

Stephen Romer : Poems

Yellow Studio

Vuillard's studio, Château des Clayes...
The corner is hard to judge
where the paintings in the painting are pinned
on the yellow wall (the *mise en abyme*
will be the end of me)

in this gleaming Institute of Donors,
this imperial temple
raised from the muck and blood
of the stockyards, out of hog-squeal
and cost-efficient slaughter

at the end of Millennium Park
where the towers crowd and crane
in an ogre's silver egg,
the concentration of capital
in a cunning device.

I stare with nostalgia, with homesickness
into Vuillard's yellow studio
and I know the place
absolutely, it is that humane
heaven of drapes and turpentine

where I shall at last lie down
on the lumpy mattress
with the stripy bedspread
below the little skylight—
my sweet, autarchic rest.



Getting Educated at MOMA

(for Masha)

You educate my gaze
in front of Matisse's
little rose table
that tilts unpromisingly and has
an unappealing object some kind of bag
un sac quelconque awkward
on its surface
this is discomfiting
and salutary

while the surface
of Monet's *Nymphéas*
is easy, viscous,
no structure no backbone
and the slime it disguises
oozes up from underneath
the seats we're sitting on
for this, apparently,
is the Bourgeois Room.

Either side, Bonnard's windows
with their framing devices
and loving views
give on to the good life
—all I ever wanted
or thought art was—
now disabused
by your grainy childhood
in a satellite of Leningrad.

But later, in your grey
and lemon outfit,
you describe to me
with a certain satisfaction
over the arugula
how one of your exes
compared you
tiresomely
to the nudes of Modigliani.

Poets in the Academy

'Again in the margins of library books earnest freshmen inscribed such helpful glosses as "Description of nature" or "Irony"; and in a pretty edition of Mallarmé's poems an especially able scholiast had already underlined in violet ink the difficult word *oiseaux* and scrawled above it "birds".' — Nabokov

Deep summer in the woods,
or the swamp;

the poets stumble out
with their incomprehensible produce.

Now they must lay it down
for comparison and analysis
as the maples start to burn
and the freshman snivels.

They must don white coats
and turn to the taxonomist

—Professor Jakobson!
Pray let us blow the dust off of you—

come stand outside the forest
with a map and compass

please to remind us
and our sullen disciples

what modes of address
we have employed

what salient features
we have moved among.

Dismantling the Library

The removal of the honeycomb
or the hornet's nest
layer by layer

is not what I thought, I did not say
this is my store, my sweetness,
my distillate, I did not feel
that here, at least,
I am lord of all I survey

but noted rather, dismayingly,
how many had lain unread
like this *Modern Turkish Poetry*
or this unputdownable Life of Tolstoy

and how even the lovely foxed familiars
retired behind their covers
as if I had to begin again
and come upon them as a stranger.

A Small Field...

A small field to autumn cyclamen
given up in slantlight, a thicket
of individual lights, the groomed balsam,
the barbed acacia drops her leaves
in a squall, strong weak light, October light,
the precious dregs, the late squibs,
the rapid dripping from the gutter.

A landfall of cloud, brushed up,
blue-violet breasting the Loire,
and the harvest brought down
from the hill, the camber running
reddish and ferment in the vats,
a sour tang, immutable summer
crushed underfoot now, as in *cru*.

Loire, August

Solitude here is not the driven wandering
through a city, but goes deep,
is actually sweet, and is wide as walls

over one yard thick: here a man
can feel the solid chalk beneath his feet,
and wake to the sound of woodpigeons calling
and a light summer rain on the sycamores.
Somewhere down there is the river,
where the terns skim and tumble
threading braids of sand, and fishermen
unchanged since the start of *congés payés*
drop a languid hook, and their womenfolk chat on
in the shade of willows or a white van,
and assorted children fill with their noise
a sunny abeyance: *Les grandes vacances*.

