



Arturo Di Stefano, *Michael Hofmann* (2012)
For an account of the painting, see page 204.

The Palm Beach Effect

Reflections on Michael Hofmann

EDITED BY

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First published in 2013
by CB editions
146 Percy Road London W12 9QL
www.cbEditions.com

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Prefaces, bibliography and compilation

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Printed in England by Imprint Digital, Exeter EX5 5HY

ISBN 978-0-9573266-0-6

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Preface

JULIAN STANNARD

In 1984 I fetched up in Genoa. I had been living in Milan for several weeks, in the apartment of Francesco Alberoni. I realised he was a writer (the author of *Falling in Love*, a columnist for the *Corriere della Sera*) only when I wandered into Feltrinelli's and saw an enormous picture of him, his latest book piled up beside it like panettone. One day I took a train to Genoa and got a job at the Faculty of Foreign Literature. I left my one decent pair of shoes in Milan. I had enough money for a second-hand typewriter. I explained to my Iranian flatmate that I was going to write poems. He handed me a crate of pistachios. With nothing but yearning, and removed from any poetic hub, apart from the city which had its own poetic of dilapidation, I sometimes treated myself to a *TLS*. It would have been there, I guess, I came across Michael Hofmann.

During the summer vacation I was for a while back in London. I went to Hatchards: '*Nights in the Iron Hotel*. Do you have it?' The assistant, not much older than myself, seemed happy. 'We don't right now but' – *sotto voce* – 'I have the book at home. I'll photocopy it for you. Do you have an address?'

Having lived in Piazza della Posta Vecchia for six months I had as yet received nothing through the Italian post. The bookseller's proposal, therefore, seemed kindly but fanciful. Sometime in 1985, however, an envelope arrived from Hatchards – photocopies, most of them legible. I walked up the marble stairs in a state of excitement. In a city of syringes, I had my first fix of Hofmann. In 1986, or 1987, I managed to buy a copy of *Acrimony* and by now the fix had become an addiction. At some stage, as Tony Williams says of himself in 'Hofmania', I must

have ‘learned “to manage” my condition’.

It is difficult to describe the power of that hit. Was there a singe of heat? There was an absolute knowingness, a risk-taking, an absence of flummery, an utter readability! By 1987 I had plundered the glass-cased shelves of absent professors, so my collection of poetry was almost respectable. I’d discovered the Genoese poet Giorgio Caproni – ‘Quando mi sarò deciso / d’andarci, in paradiso / ci andrò, con l’ascensore / di Castello.’ Here was a poet writing about the streets (named) I was walking down. As with Hofmann’s London, here was a poetic terrain which was entirely convincing. Mark Ford argues that Hofmann’s metropolitan poems are ‘among the finest London poems of our era’.

I ought to add that, as an undergraduate, I had met Fleur Adcock at a university reading and was impressed by the fact that poems might sound (almost) like ordinary conversations. I sent her poems to which she was kind enough to reply, so here too was a poet who was part of my hit-and-miss education. Adcock-Hofmann-Caproni, a weird trinity perhaps. Not one of them English, though ‘Englishness’ has not infrequently been the focus of Adcock and Hofmann’s writing. In any case, all of this was useful for an aspiring poet who’d turned his back on Thatcherland. You looked for writers who got under your skin and hoped for the best.

Genoa provided its own psychological geography. You didn’t need a classroom, you could look at ruined buildings and walk down rat-infested streets, what Dickens had recognised in *Pictures from Italy* as ‘the rapid passage from a street of stately edifices into a maze of the vilest squalor’. And, of course, one could escape to the coast, the Riviera of bougainvillea and oleander – exquisite, delectable, deathly. Everywhere, in fact, *la poesia*: Dino Campana, Camillo Sbarbaro, Eugenio Montale, not to mention Pound, Bunting *et al* and the poetic undertow of Shelley/Byron. Professor Bacigalupo hoisted his jib in the

Bay of Poets and conducted seminars off the fishing village of Zoagli.

In this improvised canon, Hofmann was by now centre stage. His poems from communist Europe, his London poems, his refusal to dance around the mulberry bush resonated with the somehow disinherited city in which I now lived. *Dépayement* seemed a gift, and his ease with crossing frontiers, his ready employment of German, his suggestion that an ‘English’ poem might not be written entirely in the English language, was not, in effect, completely removed from the modernist programme, even if he was seeing it through the Lowellian prism of the lyric – solipsism through the back door, or more brazenly, through the door at the front! If the young Pound was all show and orange socks, Stephen Romer gives us a description of Hofmann at Cambridge as the mysterious loner ‘with a black hat’. One imagines Hofmann, the dark prince, wearing a ruff, at the high table of poetry.

