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The Authority of Timelessness

- I, VINCENT: *Poems from the Pictures of Van Gogh* by Robert Fagles. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978. Pp. 113. \$12.50, hb.; \$5.95, pb.
- AGADIR by Artur Lundkvist, tr. and intro. by William Jay Smith and Leif Sjöberg. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh—International Poetry Forum, 1979. Pp. 55. \$30.00, hb., ltd. ed. Athens, Ohio: University of Ohio Press, 1980. \$9.00, hb.; \$5.00, pb.
- UNDER STARS by Tess Gallagher. Port Townsend, Wash.: Graywolf Press, 1978. Pp. 53. \$7.00, hb.; \$4.00, pb.
- ROUNDING THE HORN by David R. Slavitt. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978. Pp. 89. \$9.95, hb.; \$3.95, pb.

Four new books of poetry, differing radically from one another, and each containing superb things: it would be a pity for any one of them to languish unread simply because, in an era increasingly devoted to novelty in even the “serious” arts, they have the authority of timelessness. The first two are ambitious projects—Robert Fagles’ dramatic “translation” of certain selected paintings of Van Gogh’s into poems that evolve into a particularly poignant (and unsentimental) story one might have *thought* familiar; Artur Lundkvist’s brilliant account of the earthquake in Agadir on March 1, 1960, which killed nearly 40,000 people but spared Lundkvist and his wife. Tess Gallagher’s second book of poems, and David Slavitt’s sixth, are more conventional in structure, and address themselves to personal, and frequently private, matters of the kind contemporary poets find irresistible; yet they are considerable accomplishments, and deserve more readers than they are likely to get.

Robert Fagles’ *I, Vincent* is a “biography in small,” a fascinating cycle of poems that arises out of both Van Gogh’s letters and his paintings, as Fagles interprets them. The book is a formidably ambitious undertaking—for one thing, the poems face black-and-white reproductions of the paintings, in the handsome book produced by Princeton University Press; and of course the Van Gogh “legend” has been shamelessly popularized. A first reading of *I, Vincent* takes one breathlessly through, simply to see how the poet will manage his complex material. Fagles’ instinctive good taste, however, and the soundness of the structure into which the individual poems have been placed, give the book an unusual richness and authority, and the kind

of emotional power usually associated with narrative fiction. One is not simply “reading poems,” but living a life.

Fagles, the author of a magisterial translation of *The Oresteia*, works here to “translate” Van Gogh’s art into the brooding consciousness that created that art; he does not, like most poets who deal with paintings, concentrate upon a description of the art-work itself. Instead, the voice of Van Gogh during the last decade of his turbulent life is overheard while he is caught up in the process of creating his art (or being created by it)—in a number of the poems one can feel the artist’s eye moving back and forth from his subject to the canvas, and one can feel his hand as he sketches or paints. In even the most innocent of paintings, like “Fishing in Spring, Probably Near the Point Levallois,” and “Vincent’s Bedroom in Arles,” the ostensible subject gives way to an image of Vincent himself, a “shadow pooling darker,” a mirror-self that puts all things to rest through the labor of art, to prevent them “moving toward me.” The hearty exuberance of that most famous of paintings, “Sunflowers,” is translated, convincingly, into the poet’s overheated need to “do them in one rush”—“quick before they wither”—“before they burn into umber go to seed.” Strategically placed in the volume are the self-portraits, which, along with “The Potato-Eaters,” allow Van Gogh to contemplate himself, his life, and his art, by way of addressing others (in one case Gauguin, in another his brother Theo). Fagles recreates a Van Gogh who possesses more consciousness of self and destiny than the Van Gogh of the renowned (and biographically misleading) letters.

There are uncanny achievements here, in such poems as “Harvest,” in which the world, fields of light, is seen as a “study of God that has not yet come off,” a mere map until the artist gets his vision into it, and “Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries,” whose form reproduces both the beached skiffs and those already in the water, and a restless imagination that can envision “Africa in the offing.” “All I work with is myself / my own empty chair” the poet says in “Vincent’s Chair with His Pipe,” which becomes a powerful study of loneliness (“soon there will be more / soon nothing but empty chairs”). His portrait of his mother is created with “vengeance,” partly as a consequence of the woman’s love for the first-born Vincent, the brother who died (and who resides in Van Gogh’s imagination as a double and an accuser).

