A Review of Chad Faries' The Border Will Be Soon

By Thomas Cooper

The Border Will Be Soon, a collection of verse and prose poems in the form of journal entries by Chad Faries, is a complex intermeshing of voices that entangles the deeply personal, frequently erotic visions of the poet with the harsh, often stark yet often tender perspectives of the inhabitants of the world he recreates. Rich with allusions from works as esoteric as Pound's Cantos and as familiar as the songs of Neil Young, the poems situate a distinctly American sensibility in the midst of a foreign world in crisis, the world of Serbia and Montenegro in the latter half of the 1990s. These poems explore the meanings and presence of borders (political, cultural, personal) and the ways in which these borders are transgressed through acts of intimacy and violence. Ever present is a sense of profound compassion and attachment tempered with anxieties of estrangement and incomprehension.

Perhaps the most moving, because it is the most jarring, poem of the collection is the first, entitled *My Hand Was Made Strong*. As the subtitle indicates, it is a poem in various voices, including that of an aged Serbian grandmother who speaks to the poet in broken German ("we stehen Sie?") and that of the granddaughter who speaks in disjointed English ("She apologized tomorrow morning but I couldn't forgive her./That hurt tremendously me"). These two voices, however, come as abrupt punctuations that almost seem to interrupt the many voices through which the poet crafts his own voice as a highly self-conscious effort at comprehension that projects its reference points (which range from French neo-classical painting to the Bob Marley allusion in the title) onto the world it seeks to grasp. Visions of intimate familiarity ("A hand was made strong pushing a spaghetti strap/off the bluff of her shoulder") clash with visions of estrangement ("*And all the places (or* trgs *they're called here) fill with people and many/of the streets too, all of them looking dark and sort of ominous*") and the triumphant metaphor of the title is invoked in a moving depiction of the failures of metaphor ("My hand was made strong drawing spirals—failed attempts at circles"). The tensions of the intertwining voices express the poet's frustration with the hopelessnesses of language ("She thinks I may understand, but all I know is language fails"), yet at the same time they create a moving depiction of language as a territory in which we words are used to palpate and negotiate the borders between ourselves and others.

As intimate and deeply personal as many of the poems in this collection are, they touch with stunning sensitivity on the tragedies of the political situation in Yugoslavia, or more precisely Serbia, in the latter half of the 1990s. It is a world in which an outsider cannot help but become embroiled, yet given the complexities of the conflicts he does so at his peril. To write with compassion about the sufferings of one community is often tragically and mistakenly understood as an expression of sympathy for one or another political agenda. In one of the prose poems the poet addresses the impossibility of this position:

> I have come to Serbia after the bombing to see my friends who had protested for three months in the winter snow of 96-97 against the Miloševič regime. I keep

> this writing at a distance from interpretation but everyone will think I am biased because I haven't the other names, Ramiz, Agron, and Hamdija, in my poems.

The poems linger over ironic moments that foreground the desperation of communities that are at once cosmopolitan and international yet utterly isolated. One of the prose poems notes that the Serbian family has cable television showing "all the different European stations, most in languages we don't understand."

As depictions of life in Serbia from 1995 to 2000 the poems in this collection triumph in part because they never resort to the evasive metaphors of hells and devils invoked far to often in the media. On the contrary the poet challenges those metaphors, insisting on the personal over the allegorical: "At the flooded border the driver turns to the backseat and says, *welcome to hell*, but I'm thinking of loving Ljiljana in the dark stone stairwell of Zagrebačka 6. We pass through without problems." This passage is reminiscent of the close of the Nobel Prize winning novel *Sorstalanság* (translated into English as *Fateless*) by Hungarian Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész. When asked by a journalist to speak of the hell of Auschwitz the protagonist replies "I [am] not acquainted with hell and [cannot] even imagine what that [is] like."

Faries' experiments in style in this collection are ambitious and striking in their range. He is unafraid of striking shifts in tone and constantly uses jarring enjambments to provoke his reader to rethink the logic of the sentence. The poems are interlaced with allusions that create a tension between the personal nature of the individual vision and the communal nature of language, a tension that is all the more moving in poems set in a region of Central Europe in which attachments to personal and communal identities were brutally exploited. One of the boldest and most haunting piece of the collection, the prose poem entitled *Statement of the Present*, is merely a rough English translation of a ticket issued to someone selling gasoline illegally, a common way of raising money in Serbia during the embargo. The individual tragedy evanesces behind the official language of the ticket, reproduced in a translation that foregrounds the impersonality of the language. Set alongside the other poems of the collection, in which a highly individual language pervades, this poem is a stark reminder of the potential impersonality of language.

As a collection of poems, *The Border will be Soon* is notable for its striking and often disturbing imagery and its sensitivity to the resonances of language. As a depiction of an outsider's relationships with a part of the world in crisis it is remarkable for its pathos. Unsettling and challenging, the poems contained in this collection are not to be read only once nor in isolation. The collection is perhaps best read as a single narrative retelling the attachments, desire, anxieties and grieves of an American whose life has become forever intertwined with the lives of people in a land both remote and, in part because it was rent by war, disturbingly ever-present.

After completing his Ph.D. in comparative literature and Central Eurasian Studies from Indiana University in 2003, Thomas Cooper taught in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of North Carolina for two years before coming to Columbia University to

pursue research as a postdoctoral fellow in the Center for Comparative Literature and Society. He has published numerous articles in the Journal of Hungarian Studies as well as translations of prose and poetry by contemporary Hungarian authors in several literary journals. He is currently serving as the Assistant Director of the Center for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia.