

## BOHEMIAN RHAPSODIES

Roberto Bolaño. *Tres* (translated by Laura Healy). New Directions, 2011.  
 Jules Laforgue. *Last Verses* (translated by Donald Revell). Omidawn Publishing, 2011.

*Robert Archambeau*

Bohemia, that mythical land of outsiders, rebels, malcontents, slumming rich kids, and rent-grubbing scam artists, spreads its porous boundaries wide in both space and time, extending from Montparnasse to Greenwich Village to North Beach, from Thomas DeQuincey's opium den to Barney Rosset's office at Grove Press in the sixties, to a grimy gallery in a neighborhood too newly annexed to the Bohemian empire for the likes of us to know about it. Bohemia is often seen as a kind of effortless Arcadia, a patchouli-and-pot-smoke saturated world of laughter and lotus eating. But in two recent translations of books by Jules Laforgue and Roberto Bolaño, both of whose bohemian credentials are beyond reproach, we see something else entirely. In Laforgue's case we see a struggle to overcome some of the habitual attitudes of the bohemian poet; and in Bolaño's, a long struggle to endure the kind of alienation that drives the bohemian away from mainstream society.

Paris, as Walter Benjamin has said, was the capital of the nineteenth century—and it was also the capital of that great invention of the nineteenth century, literary bohemia. Though his sojourn in Paris was brief—only five years—Jules Laforgue was in many ways the perfect Bohemian. Born in Uruguay, he was a bit of an exotic; raised in a provincial French boarding school, he was already a veteran practitioner of the arts of brooding alienation and scathing satire when his family took him to Paris. He'd written biting parodies of the teachers and petty authoritarians of his school before escaping to what he hoped would be an artist's life in the city of lights. But the arrival in Paris almost coincided with the death of his mother, making the scene of liberation also a scene of loss. After a period in which he associated with Impressionists and wrote the melancholy, melodramatic poems of his abandoned manuscript *The Tears of the Earth*, he left bohemian Paris and took a position in Berlin reading to Empress Augusta of Prussia from French newspapers in the morning and French novels in the evening. A South American in France; a lonely boy in a provincial boarding school; an early sufferer of losses through death; an artistic bohemian in a great political and financial capital; a minor figure on the fringes of the

Prussian court—these roles were the perfect background for a poet whose *métier* was deflationary observation and a self-protective ironizing of his own emotions. Perhaps his most typical work can be found in *The Imitation of Our Lady the Moon*, a series of poems celebrating sterility and irony through the images of the moon and the sad Pierrot, the cynical, alienated clown of French and Italian art and literature.

Donald Revell, whose translations of Rimbaud and Apollinaire have earned him an honorable place in the pantheon of translators of French poetry, has given us, in his version of Laforgue's posthumously published *Last Poems*, a dozen linked poems that show us Laforgue at his least typical. Here, in poems written under circumstances that truly focus the mind (Laforgue was young, in love, and dying) we see the poet self-consciously struggle to overcome his own habits of reticence, to break through irony, pessimism, alienation, and cynicism, and arrive at a sincerity of expression made urgent by his situation.

The book begins, appropriately enough, with a long quote from *Hamlet*, in which we hear Ophelia speak of the prince, the archetype of all habitual bystanders trying to pull themselves out of the tangle of their own jammed-up emotions. The mystified Ophelia tells her father how Hamlet had grabbed her by the arm, stared into her face, and, with "a sigh so piteous and profound/That it did seem to shatter all his bulk" let go of her and fled. "This," replies Polonius, "is the very ecstasy of love." It's a perfect introduction to the poems, giving us both the figure of the self-conscious, emotionally paralyzed protagonist, and a sense of tragedy and inevitable doom (both Laforgue and Leah Lee, the woman of whom he writes in *Last Poems*, would both soon die of tuberculosis).

One of the great challenges for the translator of Laforgue's *Last Poems* is to capture the incredible rapidity with which the tone shifts as the poet tries to break the "sentimental blockade" that keeps him from an open expression of love. Revell manages—just—to keep up with the juxtaposition of the sublime and the disgusting, the flashes of hope, the fallings into disappointment, and the turns toward the brutal in passages like this, from the opening poem "The Winter Ahead," which shows us the sun, Laforgue's symbol for fertility and affection:

Tonight the dying sun sprawls on a hilltop  
 Turns onto his side, in the heather, in his overcoat.  
 A sun as white as a barfly's phlegm  
 On a litter of yellow heather,  
 Yellow autumn heather.  
 And the hunting horns call to him!

