

THE TASK OF THE WRITER*By Anton Viesel*

When I remember that at the tips of these words (tapered, and smooth as bone) are real things and real people, and that too often the people find themselves laced among the things, like mice caught between the wood and the steel, I remember to try to be more careful. Too often my words are ghosts, loose and shifting, hoping to avoid an unexpected glance. For – who would want to be the tailor to sew the soft grey fur into its own shroud? With what delicate knotted fingers? When the needle is clumsy and thick. So go slow and look to where your words end, where you hear neither a bang nor a whimper, but the speech of an everyday people. Look up and see, and you shall see: neither the Sword nor the Scales, but a woollen blanket and a splint.

Over its dearest acolytes writing exercises a tyranny of illusion: the fantasy of the power of the Word. Poets who believe the quickening waltz of apocalypse that drives the cadence of their verse is storming westwards over the horizon, in sharp materiality; who believe their poetic invocations to have the power of conjuring the real. Harmless magicians, silly as schoolboys. Draftsmen sit in air-conditioned hallways, knitting in close diagonal ribs, where the slant of the outward is the reverse of the hidden.

Among the heavy folded fabric, the shard of wood – ambiguous comforts – there we find ourselves, a murmuring people. We sound the darkness with our mutterings in the hope of patterning space, and these the shapes that return to us, that we see in shifted echoes: the blanket and the splint. Whether to bury our dead or heal our sick – the shape of that is yet to be made. Darkling the world lies around us. Through its people and its things are laced fibrous cables that end – where the rainbow ends! Let us pull the crock of gold into the clearing with our old language, pulling at the cables that bind us in, and let us empty it into the stream. To expose in the water's sunlight with a careful word, a stumbling thought, the world that is already made. Both fool's gold and auric, we'll pan it to one side to amalgamate with mercury (god of thieves and god of commerce, hermeneutic mercury). What do you see inside this copper tube? What elemental indictment? We murmur towards liberation.

All too soon the written word slips easy along the waiting cables. Smoothly gliding in a lazy sway, following the grotesque slapping steel, which appears protean change, but is strong and heavy. It is the vicarious power of the Word that has led us astray. For it

is the master with which it makes its bargains that determines its force, the hulking vessel that stands at anchor in a deserted shipyard. An autonomous work is a peculiar one, strung out between two poles along which a fool dances. And all too soon our words, too, bind us more closely, keeping the ground at a careful distance.

But how then to write free words, words of liberation? When they must be mired to the eyeballs and caught in the warp of a world that has been shown its face in a fairground mirror and has found itself pleasing in countenance. Perhaps: the old language that fissures the current – a kind at odds with the curve of the mirror, whose seams run cross-wise to the surface. To hold up against appearance our own, concave and convex, to play with visions (slowly and cautiously), to travesty the language and ghost its words (delicately and suspiciously, suspicious of ourselves), to suppose worlds of disjunctive language that speak against the total world, whose hybrid forms are dissimulating masks of the same eternal readiness, the standing in reserve of a colonizing power. To smother its variety in a grey blanket, to break its dancing leg with a strong splint.

Lost by now at my looking-glass screen; no-one to blame. The buses go past at such a rate and every one a little poem that fills and fulfils, you and me. Only a captive audience can be subjected to time. Do I, then, save up for you a careless contempt? No. Listen to the cadence of these sentences. How they are, or try to be, careful, unsure of themselves, a little quiet and tentative. Dear reader, we're run through, the both of us (as they might have made us say on account of a movie we've seen or not even had to see), run through by the abundant and beautiful visions that are the surfaces of our world: surfaces infinitely alive to every pressure of feeling that may touch them. A strike at a mine in a country we've maybe heard of can shiver onto taxis images of a lithe neck adorned with diamonds. But before our slow and human brains have found ourselves at home, there in the darkly-lit apartment by the ice-cold champagne, the fabric of the net twitches and the space is transformed at the switch of a whip to a – what does it matter. Were we to turn away, what else would we see?

Before you put down what you have raised up, make certain there are no ghosts there that have chosen this moment to put on their old-fashioned suits to step out into the fresh autumn air. In the clear evening they may seem merely quaint, when it is so still and peaceful. Look closely at their shoes, the leather, the sole, the heel, see how he holds his chin, how he whistles as he walks, do you recognize the cut of that collar? These are no dear old acquaintances of your mild-mannered youth – these are the shades that tend the humming terminals, expectantly surveying their seated staff. You find them in your phrases, the awkward size of them. Yes, these

men who sup and who quaff in immaculate style, whose tastes are Greek as a column, whose appreciation of your lines and whose undoubted finesse are so welcome and refreshing after the grime of the world, with all its – oh all its things! These men who are ciphers of an impersonal order, with their ease have done what cannot be spoken (would it not be in bad taste?).

But before we decline the opening gambit, before we acknowledge that there are only ever two colours and thirty-seven pockets, and that the punters never win, we'll take a chance and play for the '0' (how the house will laugh!), trusting to its green rusticity:

“By hook or by crook I'll pull these old words out into the open, drag them to the clearing, stop my ears to their bleating and praise myself the while the good shepherd”. So saying, he sits himself down in a pastoral scene, a picturesque rock at hand as ever, foreground marked by neat perspectival tricks, background shading into blues, produces well-worn lyre and plucks, the goats forgotten where the darkness gathers. “Sing, muse, of the hackneyed phrase, of coinings smoothed featureless by the grabbing of gabbing generations, the moneyed voices honeying syrupy balm around the cut of words; and sing, sing, of where you hide among the strong currents that carry our language away from us, by which cluster of reeds you eddy the confusion that alone gives hope of the benevolent stream that will not launch any ships, not this year, not yet. Of that apparition, that dark ghost caught between the sun and the water, inversely struck on the surface of bright film, waking its vigil past our busy shoreline, tell...”

Who is it that speaks? The free voice, the unravelled spun thread that can flurry and hither to where it pleases? An illusion. The bondsman to a thin language.