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REVIEW: Rodolfo Hinostroza. *Contra Natura*. Translated from the Spanish by Anthony Seidman. Cardboard House Press, 2022. 123 pp.

Surely the Peruvian Roger Santiváñez's blurb asserting that his countryman Rodolfo Hinostroza's *Contra natura*, winner of the prestigious 1970 Maldoror Prize, "proves to be the most influential book of poetry written in Spanish, on both sides of the Atlantic" is pure hyperbole. How else could Anthony Seidman's translation, out only this year from Cardboard House Press, be the first into English since the work's 1971 publication? Indeed, for such a respected figure, Hinostroza (1941-2016) has had some trouble gaining a toehold in the U.S.: none of his work appears in the comprehensive anthologies *Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry* (University of Texas Press, 1996) or *The FSG Book of Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), although that of his contemporary compatriot Antonio Cisneros (b. 1942) does. While three poems from other Hinostroza volumes, translated by David Tipton, are included in *Peru: The New Poetry* (Red Dust, 1977), just two of these are reprinted in *Assymetries: Anthology of Peruvian Poetry* (Cardboard House Press, 2014). The exception here is *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2009), in which, somewhat inconceivably except for considerations of space, only the first two of the three sections of "Contra natura," translated by William Rowe, grace its pages.

Seidman's solid introduction, "*Contra natura: A Translator's Experience*," enumerates not only some of the challenges faced in rendering the volume, but (perhaps, inadvertently) why Hinostroza's verse might strike English-language readers as more difficult and opaque than ludic and transcendent. *Contra natura* consists of fifteen longish lyrics incorporating many languages and quotations on themes of love and political resistance in largely "staggered" (7) paratactic lines that can tend toward the flatly narrative despite frequently luminous phrasing. Classical subjects and historical figures are imbued with a kind of international sensibility arising from the poems' political present. All this is not to mention "the insertion of symbols and signs" (7), some of which seem to aspire toward being correlative ideograms. Seidman sanguinely notes: "The North American reader may quickly draw a parallel between Hinostroza and Anglophone poets like [Charles] Olson, [Hart] Crane, and

[Ezra] Pound, yet the open sequences by Hinostroza in *Contra natura* are very much of the Latin American, if not Peruvian, grain” (9).

Seidman is primarily a poet, and in places his verbal skills shine through in these translations. In “King’s Gambit,” for instance, he translates “volviendo” [returning] nicely as “the homecoming,” a phrase he repeats a few lines later to render “el regreso” [the return] (16, 17). Later in the same poem, at checkmate in a game of chess, he teases a colloquial shading out of “Act. V. Telón” [Act. V. Curtain] with “Act. V. Curtains” (20, 21). In “Imitation of Propertius,” “qué fueron sino rocío de los prados” [what were they but dew of the meadows] becomes the lyrical “what were they if not the meadow’s dew” (36, 37). The troubled title character’s first-person monologue in “Problems of Brabantio” has him saying “paseo” [I walk around] in Spanish, while Seidman opts for “I amble about,” aptly signaling the speaker’s state of confusion (54, 55). Similarly, in “Origins of Sublimation,” Seidman deftly renders “sólo el rumor de líquidos tibios y babosos” [only the sound of tepid, sticky liquids] as “only the gurgle of warm and gooey liquids” (68, 69), while “y he aquí un brillo inesperado” [and here is an unexpected shine] appears in heightened English as “and therein an unexpected sparkle” (70, 71).

No doubt, as Seidman writes, “*Contra natura*” must have “proved to be an . . . exhilarating translation” for him (8), but a comment he makes about an admittedly thorny translation problem in the poem betrays not only a timidity in his methodology, but a seeming willingness to rely overmuch on aspects of the Spanish source texts to supply poetic effect. Puzzling over how to render the tricky “un coup de cheveux” as opposed to the more “proper” (Seidman’s word, 8) “coupe de cheveux” [haircut] and pondering whether the phrase might signify “[a] ‘coup’ of hair, or overthrowing the despot’s power with his hair as a metaphor for virility and strength, as with Samson, or a blow to the hair of the despot, hence a decapitation?” (8), Seidman throws up his hands and concludes: “Once again, I realized translating that one phrase in a creative manner would have been folly. The strength of *Contra natura* resides precisely in its occasional difficulty, in the gathering of different voices, linguistic registers, and epochs” (8-9). The assertion left this reviewer wondering whether Seidman was referring here to the text in translation or in the original, as the rendering is rife with instances where the Spanish might have been more fruitfully Englished.