Awake!  
 Up and awake!  
 Tally-ho! Tally-ho! View halloo!  
 Oh sad refrain, you're finished!  
 And in a fools game!...  
 He just lies there, like a gland torn out of someone's throat,  
 Shivering, utterly alone.

The tonal shifts come almost line-by-line in these poems. Often we see Laforgue almost break through into open sincerity (“If only I had fallen at your knees!/If only you had fainted at mine!/I would have been the ultimate husband”) only to deflate his own sentiment with a sudden, incongruous comparison (“Just as the frou-frou of your frou-frou is the ultimate skirt”). At other times, he’ll confess love, only to turn bitterly against the woman to whom he confesses it (“Shut up! Even your eyelids are perjuries/....If I ever loved you, it was all a joke”). The overall sensation is of sincerity battering at the door of the castle of irony and self-doubt, yearning to be let in. In the end, sincerity does gain entrance, but not in a triumphant way: this is no Beethoven’s Ninth, with the stormy and troubled music driven away at last by a triumphant ode to joy. Instead, we get something in a minor key, a tentative embrace of what life can offer us in the shadow of death:

All right, then, we must love whatever stories we find  
 In the beautiful orphan’s eye,  
 O Nature, give me the courage and strength  
 To be old enough,  
 Nature, life me up!  
 Sooner or later, we all die...

Revell gets the arc of the series of poems right and, miraculously, manages to retain much of the texture of Laforgue’s poetry. Revell takes liberties with the French original in order to bring into English a sense of Laforgue’s *vers libre* metrical play, his enjambments, neologisms, and oddball syntax. Revell’s English alliterates, bursts into sudden, unexpected internal rhyme, and captures the juxtaposition of high and low idioms we find in the original—though nothing Revell can do will ever bring us back the freshness and surprise of Laforgue’s idiom, which was so deeply absorbed into Eliot’s modernism that it became a familiar part of almost all Anglo-American poetry of the past century. There are, inevitably, lapses. One might question Revell’s decision to use phrases (Roy Orbison’s “only the lonely,” say, or Kurt Vonnegut’s “so it goes”) that resonate too fully with twentieth century American cultural icons to fit comfortably into a translation of a book published in

France in 1890. And one should certainly question the homophonic translation of “Oh! que...” as “Okay!” Occasionally one wonders just how familiar Revell is with Laforgue’s work outside of *Last Verses*: when he translates “comme deux fous” as “like mooncalves,” for example, he’s not exactly wrong, but he seems unaware of the very specific symbolism the moon has in Laforgue’s poetry. But these are small things, and the occasional misstep is a small price to pay for a translation that makes the bold attempt to capture the sudden shifts of tone, diction, and verbal surface that made Laforgue a great innovator in French poetry, a major influence on Modernism, and a perpetual challenge to translators.

The three parts of Roberto Bolaño’s *Tres* present fewer challenges to the translator than do Laforgue’s *Last Poems*: where Laforgue is jumpy, full of rapid changes, and attentive to the scansion of every syllable, Bolaño gives us a flattened, plainspoken, prosy style. The style represents a deliberate move on his part: Bolaño follows his fellow Chilean, Nicanor Parra, in rejecting the hothouse Surrealism and rhetorical grandiosity of some Latin American poets for the “antipoetry” of the colloquial. Laura Healy, who translated Bolaño’s shorter poems, *The Romantic Dogs*, knows the idiom well, and restrains herself appropriately, letting the three parts of *Tres* (two sequences of linked prose poems and one long narrative poem) gain strength through large structures of parallelism, repeated themes, and narrative turns, rather than any Laforguean line-by-line linguistic flash and dazzle.

The first of the three parts, “Prose from Autumn in Gerona,” is an exploded or deconstructed short story in the form of prose poems ranging in length from a couple of lines to a full page. The series begins abstractly, with an author protagonist, a stranger, and the image of a kaleidoscope. The prose poems loop around a number of themes and images: an isolated figure in a seedy apartment, a soon-to-expire visa that gives no right to work, poverty, lost love, and the disappointment of a writer whom fame has passed by (the earliest of the three pieces in *Tres*, “Prose from Autumn in Gerona” was written in 1981, long before Bolaño’s astonishing launch into the international literary stratosphere). Elements of a plot slowly coalesce for us, and the kaleidoscope becomes an image for the coalescence, for the slowly changing formal arrangement of literary elements. Near the end, we find two short sections juxtaposed on a single page. One reads:

THE KALEIDOSCOPE OBSERVED. Passion is geometry. Rhombuses, cylinders, pulsing angles. Passion is geometry plunging into the abyss, observed from the depths of the abyss.

