

Book Review

The Seventh Gesture by Tsvetanka Elenkova
Translated from the Bulgarian by Jonathan Dunne
Shearsman, 2010. Softcover. 89 pages \$15

The *Seventh Gesture* consists of seventy-seven – the number is surely no coincidence – prose poems that are nearly all the same length: nine printed lines. I mention these arithmetic facts not because these subtle, gently thought-provoking texts written by the Bulgarian poet Tsvetanka Elenkova (b. 1968) and smoothly translated by Jonathan Dunne are chilly, austere or formally intimidating in any way; nor because they seem generated in accordance with some esoteric numerical scheme. On the contrary, the author of *Amphipolis of the Nine Roads* (1998) and *Even Though That* (2004) – the latter volume is also available in English – writes poetic prose that is full of human warmth and that addresses essential questions involving love, the family, death, and Orthodox Christian theology. Yet mathematics comes to mind because of the regularity of the page layout and also because her prose poems function like equations. That is, a poetic equation that begins with a fact, an object, an event, or an observation, takes off from it briefly, even sometimes heading off on a tantalizing tangent before producing an unexpected result. After Elenkova’s poetic calculus has done its job (and oblique transitions play a key role in the inner logical apparatus), the result, which is usually a subdued surprise ending, often represents a matter of existential import that cannot be deduced from the initial context and that will linger long in the reader’s mind.

A case in point is “Hall of Distorting Mirrors” which, like several other pieces here, alludes to Greece and, indeed, draws on geometry:

Every fair has its hall of distorting mirrors. The extended projection of the Parthenon, asserts Seferis, is a pyramid. Reflected, the pyramid looks like an ellipse, and the lemon-tree in my yard with the five tips is probably a circle. Albeit not ideal. So many edges, shapes, images, points of glass, you’d say, so jagged, why reflect them? Why iron clothes that should be worn creased? Natural edges cannot be smoothed out, even with steam – from a combination of moisture and sun. From agitation. You wipe the mirror. For a rear view.





This “rear view” that reveals oneself to oneself is likewise characteristic. Even more typical is looking forward. Although many different, mostly natural things – dogs, cats, beetles, fruit, mountain summits, the sponges of Symi, a mother’s breast, a musician’s or a poet’s hand – crop up in Elenkova’s poems, her goal is not to describe them as such but rather to use them almost as “gestures” pointing to deep, hidden feelings about being alive or to potential vantage points from which we can look out on ourselves, our loved ones, or speculative transcendent possibilities such as God. In one poem, Elenkova offers three metaphors for explaining the divine trinity to her “unborn daughter,” before handing on her own experience: “When one spring you look at the Milky Way with the first drop of blood in your knickers, you’ll understand what God is. Then you won’t want to wash it off. No, you won’t.”

Evocations of the body occur often in *The Seventh Gesture* and inevitably blossom into broader themes. In “Humility is Never Enough,” the poet departs from the functioning of the eye’s pupil and arrives at solitude and death:

When in the dark, before you enter the room, switch on the light—on the threshold itself—the pupil swallows the iris, its black swells not for the darkness but to let even the slightest ray through. When it is greedy like this, even lifeless: light to dark, more than a camera lens focusing on an insect on a flower. More than a photograph taken into the sun. And you close the lid then. You close the eyelids. Or someone else does. You’re the seed of a plant that sows itself alone.

There are other solitary moments in *The Seventh Gesture*, an allusion or two to the end of love (signified by “the black reel before *The End* of old films”), but also several positively connoted signs of intimacy with others. Poems about the poet’s grandmother are particularly touching. An undefined “you” in many poems balances out a narrative “I” that Elenkova employs elsewhere with naturalness and simplicity. When she is an autobiographer, she is a discrete one as she crafts these meditations that engage us all. This is poetry that often establishes an implicit dialogue with the reader.

John Taylor has recently published three translations: Philippe Jaccottet’s *And, Nonetheless* (Chelsea), Pierre-Albert Jourdan’s *The Straw Sandals* (Chelsea), and Jacques Dupin’s *Of Flies and Monkeys* (Bitter Oleander). He is also the author of the three-volume *Paths to Contemporary French Literature* (Transaction) and *Into the Heart of European Poetry* (Transaction).