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Review of Sònia Hernández's *Prosopagnosia* (trans. Samuel Rutter)

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Hernández, Sònia. *Prosopagnosia*, translated from Spanish by Samuel Rutter. Scribe, 2020.

Hernández (Terrassa, 1976) is a relative newcomer to the Spanish literary scene. Her first published work was a book of poems in 2006. Since then, she has published four novels, *Prosopagnosia* being the only one translated into English.

The first remarkable thing about the book is the fact that Scribe has chosen to put on the cover the title of the first part of the book, while the title of the Spanish original (*El hombre que se creía Vicente Rojo*) becomes merely the second part in the English translation. *Prosopagnosia* is of course a much more eye-catching title than 'The man who thought he was Vicente Rojo'.

Prosopagnosia is a neurological disorder whose sufferers are unable to recognise familiar faces. Berta is the (extremely) unreliable narrator's daughter, she has fainted at school while staring at a painting by a famous exiled painter, Vicente Rojo. The painter helps the young student get home and makes the mother's acquaintance.

But Berta was actually playing a game she calls prosopagnosia. One has to hold their breath until the brain makes the player see distorted images. When played in front of a mirror it is, allegedly, more fun. If we are to believe Berta, of course.

Both mother and daughter are having existential crises. Berta is a teenager, and her father has abandoned the family home. From her teenage perspective, ugliness is everywhere to be seen. Her mother has her own issues – she's extremely insecure about her professional ability as a journalist, her own body image, and the personal and professional pathways she can take after a divorce. Thus, meeting the painter seems to cast her some sort of a lifeline: surely an interview with the renowned artist would regain her some good standing and self-esteem.

But is the painter the person he claims to be? Is the narrator the kind of person she has always thought she was? The novel explores the uncertain boundaries between truth and fiction, but it does so in a rather patchy way. Berta's mother is set as the sole narrative voice. Initially, we are led to think that *Prosopagnosia* is going to be a confession of sorts:

For a large part of my life I have been plagued by the proximity and inevitability of the end. [...] I have always felt that the end was very close to me. It's like an endless *memento mori*. Exhausting.

My relationship with Pablo [ex-husband] began when I was exactly eighteen years old. Now I'm forty-three. [...] we had been living a continuous ending, as if our relationship had never even had a beginning.

I'm forty-three years old. Pablo left home on the day of my birthday. [...] Being forty-three years old places me near the end of something. (13)

Thus, the story focuses on her existential angst while Berta's serious teenage issues seem to be somewhat neglected. The article or essay she will write on the famous painter will help her achieve personal growth by overcoming her self-doubting personality, her fear of

failing and disappointing others. Whether this new foray into journalism achieves that objective or not is beside the point, really.

The second part of the *nouvelle* hardly advances the plot anywhere. Berta suggests the painter could be asked to help the school community to paint a massive mural in honour of one of her fellow prosopagnosia practitioners, Mario. He has been diagnosed with a serious disease. The painter hesitates. Berta's mother continues to visit him. The interviews she holds with him feel more like therapy sessions than journalistic work.

Eventually there is a confession of sorts from the fake painter. The story points towards a positive moral, namely that it should be possible to break away from our past and construct a new personality that gives more meaning to our self.

Yet as a reader, I am less than satisfied about Hernández's ultimate purpose. Perhaps the idea is that not only are there unreliable narrators but also unreliable characters who think they are unreliable narrators.

Samuel Rutter's translation does raise some questions, too. To start with, the English version has excised a few paragraphs from the source text. The first significant omission occurs on page 13. It is a short paragraph where the mother describes Berta's angry reaction when she learns the painter has gifted her the watercolour painting that she had been staring at school when she fainted.

However, much more significant is the removal of two long paragraphs – close to forty lines (119 in the target text). These describe the many merits of the *real* Vicente Rojo, who was a Spanish-born painter. He exiled himself to Mexico in the wake of the Civil War and subsequently became an accomplished and much-admired painter there. His was the cover for the first edition of a contemporary classic: García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*).

It is hard to understand the decision to excise these two paragraphs. One can only presume this occurred as a result of editorial intervention rather than Rutter inexplicably slicing a small yet meaningful chunk off the original.

Apart from these omissions, there are a few other minor mistranslations. The first is an evident inconsistency. On page 18, Berta's mother explains how, after meeting the painter for the first time, stops at a café “de vuelta a casa” (i.e., “on my way home”) to order and eat a massive *merienda*. The English version incorrectly renders the phrase as “when I got home”. Moreover, Rutter simplifies the quintessentially Spanish *merienda* as a “meal”. Personally, I find the English short-changes the reader. The narrator has earlier placed emphasis on how overeating after the divorce has made put on weight. A late afternoon *merienda* will typically include a pastry and a mug of milk coffee, or even hot thick chocolate in the winter months.

Other minor mistakes include the reference to the painter's seeming reluctance to leave Mexico (“apenas salía de México”), which in the TL text becomes “he had only just left Mexico” (21). This is an important deviation from the original; it is an early warning about the questionable identity of the man who claims to be the renowned painter. Also, the “barracón” of the school Berta attends (i.e., the deplorable demountable or portable classroom, now almost an icon in far too many Australian schools) is oddly translated as “depot-like building” (8). And when Berta is being scolded by her mother about her inexplicable dislike for the old painter, trying to reason with her (“lo único que hizo fue ayudarte”, that is, “all he did was to help you”) is inaccurately conveyed by Rutter as “he was the only one who bothered to help you” (30).

Two editorial errors should be fixed in future reprints: “you could [see] the little hairs beginning to emerge” (99) and “I wasn't sure if she [was] seeking consolation” (100).

Notwithstanding the mostly unimportant mistranslations and the two lengthy omissions – rather baffling for contemporary editorial practices – Samuel Rutter's translation serves its

purpose. I'll admit Sònia Hernández's book did not make me rush to the bookshop in search of her other books. Other readers might relish this story more, though.