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### **Veronica Smirnoff: Childhood, Nostalgia, Distance**

In *Poems from Exile* Brecht wrote: "I'm the one who always brought with him / a brick, to show to the world / what his home had once been like." Veronica Smirnoff has brought from her Russia nostalgic images of snow, of izbas, of animals, of icons. But in her delicate paintings, mostly tempera on plaster, there is also the sweet memory of her childhood and adolescence, which finds expression in the faces of her grandfather, the little girls and the other human figures that, molded by her imagination, resurface from the past. It is as if time flowed gracefully out of the tubes of paint to be fixed or its perfume were released from the bottle of memory in which it had been imprisoned.

Transplanted into a new land, into a universe of continually revived differences, expatriates (Veronica has lived in London and Vienna) tend to mimic their lost homeland, to reproduce the places they have left behind, to continue to think in their own tongue and to imagine according to the canons of their own figurative tradition. The wound of the separation from her world of experience and affections is transformed in her work into nostalgia (we always keep inside us the bell tower of our village or our town or the smoking fireplace that we see in children's drawings).

Our life is a continual experience of separation: from the body of our mother, from our parents, from our friends, from our own selves as they were in the past. And tries to get us used to it and come to terms with it, especially when the separation coincides with an irreparable loss. The existence of each of us is an alternation of separations and reunions, of breaks and mendings, of farewells to the past and discoveries of the new. It is as if we were incessantly being pruned by ourselves and by others, cut off from the house and country of our birth, isolated, pushed into our inner thoughts, polished (as in Veronica Smirnoff) or roughened by the pain of detachment.

The experience of separation is so charged and almost inexpressible that only art is capable of conveying it fully. It is, in fact, called on to operate on the terrain of what I would like to call "commonplaces." Resembling the squares or meeting points at which people exchange their products and work through their past, these should not be confused with banalities. Rather they are areas of extreme condensation and sedimentation of experiences and questions, virtually shared by all because they touch on common occurrences that cannot be sidestepped, although very hard to express in words that do not seem superficial or that verge on ineffability. Art on the other hand gives them a lucid, articulate, pregnant and, above all, communicable form. In the rituals of communication, these commonplaces constitute the point of equilibrium between what one is capable of saying and what, in itself, appears ineffable, but which can be understood almost instinctively by anyone who has gone through similar trials and is able to make the words of others fit with their own experiences. Paradoxically, the majority of people are not capable of expressing what is most important. As is said of dogs, all they lack is speech. Artists have the words and the images to express these commonplaces, in which all can then recognize themselves, in which they hear what is said about them or are presented

with images that are reflected in their soul. And sometimes they experience them with intense emotion in the form of a shudder, whether of explosive joy or aching sadness, as if the deepest chords of the soul had been touched and were vibrating in them.

However lucky we may be in our own life, each of us is fated to lose something, to be estranged from others and from ourselves. We are all, in fact, emigrants in time and every moment is the fragile bridge between the known that we leave behind us and the unknown toward which we are headed. For this we have as much need to remember, in order to maintain our identity, as we have to forget, so as to turn over a new leaf, to be able to start over after each discontinuity, however painful, in our existence.

Separation brings a break with the past, creating a vacuum that sucks us into it and threatens to make us renounce the intensity of the present. How can we staunch this hemorrhage of life? How can we handle the inevitability of loss? How can we replace what continually detaches itself from us? How can we live with the sense of transience, seeking ideally to block the *inreparabile tempus*? How can we avoid the menace of the approaching end? Baudelaire wrote: *Horloge, dieu sinistre, effrayant, impassible / Dont le doigt nous menace et nous dit "Souviens-toi! / Les vibrants Douleurs de ton coeur plein d'effroi / Se planteront bientôt comme dans un cible* ("L'Horloge," in *Les fleurs du mal*, LXXXV: "Impassive clock! Terrifying, sinister god, / Whose finger threatens us and says: 'Remember!' / The quivering Sorrows will soon be shot / Into your fearful heart, as into a target").

Veronica Smirnoff's painting delivers us from the feeling of loss and transience with a levity that might be called Calvinistic; it does not expunge the sadness but transfigures it, distilling moments of joy from it. Her figures float in landscapes of dream, as if suspended in the air, with pale colors and softened and vague forms. Only in her portraits, as if to emphasize the individual personalities, do the tints grow bright and the features well defined. Whether framing recollections or alluding to perceptual reality, her choice to remember makes pictorial memory the location for the preservation of absence and the possibility of its recall. To paraphrase a great poet and painter, William Blake, there are works that contain closed and limited messages, like the water in a well, and others that spill over and are constantly renewed, like the jets of water of a fountain. So Veronica Smirnoff's memory is alive: whoever looks at her pictures sees other images flow from them, by association, and hears the echo of other remote experiences.