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“Antic Absurdity”

The Parson's Widow

Marja-Liisa Vartio

Translated by Aili and Austin Flint

Dalkey Archive Press

256 pages; paper, \$13.95

This is the first English-language appearance of what is considered Marja-Liisa Vartio's finest novel, which originally appeared in Finnish in 1969. Though I can't speak to the quality of the translation, I can say that the English reads smoothly, never blandly. Reading *The Parson's Widow* brought up echoes of David Mamet in his prime with its use of repetition as a rhetorical device, but this may say more about the translators than about Vartio. She conveys with exactness the social mores of a rural setting represented less and less frequently in Western literature in the last century (the powerful, and odd, fiction of T.F. Powys, who also concentrated on the harshness and the meanness of a small community's inhabitants, is a notable exception). Beyond the connections forward and back, then, and across languages, Vartio added to the tradition of writing on village life by speaking in a modern voice, and the novel has been highly regarded since its publication.

The plot is insubstantial. Other things are more important, and these are brought out by speech. Adele is the widow of Birger, and therefore has a certain status in the village. She talks to her servant, Alma, and occasionally to her son and members of her dead husband's family who live near her home, about her past, her perceptions, and her dead husband. Alma talks to, or is talked at by, everyone, whether or not she wishes to. (Late in the novel there occurs this passage: “By afternoon, Alma had forgotten the whole thing, or at least she no longer talked about it.” At this point, a reader will doubt that that qualification will hold true.) The recollection of the parsonage burning down occurs at the beginning. During the fire the parson rescues his stuffed bird collection rather than the church records, to the scandal of everyone except his wife, who is interested in the linens. We don't see this directly. Indeed, throughout there is very little direct action. When something does occur in front of our eyes, it involves Alma, and is often brutal.

Instead of presenting a sequence of physical actions, Vartio gives us character studies via a spiraling conversation about events, deluging the reader with points of view, dialogue, and variations on familiar stories. When Alma attempts to tell Holger, Adele's brother-in-law, something from her life, at Adele's request, it is aggressively appropriated by the parson's widow.

“My sister, she was the first one to see, she looked out the window, she was sitting behind the table and talking with Mother. She had dropped by for a visit home, she was already married then, but she did come by to see Mother every day. It was afternoon, like this, and home was still a home for both of us, but when that woman came...”

“Stick to the story. Go on with what happened when you saw them coming.”

“Sister looks out the window...”

“You said that already. Let me tell. ‘Who are these people?’ says your sister. And you go to the window and say ‘Who are they?’ And you answer: ‘Who else but them, that woman, she’s coming now, and the mistress of the Rämälä farm, and third, your brother.’ And you got all upset. Go on.”

In this typical passage, stories get boxed within stories while illustrating the master-servant dynamic as a form of narrative colonialism. Vartio is acute about power relationships.

One of her main interests is the ambiguity behind any word, gesture, or deed. Holger is husband of Teodolinda, one of the parson’s sisters, and is a lecherous man seemingly at the mercy of his wife, who keeps him in the basement. A reader largely has only his version of how he’s treated to go by, and must decide if what he’s saying is true. When Adele’s story concerning the division of property after her husband’s death is compared to those of her two sisters-in-law, the truth is impossible to locate. Alma can say one thing and mean another, or misconstrue what is said to her, which makes her an unreliable reporter. The village, a brooding and by no means uninterested or disinterested party, conjures up rumours about all of them. Adele’s in-laws are scheming (or not), watchful (or concerned), and difficult about supplying her “medicine” (or else not inclined to help her with her addiction) until Alma threatens to leave Adele in their care. Then we glimpse what may be motives, but like the truth, they slip away from us with each word added to the tale. We receive enough information to arrive at multiple interpretations but not enough facts to come to a decision.

Alma’s main task when she is first taken on by Adele is housecleaning. With the passage of time she is relied on, and takes it on herself, to watch over the parson’s widow (as custom has her address her employer), who is obsessed with the stuffed birds, to report to the in-laws what is happening with the family silverware, and to talk with Adele. This early exchange gives some of the flavour of their exchanges:

“How old were you, Alma, when that painting came into the house?”

“The parson’s widow knows how old I am.”

“Well, soon you’ll be thirty. How long is it that you’ve been in my house?”

Alma turned, giving her a hostile look.

“I mean, I mean I’m only asking.”

“Don’t you want to keep me on any longer?”

Alma always misunderstood her. How could she say it? She made another try.

“That’s ‘Jacob’s Dream,’ Alma.”

Alma gave the painting an admiring glance and then back to wiping it.

“Well, Alma, what I mean to say is that you don’t know how to handle paintings... or birds. I can understand that you don’t know how to handle birds but I would have thought you’d know you mustn’t wash paintings.”

What Vartio is able to do with apparently clear utterances, phrased in prosaic language (in this translation, despite the use of some formal speech), is achieve a certain level of characterization (without going too far in the direction of psychological exploration) primarily through speech, and at the same time prevent the reader, or make obvious to the reader, that, much like Alma and Adele, much can easily be misunderstood from the most innocuous expression.

Now, one reaction to *The Parson’s Widow* could be to throw it against a wall after the first few pages. Adele’s house and the village are claustrophobic, and so is the novel. It can come

across as static. The “antic absurdity” the translators detect is there, though not in sufficient quantity to ameliorate the gloom and tension. The writing not only possesses exactness, but is exacting. It’s possible Vartio slyly anticipated criticism of her novel when Teodolinda says this about some version of events: “In a word, all of it is nonsense, such inaccurate talk that even what was factually correct wasn’t really true.” To which Holger replies, “Certainly not accurate, or very badly exaggerated.” “And simply nasty,” his wife answers. The talk here, though it may be maddening, like Thomas Bernhard’s fiction, is not nonsense. Despite the hardships, interruptions, and disappointments, each character has sufficient energy to keep talking and to go on. And they do go on. Readers who persist will find the endpoint worth it.

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