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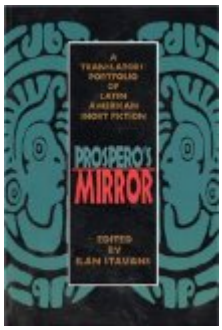

Ilan Stavans, ed.. *Prospero's Mirror: A Translators' Portfolio of Latin American Short Fiction.* Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press, 1998. xxvi + 323 pp. $17.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-880684-49-8.

Reviewed by Jeroen Oskam

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The idea behind this bilingual anthology of Latin American Short Fiction is to manifest the role translators play in the contact between cultures. Of course, there is no question about the usefulness of their craftsmanship nor about the creativity or interpretative implications of their work. However, literary translators have a far-reaching cultural influence that goes beyond the interpretation of the originals, since their initiatives are usually essential in the process of discovering, selecting, and getting recognition for texts that are eventually published in the target language. Therefore it is not only an excellent idea, but also a logical one, to support and encourage these efforts by collecting in one volume the personal choices of a group of eminent translators.

Translation has had an even greater importance for Latin American identity, as Ilan Stavans argues in his essay "Translation and Identity," which introduces this anthology: it was "at the birth of the Americas" (p. vii). During the early stages of the *Conquista*, it became a powerful weapon in the hands of the Spaniards that led to the replacement or the annihilation of aboriginal languages. As a result, "the continent has been forced to appropriate a foreign, non-native vehicle of communication" (p. xvii). The implications of this statement are more controversial than they may seem. Authors like Fernandez de Lizardi, Neruda, Asturias, Machadode Assis or Allende are mentioned as examples of this "appropriation of a non-native language," which we can even see as a "form of linguistic cannibalism": "in order to be members of Western civilization, Latin Americans need to be initiated, and then are forced to perfect the language of the invader" (p. xv). And even though recognizing that Garcia Marquez was born into Spanish, and raised in Spanish, Stavans still points out that his birthplace, Aracataca, "was a landscape where pre-Columbian languages and dialects were used" (p. xvi). Should the conclusion be that the continent has a linguistic reality that resides outside those who live, speak, and write there?

Returning to the initial purpose of this anthology, Stavans concludes his introduction with a brief history of literary translations from Spanish into English. This history leads to the names of

Gregory Rabassa and Helen Lane, who are among the "veterans" contributing to this collection. Besides these established names, several up-and-coming translators were invited to submit a short story. In order to give an impression of the style and method of these translators, they were asked to answer a number of questions about the way they work. Together with a short curriculum of the translator and a few introductory lines about the translated author, the answers to these questions are included in the comments that precede the different contributions.

As an inevitable consequence of the chosen approach, the anthology is quite heterogeneous. It includes stories by Alfonso Reyes, Luisa Valenzuela, Marco Denevi, Ana Maria Shua, Jorge Lanata, Silvina Ocampo, Ruben Loza Aguerreberre, Antonio Benitez-Rojo, and Augusto Monterroso; the Brazilian Dalton Trevisan, Alfredo Bryce Echenique and Felisberto Hernandez; and several less well-known authors like the Honduran Jorge Medina Garcia, the Panamanian Jorge Turner, and the Spaniard Jose Carmona Blanco, as well as a short story by Ilan Stavans himself.[1] The list of names illustrates the enormous differences in generation, style and recognition that this collection covers. This diversity is, of course, natural, and can only be positive for the purpose of introducing undiscovered Latin American writers and texts to readers of English. However, the particular characteristics of this anthology--an anthology inside an anthology, composed with as many different criteria as there were translators invited to collaborate--would have required a more clarifying motivation for its composition, a more relevant explanation of the choices made by the translators. While only a minority allude to the literary qualities of the selected story, others simply limit themselves to the fact that the writer in question is important and deserves more attention from the public. Helen Lane submits her translation (of Luisa Valenzuela's "El lugar de su quietud") as an early example of her own translation style (p. 19). Asa Zatz, translator of Jorge Lanata's "Oculten la luna," confides that the selection of this author "emerges in part from the pleasure of reading him" (p. 109). James Maraniss motivates his selection of "Incidente en la cordillera," by Antonio Benitez-Rojo, as follows: "I selected this story because I like it, had it at hand, was short enough for didactic use, and is the first piece that Benitez-Rojo has written after thirteen years of non-fictional theorizing" (p. 163).

