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Review of "Reversible Monuments: Contemporary Mexican Poetry"

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Review of *Reversible Monuments: Contemporary Mexican Poetry*

by Marianne Rogoff

water

rain

consciousness

limits

meaning

From the center and edges of the vast and diverse landscape of contemporary Mexico, whose “boundaries are largely the accidents of history,” the poets in *Reversible Monuments* ponder the limits of consciousness and search for meaning(s). Aware of the limits yet pressing beyond them they consider love, “A man and a woman stare,/they speak at each other: not understanding (*Antonio Deltoro*); God, “the Great All that has no name” (*Elsa Cross*); and the very nature of words, “Dark dwelling place of meaning,/limits and prisons/of what is given us in silence (*Elsa Cross*).

chiaroscuro

lamplight

sleep

mosaic

The poets collect the light from the darkness and arrange it in patterns that suggest ideas or answers. The many “maps” and “cartography” poems here strive to provide a sense of direction, geography, or destination. The many “mirrors” and “reflections” poems imply perhaps that life on earth might be merely an image of what eternity more wholly could contain.

echoes

specters

memory

“vague signs and gestures” (*Malva Flores*)

“the stupor of after-dinner conversations” (*Jorge Fernandez Granados*)

moths

butterflies

“the coming and going of the possible:/its presence in the real” (*Malva Flores*)

“that persevering futility: words/airing themselves in the afternoon, the notes/of
some imprecise reality” (*Malva Flores*)

And, of course, these poets write about ever-present death, in Mexico visible, a
neighbor or member of the family.

“Nothing will remain in nothingness,/Nothing will be forgotten./There is a place in
the universe/Where the memories of time/Are written down.” (*Juan Gregorio Regino*)

Some of the poems are narratives, strings of long sentences, paragraphs of phrases;
some shapely, concrete evocations of rain and reflections; most are lyrical, metaphysical,
and grounded in the natural world of their country.

“and I -- where am I?/I am the woman I always was. The unexpectedness of being/I
come to the place of origins where the beginning begins/This is the time/Time to wake
up. (*Gloria Gervitz*)

The voices are distinct, individual, independent, unified in their humanness, like us,
but apart because they are the bearers of gifts, poems, willing deliverers of news from

earth and other realms, tireless workers for causes environmental, political, and personal. Young, born since 1950. Ancient, tied to deep roots. Ageless, spanning centuries of thought, language the spindly messenger.

This volume is unique because, along with writings in the Spanish language of Mexico, it also includes poems from native languages such as Zapotec, Mazatec, and Tzeltal, side by side with English translations. Copper Canyon's imprint Kage-An Books is new since the year 2000, dedicated to publishing works in translation. The Japanese term "Kage-An" means "shadow hermitage," reflecting the solitary dedication of the translator who works in the shadows of literary tradition. According to the editors' preface, the title *Reversible Monuments* comes from a "Topopoema" by Octavio Paz, perhaps Mexico's best-known author. "It is a concrete poem in the shape of a rhombus that has different images that reflect on each other vertically as well as horizontally. The poem can be read in many different directions, in the same way one can read poems in translation. The poem is circular, has neither a beginning nor an end. We like to think in these terms about translations, which are never final, and about generations of poets who owe as much to the poets who came before them as to the ones ahead of them who in turn will keep their poetry current. We also had in mind the geographical disposition of Mexico and the United States, and the way the two countries' poetic traditions have influenced each other."

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