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**José Martí. *Ismaelillo*. With a critical introduction, notes and an English translation by Tyler Fisher. San Antonio, Texas: Wings Press, 2007. 128 pages. Hardback. \$19.95. ISBN-13: 978-0916727420**

Tyler Fisher's bilingual edition of José Martí's landmark work *Ismaelillo* fills a glaring lack; it is the first complete translation of the first book of poetry published by the Cuban poet. The translation reads beautifully aloud and is, with very few exceptions, painstakingly accurate. Fisher's introduction and the notes that discuss translation dilemmas enhance the reading experience and bear witness to the translator's dedication and research.

Originally published in New York in 1882 by Thompson and Moreau, this book of 15 poems is dedicated to Martí's absent three-year-old son, José Francisco Martí Zayas Bazán, and all of the poems are about his son or are addressed to him. As Martí explained in a letter to his friend Charles Dana, editor of *The Sun*, "[*Ismaelillo*] is the romance of my love affair with my son; one gets so tired of reading so many romances about love affairs with women."<sup>1</sup> Although dedicated to a child, the book is not meant for children. *Ismaelillo* contains poems that depict the tenderness of a father playing with his son ("Príncipe enano"/ "Tiny Prince;" "Mi caballero" / "My Cavalier;" and "Musa traviesa" / "Mischievous Muse"), but most of the poems are oneiric, full of powerful nightmarish images, and the son's role is to serve as a solace to the cares and worries that haunt his father. The first words of Martí's dedication make this clear, "Son: Daunted by all, I take refuge in you" (3). The poetry of *Ismaelillo* is characterized by vivid yet often confusing imagery. Its flexible, innovative use of syntax simultaneously and paradoxically points forward to avant-garde poetry while still remaining anchored in the baroque traditions of the Spanish Golden Age. Although most critics currently argue that the influence of *Ismaelillo* on contemporary *modernista* poets was probably negligible due to its limited distribution, literary historians consider it a pioneering work of early *modernismo*.

To undertake the first complete translation of *Ismaelillo* is not a task for the faint of heart and Tyler Fisher has wrestled courageously with Martí's demons and with his often devilish verses. He has produced an English equivalent that is not a paraphrase but manages to create poetry of its own. Since, as the translator explains in his introduction,

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<sup>1</sup> This is my translation. The letter is quoted by Gonzalo de Quesada y Miranda in his article "¿Cómo escribió Martí su *Ismaelillo*?" *Bohemia*: 29 de enero de 1933. De Quesada y Miranda's translation into Spanish of Martí's letter in French to Dana reads: "es el romance de mis amores con mi hijo; uno se cansa de leer tantos romances de amores con mujeres."

[http://www.bohemia.cubaweb.cu/dossiers/historia/josemarti/marti\\_quesada.htm](http://www.bohemia.cubaweb.cu/dossiers/historia/josemarti/marti_quesada.htm)

the rhythm of Martí's verses cannot be reproduced in English, he sought ways of recreating the musical effects:

When approaching the translation of *Ismaelillo*, I determined a hierarchy of linguistic effects that I desired to echo – poetic values that I deemed essential to the original text and essential to a satisfactory English reading. For me these intended effects include the following: Martí's meaning, rhythm, and additional phonaesthetic elements such as alliteration, anaphora, and rhyme. . . . My prioritizing of poetic values simply determined that, when faced with creative choices, I would sooner preserve what an original line denotes than sacrifice clarity of meaning by rearranging words for the sake of rhyme. When faced with a choice, I would sooner maintain a rhythmic approximation to the original than reproduce a cunning alliteration (xxvii-xxviii).

In preparation for this review, I first read *Ismaelillo* in its entirety in Spanish and then read Fisher's translation aloud also in its entirety without pausing to compare it with the Spanish text. I then went back and did a comparative reading. I find that Fisher took his policy very much to heart and in almost every case was consistent with it. I seldom disagreed with his choices, or at least could see his rationale.

Having said that, there are a number of cases, and not all inconsequential, where I found Fisher's decisions baffling. After he states the importance of understanding the context of the work (xxvi-xxvii), I don't understand why he introduces Hawaiian culture into "Fragrant Arms:" "And weave for me / A lei of mystic irises!" for "Y de místicos lirios / Collar labrarme!" (11). Here I also think that "místicos lirios" are probably "lilies" (because of the connotation of purity) and not "irises" although "lirio" is both "lily" and "iris" in Spanish. Likewise the use of "My buckaroo!" for "Mi jinete!" (12-13) in "My Cavalier" introduces the Wild West into a poem whose principal conceit is that of the little boy as knight.

It is also disappointing that in five instances Fisher's translation fails to preserve metonymies deftly employed by Martí. I find this especially objectionable because Martí habitually employs metonymies to give immediacy and vibrancy to his verse (and prose). In "Mischievous muse" Fisher renders Martí's "Y, en vez de acero verle / de pluma armarse" as "To see him armed with pen / Instead of sword," (20-21). Likewise in "Fierce Gadflies," Martí's metonymy: "De los cortantes / Hierros: rojos relámpagos" becomes "Piercing sabers? / Fatal splendor:" (48-49). Here the use of "piercing" with "saber" is unfortunate as this weapon is used principally for slashing which is the motion intended by Martí, and two lines below Fisher correctly renders "la niebla tajen:" as "Slash the fog." Similarly, later in the same poem "De hierros que se parten" is given as "Of severed swords," (54-55) and in "White Turtledove," "In lava and fire;" for "Y en lava y en llamas;"(60-61). Clearly Fisher is not unaware of the power of Martí's metonymies as evinced by his masterful translation of "Muérdame en los dos labios / La bella carne:-" as "Let handsome flesh / Gnaw both my lips:-" from "Fierce Gadflies" (51). On that same page "Splintered blade" preserves Martí's metonymy "Quebrada la tajante," but it naturalizes and thereby weakens the image. Martí's choice of "tajante" over "hoja" is bolder and memorable.

There are a few instances where I believe Fisher's translation is based on faulty research or a misreading of Martí's text. In "Mischievous Muse" I don't think "paño

árabe” should be translated as “Arab linen,” and a comment made by Gonzalo de Quesada y Miranda, whose father was a good friend of Martí’s, bears this out: “Es de un pobre paño de franela, cubierto de arabescos, el solo adorno de la mesa; es una compra de pocos centavos en un ‘departament store’.”<sup>2</sup> It seems therefore that it was an inexpensive orientalist hanging. In “White Turtledove,” “Champagne with its glitter / Of russet gold luster / Erupts in bright bubbles / When happily emptied,” does not seem to attend to the possible sexual connotations of “Detona, chispea, / Espuma, se vacía, / Y expira dichosa / La rubia champaña:” (58-59). In Martí’s poem there is a strong personification of champagne which is not only “blonde” but “expires blissfully.” Another example of a misreading (again involving metonymy) is found in “My Pantryman” and this one is hard to account for as Fisher’s note explains that “Since ancient times, Cyprus has been a major exporter of wine” (66). Consequently, the rendering of “Qué me das? Chipre?” as “What will you give me? / The island of Cyprus?” is surprising as I would have expected something like: “What will you give me? Cyprus?” as we might say “What will you give me? Burgundy?”

These infelicities mar what is nevertheless, page after page, an intelligent and sensitive rendering of José Martí’s *Ismaelillo* into English. If I have dwelt on disappointing moments in Fisher’s otherwise admirable translation, it is because I hope that he may reconsider them in future editions of the work. Thanks to Fisher’s efforts an important component of José Martí’s oeuvre is now finally available to English speakers.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.