

The Precarious Beauty of Waiting at the Post Office

郵便局で期日を待つという危うい美について

On the Late Work of Maria Virhov

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このエッセイは故マリア・ヴィルホフ(本名マリア・ステファノヴァ)の晩期作品をテーマにしている。ヴィルホフはブルガリア生まれのブルガリア語及びロシア語詩人であり、翻訳者であった。現代ブルガリア文学に鮮やかな跡を残した彼女の力強い、実験的な作品はブルガリア文学の主流とは言えないものの、今後徐々に評価されていくことが期待できる。

Maria Virhov (1969-2011) was a prominent Bulgarian poet and translator. She wrote (mainly poetry) in both Bulgarian and Russian and translated a large number of literary works into Bulgarian, most famously Chekhov's "Chayka" (*The Seagull*), as well as works by Osip Mandelstam and Velimir Khlebnikov. She published three books of poems in Bulgarian and one in Russian.

Since her debut, "Zhalta poeziya" (*Yellow Poetry*, 1995), Virhov's poetry has been distinctively experimental. The vast worlds she seeks to explore in her poetry – the new freedom of post-socialist Bulgarian society, youth, motherhood, femininity, rebellion, decay, death – and the linguistic tools she uses to do so are equally bold, if sometimes awkward.

Self-reflection and self-humiliation are recurring themes in her poetry. She often plays with her name in her work – "Zhalta poeziya" opens with a poem entitled "Virhova prikazka" (*Virhov Fairy Tale*). Four of her poems were published in the anthology "Stih i chetka" (*Verse and Brush*), and here I would like to use one of them as an example of Virhov's self-humiliation as a poetic tool.

Something

This stupid, dirty Maria
this stupid simply Maria
we need to say something
somehow we need to

so that she feels bad
I love women, men too much

something we need to say
somehow she needs to feel bad
this stupid simply Maria¹

Although too simplistic of an interpretation, it is clear that there are at least three voices in this text - the blaming voice, Maria's voice and the title's anonymous, cold voice. Virhov often combines polyphony and self-reflection to add an aspect of spatiality to her work. It is similar to the experience of suddenly hearing an echo in a dark room and realizing you are not standing in a dining room but in a huge cave, and the seemingly cozy familiar darkness is more than a mere lack of light.

Another distinctive feature is bilingualism – in both “Zhalta poeziya” and “Vyatarat martav ezik” (*The Wind A Dead Language*) there are several texts written in Russian among the majority of Bulgarian ones. Some of her poems were written in both Russian and Bulgarian, but Virhov's bilingualism is yet to be studied. My interpretation is that as a translator, adventurer and someone deeply immersed in language, Virhov was constantly tempted to abuse, bend and twist the borders of all tools and means at her disposal. I would also like to mention her abundant Bulgarian vocabulary, rooted in a deep knowledge of folklore, literature, Church Slavonic and classical Bulgarian texts.

In 2009 Virhov submitted 5 poems to the *Ah Maria 2009* literary magazine.

Here I would like to take a close look at one of them in order to see Virhov's poetry distinct features in their full beauty:

and I prayed – lord, send me an angel
if you send there forward him to me the way it is spelled
in my mind and through the thin pain in the knee

through the empty books and grey bar glasses
full of rain, lord, do you know an angel

and lord brilliant angel knew and perched
on the post office where next to the blue pigeons perch
the letters at nine and five lord collected the invitations
into shiny packs in packs they flew

pas de trois pas de jour the tan perpelinae

at night in the light of the shirts
piling up examples

and he sent and sent
but they say there was still term to be waited
at the post office

This poem contains the quintessence of Virhov's poetry in its full beauty and I would like to make several points I consider key to her work.

The first of them is the polyphony – one can hear a number of voices through the text. However, unlikely in “Something” or in other earlier work where the voices are distinct, in “and I prayed” each word is intertwined with the next, adding depth and other layers of meaning. This is very visible in the first stanza, where “it is spelled” is more than a caesura – it simultaneously connects and disconnects the second and third verses. The same effect is achieved in the third stanza and the collection of invitations – the narrative flows from one image to the next without breaking into pieces. Only the last two verses clearly belong to “them”, and those sound as if the rhythm of the poem to that point has been interrupted and cut.

Another key characteristic of Virhov's work is word play and language enforcement. The “tan perpelinae tan” are the culmination of word play in this text and they, as many others, are Virhov's invention. They could be connotation to anything from “purple” to “perepel” (Russian for quail) or something completely different. However, here the focus is not on meaning but on sound – the “perpelinae tan” highlight the culmination of the rhythm. At the end of the third stanza the invitations (or the letters? or the angels? or the pigeons?) fly in shiny packs and then we see the ballet moves, then the “perpelinae tan”, followed by the scene setting – nighttime at the light of the shirts. Therefore the “perpelinae tan” are the mysterious, inexplicable but exhilarating components of this imaginative nocturnal landscape.

Lastly I would like to draw attention to the frame of the poem, starting with “and” (in Bulgarian “a”, its meaning standing somewhere between juxtaposition and conjunction) and ending with the waiting, imposed by what “they” are saying. The poem starts off very intimate, with a prayer addressed directly to god in second-person. Then the prayer becomes a clear third-person narrative and right before the end of the text abruptly ends with the waiting. There is a peculiar reflexive form “se chakalo” employed here, closest to the English “the rules are one waits”, “one is supposed to wait” (“...no kazvat se chakalo oshte/po poshtata srok”). It is not clear who should be waiting, although the logical subject should be the praying “I” (is the praying “I” the same as the narrating one?). The ardor of the prayer, the beauty of god's mercy suddenly hit a dead end on account of the post office and its rules.

Why does this paragraph not have an open line before it (like the rest of them)? possible interpretation

of this ending is that world is beautiful and wonderful but its beauty is hard to reach. One is tempted to employ it, considering for example the way Virhov's work did not gain sufficient recognition in her lifetime; however, there must be more to this poem.

Waiting at the post office seems as inevitable as life. There is not even anyone to contradict it. They say, one is supposed to wait. And god's brilliant angels, visible only at night, belong to another world, which we may access only after our wait is done. Our only access to that world is prayer, or whatever we substitute it with, and imagination, allowing us to see what is visible only at the light of the shirts.

Virhov's work in all its beauty and wilderness is yet to be discovered by scholars of Bulgarian and Russian literature, and the author of these words hopes she will see the day Maria Virhov's work receives the attention and respect it truly deserves.

Notes

1. All translations, if not stated otherwise, are mine (Albena Todorova).

References

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