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REVIEW: SUSANA THÉNON. *OVA COMPLETA*. Translated from the Spanish by Rebekah Smith. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021. 144 pp. ISBN 978-1-946433-54-1

Susana Thénon is so virtually unknown to English-language readers that this reviewer had to be reminded that two of her poems, translated by Renata Treitel, appear beside his own contributions in *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry* (2009). Oddly, her fifth and last book of verse, *Ova Completa* (1987), is omitted from the header to her entry, even though one of the poems included there is taken from this volume. While Sun & Moon Classics published Thénon's *distancias* (1984) as *distancias/distances* over two decades ago in 2000 (again, in Treitel's rendering), other works by this avant-garde Argentine poet, translator, and photographer—only marginally aligned, but often grouped with, the Generation of the 60s writers—have been published sparsely in English-language venues. Perhaps Thénon's closest ally among her fellow authors was María Negroni, whose afterword, "*Ova Completa: A Feast of Meaning*," helps situate this poet and a work replete with feminist themes, incessant wordplay, and humor. Indeed, it was Negroni who oversaw the posthumous publication of her colleague's complete works in the two-volume *La morada imposible* in Argentina in 2001.

Negroni points out that Thénon's often ludic "attack on homogeneous discourse" (130) was published a few years after "Argentina had only recently returned to democracy, leaving behind one of the bloodiest dictatorships in history" (129). While Thénon's "politics" tend more toward the gendered and cultural, there is at least one mention of a "picana" or "cattleprod" here (99, 37). Negroni's insightful piece, which might have better served as an introduction, nicely summarizes *Ova Completa*'s contents: "This book has everything: quotidian speech; cursing; utterances in Greek, Latin, French, and English; invectives; jargon (legal, soccer, racetrack, tango); references to the Malvinas War; sacrilege; scatology; sex; neologisms; free association; chaotic lists; temporal dislocation and furied attacks on every kind of cliché" (130). It is no wonder that the word "carnavalesque" is invoked more than once to describe this "ferocious assault on social, formal, genre, and gender conventions" (130) whose liberated candor, it is suggested, was a welcome response to Argentine poets' understandably careful self-censorship during the Dirty War. Indeed, this verbally rich volume is filled with singu-

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lar poems, many untitled, on a host of divergent subjects. In “¿por qué grita esa mujer...?” (“why is that woman screaming?...”), for instance, bystanders wonder (you guessed it!) why a woman is screaming (69, 7). “mefítico oís vosotros...” (“mephitic, you hearest...”) explores ways to say “smelly” in different linguistic registers (77, 15). “Mohammed Kafka librero” (“Mohammed Kafka, Bookseller”) describes the highly eccentric editions sold by this singular shopkeeper (111, 49). In “—¿dónde está la salida?...” (“where is the exit?...”), the egress from a concert hall leads directly to a police station (117, 55).

Smith’s translation solutions often shine. Her acuity, evident in several places throughout this volume, can be seen in a line from the poem that gives this volume its name, as she renders “la descomunal mezquita de Oj-Alá” (87) as “the colossal mosque of Al-Hopeso” (25), “ojalá,” being a phonetic borrowing from the Arabic meaning “May God grant.” Similarly, in Smith’s hands the title “Según pasan los años (Gozque te ipsum),” a play on the Latin expression “Know thyself” (*Nosce te ipsum*), becomes the doubly resonant “As Time Goes By (*Yippy Te Ipsum*)” with both its reference to a well-known song from the movie *Casablanca* and rendering of “Gozque” (literally, “small yapping dog”) as “*Yippy*” (80, 18). Below are the opening lines of the mordantly self-deprecating “La antología” followed by Smith’s rendering, “The Anthology,” in which an American female junior professor seeking to put together a collection of Argentine women poets with a certain slant (i.e., feminist and perhaps alcoholic, anorexic, lesbian, unhappy, menopausal victims of sexual violence), introduces herself to one such possible contributor (a stand-in for the author herself?) during a funded year abroad:

