**Zoran Music:  ‘Les paysages éternels silencieux’**

Ten years ago Zoran Music was included in a group show of Modern Italian Art with Morandi, Marini and Burri.(1)  Of the four he is the least known in this country, although the retrospective at the Sainsbury Centre and the Estorick Collection in 2000, along with Michael Peppiatt’s essays and interviews, have helped to expose, ‘one of the great undisclosed secrets of 20th - century art’.(2)  This is not so in Europe where his work was regularly shown in Italy, France, Germany and Switzerland, and was written about by, amongst others, Jean Clair, Roberto Tassi and James Lord.

Perhaps it is because he belonged to no movement, falling outside the familiar groupings of ‘Pittura Metafisica’ and the Italian Novecento, and remaining apart from the prevailing post-war currents of International Abstraction.  Zoran Music was also an outsider in a more profound sense.  He was not born in Italy like the others but on its Slovenian border, and despite settling for a long period in Venice always saw himself as a wanderer, a displaced child of ‘Mitteleuropa’.  He remained an exile all his life, and when he died in 2005 it was with the knowledge that the place and time of his birth nearly a century before had long since become a ghostly memory.

Yet it seems to me that it is precisely because, artistically and geographically, he remained on the periphery of the 20th century (a century irretrievably darkened for him by his experience) that his work now resonates in the post-modern era, exemplifying the artist in search not of a style or manifesto but of an identity.  He talked of his ‘incessant displacement’ between two worlds, ‘de Byzance at de Rome’, and the desire to recover (or perhaps re-imagine) the fragile ground of his own being was played out against the background, as he saw it, of two differing cultures: the Oriental and Occidental.  For Music the history of western art was,‘trop compliqué, trop baroque, trop theâtral, alors que l’art byzantin était allusif, réservé et que le drame qu’il figurait était tout interieur’.(3)

 What he was looking for in the austere spaces of ‘les paysages silencieux’ which became his chosen visual territory in the post-war years was a way to recall one set of memories while taking refuge from another.  There are two paintings in the Estorick collection - Horses and Landscape 1951 and Black Mountain 1952 - which reveal and record something of this process of self-exploration. In the first, we are looking at roughly delineated horsemen with their backs turned, their nomadic gaze moving, like ours, towards a distant mountainous expanse.  There is something deliberately archaic, both in subject and execution, a scene summoned from another time, and filtered through the artist’s recollection of the ancient frescoes and mosaics of Dalmatian monasteries.  It is a return to childhood, a place of origin and identity: ‘The Karst became a magic word for me. I thought it was paradise’.(4)

In the other, the spare lineaments of a black mountain rise out of a cluster of barren Sienese hilltops, their surfaces roughly patinated with dots and stripes.  The painting is stripped back to essentials, its desiccated surface indicating the passage not only of geological time but also of something else, something darker running through its bony fissures.  The mountain is a monument (or maybe a tomb), to a buried past and buried memories.  Its meanings remain allusive and internalised, their full force transmuted into the scarred rock face and cadaverous mounds.  The connection to his later work might seem oblique (it would be another twenty years before his recollections became graphically explicit in the series ‘We are not the last’), but it is hard, when looking at the picture today, not to sense it in the black mountain’s haunting presence.

Both places suggest a mountainous holyland, a place of hermits and wandering spirits. Music liked their solitude:

‘ I’ve always liked the most raw, barren landscapes... I like landscapes that are almost desert-like, that don’t change with the seasons but stay the same forever, like the landscapes in the Bible. I feel drawn to them, I don’t know why. It’s a need. But that applies to everything. I like things that I can see when I close my eyes, things that have been stripped down, with no masks or coverings or superfluities, things that cannot be reduced any further’.(5)

They were places he returned to often in different ways and at different times (for example, in the more abstract Terres brûlées and Motifs végétaux of the 1960s and 1970s). They hover between life and death, light and dark, presence and absence; ‘du vivant et du mort’, as Jean Clair put it.

‘In the end all you can really do is follow your own nature as closely and deeply as possible’.(6)

In the photograph the painter stands before the elemental landscape. The arid hills and stony outcrops appear empty and remote, yet beneath the surface (‘behind the eyelid’) they are suffused with deep memories and mythical beliefs.  For Music, ‘Les paysages silencieux’ found painterly form in the Karst mountains, the Dolomites, and the Sienese hills; for myself, its substance emerges from the vibrant history and living myths of the Cappadocian valleys, the sacred mountains of Tibet and the deserts of Australia and Africa.  At once real and metaphorical, concrete and spectral, each of these territories remains ‘a document in cipher, a hieroglyphic text’(7);  each offers the possibility of drawing out of the ‘geographical unconscious’ the trail of one’s own presence.

For Music, such exploration did not lend itself easily to critical trends or national movements, yet it was (despite the periods of doubt he experienced) fundamental to who he was: the child, the survivor, wandering amidst memories and ghosts.  And the wandering goes on, in another time and place: it is the source of the life that feeds the painting that feeds the life to come.

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Notes

1Giorgio Morandi, Marino Marini, Alberto Burri, Zoran Music: Quatre temps, quatre aspects de l’art italien au XXe siècle. Galerie d’Art du Conseil General des Bouches-du-Rhone, Aix-en-Provence 2000.

2 Zoran Music. Introduction and interviews with the artist by Michael Peppiatt (2000). Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, Norwich & Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, London.

3 ‘too complicated, too baroque, too theatrical, whereas Byzantine art was allusive, reserved and possessed of a totally internalised drama’ (Zoran Music, quoted in Jean Grenier’s Music,  Le Musee de Poche, Paris.p.30)

4 Michael Peppiatt, Zoran Music. p.46

5 Ibid, p.32

6 Ibid, p.24

7 Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude, p.293