative power. Vicente Pascual wrote the following concerning the act of painting, which also applies to his poetry:

Art makes sense precisely because man has the need to free himself from the ego which restrains him and the world which fragments him. Through creation, he exteriorizes what he loves or knows in order to interiorize and assimilate it through a process of objectivation.<sup>7</sup>

Through the medium of words Pascual provides the means to escape from the tyranny of words, of language itself. In our everyday world words tend to have univocal meanings. They have precision, yes, but that very quality can limit us to the mundane, the practical, the socially agreed-upon meaning. To escape the tyranny of words through multi-vocal meanings is for Pascual a means to approach closer to the Divine, to the Nameless that is beyond names, thus beyond words.

Here Pascual frequently touches on one of the exigencies of the path of early Christian and other mystics who followed the *via negativa*: that which can be named, or defined by a name, is not the ultimate reality. The Dionysian texts, for instance, state: 'And so it is that as Cause of all and as transcending all, he is rightly nameless and yet has the names of everything that is.'<sup>8</sup> This approach is found in other religions, for instance, the method called '*neti, neti*' (not this, not this) in Hinduism.

Pascual's work is clearly inspired by the great spiritual traditions in many religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, American Indian and others. Immersion in these traditions and understanding of what they share in common played a necessary

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<sup>7</sup> *Nómadas* exhibition catalogue.

<sup>8</sup> *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, ed. and trans., New York : Paulist Press, 1987, 56 ('The Divine Names,' 596D)

role in his maturation. He came to understand from them that the purpose of life was not to search for material gain or worldly accomplishments, but to embark upon a quest to find deeper understanding of what it means to be human. He saw both his painting and poetry not merely as art forms, but as practices having a larger meaning, a way of understanding the meaning of life. Thus for him these exterior expressions have primarily an interior purpose. They add a form and a leavening to that inner alchemy so essential in the search for self-knowledge.

It may also lead to addressing the unknown within the reader, the unrealized potential of one's own soul which contains the whole universe: "The universe within us;/and we a drop of dew."<sup>9</sup> Here we can also refer to Pascual's statements regarding his painting, equally applicable to his poems. The transformative power of the work affects not only the creator but also the person who sees a painting or reads a poem:

As a reflection of that process of internal alchemy... the finished picture will have accomplished its purpose for the artist, but according to its perfection, the work will, like an echo, arouse a memory of the archetypes in the receptive viewer.... The viewer will benefit in function of the spiritual depth of the work and his own contemplativity....<sup>10</sup>

What is the meaning for the artist or poet of 'that process of internal alchemy'? It is an inner transformation that goes beyond self-observation in the sense that it is an active process, a purification and a transcending of the exterior ego, which is subject to both self-delusion and the delusions of the world. The first step is to observe dispassionately one's own faults and limitations, one's own forgetting. For this to have permanence, there is the need for active

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<sup>9</sup> See below 'DE LA BIENAMADA: ¡Ay, si allí fuera aceptado!... El universo en nosotros;/y nosotros, una gota de rocío.'

<sup>10</sup> *Nómadas* exhibition catalogue. Vicente Pascual interviewed by Agustín López Tobajas, 'Conversación con Vicente Pascual' reprinted in *Vicente Pascual 1989/2008: Opusculum*, 69–79.

vigilance, for finally the poet is concerned that the end result of the process of inner alchemy leads to self-knowledge.

The essence and final purpose of spiritual practice: dying to the things of this world and of the ego—he prays will lead to the path of return. In another writing he speaks of ‘el camino de retorno del exilio’ (the path of return from exile), the wandering pilgrim who has been exiled from his true home in the world of archetypes and must now seek a way to return.

These thoughts have resonance with the Buddhist idea of liberation from suffering, from the endless round of birth and death in this world, but in fact they are central to the spiritual path found in Christianity and many other traditions. For the poet and painter his craft is the means through which he may find the path of return: ‘Art, all art, is above all a means to know ourselves and to realize in the heart what we have fleetingly intuited, or have mentally discerned, of that place from which we were exiled.’<sup>11</sup>

The present volume brings together selections from Pascual’s three published books in Spanish, *A la vida*, *De la nada*, and *100 Vistas*, as well as selections from previously unpublished works: *Romancillos*, and other unpublished poems.

I was indeed fortunate to begin work on these translations with Vicente Pascual in 2006, two years before his passing. His clarifications of meanings, words and phrases in his poems were, not surprisingly, invaluable. Further invaluable aid has come later from his widow Ana Marquina, his daughter Cira Pascual-Marquina, Francesc Gutiérrez, Hernán and Leslie Cadavid, and James Gavin.

Without the help and dedication of co-translator Susana Marín, this volume would not have been possible. Susana not only caught obvious and not so obvious errors in the translating, but also has solved knotty problems with idioms and unusual word usages.

