

Paper Walls

Simona Škrabec. Writer and translator

It is a long slow flight, the ocean below is a desert of rock, the line we trace across the map picks out the route of the silk road. Any voyage requires a starting point. This time round I take to the skies departing from a poem read in a rush and printed on a sheet of paper just before leaving: “Farewell, my loved one. Dearest one, goodbye. The wagons speed away through the cane fields and...” The verses evoke the tone of 19th century poets: “The rocking of the train through the night and farewell, beloved land.” This other poem I can also recite by heart without a single stumble and I know who it is by. I studied at schools where, in order to pass exams, we used to recite national poets by heart. But that no longer matters. Saying goodbye to your country as if you were breaking up with a girl you loved. Yes, that is how you grieved and yearned for home. I have let myself be borne away by associations and in the meantime the light telling passengers to stay in their seats has been turned off. Poetry, in all its kindness, has given me a hand to get through the turbulent first minutes of take-off.

Night slides gently by. Orion, which could be glimpsed through the set square formed by the seatback of the row in front across the window, is now slipping from sight out of the corner of the small see-through box behind my shoulder. There is a deep silence and every now and then, at intervals of maybe one an hour, a clump of lights shimmering through the fog appears below, towards four in the morning a mountain range, and that is it. The world has been rubbed out, the earth is an abstract

drawing from this perspective. If I had travelled along this path on foot or on horseback, it would have been life-changing. A whole lifetime would have been just enough to allow me a single journey of initiation. But, inside the metal capsules that nowadays carry us from one place to the other, time stops. It is the beating of my heart that measures time and space, not the movement of the plane. The traveller’s eyes describe this flight. While the vehicle is in motion, nothing touches it. The journey is the waist of an hourglass, the precise point where the sands of time seem to come to a halt for a few moments.

When seen for the first time, the Pacific is the colour of molten silver and is indistinguishable from the sky. Nor can I make out, looking out from the hotel window as night falls once more, the line of the horizon between the skyscrapers. Darkness swallows up all of the air, right down to ground level. Pictograms of the sky and the earth placed next to each other, represent the world. A Hong Kong property developer has rebuilt a whole quarter of the old French concession and called it “The New World”. Young people, relaxed, many of them foreign, small tables on the pavement with lit candles on them, as in any quiet Northern city. The soup, sharp and spicy, is served at the end of the meal. Are these small variations in customs all we can expect from a journey? Do we travel the world in order to stumble across these anecdotal surprises?

Like so many others, armed with a laptop and connected to the web, I find I am at home

wherever I go. “It is an animal that has its tail stuck in a hole in the wall, so it gets angry and begins to blow hot air,” is the description given by Svetlana Makarovič to a hairdryer in one of her imaginative children’s books. The screen also lights up when we put its tail in the socket. An umbilical cord links us to a shapeless form, inconceivable as a whole being. We are plugged in to a flow of information. But not everyone is. Nadine Gordimer gave a talk in Barcelona – 75 years of Catalan PEN – and fervently beseeched: “Do not let them take away the books.” TV brings events into homes that sometimes are made of nothing but cardboard walls and a tin roof. Writing canons have been swept away in the epic of the small screen and, with this desertion, a new oral code has imposed the rule of immediacy. The small Kafkaesque snail that drags itself painfully along the wall no longer leaves any trail behind it. The walls of *The Metamorphosis* are made of paper. In fact, that room no longer exists, nor does any man changed into an insect, there is just a spot of ink on the open page.

