

*Interview*

Petr Borkovec (b. 1970) is the most prominent of the young generation of Czech poets who emerged after 1989. His first book of poems was published in 1990, and since then he has published four further collections, most recently, *Polní práce* [Field Work] (1998). He is also a noted translator of Russian poetry, and recently he has been working on translations of Sophocles and Æschylus. Borkovec lives in Černošice, a town to the southeast of Prague. Ten of his poems appeared in English translation in *P.N. Review* 27.6 (July-August 2001), and the poems in this issue are from his forthcoming collection, *Needle-Book* (its title in Czech). The interview was conducted with Justin Quinn in Czech via e-mail between January and May 2002.

*How do you view the changes in Czech poetry since the fall of Communism—or in other words, are these kind of historical changes important for you in the matter of poetry?*

There's no doubt that the fall of Communism in the Czech Lands and Moravia was very important for poetry and poets alike. Let's put it like this: European poetic language reflects with lightning speed the tiniest changes in the world, and, at the same time, the tradition puts the brakes on that process of reflection (and for the most part, although not exclusively, I mean here the national tradition). The more interesting elements of recent Czech poetry realised in subtle ways that its brake mechanisms had been damaged, and that only now were conditions favourable for working once again on their restoration. This kind of poetry said to itself that all the rest is of less interest. Suddenly poetry was more various, suddenly there was a lot of conservatism, epigonism, and more ornament—but in my opinion that's purely a good thing. After all, epigonism is more cultivated (or rather the slow re-awakening of the knowledge that one is "born late") than what, for instance, recent Czech journalism or politics—that great show

of epigones and barbarians—has presented to us. If they do nothing else, a certain number of Czech poets, some of them from the younger generation, maintain and renew the subtlety, the delicacy, of language and the world. That alone is a greater freedom than is to be found in other spheres. And it demonstrates that it has deep resources for change.

*Could you say a little more about that subtlety and delicacy of the world? Does it mean excluding ideological themes? And what new possibilities does it open for poetry?*

I only mean here the maintenance and continuous renovation of the ways we think and speak about the world with any degree of precision—and this kind of thought is always going to be suspicious to people who judge reductively.

*Which Czech poets have had the most influence on your work? Who from abroad?*

German Expressionism affected me greatly, both the poets and the artists. Trakl, Heym, Benn, Schmidt-Rottluff, Heckel, Beckman, Marc, and in general the Blaue Reiter group. I tried to write poems which would resemble the wood-cuts of that period. Russian poetry also, and from the very start the Acmeists above all. The Czech poets I liked first were Jan Skácel and Ivan Wernisch, and I imitated them. Later I read a lot of Bohuslav Reynek and Zbyněk Hejda.

*It's not particularly difficult to rhyme in Czech. Your rhymes though are quite subtle and often go unspotted (by me at least) on a first reading. Could you say a little about how you think about rhyme when you're writing a poem? What factors are most important for you?*

The late translator of Russian poetry, Jaroslav Kabíček, who encouraged me to translate the Russian émigrés, once gave me this piece of advice: “Don’t rhyme words in a translation that only play second or third violin in the original”. Perhaps this sounds banal, but it’s difficult to do. Of course, there’s the question of what the “original” is when I’m writing my own poems. Perhaps nothing. Perhaps an apple, if I’m writing about an apple. Perhaps not apple at all, but only everything which has been written about

apples before me. In any case, I think about this advice often when I'm writing my own texts.

It's quite hard to talk about this kind of thing. I'm often aware that one rhyme can open up a space and another can close it. And the one that opens it up is capable of so much more than just economy of expression. But even that's important. Of course, it's one thing to get the hang of various kinds of half-rhymes and aesthetically louché assonances, etc.—translation can teach you that lesson well—but it's another to use them meaningfully.

*"To lose oneself to the landscape, to lose the landscape", you wrote in Polní práce. Landscape is obviously important for you. For instance, the poem "Snow general on outlying fields..." which appears in this issue, is among other things striking for the élan with which the eye moves through the landscape. Could you say something about this poem?*

It's a text about a landscape seen from behind a car-window. Or rather, a description of a landscape which flows through an eye pushed up against the window of a car. A poem about changes which aren't real changes—which is why the first rhyme is "není" [it's not] and "rozuzlení" [revelation, as in, the lack of it], and then the echo of "změny" [changes] in the third line, changes that are hardly there. That "élan", as you call it, should provoke a horror in the reader (but also a kind of strange delight) of the superficiality, of the lack of participation. I don't know if that's the effect I achieved—at least it was my intention. I wanted the landscape (which was constituted by speed) to loom out in the poem, of its own volition as it were, as though escaping the eye—and so the quick successive images at the end break up the grammar completely. One of the impulses behind this were the animals on the edge of the highway—and that's a theme to which the collection, *Needle-Book*, repeatedly returns.

