

House Of Flames

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Tomas Venclova, *The Junction: Selected Poems*, ed. Ellen Hinsey,
trans. Ellen Hinsey, Constantine Rusanov & Diana Senechal,

Bloodaxe, £9.95, ISBN 9781852248109;

Mark Doty, *Theories and Apparitions*, Cape, £9, ISBN 9780224085281

“Only a true nobody can manage / to shoulder the weight of non-existence,” remarks Tomas Venclova with sour brilliance in the opening lines of ‘Henkus Hapenčkus, In Memoriam’. A note on the text inform us that this Henkus is just the nobody he describes – the non-name, attached to absurd birth- and death-dates, that stood as an advertisement in the window of a funeral parlour in Kaunas, in the author’s native Lithuania, for decades. These poems tell us in grave and immaculate phrases about the erasure of the individual, the enormity – and enormousness – of history, the strong likelihood that we’re going to die, and the curious hopefulness that comes from recognising the bone and sinew of your curse. Here are earnest, attentive and artful poems shaped by Europe’s horrible twentieth century.

The strengths of Venclova’s poems are also their weaknesses: their bone-deep solemnity; their insistence on dropping an anchor in history as a comfort in the face of, and a rebuke to, the vandals of totalitarianism. Donne, Herbert and Dante are here as literary lodestars; Theseus and Orpheus as mythological presences. “Someone had told us once that this site,” he writes in ‘The Eleventh Canto’, “Like many sites, resembled Ithaca.” That seems to me a very well poised, half-casual, semi-disavowed way of swallowing the epic.

Some poems have a feel about them of ‘Union Dead’/‘Near The Ocean’ period Robert Lowell: a *paysage moralisé* described in a tough, defeated tone of voice; the poet’s figure semi-effaced; the pressure of history, none too subtly, leaning in on the spaces of the poem. ‘New England Harbour’ – which echoed, for me, ‘The Mouth Of The Hudson’ – talks about “the uncertainty you have lived”. In another poem, we see a man who “scoops up meaning in his hand, and washes his cancelled face”. “You are indistinct, but the setting’s explicit,” a third poem warns.

This fine selection is divided into two – the first half, ‘The Junction’, comprising poems of the last decade, more or less; the second, ‘Winter Dialogue’, spanning the mid-Sixties to the mid-1990s. Translation duties on

the former are divided between the editor, Ellen Hinsey, and the Russian-speaking Constantine Rusanov. The earlier poems are in versions by Diana Senechal. There's nothing unobvious to say about different translators – but it's worth reiterating, and this collection underlines it, that they give you different poets. There are three Venclovas here. Ellen Hinsey's Introduction describes a poet whose formalism produces poems that build stanza by stanza "like classical columns, which slowly rise towards the mythical silence where Venclova believes poetry begins and ends". Her own translations, though, seem more sinuous and idiomatic; Rusanov's more literal; and it is Diana Senechal's versions that give us the formal Venclova, rendering him ingeniously – though I've no way of knowing how faithfully – into villanelles, sestinas and what have you. Yet Senechal also gives us eccentricities – a rattlingly anapaestic poem without punctuation or upper-case letters; one set centre; one that uses a sort of incantatory anaphora. The monoglot reviewer can only read, admire what catches his fancy, wonder whether the true Venclova is so plural. Plural or not, what comes through all of these translations is that on song he's bloody good.

Can it be so many years, meanwhile, since Mark Doty's *My Alexandria* knocked all of our socks off? It's about fifteen, apparently. *Theories and Apparitions* is Doty's eighth collection, according to its jacket flap, and it has all the lyric precision and humour and poignancy you expect from him. These are poems to enjoy, easy but not shallow. You wouldn't maybe think that you'd discern Ginsberg and Wallace Stevens and Thom Gunn in so talky a poet, but you can in Doty.

The collection does what its title promises. There are a handful of "Apparition" poems (the poet spots Berryman eating lunch in a diner, Whitman in mid-town New York, and someone channeling Shelley in East Texas vowels), and a number of poems offering a "Theory" – of beauty, marriage, multiplicity, narrative, incompleteness and the soul. All these "theories", so called, though, are rooted and indeed defined by the concrete details of life. The collection opens with a lovely piece, for instance, about catching sight of a bat ("fleeting contraption / speeding into a bank of leaves [...] little Victorian handbag / dashing between the dim bulks of trees"), and the difficulties of making a poem about it. Later, he applies the same jocular exactness to a peacock – "the epic / trombone-slide-from-Mars cry / no human throat can mime [...] the archaic poem of his tail".

These poems are offhand in voice, and marvellously full of the world. "Ligustrum, penicillium, / three ragweeds, fusarium, marshelder, pollen of timothy, sweet vernal, / cocklebur and feathers, dog and tuna, dust mite, milk and yolk" are what the allergist's assistant tests on the poet's skin, for

example. Then there's the dementing Scheherazade of a Mexico City taxi driver, who so bores our hero and his boyfriend en route to the airport that

[...] when we staggered out of the cab,
hoisting luggage up onto the airport curb,

I was too sick to even feel relieved,
and Paul, gone a pale, peculiar shade
like blanched celery – I do not exaggerate,
although I have, for the sake of a good story –
bent over and vomited onto the sidewalk.

Doty states, with a hip levity perhaps unavailable to Tomas Venclova though the sentiment is shared: "If beauty *is* burning, what could you save? / The house of beauty is a house of flames."

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