



TAVARES, Zulmira Ribeiro.
***Vesuvio/Vesuvius*, translated**
by Hugh Hazelton, Canada:
Editions Wolsak & Wynn, 2015.

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Intriguing Scenarios

This year saw a quiet yet momentous event in Canadian letters: the release by publisher Wolsak & Wynn of a handsome bilingual edition of *Vesuvio/*

Vesuvius, a volume of poems by the extraordinary Brazilian poet Zulmira Ribeiro Tavares, translated into English by Hugh Hazelton. It was a quiet event in that, considering the current torrent of publication, the production of a single volume of translated poetry can be all too easily overlooked. It was momentous for its rarity: a volume produced by an arts-council supported press of work by a distinguished foreign author. Canadian arts councils as a rule value literary translation as part of the national dialogue, and thus tend to fund translations from work by Canadian citizens only. In view of the quality of Tavares' work, we can only be thankful that the publisher financed the project herself.

Zulmira Ribeiro Tavares is one of Brazil's most important and distinctive authors. Born in São Paulo in 1930, where she has lived all her life, she has published nine books – novels, short stories, poetry, essays – won numerous awards (among them the prestigious Jabuti Award, 1993) and has been widely translated. *Vesuvio*, shortlisted for the Jabuti in 2012, is her first work exclusively of poetry and constitutes, Hazelton tells us in his introduction, a kind of axis of her work. It is also the first full-

length collection of poetry by Tavares translated into English.

What we discover in the pages of *Vesuvius* is a poetry of strange, limpid powers. While Tavares' poetry features occasional warm flashes of surprising juxtaposition redolent of Neruda or Vallejo, for the most part she is cooler in her register, more urbane, oblique, whimsical. Her work, for a reader of Latin American literature, is more likely to bring to mind at once the bold yet self-effacing satire of Nicanor Parra and the labyrinthine meditations of Jorge Luis Borges.

The volume is divided into seven parts, interrelated fascicles whose titles indicate the tenor of the work: "Installations", "Ultralight", "Figures", "Seasons", "Left-Handed Lyric", "Stages/Stagings" and "Gloss". The work itself is a mixture of prose poems, many of them circuitous and complex, and brief lyrics (with one or two exceptions) that arrive more swiftly and directly to their effects.

Favourites among the prose poems include "The Stain of Colour," "Below the Poverty Line", "The Paradox of Ghosts" and the final, most elaborately entitled poem, "Proposals with Birds and Leaves that the Observer Extends to Human

Ingenuity with a Certain Reference to the Heart".

"The Paradox of Ghosts" begins with a simple but original assertion,

There are two types of ghosts:
the real ones and the fakes.

A real ghost, Tavares continues, "brings to mind the purest crystal, but without a single bit of reflected light". These ethereal beings draw attention to themselves – and to each other – through a "slight tart noise... that breaks the smoothness of the air", as when "two crystal glasses touch". Oddly enough, this makes them "congratulate one another".

A fake ghost is more the usual ghost cliché. It "wears a huge white sheet thrown over what's inside," with "an eyehole like a burka. Or else it's a blind burka". In what amounts to a delightful bit of farce, the fake ghost "often... misses its improvised sight hole [so it] stumbles over its own feet, and falls with a boom, or else tumbles down the stairs, letting loose a cavernous roar." Fake ghosts, she concludes, "are the most terrible, because they exist." The liar's paradox, with its hall of mirrors of ironic logical implications, is immediately brought to mind.

Consisting of intriguing, miniature

scenarios most often related in the third person, Tavares's poetic creations stand alone, while the author's wise, reserved presence sits behind, somber or wanly smiling. Here, a devastating short lyric that needs no paraphrase:

Way

He lived a hard life –
 a hard silent life.
 Like an empty shoe
 without a shoelace he lived.
 A weak-legged shoe
 drifting along
 without him inside. He lived
 outside himself
 a hard simple life.
 He took off his shoes to sleep
 on a stone. Without a groan –
 a sound of falling.

Here, a poem in a more typically light-hearted vein, also quoted in full:

Philosopher in Springtime

He doesn't like to show he's
 thinking
 because it doesn't seem to
 him very real.
 He disguises it, pretending
 to watch
 the small bird drinking water
 in the eaves
 of the roof – of his
 whitewashed stone house
 where he lives with his stone
 whitewashed family.
 Where could the real be, he
 wonders pensively,
 afraid that sooner or later
 they'll discover
 his principal occupation:

Asking questions that escape,
 flapping their wings
 like birds along the eaves of
 houses.

"Vesuvius," the title poem, is the perhaps most complex lyric in the collection. Far from concerning the colossal theme of destruction of the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, as one might expect, the title refers to a rubbed drawing, and evokes the artist's reflections upon, among other things, cultural and social expectations, failures and disappointments in art and love. One feels in the reading that this is a poem to be puzzled out, until the final lines draw together its diverse elements into an appropriately volcanic revelation.

Hazelton's translation strikes me as not only exceptionally readable, but felicitous in rendering the diction, tone and lyricism of the original. I say this as a reader of Spanish and French who, looking across from the translations to the original, can decipher most of the Portuguese.

Tavares is clearly as preoccupied as any poet with mortality in its elegiac and absurd implications. But she is never morbid or moribund. The intricacy of her inventions and beauty of her poetic leaps save us from that. From "The Stain of Colour":

We can move forward into the losses.

But when the days go too far, we stretch out into the shadows of sunset, we're tracker gymnasts, the shadows are our pyjamas of elastic and smoke, they carry us tautly towards the sun that's disappeared now into its stain of colour.

Our shadows are walking shadows on the road.

We are walkers with the shadows and run uselessly into the stain of colour.

Note

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