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Book review

Tomas Venclova. *The Junction. Selected Poems.* Ed. Ellen Hinsey. Translated by Ellen Hinsey, Constantine Rusanov, and Diana Senechal. Northumberland UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2008. 168 pages. ISBN: 978 1 85224 810 9.

One of the foremost Lithuanian poets, Tomas Venclova is a loyal person and inspires loyalty in his translators. By his personal loyalty I mean that he is faithful to his friends, writing poems dedicated to them (e.g., Joseph Brodsky, Czesław Miłosz, Natalia Gorbanevskaia), quoting from admired poets like Anna Akhmatova and W. H. Auden, and, remembering his own dissident roots, immortalizing other East European dissidents who paid the ultimate price, martyrs like Konstantin Bogatyrev and Osip Mandelstam. Venclova's passion for travel also liberally peppers his poetry with genius loci from Jordan to Albania to Italy to Petersburg and landscapes in between. Thus we get a sense of what people and places concern the poet. Combined with mythological and historical allusions, this intertextuality enriches his poems, raising the genre above the subjective lyric, of which there are a few masterly examples as well. "New England Harbour," which opens the book, and the deservedly famous "Autumn in Copenhagen" come to mind, but there are others, mostly from his earlier period, when his exile seems to have left controlled, but obviously traumatic, traces on his psyche. Now Venclova has become less of an exile and more of an émigré. I quote from a more recent poem: "Robbed of his name, his native land, his hearth/ a man adapts to solitude and dearth/ and is (an émigré once said) immersed/ in time like the salamander is in fire." (p. 52) This collection gives an up-to-date view of the poet's journey from the autobiographical "A View from an Alley," which returns to a childhood place of residence in Lithuania, to "Dunes at Watermill," where the author is surrounded by colleagues from Yale, but notably other émigrés.

Venclova has been fortunate to attract competent translators, first Diana Senechal and now Ellen Hinsey and Constantine Ruslanov. Easiest to translate are the poet's many nouns; verbs present more difficulties due to the presence of aspect within the Lithuanian verb system, where a prefix can change the temporal nuance of the word, or change its meaning completely. All the translators seem to compensate for this feature of the language adequately with more obscure English verbs. Ellen Hinsey sticks to the original text with surprisingly good results, while Ruslanov is more daring, and translates with a looser hand without veering off to adaptation. I can find few things to quibble about. "A View from an Alley," since it's about a particular view, to my mind should be the "The View" and the Lithuanian *alėja* is not really alley, but boulevard or avenue (alley would be *skersgatvis* or some other smaller street). However, the translator must have wished to retain the sound of the original, and thus exchanged the true meaning for the alliteration from the source. Perhaps she even had the poet's blessing for this, since Venclova works closely with his translators; certainly he did with Senechal. In this collection, the poet continues his tradition of generosity with notes and footnotes, helping the reader orient himself in Venclova's richly textured mindscape. The book is very handy since it contains a reprint of parts of *Winter Dialogue* by Senechal as well as the newer poetry translated by Hinsey and Ruslanov.

Hinsey's introduction is aimed at the British reader who, up to now, has been less familiar with Venclova's oeuvre.

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