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Jeremy Noel-Tod remembers R.F. Langley

In the last poem that he published, ‘To a Nightingale’ (18 November 2010), R.F. Langley, who died in January this year, “stopped at nothing”—as he often did—and started to look. “Nothing along the road”, runs the opening sentence. Then the mind’s eye begins to uncloset what is there: “But petals, maybe. Pink behind / and white inside.” Word by word, the empty road is framed and sketched: “Nothing but / the coping of a bridge”.

More details meet on this concrete surface: “mutes” (bird droppings), moss, insects. By a play on words, which ties up disparate etymologies, “the coping of the bridge” is also the poet’s mind finding an image for its own patience, bearing with this emptiness just as the bridge bears the road, carrying its “nothing” to an unknown destination, “coping” with it by being something in between.

Speaking of the “Man of Achievement especially in Literature”, this is the quality that Keats called “Negative Capability”: the state of being “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason”. The poem searches for precisions around the edges, lighting on “lemon, I’ll say / primrose-coloured, moths”, which “flinch / along the hedge”, and “are Yellow Shells, not / Shaded Broad-bars”. But it aims further along the road, beyond “the nick-nack of names”, at Keats’ condition for poetry, in which “the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration”. Finally, it is the sound of a nightingale that brings release from wondering about “caterpillars which / curl up as question marks”:

I am
empty, stopped at nothing, as
I wait for this song to shoot.

To know Roger Langley was to learn the virtue of both knowing and not knowing about beautiful things. Ten years ago, I reviewed his *Collected Poems* in the *London Review of Books* (8 February 2001). The volume gathered 17 pieces from three decades of small press

publication. Here, suddenly, was contemporary poetry like nothing else I had read, with—as I wrote then—“rich, tightly-orchestrated diction and rhythms” which followed the “close mapping of subjectivity... relieved by moments of lovely objective clarity”.

Like a good young critic, I also entered my caveats, querying the author’s “occasional weakness” for “private surrealism”, and citing the lines “Is it a comma’s wings / make such silky noise?” as somewhat “less convincing”. In the letter Roger wrote after the piece appeared, he kindly waited a page to correct me. The comma—as I did not know—is a butterfly. So, too, is the tortoiseshell, which whispers its wings when it hibernates. The question, therefore, was not surrealism, but a speculation in natural history, and as much “earned from observation” as other lines I praised for this virtue (“the surface of fresh snow / is more like fur”).

Everything in an R.F. Langley poem, I came to appreciate, was earned in this way. Taking up the invitation to visit him at the Suffolk cottage to which he had recently retired, we drove out to see some of the bare, decorated medieval churches (Westhall with its poppy-head bench-ends, the nave at Blythburgh) which are another world of stillness inhabited by his writing.

Over tea, he showed me a new poem. It began with the almost-nothing of “A wine glass of water on / the windowsill”, only to spread out into thistle seeds, teasels, chaffinches, wading birds, south doors, sunlit tombs, and rabbits “kindling in their / burrows”—in short, the whole country we had just visited. In the last line, there was a bird said to know “it is pink”. I went away knowing that this wasn’t poet’s whimsy either: the male chaffinch has a pink breast, and its song makes the sound of the word too.

Roger once said that he thought of his characteristically extended lyrics as “odes”. In discursive form and feeling, they are. But the word is conspicuously missing from the otherwise familiar title of his nightingale poem. Instead, the emphasis falls on the travelling preposition: “to”. Keats’ ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ begins in the painful ecstasy of hearing the bird’s song, in all its “full-throated ease”. ‘To a Nightingale’

remains more watchful in the approach to revelation. Langley's nightingale sings only after the enumeration of other audible birds—a chaffinch, a chiff-chaff, two turtle doves—and makes a sound more particularly liquid than its “pouring forth” to Keats:

One note, five times, louder each
time, followed, after a fraught
pause, by a soft cuckle of
wet pebbles

And at this sudden beauty, the poem ends, with the whole of its scene re-seen:

The road is rising as it
passes the apple tree and
makes its approach to the bridge.

The poetic act, taking force from the bird's song, has been to reanimate the empty road. As 'Still Life with a Wineglass' puts it: “We speak / from out there and we keep things / alive”.

At Roger's memorial service, 'To a Nightingale' was read by his friend, J.H. Prynne, who followed it with another in tribute: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison'. The pairing was apt and acute. In the Suffolk church, Coleridge's sympathetic observations of the natural world took on a Langleyan shine. Any reader of the raptly attentive prose of Roger's *Journals*, published by Shearsman in 2005, will recognise his affinity with the poet who, sitting alone in his garden while his friends wandered the surrounding hills, watched

Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
The shadow of the leaf and stem above
Dappling its sunshine!

