

## Gonçalo M. Tavares

### “The Inside of Things”

Mister Valéry earned a living by selling the inside of things. Mister Valéry did not sell the object so to speak, but only the inside of the object. The buyer would take a dish, for example, but in truth he only owned the inside of the dish. . . . Problems, however, arose when the owner of the inside of something happened to meet the owner of the outside of the same object.

—Gonçalo M. Tavares, *Mister Valéry*

Contemporary Portuguese writer Gonçalo M. Tavares is a literary figure of international prominence as well as a professor of scientific theory at the University of Lisbon. His radical, unpretentious work, still relatively unknown in North America, offers microscopic examinations of human nature in which he tests the materials of logic and language with each sentence, reducing the world to magnified parts only to recompose it for the reader in extended literary forms. Logic and language play about in witty texts that converse as freely with contemporary subjects as they do with world literature and Western philosophy. In a little more than a decade, Tavares has established his unique voice in contemporary Portuguese and European circles by publishing more than thirty books, translated into numerous languages, ranging from poetry, novels, and short fiction to theater pieces and unclassifiable “investigative works” such as his 2001 *Livro da dança* (Book of Dance). Internationally, his texts have inspired installations, theater, visual art, and operas. Portugal’s Nobel laureate José Saramago declared of him, “Gonçalo M. Tavares has no right to be writing so well at the age of 35! One feels like punching him!” His 2004 novel *Jerusalem* and the more recent epic and singularly lyrical narrative in poetic form, *Uma viagem na Índia* (A Voyage to India), have been acclaimed as contemporary masterpieces.

Each Tavares book is part of an evolving, extensive oeuvre divided into such categories as “O Bairro” (The Neighborhood), a series of books loosely inspired by his view of illustrious creators: Mister Eliot, Mister Brecht, Mister Calvino, Mister Walser, and Mister Valéry. “Encyclopedia” offers three works filled with

puzzlelike miniatures, on the subjects of science, connections, and fear. The quartet “O Reino” (The Kingdom) contains four novels, including his recent *Aprender a rezar na Era da Técnica* (*Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique*). Fortunately for English readers, a portion of his oeuvre is available in high-quality translations, and more are in progress.

Promotional photos and video interviews with the dark-haired, intense Tavares suggest a brooding Mephistopheles seized abruptly by the camera. Such appearances, however, disguise the uncomplicated elegance of an amiable, generous, and attentive conversationalist. He is a question mark of a writer who carves fictions in the same manner in which he thinks, probing systematically with a surgical scalpel. Too relentless and close to the bone to allow for nostalgia, Tavares’s work lacks the characteristics often identified as Portuguese and contrasts sharply with the work of other writers of his generation.

In the opening lines of *Jerusalem*, Ernest Spengler is about to throw himself from his window when he receives a call from the schizophrenic Mylia. Mylia leaves her apartment at 3:00 A.M. to go to a church. Wandering the streets at the same moment, in search of a prostitute, is Theodor Busbeck, Mylia’s ex-husband and the doctor who attempted to cure her schizophrenia years earlier. In the same vicinity is Hinnerek Obst, a war veteran so traumatized by fear that he is taken for a murderer. These are the disturbing figures Tavares winds up tightly and then sets in motion on darkened, anonymous city streets.

In his ominously titled *Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique*, the reputable surgeon Lenz Buchmann is a domineering figure whose days are filled with cold, unwavering decisions about life and death on the operating table. Obsessed with his superiority and believing himself destined to work on greater projects than ailing human bodies, he becomes involved in politics. He succeeds as brilliantly in the public arena as in his medical profession, advancing toward the summit of political power, until he is diagnosed with a brain tumor.

Tavares treats the body as an intimate and political figure in *Learning to Pray*, as he explores raw human impulses in varying contexts, contrasting them in wide-angle and close-up views. His novels afford the space required to create tension between the poles of systematic logic, in which a yes-or-no response is inevitable, and the less predictable decisions of fictional humans for whom no clear solution to conflict is evident. Tavares is a master at depicting this fertile confrontation. *Jerusalem* concludes with a question that exemplifies this duality,

when Mylia says to the person who answers her knocking at the church door, “I killed a man. Will you let me enter?”

Born in Portugal’s colonial Angola a few years before the 1974 Carnation Revolution, Tavares is uncomfortable with identifying himself with a specific generation of contemporary writers. He claims that what you write has more to do with what you read than with when you were born. “Each person has a ‘library’ of references,” he says, “and two people from the same generation can have very different libraries. A text is the result of many influences, and the idea of generation is an exclusion.” Further, he believes that personal culture is more determining for a writer than external causes, and finds cross-generational links from the past to his own writing. However, he acknowledges that although he grew up with access to his father’s books and space to roam freely outside, his parents’ Portugal was an isolated country where only the elite had access to contemporary culture. It wasn’t so much that things were prohibited as that they simply weren’t accessible.

“I don’t want to be free of the past,” Tavares responds to the suggestion that he grew up in a liberated environment after the Salazar dictatorship. “It’s incorporated in my experience, my cultural heritage.”

Most of Tavares’s texts have nothing specifically Portuguese about them with respect to cultural references or locations. His literary purpose is much broader. As evidenced in his characters’ names, if there is filiation in his work, it is closest to the German and central European traditions of Kafka, Musil, and Walser. He also expresses affinities with the literature of Latin America.

