Maria Takolander, *The Double and Other Stories* (Text, 2013)

*The Double and Other Stories*, the debut collection of short stories by Maria Takolander, is a wonderfully engaging collection of stories coming from the pen of a highly imaginative and scholarly writer. The stories in this collection are both pleasurable to read and intellectually stimulating. The collection contains twelve stories in two parts: the first part has eight stories including the title story, ‘The Double’, while the second part has four interlinked stories centred on an imaginary character named Zed Roānkin. One of the distinguishing features of this collection is the preponderance of literary allusion and intertextuality, as is evidenced by the titles of all the stories in the first part: ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’, ‘Three Sisters’, ‘The Double’, ‘The Obscene Bird of Night’, ‘Mad Love’, ‘Paradise Lost’, ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’ and ‘The War of the Worlds’.

Apart from the obsessive use of intertextuality and allusions, the stories also show a fascination with doubles, mirroring and pairings – both actual and symbolic, and structural as well as figurative. In the opening story, ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’, in which there is a strong oedipal element in the portrayal of the mother-son relationship, the indifferent and violent father is paired with the loving son who lends support to his mother and cares for the mother’s wounds, against the violence perpetrated on her by her drunk husband, his father: ‘I started cleaning the protruding thumb with the damp clump of paper. I noticed the breasts and nipples under the threadbare cotton of the nightie, and I saw that her lean thighs were smeared with blood’ (6); ‘I held Mum. I was taller than her by the time I was sixteen. I rubbed her slender back, my palms following the curve of her spine beneath her soft dress. She sobbed on my shoulder. I was trying to grow a beard, and I could feel her long hair getting caught on my cheek’ (17).

The title story, ‘The Double’, like many of the other stories, is basically a story of the migrant people, people who feel as if they have ‘lost half’ of themselves, who wish to ‘leave the past behind’ but are sent ‘things from the homeland’ still. In this extremely complex psychological story the female protagonist is haunted by her past that she sees mirrored in the black lake, ‘like a black hole in the centre of everything, drawing the world in’(55): she walks slowly, her left leg lazy, her left arm almost numb by her side. Half of her body seems to have given up. It is lucky, she thinks, that she has another half’ (62). Her sense of being haunted by memories and her present experiences that seem to be a double of her past, in which her past life gets inexplicably repeated and mirrored in her present actions, finds resonance in her father’s traumatic memories of the war in which he had encountered a dead man who looked exactly like him: ‘Their father had been dragging corpses out of the trenches, from amid the snow and the blasted earth, when he had turned over the body of a Russian soldier and looked into the face – caked in blood and soil – of a man who looked exactly like himself. Olen kuollut mies, their father says to the table on which he is leaning. I am a dead man.’(58) The use of structural mirroring succinctly delineates the father’s sense of being ‘dead’ that recurs in his daughter: ‘She wakes to a silence so complete that, for a moment, she thinks she might be buried. … She stops as she reaches the pump at the puddle’s edge and glimpses her reflection in the dark water: her unbrushed hair, her white sleepwear. Then she is leaning over the water, almost as if she has a nosebleed, and she sees that it is a stranger there in the mirrored surface, her pale face muddied, her body bound in white sheeting’ (66, 78).

Takolander’s language is poetic, her skill as a storyteller is highly commendable, especially in the psychologically complex, intensely intertextual rendering of the stories in the first part. Though the stories in this section are different from each other, they carry a sense of foreboding and silence with a touch of melancholy. The imagery employed is often stark and sinister, with barren landscapes
and dark waters (the black lake spreading open at the heart of things, p.70) with a touch of Conrad here and there. The mode of narration varies from one story to the other, with shifts in points of view, and in the use of first, second or third person narratives. The stark, indeed sinister, reality of contemporary existence that is portrayed so masterfully in the first section of this collection sharply contrasts with the fantastic, even absurd, note sounded in the second section that centres on the character of Zed Roānkin, made more conspicuous by his absence. The Roānkin sequence is characterized by an episodic structure and fanciful imagination, with a touch of satire and elements of magical realism that blurs and blends the fine distinctions demarcating the real and the surreal. This sequence of four interwoven stories, that border on absurdity, displays a playful waywardness and whimsicality reminiscent of nonsense literature.

In this fantastic series, the elusive character of Zed Roānkin and his supposedly ‘handwritten ten-page stapled A5 pamphlet’ titled The Roānkin Philosophy of Poetry, become the focal point for some absurdist but strangely relevant deliberations on contemporary status of poetry and the nature of poets. Another fictitious but symbolic title that recurs time and again in this section and thus accentuates the agenda underlying The Roānkin Philosophy of Poetry is Workplace Fraud, a book that can prove crucial in exposing the pretence and ‘fake’ talents pervading the world of contemporary poetry, as exemplified by the ‘inestimable’ Professor Nute Berger, and ‘the Berger School of monumental poetics’. The uncanny presence of the double is evidenced powerfully in this absurdist, and often hilarious, section not only through the pervasive, if mystifying, presence of the absent poet-philosopher Zed Roānkin, who haunts the dreams and memories of the narrator-protagonists, but also through the structural doubling of the two stories – ‘A Roānkin Philosophy of Poetry’ and ‘Roānkin and the Librarian’ – in which the narrator first searches for and then at last becomes the elusive poet-philosopher Zed Roānkin herself bringing the collection to a full circle. In The Double and Other Stories, Maria Takolander thus promises her readers a delectable fare of richly woven stories, some with psychological intricacy or an uncanny foreboding and others that are fantastic and ridiculous, but all with an ability to keep the readers intrigued and engrossed.

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