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Crookedness

SELECTED PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS BY TSVETANKA ELENKOVA

The Seventh Gesture

AS EDITOR

At the End of the World: Contemporary Poetry from Bulgaria

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Tsvetanka Elenkova

Crookedness

*translated from Bulgarian
by Jonathan Dunne*

Shearsman Books

Second edition

Published in the United Kingdom in 2019 by
Shearsman Books
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green
BRISTOL
BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-686-8

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Crookedness was first published in Bulgarian as *Изкривяване*
(*Izkrivyavane*) by Stigmati Publishing House, Sofia, in 2011
and in this translation in 2013 by Tebot Bach,
Huntington Beach, CA., USA.

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For Jonathan

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Beauty is symmetry
Plastic surgery advertisement

Wisdom is knowing when to shun perfection
Italian restaurant menu

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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.

Fiona Sampson
Carey, May 2019

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I

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PAIN

When you hold a bottle and hear the wind
through the open throat
when you put a conch to your ear
the echo pain from the emptied body
and when a single slight hiss
as of a punctured bicycle tyre
finally fills the empty space
like a newborn's wail
Take it carefully in your arms
and give it or don't to its mother
but take it carefully
it's so fragile all cartilage
Give it water or leave it on the shelf
by your head

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PAIN IS SO CLOSE TO PLEASURE

The question of love and pain
has as much to do with physics
as with the teaching of Lao Tzu
For instance
communicating vessels are not just connected
they feed into each other
And it's very important who is higher
where the flower pot is where the bucket of water
when you're away
So the question of love and pain
has as much to do with Freddie Mercury
as it does with Christianity

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POST

The galaxy is a dog's black coat
which opens when combed
you see the skin
or make a parting
then tie two bunches
perfect schoolgirl
the road opens even more
swollen river's dykes
bed dug over centuries
You drop a leaf boat or shell
or just a stick
If it doesn't lodge on a stone or sink
it'll flow out somewhere in the end
dandelion on your balcony
You pluck the black simile and know
it's a letter from your lover

HOURGLASS

As under the crown of a broad-leaved tree
which is an upturned conifer
we sit in the shade pick its fruit
or build a tree house
to watch the coming storm
or experience it for ourselves
we experience the death of a friend
relation or our own
and then bottles glass decorations
and then candles lights
of Christmas trees
we never scale

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INTELLECTUALS

You send me a photo
of those “honest animals”
living on the border
on dependence
with condescension not humility
like my dog and our infant son
I throw a ball to all morning
to-fro up-down
vying jealously
electricity
not like those meandering sleeves
at airports as well
swollen scattered
in all directions
grey eventually
they will out

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