

METAMORPHOSES

The journal
of the
five college
faculty seminar
on literary
translation

Amherst/Northampton
Massachusetts



VOLUME 25 • ISSUE 2
FALL 2017

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REVIEW: EDUARDO CHIRINOS, *STILL LIFE WITH FLIES / NATURALEZA MUERTA CON MOSCAS*. English translation by G.J. RACZ. Dos Madres Press, Loveland, Ohio, 2016.

"Here we peek in on Chirinos and Racz, two Old Masters in the studio entertaining the muse," says a blurb on the back cover by Kelly Washbourne. "Old Masters" indeed. Anyone who has read Racz's fine translation of Chirinos' 2011 collection, *Reasons for Writing Poetry*—or, failing that, our review of it in the Spring 2012 issue of this journal—will know what Professor Washbourne means. Now, once again, we have the pleasure of finding, in this collection by the contemporary Peruvian poet (he died last year) with twenty volumes of poems to his name, what we saw as the most striking trait of his work. It is the quality the great poet and theorist of Modernism Guillaume Apollinaire "identified...as the essence of Modernism: surprise." Here, some of the playful surprises, the ordinary language and objects in the poems make us think of the American poet Ron Padgett, or the quirky narrative poems of James Tate. In fact many of the poems in this collection are narratives, of a kind. Closer to home for Chirinos, the "anti-rhetorical" work of the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra and even the Brazilian Carlos Drummond de Andrade come to mind as possible models or rather, kindred spirits.

A quick scan of the table of contents shows the spirit. "1) A MOSS-COVERED STAIRCASE: Poem Written Under a Time Limit, Wandering Angels, Dream with Pools, Lament for Juan Gelman's Mustache ... 2) A RIVER RUNS UNDER YOUR TABLE: A Brief History of Poetry, Like a Line of Poetry That Doesn't Want to End, Disorder and the Tree, Party in the Garden of Logos, Dancing with Abyssinians, It's Cold in the Kremlin... 3) I HAVE INSOMNIA BECAUSE OF IT... Problems with the Calendar, Octopus's Garden, In the House of Headache..."

As for his translator, G. J. Racz, whose versions of Calderón and Lope de Vega have been published by Norton, Penguin and Yale, he has translated six books by Chirinos, most recently *Medicine for the Ailments of Falcons* (Literal Publishing, 2015). His translation of Chirinos' *The Smoke of Distant Fires* (Open Press, 2012) was shortlisted in 2013 for the PEN award for poetry in translation.

Chirinos's poems are written in a conversational tone and style. They include us, rather than giving us a beautiful object to marvel at. We

find ourselves in conversation with a brilliant, playful, original mind. Stories are told to us, too. There's a surprise twist or two on every page and often something delightful. As the poet says, "Our routine is made up of little / pleasantries and happy inventions bound to lead / us who knows where." Those lines from "To Celebrate Our Wedding Anniversary" (23) are addressed to his wife but could easily be intended for the reader. Ordinary small events become strange and strange events are treated naturally, as in the work of Henri Michaux but without Michaux's penchant for terror and rage. "Contracting with Lions," for example (19), begins like this:

This morning I awoke with the phrase "contracting with lions" in my head. I wasn't clear on what it meant, but it got me out of bed. Still sleepy-eyed, my wife said: "It's Sunday. Where are you going so early?" "to contract with lions," I replied, slowly wending my way down to my desk without turning on the lights. The animals' preserve was a large circle of sand. It was hot in there (I guessed), though outside (where I stood) it was cold. I turned up the heat a bit, which they didn't seem to care for. (. . .)

The poem ends: "I was embarrassed to have received them in my/slippers, but what could I do? It was Sunday morning / and it's rare to have visitors during those hours." So the strange becomes ordinary in a way that provokes an inward smile.

Humor is a constant in these poems. Sometimes, just as the lion poem ends with a self-deprecatory little twist, Chirinos gives us the little self-created catastrophes typical of humorists. In *Le Mot Juste* (103), a courier delivers a mysterious package to the narrator, with impressive red seals on it. At the end of this 24-line poem, after imagining what might be in the box, the poet says he was tempted to open it, as perhaps it was "the one I wanted and had been waiting for all / this time. Still, no package is irreplaceable, I told myself, leaving it on the mantelpiece / unopened. It's been sitting there for years now. / Guests ask me what that package is doing above / my hearth. I never know what to tell them." (Here, instead of "hearth," the Spanish *chimenea* could have been better rendered, perhaps, by the more ordinary "fireplace." More on the translation itself further on.)