In the context of the series, this reads as a statement about the formalistic

satisfactions of art, about the paradox of purely aesthetic composition creating a kind of life, full of passionate geometry and pulsing angles. In juxtaposition to this we find another passage, one of the most realistic in the series:

THE STRANGER OBSERVED. Breasts pink from hot water. It's six in the morning and the man's voice offscreen is still saying he'll walk her to the train. It's not necessary, she says, her body turning its back to the camera. With precise gestures she shoves her pajamas in the bag, closes it, grabs a mirror, looks at herself (there the viewer will get a view of her face: eyes open wide, terrified), she opens her bag, puts in the mirror, closes the bag, fades out...

Pink breasts, not rhombuses: we're in the realm of life itself, and living passion, rather than the abstractions of form. One wants to say the juxtaposition of the two passages poses a problem as old as Yeats' poet's conundrum: a choice between "perfection of the life or of the work." But not so fast: these are the characters we've been reading about throughout "Prose from Autumn in Gerona," but now, with the woman's back turned to the camera and the man's voice coming from offscreen, we're experiencing them in one of the most popular, and most conventional, forms of narrative: the movie. What we're really being offered is a choice between the artist as formalist and the artist as the popular purveyor of romance: the bohemian's dilemma of whether to pursue *l'art pour l'art* or to bid goodbye to all that and pack his bags for Hollywood.

The second part of *Tres*, "The Neochileans" is Bolaño's pocket-sized *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and, like Byron's original, depicts a pilgrimage without a destination, a setting out on the road in disillusion without hope for transformation or redemption ("in a sense," writes Bolaño, "the trip was over/when we started"). A Chilean rock band led by one Pancho Misterio sets out northward into the South American hinterland, eventually crossing into Peru, where the lead singer falls into a fever, and the narrator is confronted by questions about the nature of the journey:

And if we weren't  
 In Peru? we  
 Neochileans  
 Asked ourselves one night.  
 And if this immense  
 Space  
 That instructs  
 And limits us  
 Were an intergalactic ship,  
 An unidentified

Flying object?  
 And if Pancho Misterio's  
 Fever  
 Were our fuel  
 Or our navigational device?

Here we see Bolaño at his most Romantic and bohemian: alienated to the point where he may as well be leaving the earth on a spaceship powered, and guided, by feverish dreams. Significantly, the passage's questions remain unanswered, and we switch to a scene of the impoverished, politically oppressed streets:

And after working  
 We went out walking  
 Through the streets of Peru:  
 With military patrols,  
 Peddlers and the unemployed,  
 Scanning  
 The hills  
 For Shining Path bonfires,  
 But we saw nothing.

There's something of an explanation for the naïve, hopeless, objectless quest of the Neochileans here: the Latin American world they inherit is one that offers little by way of hope, and much at which to despair. Where else to go but into Byronic disillusion?

Well, perhaps into literature: at least that's the proposition made by the final section of *Tres*, "A Stroll Through Literature." In these prose poems we see a series of dreams about writers, plus snippets of imagined erotic or *noir* episodes involving figures from Mark Twain to Georges Perec. We see literature as burden, as hope, and, in the following passage, as a dangerously volatile fuel for escape:

I dreamt I was fifteen and was, in fact, leaving the Southern hemisphere. When I put the only book I had (*Trilce* by Vallejo) in my backpack, the pages went up in flames. It was seven p.m. and I chucked my scorched backpack out the window.

Why does *Trilce* burst into flame? There's no literal explanation in the dream logic of the passage, and symbolic explanations seem ambiguous. Things become clearer when, near the end of the series, Bolaño revisits the image:

I dreamt I went back to the streets, but this time I wasn't fifteen but over forty.

All I had was a book, which I carried in my tiny backpack. At once, while I was walking, the book started to burn. It was getting light out and hardly any cars passed. When I chucked my scorched backpack into a ditch my back was stinging as if I had wings.

The books we carry become the things that burn and scar us—and those marked by literature are both cursed and, just possibly, blessed. In that image of a scorched, stinging back we have the poet as a marked man, an outsider bearing his particular pain. But we have, too, the potential (perhaps illusory) of flight. The passage presents an analogy to Baudelaire's idea of the poet as a grounded albatross captured by sailors, a bird whose great wings make him ridiculous and hinder his ability to walk: hope, for the poet in an alienating and damaging world, resides in the possibility of imaginative flight. This is about as Romantic an image of the poet as one is likely to find nowadays, and it's no accident that it comes from Bolaño, who led even more of a bohemian outsider's life than did Laforgue a century earlier. One rarely finds something as desperate, as raw, or as at risk of melodrama from the current crop of contemporary poets.