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**KATERINA BRAC: CHRISTOPHER REID'S
EASTERN EUROPEAN POEMS**

Arcadia (1979) and *Pea Soup* (1982), the first two collections by Christopher Reid, were generally considered by the critics to be a manifestation of the newly emerging tendency in British poetry wittily labelled the "Martian School" by James Fenton¹. Reid's marked interest in, and fascination with, images of visual transformation, his great reliance on metaphor and the tendency to "make the familiar strange" seemed clear indications that here was one poet who could be grouped with the founding father of the Martianism, Craig Raine. Reid's Martian connections, which he was always a bit suspicious about,² went beyond the superficial stylistic similarity. For one term Reid studied with Craig Raine at Christ Church in Oxford, and as interviews document, they often discussed their works together.

However, in 1985 Reid published his first Faber collection *Katerina Brac*³ which in many respects can be seen as a deliberate attempt to break away from the limitations of the Martian school, a venture into a new territory. The collection, chosen as Book of the Year by Stephen Spender and Ian McEwan, was a conceptual volume, based on an original idea that the poems included are not Christopher Reid's own poems but translations from the works of one Katerina Brac, a fictitious character. The worn out photograph of Brac appears on the front cover of the book, the woman is accurately wearing dark glasses which emphasise her mysterious nature. Apart from the photograph the only other source of information about

¹ J. Fenton, "Of the Martian School", *The New Statesman*, 96 (1978).

² Cf. "I'm delighted to be associated with Craig. I admire his work enormously, the abundance of his imagination. I envy him a great many of his poems. Perhaps envy and rivalry are the key to our friendship - we like to impress each other. But the notion that we represent a new school, working to a common programme, is somewhat misconceived. We're very different people and very different poets". J. Haffenden, "An Interview with Christopher Reid", *Poetry Review*, Sept. (1983).

³ C. Reid, *Katerina Brac* (Faber, 1985).

the presumed author of the poems is supplied on the back cover of the book, which includes carefully worded editor's notes. In these scarce bits of information, the editor does not reveal her nationality, nor the dates of her life. The only certain fact that the readers know about the imaginary poet is that she is a woman. But Reid gives another hint that helps to create the portrait of his fictitious character. According to the editor, Brac is a poet "under pressure". The phrase "under pressure" refers the reader to Al Alvarez's collection of interviews published twenty years earlier under the very same title, concerning the relationship between the artist and society. Among Alvarez's interlocutors there were a few so-called Eastern European poets. In this way Brac can be further identified as a woman poet from Eastern Europe. In his review of the volume, Peter Porter ventured to sketch a short literary portrait of Brac when he wrote: "Katherine is a kind of English incarnation of one of those emblematic poets of repressive regimes, crossed with a Romantic Expressionist – the centaur which would result from the mating of Zbigniew Herbert and Ingeborg Bachman. Except that Katerina is very calm and her poems are most beautifully put into English".⁴

It is not by chance that the key to Brac's identity was vested in the title of Alvarez's book. At the time when his collection was published, Alvarez was widely known as the most important advocate of Eastern European poetry in Britain. Together with Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort, editors of the seminal magazine "Modern Poetry in Translation", he introduced the English speaking world to the new poetic voices coming from beyond the Iron Curtain. He was the editor of a highly influential series Penguin Modern European Poets, which included the works of such poets as Zbigniew Herbert and Tadeusz Różewicz, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Anna Akhmatova, Sandor Weroes, Ferenc Juhasz, Vasko Popa, and Miroslav Holub. And although the series was not designed to present only poets from Eastern Europe, and included volumes of French, German, Spanish and Italian poets as well, its greatest achievement was the introduction of "still too little know", or altogether unknown poets from beyond the Iron Curtain. The significance of Alvarez's enterprise can be judged if only by the presence of the Eastern European models in the works of Ted Hughes.⁵ The series, very popular at the time, helped to create the image of Eastern European poetry as being written under pressure, poetry which is "young, fresh, and outspoken and frets at restraint and injustice",⁶ and "shows an unwavering sense of the realities of life".⁷

⁴ P. Porter, "Songs from Another Country", *Observer*, Nov. 17 (1985), p. 31.

⁵ On the influence of Popa and Herbert on Ted Hughes read e.g. in T. Gifford, N. Roberts, *Ted Hughes. A Critical Study* (London, 1981).

⁶ Y. Yevtushenko, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth, 1962).