This introduction is drawn in part from my essay in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* (vol. 15, no. 1, Spring 2015), “‘In That Luminous Darkness’: The Poetry of Vicente Pascual Rodrigo.’ My thanks go to Poetry Editor Mark Burrows and Editor

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

## INTRODUCTION

Douglas Christie for encouraging me to write and submit the essay and for their helpful suggestions.

Finally, we would like to thank Juan Acevedo and The Matheson Trust for their willingness to publish Vicente Pascual poetry and thus making his work more accessible to English-speaking readers.

William Wroth

## A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS

William Wroth started working on the translations in this volume in collaboration with Vicente Pascual in the last few years of Vicente's life. In December 2018, as William was diagnosed with a terminal illness, he tasked himself with completing the translation of all of Vicente's poems. When he asked me to assist him, I agreed with pleasure as I was struck by the richness of meaning and the beautiful usage of the Spanish language in Vicente's poetry.

In February 2019, I visited William and his wife Deborah in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In their adobe house overlooking the mountains we worked on Vicente's poems every day, enjoying our discussions of words, meanings, and turns of expressions, often marvelling at the depth of spiritual realities that these poems evoke. It was also at that time that the Matheson Trust agreed to publish a selection of Vicente's poems. This was a project very dear to William's heart and I am glad that he was able to fulfil his wish of having Vicente Pascual's poetry published in bilingual edition for the benefit of English-speaking readers before his own passing on November 10, 2019.

Susana Marín

A LA VIDA



TO LIFE



## DE LA VIDA

¡Venid,  
guerreros, amantes y letrados!  
Calentaos en mi hoguera,  
que hace frío en esta noche  
y quizás no haya mañana.

## OF LIFE

Come,  
warriors, lovers and wise men!  
Warm yourselves around my fire,  
it's cold tonight  
and there may be no tomorrow.

## DE LA MUERTE

Como esa noche tan clara  
que sólo es de luz ausencia.  
Ay, cautiva noche oscura,  
¿de qué velo eres carencia?

## OF DEATH

Like that night so clear  
which is only absence of light.  
O captive dark night,  
which veil are you missing?

## DE LA BIENAMADA

Me dijo la bella joven  
que el carácter del silencio  
queda lejos de afonía.  
Que está vivo, siempre vivo.

*Y el silencio cómo ruge,  
con rugido silencioso.*

## OF THE BELOVED

The beautiful girl told me  
that the nature of silence  
is far from voicelessness.  
That it is alive, always alive.

*And silence, how it roars,  
with a silent roaring.*

## DE LA VIDA

Cierro aquí y ahora estos ojos  
en la cueva murmurando.  
Siento la brisa de oriente  
bajo el frondoso ciruelo.

Cierro aquí y ahora los ojos,  
bajo el árbol murmurando.  
Y hay aromas que me envuelven,  
sobre esta noble montaña.

Cierro esos ojos, ahora,  
en el monte, murmurando.  
Brisa y aromas ya no siento.  
Es sólo él quien me susurra.

## OF LIFE

Here and now I close these eyes  
murmuring in the grotto.

I feel the eastern breeze  
underneath the leafy plum.

Here and now I close my eyes  
murmuring under the tree.

And on this noble mountain  
fragrances envelop me.

I close those eyes now,  
murmuring on the mountain.  
Breeze and fragrances I no longer feel.  
It is only he who whispers to me.

## DE LA BIENAMADA

¿Ves, amada?

¿Ves las nubes cómo bajan?

Cómo visten aquel monte.

¿Ves su cima, que se eleva,  
que se asienta sobre ellas?

¿Ves mi pecho dilatado?

¿Ves, amada, lo que ves?

Es el cielo en nuestra tierra  
y la tierra en nuestro cielo.

## OF THE BELOVED

Do you see, Beloved?  
Do you see how the clouds descend?  
How they clothe that mountain.

Do you see its soaring peak,  
standing above them?  
Do you see my expanded breast?

Do you see, Beloved, what you see?  
It is heaven on our earth  
and earth in our heaven.

## DE LA VIDA

Id por el mundo soñando  
y si os parece triunfando  
que yo aquí duermo ignorando.

## OF LIFE

Go dreaming through the world  
and if you like, be triumphant,  
for I sleep here, unconcerned.

## DE LA MUERTE

Cuando yo fui alumbrado  
ya conmigo tú naciste.  
*¡Oh, mi muerte!*

Esperando ese instante  
en queriendo hurtar mi vida,  
esperando ser en ella.

Cuánto querría yo ser  
una muy leve humedad.  
Que creciera en grandes nubes,  
que muriera siendo lluvia.

Y entre vidas un descanso  
dando vida, dando vida.

Y es que a mí se me parece  
que con muerte viene vida.  
*¡Oh, mi muerte!*

## OF DEATH

When I first came into the light  
you were already born with me  
*O my death!*

Waiting for that instant  
wanting to steal my life,  
waiting to be part of it.

How I would like to be  
a very faint moisture.  
That would grow into great clouds,  
that would die becoming rain.

And between lives a repose  
giving life, giving life.

For it seems to me  
that with death comes life.  
*O my death!*