His work is free of any trace of quaintness or notion of a grander past, such as Portugal’s folk motif of the sleeping king, known as Sebastianism, which inspired such writers as Fernando Pessoa. Rather, Tavares probes the contemporary and seemingly nonbiographical themes that link all humans: their animality as expressed in desire, violence, agitation, and fear. “Culture is what surrounds that,” he notes; “the decor . . . it’s not essential.” The objects that people employ (a rock, a knife, a pencil, a cup) serve as extensions of emotional dimensions, and he zooms in, narrating how his characters relate to them.

### “Cups and Hands”

Mister Juarroz was always loath to pick up his coffee cup because he couldn’t help but think that it wasn’t one’s hands that picked up objects but rather the

objects that picked up one's hands. And this fact displeased him, since he couldn't accept that a simple cup could grab his hand.

—Gonçalo M. Tavares, *Mister Juarroz*

"How you look at things determines how you interpret them," Tavares observes. His *métissage* of analytical thought and fictional narrative is distinctive in contemporary literature and unprecedented in the Portuguese canon, amounting to a mixing of blood that is uncannily entertaining, revealing, and savvy. His comment about viewing and interpreting is a key to reading his work. As in his books *Mister Juarroz* and *Mister Valéry*, reversing the apparent evidence of ordinary things makes for playful images and unexpected observations.

Critical of the Cartesian tradition inherent in Western scientific theory, which he confronts candidly in his fiction, Tavares comments, "In Western tradition we take things apart when we don't understand them. Understanding means to comprehend the parts rather than seeing the similarities in things. It is rich in detailed knowledge, but the cost has been great in sacrificing other perspectives." The interweaving of holistic and reductionist views is a philosophical, artistic issue for Tavares, one that he manipulates constantly to dynamic effect.

Suggestive rather than didactic, Tavares's novels are still unmistakably systematic and filled with clear intention. In *Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique*, Lenz Buchmann watches people from the window of his upper-level apartment. In the operating room, he performs surgery with microscopic precision. In his move toward political power, he imagines the same processes operating on the body politic as on an infirm human body. The longer, more spacious fiction of the Kingdom collection allows his metaphors to gain dimension and force.

### **"The Ingenuous Country"**

Sadness was so prevalent that people were paid to smile. Amid the city crowds, plainclothes men watched for the few smiling citizens that happened to pass by and, discreetly, ordered them to stop.

—Gonçalo Tavares, *Six Tales*

Much of Tavares's work reads like a puzzle with echoes of a cosmic joke. There is a fertile zone between yes and no, between perfection and imperfection, between beauty and ugliness. This is the sensitive flesh that Tavares probes with



words. "A book is done when I have corrected the error I made in the first sentence," he says. The notion of error is essential to his relentless analysis of reality, humans, and the material world. Particularly in his short fiction, he systematically challenges the idea of success and error, as if performing a literary laboratory test. Perhaps each writing project begins with a flaw because that is the only way to start, and it provides an irresistible stimulus for an exacting writer to work his way through the creative labyrinth and back to the beginning. His notions of truth and error are as metaphorical as they are technical.

So far, there are no professors of science theory in Tavares's oeuvre, but one senses the control of a "technical age" Lenz Buchmann in Tavares. It is revealing that at age twenty-one, with finished manuscripts already in hand, he decided to wait ten years before publishing, all the while elaborating an oeuvre that since then has allowed him to present an average of three new works per year and vault to the forefront of contemporary Portuguese literature.

Tavares is a keen observer of humans' relationship to technology, commenting in particular on its omnipresent role in contemporary life. "The new thing in our age, and what the Greeks couldn't anticipate, is technology, for example, in relation to the body. It's not what's around us but what is inside us that is different now. Traditionally, the flesh was sacred. A bullet or a blade was fatal. The natural and artificial worlds were different. Now we are artificial and natural at the same time. A factory can make a body part." For Tavares, this is the subject of ongoing speculation and ripe material for his texts.

He is fascinated by a journalist's excited report that a computer program had been created that could write news stories. The journalist marveled at a machine that could render him useless and unemployed. Tavares ponders such behavior and our blind faith in the superiority of technology. The marvel lies in how a human could be so apt at inventing a means of making him useless and admire it at the same time. "It's a kind of happy suicide. . . . One problem of our economic crisis is that we believe technical progress is equated with human progress. We have to figure out whether it makes sense that a machine replaces a human or not. It is an illusion that technology allows everyone to be more creative. Many people don't want to be poets."

It's exciting to wonder where the pace and scope of Tavares's literary production will lead, and such anticipation adds to the pleasure of reading his work. Technology could never invent the world he depicts. He retains the childhood memory of viewing the construction sites where his father worked, and how

they were transformed from a hole in the ground into buildings with windows and doors. There is no doubt that in his expanding, multilevel literary oeuvre, Tavares is erecting a world that it is imperative for English readers to discover. As they do, they will discover the mutually inclusive forces of a sensitive human observer and furiously productive writing machine.

#### NOTES

This essay is part of a series of portraits of four contemporary Portuguese writers, written with support from Portugal's Instituto Camões and the Québec Arts Council.

For more on Gonçalo M. Tavares, visit <http://goncalomtavares.blogspot.ca/> or [www.mertin-litag.de/authors\\_hm/Tavares-G.htm](http://www.mertin-litag.de/authors_hm/Tavares-G.htm).

#### WORKS IN ENGLISH

The following titles are available from Dalkey Archive Press:

*Jerusalem*  
*Joseph Walser's Machine*  
*Learning to Pray in the Technical Age*

The following titles are available from Transbooks:

*Mister Valéry*  
*Mister Henri*  
*Mister Brecht*  
*Mister Juarroz*  
*Mister Calvino*

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