⁷ M. Holub, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth, 1967).

The Eastern European poets who emerged in English translations in the 1960's were seen as an alternative to the stale, insular British poetry of the period, which according to Alvarez, suffered from the "gentility principle".⁸ Their poems were often based on the structure of a (mythological or historical) parable, which often served to disguise the realities of a life in a totalitarian state. The poems, partly due to the translations, differed from the mainstream British poetry also in another aspect: their diction was simple, straightforward, if not overtly prosaic; unrhymed lines of unequal length, lack of punctuation, became the hallmark of the Eastern European diction. Untranslatability, culture-specific references, but also inadequacy of some of the translations made the poems in translations "strange" to a reader of English verse. It is as if a new language was produced, a clearly identifiable new idiom.

Christopher Reid tried to recreate that strangeness in the diction of his Katerina Brac pseudo-translations. Craig Raine, his editor at Faber, recalls the numerous revisions that Reid would make to what already seemed to his editor successful poems.⁹ It is only later that Raine realized that the reason for these corrections was to make the poems sound more strange and a bit awkward to the ear of an English-speaking reader. Blake Morrison, who called the pseudo Eastern European diction of Katerina Brac "a kind of antidialect – English, but neutral, delocalised English", observed that its "language is not bad, but too colourlessly correct, continually alerting us to the poetry that has been lost in translation".¹⁰ Neil Corcoran calls the volume "a commentary written in the margins of the Penguin Modern European Poets series of the 1960s and 1970s" and then remarks how "Reid brilliantly mimics the hesitations, the odd flatness and sudden intensities, the failures of accurate idiom endemic to modern poems in English translation".¹¹

In Seamus Heaney's collection of essays, *The Government of the Tongue*, which takes up the subject of the relationship between the art of poetry and the world of politics, and discusses it using the example of contemporary Eastern European poets, such as Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Miroslav Holub, and Osip Mandelstam, one can find a chapter under a very appropriate title "The Impact of Translation". The Irish poet claims there that within the Eastern European poetry, marked by moral courage and a will to resist the pressures of a totalitarian state, English speaking poets can find an important, alternative voice, imaginative power, and faith in the efficacy of the art of poetry in the modern world. The essay opens

⁸ See "Beyond the Gentility Principle", in A. Alvarez, *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth, 1962).

⁹ Private communication (1985).

¹⁰ B. Morrison, 'Dialect does it', *London Review of Books*, Dec. 5 (1985).

¹¹ N. Corcoran, *English Poetry since 1940* (Longman, 1993), p. 214.

with Miłosz's poem, "Incantation", which serves as an example of the Eastern European diction, radically different from the observed norms of the mainstream poetics. Miłosz's poem is a display of many strategies supposedly forbidden to modern poets: it is not only full of abstract nouns and "conceptually aerated adjectives",¹² but also displays unabashed didacticism and delivers a message. Heaney's idealized account of the poetry of Eastern Europe harmonizes with the dominant, popular line of criticism, which points to the moral dimension of the poetry and links it very strongly with the extra-literary context: the awareness that the poems were written "under pressure" is an important element of their meaning – these are poems in which, as Heaney puts it, "courage is tested".¹³

It is not surprising then that the Irish poet in his chapter on the importance of Eastern European poetry refers to Christopher Reid's *Katerina Brac* as an example of an attempt to look at British poetry from the outside. Reid, in Heaney's opinion, puts forward a different tradition that disturbs and questions the self-congratulatory certainties of contemporary British verse, which departed from the internationalist, history-bound poetics of the great Modernists. "Christopher Reid's book represents a moment of doubt; and it represents also the delayed promise, though not the complete fulfilment of a native British modernism".¹⁴

Yet *Katerina Brac* is not, as might have been expected, a collection of overtly political poems, neither does it display a particularly keen sense of history. The poems are written in a very personal, intimate voice. The personal is surely the category which establishes the key to that poetry. It manifests itself in the diction of the poems. The fact that many poems in the collection refer to childhood memories, can also be seen as an example of their deeply personal character. The reminiscences on the distant past and on the more recent events in Katerina's life are full of trivial, tiny objects. Together they constitute not only the emblem of degraded reality, the ignored world of the small, yet important things, but also further emphasise the consistently personal perspective of the poems. The most characteristic poem in this respect is "A Box", whose form is that of a catalogue of most diverse things, either concrete like "a soup bowl" and "a small photograph", or abstract such as "a journey by train" and "the words spoken by a pensive mother". The list of things included in the box, which may remind us of the art of an American sculptor Joseph Cornell and specifically of his boxes "housing surprising collections of romantic or Victorian bric-a-brac",¹⁵ reads like a summary of one's life, a chain of objects

