

On Hortense Calisher · Kathleen Snodgrass

PAUL GONCHEV, the hero of Hortense Calisher's twelfth novel, *In the Palace of the Movie King*, is one of her most elusive and intriguing characters. Like so many of her protagonists, he clearly sees the psychic enclosure he has devised for himself, all the while blind to the costs it exacts. In this novel, however, the boundaries are literal as well as metaphorical. Sixteen years before the novel begins, the Russian-born Gonchev leaves his adopted Japan for the "fiercely xenophobic" Albania, where, paradoxically, he enjoys enormous artistic freedom and creates travel documentaries that have earned him international acclaim. Since actual travel is forbidden, Gonchev—on the grounds of his movie kingdom, Elsinore—constructs eerily accurate scale models of the world's major cities. No Balkanized Hamlet, Gonchev is a man in love with film and film-making: he "Dubbed] his plateau Elsinore . . . for a once-glimpsed shot of an old location site in California's Santa Ana range, used long ago by the Hollywood he might now never see."

Gonchev is a vigorous man in his fifties whose life, private and professional, seems complete. His Elsinore, ringed by craggy mountains, is at a literal and metaphorical remove from Communist Party functionaries' interference. He is happily married to a beautiful Serb who abandoned a successful acting career for life with him in Albania; with their two teenaged children they enjoy certain perks usually allotted only to important Party members. Even the fundamental constrictions of Albanian life suit his nature and his craft: "Space confined—to the grown man this was what has been adventure. As in the fierce backwater of a country that had made travel a sin—and was craving it. On film." Significantly, it's not his "travel" films' realism that Western audiences applaud: "What they had loved in his 'cities' was his fantasy of them—the improbable edge of truth, from a bibliographer who had never seen the books. Fantasies that showed the free world what it was to be free."

In the Palace of the Movie King, by Hortense Calisher. 423 pp. New York: Random House, 1994. \$25.00

Still, as any long-time reader of Calisher must suspect early on, such a settled and manageable existence will always be undermined. Gonchev is the latest in a long line of Calisher protagonists—beginning with Pierre Goodman of her first novel, *False Entry*—who leaves a safe enclosure to face the world’s “treacherous glare.” As always in Calisher’s fiction, stasis is a false god, a sterile substitute for a vital life in motion. The French slang for a motion picture camera’s dolly—“*le traveling*”—occurs at the novel’s beginning and very end: an important thematic tag that reminds us of what, in Calisher’s fiction, lies at the heart of the authentic life.

Gonchev’s wife arranges for her unsuspecting husband to be kidnapped and forcibly taken out of the country. The destination she intends for him is Paris but he ends up in America, where he undergoes often bewildering initiations into American life; they are so many and so various that his near-demise in a California earthquake doesn’t register significantly on this novel’s Richter scale.

Of all of Calisher’s novels, this is one of the richest in incident and encounters. Gonchev has several American guides: an irritatingly enigmatic government man, a hard-drinking New York Irish newspaperman, and a beautiful, preternaturally self-possessed young Korean woman—Gonchev’s interpreter and lover. Each of his guides leaves Gonchev feeling “agreeably lost and about to be enlightened.” That “about to be” is an essential component: Calisher has always shied away from the conveniently illuminating epiphany. Throughout the novel, Gonchev refuses to be pigeonholed as a “dissident-at-large,” “a professional émigré” always at the ready to supply “talk-talk.” Already a curious hybrid before his forced emigration, the Russian-born, Japanese-trained, Albanian-adopted movie king works hard at maintaining a provisional status: “A visitor, vowing to remain one in spite of the role laid on him.” It’s fitting that his first American home should be a houseboat. Like so many Calisher protagonists, he relishes an in-between existence, neither fish nor fowl.

Calisher has dedicated the novel to “My Country—on the verge.” “Of what?” remains a question for reader and protagonist alike. What strikes Gonchev about America is that “this country is a palace the natives don’t see. Falling apart, but with such grandeur. . . . These streets alone will be my salvation—but first my studio. And how else would I study, except with that traveling box camera I was born with?” What he yearns for, in life and in work, is what he once tried to accomplish in his early films: “to give

shape to . . . that inner fairy tale of vision that comes naturally to a child continuously moving on.”

For a novelist known for her wonderfully idiosyncratic style—the long sinuous line so often juxtaposed with the abrupt fragment, the flat and slangy voice jostling the cultured and elegant—it may seem curious, at first, that the novel’s protagonist continually devalues language. This, however, is in keeping with one of the strongest threads in Calisher’s long career: a deep mistrust in language’s ability to do justice to our many-sensed apprehension of the world. Calisher imbues the protagonist of her first novel, *False Entry*, with a “monologuing eye,” a surprising syncretism that applies as well to Gonchev the film-maker and the hero of the moving picture that is his life. For him, the visual will always take precedence over the verbal.

At novel’s end Gonchev’s life seems enviably secure. He has been reunited with his wife, his daughter is enjoying a crash course in Americanization, and his son (all too chillingly at home in Albania) stays behind. Thanks to an art-loving billionaire, Gonchev can look forward to five generously subsidized years of film-making. At the same time, the novel ends with a directive against complacency and stasis: “When he has students again he will instruct them never to dream any city wholly, but to record wherever one is, while standing by the river of flux.”

In her twenty-first book, Calisher demonstrates once again an astonishing imaginative range. In earlier novels—notably, *Journal from Ellipsia* and *Mysteries of Motion*—she has written of marvelous journeyings but never before has she charted such an engrossing odyssey through so many varied worlds. This novel is yet another confirmation of Calisher’s intellectual and imaginative fearlessness.