Ru
by Kim Thúy, trans. Sheila Fischman

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

In 1953, Susanne Langer published Feeling and Form, a philosophical discussion of music which proved highly influential to the future development of classical music as its ideas were responsible for the way Elliot Carter would approach rhythm. She looked upon time, in music, as, on the one hand, the experience of passage and, on the other, as the experience of change. One way of conceiving of this dichotomy is to consider the former as chronological time, the time of the clock, and the latter as emotional time, the time of experiences, tears and laughter.

So why do I open this review of a novel with a description of time confined by Langer to music? It is because Thúy uses those two concepts in her Governor-General’s Award–winning book. Ru opens with what might at first be confusing to readers expecting to find prose. Instead, they encounter a passage that is better poetry than that found in most of today’s poetry books:

I came into the world during the Tet Offensive, in the early days of the Year of the Monkey, when the long chains of firecrackers draped in front of houses exploded polyphonically along with the sound of machine guns. (1)

Immediately, we are plunged into a strange hybrid: a combination of chronological time and myth. Northrop Frye, if he were still around today, would have a field day with this one.

Almost immediately, the flip side of time comes into play:

I was born in the shadow of skies adorned with fireworks, decorated with garlands of light, shot through with rockets and missiles. The purpose of my birth was to replace lives that had been lost. My life’s duty was to prolong that of my mother. (1)

Never before has language been used to portray experience in this manner in a novel (actually, given its overall length combined with the length of some of the pages, a novella). Love finds flower in both familial love:

My mother often put me in situations of extreme shame. . . .

For a long time, I thought my mother enjoyed constantly pushing me right to the edge. When I had my own children, I finally understood that I should have seen her behind the locked door, eyes pressed against the peephole; I should have heard her talking on the phone to the grocer when I was sitting on the steps in tears. (20)

and in sordidness:

One night, as I followed into a restaurant a man with a slashed earlobe like that of one of the Communist soldiers who’d lived in my family home in Saigon, I saw through the slit between two panels of a private room six girls lined up against the wall, teetering in their high heels, faces heavily made up, bodies frail, skin shivering, totally naked in the flickering
light from the fluorescent tubes. Together, six men took aim at the girls, each with a tightly rolled American hundred-dollar bill, folded in half like a taut rubber band. (124)

Thúy does not spare her readership from the horror of her heroine’s experiences, the writing always evocative. Take, for instance, this passage concerning the death of a woman going to use the primitive washroom facilities of Saigon:

One of those women, whom I knew, died when she lost her footing in the toilet, perched above a pond full of bullheads. Her plastic slippers slid . . . She died in the family’s septic tank, her head plunging into a hole full of excrement between two planks. (39)

But even in such dismal situations as the plight of the boat people – those who fled Vietnam at the fall of Saigon and the abandonment by the American forces finding themselves floating in overstuffed, leaky boats where those who were lucky found a quick death rather than a death by dehydration or starvation or pirate attacks, Thúy doesn’t lose her ability to laugh at the human comedy evident even in this desperate plight:

In any case, since our escape by boat, we learned how to travel very light. The gentleman seated next to my uncle in the hold had no luggage, not even a small bag with warm clothes like us. He had on everything he owned. Swimming trunks, shorts, pants, T-shirt, shirt and sweater, and the rest was in his orifices: diamonds embedded in his molars, gold on his teeth and American dollars stuffed in his anus. (42)

The human comedy extends to Quebec and gratitude toward sponsors – the scenes of life in Quebec and life in Vietnam playing leapfrog throughout the book in a battle to determine whether chronological or emotional time takes precedent:

I have a photo of my father being embraced by our sponsors, a family of volunteers to whom we’d been assigned. They spent their Sundays taking us to flea markets. They negotiated fiercely on our behalf so we could buy mattresses, dishes, beds, sofas – in short, the basics – with our three-hundred-dollar government allowance meant to furnish our first home in Quebec. One of the vendors threw in a red cowl-necked sweater for my father. He wore it proudly every day of our first spring in Quebec. Today, his broad smile in the photo from that time manages to make us forget that it was a woman’s sweater, nipped in at the waist. Sometimes it’s best not to know everything. (24)

Ru is a read that will rip your heart out even as you smile and delight in the sensuality of language and get lost in the oscillations of time.  


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