O Resplandor
by Erin Moure

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

A new book by Erin Moure is always an exciting event in Canadian literary history. You never know what you’re in for or where you’re going be taken. All you know is to expect the unexpected – something Moure seldom fails to deliver.

The initial surprise is the voice of Nicole Brossard heard clearly echoing from certain passages, such as this one: “I stood before the screen of my own language. There was no remedy. Either I stood before the original work in its incredible beauty or I stood before the screen of my own language. Before this screen, I had no recourse.” (4) This is proto-typical Brossard. Another example: “Each time, time’s rupture must be admitted, for every translation destroys time. This is not ‘an impossible sentence with no meaning.’” (6) These are acknowledgements, an homage. Moure began her translations – and the third phase of her literary career – with Brossard’s poetic works, co-translating them with Robert Majzels. She has now become the centre of a group of poet translators in Montreal, of whom Oana Avasilichioaei, Angela Carr and Elisa Sampedrin are the leading satellites.

The second surprise is that, with this work, Moure clearly carves out a unique new area of literature – that of meta-translation. There have been predecessors, O Cadoiro and Expeditions of a Chimaera, co-written with Avasilichioaei and Sampedrin, but this new work is her most clearly definitive statement of this direction.

But perhaps the biggest surprise of all is that Moure has returned to her first two phases. The first, which began in 1979 with Empire, York Street, was characterized by what Doug Barbour calls a lyric/anti-lyric structure (although he never specifically included Moure within this field). This phase is represented in “Inheritance”:

Father my father died of dying
undied himself from my mother
even from me his daughter, he unlocked his shoulder-case
and self-undied. (9)
The second began with the publication of *Furious* in 1998, which won the Governor General’s Award. *Furious* was a transition that led to the radical changes of *WSW* (*West South West*). This was a time of extensive poetic exploration. We find this reflected in the retention of error in the last line of “Pietà” (12) “!flesruoy fo erac ekaT”.

*O Resplandor* progresses like a dime store mystery novel with the story centred in Bucharest (referred to by O. as Bucharesti) and on three characters – O., E. and M. The story, written in a poetic prose, tells of a search for identity, as this excerpt from Crónica Three demonstrates:

I couldn’t get around it. O. knew E.S. Not only that, but likely she had cooked and eaten a meal with E.S. in a concrete outskirt of Bucharest. Nowhere near a library. And who is that figure watching them both from the balcony? That third hand, O.’s hand, penetrates the photo, though O. is nearly completely obscured by the striding Elisa. I look down at my own hands, opening them. I will have to go back up on the roof and see her hand again, just to make sure. I have to find O. (31)

This blurring of genres is a new direction for Moure, one which she handles with aplomb. Within the blurring, Moure returns to a traditional lyric structure, demonstrating her chimaera, a chameleon able to move between multi-coloured branches. These passage from “My Fear” are exceptional from a traditional lyric perspective:

In time this temper yields
to a stirring in the blood
as i stretch out, old, limping (37)

The iambic trimeter of the first line dissolves into a near anapestic dimeter before these two metric patterns merge in the final line. The alliteration of “time” and “temper” plays with the vowel sounds, creating an internal half rhyme, while that of “stirring” and “stretch” shifts consonantal sounds so that the “t” sound in “stirring” is stretched from the “st” sound in “stretch.” Absolutely brilliant is the play of sound between “blood” and “old,” the prefacing of “old” with “out” launching the former into orbit while the return to the “m” and “p” sounds through “limping” firmly centres this orbit on this three-line sound fragment. This is a tour-de-force of lyric writing of which any darling of New Criticism would be proud. And yet, we find it here in the writing of one of Canada’s most experimental poets, who has provided us here with a sonnet of all things: the initial octet proceeding in end near rhyme couplets while free verse heralds the sextet.
Not long after presenting her reader with this traditional lyric, Moure blows that reader’s mind with “The Seized Elegy,” where ghostly murmurs of typing errors or other such devices surface like bubbles in a pond and we encounter such lines as “”””facin gyo uhand-firs tt oexplod eu sope n” (54) written in draft mode.

Lest the reader think that the poems in O Resplandor are culled from various points in Moure’s career, she has advised in an email that “the poems were written from early 2006 to fall of 2008 . . . about 2.5 yr period.” Still, she has returned to her past to create a new direction for the future. What will come promises to be exciting and unexpected. In other words, this will be typical Moure.

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for Malahat Review, Arc, Antigonish Review, Fiddlehead and The Danforth Review, in the U.S. for Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge and Galatea Revisits, and in Australia for Jacket.

Buy this book at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the link below):
http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/product/isbn/9780887848148/bkm/true/erin-moure-o-resplandor