And the voice! A young man’s voice without the prevarication of youth, gleefully lugubrious, irreverent, insouciant! I took it with me through the *vicoli* of the city; lines slipped into my head (and remain in my head): if I found myself walking fast I was walking fast ‘to lose weight’, not, mind you, that it ever seemed to work. I have a memory of reading Hofmann under a high ceiling whilst listening to Leonard Cohen: ‘There’s a concert hall in Vienna / where your mouth had a thousand reviews / There’s a bar where the boys have stopped talking / They’ve been sentenced to death by the blues.’

The Palm Beach Effect was a necessity and we’ve been fortunate with our contributors – novelists, translators, editors, critics, academics, erstwhile students, friends of the poet, a gifted contemporary artist who has gifted us the cover image, and a platoon of poets. It felt especially gratifying that so many of Hofmann’s contemporaries were eager to contribute: a cause for celebration,

an acknowledgement of debt, a timely re-evaluation of a literary career spanning a quarter of a century. And gratifying too that the quality of argument should, again and again, illuminate and entertain. C. K. Williams admires the drive of Hofmann's critical writing, arguing that poets all too often put up with a level of commentary that is lame and wide of the mark. In these pages a community of poets from across the world has provided the critical and creative engagement Hofmann deserves.

And there's no lack of variety – essayistic enquiry, anecdote, reflection, observation, material from interview. The book transcends the tedium of pedestrian scholarship but will provide, *inter alia*, a lively document for future readers of Hofmann's work. Poets (one thinks, for example, of James Lasdun or Stephen Romer) who were sometimes the 'addressees' of Hofmann poems or were part of the occasion of the poem write from their perspectives; we follow the progression of the fledgling (if assured) Cambridge poet in the early 1980s to the greatly admired poet-critic-translator of the twenty-first century. And, thanks to former students at the University of Florida, we are given fascinating accounts of Hofmann the teacher. Now that we live in a world of workshops (is there no end to it?) it's gratifying to see how Hofmann can turn the occasion into an assault on platitude and bullshit. And poets have, thankfully, provided poems too; the gathering is distinguished and includes, among others, Christopher Reid, Sarah Maguire, Frederick Seidel, Durs Grünbein, Hugo Williams, Michael Schmidt, Andrew Motion, Robin Robertson, George Szirtes, Alan Jenkins and Hans Magnus Enzensberger.

Although the focus of this project has been the writing of Michael Hofmann, with more than one commentator referring to the *sine qua non* of Hofmann's poetic signature, it's worth for a moment considering the wider context. Jamie McKendrick compares Hofmann's resolute use of the 'lyric I' with the neo-modernist principles of J. H. Prynne's 'Cambridge School',

which was in the ascendancy when the poet was at Cambridge. His refusal 'to abandon a lyric tradition', in effect, might tempt us to position Hofmann (not, I suspect, that he would wish to be positioned) among the fractious tribes of post-war Anglo-American poetry. In simplistic terms Hofmann's lyric impulse seems antithetical to modernist 'impersonality' which scatters its legacies far and wide and sees its most exacting (and sometimes sterile) manifestation in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. Romer maintains that Hofmann has been central in establishing the anecdotal – anathema in some quarters – 'as a mode, perhaps *the mode*, of *fin de siècle* mainstream British poetry'. Hofmann's poetic cuts across, gainsays and confirms certain orthodoxies. His embrace of the author of *Life Studies* inevitably recalls Alvarez's co-opting of Lowell *et al* for his 'turbo-charged' *The New Poetry* (1962), which lambasted the pusillanimity of English Movement poetry (the 'gentility principle') yet which nevertheless represented several of the poets who had appeared in Robert Conquest's offending anthology *New Lines* (1956). And Hofmann's literary interests often take us to a European modernist landscape, and are at times drawn to what Iain Sinclair celebrated in *Conductors of Chaos* (1996) as the 'remote, alienated [and] fractured'. Poets this side of the Atlantic wishing to escape the condition of Little Englandism have typically looked to America; the question of their looking and the poets they seek out become emblematic – San Francisco? Black Mountain? New York? Hofmann's engagement with Lowell, Berryman, Weldon Kees, James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara suggests contiguous traditions rather than an all-conquering single tradition. And, within a 'British' context, it's useful that Romer should cite Paul Muldoon (a poet whom Hofmann applauds in *Behind the Lines*). If the Irishman is all 'linguistic euphoria', Hofmann is quasi-therapeutic by providing 'a handle on our own helplessness, our fecklessness and unease'.