*To what do you give priority, the poetry collection as a unit, or individual poems?*

Individual poems. Certainly it's difficult to put together a good collection, and it is worth the work. (That's why it's also important to translate not only selections of great poets—which is almost the rule in our country—but the individual collections, as those contain variations, weaker poems, title of sections, etc.

Those are the crevices through which you break through to an author.) For my last two collections I've worked with a poetry editor who wasn't employed by the publishing houses that brought the books out. For example, at his suggestion twelve poems were dropped from *Polní práce*.

*Many of your poems are addressed to a woman (I'm thinking especially of the poems at the beginning of Polní práce), but they don't seem to me to be traditional love poems. Rather they seem like "scenes from a marriage" in which many other things emerge. How do you see this?*

In the first section of *Polní práce* the poems are extremely intimate, some of them perhaps almost too much so. They are "scenes from the end of a marriage", to use your terms, and "scenes from the beginning of another relationship". It's actually a diary of those events, but many days are left out, so the story doesn't come through clearly. And that's as it should be, as it's not the point of the thing.

*You've been the literary editor of several journals and newspapers in the last ten years. What did you see as your main tasks?*

In all of those jobs, I placed an emphasis on translations of contemporary world literature and critical response to those. I tried to gather around me a fixed group of translators and critics who only published on my pages. That's extremely difficult to do in the Czech Republic, and I didn't succeed. I also tried, even in the newspapers, to establish a characteristic style which readers would seek out (and that entailed some vigorous editing). An important element in creating such a house style, even in the newspapers, was poetry, along with translation and criticism of it. What often happens in this country is that an important book of poetry is published in translation, and journal editors haven't paved the way for the reader at all. Newspapers pass over even the poems of Nobel Prize-winners, and literary magazines seldom stick to the aims they've set for themselves—for the most part they attempt to range widely in order to make ends meet.

It's also necessary to remark that literature in the Czech Republic hasn't the slightest social prestige. Critical work is openly mocked and no-one cares. You don't have to look far to see the truth of this.

*Your translations of Korean poetry are just out. Do you think that translation has, or will have, an influence on your poetry?*

I don't have any Korean—I translated it with a scholar. The result is that there's not going to be much influence on my poetry. Above all it was a form of study. I hope at least that we succeeded in correcting the Czech idea of classical Korean poetry. The preceding translations from the 1950s erased all the spiritual aspects of the poetry, and they were artificially formal.

In similar collaborative translations, the poet—if he doesn't lose the run of himself—plays a much smaller role than readers usually think. In the true sense of the word, it is the scholar who does the translating; no matter how literal and open his translation, he accents the resulting style. The ideal situation is when the poet can break through at least a little to the language of the original, and when the scholar knows the languages of the target literature and can make comparisons. From the poet's point of view, it's generally only a kind of language game. The contemporary translator of poetry into Czech must pay great attention to the formal aspects, since our translation tradition and readers' expectations unanimously demand a translation that has the dimensions of the original, in other words they place priority on a formal perfection which is often at the expense of sense. I think that above all the translator must understand and translate the sense—if indeed it's necessary to make this kind of distinction here. The great translators achieve a compromise—and their linguistic feats can, I believe, compete with the achievements of original literature. We might even say that the greatest contemporary poets in the Czech language are two or three first-class translators into that language. They've made a great impact on it.

*You translate from Russian poetry. Why is that important for you?*

For several reasons. When I read Brodsky's essay about Auden where he writes what it meant for him to stand in Auden's shadow, it occurred to me that the real reason for translation is to stand in the shadow of authors we love, and to do honour to them through translation. True honour—the kind which one comes across only rarely—resides in the fact that we behave towards the dead as though they were still living. It's painstaking work. It demands concentration and a good deal of knowledge. Both

translation and the writing poems require such oblique methods—above all on the level of language (but not only on that level, although it's hard to overemphasise this). When I pronounce the name of a dead person in an elegy, it will always mean less than when I use a word which he himself liked to use; in an elegy for a poet when I write the title of one of his books, I pray less effectively than when I write the whole book in his metre. That kind of libation lets the poet speak, whereas the translator is mostly silent.

But there are other less important reasons for translation. I work mainly with poets of the Russian exile in the twentieth century, i.e., the Parisian group of Vladislav Khodasevich, George Ivanov, Gippius, Odarchenko and others who are completely unknown in the Czech Republic. Spreading this kind of knowledge is also an important function of translation. Moreover, Khodasevich, for instance, is without doubt one of the best post-Symbolists, a truly great Russian poet, Pushkin's heir.

*Robert Chandler has translated Khodasevich's "Janus" into English for this issue of Metre. Your yourself have translated this poem into Czech. What significance does it have for you?*

Khodasevich's poem is an epitaph. He wrote it during a time when he no longer published poetry, when he devoted himself for the most part to Pushkin and the Roman poets which he loved throughout his life. Further, it's composed in eight short lines, which is a difficult form and for me fascinating. In the first verse, there is a forceful expression of what I think is the single true task of the poet. The second verse is suddenly dark. Perhaps that's a bit much for one short poem, and perhaps not.