Tomasz Różycki and Major Jackson

Writing Is a Celebration

October 1, 2008

Irena Grudzińska Gross: Tomasz Różycki is a poet and translator who lives in Opole, Poland, where he was born. He has published five collections of poems; his fifth volume *Colonies* was nominated for the Nike award, the most prestigious Polish literary award. This would be one of his many important awards, and his poems have been translated into several languages. The first English-language volume of his poetry has just been published. Another important piece of information is that excerpts from his long epic poem were included in the final high school examination taken by all Polish graduates. He may be on his way to becoming a classic.

Major Jackson has two collections of poetry: *Hoops* (2006) and *Living Southern* (2002). He is the winner of the 2002 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Callaloo*, and in *The New Yorker,* among other literary journals and anthologies. He is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Vermont and a faculty member at the Bennington Writing Seminars. During the 2006-07 academic year, he was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University.

Tomasz Różycki: ***Coffee and Cigarettes***

When I first started writing, I didn't yet know
what poems would do to me, that I'd become
some perpetually sleep-deprived phantom
with see-through skin, that I'd wander around

the city on some kind of high and only go to bed
with the furious dawn. And at daybreak I'd still be
dropping in on friends, flat broke like a louse,
some kind of vermin, summoned in sleep

by a bit of bare skin or maybe a sigh. And, honey,
I didn't even know what these dumb poems
would finally turn me into and that you'd be the one
to summon me to life and that because of you

alone I would be visible, that I'd lie down beside you
and wait out the moment, till you drop off to sleep.

(translated by Mira Rosenthal)

Major Jackson: ***Cecil B. Moore***

1.

Gwen, I am glad you're not living at this hour,
  For we are like the kid pushed in a yard
Who pushes back, then finding his power,
  Becomes the bully with no regard
  For what hates he sows. How soon our scars
Fade. The light of an empire ages. Daily seas
Rumble below repeating man's history.

2.

September triggered a rash
  Of abuses, all around. I am concerned

For Langston's future. We are not rich
  Enough to avoid conscription. He'll earn,
  His stripes, I hope, by not harming
Other parents' children, but performing acts
Of diplomacy, which today smack

3.

Of the dress rehearsal before the attack.
  How would you have responded? Images
Of men and women beheaded or stacked
  Before a camera, the mental war waged
  In our name? Who foretold the carnage?
Or the beast beneath our skin? how we proclaim
Civility, then digitize the cave whence we came?

4.

Our psyche takes the beating, six hooded
  Iraqis lurk behind us in our dreams.
When the axe swings, we awaken, doomed
  To not hear the Sanskrit above our screams.
  My grandfather came on the scene the same
Year as you. Stunning to think of the horrors
Of the century in his head. In a corner,

5.

The child in him crouches as the room darkens.
  He was born to a world at war & expects
To die a night of bombs evening the score. When
  I fire-up my laptop & cam, he shirks
  & cannot take more of the world at work,
Enough electric spanking he seems to say,
Nor believes men on the moon, to this day.

6.

Question: How much headway can we take?
  Are we advancing faster than our blood

Courses? Much we've already taken
  At a lightning pace, over-flooding
  Perhaps what our brains can endure. You'd
Giggle at the breakthroughs of the past decade,
For one, robots disarming bombs in caves.

7.

The wireless world we live permits instant
  Admission. The Internet shrinks the globe.
We've hotspots to our bank accounts,
  The Hague, stores, our homes, I can disrobe
  On a beach and never cease the work mode,
Like registering students for my classes,
Or answering e-mails from lads & lasses

8.

We've developed at last alternative
  Ways to move our cars. Hybrid engines
Free us all the more from excessive
  Costs at the pump. In our fin
  De siècle despair of OPEC's siphoning
Of American pockets, I predict, once
We're through all together with oil, the only

9.

Vehicles left to fuel will be machines
  Of war, our children sure to become Lowell's
Ghosts orbiting forever on a big screen,
  A reality show we will likely sell
  To the public as a means of swelling
National pride,—in our time, a hollow value,
The gist zapped from the red, white, and blue.

10.

Of TVs, we hunger for bigger screens, better
  Sounds, XM & Sirius broaden

The waves with satellites and crystal-clear
  Tunes or the news. The man in Tienanmen
  Square and I can synchronize more than
Our thirst for democracy. We can get our fill
On Dylan, Coldplay, and Cypress Hill.