Most painful are the “mad” poems in which the artist’s voice frequently declares itself beyond madness, and those poems in which writhing images of death and dissolution emerge out of the artist’s brushstrokes, as if against his conscious desire. In “The Starry Night” the painter declares:

Long as I paint
I feel myself
less mad
the brush in my hand
a lightning rod to madness.

But when the frenzy of madness fades there is an even more insidious lethargy:

You're a cab horse, you know?
Hitched to the same creaking cab, hauling
coachfuls of people out to breathe the spring,
and you'd rather frisk in the meadows, drink the sun,
flanked by the other horses, mounting—free.

(“Self-Portrait”)

At the end when Van Gogh says calmly, “I think I’d like to die,” the utterance is both terrible, and right.

In all, forty-three works of Van Gogh’s are reproduced, ranging from sketches and studies he did in The Hague in the early 1880’s, to the great works of his middle and later years in Provence, Saint-Rémy, and Auvers. Fagles has done a remarkably sensitive portrait of a man who saw himself as both exultation and vengeance, and whose doom was forestalled through the vigorous act of creation.

Equally uncanny, and equally successful, is the long poem *Agadir*, by the Swedish poet Artur Lundkvist, whose work is little-known in this country. In beautifully modulated language the horror of the earthquake is evoked, at first through indecipherable signs—“small white worms burst from trees and sewed their / black thread through the leaves, / beetles emerged from cracks in the earth,” “large ants assembled and together dropped their wings (which seemed made of glass).” The surf behaves strangely. The sea is heavy and greasy and black. There is a first jolt, almost imperceptible; only dogs respond by whimpering or barking. A boy appears carrying a fish in a plastic bag: “When he lifted it to the light, the fish became transparent, / revealing a network of blood vessels / like fine lines of red ink.”

Lundkvist builds slowly to the earthquake itself, which is imagined as an event for which everyone is unconsciously waiting. When it occurs it is quite simply too massive to be absorbed: it comes from all directions at once, a “rebellion from the entrails of the earth, a wild erupting dance.” There is no time to feel or think, nothing to do but “wait like a mirror under a rain of stones.” The experience, despite its

catastrophic physicality, is also a mystical one, for the poet senses that "what had happened somehow already was part of the past while it still occurred" and "everything came out like an equation that had been solved, an account added up and completed, . . . a closed circle."

The earthquake lasts, perhaps, no more than ten seconds. Yet the world is transformed. Everything has been altered. Walls have crumpled like paper, the street has become an empty gorge, water gushes from broken pipes, a cloud of dust rises from the collapsed buildings. As the poet and his wife climb through debris they enter a room where a candle still splutters on a table and an old couple are undressing, incredibly, and the man shouts in brutal German, *Was wollen Sie?* Surreal images abound; yet the "real" is equally bizarre; an Englishman who calls himself a "veteran of earthquakes" (he has survived four major earthquakes) speaks with the poet, and crowds of lost people begin to form "shivering together like a single human body."

Agadir, despite its violent subject matter, is a masterpiece of understatement. Apart from the eerie beauty of its images, which shade delicately into the surreal, it is most successful in its presentation of a number of voices which arise, dislocated, bewildered, too stunned to register pain, out of the ruins of the city. In the words of William Jay Smith, who, along with Leif Sjöberg, has done an excellent job of translating, the poem projects a canvas of *chiaroscuro* in which Agadir, the shining white city, becomes a microcosm of the entire human world overtaken by darkness. It is reality itself that is in ruins. Only at the poem's very end does the poet lapse into helpless rhetoric, as he and other survivors are being flown away. But what is there to say about such an experience? Ten seconds, and nothing more: and an unforgettable image of the Earth's total destruction. The poem is a heroic attempt to translate the ineffable into concrete human terms, and even into human concepts, however frail.

