

Laudatory speech of the Jury Chairwoman, Małgorzata Szejnert, for Liao Yiwu

THE CORPSE WALKER

After the Tiananmen Square Massacre, twenty-three years ago, Liao Yiwu wrote a poem which marked the beginning of his hard lot as a dissident in China. The poem is addressed to the dead:

Let's go home.

Brothers and sisters, your shattered bodies littering the earth.

Let's go home.

We walk noiselessly,

Walk three feet above the ground,

....

We so wish to hide within a stalk of grass,

A leaf

The killed ones should return home. Liao Yiwu addresses them as a guide who shall lead them there. He enters the world of the dead. They walk together *three feet above the earth*.

The corpse walker returns in the book awarded today not as a vision but as a real person. Mysterious, grounded by the writer in events and customs of his motherland; difficult to understand for people stemming from other civilisational and spiritual areas. European or American reader of Liao Yiwu's book needs to exceed, with their minds and hearts, the limits of their own experience, in order to understand that what they are faced with is not a collection of stories on the brink of fiction but literary reportage. And then the unbelievable becomes believable.

The source of Liao Yiwu's stories lies in the conversations he had with people from the lowest levels of Chinese society. He meets them in jail where he spends four years

imprisoned for being a dissident against the system, on mountain roads he travels as a homeless flute-playing busker, in tea-rooms and pubs he works at, in his home village, in a public toilet, in slums, in front of the court of justice, in a market square where the unemployed await somebody to hire them. Within these outskirts, everyday life pulsates; nonetheless, misfortunes from the past still incessantly manage to rise to the surface of everyday life. Belonging to the past yet not bygone. Liao Yiwu's interlocutors are not energetic creators of China's new power; they are old or elderly people: tired, disappointed and lost, striving to tackle their lives in various ways – more or less abiding by law; orphaned, expropriated, famished, forced to years-long pointless social actions, to disavowing themselves and their relatives, to committing cruel deeds... and, in some cases, zealously participating in the abovementioned, in fact.

On the bottom of reality recognised by Liao Yiwu, the effects of the decisions made at some point by the central government may be seen clearly, scrutinized and presented in smallest details, as if examined with the use of a looking glass. Smelting of iron from household pots and pans, aimed at supporting Chinese industrial production, is not grotesque but dramatic indeed, as those were real treasures for a starving pauper; and the raw material produced in this way presented no real value. Cannibalism in the stories of Liao Yiwu's interlocutors was not a bestiality but an act of self-preservation, agreed upon by members of families; stronger children were saved from dying of starvation at the expense of the weak ones who would die one way or another. Public toilet was an enterprise selling the best excrements to the famous farm called the Red and Bright Commune; as well as a place of natural abortions and of hostile propaganda scribbled on walls; cleaned by university professors in their re-educational exile. At the very bottom, it is very plain to see that there was no escape from the decisions made at the top; one could not hide in a stalk of grass nor in a leaf.

New superstitions from the “Little Red Book” by Chairman Mao are accompanied by centuries-old ones, from the punishing power of which it is difficult to hide; equally difficult as it is to hide from the earthly power, the more that the earthly one was deified. Liao Yiwu presents how these two oppressive powers intertwine; like a snake, a salamander; a phrase from centuries back may influence the lot of a poor man, devoid of social support. Very often, the author meets future characters of his book while travelling in the mountains. He talks to them not as an accidental companion they happen to meet on their way but as one of them; the more naturally that his own life experience helps him

understand perfectly what they talk about, and this fact is enhanced even more by Liao Yiwu's ability to communicate with people in a natural and friendly manner, and by his warm sense of humour. He asks practical questions, answered in an equally practical way; and from the answers, images of truly unimaginable torments emerge. Liao Yiwu does not steer clear from irony and judges his interlocutors' deeds at times; and among them, there are: a trafficker in humans, denunciators and torturers of their own relatives. At times, the author reprimands them even for their deeds, and they accept it with no mutiny nor remorse as they were both tiny cogs in the monstrous machine crashing everything that's humane and the victims thereof at the same time.

