

Handkerchiefs And Veils

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Hédi Kaddour, *Treason*, trans. Marilyn Hacker, Yale University Press,
£16.99, ISBN 9780300149586;

Sylva Fischerová, *The Swing in the Middle of Chaos*, trans. Sylva Fischerová
with Stuart Friebert, Bloodaxe, £9.95, ISBN 9781852248598;

Tsvetanka Elenkova, *The Seventh Gesture*, trans. Jonathan Dunne, Shearsman,
£8.95, ISBN 978-1848610842

When it comes to translated poetry, R.S. Thomas has a lot to answer for. His oft-quoted declaration that reading a poem in translation “is like kissing through a handkerchief” has long been a millstone round the neck of translators, not least because it has a troublesome ring of truth about it. Poetry deals in the effect of just such a word, placed just so. How could one possibly render all the echoes and vibrations such specificity creates into another tongue?

The answer, of course, is that you can't, not exactly. But, as the alternative to handkerchief-kissing is celibacy, poets and translators have kept at it – and created, by the by, a complementary art of their own: more pliant, less particular. Key to success is the poet's choice of translator, and the relationship the two parties build together – which may be why the first of our volumes is such a pleasure. In fellow-Parisian Marilyn Hacker, Hédi Kaddour has found a champion and, according to Hacker's lengthy, absorbing, preface, a friend. The sympathy between them is evident in the volume's harmonious arrangement: Hacker has “taken the liberty” of arranging Kaddour's poems thematically, rather than chronologically, directing the book's current so that it pools and flows.

In the opening section, ‘Far From Byzantium’, she gathers together poems that mine history, both real and imagined. “Poetry / remembers”, Kaddour tells us, and it does. His poems recall both the murkier episodes in France's recent past (“a convoy of Jews sent to Auschwitz by / the Préfecture of the Gironde [...] / bullet-bloated Algerians who float / under the pont Mirabeau”) and deeper, dreamier folk-memories of forests, wolves and winters, in which the fairytale-feel is heightened by Kaddour's artless use of colour: “intensely blue” skies; “rosy stones”; a “sunlight flash” from which a “rainbow sprang forth”. In the third and final section, the poet dwells on the

sweetness of food and sex in poems of rich and enlivening sensuality. But it is in the central section, 'A Walk in the City', in which he picks up where Paris's famous *flâneurs* – Baudelaire, Réda, Hacker herself – left off, that Kaddour excels. He paces the streets of his city, introducing us to the teenagers, tourists, chestnut vendors and "rushed commuters" who come together to create it; blending the "roar / Of a motorcycle" with "the rain's small music"; offering us snatched, intimate glimpses of "half-open shutters" and "geranium beds". Between them, Hacker and Kaddour have created that rare thing: a fluent translated collection that retains its alluring otherness.

Czech poet Sylva Fischerová's decision to undertake the translation of her poems herself (with the help of fellow-poet Stuart Friebert) reflects a vein of self-determination that runs through her work. True to their Mittel-European origins, the surfaces of these poems are disputed battlefields, criss-crossed with conflicts and religion, clotted with mud. They bear witness to Fischerová's attempts to free herself from the bitter weight of "amputated limbs [that] salute us / from the greasy Gulag" and the "dark eyes of the Jews who never came back" through a constant quest for comprehension; the ability to "understand / just one thing absolutely". While it may be possible to wriggle out from under the burden of the past however, her Catholicism – which is written into lines overflowing with "sin" and "angels"; metaphors that view the heart as "the bell of a cloister", or see "God's Providence / spread[ing] its veils / like spiderwebs" – remains essential. Chess is a recurring metaphor, adding to Fischerová's sense of being no more than a disposable piece in a larger game. "And why should it end well?" she demands in the poignant late poem, 'And Still We're Moving Forwards, Backwards, Left and Right', "Why suppose I'm better than / anyone who's suffered like a dog...?" It's no surprise that one so battered by the tides of history is unwilling to relinquish control of her own voice.

The Seventh Gesture, by Bulgarian poet Tsvetanka Elenkova, is also anchored by religion – but there the similarity ends. Where Fischerová's poems are weighted down by the pressures and perils of faith, Elenkova's association with religion is comfortable, even joyous at times. "Just a little grass between me and heaven" she says, of climbing to Cherni Vrah, the summit of Bulgaria's fourth-highest mountain. "Violets everywhere [...] It heals me all over [...] 2290 m. closer to God." This free and easy connection with her maker is reflected in Elenkova's wider relationship with the world. Her approach is friendly and discursive, her "I" inquisitive, engaging. Read together, the poems blend into each other, presenting a likeable mishmash of anecdote, imagery and her mother's and grandmother's homespun wisdom

(“No one deserves a girl’s tears”; “Time flies after sixty”). Taken separately, however, their impact is more acute. Each of the collection’s seventy-seven prose-poems takes as its subject a single moment or notion – an afternoon in Athens when the light broke “into sheaves just like the Erechtheion’s fluted columns”; the idea of freedom – and reflects on it. There’s a lovely clarity to her thoughts, which combines with the warmth of her delivery to produce an unusual, uplifting collection. Not a handkerchief in sight.

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