

*The Butterfly Cemetery. Selected Prose (2008-2021)*, Franca Mancinelli, tr. John Taylor (Bitter Oleander)

The Bitter Oleander Press have already published two books by Franca Mancinelli, a book of prose poetry and another of poetry, both translated into English by John Taylor, and this paperback of prose, poetic prose and poetics will only add to the evidence of Mancinelli as a major contemporary Italian writer.

The short prose which makes up the first section of the book is a surprising mix of the romantic, personal and gently shocking. Childhood memories and fairy stories turn into stories with corpses, frozen tears which form stalactites in the eyes, blood and portentous signs. Yet these are deftly written, engaging and lucid tales, written with an accomplishment and flair that does not linger on the darkness but works to produce worlds of magic and light, and of promise, even when things seem grim. Here's the end of 'Walls, Rubble', a story of claustrophobia, paranoia and 'not feeling at home': 'I believe this space will collapse: a cataclysm will fall on this apartment. I will live under the rubble in an air gap, until I reemerge, come back out free.'

If there's a problem with this I might challenge the vague use of the word 'free', which is in sharp contrast to the physical and emotional realities Mancinelli uses elsewhere in this piece. It's a problem I have later on in the book when she addresses the topic of poetry, but first there is a selection of what I take to be non-fiction pieces.

There are descriptive yet still personal responses to the hills, cities, the beach, Milan Central Station, along with a meditation on her given name Maria, which the author has deleted from her writing name. Physical description, memories, geography and the imaginary coalesce into vivid moments and portraits of place, with a final, lengthier piece, 'Living in the Ideal City: Fragments in the Form of a Vision', emerging from contemplation of an unsigned painting in the Ducal Palace of Urbino. Again, there are some vague phrases I would question, such as 'unstitched by wide rips of emptiness' as part of a response to having her backpack stolen at the station. The same story, early on, also uses the phrase '[t]he law was to go, to follow the train timetable, the platform', which I wonder might work better as 'the rule' rather than the (I assume) literal translation of 'law'?

As I get older I am more and more fascinated by how others write poetry, and their creative process. Mancinelli's ideas are no exception, although at times I almost shouted aloud at some of her romantic notions of what poetry is! (I accept I tend to have a reductionist approach that starts from the notion of text and language as something to build, remix and collage with/from, rather than any initial desire of self-expression or shared emotion.)

Yet, we share many traits. I have never been taken for a traffic warden, but I too stop and make notes in the street (and elsewhere), just as Mancinelli does in 'Keeping Watch'; and I like her down to earth summary here: 'I am making a report, and delivering it.' I also understand the confusion and sense of being lost as one composes, shapes and edits a poem, but I reject the idea that 'poetry is a voice that passes through us' or the idea that she has 'caught something', both of which seem like a refusal to take responsibility for what has been written. Neither, for me, is poetry rooted in my sense of bodily self or 'a practice of

daily salvation'; and I do not believe that '[i]t is the forceful truth of an experience that generates poetic language.' I like it, however, when she writes of 'broken sentences', 'fragments', 'disorientation' and 'other meanings', although I do not believe poetry is anything to do with 'salvation' or 'transcendence': we experience and describe the world through language, and it is language we use to make poetry (and other writing) from. It's good, however, to be challenged and engage with what other authors think.

Taylor, in an intriguing 'Postface', considers Mancinelli's writing with regard to 'dualities of flux and the search for stability, using ideas of home and homelessness, place/space and elsewhere, highlighting the biographical, the physical body and notions of a more spiritual or metaphysical self, but also a more 'existential dilemma' and 'ontological resonance' dependent upon the invisible. He also unpicks the idea of the book's title, quoting the author, who explains that it 'is a place steeped in the memory of childhood, whose boundaries have blurred over time, and at the same time it is the space of writing [...]'. The butterflies of childhood have long faded and turned to dust, but Mancinelli's desire to make words live and fly again, informs her strange and original writing that evidence traces of both her and our being.

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[826 words]