INTRODUCTION

The publication of Christopher Reid's *Katerina Brac* (1985) marked—and indeed, in some ways, ironically exploited—the high tide of interest in poetry from Central and Eastern Europe. This book of translations from the work of a non-existent poet (Czech? German? Polish?) simultaneously paid homage to the idea of the poet under pressure, and slyly made fun of the way such figures had been unquestioningly lionised in the West. In a fundamental way, it was *about* both the East and the West, about the whole business of the Cold War as registered by the ghostly intelligence of Brac. But as the countries of Central Europe have struggled to re-establish capitalist democracies over the past ten years or so, interest in their poetry has for various reasons dropped significantly. As the 1980s drew to a close, the terms in which Central European poetry had been lauded came under increasing scrutiny, partly because those terms had by that stage made their way into high-profile critical writings which valorised the Central European poet-as-witness, and simultaneously drew uneasy parallels with Western culture in order to validate the "seriousness" of Western æsthetics. Once a certain Western sentimentality about suffering had been exposed, it seemed that critical debates about Central European writing had nowhere left to go. The attempt to market "the poetry of perestroika" marked the last gasp of an existing debate rather than the beginning of a new critical dispensation. More recently, re-interpretation of interest in Central European writing as indicative of a new "internationalism" or "cosmopolitanism" may carry as many problems of elision as that earlier fascination with political oppression. All the coded reports from the poet under pressure have themselves disappeared, and it would seem that for most Western readers, now that the allure of political oppression has gone, Central Europe has to be satisfied with the same casual interest afforded other countries' poetry (Holland, Belgium, Sweden, etc.).

In one respect there is justice in this. Some reputations were pumped up with spurious claims of dissident status. (One British publisher described one of its Central European poets as a "non-person"; that same person held an important academic position

in his own country). But in another respect, it is a shame, as the poetry of countries such as Hungary, Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republics, not to mention the countries of the former Yugoslavia, has been undergoing sea-changes in the last decade. As George Szirtes puts it in his essay here on Hungarian poetry: "Reassessment is a normal part of literary life and moves with the generations, but post-1989 it has a different edge. The re-orientation goes on while the body politic is in an anxious, almost fraught state of transition." How fissiparous the situation is is demonstrated by one experience we had when putting this feature together: having approached two different poet-critics from one country for a list of contemporary poets each considered central, we discovered there was no overlap between the two lists.

One of the most important aspects of that re-orientation has been the restitution of lost œuvres. For instance, the period 1989-1999 in the Czech Republic saw the discovery of huge bodies of works that had been lost or suppressed during Communism. It was as if not one but several Emily Dickinsons had simultaneously appeared, and the effect was all the more palpable as the Czech Republic has a small literary culture, at least in comparison to that of the Anglophone world. In this respect the story of the Czech poet, Ivan Blatný, told here by Zbyněk Hejda, is iconic for a whole generation of Central European writers.

The poets, editors and translators who are effecting these changes are also looking further afield to avoid the stark political polarities of the previous generation. One notes a frustration with the poetic mode of political allegory, perhaps the central device which helped to establish figures such as Czesław Miłosz, Miroslav Holub and others. Often, as we discovered in putting together this feature, poets didn't even wish to respond to question of politics, as if fatigue had set in. (That fatigue suggests, in part, that the over-determinism with which "iron curtain" poets have been interpreted has served, ironically, to bring its own pressure to bear on the poet-under-pressure.) This might lead to some disappointment in Western readers: after all, who should we to look to for passionate engagements with politics in poetry if not to the East? The clear answer is that that time now is over. What is revealed is a much more complex and interesting panorama of various literary cultures, constrained in the past by various forms of politicisation, beginning to explore and rediscover other modes. As Petr Borkovec remarks in the interview here, the fall of

Communism was important for poetry, and of course poetic language reflects the smallest of changes in the world. But poetic tradition also puts the brakes on such reflections, and if the braking mechanism of tradition was not working as it should for forty years, the opportunity has now come to work on its restoration. To reassess the phenomenon of Central European poetry is thus, in part, a re-assessment that understands a genuinely international map of poetry through its workings in national tradition as well as within a broader European poetic language.

The feature is by no means thorough in its coverage. Our aim was rather to collect material which was exemplary of some of these changes above, and we particularly regret that there is nothing here from Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, Romania and Bulgaria. The feature begins with a poem by the Russian poet, Vladislav Khodasevich (1886-1939), a friend of Nabokov's who lived and died in exile in Paris. "Janus" is concerned with various ideas of restoration, and it seemed fitting to place it at the beginning of this feature, which is itself a kind of crossroads, and let Khodasevich say about himself, and about literary traditions more generally, "In me things end, and start again".

—FB & JQ

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