

the ancient waters, the new oceans  
and can discern the radiance:  
the labor of the few  
of a few centuries —  
the phosphorus tree

Tell me, when you touch your button  
what is it that renders visible the horizon beyond  
the conceptual limits of all colors?  
other peaks, other peaks  
the spirit of Time, my love, sleeps its sleep on our knees . . .

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Translator **Aron Aji** is a Dean and professor of English at St. Ambrose University, Davenport, Iowa. A native of Turkey, he has translated fiction by Bilge Karasu, Murathan Mungan, Elif Shafak, and Latife Tekin, including two book-length works by Bilge Karasu: *Death in Troy* (City Lights, 2002), and *The Garden of Departed Cats* (New Directions, 2004) which received the 2004 National Translation Award, sponsored by ALTA. Aji is also the recipient of a 2006 National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship for his current translation project, a third novel by Karasu, *The Evening of a Very Long Day*.



Tsvetanka Elenkova & tr. Jonathan Dunne

Tsvetanka Elenkova is co-director of the publishing house Small Stations Press. Born in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1968, she was educated at the University of National and World Economics. She has published three collections of poetry: *The Stakes of the Legion* (1995), *Amphipolis of the Nine Roads* (1998) and *The Seventh Gesture* (2005). Her poetry has appeared in 15 different countries, including in the magazines *Modern Poetry in Translation* and *Orient Express* in the UK and *Absinthe* in the US. Her latest book is a collection of nine essays on the Balkans, etc., *Time and Relation*, published by Small Stations Press. She translates from English, Greek and Macedonian. Her translation from English of the anthology of Indian mystic poetry *Speaking of Siva* was nominated for the Hristo G. Danov National Literary Award. Her other translations include Jonathan Dunne's *Even Though That* and anthologies of poetry by Raymond Carver and Bogomil Gjuzel. She co-edits and translates the series *Modern English Poetry*.

## Tsvetanka Elenkova

### **"The Lord Made Darkness His Secret Place": A Pilgrimage to Bulgaria's Monasteries**

*There are no paths in the desert except the ones you  
make by walking on them.*

— Maria Boulding, *The Coming of God*

There are three places in Bulgaria every tourist always visits. Two of them are included in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Rila Monastery and Sofia's Boyana Church. The third is Vitosha Natural Park, another obligatory stop because of its position next to the capital. I mention them not so much to start with them as not to start with them, as a reference point for the other Bulgaria and its small monasteries known as the Little Holy Mountain around Sofia, which almost no one writes about. Not that the frescoes of Rila Monastery, work of the greatest Bulgarian iconographer, Zahari Zograph (on a par with Andrei Rublev and Theophanes the Greek), and the architecture with its embroidered gilding are not unique (Zograph also decorated the Bulgarian monastery on Mt Athos in Greece, which is named after him); not that the frescoes in Boyana Church, said to have anticipated the European Renaissance in a country on the margins of Europe, with their similarity to the portraits of Fayum, do not appear to be resurrecting; not that the slopes of Aleko twenty minutes from downtown Sofia, from where you can reach Vitosha's highest peak, Cherni Vrah, at 2920 m., are not attractive. But much more alluring are those paths which lead to undiscovered monasteries or the church of Eleshnitsa Monastery with its unusual naivist paintings or the gravesite of St John of Rila and the cave where this hermit lived, which most people don't get to. In short, what's not on the list is important, as in spiritual terms the oral tradition precedes the written and the choice of a site precedes the building of a church.

"I am the way," says Christ and only then does he continue, "the truth and the life." The way which leads to truth, and the truth which

leads to life; the way C. P. Cavafy writes about in *Ithaka*: "wealthy with all you have gained on the way" (tr. Keeley/Sherrard); the way stretching for thousands of miles which pilgrims from all over the world walk to Santiago de Compostela, the final resting place of St James the Greater, taking a stone with them and depositing it when they arrive. The stone which, like those from the destroyed Temple of Solomon in the Old Testament, became the cornerstone of the New Testament because cornerstones on the way are the real Temples of Solomon, where, though spiritual, you can sit and catch your breath. In- and out-breath, two sides of one and the same thing: creation.

