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Book reviews

32 Poems / 32 Poemas by
Hyam Plutzik —
Frank Garrett



Twentieth-century American poet Hyam Plutzik is perhaps not as well known as many of his colleagues. But Miami-based Suburbano Ediciones hopes to correct this situation, as well as to introduce Plutzik to readers of Spanish, with their recent publication *32 Poems / 32 Poemas*.

While the scale is humble—a mere thirty-two poems, after all—the scope of the volume itself is expansive. In addition to some of Plutzik’s most important poems, this book contains work from an impressive bevy of translators, fifteen in all, from diverse Spanish-speaking regions (Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Spain, and Venezuela, among others) who came together to collaborate on the project.

What instantly strikes the reader is Plutzik’s almost casual use of language. But while his style and lexicon seek to be readable, there is a metaphysical current that discharges throughout the collection, almost as if a scintilla of philosophical gravity is enough to keep the words from flying off the page. The eight-line, unrhymed “The Poetic Process,” for example, starts out simple enough: “The poetic process is lonely but theatrical....”

Plutzik compares writing poetry to improvisation in theater, but then asserts in the second stanza that “The problem is always one of self-projection.” As if the multiple meanings of projection here weren’t enough, Plutzik goes one step further by insisting that the actor never sufficiently escapes the theater of life or of the stage: “Burbage must die while he wears Hamlet’s beard; / But also, strangely, when the tragedy is his own.”

In the two remaining lines, the poet corrupts Hamlet’s famous speech, leaving out the “or not to be,” whose absence lingers, reverberates even, coloring the entire mood of the poem: “To be, then, passionately impersonal / Yet nourish the self, is the poetic dilemma.” In these final few lines Plutzik destabilizes the once easy space between actor and role, between poet and poem, and in effect reveals how “the poetic process” from the title and first line readily shows itself in the last line as “the poetic dilemma,” something that both sustains and disavows the poet.

Jorge Vessel’s translation “El proceso poético” heightens and intensifies the quandary even more by inserting the adverbial phrase “a la vez” [*both or together*]: “Entonces, ser apasionadamente impersonal / O nutrir el yo a la vez, es el dilema poético.”

Some readers might have preferred mini translation statements or even a general statement about the overall project’s aim and how the translators understood, or were to understand, their particular task. Some translations attempt to carry over some sort of rhyme scheme from the English poem, while most of them refrain from preserving rhythms, meters, and other phonesthetic qualities altogether.

Translators Ximena Gómez and George Franklin fall into both camps. Their translation of “**The Milkman**” / “**El lechero**” makes no attempt to maintain rhyme, for example, while their translation “**Absurd Cycle**” / “**Ciclo absurdo**” strives to keep as much prosody as possible:

Absurd Cycle

The wounded thing

First like a fish

Will become a man

And make a wish

For a peck of apples,

A pint of dream.

And a leaping fish

In a stream.

Ciclo absurdo

La cosa herida

Como pez, primero

Se volverá hombre

Y pedirá un deseo

Por una bolsa de manzanas,

Una pinta de sueños

Y un pez que brinca

En un riachuelo

It is easy to see how including statements from fifteen different translators, however, would make the book a bit too unwieldy.

32 Poems / 32 Poemas was edited by one of the preeminent Spanish-to-English literary translators George B. Henson, who in his introduction dubs the book “a gesture toward not only reviving the memory and work of a brilliant American poet but also a step toward making his work universal.” The book includes a Forward by Richard Blanco and an Afterword by Edward Moran. All three thoughtful essays provide helpful contextualizations of Plutzik and provide compelling evidence as to why we need to know his work better today.

This slender bilingual volume signals a sea change in acceding to the slow forgetting of Plutzik’s contributions to American letters. *32 Poems / 32 Poemas* just might be the catalyst for making the poet’s name more recognized, both in his native United States and now across the Spanish-speaking world.

Hyam Plutzik (1911-1962) spoke only Yiddish and Russian at home and did not learn English until he attended a one-room schoolhouse in rural Connecticut. Educated at Trinity College and Yale University, he taught for 16 years in the English department of the University of Rochester before his untimely death, at 50, in 1962. He was a three-time finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for *Aspects of Proteus* (1949), *Apples from Shinar* (1959), and *Horatio* (1961). *32 Poems / 32 Poemas* is published by Suburbano Editions.

Writer and translator Frank Garrett lives in Dallas and is a contributing editor at Minor Literature[s]. His translation of Bruno Schulz’s long-lost literary debut Undula (originally published under the pseudonym Marcelli Weron) is out by Sublunary Editions.