Roger Langley - an Appreciation

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CHARLES MUNDYE

Since the publication of his *Collected Poems* in 2000 Roger Langley's position as a poet of significant stature has been consolidated and documented, but his career as a teacher should also not go unremarked. I first met Roger Langley in 1985. I had just started my A-level studies at Bishop Vesey's Grammar School in Sutton Coldfield, and Roger, then Head of English, was running after-school sessions for anyone who wanted to think seriously about literature outside of the constraints of the curriculum. I went along, with a group of seven or eight others, and we started with this: 'What does not change / is the will to change'. The first text I studied as a sixth-former was Olson's 'The Kingfishers'. Langley took us through a vortex of the unfamiliar and (to us) new: the Aztecs, Mao, Pound, Heraclitus, Rimbaud, the problematic concept of civilisation, composition by field. We continued into Olson's prose, *The Maximus Poems*, Ed Dorn, and Robert Creeley. I started to get it. Here was someone who wasn't disconnected from the substance of his teaching. It mattered, and it was obvious that it was of direct relevance to the way he thought about the world and his place within it. By the time we reached Eliot's *The Waste Land* several weeks later it felt rather classical and fusty to our newly minted avant-garde sensibilities. We covered William Carlos Williams, more Pound ('this is why Pound is the centre of my universe'. How can a poet be that? What is he finding in these texts, why is literature this important?), Hugh Kenner, Eliot, Donne, Hopkins, post-Freudian theory (who is Melanie Klein? Come to think of it, who is Freud?), Adrian Stokes, Donald Davie. There were disquisitions on sculpture, architecture, and aesthetics. In the 'normal' classroom environment a throw-away remark illuminated Austen's *Mansfield Park*,which had been the subject of weeks of helpless scrutiny in another class, a remark swiftly followed by the injunction to read Willa Cather, his then favourite, as a kind of corrective to the cult of Austen.

Nearly every lesson opened a new area of pursuit, and gave new insight. He brought a poet's eye to Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, showing us the way in which the book is an embroidery of images and symbol systems, expounding on Stephen's aesthetic theory and mapping it onto his own. After a few months a smaller splinter group formed, and he asked three of the keenest amongst us to taught sessions at his house. For whole weekend afternoons we would sit in his living room, surrounded by cases of exotic books, discussing Wordsworth ('you've got to learn to be the gentle reader'), Crabbe (with disappointment, 'I think you might be a bit of a Crabbean, Mundye'), and Browning. He lent us his precious copies of Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience*, introduced us to Geoffrey Hartman, explained in passing why we needed to read Edgar Wind's *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, told us how we couldn't consider ourselves citizens of the twentieth century unless we were familiar with Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. I would cycle to Shenstone with one kind of world to inhabit, and then back up the hill to Sutton carrying another. Of course we took it all for granted: why shouldn't a teacher give up their weekend to talk to us about subjects we were barely able to articulate? He ran art history classes for General Studies, acidly remarking that the only knowledge not worth having was the general variety, but nevertheless ensuring that I know my rudimentary way around the Italian Renaissance. Much of what I think I understand about Shakespeare I owe to Roger Langley. I can remember sharing his excitement over Terence Hawkes's essay on the two historical valencies of the word 'love' in *King Lear*, an example of the kind of criticism that was particularly engaging because we weren't just covering material, we were learning what I now appreciate to be a sophisticated way of reading. We were beginning to recognise the particulars of words, their sounds, their etymologies and histories, their echoes and resonances, and how meaning is contingent upon all these aspects in interrelation.

It was impossible to pay attention to Langley without absorbing some of these insights and techniques of comprehension. I had studied O-level Latin, but I had no idea whether there was any point to it until Langley drew my attention to the ways in which words in literary texts are complicated, playful, deliberately ambiguous, ambivalent, and caught in any number of competing or confluent systems of meaning. So Skeat's etymological dictionary was added to the list of essentials. He taught us skills of close attention, of deep reflection, of the need to master the specifics before we should venture into abstraction (the Poundian in him).

Looking back, he is clearly one of the most important influences on my life. I read English at university because of him, I studied Ezra Pound as a postgraduate because of him, and every time I teach my own students I am conscious of an unmatchable role model. It is typical that I didn't keep properly in touch. I bought his books when they were published, and heard from one of his publishers how pleased he was that I had done so (the nature of the small press!). I alerted my friend Patrick McGuinness to his poetry, who helped bring about an interview and poetry reading on Radio 3's *Night Waves*, and then subsequently reviewed Langley's *Collected Poems* in the *Times Literary Supplement*. I was able to make a small contribution to that review. Knowing the landscape of Langley's Midlands poems I pointed out a contemporary ironic resonance in 'Matthew Glover', which describes an area now dissected by the M6 toll road. I was pleased to hear that Langley enjoyed the detail of the observation. The debt I owe will never be repaid, but it should be on record that his influence as a teacher is powerful, and will remain so for a long time yet.