THE WORLD SEEN ASKEW

*Sounds*, Vasily Kandinsky (141pp, Shearsman)

Shearsman have always had an interest in the past and in translation; their recent Shearsman Library venture, reprinting key texts from the recent past, in their original format, has given readers an original and intriguing take on one version of experimental poetry. *Sounds* is less innovative perhaps, but also immensely enjoyable: a reprint of a 1913 or 14 prose poetry volume by the artist Kandinsky, complete with woodcuts, a dozen of them in colour.

The poems, translated by publisher Tony Frazer, are vignettes, condensed and sometimes deconstructed short narratives, oblique and entertaining:

 You clapped your hands. Don’t tilt your head towards your joy
 Never, never.
 And then he’s cutting again with the knife.
 Again he’s cutting through with the knife. And then
 thunder rolls through the heavens. Who led you fur-
 ther in?

is the first half of ‘Way Out’. Elsewhere there are songs and a ‘Hymn’, longer prose works, all with a musicality of their own. In his ‘Translator’s Note’ Frazer makes a point to discuss the 'end-rhyme, alliteration, assonance, repetition and, very occasionally, metre’ of the originals which he has tried to reproduce ‘as far as possible without damaging the text, albeit not always in exactly the same places as the original’. For me he’s done a grand job, the texts ooze a kind of prosaic music.

Frazer also mentions trying to replicate the feel of the original book, which presumable explains the over-large and blocky type throughout this large format book, which slightly undercut the effect of the wonderful images here. Kandsinsky seems to be between artistic phases– there are both figurative scenes and dynamic abstracts here, the latter redolent of his most renowned paintings. In no sense are they ‘illustrations’ although they accompany the texts, they are visual poems in themselves, and the larger and the coloured works are especially striking.

This is the world seen askew, anew, even a century or more later. Kandinsky’s poetry is as original and vibrant as his art, the work of a keen observer:

 I saw all this from up here and I beg you to watch
 it from up here too.

is the conclusion of ‘Hills’. I’m more than happy to stand alongside Kandinsky and view the world alongside him, with the aid of this beautiful volume.

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