¿tú eres
la gran poietisa
Susana Etcétera?
mucho gusto
me llamo Petrona Smith-Jones
soy profesora adjunta
de la Universidad de Poughkeepsie
que queda un poquipsi al sur de Vancouver... (115)

are you
the great poietisa
Susana Etcetera?
nice to meet you

my name is Petrona Smith-Jones
I'm an assistant professor
at the University of Poughkeepsie
which is just a weensie bit south of Vancouver... (53)

If Smith's preservation of the misspelled borrowing "poietisa" indicates her understanding that the American academic's Spanish is not quite up to snuff (see my commentary below), then this proves a nice touch to the rendering. It is, however, Smith's deft handling of "un poquipsi," a ludic variant of "un poquito" (literally, "a little"), that stands out here, amusingly rendered as "weensie" to maintain a sort of off-rhyme with "Poughkeepsie."

Still, this reviewer wonders about Smith's somewhat inconsistent approach to translation. Here, for example, is a snippet from "Poema con traducción simultánea español-español" followed by Smith's version, "Poem with Simultaneous Spanish-Spanish Translation" about one "Cristóforo" (clearly Columbus, "the Bearer of Christ") who sets sail for the New World:

no sin antes persuadir a Su Majestad la Reina
Isabel la Católica de las bondades de la empresa
por él concebida
(no sin antes persuadir a Her Royal Highness
die Königin Chabela la Logística de empeñar
la corona en el fígón de Blumenthal con-verso)... (84)

not without first persuading Her Majesty the Queen
Isabel the Catholic of the benefits of the enterprise
he'd conceived
(not without first persuading Su Majestad la Reina
die Königin Bella the Logistical to cop
the crown in Blumenthal's con-verted canteen... (22)

Thénon's verbal play would put any translator through his/her paces, and Smith valiantly tries to keep up with the interlingual double entendres here. By her own admission in "The Whole Ova," a sort of translator's note that closes the volume, the decision to use Spanish where Thénon uses English (not infrequently in titles) leads to an inevitable loss of the "transgressive charge" (138) of a period when, with the author's country at war with England over the Falkland Islands, Ar-

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gentine radio was forbidden to play songs with English lyrics. Some of the choices here are representative of Smith's approach: the close/cognate use of "Bella" for "Chabela," a corruption of "Isabel[la]" (which is actually Spanish for "Elizabeth"); the slightly odd lexical correlation between "empeñar" and "cop" as well as between "figón" and "canteen"; and (perhaps) the preference for not reinscribing into her target texts the insensitivities of different times and cultures. Thus, she mutes the possible antisemitism of the cheap restaurant owner Blumenthal (a formerly Jewish financier of Columbus's voyage?), who is a convert to Christianity ("con-verso": literally, either "convert" or "with verse"). Smith handles the final two lines of "Secuencia occidental horrorosa con final chino ecuánime" with similar unease, rendering the stereotypically Asian-accented Spanish of "*y molil significa deseal nada / y fastidial cada ve meno*" (113) in her "Dreadful Western Sequence with Equanimous Chinese Ending" as "*and dying means wanting nothing / and fussing a bit less each time*" (51). She explains her reasoning in this manner: "I couldn't find a way that didn't seem incredibly problematic to mirror the Chinese accent...so I went with an approach that relied on a superficial understanding of classical Chinese philosophy, in which the end of life is a welcoming of non-desire, a less fussy time" (137).

In short, this reviewer wonders whether Smith was ultimately up to the task of tackling Thénon. Even as the wordplay and cultural allusions abound, Smith's translations can strike one as timid, if not off the mark. Compare, for example, Treitel's rendering in *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry* of the lines quoted above:

not before persuading Her Majesty the Queen
Isabella the Catholic of the goodness of the enterprise
he had conceived
 (not before persuading Her Royal Highness
 die Königin Bessy of the Logistics to pawn
 her crown at the greasy joint of Blumenthal *con-verso*) (420)

The automatic Spanish-English substitution is gone; "Bessy" captures the familiar-sounding quality of the nickname for "Isabel / Elizabeth" (Queen Bess?) that effects the simultaneous translation heralded in the title; "pawn" correlates more directly with "empeñar" than "cop" and therefore is less distracting; "greasy joint" is similarly semantically closer to "figón" than "canteen" ("greasy spoon" may have been a better option yet), and the issue surrounding Blumenthal's religious provenance is pun-

ningly echoed, at least for readers who can fight through some Spanish, in an italicized word that hints at its linguistic origins while pointing to the vatic medium of poetry itself.