11.

Kids no longer devour dots. Gaming videos
  Turn them to fighters who hunt bad guys.
Fully armed imaginary worlds like Halo
  Insure no one different catches the prize.
  In Grand Theft Auto, they've even devised
Squalid streets that let you explore the thug
Within: soccer moms jacking rides for drugs.

12.

Computer chips are smaller than fingerprints.
  We've acronyms for it all: with GPS
You never guess where you're going. With Sprint
  Phones just about anyone can be a spy.
  Every cell is a cam, and every cam an eye.
Picture the universe through a single bubble,
Planets billions of years away through the Hubble.

13.

An unmanned spacecraft landed on Mars.
  iPods will never leave you without a song.
My students walk the quad like Martians.
  Biotech firms go cloning along.
  Stem cells can remake our bones strong.
We are mapping the human genome;
We'll soon design kids to match our homes.

14.

I looked you up this morning. Eighty-one
  Thousand results with audio links,

Biographies, profiles, and pics, your life summed
  & presented to the tyro in a blink.
  Substitute the Cartesian logic, I think
To "I Google, therefore I am," and you've
Uncovered our zeitgeist, the groove

15.

Of an era, our mark on earth measured
  In binary codes, not by deeds, which total
Many for you. So many claim your sway, treasure
  Your artful phrasings and praise, fell under
  Your spell like electricity to thunder.
I, like them, value you above all else,
Indispensable poet of the public's health

16.

I begin this stop all wrong: you *should be*
  Living at this hour. We need your bolts
& resounding poems like we need Sweet Honey
  In the Rock's sacred songs, a revolt
  Against plain figurings, new and bold
Metaphors to help us keep people always
In vision, to fight the corporate bug away.

IGG (to *MJ*)*:* The poem "Letter to Brooks" [a fragment of which we see here above] is political in a very direct way. It's not something that you do very often, I believe. Why did you write it? Whom do you represent? What does it express?

MJ: Poets are moved by either extreme moments of felt beauty or felt love and affection or, in that particular case, felt anger. I think that on that particular day that poem struck me or came to me. I wanted to write about the war that we find ourselves in. I was in Starbucks and there was the *New York Times* and there I was buying my latte and on the front cover was this kid who couldn't have been much older than my son and I thought about my relative leisure. This was a particular trigger, and my hope, or rather the feeling of being at a great distance, at a great remove, from violence perpetrated by the country that I live in, that I claim citizenship of. One of the poet's jobs is to articulate that sense of unease. So you're right; it's not something that I do frequently, but I think there are certain moments when poets should direct their attention and their creativity towards some larger purpose, and I happen to come from a tradition of poets in which that is not something that we separate - the lyric voice and political voice. It's all in this tradition of poets or lineage that I claim.

IGG: Could you name that lineage?

MJ: It goes all the way back to the great abolitionist poet, Frances E. W. Harper, whose poetry took on an oratorical, rhetorical function. With her poetry and also with her speeches she was articulating not only the plight of the Afro-Americans in this country but also the plight of women. I am thinking also about poets whose work on the surface does not look political. For example, Robert Hayden, who was deemed somewhat apolitical during a charged moment in American history in the 1960s and 70s. Or even today poets who are doing very interesting things on the page with language. There's something intrinsically political about it because they're taking the language itself, hoping to change structurally how we think about ourselves in the world, how the world is represented.

IGG (to *TR*): Of all of your poems that I know, none is as directly political as Major's "Letter to Brooks." What can you say about the relationship between politics and your poetry?

TR: Poetry is always a way of representing different adventures and misadventures of the soul. When politics attacks you and tries to change your life, you must say something, you must write it down. Poetry is something completely different from politics, but in such a situation there is a need to react. In my poems, rather than political subjects, there are frequent historical subjects. The history of Poland, of my family, of my tribe, and of my city is very important to me, and it is always there when I start to write, it is always behind me.

IGG: Would you be able to show us the lineage? Who are the poets that are hovering in the background, looking at you, trying to influence you?

TR: In Polish poetry, these are generations of Czesław Miłosz and Zbigniew Herbert, Miłosz and Herbert, Herbert and Miłosz. They are not the same generation but some of the greatest generations in Polish poetry. It's a very important influence on my poetry and there's always a sense of rebellion against their poetry, but also a need to continue their way of thinking and presenting political ideas. So, it is Herbert and Miłosz , and Polish romantic poetry.

