ForeWord Reviews

Migraciones
Gloria Gervitz
Mark Schafer, translator
Junction Press
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A discussion between the poet and her translator at the back of the book offers a much-enhanced access to the sometimes difficult passages in this long poem. Their conversation makes it clear that this Russian-Jewish-Mexican woman knew exactly what she was doing during the construction of a single poem that covers seventy-three pages of text and took twenty-seven years to write.

Sharing personal information with Schafer, Gervitz explains her persistent preoccupation with female sexuality as an important element of her search for the meaning of both her personal life and life in general. Her hybrid background includes grandparents of mixed ethnic and religious origins, and a lifetime of influences from both Catholic and Jewish lore. A summary of her rich educational sources makes it clear that these passionate confessions are grounded in a profound knowledge of religious rituals, and a wide range of literary influences springing from a variety of languages.

Each of seven sections is introduced with a quoted epigram and a title of either Hebraic or Classical allusion that suggests its essential ambience. For example, she refers to Shaharit (traditional Jewish morning prayer service); Yizkor (a prayer for people who have died); Threnody (a lament); and Equinox (a major shift in climate, the beginning of a new season).

A quotation celebrating a famous rabbi emphasizes the major theme of the entire poem: “Shortly before his death, Rabbi Zusya said, / ‘When I stand before the gates of heaven, I will not be asked, / why were you not Moses, but, why were you not Zusya? / Why did you not become what only you could be?’ “

The first section is largely stream-of-consciousness musings, clearly those of a young woman, with a mixture of self-awareness, memories, and wishes, and punctuated by an occasional flash of brilliant imagery: “The cranes return / open silence with their wings / sudden white flowers in an empty sky.”

The middle five sections are a catalogue of grief, of mourning, building to a crescendo in the section that treats most specifically of the poet’s relationship with her dead mother. This lugubrious note persists throughout the poem until “September,” when in an outrush of joyful

exclamations she announces to the world, and to herself, that she has finally awakened to the wellspring of her own being that she has been seeking all her life.

Schafer, already well known for his numerous translations of Latin American poetry and prose, worked for thirteen years in close collaboration with Gervitz. The fidelity of his translation to the original Spanish loses nothing of the intensity invested by both in this fine bilingual presentation.

Sandy McKinney