

Marcelo Cohen (2014)

Música prosaica (cuatro piezas sobre traducción)

Buenos Aires: Entropía, 85 pp.

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"I'm a translator. A professional one" (11)¹ opens Marcelo Cohen's latest book, *Música prosaica (cuatro piezas sobre traducción)*, a collection of four essays recounting his personal experience with translation and exile. One of Argentina's most notable writers, Cohen's list of translations includes the outstanding names Christopher Marlowe, Jane Austen, T.S. Eliot, Philip Larkin, Scott Fitzgerald, William Burroughs, Machado de Assis, and Clarice Lispector, among many others. Far from a translation manual or theory book, *Música prosaica* proves to be an intimate and personal book about a translator's shortcomings and successes, his eccentricities and occupational hazards. Heavily autobiographical, the essays that make up this book (previously published as articles in the literary magazines *Otra Parte*, *Vasos comunicantes*, and *Dossier*) are also interwoven with music, another of his passions in addition to writing.

In his first essay, which gives the title to the collection, Cohen dwells on the concept of translation as performance, and of the

translator as a musician, rendering a music score. For him, translating is a need with physicality, his fingers start to tingle if he doesn't translate for a while; "my fingers want to play" (11)². Being able to translate means being able to listen to literature's music, to the rhythmic possibilities of its narration, capturing its tune, but also reproducing its dissonance.

In the second essay, "New battles over the ownership/propriety of language,"³ Cohen goes back to his origins as a translator, which coincides with his time in Spain, where he lived in exile for twenty years. There, he also developed as quite a prolific writer, publishing over a dozen books. In this essay, through his personal experience as writer and translator, he raises fundamental questions such as, who owns language or what is proper Spanish. The matter of language's musicality reappears, as Cohen is caught in the conflict of Spanish varieties. "I was a foreigner in a mother tongue that was

1 "Soy traductor. Profesional"

2 "los dedos quieren tocar"

3 "Nuevas batallas por la propiedad de la lengua"

not my mother tongue" (35)⁴, says Cohen echoing Derrida's "I have only one language and it is not my own." But Cohen soon discovered that the difference between Argentine and Peninsular Spanish is not a lexical one (saying "calabacín" or "zapallito" for zucchini) but rather lays in "the beat of the interrogative (...) in the diction, intonation and prosody" (38)⁵. That is to say, in the music. Submerged in a double exile, a territorial and a linguistic one, Cohen quickly developed a "dialectical schizophrenia," and his translations thus acquired a unique sound, that of "an incognito Argentineness, a distinguished hybridity" (45)⁶. He would smuggle a strange and foreign-sounding word here and there, practicing a linguistic insurgency and performing polyrhythmically.

In the next essay "Two or more ghosts,"⁷ it is translation that once again triggers the reflection. While translating "Easter Morning" a poem by A.R. Ammons, Cohen ponders about the roads not taken: who would he have become had he stayed in Spain, and who would he have become had he never left Buenos Aires. The fact remains though that his rather impertinent translation method followed him back home to Argentina, a country as linguistically unwelcoming as Spain can be, and where some of his adopted peninsular slip-ups could be considered a trait of vanity or high treason (64). But

Cohen is sure his translations sound in Argentina just as strange as they sounded in Spain. "I do it on purpose, of course" (48)⁸, he brags.

In the fourth and last essay, "Persecution"⁹, readers are given an insight into the everyday activities of his "sedentary nomadism" (73)¹⁰, an account of the trivial life of a translator. Shower, run, meditation, breakfast, newspaper, dictionaries, computer. He is translating upstairs. "What did you say?" yells his wife from downstairs. But he's talking to himself, he is constantly saying phrases out loud (78). He needs to hear how they sound, listen to the music of translation.

Música prosaica (cuatro piezas sobre traducción) is a short yet sharp book, a personal entry point to Cohen's mind, ideal for anyone interested in his writing, translation, and, of course, music.

4 "Yo era un extranjero en una lengua madre que no era mi lengua materna"

5 "la cadencia del interrogativo (...) en la dicción, la entonación y en la prosodia"

6 "una argentinidad de incógnito, una hibridez distinguida"

7 "Dos o más fantasmas"

8 "Lo hago adrede, claro"

9 "Persecución"

10 "nomadismo sedentario"