Tidal Events
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Translator’s Note

Mária Ferenčuhová was born in Bratislava in 1975 and is a poet, translator and film theorist. She is editor of the film magazine, King-Icon, translates from French and teaches at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava and the Academy of Arts in Banská Bystrica.

She has published four collections of poetry, Skryté titulky (Hidden subtitles, 2003), Princíp neistoty (Principle of uncertainty, 2008), Ohroz- ený druh (Threatened Species, 2012) and Imunita (Immunity, 2016), also a study of documentary film, Odložený čas (Time Delay).

Mária Ferenčuhová is in terms of her publishing history a wholly twenty-first century poet and this is true of her style, procedures and subject matter. With four collections in thirteen year she writes relatively slowly compared with some of her contemporaries considering that Slovak poetry collections are relatively slim volumes, usually much less than 1,000 lines in length. Slovak critics have characterised Mária’s work as related to the ANesthetic generation and the Text generation of Nora Ružičková and Katarína Michelová whose neutral tone and use of abstract terms is in contrast to the post-Tender Revolution passions where an older generation of Slovak poets was able to release work energized by the Beats. Mária’s work resists the pressure emerging from a still potent male-centred critical attitude to women poets which has confined them to a role where they wrote brief lyrics on intimate themes, nature or composed poetry for children. Despite the work of a number of strong, older women poets, for example Mila Haugová (born 1942), Anna Ondrejková (born 1954), Dana Podracká (born 1954) and Viera Prokešová (1957-2008), this expectation of a feminine as opposed to a feminist still poses a barrier to the reception of poetry by women in Slovakia so that poems whose energy and content is directed outside or beyond this patriarchal undercurrent often catch critics off guard.

The poet and critic, Ján Gavura, has coined the phrase “oko kameramanky” (camerawoman’s eye), referring to her work as a lecturer on film. This is slightly misleading for Anglophone readers for whom Isherwood’s “I am a camera” belongs to another era of realism in writing. Mária is not a realist in that sense at all. Part of a characteristic avoidance of using a poem to create a dramatic or emotional event for the reader is a resistance
to possible reader expectation of the woman’s poem, an expectation which ironically is often met by the anger in overtly feminist poems. Máriá’s strategies contain an ability to sidestep conventional responses as in the first poem in her first collection, In ‘City of Dogs’, where a decaying urban environment is rendered not in grand guignol gestures but in the details of leftover food, “smell cheese / fish and small stains on surface” and the hidden scuttling life of a city, “mice also quick: / underground. in colour. under seats.” Judgement is deferred to the use of the second person “You pity the slow, everyone, who paused” and a sense of ceaseless, purposeless activity is evoked by the refusal to use capital letters at the beginning of sentences which are often telegraphic in structure. Such mimesis has remained a favourite device.

Máriá’s strongest work often seems to have urban origins. The trio of poems, ‘City Maps’, also from her first collection, continues using an unconventional punctuation and explores the distortions in perceptions of space that the city induces. These are taken up in ‘Illuminated Cities’ from her second collection and extended into sections where derelict individuals appear, where there is a switch to a temporary city of tents perhaps of refugees and in the next section motifs from the fatal infection of trees which is identified with the addressee of the poem. When the city becomes identified with parts of the human body containing a bourgeois family, “three children, four cars / and a pedigree dog” it is akin to the sensibility that Walter Benjamin analysed in Baudelaire in his essay, Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century, especially in the section ‘Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris.’ Illuminated Cities approaches an allegorical reading echoing the sense of submergence in Baudelaire’s poems as in Rêve parisien, “L’enivrante monotonie / Du métal, du marbre et de l’eau,” and the figure of the angel in ‘L’Irrémédiable’, “Au fond d’un cauchemar énorme / se débattant comme un nageur.” In section 6 of Mária’s poem the angel is the city who “indifferently offers a smile to the cameras” whilst distracted by “a lower trembling / tickling the soles of her feet, / after which hurtle packs of stampeding / rats.”

The title poem, The Uncertainty Principle, has two fine Baudelairean lines, “By recollection in a single gesture of a demiurge / by which everything good turns to evil,” but turns away from an isolated consciousness overwhelmed by the city towards personal relationships and carrying a child, “But even here grace comes: suddenly, from behind
your back, / from within like the first movement of a child in your body.” Personal responsibility preserves the individual from despair. “Yet it depends on me as to what I turn my face. / Whether to wind, sun or rain. / Or stones.”