Many characters from the book are people connected with death-related ceremonies: professional mourner, mortician, grave robber, Feng Shui master seeking out the best grave-sites or the title corpse walker. Liao Yiwu writes that the profession of a corpse walker is one with centuries-long tradition in China, dating back to ancient times; for if a deceased is not brought back to his motherland, as the custom requires, they become lonely, homeless souls. And since the roads were poor and insufficient transport was an issue faced on a daily basis, those who were able to afford it would hire professional corpse walkers, specialized in what they did. During resettlements, exiles and flights in Mao times, many people died far away from their homes. Sometimes, a faithful family wanted to fulfil their dead one's last will. And so, a specially trained strongman and walker carried the corpse on his back, under a black cape; the journey always took place at night-time, with the path illuminated by the porter's alternate. Such travel of a cape-clad giant accompanied by a light-bearing guide would sometimes last many days. Liao Yiwu describes one of them; one with a tragic finale caused by denunciation. The two walking a deceased woman were subject to an extremely cruel treatment as she was a nationalist's wife.

"The Corpse Walker", a book that in its documentary aspect is undoubtedly a reportage, is a great literary elegy in fact, the title of which may be related to the author thereof. Liao Yiwu, talking to his characters, accompanies ghosts, actually. These people, still desperately clinging to life, are in reality utterly devoid of strength of any nature; their weakness - both physical and moral - stems from poverty, humiliations, demoralization, loss of faith in what they used to believe in. The author listens attentively to those survived poor people and gives them permission to speak. They would never manage to have their say by themselves as they do not fit in the landscape thought to be joyful and colourful.

They survived Maoist government but even doing their best to keep their serenity and working hard to patch their lives, they still bear the stigma of posthumousness; the country they live in lost at least forty million of its inhabitants as a result of terror and famine.

In our praise for Liao Yiwu's book (the Jury got acquainted with the Polish translation), our appreciation for two translators is contained, namely Wen Huang and Agnieszka Pokojska. Wen Huang, who translated the book from Chinese to English, collaborated with the author on selecting stories to be included in the translation, chosen from the original edition (twice as voluminous), and on adapting them in a way which would enable American and European readers to grasp their gist, keeping at the same time the author's personality: his empathy, humour, realism and magical imagination. The book's publisher, Czarne, used the version created by Wen Huang, which was translated to Polish by Agnieszka Pokojska. The Polish edition is noteworthy for the living language the translator used; it is precise in conveying Chinese realities and appeals both to popular and very demanding readers. The Jury appreciated the value of the work of both of the translators and decided to divide the prize for translation in half. Had the publisher wanted to work with the Chinese original of Liao Yiwu's book - the Jurors were aware of this fact - we would have to wait for a Polish edition for many more years. The Jury wishes, however, to expand this opinion, quoting one of the Jury members, a prominent translator, Anders Bodegård, who said:

Kapuściński Award for literary reportage is a generous Polish award. It is open for books translated to Polish; and those make up the lion's share of the nominated titles indeed. Therefore, translation is an essential engine of this competition. Jury found Liao Yiwu's book to be the most valuable literary reportage, which met strong competition from the 72 books submitted this year. I do agree with this decision but I still believe and emphasize the fact that it should be an exceptional situation in the Award's history. Otherwise, we risk that, in order to make their work easier, publishers will prefer English translations, the language being a lingua franca. Yiwu's work was translated from the original version to German and French as well. If there are no translators in Poland fluent in a given language, they should be educated. Only direct translations of great literary works may truly enrich literature.

Liao Yiwu's stories, just as it was in the case of the two great books awarded in the previous editions of our competition: "The Antelope's Strategy" by Jean Hatzfeld and "War's unwomanly face" by Svetlana Alexievich, present sufferings and crimes which shall

not be forgotten. Self-preservation instinct requires this.

Małgorzata Szejnert

Translation: Małgorzata Czackowska