Smith's diffidence is announced in the very title of the volume, a feminized take on "complete" or "full eggs" from the phrase to have "huevos llenos"—that is, in the spirit of Thénon's use of vulgarity—"full balls," meaning "to be fed up" (94). This explains the slight oddness of the English title, but not why there was no attempt to signal its connotation otherwise. (It also bears the linguistic trace of "Obra completa" or "Complete Works.") This reviewer is less concerned with individual choices than with general methodology, so wonders whether a kind of reflexive literality or source-text devotion somewhat inhibits the poet's voice here. Why translate having read Dante "de pe / a pu" (literally, "from A to Z") as "from ay / to bi" (71, 9) or maintain in one instance the Spanish spelling of "albatross" with one "s" (11)? If "Gozque te ipsum" becomes "*Yippy Te Ipsum*," then why render the title "Kikirikyrie" as such instead of as "Cockadoodlekyrie" to mark the way Spanish-speakers transcribe a rooster's crowing (i.e., "kikiriki") (52, 114)? Thénon's voice can be raucous and irreverent to say the least, so when the poet-speaker of "La antología" cited above expresses disdain about her work being sought for inclusion in a collection by an untenured American professor who has a preconceived profile of troubled women writers in mind, this academic relates that she is in Argentina "becada / por la Putifar Comisión" (115). Smith softens the speaker's obvious scorn toward this "Putifar grant" (53), whereas the lexical unit "puto/puta" (denoting or connoting "whore," "rent boy," and/or various possible obscenities) cries out for something along the lines of "Rockafucker" or "Fuckafeller."

Somewhat surprisingly given Smith's capabilities as a translator, many cultural allusions are also lost in translation here, reducing in English Thénon's prodigious range of reference. In a passage with a Christian subtext, Smith renders "(sobre esta roca)" as "(over this stone)" when it is a clear citing of the instance in which Jesus renames his disciple Simon "Peter" (Greek for "stone" or "rock") and declares that "on this rock" He shall build His Church (126, 64). Turning to mythology, "LAGUNA ESTIGIA" appears as "STYX LAGOON" and not "RIVER STYX," although an 1887 canvas by the Filipino painter Félix Resurrección Hidalgo singularly exists under this unusual name. Similarly, music here is said (not) to "tame the beasts" ("amansa a las fieras"), when the original quote from William Congreve affirms that it "has charms to soothe a savage b[r]east" (42, 104). In the realm of psychology and the unconscious erotic mind, a type of castration by an elderly woman will be understood, a psy-

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chic declares in “Libretos,” “cuando advenga un tal Sigmundo / o Segismundo” (123-24). Smith renders this in “Librettos” as “with the advent of some Sigmundo / or Segismundo” (61-62), seemingly unaware that the line refers to Freud and, thus, keeping the names intact in Spanish. (See the case of “Isabel” above.) Perhaps she was aiming for the symmetry of the “o” endings, but Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s famous protagonist from the Golden Age drama *La vida es sueño* (*Life Is a Dream*) may, like “Sigmund,” appear as “Segismund” in English, as he does in this reviewer’s and other translators’ versions of the play. More troubling still are the number of lexical mistranslations that dot the volume, again in many cases the apparent result of a tempting indolence stemming from the siren song of the cognate.

Ova Completa is number 32 in Ugly Duckling Presse’s admirable Lost Literature Series of “neglected, never-before-translated, or scarcely available works of poetry and prose, and resonant historical works that fall outside these confines” (144). As such, this reviewer would have liked to have seen a Contents page listing all poems by title. Perhaps inviting to the reader, but maddening for the reviewer, is the volume’s opting not to place the source texts and translations *en face*, which has not been a consistent practice at this press; this reviewer has on his bookshelves one title from this series in facing-page format and two others that contain only the English-language translations. Perhaps these editorial decisions were made on case-by-case bases as translators and/or publishers deemed best. All reservations aside, however, one must be grateful to the press for publishing this volume and to Rebekah Smith for her courageous efforts to bring more of Susana Thénon’s unique poetry to English-language readers.

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