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Review/Reseña

The River Is Wide, El río es ancho. Twenty Mexican Poets, A Bilingual Anthology. Marlon L. Fick, ed. and tr. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005.

Crossing the river, Cruzando el río: Twenty Mexican Poets

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The River is Wide builds a poetic bridge between Mexican and American waters. Poetry flies over the border, defies immigration officers, and leaves unexpected footprints in each of its trips. I've been traveling with *The River is Wide* for the last couple of months. I take it with me to read on the airplane, in my office or on my sofa, and each time I read it I explore a different poet, a different poetic language. As the title suggests, this anthology of twenty

contemporary Mexican poets, most of them alive, embraces a wide range of poetic styles and voices, from diverse historical and aesthetic periods.

In the preface Marlon L. Fick eloquently describes the overwhelming process of translating these poets: “For twenty blackbirds, like twenty poets, the translator submits to a divine form of multiple personality disorder.” The reader can experience a similar dizziness, and that is why, one must read this book over time, slowly, not necessarily following its order or sequence. Each poet is a whole different book. The most notable absences are Octavio Paz, Rosario Castellanos and José Emilio Pacheco, but these are poets who have been translated into English and are very well known in the US. The anthology includes nationally and internationally recognized poets from Alí Chumacero, Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, Jaime Sabines and Tomás Segovia, to Coral Bracho, Héctor Carreto, Elsa Cross, Juan Cú, Jorge Ruíz Esparza, Jorge Esquinca, Gloria Gervitz, Francisco Hernández, Elva Macías, Myriam Moscona, Óscar Oliva, Lillian van den Broek, Verónica Volkow and three younger poets, in their twenties, Francisco Ávila Fuentes, Hernán Bravo Varela, and Bernardo Emilio Pérez. The impressive selection of poems by Hernández, Sabines, and Volkow, in contrast to the glimpses of Cú, Esquinca, and Macías, shows that there is a crucial need for more bilingual anthologies of Latin American poetry.

The book is built upon a dialogue between the original texts in Spanish and their English translations. Fick’s *Preface* gives its readers an interesting take on that poetic dialogue, on how he approached each poet and what his research tools were throughout the translation process: “To translate Juan Cú, I combed dictionaries of American slang, children’s poetry, and sixteenth-century guidebooks for nuns. To capture Alí Chumacero, I re-read parts of King James Bible. To intimate Coral Bracho—her enormous vocabulary, her textures—I re-read Hart Crane...” I understand the

connections between those texts, and yet I was intrigued by how they determined the words, the tone and the rhythm he used in his translations. Fick also comments on the task of the translator and its difficulty when one translates living poets. Yet he really doesn't expand on the process of "collaboration," only signaling his walks and talks with Tomás Segovia. Full of catchy anecdotes, in a page and a half, Fick gives us a taste of his book, which he has been slowly cooking and digesting, but as readers we need and want more than a taste. I am not sure if this was Fick's decision, but this anthology clearly needed an introduction, and a longer preface or a translator's memoir.

These poets need to be introduced, and although we can argue that the poems stand on their own, and that they speak for themselves, an introduction to their respective poetic works is imperative. At the end of the anthology, there is a very short summary of each author's biography, but it is just a few of sentences that don't contribute much to our reading of the texts. The introduction to each poet and their respective works should have been included before their selection, particularly if one considers that most of these poets are unknown to the great majority of U.S. and English readers. The other main problem with the presentation of the texts is that they appear in a contextual vacuum. The poems are not dated, and most of the time, the poetry books in which they were first published are not specified. However, one may argue that readers who are interested in a particular poet can do more research on their own.

Still, Fick's meticulous, respectful and loving translations establish a dialogue with the original texts that reveals their multiple and complex layers of meaning. He tries to be faithful to the text itself, and most of the time he captures its rhythm and its word plays. For example, in his translation of Elsa Cross's "Orilla" he enriches the translation by evoking the movement of the snake with the use of

alliteration: “A snake crosses my path, / a visitor, / streaked with gold reflection / slides like water.” In Francisco Ávila Fuentes’s “Yoviendo,” Fick faces the word play in the title and tries to reveal its double meaning. “Yoviendo” combines “I see” or “I, seeing” with “Raining” which is written in Spanish, “Lloviendo.” Fick translates it “I See I Rain,” which interprets and anticipates the poem’s metaphor of an internal rain, the speaker’s desire to “rain.”

The anthology is uneven in its attention to each author. It is clear that Fick carefully and admiringly worked on his translations of Francisco Hernández, Jaime Sabines, Tomás Segovia, and Verónica Volkow. He finds the irreverent tone of Sabines’ “Canonicemos a las putas”, (Let us canonize the whores) and the cutting-edge verses, “cortantes” in every sense of the word, in Francisco Hernández’s political critique in “Manhattan arde” (Manhattan Burning). The selection of these poems is excellent, and most of these translations are elegant and poignant.