¹² S. Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue. The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures* (Faber, 1988), p. 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁵ H. Osborne (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Art* (Oxford, 1981), p. 130. Christopher Reid in a private conversation has declared his keen interest in Cornell's art.

which are unique and indispensable, with a hidden meaning undecipherable by an outsider. The contents of the box stands for the small neglected things, but also for the most cherished, personal memories. The association with the coffin, the ultimate box of life, can also be inferred here.

"A Box" is not the only poem which lists seemingly irrelevant, but – in the life of the speaker – precious objects. These trivia from everyday life are often representative of a devalued, poor reality. The dispossessed objects, such as blisters, or dirt under Katerina's nails, have a surprising equivalent in the broken crockery which Katerina finds more valuable than the ancient Chinese pots in the museum of art:

Forgive me if I prefer the pieces
on other shelves: bottles with cricked
necks, and the jar that dribbles
its glaze like a sloppily fed baby.

Even more moving are the broken patterns
of pots that wanted to be earth again.¹⁶

The collection celebrates the world of ordinary objects, with all their imperfections and implied poverty. The poet seems determined to redeem them from oblivion – the obsessive recurrence of this celebratory, affirmative motif sounds almost like a moral imperative which the poet must persistently follow. It is here that the highly personal element of the poetry can be interpreted in more directly political terms. The poems build up the unstated, yet very real opposition between the official history and the personal story, the former being either utterly mystified or highly selective, suited exclusively to serve the state's ideological purpose. The latter follows a different type of logic and registers the existence of things gratuitously, accepts their presence for their own sake, differing thus from the instrumental treatment of the official chronicles. In "Annals" Katerina claims that:

Someone ought to write
the annals of the villages
on this bank of the river.
Conferences, statutes
and the economic forecasts
printed in the newspaper
are naturally important,
but there is much to learn, too,
from the sayings of old women
and the deaths of pigs.¹⁷

¹⁶ "The Oriental Gallery" in C. Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁷ "Annals", in C. Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

The world of Katerina Brac's poems is filled with objects which are fragile, frail, ephemeral, small, sometimes imperceptible. Many of them are already decomposing, falling to pieces, dilapidated. This is a world on the verge of destruction, over which floats a shadow, if not of death, then of the passing of time. The images bring to mind the theme of *vanitas*, miniature lyrical poems can be seen as poetic versions of the still-lives painted by the Dutch masters. Soon-withered flowers, grapes, a dead hare have their equivalent in the images of butterflies, strawberries, small coins, "broken patterns of pots", bluebottles, ash. These images contribute to the emotional portrait of Katerina, a woman deeply aware of her vulnerability. The poems evoke the atmosphere of threat, be it existential fear of decay and mortality, or the more historical/political anxiety. The powers which threaten the world of Katerina Brac are rarely named, the poet is not interested in them, her subject being rather the world exposed to these destructive forces. She does not try to identify the enemy: maybe the enemy does not exist, or has become a part of the world to such a degree that the hostile forces cannot be differentiated from their victims. This moment of doubt is registered in "Apollinaire", where the poet writes about bombs which are "as gratuitous as flowers in the iconography of children".¹⁸ The world is in the process of inevitable decomposition, which is reflected for example in the catalogue structure of many poems in the collection. But despite the ongoing fragmentation of the world there is hope: the poet believes that there is sense in this world that has fallen to pieces, that some order of things can be found, by securing a place for the dispossessed world of trivial objects in one's own biography, one's private and intimate life.

The last poem in the book, "I Disagreed", recalls a visit to a famous abbey, which was all "nettle-sprung ruins". Yet the speaker affirms that anything is likely to happen here, even though she stands among the debris, and her companion sees nothing around apart from what can be summarized in one, desperate word "Dead, dead". The ruins of the abbey, the material sign of history, which Katerina confronts with her lover, may appear to be mere props collected backstage, with the real play, just like the real history, taking place elsewhere.