A few lines from “Imitación de Propertio,” followed by Seidman’s version, might provide a telling glimpse into the general difficulty of the endeavor:

“is” (36, 37)—lexical worries are hardly few. “[U]na estampa bíblica” is not a “biblical tale,” but an “image” or “card” (18, 19)—the context reads that “heroes . . . crumple [‘caen’]” like an “estampa.” The “gerifaltes” that “don’t arrive” at “spume of young and mortal seas” are not “lords,” but “gyrfalcons” (38, 39), and the eyelids described as “tasa-jeados” in “Horoscope of Karl Marx” are not “appraised,” but “sliced” (18, 19). These are significant semantic divergences. Sounds put Seidman through his paces particularly: “the murmur of the machine guns” for “el murmullo de las ametralladoras” (19, 18)? How about “rumble”? Elsewhere he renders “el cisne grazna / un ultimo gemido” as “the swan squawks / a last moan” (100, 101) when swans “cry,” “trumpet,” “bugle” or “whoop,” though why not choose a more neutral initial verb like “utters” or “emits”? Again, the principal issue here is Seidman’s failure to translate fully Hinostroza’s Spanish text, unless he is aiming to produce a sort of foreignized version, unnecessary, to this reviewer’s mind, due to *Contra natura*’s many already unique and estranging qualities.

In *Why Translation Matters*, Edith Grossman famously complains: “Do [reviewers] think translations consist of a magical kind of tracing paper placed over the original text? Are they really convinced that the contribution of the translator is a merely rote mechanical exercise on that miraculous tracing paper, like the wondrous interlinear translations of second-year language students?” (31). My criticism is nearly the opposite: while Seidman’s efforts are hardly so rudimentary and pedestrian as the ones Grossman describes, this reviewer was frequently left with the feeling that using “a magical kind of tracing paper” is too often Seidman’s go-to strategy. How else to explain the non-English notation of centuries with Roman numerals, exactly as in Hinostroza’s original, or leaving a man’s height as “1.83 meters tall” (49) or maintaining the Spanish spellings “Babilonia” (56, 57), “Monte St. Michel” (45), and “Alfa” (115, 119)? Why leave in Spanish (albeit italicized) “puto,” a slur for homosexual males, when a nuanced rendering might have added some understanding of Propertius’s (ironic) self-image (33)? Why keep the dash in “Super-Markets” (103) or explicitate “correhuelas” as “a *correhuela* flower” (again in italics) when in English it is the “field bindweed” (46, 47)? While the sound of waves depends much on poetic license, must it be spelled “plac roar plac roar” (49)? Ditto for the “chords of the crickets” preserved as “ba bek brak bek” (55).

Seidman curiously adopts a seemingly contrary position toward the rendering of intertextual quotations. When it comes to translating “Los manjares / del banquete nupcial sirvieron para el banquete / de

METAMORPHOSES

difuntos' (16), a back-translated line from *Hamlet* ["The funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables," *H*, 686], Seidman opts for an ungainly paraphrase: "The / delicacies of the wedding feast served for the feast / of the dead" (17). This may be because, as he states with respect to the echo of lines from Walt Whitman, "One of my wiser editors suggested that I modulate [such material] a bit and have them slide less brazenly into the setting provided by Hinostroza" (7). This strategy leaves the looser gloss of a passage from *Leaves of Grass* similarly awkward in English. Whitman's Canto 6 begins: "A child said *What is the grass?* Fetching it to me with full hands; / How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he" (*LoG*, 33). For Hinostroza's "Qué es el dinero? me dijo un niño / mostrándome ambas manos llenas / Qué podía yo responder al niño? / yo no sé, como él qué es el dinero" (102), though, Seidman gives us, with one change of preposition and peculiar-sounding final-line inversions, "A child said What is money? / fetching it for me with full hands / How could I answer the child? / I do not know any more than he what is money" (103).

Perhaps, the appearance of *Contra natura* with facing-page translation will prompt more renderings of works by this author still too little known to English-reading audiences. Seidman, more accurately than Santiváñez, declares him "a bridge between the generation of César Vallejo, his celebrated peers and friends like Carmen Ollé and Blanca Varela, and contemporary Peruvian poets" (5-6). The challenge in translating Hinostroza, as with so much of Latin American poetry, is to "carry over" an entire aesthetic into the English-language poetic tradition. This more holistic approach might overcome stumbling blocks and better reconcile Anglo-American conventions with, as Seidman nicely puts it regarding Peruvian literary history alone, "the demanding poetry in [Vallejo's] *Trilce*, Oquendo de Amat, the open sequence *¡Oh Hada cibénetica!* by Carlos Germán Belli, . . . the odd ode to perfume's geometry by Rafael Méndez Dorich, or such a recent masterpiece as Jorge Pimentel's *Tromba de agosto* (1992)" (9).

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