I wanted to stay clear of the term *Festschrift* because it

suggested to me we were giving out a kind of Lifetime Achievement Award. It's true that Hofmann is now older than '[His] Father at Fifty', an age which might have several of us recognising the 'bleak anal pleats' appearing under our eyes. Yet, notwithstanding the development of his poetry in *Corona, Corona* (1993) and *Approximately Nowhere* (1999), I can't entirely separate the Hofmann of today from my memories of reading Hofmann in the 1980s, almost (if not exactly) a Rimbaudian experience that left a lingering appetite. The poet has translated prose voraciously but the volume of poems has not threatened to breach the levee. It is revealing, perhaps, that 'Broken Nights' (*Selected Poems*) should have Hofmann 'Groping for a piss', hence rubbing shoulders, as it were, with the Larkin of 'Sad Steps'. This *pas de deux* with the English curmudgeon might hint at poetic withdrawal, the subtle pleasures of parsimony; after all, the delight of a truffle lies, in part, in its rarity. Yet the poet has not yet reached a venerable age, and nor has he departed for the Horn of Africa. Hofmann's readers remain, as ever, in a state of anticipation.

Preface: Under Different Flags

ANDRÉ NAFFIS-SAHELY

It's easy to see why Rustam is the most popular character in the *Shahnameh*: when still only a boy he slays an elephant with a single blow before going on to spear the obligatory dragon and lasso evil demons like cattle. While Rustam performs only seven labours, unlike his colleague Hercules, even his horse is hard as nails, once even tearing a lion apart with his teeth to protect his master. Yet rather than the Persian Hercules, Rustam is the Persian Achilles. Both are near-invincible; both spent time in exile during their youth, seducing royal princesses and fathering sons they unceremoniously leave behind. Sons that are destined to follow their fathers into battle; yet while Neoptolemus fought alongside Achilles on the beaches of Troy, Rustam and Sohrab were to meet as champions of their respective armies, under different flags. Both men are determined to win: Rustam to protect his reputation, while Sohrab wants word of his exploits to reach his father's ears, whom he thinks is altogether elsewhere. After all, Sohrab has never seen Rustam and doesn't know the real identity of the man he's about to fight. The two champions wrestle, and just when it seems Sohrab is gaining the upper hand, Rustam stabs him in the heart. By the time Rustam realises his mistake, Sohrab has died in his arms.

Anyone fascinated by Michael Hofmann's poetry would be well served by watching *My Father's House*, which was aired on the BBC in November 1990. The documentary pits father against son, Gert Hofmann the novelist versus Michael Hofmann the poet. Here too we see father and son under different flags – as Michael was later to put it in 2008, 'it was as if we had divided the world between us; my father got prose in

German and I got poetry in English'. The documentary opens with Michael reading the closing lines of 'Fine Adjustments' from *Acrimony*:

It was a fugitive childhood. Aged four, I was chased
round and round the table by my father, who fell
and broke his arm he was going to raise against me.

We then hear Michael describe his anger at being left at boarding school in England, when after years at British and American universities, his father decided to return to Germany 'in order to live closer to his language'. This is another story where the quest, in this case the father's literary ambitions, triumphs over the son, who is left in the margins. At least Telemachus got to stay at home! The first time we actually *see* Michael in the documentary, he is wearing the black coat and fedora ensemble described in James Lasdun and Stephen Romer's essays at the beginning of this book. As he reads out his poems to an audience of Eton boys, the gawky, pasty teenagers stare in disbelief. When the floor is opened to questions, a student asks: 'Were you worried that your relationship with your parents might be affected by your writing poetry about them?' Michael hesitates and then replies, 'I think I was probably being a bit naïve . . . I thought the fact that my father was a writer would protect me from a non-literary response, but it didn't happen. It was better, more honest, maybe even more German to come to them with my concern and criticisms.' 'Criticisms' is one way to put it. There's no mistaking that the younger Hofmann is on a war footing: three minutes into the documentary we see a close-up of him in a barber's chair as his curly locks fall to the floor, as if he were one of the GIs in Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. All his life has been leading up to this point – to the catharsis of *Acrimony*, to the peregrination of the truth-telling child poet as he wages an emotional war with an often elusive father. The anger is palpable, but so is the affection,

