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The Midday Still Life: a first impression on reading Leonid Aronzon's poetry

The first poem of Leonid Aronzon that I read was '*Like music playing on a harp this pure April morning*'* (included in an as yet unpublished anthology of 1970s poetry compiled by the poet Olga Sedakova). And with this first line I entered a still world of contemplation, was held there, and came out feeling as though I had been in a place of bright sunlight. It was a place I wanted to return to, one which had the feeling of a place I had known in my childhood as siesta: inside, the cool white walls, a lull descends and finally a stillness; outside the sunparched earth, dust, stark shadows and light, no people. The moment of stilled life. I felt in reading this poem of Aronzon a free poetry – free of narrative movement, free from the rigour of verbs. But it isn't static; it is rather a stilled life, distilled even, pure life. Not a poetry of happening, but of creating. In this first poem, morning gradually drifts over to midday, the time of siesta. Here life slows to the buzz of flies, slips under the narrow shade of trees; here day almost comes to a halt and the poet is free to wander the landscape of the stilled world. The sun warms the shoulder, sunlight falls on the wall, the table, touches the sheet of paper and permeates it. It is the gift of light; here the poem is made.

Before reading any more poems by Aronzon, I had started thinking of him as poet of the midday still, an equivalent of sorts to Morandi as painter of the midday still. The English word 'still' is particularly pertinent here in all its meanings. Last year I came across a wonderful mistranslation of the phrase 'still life' when walking through a small town in southern France. A sign outside an artist's workshop announced 'Natures Mortes' and gave a translation into Italian, German, English and Russian. It would seem the Russian translation had been reached via the English, resulting in the startlingly literal 'Eshche zhizn. *Still* here is translated as *esche*, as in 'he's *still* alive', rather than the adjective meaning *tranquil* or *motionless*, thus when translated back into English it becomes a rather dramatic declaration: 'there is still life', a rejoinder perhaps to someone's denial of there being anything left to live for.

* The translation here of titles and lines of poetry is intended to be as close to the original Russian as possible.

When I came across the recently published collected works of Aronzon (Limbakh, 2006) and started reading the poems of 1964, my sense of a midday stillness in his work deepened. His poems seem to depict a life that is *still*, in both senses of the English word. There is the midday stillness of a moment captured by a contemplative gaze, but this is no surface snap shot of the moment. It is rather an excavation of the moment – we find that life has not halted after all, that there is *still* more, it goes deeper still to where all likenesses find their source.

I was overcome by that joy of recognition (of which Mandelstam speaks) when I read on to find the ‘midday’ setting coming to the fore in several of these poems, casting the perfect light in which to create a stark still life. Like Morandi, who populates his paintings with the same characters – bottles, vases, jars – over and over again, each time differing slightly, I discovered that Aronzon creates landscapes that cross from poem to poem, varying his use of the same words and images: light and shadow, expanses and depths, sand, river, the woods, flowers, dragonflies, the tracing of a name, children at play. In two poems written at the peak of summer 1964, the midday still becomes a backdrop for the poet sketching still lifes (*Midday* and *Dunes in June, in July*) In *Midday* the poet observes the life around him: “...but I didn’t enter their being. / I contemplated, looked on, nothing more.” Day lays open before him to be explored in its abundance of being, but at a distance. And as midday arrives, life slows down, becoming starker and stiller yet: “But in the sun’s blaze, the still and roses all took on still-life poses” (here the Russian adjective describing the ‘poses’ translates as ‘still’ or ‘motionless’). These are the conditions in which the artist may best view the still life. A transformation is taking place, revealing a world bursting with a “fullness of creation”. This is the place too where the poem is written; it can be entered, but must eventually be left: “I walked away through the gap in the trees / into the gathering of still bodies”.

In the following poem *Dunes in June, in July*, this sense of midday still life as the moment in its creation is explored further. Assonance abounds, vowels engender vowels. The poet-painter is seeking out – distilling – the life before him:

“yunoshi / vyodra, / sklonyayas, / okunayut v kolodtsy” (young boys, tilt pails, plunge them into wells). The search is on for the essence of the moment: does it lie in a pose, a word, a vowel? A lull falls: “But everything comes about in the stillness” – and the moment of distillation is near. At midday all things become transparent, like a heat mirage:

“the midday of summer is so weightless / that the honey-yielding flowers / all resemble saints’ faces”.

He sees through to the source of all things where likenesses abound, and here his desire of the previous poem “I wanted to become younger” – a desire to become part of this still life – is answered: “But however young you are, you lack the strength / to enter into the midday of these dunes.” He must turn away; but leaves having seen this light, this place, once more.