Most Bulgarian monasteries share the same history: built in the early Middle Ages, decorated by anonymous artists (let's not forget that before Homer poets were also nameless), destroyed and desecrated in the time of the Turkish Occupation, which lasted for five centuries, some renewed and restored following the Liberation, during Communism, to today. It is as if they repeat the horizontal line of the Biblical Creation, Fall and Resurrection. They are everywhere to be found, sunk in the earth below sea level (under Turkish rule, a church could not exceed the height of a man), on the plains and high up in the mountains, almost out of reach. In this, it is as if they repeat the vertical line of the Resurrection: to Golgotha and on from there even higher to the Cross and Ascension. Even the season and the weather leading up to Easter recreate the atmosphere of the Resurrection. You don't have to go to church to experience it, passing under the wooden cross, a copy of the original, with wreaths traditionally pinned to the hands and feet of Our Savior as we continue to crucify him. Quite different is the risen tree on the way to St Stephen's Monastery above Sapareva Banya, bathed in a circle of light in the darkness of the forest; or the tree on a lonely hill with storm clouds hanging over it, in whose form we make out the face of Our Lady and the triangle of light representing the Trinity; or that small tree in flower like a pulsating soul in front of a large green tree; or that bush on the golden slope which looks like the navel of the world, like New Life, starting from bread (Christ's body) or a mother's womb. A little further down, two trees overlap, one with leaves, the other nude, the latter like a transfer which lifts from the water, a soul which lifts from the body. A nude soul, there being a difference between nudeness and

death, although they are so similar. Actually what distinguishes them is the light, which alone makes dust (out of which we are formed) to be visible or resemble stars, and which can revive a dried tree. I call this Easter Triptych and while we do not make it to the monastery — the end of the path doesn't appear, snaking ever upwards — I understand what temptation is: to want to proceed, not to want to stop. Many Alpinists died in this way, as Christ could have died when he was tempted in the wilderness to jump from on high in hope of salvation. But he didn't. Monasteries in high places also teach us this: that we do not always, at all costs, have to reach them. They teach us to be humble. For what else is temptation but hoping for an end that doesn't come in sight? In the forest's labyrinth.

In the narthex of Eleshnitsa Church, the 16th-century frescoes also recall a labyrinth. A rope like an umbilical cord or the formula of DNA links scenes from the Garden of Eden with the Last Judgment and the haloes of saints like the ruffled sea of children's books, reaching the kingdom of heaven with Christ seated at God's right hand. The 18th-century frescoes in the nave, around the bodies of Christ, the Father and angels, teem with haloes that are transparent white (maybe light white is transparency). Luminescent light. The church with the most variety of light I have ever experienced: the dazzling light of a July day through the stone windows, the light of the candles, of a crack in the plaster like a bolt of lightning, of the haloes of Church Fathers. Seated in a circle, the apostles at the Last Supper, with their faces turned backwards, resemble a Cubist's painting. The naivety of their faces confirms the Biblical truth that children look God in the face and, if we don't become like one of them, we will never know him.

Temptation is all around. The prostitutes parading in front of Chepintsi Monastery; the two men downing bottles of rakia in the yard of Balsha Monastery; the insane with arms crossed on their chests as if they're cold or are hugging themselves because they've no one else, whom you have to pass in order to reach Kurilovo Monastery, which donated its lands to a psychiatric hospital. Whores, drunks and lunatics: the really sick people Christ came to save, always to be found next to holy places. Like the busy motorway connecting Sofia with Bulgaria's second city, Plovdiv, which with its car fumes blackens the white wall



*The Last Supper (Eleshnitsa Monastery)*





*The Trinity* (Kladnitsa Monastery)

of Lozen Monastery, so different on the inside. There is a garden with tulips as big as bells and windows that reproduce the four colors of the diffraction of light, like the colors of their little bells (though the word *tulip* derives from the Persian word for "turban"). And two swallows which made their nests under the eaves next to each other in a heart-shape. And two swallows which landed on the metal gate in Chepintsi Monastery. Swallows everywhere like monks with their black robes or like candle-wicks, so black and so linked with the light, which always starts from the dark as a flame starts from the wick. Then you understand that this hell outside and heaven inside, though they share a border, have nothing in common. The distance is not a question of kilometers but of difference. And yet, as moths bore holes in woolen garments, there has to be a hole between them, so that he could come down to earth and sinners pass over to the other side. This is what Christ means when in Luke 16 he talks about the chasm separating the living and the dead, the real living and the real dead, a chasm which is measured not in width but in depth, not horizontally but vertically. Like the crack in the wall of Lozen Monastery.

On the ceiling of the church in Kladnitsa Monastery, the tulips are already black. The Trinity resembles a painting by Picasso or Chagall. And the book, which in the Orthodox tradition of iconography should be written, is actually empty. That unwritten, empty white page we're so afraid of. But perhaps the white page is the only one written by God, perhaps we do not write, we simply shed light on what he has written with fluorescent letters, or we press down as on one of those children's writing-tablets where a sweep of the hand erases everything. Outside, on the wall, the cross formed by the eaves and that painted by a local monk (unusually for a cross full of leaves) take you back to the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis, which we had to take a bite from, in fact to eat all its fruits through the centuries until it became a naked cross, like most trees in winter, giving us hope of New Life in the spring.