The irrelevance of these comments becomes somewhat irritating when we examine the second important aspect of this book: the presentation of a series of translations by eminent or promising experts. When, for example, an author who is known to be "difficult to translate," like Dalton Trevisan, is selected by a translator as prominent as Gregory Rabassa, it would indeed be fascinating to learn about his style and method, about the problems and solutions he encountered. Instead, what strikes us is the triviality of the observations some translators share with us: how late they work, whether they read the book once or twice, or which brand of ice cream helps them through moments of reduced inspiration. Responding to Stavans' questionnaire, some of them indicate that they prefer not to consult with the authors, and others say that they do; this does shed some light on the matter of a translator's style and method, but would it not have been more interesting to know what they consult them about?

In spite of the hardly satisfactory result of the questionnaire, this book gives an interesting insight into the styles of different translators; after all, it is a bilingual edition. To give an example of a well motivated choice a translator can make: the character of Marco Denevi's story "Carta a Gianfranco" (translated by Alberto Manguel) makes a comment about the color ***malva*** (mauve), and tells that she does not know what it looks like (p. 42). Obviously, this requires the English word for ***malva*** to be an uncommon one; therefore, I believe that "cerulean" is adequate. Further on in this same story, we read: "Ultramarinos. Que hermosa

palabra, Gianfranco. Almacen de ultramarinos" (p. 52), which also for stylistic reasons leads to "Ultramarine shops" in English--even though it might be less clear what these are.

There is a similar stylistic problem in Jorge Turner's "Mangos de enero," translated by Leland Chambers. One of the characters hears a "strange word: 'yearning'" (p. 253). Here the result of the translation is rather odd. *Yearning* is not such a strange word; but "desalmarse" is. Usually, difficulties of this kind also emerge from obligatory changes between Spanish and English, which often demand a creative solution. This could be the case, for instance, when there is an explicit reference to a change from the polite to the informal pronoun, or, as in the following example taken from "La musica de la lluvia" by Silvina Ocampo (translated by Suzanne Jill Levine): "--Para Octavito-- . . . -No-- susurro la senora de Griber, deteniendolo-- . Puede ofenderlo. No le gustan los diminutivos" (p. 144), which becomes: "'For little Octavio' . . . 'No,' whispered Griber's mother, holding him back. 'It may offend him. He doesn't like diminutives.'" The solution sounds a little artificial, since the "diminutive" has disappeared from the translation.

I agree that *cena* ("La cena" by Alfonso Reyes, translated by Rick Francis) could be translated into either "dinner" or "supper"; but why choose one for the title and the other for the quote that follows it ("The Dinner--'The supper, that delights and enchants.'--St. John of the Cross," p. 5)? Why does the character of "La musica de la lluvia" put on "his shoes and his socks" (p. 145), and not, more conventionally, his socks first like his Spanish counterpart? I am not suggesting that these translations are wrong or inadequate; it is simply that the reader who feels encouraged by this bilingual version to compare both versions, is likely to be interested as well in the motivation for these choices. And again, he or she would have felt less frustrated if the introductions would have made a more serious reference to those questions.