IGG (to *MJ*): Do you feel that you are influenced by, or have a strong relationship to, any non-American poetry?

MJ: Yes, I was just thinking about it. There are poems that do not set out to be political, but end up being a statement of human resistance, for example by going local and writing about the particulars of the world. This pertains to Eastern European poets whose poems have a kind of metaphysical dimension through the small things. They have been very important to me and I teach Miłosz's "Song On the End of the World" just about every semester. I think I've acknowledged a Zagajewskian influence in public and that of South American poets. I wish the rest of the world knew that one of the interesting things about Afro-American poets is this kind of dialogue whether it's with East-Asian poets or Southern American poets. Afro-American poets have always been global because of the particular position they write from in this country. Whether it is Langston Hughes being celebrated in Russia or Asia or Amiri Baraka and Sonya Sanchez down in Brazil. I think also about the work of a journal like *Callaloo* - its editor, Charles Rowell works very actively to continue the dialogue that African-American poets have long been having with global poetry.

IGG (to *TR*): And what is your attitude towards this global dialogue? I need to add that Tomasz is professor of French literature and French language and a translator of French poetry into Polish. Has this been a vital influence for you? Is this a culture to which you refer? Are these the thoughts behind you when you are writing?

TR: I am surely influenced by French literature because I teach it and it's always behind me, but it is not clear to me what kind of inspiration it is. My inspiration comes also, for example, from Russian literature, from German literature, from Ukrainian literature. I think it's always many, many inspirations. And it is unclear how the inspiration works. I never know how important the poem I write is to me. It's a mystery, I think.

IGG: Both of you are poets and teachers of poetry and I wonder, are you teachers because you have to make a living, or are you teachers because you think people can learn how to write poetry? Or are you teachers because you are teaching a certain type of culture? What would be the ideal way of teaching poetry in an ideal global university or local university in which you could design your courses all by yourself?

MJ: I've been thinking about this a lot lately. The idea of an anthology is fantastic; you have this kind of meal after meal after meal. But I think then if I could just assign my students two poems a month so that would give them about eight poems to learn per semester, I mean really learn, learn them by heart, take them into their body, together with the historical and aesthetic circumstances around those poems. Because, despite what some critics say, poems are born out of a life in a particular period. Hopefully, those poems that I chose would teach them something about experiencing the world not just through language, but teach them how to see, teach them how to hear, teach them about ethics, teach them about anthropology, geography. Hopefully, there's something that they can take other than just sort of a mere encounter with language. So I would take probably eight poems and even visit the places those poems may conjure, either in a book or physically. I think that whole classes can be designed around certain poems, for example the wonderful poem "The Venus Hottentott" by my friend Elizabeth Alexander who is here in the audience. I think there's so much in that poem and in other poems by my friends that do more than just exist on a page.

TR: I hate teaching! I hate teaching. If I love a poem very much and this same poem is misunderstood by my students, it's very confusing. When you love something - and I think poetry is very personal - it is very painful when you cannot make somebody love it the way you do. But it's very wonderful when it works. It works for two or three students. Sometimes it works for the whole group but usually for two or three people only. It's very personal, I think.

Question (from audience): I have a question for both poets: You are poets talking about politics. When does politics actually affect a poet?

TR: If there is something on TV, for example, that makes me nervous, or in the newspapers, and I feel angry, that is when I am affected by politics. Feelings are a base for the poetry and you make poetry with emotion, with feelings and with words.

MJ: The writer and philosopher Albert Camus has this passage where he talks about the artist who used to be able to sit in a stadium while the little peons were being chased by the bulls and the artist can look up at the sky and look at the stone benches and write about that or paint that, and now the artists find themselves in the middle, down in the stadium being chased themselves. For me, it's a daily encounter. Also, writers and artists find themselves driven by the mystery of existence and so they are part of particular conversations, they are out in the world. I don't make a distinction as to certain moments, but just being able to sit here right now and have this discussion is in itself a political act. It's also part of privilege and privilege is about power. Just think about some of the kids your age or younger being cast into a war that they had no decision to be involved [in] or not.

Question: Mr. Jackson, from what you wrote, I would say that you are angry with technology, with the norms of society, or if not angry, disappointed with the way society has gone.

