

STRAIT AND SLANT:  
TSVETANKA ELENKOVA'S *CROOKEDNESS*

To read any poet who matters is to step into a terrain that's all their own. This terrain may be purely textual, made up of the particular rhythms that form their thought or the formal games they like to play. Or it may be homage paid by the imagination, memory or the poet's eye to places we readers have never visited for ourselves. It may be tonal, a question of mood or atmosphere. It may combine all of these at once and also be yet something more: a transformative visit to another way of conceiving of things, whether abstract or concrete. The best poets take you to a conceptual world you have otherwise never visited, although when you see it for the first time what you feel is recognition. This is the other side of T.S. Eliot's return, in 'Little Gidding', to something seen (as) for the first time: an initiation into the familiar.

For the Anglophone British reader, one of the most obvious recent examples of a poet's terrain must be Seamus Heaney's *Mossbawn*. The rural Irish way of life is as far removed from the daily, urban experience of most admirers as, say, Pascale Petit's Amazonian rainforest: yet is made equally accessible by how it is written. Brilliant textual terrains many readers have visited in recent years include those of the Canadian Anne Carson or, in the US, Claudia Rankine. (Both writers have highly engaged political agendas, but it's their formal brilliance that actually achieves the feminist, anti-racist work of their poetry.) Working in a different tradition, Tsvetanka Elenkova creates the third kind of poetic world, one that comprises, and offers the reader a way into, a different conceptual universe.

The world according to Tsvetanka Elenkova is both lucid and hieratic. In it, a lover's eye is 'a disc on a chain /with the god of the sun /the window casts on the wall'; but love itself is an 'Altar' on which the lovers are 'lying crosswise'. The poet's own narrative eye keeps shifting viewpoint – and perspective – not for the sake of it but to create depth and meaning: 'The other side of

perspective /is dimension'. It's all expressed with economy and the utmost clarity: yet that clarity is deceptive. These poems, too, depend on your point of view: 'Reflection is capture' indeed, and reflection may be not only the untroubled mirror image, but the pause and re-handling of meditation.

Another way to say all this is that Elenkova is a religious mystic; something that her specialist scholarly studies underline. She lives in the world of cars, mobile phones and city parks, and has an imagination stuffed with cultural riches, as a riff on a rose reveals: 'lace/curtains crème brûlée parasol /boat which tugs on its rope /nose by Chagall /eyes of a geisha or lady from the court of Louis XIV /complete with make-up wig beauty-spot / and hairstick'. But she also lives in a poetic world, peopled by a son and a lover, of religious mystery, mortality, love and desire. This mystical verse dives repeatedly into the given, and discovers there a world of symbol and – perhaps above all – movement. It is not Gerard Manley Hopkins's search for 'inscape', but instead an apprehension that from moment to moment forms itself into symbolic codes – and then releases those codes into the material, sensual world.

There is nothing remotely sweet about this:

The other  
at the end or beginning  
is black  
there you enter-exit

is both a shell and the lover with whom, 'you set up camp' between 'the two strokes of 12': that is, in the movement from one (1) to two (2). This kind of active meditation is anti-quietist; it is a violent, ravishing almost, interpolating of self with world, one in which both world and self are to be sacrificed. If that sounds too great a claim for any verse, we could remember that the discomfort with which we try to fit ourselves to these new concepts as we read – that 'leaving the comfort zone' of the familiar – poses us questions about who we are. What kind of readers are we: can we tangle with the mysteries of the world and

existence like Elenkova, or would we prefer to retreat to easy-reading anecdote, description, or expression?

Tsvetanka Elenkova doesn't pose us this challenge because she's Bulgarian: in her home literature too, she is simultaneously distinguished and poetically revolutionary. Nor do these poems challenge us because they are fine translations, made by her husband, the poet-translator Jonathan Dunne, from the Bulgarian original. It is Elenkova's consistently searching poetic vision that challenges us. The achievement of her poems is to lend this vision to the reader: so to frame the inexpressible that we too perceive it. Which means that, as we read, we too take part in the mystical transformation of world to revelation.

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