This feeling that the world in which Katerina lives is unreal reappears in a number of poems from the collection. The official world is – like the official history – untrue; what the poet demands is reality, or as she says in one of the poems, "years and years of realism".¹⁹ The unreality of the official world becomes one of the subjects of perhaps the most openly political poem in the book, "Tin Lily". The highly Martian visual metaphor

¹⁸ "Apollinaire", in C. Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹⁹ "Realism", in C. Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

for the loudspeaker on top of a military van introduces the theme of absurd incongruity, or even that of violence directed against something natural. The political context of the poem is introduced already in the opening line by the use of a military word, "A salvo of blurred words". Images appear which stress the unnatural character of the van, spreading noisy political propaganda in the streets: the van is called "one of those anomalous things". It is indeed unnatural, a violation of law, or as the poet says "a counterblast to Copernicus". The van is inhuman, it belongs to a different time, existing outside the time of the seasons of nature, but belongs to "those speedier human phases that run athwart them". The image of the tin lily is used to represent an all-permeating propaganda which is yet barely intelligible, and cannot be differentiated from the noisy razzmatazz. But the lily, being a four-ways-facing device, gives the impression of a totalitarian control exerted by the state. The fact that the van is moving at a regular walking space provides yet another image of the repressive character of the state in which this scene takes place: the van, as well as the voice from the lily, always accompanies (and persecutes) people. The poem ends with lines which testify to the dubious status of that new reality, which is both genuine and arbitrary.

Picture an olive-green van
and its four-ways facing lily
strafing the boulevards.

This is not surrealism,
but an image of the new reality,
a counterblast to Copernicus.²⁰

The political and social context also surfaces in the short poem "Little Man", which evokes the atmosphere of the bureaucratic state run by anonymous institutions, and its anonymous clerks, dehumanized by the environment they live in and by the job they do. Reid gives hardly any details of the scene. Both the nature of the meeting with the clerk, and the character of the institution the speaker visits can only be deduced from a few sparsely given clues: the seemingly inconsequential phrase, "he asked me a question", resonates with sinister overtones in the world of "rationed light", "plain desks", "clerical buildings overlooking a drab back-street". With such economy does Reid build a picture of the imagined country of Katerina Brac. The details which amount to the vision of a totalitarian state can be easily overlooked, yet they appear consistently throughout the book. They are not the real subject of these poems, they emerge from among other things as an unwanted, yet unavoidable *couleur locale*.

²⁰ "Tin Lily", in C. Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

In "Pale-Blue Butterflies" [we] "drove to town to be given the official market price". In another poem we are told of "presents from the black market" ("What the Uneducated Old Woman Told Me"). In "An Angel" electricity dims causing a moment of terror:

That one brief indecision
of the electric light
in a night of solitude
showed me how weak I was.²¹

Apart from particularizing the setting of the whole collection, this poem also provides a fit example of the transcendent strain in Reid's poetry which manifests itself in the desperate search for the lost sphere of the sacrum. In the aptly titled poem "Heaven and Earth", the poet describes two epiphanies, one of which is a transubstantiation in the sunlight of an office block into gold, the other is the image of a crop-spraying monoplane reminding the poet of Semele or the Virgin during the visitation. This religious impulse is typical not only of Katerina Brac poems, but can also be seen throughout Reid's other works. As Neil Corcoran observed in his review of the two early volumes, "Many of Reid's poems do actually elaborate some kind of religious imagery, making – as it were – newly domestic sacraments out of the secular".²²

If one remembers that the idea of defamiliarization lies at the heart of Martian poetics, then Reid's project in his "Eastern European" poetry can be interpreted not so much as a departure from Martianism, but as a rechanneling. The whole concept of the book is nothing more than an example of defamiliarization at work: Reid makes the language of poetry strange by writing pseudo-translations. The defamiliarizing drive can also be detected in the poet's decision to write women's poetry. Reid parodies Eastern European diction in the same way as he imitates women's diction, though it should rather be said that in both cases Reid refers the readers to the popular understanding of what Eastern European poetry and women's poetry are; the poet deals then with established conventions, received ideas and stereotypes.

If the Eastern European element can be seen in the poet's economy of expression, in his use of free verse, parabolic structures, the provocative introduction of abstract words and discursive language, as well as in his thematic choices, then the feminine element reflects the common stereotypes of women's poetry. In "Ariadne's Thread"²³ the editors identified women's

²¹ "An Angel", in C. Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

²² Quoted after: J. Vinson (ed.), *Contemporary Poets* (St James Press, 1992).

