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Roberts Pool Twilights

Roger Santiváñez
Translated by Elsa Costa
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Gregary J. Racz

A website for Roberts Pool in Collingswood, NJ, calls it “a beautiful complex for summertime fun and relaxation […] offering activities, programs, and a place to cool off.” For Peruvian poet Roger Santiváñez, this recreation facility near Temple University in Philadelphia where he teaches evidently offers more than that, namely, the eroticized images in Roberts Pool Twilights of watery women in assorted guises—nymphs, goddesses or mere poolside lovelies—whom his speakers variously admire, yearn for, evoke, and/or transform. Do they have a muse (or muses) in mind? The three-part ordering of these twenty-two rhetorically compact, linguistically playful poems, all but one composed in four free-verse tercets (some with an additional half-line), seem to suggest as much.

For instance, in the three works that make up “Dante’s Reading” following the initial titular section, one verse from the opening piece, “Plegaria,” reads: “me das el estilo dulce” (“you give me sweet style”). The next poem, “Aganipe,” is titled after the famed naiad—does the “Chapo-teo feliz de rizada niña rubia” (“Happy splashing of a blonde curled girl”) refer to her?—while the third, “Hipokrene,” invokes the mythological spring of poetic inspiration. (The sea, as well as the Rímac River that runs through Lima, are other bodies of water mentioned in this consistently moist collection.) The last poem of the volume, “Canorum ver novum” in “Finale Yet,” takes as its title a phrase from the classical
Roman work *Pervigilium Veneris* (*The Vigil of Venus*), further suggesting the fertile confluence of poetry and love.

Santiváñez’s dense versifying, which handsomely repays determined reading here, might well have suffered in the hands of a less capable translator than Elsa Costa, whose thoughtful rendering grapples valiantly with the sonorous, unpunctuated, and often enjambed Spanish original. Costa’s strategy appears to favor raising the linguistic register in English as a match for Santiváñez’s incessant wordplay; hence, a fine line like “No sunlight now but glow of dusky air” serves for the more elementary “La luz ya no es del sol sino del aire umbra.” See how Costa nicely turns the long e sounds of the book’s first line into short English i’s, transforming “& el destello del brillo del rio” into “& the glitter of the river’s shimmer.” Such sensitive touches characterize this translation, down to the expert handling of broken end words, as when she counters “& el viento preci // Pita cadencia recurrente” with “& the wind drip- // Drops recurring cadence.” Perhaps such poetic exuberance leads to some of Costa’s fancier solutions, like this rendering about bushes—“Solitarios ante mi susurrada cancion / No me dicen sino dulzura enhiesta”—as “Aloof before my susurrated song / They tell me naught but upright charm,” or of the lines “Reza tu belleza de rosa echada en el / Casto jardín sosegado orlando pétalos” as “In supplication your rose beauty lain in the / chaste garden assuaged decoupaging petals”? Translating *Roberts Pool Crepúsculos* could not have been an easy task and the result is no mean feat, so let’s forgive Costa her intermittent excesses, celebrating this collaboration with a poet ever more visible in English, and applauding the continued efforts of Cardboard House Press in bringing Spanish-language poetry to a wider readership through translation.

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