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Stephen Romer: A Poet in Translation

Raphaël Costambeys-Kempczynski (Sorbonne Nouvelle, France)

Born in Hertfordshire in 1957, Stephen Romer was educated privately before completing his studies at Cambridge. Where some British contemporary poets have followed general political trends and developed a devolved voice anchored in a questioning of regional and social roots, others such as Romer (with an upper middle class Home Counties status current trends may be suspicious of) have turned to the Continent as the backdrop to their quest for a centre out of which they can write. Romer's love affair with France is undeniable. His intricate understanding of French culture was recognised by Faber when in 1998 he was commissioned to edit their anthology of modern French poetry, *Twentieth Century French Poems* (2002). Talking about contemporary French exponents of the lyric form, Romer writes in his introduction to this anthology:

Renewing, so to speak, with the world, necessarily involves renewing with the shocks that flesh is heir to. In the poems of Guy Goffette, Paul de Roux, Gilles Ortleib and Paul Le Jéloux these new negotiations with the outside world often take the form of painful, tangential moments of exposure; their poems frequently record instants of bleakness in dreary towns, in temporary rooms, on the street, on a station platform...

These themes point to the huge influence of Pierre Leiris's French translations of T.S. Eliot, themes which also resonate in the work of Romer, himself an Eliot scholar. This may place Romer closer to his French contemporaries than his British ones. Romer's very first collection, *Idols* (1986), begins with 'French Translation', a poem that immediately sets up a tangential relationship between the poet and his inherited world, a relationship "at an angle to England". Out of literary kinship, the poet sees himself echoing through Stephen Dedalus back to the mythical origins of Joyce's alter ego's evocative name. Though there may be a desire to be translated into the French landscape, an escape from his home appears ultimately doomed. What France does seem to offer, however, is a

labyrinth in which the poet hopes that he will eventually find himself. Unfortunately for the poet, *un labyrinthe peut en cacher un autre*, and more often than not the embedded maze comes in the guise of an encounter with a beautiful and exotic girl. Twenty years on and these themes still drive Romer's work as the new poem 'Getting Educated at Moma' testifies. Here the poet may find himself in New York, but Bonnard's "framing devices" offer a view onto a world known to the poet, and this is the knowledge that experience offers over education. In the end the habitual sense that slime is rising to engulf the poet is a gut feeling that his relationship with this Russian doll was but another distraction. But does the poet have the "structure" or the "backbone" to disentangle himself from the situation?

French place names, names of artists and writers, appear as touchstones in Romer's poetry, allowing him to move from the personal to the general, and from there to reconstruct himself. At times, a change in language allows the poet a transpositive precision: the urban taint of "*congés payés*" does not hold the same history as the notion of 'paid holidays' for the fishermen of 'Loire, August'. At others, a shift from location to relocation introduces a journey from the physical to the metaphysical, a shift that is instrumental in the passage from a France tied up in its own geography to a France of the mind. More often than not, the poet manages to escape the traps laid by these embedded labyrinths even though he knows the risk he is running is high, as he admits in his reflexive aside in 'Yellow Room': "the *mise en abyme* / will be the end of me". Unfortunately, on other occasions the poets Francophile pastoral visions fail to attain the synthetism of Vuillard's later works and leave us wondering if we haven't already been here before – the poem 'Loire, August' is not a million miles away from an 'expats' view of rural France as expressed in popular travelogues of the 1980s and 90s.

The first two sequences of *Plato's Ladder*

(1992) offer perhaps the best examples of how the poet's very body seems caught up in travels through landscapes of the mind. Much as in the work of his French counterparts, the body of the persona in Romer's poetry is often lost in airports, train stations, and on trains, or rather lost in thought. The body is trying to remain both perfectly still whilst the mind is in necessary flux, the poet thus tries "to linger in perpetual motion" as suggested in the poem 'Adult Single'. The vehicle for this perpetual motion is often made up of encountered traditions, traditions that once mingled with those of the poet, allow him to better grasp and understand them. Romer revels in placing himself at the centre of his own inherited traditions and at the heart of others that he has chosen to explore. Through his work he is continually searching for diachronic associations that will help construct cultural and moral landscapes that superimpose themselves on the physical landscape he is observing. Romer has studied in depth the works of Eugenio Montale and shares with him, perhaps, the characteristic of wanting to transform emotion into landscape. This leads to the construction of a past that is fed by his own hinterland, his son's future, as well as the weight of history.

The final section in *Plato's Ladder*, dedicated to a year spent teaching in Poland during the transitional time of 1989-90, sees the poet grappling precisely with the awe of witnessing history in the making. Here the poet shows us his maturity, understanding that he is but a bystander, a part of these events for a finite time. In the poem 'A Letter from America', the poet both recognises and regrets the post-tourist quality of his experiences and perhaps shares with his colleague the sense of paradox of his situation:

I survived
 'my heroic year'
 as a Polish colleague put it
 with glinting irony.