In the translation of Segovia’s poems, Fick chooses to include the commas and other punctuation marks that the original texts lack, but this actually serves the English versions better. Segovia’s “El viento en Montevideo” (The Wind of Montevideo), “A solas” (Alone), and “Llamada” (The Call) are some of the best poems of the anthology, and yet one can find some errors in both the Spanish and the English texts. In “El viento de Montevideo” (“El viento en la ciudad” (The Wind in the City) in Segovia’s *Poesía (1943-1997)*), it reads “los delicadas flancos” [sic] (your delicate flanks) which is masculine in Spanish and therefore it should be “delicados.” In “Llamada” (The Call), “tus extrañas” is translated as “your viscera,” and as the original version in Segovia’s *Poesía (1943-1997)* demonstrates, it should be “tus entrañas.” These “typos” are just “little” details, which just show carelessness in the editing process, but in the case of “A solas” (Alone) it becomes a problem of interpretation and mistranslation when “y me abres la puerta *de mí*

mismo y pones a mi alcance tu riqueza” is translated as “and you open your door *to me* and leave your richness / within my reach.” (my emphasis) The alliteration of “richness” and “reach” works well. But the door is not “your door;” it should be translated “you open the door of myself” or “my door.” This is a fundamental detail because this is an erotic poem, and the verse could be easily misunderstood as a metaphor of a “physical” door, but this is an image that evokes the erotic experience as a spiritual, intellectual journey into the self. The poem is a self-reflection; the metaphysical door into the self is “opened” through the encounter with the lover, regardless of the final revelation that it is an imaginary encounter, and that the speaker is faced with his own solitude.

His rendering of Myriam Moscona’s work is also rather careless. For example, in Moscona’s first poem, “Quise conocer la exultación de su carne” (I wanted the exultation of her flesh), there is a clear mistranslation, that does not depend on the interpretation of the text. He translated “durmió bajo el castaño de mi casa” as “she slept under the brown of my house;” but “castaño” in this verse means “chestnut tree.” Another example in Moscona’s “La mujer de Lot encuentra nombre” (Lot’s Wife Finds a Name), the verse “La muerte llegará temprano” is translated as “The dead will come early,” when “la muerte” should be read as “Death” itself, and not the dead in plural. Nevertheless, most of the anthology’s translations are not characterized by such missteps.

Fick engages with an immense variety of poets and poems, and some of his translations also reveal the humor and the word plays in Spanish the authors put emphasis on. For example, Lillian Van Den Broeck’s minimalist poetry is witty and equally funny in Fick’s English versions. “María y su Hijo” (María and Her Son) is just one verse, “El primer hijo de María lo engendró Don Nadie,” which is translated as “María’s first son was a gift from Don Nobody.” The English version is not totally “faithful” to the Spanish, but it is well

done, because “gift” carries the ironic, irreverent tone of the text, and in the case of “Don Nobody,” instead of easily using “Mr.,” “Don” gives him a paradoxical “name.” There are some word games that are just too hard to incorporate in any translation; for example, in Van Den Broeck’s “Desesperada” (Desperate), the title plays in Spanish with “pera” (pear) and “espera” (waiting), and this is only limited to “pear” in the English version. Even though most of his translations of Van Den Broeck are sharp, there are some blunders in “Instrucciones para un verano” (Instructions for a Summer). The “typo” in Spanish “Se la leva,” which should be “se la lleva” (He sweeps her away) is irrelevant in comparison to the confusing “extra verse” in English, “She folds the paper and throws it away.” This poem is about María, whose “diploma with its pink tassel” falls from her hand when she is swept away by a man. As Fick translates: “A little girl picks it up. She tears off the tassel and ties it to her hair. She peels the photo off the paper and throws it away.” But then the translation falls when “Dobla el papel. Como un acordeón. Como un abanico.” is translated as “She folds the paper and throws it away. She folds the paper. Like an accordion. Like a lady’s fan.” She does not throw away the paper, just the photograph. This is a crucial detail because this text parodies the significance of a diploma by suggesting its multiple uses if touched by the imagination of a little girl, who transforms the symbol of knowledge into a commodity. The fan is a symbol of femininity with its own practical uses, yet the main critique is the ‘uselessness’ of the diploma.

Fick remains a “friend” to the texts in Spanish, and when pertinent, and feasible, he establishes his own musicality, his own word plays and sense of irony. His work captures Verónica Volkow’s tone, creativity and individual voice, but it also gives it a new sense of self in English. In Volkow’s “Río” (River), the musicality of “se alza el viento / rumor desglosando lo multiple,” is embraced in “the wind rises / multifoliate chorus of rumor,” a verse that through the

synesthesia evokes the sounds and the imagery of a chorus of leaves moving and singing with the wind. Fick has chosen the poems he decided to translate well, and I'm sure that his translations will provoke a multiplicity of connections with other cultural products. I was particularly impressed by Volkow's "La historia del laberinto" (The Story of the Labyrinth) as a poetic seed of the moving and amazing film by Mexican director, Guillermo del Toro, *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*). As in Escher's works, in Volkow's poem the labyrinth is an intricate web that erases and recreates the princess and her steps. And like *Pan's Labyrinth*, the multiplicity of poems in *The River is Wide* connects the fantastic and the magical, with political and historical critiques.

The anthology's translations fall and rise again, and although I signaled many of its missteps, I also tried to recognize and appreciate Fick's valuable and skillful project. His anthology is an ambitious and overwhelming work, and for the most part he successfully captures the Mexican poets' intentions. It is not structured by literary themes or historical eras. It does not aim to be a comprehensive anthology; it aims to be "borderless," and to "connect" through its translations, poets and readers from Mexico and the English-speaking world. The greatest contribution of *The River is Wide* is that it narrows the gap between Mexican and U.S. literatures, and creates a few more bridges from which to cross those rivers.