The emotion that moves both to such reflections is far-reaching. Coleridge's “conversation poems”—a revolutionary remaking of

the ode form in English—strive to establish an unprecedented intimacy with readers, through the surrogate of an addressee. So, ‘The Nightingale’, in April 1798, stops with “friends” (Dorothy and William Wordsworth) “on an old mossy bridge”, to reflect companionably on the “fast thick warble” of “delicious notes”. Roger’s poems were always sociable in their allusions to those he admired. But it is in their original observations of the smallest things that they are most intimate:

As well as the obvious celandine
open on the bank in Edward’s Lane, this
fribble of white flower is bittercress

he wrote in the late poem, ‘Videlicet’, allowing us to be nowhere but at eye-level with him by the hedge. By going into his “innermost narrowness”, as Paul Celan says, the poet finds the freedom to speak. For Roger this was true in form as well as content: all the later work is written in lines cut to exact syllable counts, a productive discipline.

For these reasons, the greatest pieces for me in his last volume, *The Face of It* (2007), are the two about a beetle and a wasp, ‘Depending on the Weather’ and ‘Blues for Titania’. Each comprises four stanzas of 19 lines with 11 syllables each. As Jeremy Harding has written, the form “braces the poem[s]”, which are a bravura display of everything Roger could do as a writer, working close observation of the territorial behaviour of a green tiger beetle and a sand wasp into a massive and rapid verbal wrestling to imagine the world from two perspectives:

to
be stitched up as them, as the beetle and wasp,
woven deep in and ready to work. But what
we remember, both, as anyone should, is
this shock of this buzz of these silvery wings.

In their deep, rhythmical weaving of disparate things, Roger’s poems—about insects, birds, carved and painted figures, as well as imaginary beings like ‘Jack’, the spirit of a sequence from the 1990s—are always

also intimate with the human world on their margins, the world that sees and writes them. Their author was a reader of psychology as well as entomology. The wasp is an erotic figure, whose easy, rising movement “unpicks her fabric / of yellow and black”. The fierce, frustrated beetle “peels a strip as he packs a shelf”: this poet has observed people at work in a supermarket too.

To speak of R.F. Langley’s greatest poems, though, is unnecessary. Everything he published was scrupulously finished and of an unwavering intensity. His two books collected 38 poems. Eight more appeared in the *LRB* and *PN Review*. I heard him say more than once that he thought the tally was enough. It wasn’t, of course. But there is a lifetime of looking, reading, thinking and feeling in these poems that will not be exhausted. An interview that appeared posthumously in *PN Review* gives a list of the books to which Roger returned. I sat down with one—Thomas Nagel’s *Mortal Questions*—the other day. The first essay, ‘Death’ begins with the question, “whether it is a bad thing to die”, and concludes that it probably is, on the grounds that “there is no limit to the amount of life that it would be good to have”. I knew the words already: they are picked out and placed at the centre of another poem on the careful accountancy of perceptions, first published in *PN Review* in 2001:

Sixpence a Day

The sea bulges or licks.
Cool as a lemonade.
A gull rides with its two
red feet, dib dab, beneath,
doing appropriate kicks.

So easily can the
low sun rearrange some
pegs, making another
countenance with its legs.
It switches hips, turns on

a toe. Marram shoves its
stems through silica and
an unidentified
spider starts to chew his
gloves. Now here he is, cream

spots on cinnamon. His
camouflage first becomes
his normal wardrobe, then—
Voilà! He's ablaze with
all his badges! Handsome

patches double on his
abdomen. You see the
sense of this, compared with
the mad quarrels in the
mix of flints. Bunch or run,

whatever he does is
excellently done. Gems
will be known and numbered
in the movement of the
secretary's watch. You

rip so you can match. A
nib makes flourishes with
an emphatic scratch. Where
nothing bothered any
more, draught boils a cobweb.

Forgotten by the world,
odd glossy bits blow round,
hang out, shake up. As keen
as mustard every seed
spits on his neaf. There seems

to be no limit to
the amount of life it
would be good to have, just
fingering the thickness
of a leaf. So what if

there are really no grand
narratives? Electric
peaseblossom flutters in
the surf on autumn nights.
Your rapier can still

spear the eel. It can pick
off this particular
caterpillar with a
flick. Your brain finds much to
amuse it in a bush.

You're the best friend of a
naturalist who hugged
himself, expecting it
to be a bear. Stand back.
Give it a chance to growl,

if it is there. The gull
glows. Dusk adjusts its grey
to that. Pit pat. There must
be huge commotion when
you touch shocks of grass. Eight

eyes. Brightest the golden
pair. A clink of chitin
as eight knees slightly clench.
This heartbeat underneath
this cardiac mark, like

a soft pulsation in
a trench. It creaks in the
thicket. Come quick! The room
is full of them, as big
as birds! The great mounsiours

in white neckties and with
their wings as floppy as
a melancholic's hat.
They hood and wink until
they eventually

clip the little ticket
which is shivering in
the muscle of your cheek.
Don't be dismayed. It's nine
o'clock. Lay all the stuff

you have collected on
the mat. Count the score. Do
the job slowly. Do it
well. Colour them in. Both
flick and flack. Maroon. Brown.

Ivory black. Once you've
got started, most of the
males will stop their flap to
settle down together
round the female on the

bell. O Peter Quince, it's
not knavery at all!
Cool as a lemonade.
The convenient place.
Just as you said before.

Author Info

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