This review is not the place for an in-depth analysis of the translations presented in this book. But even a superficial glance at its pages leads to a disconcerting conclusion: the ones on the right are shorter than the ones on the left. The reason is that sometimes part of a sentence that appears in the original is missing from the translation. It also occurs that complete sentences or paragraphs have disappeared. I found fragments that I could not trace in the English versions on pages 26, 28, 30, 32, 34 ("El lugar de su quietud"), 144 ("La musica de la lluvia"), 284, 292 (Felisberto Hernandez, "El cocodrilo," translated by Alfred MacAdam) and 322 (Jose Carmona Blanco, "Los camalotes," translated by Toby Talbot). This is probably an editing problem, since I also came across translations of fragments that were missing from the Spanish texts, on pages 65 ("Carta a Gianfranco") and 311 ("Los camalotes").[2]

A remarkable translating style attracts the attention to Donald Yates' version of "Cotode caza," by Ruben Loza Aguerreberre. Yates has an inclination to specify or embellish the original and turns "disecadores de libros ajenos" (p. 152) into "arid dissectors of other people's books." In some cases this is acceptable, but it becomes puzzling when a restaurant is decorated with "unas redes colgadas a las paredes como enormes telaranas" (p. 150), which are rendered into "huge fishing nets that hung from the walls like enormous spiderwebs." Fishing nets are larger than spiderwebs, and "huge" fishing nets can be up to several miles in length. Also, it occurred to me that Yates likes Ernest Hemingway more than Loza Aguerreberre does. The original character says that "solo me gusta su estilo para contar" (p. 154), and Yates' character replies, "I have always been impressed by his original style." When he takes the female character to Hemingway's residence in Paris, we read: "Ella no la conocia" (p. 154). But in the English version she seems more enthusiastic: "Annie

was pleased since she said she had not known about that residence."

Harry Morales has translated Ilan Stavans' "Tres Pesadillas." Besides his translator, he is also his former neighbor and they have collaborated in various projects. In short, he is not likely to misinterpret the story. So I am getting more and more confused when I read--or misread--the following passage, where the main character comes home and his maid tells him that his wife has left:

"Ms. Betzi called," she said. "She's had to leave for Rochester. It's a *ternational* conference." I deduced that *ternational* meant international. Ternational: the word sounded nice ....

"She'll be in Rochester for two days," said the lady who owned an inn ... She mechanically repeated the same phrase. (pp. 223-225)

Now, where does this mysterious lady-innkeeper come from? In Spanish, the mispronounced word is "innacional." My impression was that the sentence "Dijo lasenora que tenia un inn ..." was a repetition of her earlier announcement. The last sentence of the quoted fragment actually says so, and the position of the quotation marks in the original confirms my impression.

"Mangos de enero" is a story about anti-imperialist manifestations around the Panama Canal-zone in January 1964. U.S. military actions cause a large number of casualties and a character of the story who has been shot will be attended in the gynecological ward. The sudden entrance of wounded young men upsets a pregnant woman, who is already in labour:

"I'm having the baby!" No one pays any attention to her. The woman insists that the fetus is settling, they're all just fooling around with her while her husband thinks he's so great, he's not there, he's out getting drunk, leaves her here alone, as if there isn't much to it, thinks he's hot enough to make a good dog laugh, going around with his friends like that, just a little boy celebrating in advance . . . She'd like to see him like these kids, see him with a bullet inside him, see him going up against the gringos, see him in this mess, see him having a baby like her. Then she shit in her underwear.

While the reader feels sympathy for the lady in this embarrassing moment, she does not seem uncomfortable at all with the situation, and not even her sticky underpants can distract her for a moment from raging against her husband:

What kind of husband . . . Her mouth is full of her husband, bah! husband!: resist, resisting, resister, resistance, fingers worn out, lips bitten down. Calm, why calm?--To hell with being calm! Smell of ether bustling activity nervous sweating. (p. 247-49)

Just ether and sweat, no other smell; that should give us a clue. We look up the original passage and find:

Lo viera como los muchachos, lo viera con una bala adentro, lo viera contra los gringos, lo viera en este escandalo, lo viera pariendo como yo. Entonces se cagarialos pantalones. (p. 248)

The cowardly husband would be shitting himself ...