By contrast, Tess Gallagher's *Under Stars*, which consists of a number of poems written in and about Ireland, and eleven poems of a more autobiographical nature, evokes commonplace images and events, and renders a familiar world in beautifully precise terms. Like *Instructions for the Double*, Gallagher's excellent first book, *Under Stars* presents, in rigorously pared-back language, a series of observations, or states of feeling before they pass into conscious observations. Some of the poems are in the poet's voice, others are in the voices of strangers, or a voice suggested by a "careless waltz" at an Irish wedding or a melancholy ballad. Some interpenetrate one another; the boundaries between people dissolve; the past is present in quiet, unobtrusive images. Belfast violence, for instance, in the winter of 1976, is evoked in

oblique memories, in terms of dreams that blend uneasily with reality. In "Second Language" the speaker declares:

To speak is to be robbed and clothed,
this language always mine
because so partly yours. Each word
has a crack in it to show the strain
of all it holds, all that leaks
away. . . .
The rain enters, repeating its single word. . . .

Some of the poems reach for obscure conclusions, and I am not always certain of the voice that is being evoked, but it is impossible to read Tess Gallagher's poems without being drawn into their mesmerizing rhythms and convinced of the rightness of her intense yet unforced images. She is clearly one of the most gifted and promising of our younger poets.

David R. Slavitt, the author of fourteen novels (six of them pseudonymous), a translator of the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* of Virgil, is a poet of striking gifts. His new collection, *Rounding the Horn*, is as strong a book as *Child's Play* and *Vital Signs: New and Selected Poems*, and should win him new admirers. Slavitt's poetry is not outwardly difficult; it has not the lyric mystery of Tess Gallagher's, for instance, nor are its numerous allusions—to the classics, to mythology, to Shakespeare, to Van Gogh (his subject is the *House at Anvers*, not included in Fagles' book), to French history—obscure. One might call him cerebral, if that did not sound so curious (for surely all intelligent poetry is cerebral); one might characterize his skillful and wonderfully readable poetry as deeply pessimistic, if that did not reduce his complexity to a mere attitude. But *how* to speak of what is simply a brilliant poetic voice is difficult. Slavitt has a misleading air of facility, even of precociousness: like Howard Nemerov and John Hollander and Richard Howard he sounds at times too sophisticated, too urbane, to be true—or, in the jargon of our time, sincere.

Rounding the Horn takes on a variety of subjects. Slavitt imagines the aesthetic of the vandal who, "on the world's easel," can sign only "ruin." The vandal is, in a sense, the spirit of the era, but he is also us, for his plea with beauty is our own: "Though I be ugly, though I bleed, / I love you; love me, or I'll smash your face." Slavitt's brooding imagination is seized by the sight of an old woman on a bus with an adjustable cane—a

one-size-fits-all, indestructible,

ugly, but actually sensible metal cane
for which men and women, boys and girls not yet
lame or even born may now be waiting, whether
they know it or not.

The alcoholic's pickled brain—the Korsakoff syndrome—reminds him of the saint's aspiration toward selflessness, and liberation from “lugging the body about the mess of the world's body.”

Indeed, one of Slavitt's perennial themes is the mind's odd estrangement from the body and from “nature”—the mind's flirtation with suicide in its many forms. In “Rounding the Horn,” a small masterpiece, the poet observes that whale, “oblivion,” gobbling most of the fry newborn, and the ingenious diseases of the old in which “a body becomes / allergic to itself, breaks into bits, / each hating the others.” Rounding the horn becomes a metaphorical statement—but it is not merely metaphorical—of the mind's tragic predicament, estranged both from “natural” life and from history. The poet would “lie down like Antaeus to soak strength from the earth,” but the gesture would be a futile, self-conscious one. In the end there is an ironic solace—“When appetite dies, the fear of death also dies.”

But it is wrong to stress Slavitt's philosophical concerns at the expense of his graceful wit. He is a marvelously entertaining writer, even at his most acrimonious. Contemplating garbage, Dickens' inkwell and other icons, poison pellets designed to kill mice, an exuberant performance by Rampal and a disappointing performance by the Julliard Quartet (according to Slavitt, on February 16, 1977, at Berkeley), brooding over California (where “there are trivial / men and women who are all pleasant figments / of each other's imaginations”), and over the sobering labors of moving house, and of meeting former classmates at a twenty-year reunion (at Yale), he is amusing as well as wise. Though he seems to be telling us in “Eczema” that “there is a rage inside me, a prophet's deep / revulsion at the flesh,” this rage is beautifully tempered into an art that, one might say, can go anywhere.

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