There appears to be no doubt, however, that what Romer is trying to capture is a Poland of place, trying to translate the palpability of his experience. For this reason the poems seem more infused with a central feeling of stasis and

a peripheral one of movement, where history moves beyond and perhaps regardless of who and what it is leaving in its wake.

Romer's third collection, *Tribute* (1998), continues much in the same vein as the first two. The poet has continued his journey south and east, and the "whirlpools of the lexicon" have multiplied in a relentless need to respect "the untranslatable / sweetness and modesty and virtue" ('Primavera'). The second sequence of *Tribute* leaves Europe for India and focuses on the poet's journey across the sub-continent. In these poems Romer explores eastern philosophy, or rather, and as Thom Gunn put it when writing on *Idols*, the 'mythologies of the mind' borne out of his experiences of India. Like Poland, India appears as a fixed locus, but its lack of movement is different. Here, stasis offers a refuge in the Buddhist sense of the term. This refuge is a state which liberates the poet's mind, allows him to escape the painstaking routines of the quotidian, the doomed relationships, the continuous effort the body must make to move through the tangible landscape. It is from here that the poet attempts to reconcile his catalogue of physical experiences and a referential system based in transcendence. But as the voice in poems such as 'Emptiness glistens...' and 'Disciple' makes clear, the idea "that the emptiness / links everyone" is a difficult belief with which to come to terms. He has populated his landscapes with the ghosts of history, myths and ephemeral relationships, and it is this haunting that allows him to access cathartic re-enactment.

There is, perhaps, a more basic need for reconciliation in Romer's work: the need to reconcile his passion as an artist and his job as a lecturer. In the poem 'Functionary', Romer was already trying to come to terms with his position as a civil servant, and how hunger is dissipated by security: "Bless my briefcase, bless my parking space, / bless my badges of belonging." This theme is alluded to if not reprised in three of the new poems. 'The Poet in the Academy' remarks that the first encounter with the "sullen disciples" is earlier and earlier each year. All too soon the academic must leave that deep place of primitive belonging, to re-enter a world where the primal 'referential' will be theorised

into ‘metalingual’ obscurity (God forgive Roman Jakobson). But is this not the risk the poet must take? As the background note to the poem ‘Metamorphosis’ may suggest, the poet himself appears afraid his comfortable position will tarnish his reputation or at least tarnish his drive as an artist? Like Albert Mérat, the poet also had “his promising beginnings” but now finds himself in a “dreary sinecure”. How then to escape transformation into a still life?

Perhaps the greatest fear, then, is expressed in probably the strongest poem in this new selection ‘Dismantling the Library’ – the fear of always being the librarian and never the reader. The poem returns us to those embedded Borgesian labyrinths which reveal yet more unexplored territories. The lord of the manner is a stranger in his own land, it is through travel and displacement that Romer finds a haven where he can come to terms with the world.

Maybe it is because he is from the affluent middle-class and somewhat unfashionable Home Counties, that Romer is driven to the weight of Europe and its history. This in turn feeds his erudition, but his erudition is tempered in the English way, through a knowing sense of irony. And if irony is the dominant tone of his work, it is often used against himself. After all, the poet is fully aware that no matter the effort he puts in to constructing his own path, the journey will always be incomplete: if in his poems there are many departure halls, there are few arrivals.

Romer’s output has been slow but measured. Between each of his first three collections there was a six year gap. *Tribute*, however, is now eight years old and I for one am wondering not where he has been *at* during that period, but where he has been leaving *from*. Romer owes us a new volume.

Notes

Stephen Romer has been living in the Loire Valley, France, for the past fifteen years, and is Maître de conférences at the University of Tours.

Poetry collections:

Idols (OUP 1986)

Plato’s Ladder (OUP 1992)

Tribute (OUP 1998)

As editor:

20th-Century French Poems (Faber 2002)

SUBMISSIONS TO THE MESSENGER

Copy for the next issue of *The European English Messenger* 16.1 should reach the Editor by **15 March 2007**. It would be appreciated if material is sent with fairly minimal formatting in **Microsoft Word** and **Times New Roman 12pt**, and with **Endnotes** (rather than Footnotes) to: <john.stotesbury@joensuu.fi>