So many things that at first sight appear contradictory turn out to conceal great wisdom. Like these deserted, remote, one might even say "God-forsaken" places, which could never be compared to the pyramids of Egypt or to Varanasi in India. And yet whoever sets out for these monasteries puts them on the same level. I say "set out" because

the priest in Batulia showed me a map as of stars linking them, making various figures or constellations. Unless, that is, the sky projects its forms on the earth and not by chance on holy places. Earth and sky not rejecting one another, as people think, like science and faith.

In Rila Monastery, gambling and icons have a lot in common. An absurd statement, but standing in front of the icon-screen with its gold-leaf and relief-like vividness, you get the feeling they're not just faces looking at you. Like coins, which are double-sided but identified by the design on the back. This, according to my husband, Jonathan Dunne, would explain the similarity between the words *icon* and *coin*. In the same monastery, from the racks of postcards outside, I choose from three different groups but always end up with Archangels Gabriel and Michael. As a conjuror standing in front of his audience always produces the card someone wants. But while with the conjuror the trick is a studied miracle, here it is a question of faith. Unlike tricks, miracles cannot be performed by a single person. When in Mark 5 the woman suffering from hemorrhages touches Christ's cloak in hope of a cure, he says to her, "Your faith has made you well." On this dazzling July day, a white butterfly heads for the darkness inside the church, although insects never make for the dark. It doesn't need a shawl around its nude body, it has its wings. You also need wings if you are to reach the hermit's gravesite and again you need them to squeeze through the two holes in his cave, hoping for the forgiveness of your sins. A superstition dating back I don't know how long or to whom. But of course those who succeed are slim or children. Or at least they've been on a diet. Success, however, is sometimes not in the result but in the motive. The desert fathers constantly prayed and fasted before God, eating only wild fruits. But not everyone with a slim waist is automatically cleansed of their sins. So the ethos of the end is what justifies the means or, to put it another way, it depends on your longing for salvation. Every sentence spoken in human terms can be paraphrased spiritually; or rather it carries its spiritual meaning paraphrased in human terms. So the famous prayer-rock nearby also has its spiritual and real dimensions: real because many monks used it to pray in solitude to God; spiritual when we see the projection of another or many others who have prayed there. But you have to freeze the frame. Only then is the legend behind reality visible.

I slowly make my way to Kokalyane Monastery, a universe among the branches of stars and fish (the first Christian symbol). It is situated about 600 m. above sea level, not far from Sofia, like Golgotha from Jerusalem. Both vertically and horizontally. I climb this stony place and wonder whether it was called Kokalyane (from *kokal*, bone) because of its similarity to Golgotha or its proximity to a village of the same name. If you believe in cause and effect, you'll identify with the second answer; but if you believe, if you trust the former, then it's a miracle. A miracle as you make your way with sweat on your brow attracting mosquitoes, like a crowd wishing to divert you, and understand the cross has meaning not only when it is carried on the back but when you climb with it. That's why it's Golgotha. The Cross and Resurrection make sense not on the flat or descent but going upwards. And the only time it was dismantled was when people took it down in order to spread the Word. Sometimes it's even easier to carry a load on your back than on your front, as backpackers will tell you. So the little gold or silver crosses we wear on our chests are no lighter, although it is said we can only understand things when we've borne them on our shoulders.

Heading from Dragalevtsi Monastery in the direction of Simeonovo, I experience a storm in the mountains for the first time. It becomes dark and wet as when you dive and don't just swim in the ocean. A swim is to experience the storm in some busy, central street and seek shelter in the nearest entrance. Two tourists skitter past me because they've nowhere to hide, although they are under the eaves of the trees. I have often watched a mountain storm from my window but never imagined that right there, outside my room, district, city, there is someone in the background. That the background is more important than the center, even in a picture. That it is inhabited. And that one day, in the end, we also will become part of it, without thinking it an accident. Because things in nature are not divided into good and bad, they simply happen, just as we happened to encounter the storm after leaving the monastery. When in the eye of the storm, in the dark, you see a blue, a blue like the sapphire under God's feet, you realize every hole has an exit through the colors of life — the iris to the white beyond. And no darkness is complete since only the light passes through a crack, not the dark. And on this journey someone tells you not to give up.