as well as the curiosity. Sohrab dies in Rustam's arms because father and son don't know each other. In a way, Michael's poems about his own father were an attempt to get to know him; as he himself put it in one of his letters to Michael Schmidt just before *Acrimony* was published, Michael intended the poems as 'footnotes to his [father's] life and work', as if he were a scholar documenting an unsolved mystery.

What the documentary adds to the poems is that it provides a portrait of the emotional turmoil that is caused by the literature, but also what prompted such fury in the first place; Michael's last words in the documentary are: 'if you have the power to hurt someone, I suppose it means they still love you, or something like that, and I wanted to be assured of that.' Yet outside of the personal dimension, Michael's poems are themselves a superb documentary: they capture the smouldering sparks as fathers and sons debate the great questions of life. Through them, we see sons as they really are: volcanic, inappropriate, inspiring awkwardness and embarrassment in their fathers – fathers who despite it all tend to accord their sons a modicum of respect. After all, sons have every reason to feel aggrieved: they have not lived long enough to lose their ability to be outraged by the world, outrage that is often the only true engine for change: a chemical reaction that sees sons 'buzz' round their fathers 'like an electron', as Michael writes in *Approximately Nowhere's* 'Last Walk'.

I started reading long before I learned how to live; which is why I still turn to books first. Of late, I find myself re-reading early favourites, the great *Bildungsromane*, mostly either German or Russian: books like Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Novalis's *Ofterdingen* and Goncharov's *Oblomov*, surely the greatest anti-*Bildungsroman* ever put to paper. Unfortunately, *Bildungsromane* are often erroneously billed as coming-of-age stories, whereas they usually have more to do with disillusionment; the best of them gyrate around the most pressing question of our time: can individuals

truly fulfil themselves while simultaneously remaining part of an increasingly complex society? Most German writers I've read don't seem to think so. It is no coincidence that Günter Eich – whom Michael has translated extensively – concludes his poem 'Dreams' with the following: 'Be as sand, not oil in the thirsty machinery of the world!' This – earnest, foolish, essential! – obsession with peeking inside the machine is something at which modern German literature has excelled, thanks to the clear-eyed intensity with which it has denounced the widening chasm between individuals and society, that process of alienation whereby we become simple cogs. If we agree with Heiner Müller that *Germania* is where 'spear' (*ger-*) meets 'mania', 'a form of insanity characterized by great excitement, with or without delusions, and in its acute stage by extreme violence', then literature too, just like politics, is war by other means. This is a challenge Hofmann clearly accepts. In his poetry, people are often bleached, unhappy ghosts floating around the perpetually morphing, jagged metropolis; and since nearly all his poems are episodes from his life – and he has tended to publish them fairly chronologically – I think his work will stand as the finest *Bildungsroman* in verse written during the closing decades of the twentieth century: a poem on an epic scale, whose narrative stands out for its lapidary quality.

It is cause for hope in a truly cosmopolitan world to see so German a poet express himself so effortlessly (and inventively) in the Anglo-American idiom and carve out a crucial place for these questions in the world of English-language poetry. The German wunderkind as an English poet. It can't have been easy; wunderkinds usually have more to worry about than late-starters. Their work doesn't tend to age well: while young, their boyish charm aids them when in a tight spot. Old men, like Thersites, who point their accusatory finger are usually mocked and rebuffed. It seems we prefer our underdogs young.

★

A few words on the book: this is not a Festschrift; Michael has many years still ahead of him and is far from the point where, to borrow from Richard Wilbur, writers become the good, grey guardians of art; secondly, Festschrifts are sometimes rife with encomia, whereas I see *The Palm Beach Effect* as a space where Michael's friends, peers and admirers – new and old alike – congregate in critical tribute. As C. K. Williams, another of our contributors, put it in his book on Whitman, 'all great poems, by their very definition, by the way they colonise and amplify and enhance the music of our own inner voices [. . .] ask us to be greater than we are, and if we read them well, even show us how to begin.' Michael Hofmann's poems have rented spacious suites in my mind, and even if I wanted to, I doubt I could ever evict them.