

*Katerina and Her Kind*

I'm not sure exactly why, but a lot of my recent writing has been for children. What I can say is that Vasko Popa has had something to do with it. In the summer of 1999, I opened Anvil's *Collected Poems*—translations by Anne Pennington, revised and expanded by Francis R. Jones—at the breakfast table, and among the things I looked at was his “Hen”. The same day, I wrote my own “Questioning a Hen”, and, in the following few weeks, most of the poems that went into *All Sorts*, my first children's book.

“Questioning a Hen” could never be mistaken for a Popa product. It is too long-winded and it strikes a very different note. Neither Popa's hen nor mine is a simple barnyard fowl, but his is the more mysterious. “Hen”, even in English, is the superior poem, being both smaller in size and bigger in scope. The true value, to me, of my borrowing—I wish I could call it theft, in the Eliot manner—was the reminder that the ordinary world of creatures and heavenly cycles was still potentially wondrous subject matter, if handled right. Reading “Hen” at breakfast gave me new confidence: enough, in fact, to keep me uninterruptedly busy for three or four weeks.

Popa has not been the only provider of such refreshment and stimulus. Earlier this year, a mutual friend, Charles Boyle, showed me Wiesiek Powaga's as yet unpublished translations of some of Zbigniew Herbert's miniature prose pieces, of the sort with which Herbert used to interlard his collections of verse. A number were already known to me from the translations of Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott in the Penguin Modern European Poets *Selected Poems* of 1968, while others were quite new. “Why not prose poems for children?” I instantly thought. Scarcely a money-making wheeze, but I have so far composed 40 of the possible 100 that my wife and I may well end up publishing ourselves, as we have done with *All Sorts* and *Alphabicycle Order*.

The riddling, the fable-making, the wily humour and the broad-minded acceptance of what is inexplicable or troubling

that one finds in the work of both Popa and Herbert lend themselves pretty obviously to the business of writing for children. In fact, I believe they sprang from it, in large part: that is, from the great store of children's literature, some written down, but much of it oral and subject to perpetual re-invention, which has always been somewhat protected from academic and political surveillance, and which therefore suggested a potentially less compromised style to writers looking for ways to address an inimical world.

That world, diverse as it was, embracing the many countries, languages and literatures hidden behind the old Iron Curtain, was still essentially different from the one into which the Penguin Modern European Poets were introduced in the late '60s and early '70s. Yet I am certainly not the only reader from the democracies of the decadent West to have felt that it spoke immediately to them. The Penguin series, with A. Alvarez as its Advisory Editor, and with Daniel Weissbort and Ted Hughes, the founders of *Modern Poetry in Translation*, as additional éminences grises, included not just writers from the Eastern Bloc, but Frenchmen, Italians, Scandinavians, Israelis, and others. Nonetheless, it seemed to have a pronouncedly Eastern centre of gravity. Its way of reaching us—from lands we could never hope to visit, at random intervals, in compact paperbacks with unconventional graphics on their covers, under the smuggler's overcoat of translation—was exciting in itself. It would be impertinent to liken it to samizdat, but there was a sense that these books had dodged two sets of authorities, the second being the commissars of Eng Lit on our side, in order to get through. They were unofficial; they went against the grain; their behaviour had mischief in it; they were fresh and they were fun. To me, a baffled and miserable student of English at Oxford, they were just what the doctor—not a colleague of Dr Leavis—had ordered. I was, and I remain, hugely grateful.

Strangely, little of what I learned from those volumes fed into my own early work. Its main, non-English source of nourishment was American. Craig Raine, with whom I was swapping poems at the time, helped me to understand Stevens and Lowell. I had also discovered Bishop. For a while, that was plenty, and I scarcely looked at Popa, Herbert, Holub, or anyone else from Penguinland. It was not until after my second book, when I found myself stuck in a two- or three-year muddle of self-imita-

tion, disgustedly throwing away, or abandoning before completion, everything I wrote, that they came to my rescue.

It seems obvious in hindsight, but, as I say, it took two or three years of page-scrumpling and staring into space before it occurred to me that a neat trick to avoid rewriting my old poems might be to write someone else's. Or some other people's. My initial plan was a volume to include "translations" from the work of three different poets, two men and a woman, an artistically public and emotionally private eternal triangle. I'm glad now that I jettisoned this novelistic scheme, but it must be added that the decision had less to do with my own judgement than with the fact that Katerina, with whom I had started, and who was yet to receive her name, simply could not be stopped. She stayed for a month, dictating poems at the average rate of one a day, in the order in which they were eventually to be published. Her presence in the tiny flat my wife and I shared was peremptory and impossible to ignore. Visitant/visitor, she was exhilarating, but also exhausting, company, and I was relieved at last to see her go. Robert Graves tells the story that, when he was writing one of his "Sergeant Lamb" books, his hero became so real to him that he would catch himself at mealtimes laying an extra place for his guest. Nothing like that happened to me, though the feeling that Katerina was whispering in her translator's ear, or pushing his elbow as he sat at the typewriter, was often there.

A lot of travel had gone into the notebooks of mine that she urgently ransacked: Europe, South Africa, North America, Japan. The loudspeaker van in "Tin Lily" was observed by me, not in some Communist state, but on the streets of Tokyo; the eponymous "Pale-blue Butterflies" and the natural pool described in "The South" were snaps from a holiday taken very much further than the Katerina of "A Tune" or "Annals" could have journeyed, in Swaziland. I had hoped that this geographical diffuseness would mean that no one could be sure which part of the world my still nameless poet came from. It didn't turn out like that. Even as the heterogeneous details accumulated, it grew ever more obvious that gravity was pulling her—as, in my mind, it had done the Penguin series—towards Eastern Europe: no particular country, just some political and cultural generalisation.

Throughout the writing, I went back to the volumes I had collected. These included, not only the poets already mentioned, but Ungaretti, Grass, Celan, Akhmatova, Guillevic, and others as

well. The purpose was not to find Katerina's voice, or repertoire of gestures, or psychological profile, all of which were as clear from the outset as her presence in the flat had been palpable, but to help me capture the peculiar texture of verse translation: its roughnesses and kinks, the unevenly packed feel of its lines, whatever it may be that signals some other, more desirable arrangement of words lying forever beyond the reader's reach. Of course, there is danger here, too, generalising about translations. I certainly had no intention of mocking the translator's art, and was dismayed, when my Faber contract arrived and I was still looking for my poet's name, to see the book referred to as "THE HOAX". The nature of the work, down to and including its solemn blurb—my miscalculation, I now think, and the new edition is much better without it—was meant to be immediately evident. The strange, strained relationship between poet and translator, each indispensable to the other, is at its very heart.

Eventually, Katerina Brac and *Katerina Brac* got their names and went out into the world, without causing much of a stir. I did once hear of someone nominating her as a favourite poet, but that was at second hand and we know what happens to accuracy in the course of either hearsay or translation. On the several occasions I have come across the book filed under "B" on a bookstore shelf, and I have left it there. When the Public Lending Rights people wanted to pay me at a translator's rate, however, I did put up a fight and won it: an empty triumph, considering how infrequently it has been borrowed from a library in the sixteen years of its published life. It has been translated only once—into Polish, to my intense pleasure, by Leszek Engelking and Jerzy Jarniewicz. A Polish friend tells me their version reads extremely well.