MJ: There's a lot to be said for progress and technology, but some of it is inane and one of the writer's tasks is to explore those emotions even if others may not agree. I was worried when there was public talk about whether or not we would have a draft. I have a son just slightly younger than you, he is fourteen now, and it's just stunning for me to think that he could find himself in a war that he doesn't believe in - not by his own decision - so yes, that does get me steamed up somewhat. But I think there's a lot to celebrate as well, and I think the mere fact of writing is a celebration, and I think it is important for artists and writers to explore the full range of their emotions.

IGG: It is painful for me as a reader of poetry that there is this big division between the language of politics and the language of poetry. Of course, the language of politics is in danger of being repetitive, and one wants to say something that is one's own, something that was never said before. We don't want to read the same things over and over. But in a situation where there is this incredible war, and we are every day exposed to horrible images, the question is of our responsibility. The avoidance of political language as the language of repetition is also an avoidance of the language of community and of growth. I would love for somebody to stand up and scream about it in one's own voice, in a very individual way, and very convincing and very citizen-like.

TR: I think that the language of politics and the language of poetry are two opposite poles. The language of politics is the language of community, which has nothing particular, nothing personal - it's transparent. Poetry has one thing to do, I think - to preserve language. So because of this opposition between languages, when we write poems, we write down our feelings and emotions. It's very, very personal, deeply personal. Politics try to make out of language something global and the only way to preserve our language and our culture is to make some poetry.

Question: Yeats says that we make poetry out of our quarrel with ourselves. I'm curious what the relationship is between the narrative "I," the speaker in your poems and yourself outside the poems, the "I" beyond the poems.

MJ: My poems are wiser, smarter, sexier than me. There's some point where you're writing and you're tapping into the whole wealth of your being and so there's a mythologizing of the self that happens at that moment. I make bad decisions in my life. The voice on the page seems sturdier and more exultant, and it is the same experience you have when you read a journal entry or something that you wrote five or ten years ago, something that is kind of permanent on that particular page. I don't think fiction writers should have all the fun, so I lie a lot in my poems and try to make sure that I'm not just a secretary to my life. I'm very conscious of the fact that there is a crafted voice, so to speak, in the poems and hopefully it's somebody that you'd want to go to a ballgame with or go to a march with.

TR: The "I" in my poems is sometimes a super hero and sometimes someone who is very, very stupid and I hope I am not like this person who lives in my poems. It's like an emanation of our, who knows what. When we sleep there is someone who starts to live in our place and starts to do something in our place. It's a person of dreams, a monster.

Question: I think my question is also about politics. I see that both of you are, in a certain way, realistic poets. That is, the reality of where you go and whom you see and what you do is present in your poems. At the same time for me, both of you are kind of profoundly displaced people so that you [Major] live in Vermont, and you [Tomasz] live in an apartment in a city which you write about and your family is from somewhere else. I feel that even this everyday relationship with gravity, even stepping up on the porch of your new house, even that is political because it is problematic, because it needs to be somehow domesticated. Is this something that I am injecting into your poetry or is this true?

MJ: Well, let's see, I guess I do sometimes feel like I am an outsider in Vermont, but the attention to the place also comes out of a particular aesthetic tradition or conversation that I think I'm in. That sense of displacement is a great position to be in. It is a kind of restlessness and unfamiliarity that puts you intellectually or physically in the position of Crusoe or Adam where you're discovering the places around you and you're trying to name them. My great fear is to write poetry of leisure and decay where there is a terrifying familiarity that enters into my work that doesn't excite me, doesn't excite my readership. It's a political act figuratively and literally to say that I will not have my movement in the world be determined by anyone else except myself both creatively and psychically and I think that's huge in terms of being free and being a writer, not having your agenda set or your movement set in the world.

TR: Displacement is very important for me because of the history of my family and of where I live now in Poland. My family was forced to leave Lvov and settle in new territory. But perhaps it goes deeper, perhaps it can be "genetic." It is a good position for a writer because even when you have homeland or hometown, a country where you have roots, every time when you write a poem you immigrate into the language of a new land created by yourself, and this position of a writer is always stranger even than the history of his family, I think. There is always emigration, always a new world, new territory.

IGG: That reminds me of a statement of Miłosz who wrote in one of his reminiscences that he was nostalgic already when he was seven years old. This may simply be the condition of the writer.