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## A Valuable Translation of Vesaas

### **books/poetry**

Through Naked Branches: Selected Poems of Tarjei Vesaas  
Bilingual edition. Translated and edited by Roger Greenwald  
Princeton University Press (USA)

*Greenwald's fine English versions demand our full attention  
and concentration*

The fine American poet Roger Greenwald has done it again. In 1997 he published a selection of poems by Rolf Jacobsen. This year a selection of poems by Tarjei Vesaas has appeared. Both editions are bilingual—the originals and the English versions are printed on facing pages—and both have been published by Princeton University Press in a prestigious series of poetry in translation.....

[Greenwald's] Introduction is offered as a guide for English-speaking readers who are unacquainted with Vesaas and with the Norwegian literary tradition, but it soon proves to be much more than that: Greenwald has written one of the more insightful short analyses of Vesaas's poetry, and especially of the role and significance of nature in it. By building on insights from both Arne Næss and Christian Norberg-Schulz, and on a familiarity with Norwegian Vesaas-criticism and Anglo-American poetry, he opens new perspectives on Vesaas's poetry.

Few people are as well equipped for this task as Roger Greenwald. He combines his English-speaker's standpoint and intimate knowledge of Norwegian language and literature with a poet's sensitivity to poems and feel for writing them. It is these poetic abilities that above all set their stamp on his translations. He allows himself few liberties, stays very close to Vesaas in form and in choice of words. Nonetheless, it is appropriate to speak here of re-creations rather than mere translations. His versions

emerge as fine poems that are well worth reading in their own right.

For a Norwegian reader these translations also serve as new ways in, new gateways, to Vesaas's poems. For a translation is necessarily also an interpretation. And here we have interpretations by someone who has penetrated Vesaas's poetic world as few others before him have done. A reader who is reasonably familiar with Vesaas's poems will find new ways of reading them, while a reader who hasn't yet had close contact with this singular poet will find this book an outstanding introduction to the work, not least because of the selection Greenwald has made.

In a very few places I at first thought that something jarred, only to conclude after a re-reading and some reflection, "Perhaps that's what this means," or, "It can mean this too, after all." For just as Vesaas requires more than a hasty once-over, so Greenwald's fine English versions demand our full attention and concentration.

Vesaas started out writing rhymed poems in strict form. In translating some of these early poems, Greenwald has chosen to use the freer style that Vesaas developed later on. I think something is lost here. This becomes especially clear when one reads the one poem that is the exception among Greenwald's translations of early Vesaas, "Snow in a Face." For here he has permitted himself an almost unnoticeable suggestion of rhyme, so slight that I might not have spotted it if I hadn't had the original poem on the facing page. In this way he has preserved something of the feeling created by the form of the original poem, and at the same time has written in a form that he is comfortable with.

I recommend *Through Naked Branches* to Norwegian readers.

REVIEWED BY ORM ØVERLAND

*trans. R.G.*