

SWEET GIFTS OF LIFE

The name Bohuslav Reynek (1892-1971) appears between the wars in France, especially in Grenoble, where he lived part-time after marrying poet Suzanne Renaud (1889-1964) in 1926.

He was then known only as a painter and engraver, long before earning recognition in his own country. His earliest exhibitions, consisting of pastels and charcoals, took place at the Saint-Louis Gallery in Grenoble. Only one seems to have been held in Bohemia at that time, in Pardubice in 1929. Then there were none before 1964. Reynek painted the Provence and Tricastin landscapes around Grenoble, which he had discovered during winters spent in Dauphiné. After the war, his friends in the Dauphiné region staged shows in Grenoble of engravings, drypoints and etchings. Their technique was so personal that they later made him famous in Czechoslovakia and beyond.

Alongside his work as a painter, from his youth Reynek translated French and German literature by Trakl, Billinger, Rilke and, until the early 1950s, Charles Péguy, Paul Claudel, Paul Valéry, Francis Jammes, Max Jacob, Georges Bernanos and Jean Giono, whom he had met during stays in France. He also introduced most of Renaud's poetry to Czechoslovakia. It was not discovered in her homeland until much later, when the critical edition of the *Œuvres complètes* came out (Romarin, 1995 and 1998).

Reynek's work as a translator, an ambassador and missionary of French letters, and marriage to Renaud, a poet, allowed him to acquire a deep knowledge of French poetic language. In France few knew that he was himself an accomplished Czech poet, recognised in his homeland, where he weathered all the political upheavals of his age. Written throughout his life, his poetry—thirteen collections in all—left a mark on the conscience of many poets of his time. Conversely, the works of certain Czech poets, such as Halas and Holan, inspired him and his wife to translate them into French. They are known by just a few insiders. But Reynek's poetic artistry can be glimpsed in his letters in French to friends in Dauphiné, attesting to unbreakable ties with this couple of "transparent brothers", in the sense of Paul Éluard, which became painfully mythical after the events of 1938. Some of them are gems of prose poetry, where one recognizes the precision of the burin and the color of the monotypes that are so close to us, still today, in the many exhibitions that have taken place in France in recent years.

But Reynek's poetry found few French translators.¹ His ruggedly beautiful work remains absent from the Franco-Czech literary heritage. Mystery still shrouds a poetic language with an "exceptional structure where the foundations of Czech Baroque and folk culture are combined with an intimate, personal knowledge of modern letters, French first and foremost [...] A concrete language, at once simple, rooted in everyday life, and sublime."² If, as Michel (Jiří) Reynek, the poet's son, himself a translator, argues that rendering a poem from one language into another is traumatic, like crushing a shell, Reynek's poetry, with images and cascading metaphors set in sober, brief verses, ranks among the hardest to translate.

Nevertheless, that challenging reputation is fading. The few poems in this collection are drawn from Reynek's long creative streak from 1921 to 1969. They give the French reader a glimpse of Petrkov, his native village in the Czech-Moravian Highlands, where he lived and died in the solitude and silence he loved so much. His artistic visions populate these bleak landscapes: the Angel of Advent standing at the edge of a forest filled with love, the Virgin sitting in the yard with Jesus in her lap, Don Quixote wandering by, lost in the snowy field next door. Eternity kindly keeps watch beyond the frosty window. Sister Winter and Brother Wind, busily going about their tasks, are the artist's companions.

¹ An example is *Le serpent sur la neige*, a bilingual collection translated by X. Galmiche, Romarin 1996.

² Jan Vladislav: *Serait-il impossible de traduire la poésie de Reynek en français ?* in *L'Œuvre de Bohuslav Reynek. Une éclaircie au loin...* collectif. Romarin 2000.

Buds like children's golden faces, tears of divine pity, secret butterflies between the hands of autumn... The poet quivers with gratitude, accompanying these sweet gifts of life with his silent prayer.

Annick Auzimour

Preface to Bohuslav Reynek's collection *V nadějích samoty – Dans les espérances solitaires*, Bonaventura 2006.