I do not know if I am splitting hairs here. "Los camalotes" is about the sinister find of human remains washed ashore in Uruguay. Before eventually being able to reconstruct two complete amputated hands, the character of the story finds a man's ring finger, a female middle finger and then a second ring finger, also part of the woman's hand. Therefore, "el segundo anular" is not equivalent to "the second finger" (p. 317): I imagine that a reader who has no access to the Spanish version will feel completely lost here. In general, I would like to remind that these are translations which the translators themselves have selected and submitted to be published along with the originals in order to show us the secrets of their profession. One should expect the details to be taken care of.

I am running out of euphemisms. What to say of "En medio del bullicio," "Along the boulevard"

(p. 151)? "?Cuando lees?" and "When did you read?" (p. 153)? "Un muchacho muy erudito" who turns into "a sensitive young fellow" (p. 159)? Mystic "sabios" of inland South America who are called "researchers" (p. 27)? Literal *calques* of idiomatic expressions as "Me toco hablar"--"I was scheduled to speak" (p. 149)--or play the piano with your hands, "como Dios manda"--"as God intended"(p. 135)? "Un color claro" that turns out to be "a dark color" (p. 283)? A man who puts his "plata" in his pocket and only has got "silver coins" (p. 317)?

The overall impression caused by this book is that it is a far too hasty product based upon a maybe good and "novel" idea. But in order to be of academic value, the introductions need to be rewritten, to be made more informative and less frivolous. And whereas normally bilingual editions of literary texts might be a useful instrument in undergraduate reading classes, I am afraid that this one is not--unless you want to make people laugh. The really sad thing is that it contains translations that are acceptable or even worthwhile. With the contributions of Rick Francis, Alberto Manguel, Dick Gerdes ("Como una buena madre," Ana Maria Shua), Asa Zatz, James Maraniss, Edith Grossman ("Movimiento perpetuo," Augusto Monterroso), JoAnne Engelbert ("La noche clara de los coroneles," Jorge Medina Garcia), Gregory Rabassa, Hardie St. Martin ("Con Jimmy en Paracas," Alfredo Bryce Echenique) and Alfred MacAdam, these are, in fact, the majority. But they are overshadowed by other translations that, simply, are not ready yet for publication.

Notes

[1]. The complete list of the stories included in this volume is as follows: Alfonso Reyes, "La cena," originally published in *El plano oblicuo*, vol. III of *Obras Completas*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1956. Luisa Valenzuela, "El lugar de su quietud, *The Censors*. Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press, 1992. Marco Denevi, "Carta a Gianfranco," *Hierba del cielo*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1973. Ana Maria Shua, "Como una buena madre," *Viajando se conoce gente*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1988. Jorge Lanata, "Oculten la luna," *Polaroids*, unpublished in Spanish. Silvina Ocampo, "La musica de la lluvia," *Las reglas del secreto: antologia*, Matilde Sanchez, ed. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1991. Ruben Loza Aguerreberre, "Coto de caza," *Coto decaza y otros cuentos*. Montevideo: Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, 1993. Antonio Benitez-Rojo, "Incidente en la cordillera," *A View from the Mangrove*. London: Faber and Faber, 1998. Augusto Monterroso, "Movimiento perpetuo," *Complete Works and Other Stories*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. Jorge Medina Garcia, "La noche clara de los coroneles," *Pudimos haber llegado mas lejos*. Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 1989. Ilan Stavans, "Three Nightmares," *The One-Handed Pianist and Other Stories*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1996. Dalton Trevisan, "Tres tiros na tarde," *The Vampire of Curitiba and Other Stories*. New York: Albert A. Knopf, 1972. Jorge Turner, "Mangos de enero," *Viento de agua*. Mexico, 1977. Alfredo Bryce Echenique, "Con Jimmy en Paracas," *Cuentos completos*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1985. Felisberto Hernandez, "El cocodrilo," *Las hortensias y otros relatos*. Montevideo: Editorial Arca, 1966. Jose Carmona Blanco, "Los camalotes," *El reencuentro: cuentos*. Montevideo: Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, 1978.

[2]. This review is based upon an uncorrected copy of the book.