The Unmentionable
by Erin Moure

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

After having gone through three poetic phases – the first being the fractured lyrical phase with which her writing career began, the second the highly experimental phase that began with *Furious* in 1988 (for which she won the Governor General’s Award), and finally the career as poetic translator, which began in 2000 with the translation of Nicole Brossard’s *Installations*, Erin Moure now appears with all the colours of her rainbow displayed simultaneously. Simultaneous with this release is a release, by Wolsak & Wynn, of a domestic translation of Louis Dupré titled *Just Like Her* and an international translation, by BuschekBooks, of the Galician poet Chus Pato titled *Hordes of Writing* (also reviewed for *Prairie Fire* by this reviewer.) The latter translation was released in the U.K by Shearsman Books.

In Moure’s *WSW (West South West)*, published in 1989 immediately after *Furious*, she became fascinated with typos as a Freudian reflection. This is probably what led to the title of the book here under review.

Moure began her international translating career in 2001 with *Sheep’s Vigil by a Fervent Person*, a translation from the Portuguese of Fernando Pessoa / Alberto Caeiro’s *O Guardador de Rebanhos*. This fact is worth mentioning, even though it may be unmentionable, as it was as a result of the coupling of Pessoa with Moure that led to the birth of E.S., otherwise known as Elisa Sampedrin, in *Little Theatres* in 2005. Interestingly, *Sheep’s Vigil by a Fervent Person* and *Little Theatres* were both shortlisted for the Griffin Poetry Prize. Ms Sampedrin reappears in this book as Moure’s alter ego cycling us back to the Freudian. Oh what an incestuous web we weave when first we practise to deceive.

And now to the book.

Not long ago, Moure returned to the environs of Calgary, where she was born (although what were the environs at that time have probably now been swallowed up by the never-ending expansion of that oily city). Whether this had an effect or not, *The Unmentionable* is an odyssey through her roots written in a collage of confluences.

Her history is on display in a collision of words and alphabets:

Marked by that foreign word, marked too by imperial consequence
and time, peeled from the mud of labour, s_rr_w too
harvested of v_wels
f_r tr_ut

, dad <tató> came in and whispered to me to say (for ever after) –
ukrainian <mom> МаїїНКа, Мама, МaТH

But, even out of this typical Mourean architecture, her earlier lyricism emerges: “There are places on the skin where passivity lies as tremendous as light. // I woke up among the fallen petals.” (10)
The appearance of Elisa Sampedrín is masked in jest and disfigured prose:

(\textit{the scythes}) Perhaps it is better if Elisa Sampedrín writes of these things. She Galician not of Halychyna or the Krai or Kresy, not of the verges but of Brigantium Flavium, rúa dos Xudeos, who gets off the train from București at [...] to find Erín Moure burying the ashes of her mother, in the grove where once a latin church stood. (14)

Sampedrín declaring at the end “\textit{I come from nowhere, she’d say to the small E.M. / Some people come from nowhere}” (14). This is poetry as typography, as a pictorial representation, the importation of Letterism (a French avant-garde movement, established in Paris in the mid-1940s by Romanian immigrant Isidore Isou), which is only appropriate since Elisa, before having an apparent nationality change operation, originated in Romania – hence the reference to Bucharest.

Part 2 opens with a quotation from Denis Diderot, 1759: “This is the first time I have ever written in the dark. Wherever there will be nothing, \textit{dearest trout}, read that I love you” (17). That is Moure’s translation for what, set out in faded text, appears to be the French original – in which the ‘trout’ fails to appear. This ‘trout’ swims throughout the text – something like a musical motif binding this symphonic fantasy. As Moure says:

\begin{quote}
If anything, it’s the fault of reading. When Chus Pato’s poetry appeared on my desk, I decided to give up writing poems. I moved to București to see if I could free myself from this crisis of experience, this excision of language. Then I saw Erín Moure in the park at a café table, looking at me. Why did she come here? (19)
\end{quote}

In Part 3, Moure looks back:

When I first saw Elisa Sampedrín on the terrasse of Cafepedia (38\°c) on Str. Verona, she was reading \textit{Călătorii imaginare}, by E.A. Poe, in the Corțățău translation. The page open to a Chus Pato favourite: “Povestea lui Arthur Gordon Pym”. Later, on the terrasse of the Persian restaurant (38.6\°c), Str. Aivalașești 21, colț cu Timpuri Noi, I saw E.S. again. (33)

In jockeying for attention, E.S. and E.M. continue to spy on each other throughout the text, sometimes invoking the absent presence of Chus Pato, sometimes not, sometimes with evil intent:

\begin{quote}
I’ve decided to take E.M. for my experimental subject. She’s here and she’s a pest; she might as well serve some useful purpose. (57)
\end{quote}

One of the final sections is \textit{the unmementoable}, which opens with a 1963 quote from Paul Celan, in which the trout makes an appearance. A multi-part poem, it begins “when i stood and wept before the icons / of the brain / the calf was sleeping” (89).

We depart this Dadaistic display – which presents a significant challenge for the reader, the reviewer, and the typesetter – shaking our heads in an effort to return to a semblance of normality, but the song goes on and we realize we can never escape the web Moure weaves. ♫
John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *The Malahat Review, Arc, The Antigonish Review, The Fiddlehead* and *The Danforth Review*, in the U.S. for *Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

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