The lions in the poem quoted above are part of an odd bestiary

that runs through this collection. Rare are the poems with no mention of animals and in many, they are the center of the poem. In the title poem alone (159), we find ravens, dogs ("that smell like vegetables"), buffalo, hares, a water bear, an Indian rhinoceros and flies (of course). Like various other objects in Chirinos, the animals sometimes come explicitly from the world of literature but are also "real." While other objects may seem "real" but slip explicitly into the world of literature. In "A Cat in the Night Undoes its Legend," (17) the narrator, who doesn't have a pet, is visited every night by a cat. The poet tries to identify it: "You must be Baudelaire's chat, I say," and then runs through a few other literary possibilities (including the Cheshire Cat), ending with "Nasume Sōseki's philosopher cat 'who still / doesn't have a name'? Nothing—the cat / just raises its tail, turns half-way round and / heads off indifferently into the night." So it's a "real" cat after all, not one that exists only in literature. In "On Birds" (41) the word "bird" the poet types on his computer actually sings, and so loudly it bothers the neighbors and is joined by various animal and plant species ("And, of course, mushrooms"—you have to love that "of course") and finally ". . . My room is filled with / birds. Frankly, I don't know what to do with them." As with the lions, the fantastic is banalized—humorously. Similarly, but conversely in its passage from abstraction to concreteness, words, in "Party in the Garden of Logos," (71), act like little creatures, "perch on my shoulder" . . . and keep on "dancing as if all this didn't matter to them." This poet's universe is so explicitly full of literature and animals that in his "Goodbye" to the Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco (37), he asks "Are there zoos for literary animals? If / there were, I'd have to look for José Emilio/ in the most spacious and elegant of cages, / where fire and earth cohabit."

Even the "Poem on the End of the World" (143) is conceived largely in terms of animals. ". . . A pack of / hounds pursues a fox, inevitably bringing it to bay. (. . .) The dogs sharpen their fangs as the / horses draw dangerously near." At the end, when ". . . nothing remains but a desert plain, a faint / and tranquil glowing"—a scene right out of a sci-fi catastrophe film—" . . . The fox breathes / a sigh of relief, looking first toward the east, then toward / the west before raising its tail and slipping into its den."

"Party in the Garden of Logos," quoted above for its participation in the poet's bestiary, displays another characteristic of Chirinos' poetry. There is, throughout this collection, a delightful interplay between the abstract (words, identified as such, and concepts)—and the concrete, often represented by the simplest, homeliest images. This is a perfect ac-

companion to the self-reflexive nature of many of these poems: the poet is wondering about words, about poetry, about the writing of the poem as he writes it. Thus "Strange Music to My Ears" (133):

I don't know what to call these things, either. It's
best to steer clear of the mud or else sink into it while
fully accepting the consequences (deleted words,
uncomfortable silences, erasures that muck up the page).

All this belongs to the past now, but the past knocks
at our door while we insist on letting this visitor in,
inviting it to have a cup of coffee. (. . .)
(. . .)

. . . Once I left the past outside
for three winters. It withstood the cold and hunger
all right, but didn't say a word, only slicing itself with
a knife—not a deep wound, of course, but the ink still

ran its course. Overflowing the present, it clouded
the future and covered this page with shadows,
filling it with mud. All this was strange music to my
ears. I don't know what to call these things, either.

In this poem, the needless repetition of "course" from one line to the next in two different expressions—"of course", "run its course"—is a minor infelicity. That happens rarely in these translations, which are generally euphonious and accurate, both lexically and tonally. In fact, they are occasionally too accurate. We sometimes wished for more "moxie," more daring, more punch in the English. From time to time, perhaps the translator could have used the vast vocabulary of English to substitute more graphic verbs and adjectives as equivalents for the Spanish words. The one liberty Racz does take with the Spanish is his use of enjambment: Chirinos uses it often, but Racz uses it more than he does. But here, it seems to us, his English captures the "strange music" of Chirinos—the spirit, not the letter, of the Peruvian poet. We applaud him for it.

The poem "Pale, Crazy Syllables" (151) evokes that "strange music" beautifully:

The hand that touches spirit touches
sweetness, avoiding the slash of death
that exists in all perfection. (. . .)

(. . .)

. . . the hand that touches spirit
touches sweetness, avoiding the slash of
death that exists in each of our bodies. In
all perfection I hear pale, crazy syllables.

A good description of the wonderful poems in this volume, as they stand in English—not frozen, motionless "perfection," but "pale, crazy syllables". Except, perhaps, for the adjective "pale": Chirinos' poetry comes in all colors. Anyone who loves poetry and doesn't know Spanish very well (or not at all), should be grateful to G.J. Racz for bringing the poetry of Eduardo Chirinos into English, especially in this well-produced bilingual edition.