

Cigarette Ash
in the Hollow of my Hand

Stephen Romer, *Tribute*. Oxford, £7.99

Michael Hoffman, *Approximately Nowhere*. Faber, £7.99

If it can sometimes seem that English poetry (and for once one is being very precise: “English English”) has been losing out in recent decades to the poetry of other parts of the English language *imperium*—look at the treatment being meted out to poor Andrew Motion who might be thought deserving of congratulation for his subtle rewriting of the job description of Laureate to encompass the poeticising of national events rather than hired carolling to the Windsors—there are powerful suasions on the other side. The sneering at Motion represents the latest bout of English self-flagellation and it’s a *vice anglaise* it would be killjoy to censure (these gluttons of punishment, however, noticeably recoil from the pain of confronting some graver threats to the body poetic than Andrew Motion will ever represent). But here are two Oxford and Faber poets, both born in 1957, both racing at full fortysomething throttle, and both with more than a casual foothold in cultures beyond Little England—France in Romer’s case, Germany in Hofmann’s. Both suggest that there is indeed range, life and vigour in the poetic lists.

Romer’s new collection, his third, will not disappoint those who relished the lucid intelligence and dazzle of his previous collections, *Idols* (1986) and *Plato’s Ladder* (1992). This is a poetry which has not been told about the phenomenon of “dumbing-down” and which assumes its readers can take in their stride quotations from, and allusions to, Homer, Dante, Goethe, Verlaine or Nerval. Romer’s well-stocked mind which, as Thom Gunn observed of the poet’s first collection “opens up the imagination to mythologies of the mind”, makes no concessions to the Larkinian plain man aesthetic. Yet its springy delicacy of touch, exploring states of bodily and intellectual ecstasy (“delight that seizes the whole of your body” is a line with which one

poem characteristically climaxes), alive to the natural world as well as to the landscapes of the mind, lays no real obstacles in the reader's path. The "tribute" of the title is that due to love which teaches, in "Miracle, we say..." that the inevitable loss proves not that we are wrong to surrender to its sway but that "only the recognition has ruined us". The lifted tone of these love poems, even when they record failure and loss, is rooted in their affirmativeness. As the titles of several suggest—"A Lesson in Materialism", "Ideal"—Romer is a contemporary metaphysical, concealing philosophical perceptions beneath the sheets. Whatever lessons the mind may learn as it pays tribute to Eros, it cannot escape the tyranny of what one poem calls "the Terrible Crystallisation". Poetry of this sort—dandyish and shamelessly clever—can run the risk of seeming merely narcissistic. Romer, however, has always kept his attention focussed equally on the wider world. There are poems here, particularly in the third of its four sections, which engage in a more or less satirical fashion with contemporary society ("Functionary", "Linguafranca") and there is even a hesitant and self-doubting—Holocaust poem, "Exchange", recording the poet's encounter in Jerusalem in 1994 with a survivor. He worries at the tone of the exchange ("We might be exchanging / office gossip") and concludes that "There is something wrong / about this facility", a casual encounter across a divide of experience where "language, it may be, / is lying utterly". The scruple is characteristic of a poet compulsively alert to nuance and shade of meaning.

Romer's poem, "Fallacy"—about the end of an affair—asks how the flowers and trees, the ritual actions of the lovers on their "tragic walks", could not "give back our force as comfort, / how should they not glitter / alive with our excess love?". Such exaltation, such idealising excess, is not a characteristic property of Michael Hofmann whose trademark is bitter observation, disillusioned reportage, stark confrontation with the bleak look of things as they appear to be. His new collection, his fourth, confirms him as a poet of rancid urban reality, recording raw emotion amidst the grunge. His preoccupation with the relationship with his father, the German novelist Gert Hofmann, memorably and acidly etched in his 1986 collection, *Acrimony*, lingers on here, the collection opening with a 1979 poem, "Tea for My Father", which is much more direct and concrete in its address than a Romer poem would be. Direct and concrete also is the record of the disintegration of an old relationship and the adulterous beginnings of a new. No metaphysical niceties in a poem entitled simply, "Fucking". The poet—whom I have seen criticised for exposing his former partner to all this in poems first published in the *London Review of Books*—hardly spares himself in a self-portrait stripped of any redeeming panache: "I piss in bottles, / collect ciga-

rette ash in the hollow of my hand, / throw the ends out of the window / or douse them in the sink". West London bedsitter land, grotty interiors, drainpipes are all here but with the force of felt experience rather than as a Bohemian pose. In a recent contribution to a *festschrift* for Ian Hamilton*, Hofmann admired the poet's "intensity" and the way: "Each individual poem is pruned back to an austere and beautiful knot of pain". That touchstone of sincerity to the authentic emotional experience patently matters to Hofmann.

But one can't leave it there. Hofmann is more than the sum of his bleak notations. For one thing the range of tones is wider than I have been suggesting. Moreover there are poems here, like the splendid elegy for Joseph Brodsky, "One Line for Each Year of Life", the contribution, "Scylla and Minos", to the collection of Ovidian reworkings Hofmann edited with James Lasdun, *After Ovid*, and the free and flowing poetic letter, "Kleist in Paris", which show that his range is steadily growing.

Both these books are proof that English poetry has not quite yet reached the doldrums into which it self-indulgently wishes to propel itself. But try telling that to the knee-jerk jeremiahs.

* *Another Round at the Pillars: Essays, Poems, and Reflections on Ian Hamilton* (1999) ed. David Harsent, Cargo Press, Tregarne, Cornwall.