
As an architect of words, Brazilian author Zulmira Ribeiro Tavares (born in 1930) writes with supreme precision and intuitive insight to capture a full range of human experience. Although she is best known for her award-winning fiction, published in nine books to date, Vesuvio is Tavares’ first book devoted exclusively to poetry. It was published in 2011 by Companhia das Letras in São Paulo, Brazil, and subsequently became a finalist for the Jabuti, Brazil’s top literary prize. Four years later, Canadian scholar and translator Hugh Hazelton introduced Anglophone readers to the first book-length edition of Tavares’ poetry, in the form of a slim volume divided into seven sections. These sections bear the following titles: Installations; Ultralight; Figures; Seasons; Left-handed Lyric; Stages/Stagings; and Gloss. The 2015 bilingual edition includes a preface written by Hazelton that introduces the reader to Tavares’ extensive writing trajectory as fiction and essay writer, as poet, as well as film critic and researcher. He also highlights key tropes and elements present in the volume.

The collection’s sections display a high degree of linguistic variation and attention to artistic composition, with occasional emphasis on musical arrangements. In Hazelton’s introduction, “Searching for the Other Side,” he states that in Vesuvius, Tavares “examines the line between what is and what seems to be” [x]. He adds that “[w]riting itself is a fluid, protean art for Zulmira: the word is what is important, and it is unrestrained by genre boundaries” [xi]. To illustrate his point, most poems in the first section, “Installations,” are in the form of prose. The poem “Below the Poverty Line” is masterful in the way it transforms geography and an architectural urban grid into a moving testament to human inequity. Here are the poem’s first lines:

Looking out I can see the poverty line in the irregular contour of the buildings, high or low, or of the small hand-built houses on the hillsides.

The line that affects me most is the straight one, that goes from
one point to the other without a single deviation. I know there are numbers in it. Which ones, I don’t know. Though the invisible has no colour, weight or tangency, it’s strong. I read about it.

I believe the horizon line is the one closest to what I imagine the line of poverty to be. [23]

In the last section of Vesuvius, “Gloss,” Tavares responds to a 1970 text written by Portuguese poet Ruy Belo, making his verbal love song to nature and the beating heart of human life resonate anew. In these and the other sections in between, Tavares’ poetry depicts a spectrum of moments, movements and meanings. My favorite poems portray a diverse array of experiences and references to life at large: a surfer conquered by a wave; a transvestite hanging laundry on a clothesline; a whipping wind transforming the cityscape; a screeching parrot; a boy and dog lost on a day-long quest; an unadorned moon and its observer.

Hazelton’s preface describes Tavares’ Vesuvius as “strange and urbane.” In his words, Tavares’ style is “intimate” and “precise,” [xi], in which “[m]oments of existence […] are fleeting, unstable constructions” [xii]. He closes his preface with what he terms Tavares’ emblematic title poem, indicating that Tavares’ representation of the infamous volcano is symbolic of humanity’s existential strata, from surface to core, from active vigor to dormant ash.

Hugh Hazelton’s translations are brilliantly rendered, capturing the intricacies of the original Portuguese with accuracy and skill. As a seasoned translator and former co-director of the Banff International Translation Centre, Hazelton relies on his linguistic versatility and scholarly expertise in comparative literature, with particular strength in the Romance languages. For the bilingual reader, the act of comparing each poem side by side is a joyful task. Often the English version elucidates Tavares’ complex layering of meaning and voice with equivalent exactitudes, even mirroring the alliteration of syllables and sounds (for instance, the soft “s” sounds in the poem “Passaroco,” or “A Small Bird’s Sorrow”).

Occasionally the reader might question Hazelton’s word choice. For example, is his selection of the word “tin” instead of “pewter” in describing the moon designed to appear less sentimental and more metaphysical in “Open to the Public” [109]? Or is his choice of the word “scarcely” instead of “merely” in the poem “A Day Deathly Afraid” [117] meant to unsettle the reader? In the same poem, the expression “do not
glance aside” might have the same destabilizing effect on the reader, rather than use the more common “do not glance sideways.” In the poem entitled “The Afternoon” there seems to be a shift in perception between the deceased at a funeral wake becoming “forgotten” and his becoming “forgetful” in the English version.

In the original:

Diante das conversas no velório
Ficou meio esquecido. [46]

In the translated version:

Faced with the conversations at the wake,
He became a bit forgetful. [47]

These minor quibbles aside, the translations are meticulous and elegant.

As in the poem “The Architect and the Ballerina” from the section “Left-handed Lyric” [100-101], Zulmira Ribeiro Tavares’ poetry and Hugh Hazelton’s translations present a world of graceful arcs and rhythm. In the acknowledgements on the book’s final page, Hugh Hazelton signals to the reader a close correspondence through active dialogue between translator and author. This dialogue is visible on every page, marking this collection’s distinct beauty and enduring success.