“What trace line/do you follow?...” asks Gabriel Ferrater before the sight of two bodies so fused together that the outlines of each do not allow them to be untangled. Man trapped in a sign, that is the theme of his tender love poem. At this very moment I am surrounded by ideograms I cannot fathom, which is maybe why I find it so burdensome to try and decipher the meaning of the lines. Seated before the hotel’s great glass frontage, I am translating Gabriel Ferrater’s greatest poems which are due to be published in just a few weeks’ time – the matter is pressing and cannot await the return home. How many have sought to capture the objective parallel story of his squid obscured in an ink cloud? In China the branches of the cherry tree in bloom are a recurring code that is reproduced in the least expected places. At the museum, Wang Mian’s brushstrokes, that dense weave

of branchlets that have trapped the tender flowers, produce a shiver. But the small porcelain dishes decorated with the very same pattern and a trellis of narrow squares, in an assembly that acts as a contrast between living organisms and inert matter, are paintings to be read emotionlessly, like deciphering a signal code. The world translated into writing, made ready to be understood in a very specific way, without room for deviation. The whole lifecycle – birth, growth, death – captured in a single branch until the metaphor expires and become a simple pattern to be traced. Ezra Pound, however, managed to bring the cherry tree back to life in the corridors of the Metro, turned into long wet boughs brightened by the shining faces of the crowds. Two lines bringing an image to life, there lies the challenge.

Among those peoples that have seen the wagons disappearing among the cane fields, poets do not boast of living in an ivory tower

Ferrater is rarely translated and cannot even be read in German, though he lived in that country and translated Kafka “for the first time in Spain” as the promotional cover strip on the first edition of *The Trial*, published by Aymà in 1981, announced. The Germans know nothing about the protagonists of his poems sleeping atop a train, “brown on their bench of brown wood/now thirty years have passed since the brownest years.” Only a few verses further on comes the phrase that justifies locating the action in a high speed train: “Two bodies unjoined, merely slipping/entrails that the hours of tenderness/have peeled away from the parched skin.” The body ages; it is perishable.

Following the long journey of his life, Zoran Mušič paints his portraits of man as *pelegrinus viator*, as Jean Claire, a student of his work, describes these tall solitary figures.

This uprooted traveller skips between various languages, Slovenian and Croatian, German and Italian, French. Adaptability turned out to be the only possible means of protection in a region where borders have danced a *danse macabre* over a whole century.

The shared backdrop of experience, intuited beauty, the passing of time, death, all lead to dialogue among cultures being inevitable in the end

Small populations fit into a train, Adam Zagajewski remarks. That is the lesson of history. Among those peoples that have seen the wagons disappearing among the cane fields, poets do not boast of living in an ivory tower. Peter Handke, on the other hand, enclosed in his tower, states suavely: “That which is sung does not exist, all that there is is the voice of the singer.” Slovenians are Mayan Indians, destined to disappear because they live in a landscape of limestone rock where water filters through underground. Between Carinthia, where Handke was born, and Slovenia there is a fabric that catches all the tensions. The dividing wall forms a single, ever-present, elastic line that is impossible to cross. This is his poetic “truth” that denies reality.

The men in Mušič’s last portraits have elongated fingers, hands that are disproportionately

large, knotty like those plane trees that every spring have their branches pared back to the trunk. Landscape to Mušič means deforested lands, eroded by water. He himself is the pilgrim who speaks all the languages that are useful to him, but uses words very sparsely. Persistently he draws self-portraits in which the face ends up erased.

The shared backdrop of experience, intuited beauty, the passing of time, death, all lead to dialogue among cultures being inevitable in the end. It becomes impossible not to realise that there are other experiences which tally with our own. But the dilemma is not just understanding, but how to conserve the imprint of otherness, to avoid fusing all men into one single archetypal man. How to escape the identification under which fiction for the masses operates? Dialogue is no more than verbiage if we do not seek out the eyes in Zoran Mušič’s empty faces, if we do not ask ourselves why they are not there, if we do not understand where the earthy colours of his bare landscapes come from, or the contrast between the yellows and blues on the walls of his interiors. Dane Zajc ends his poem “Lump of ashes” saying that, after feeling the fire that burns the throat, man learns to speak words of soil. Not of clay, which is pliable and easy to work, but of black soil, of humus, that crumbles between the fingers.