²³ S. Bassnett, P. Kuhivchak (eds.), *Ariadne's Thread. Polish Women Poets* (Forest Books, 1986).

poetry in the way that seems adequate to Katerina Brac's own poems: the work of women in other cultures, the editors write, is characterized "by the blending of public concerns with private pain, the return to classical mythology, the emphasis on smallness rather than on vastness".²⁴ And indeed, no matter how true this account of women's writing is and to what extent it represents only a popular stereotype, Brac's apocryphal poems are obsessed with small, everyday things, avoid sweeping generalizations and occasionally refer to classical mythology. They include passages which could easily be classified as over-emotional, even sentimental, especially in the poet's use of emotive adjectives and expletives. There are passages which do not present the emotion, but merely describe it, as if Katerina could not, or did not want to find poetic correlatives for her feelings, thus lending herself to the charge of sentimentality as defined by, for example, Paul Fussell.²⁵ The poem "Like a Mirror" ends with an exclamation which – according to the "tough" normative views on modern poetics – might be regarded as an example of affectionate, self-indulgent style, betraying the poet's lack of discipline. Other passages can be attacked for their prosaic wordiness and directness (or, to use a more critical term, lack of complexity). Since in *Katerina Brac* one deals with the poetry of the mask, it is hard to distinguish which of the uncontrolled emotions belong to the persona, Katerina Brac herself, and which to Christopher Reid. To be consistent the critic would have to assume that all the words in the poems from this cycle build up the persona of the imaginary poet, and therefore whatever weaknesses or departures from modern poetic criteria one can detect, should be seen as literary devices deliberately used by Reid to evoke the model of women's poetry. Not everyone though is ready to accept this view. Dick Davies in his critical account of the book wrote that "the persona seems not much more than a way of evading responsibility for the less interesting parts of the poems".²⁶

The idea of translation underlies the entire volume and manifests itself in a variety of ways. There is a Martian translation of the familiar into the unfamiliar (it is worth mentioning here Craig Raine's poems in "translationese" from the collection appropriately called "A Free Translation"). *Katerina Brac* is a fake translation from a foreign language, a translation of a different poetic idiom, and finally a translation of women's poetry. These forms of translation, considered on different, diverging levels, help us see the poems as an essentially two-way process. They are translations both *from* poetry and *into* poetry at the same time. Reid pretending to be

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

²⁵ See Fussell's article on "Sentimentality" in A. Preminger (ed.), *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (London, 1979), p. 763.

²⁶ D. Davies, "Obliquities", *The Listener*, 114 (1985), pp. 33–4.

Katerina Brac's translator translates *from* the language of Eastern European poetry, whereas Reid, an English poet, translates *into* the language of Eastern European poetry. The editor's note in the book, an integral part of the volume, ends with the paradoxical statement that "a poet must become the creation of his or her translator". The poet, Katerina Brac, is clearly the creation of her translator, but equally well one could say that the translator is also the creation of the poet. The two roles, that of a poet and that of a translator, become identical. And if that is so, one should stop asking about the original versions: creativity is a series of continuous translations.

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**KATERINA BRAC: WSCHODNIOEUROPEJSKIE WIERSZE
CHRISTOPHERA REIDA**

Artykuł omawia wydany w 1985 r. tom wierszy angielskiego poety Christophera Reida, zatytułowany *Katerina Brac*. Jest to zbiór rzekomych przekładów poezji fikcyjnej poetki, Kateriny Brac, piszącej w jednym z języków wschodnioeuropejskich. Wiersze zawarte w tym tomie, reprezentujące lirykę roli, zostały przedstawione w kontekście poetyki szkoły Marsjan, do której jest zaliczany Reid, a także na tle ogólnego zainteresowania poezją krajów Europy Wschodniej, jakie da się od dłuższego już czasu zauważyć wśród poetów, krytyków i wydawców brytyjskich (Alfred Alvarez, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney i inni). Autor wysoko cenionych przez angielską krytykę wierszy z tomu *Katerina Brac*, których głównym tematem jest istota przekładu poetyckiego, proponuje oryginalną grę literacką ze stereotypem poezji kobiecej i poezji wschodnioeuropejskiej, zadając szereg pytań na temat statusu przekładu poetyckiego, roli tłumacza w kreowaniu obrazu poezji i obrazu poety, elementu obcości w języku przekładu oraz zagadnienia nieprzekładalności tradycji, konwencji i doświadczeń kulturowych.