In her third collection there is an assurance in technique particularly in her handling of line in a poem, which enables Mária to broaden her thematic concerns. This has been commented on by a few Slovak critics as being too explicit although when I compare her oblique treatment of environmental issues and a poem featuring a Holocaust survivor with its Anglophone equivalents I suspect the survival of a critical habit from the days of censorship which tends to read everything into an image. However, Mária’s poetry can effortlessly switch visual perspectives in the space of a single poem telescoping perspectives in an equivalent of the dolly zoom. In ‘Threatened Species’ the sequence opens with a view from space, “The view from above doesn’t belong to a god / but a satellite”, but by section 10 we have a microscopic viewpoint, “we examine the skin on faces / maps of blood vessels, craters for cells.” Much of the phantasmagoric vision of the poem is akin to that of Elizabeth Bishop’s poem, ‘Night City’, which carries the epigraph from the plane. As with her earliest work there is also a merging of the self with the environment: human beings in this poem and elsewhere in Mária’s work are also animals not separated from the environment. Often in her poetry the body becomes both exterior and interior landscape, a juxtaposition of macroscopic and microscopic vision akin to the hermetic doctrine of “as above, so below.” The extension in range of thematic concerns is complemented by a wider emotional variety. ‘Starfish’ hints at a history extending back into the Hapsburg era and the devastations of the industrial and age and the Holocaust. There is an even more savage dismissal than in Philip Larkin’s ‘Not the Place’s Fault’ with her last lines in section 4, “Here, in this little town my great- / grandfather once owned a pub and a cinema. / He drank them up before they were taken from him. / A second-class station. / Our train doesn’t stop here.”

The sequence ‘Poland’ has a comic episode with a would-be seducer of the protagonist making a spectacle of himself and hurling an intended gift to the ground in disappointed rage. Indeed a broadening in the range of feeling that her poems encompass is evident especially when one reads her latest collection, Imunita, published in 2016. The section titled
‘Key Indicators’ (Kľúčové príznaky) is effectively less bound together thematically as in Mária’s customary mode of working. The poems range from the horrific ‘Inflammations’ through the impersonal, ‘Case History’, to the visionary or hallucinatory, ‘Connection’, and sinister ‘Something Could Have Happened’ and ‘Meteor’ addressed to a six-year-old son with its unexpectedly tender conclusion, “Is the world so, as I see it? / Am I really / who I think I / was?”

With its ability to combine particular detail with visionary perception I read Mária’s poetry with the same excitement that I first read the English Metaphysicals many years ago.

After many years of working with my partner, Viera, who prepared the base translations for our many collaborations on Slovak poetry this is my first venture into solo translation. However, Viera checked my translations as I went along and pointed out errors as did Mária when I sent her the penultimate versions. I’m deeply indebted to both of them, and to the poet, Michal Tallo, who reviewed the final versions, for keeping me reasonably accurate and faithful to the original poems.

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Simply they’ve come out of the woods.
The whole herd slowly
setting out for the city,
Their hooves knocking
on the tarmac:
cars pull over,
they pour from the roads.

Roebuck and doe
have headed to the houses,
kneeling in front of gates,
folding their bodies on lawns,
pavements, roadway
and crossroads.
They bleat monotonously,
yet turn their heads away,
if someone wants to stroke them.

Every day
the new and new kind
lose their shyness.
They approach us,
look us in the eye,
lead us to the sea.

Without fear
together we stop to breathe.
In the City of Dogs

1.

Crystals grown too quickly to champ with teeth
scratch throat. with narrow fingers across
canvas voiceless retrace twists and turns.
local water next road: maybe according to old
secret recipe for a cleaning process to preserve
sludge. smell – survive survive, smell cheese
fish and small stains on surface: nothing
else, yet delicious food for dogs yesterday.
2.

mice also quick:
underground. in colour. under seats.
they seek food. between two trains.
utterly deafened: they follow – like you –
trembling wheels legs.
3.

last shells. from days previous. (cleaning process to preserve sludge.) in darkening mirror another of your faces.
each time belonging to a race they bewitch.
4.

you pity the slow, everyone, who paused, showed palm and naked forearm, everyone for whom private skin slid out from sleeves much too much for eyes. and if someone’s random smile rests on you, it stays random. that which you wear under your hair and here some so often address you over-familiar.
too long without measure: two three weeks like different species. while they blinked, it died out. Stumble against wall, forget in your guts. this i: let it fossilize. in Cuvier’s museum simulating body with spine in a crazy smirk.