

# REVIEWS

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John Hacker whose paintings are on the front and back covers of the Retrospectives issue.  
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Will Stone: A Tribute to W.G. Sebald

## Shanta Acharya

Shanta Acharya was born in India; she won a scholarship to Oxford, where she completed her doctoral thesis before going to Harvard as a Visiting Scholar. Her study, *The Influence of Indian Thought on Ralph Waldo Emerson*, was published by The Edwin Mellen Press, USA. Her latest poetry collection, *Dreams That Spell The Light*, her fifth, was published by Arc Publications, UK, in 2010. A widely anthologised poet, Shanta has published over 300 poems in major publications in the UK, USA, and India. [www.shantaacharya.com](http://www.shantaacharya.com)

## Indian Poetry in Translation

Rabindranath Tagore, *I Won't Let You Go: Selected Poems*, translated by Ketaki Kushari Dyson (Bloodaxe Books, UK; 2010)  
ISBN: 978-1-85224-898-7

Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, translated by William Radice (Penguin Books, India; 2011)  
ISBN: 978-0-670-08542-2

Kunwar Narain, *No Other World: Selected Poems*, translated by Apurva Narain (Arc Publications, UK; 2010)  
ISBN: 978-1-904614-81-4

The celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore's birth (7 May 1861 – 7 August 1941) has generated fresh interest in his poetry. A new and enlarged edition of Ketaki Kushari Dyson's translations of Tagore's Selected Poems, *I Won't Let You Go*, appeared in 2010. In a new translation of *Gitanjali*, William Radice renders with beauty and precision the rhythm and intensity of the Bengali originals. Tagore's original sequence of poems appears alongside Radice's translations, bringing the reader closer to Tagore's conception of the book.

These translations create a space in which Tagore's poetic voice that is hauntingly musical, richly metaphysical, and delicately sensual can be heard. In his poetry we encounter a rainbow of consciousness where Indian classical and folk traditions mingle with western literature and thought, Sufi mysticism and Buddhist teachings. The best of his poetry is intensely personal and universal, spiritual and secular – reminding us of songs and ballads of the Romantic poets, of bhajans and Bhakti poets, of ghazals, Rumi and Sufi poets, of hymns and the Bible.

However, it would be limiting to think of Tagore's poetry as simply 'high-minded'. His deep spiritual moorings freed him to think clearly, explore unreservedly life and the world. His poetry displays an astonishing range – he is a great love poet; an enlightened nature poet; he writes movingly about loneliness and bereavement; he is a poet with a keen insight into the psychology of children; and he empathized deeply with the oppressed and those less fortunate. Tagore expresses a profound and passionately human yearning, and like a musical

*raga* his poems unfold all aspects of life bringing the reader a sense of completeness, fullness, *purnata*.

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Tagore's poems "record an authentic spiritual autobiography which can be shared by others. It is an open-ended poetic corpus that oscillates in a human fashion between a faith that sustains the spirit in times of crisis, or fills it with energy and joy in times of happiness, and a deep questioning that can find no enduring answers. It is religious, not in a sectarian sense, but in the deepest sense." (Dyson, pg 65) A record of this journey began with the publication of *Sandhyasangit*, literally translates to evensong, in 1882, the first publication stamped with his poetical sensibility.

Faced with death early in life (he lost his mother at the age of fourteen), Tagore knew intimately about loss, loneliness and bereavement. The romantic anguish of "The Suicide of a Star", a poem triggered by the attempted suicide of his sister-in-law (Kadambari Devi) cannot be missed: "Not once did anyone ask/ why she abandoned her life!" Nearer to Tagore in age, she represented a mother figure, an older sister, and a confidante; they were close, their friendship platonic. Unsurprisingly the hyper-sensitive, young poet was outraged by the repressive regimen of a society that eventually drove her to suicide.

Unable to change society, Tagore transformed his pain and suffering into faith and compassion in his poetry. In "Invocation to Sorrow," he confesses: "Oh, how lonely this heart is! / .../ This homeless heart/ wants a companion/ that's all..." (pg 82) He is writing about himself as much as the human condition, like the *Baul* singers, the wandering minstrels of Bengal living on society's edge, pouring their hearts out in songs of love, Divine love. In "Endless Death" (*Prabhatsangeet*, 1883, the title of his second collection translates to 'martins' or 'morning song'), Tagore struggles with the meaning of life itself: "Life, is it then a name for a handful of deaths – / an aggregate of dyings? / Then a moment's a cluster of a hundred trivial deaths – so much fuss over a naming! / As death grows, so will life." He concludes with the realization that "Death's just another name for what you call life." (pg 83-84)

Yet understanding does not banish loneliness. In "Desire" (*Manasi*, 1890) Tagore regrets he "neither showed her imagination's true realm, / nor made her sit in my soul's dark solitude." He wonders if "two minds could spend an eternal night together – / in the sky no laughter, no sound, no sense of direction, / just four loving eyes waking like four stars!" (pg 87) This awareness of another – disembodied, sublimated love – where 'just four loving eyes' become 'four stars' is no less intense, no less realized. The swan in his poem "Death-dream" dies, but does not sing. These poems are clearly haunted by deaths of loved ones in his family, yet they transcend the personal.

He explores reality and illusion, creation and destruction, the cycle of life and death. He talks of "the cosmic collapse," when an "instant and eternity become one" – clearly referring to a moment of epiphany. However, the poem does not end there; it ends with: "The earth kept her vigil, creatures asleep on her lap." (pg 89) Suggesting perhaps we too are asleep on her lap. Mother earth is all Nature, the cosmic Maya whose ultimate authority is inviolable. Yet The earth is a mother whose hands hold not 'infinite riches' but 'unfinished pleasures' ("On Her Powerlessness"): "Mother, I know your hands hold unfinished pleasures:/ whatever you shape and give us breaks into pieces./ Death, omnivorous, pokes his fingers in every pie/ and all our hopes you can never satisfy/ but that's no reason to forsake your warm breast!" (pg 105)

Tagore's poetry kindles an intense sense of kinship with Nature, and a burning awareness of the universe of which we are part. His transcendent yet human vision comes across

forcefully in “Earth” (1893, from *Sonar Tari*): “Deep is my desire/ in country after country to identify/ myself with all men; to be born/ as an Arab child in the desert, fearless and free...” The self spills out to embrace the universe, the Universal Self; he is Everyman. Tagore’s personal vision of the interconnectedness of the universe is celebrated in the poem: “Take me back/ to the centre of that wholeness, whence continually/ life germinates in a hundred thousand ways/ sends out shoots and buds, whence songs burst/ in a million melodies, dances emanate/ in countless gestures, where the mind flows/ in torrents of ideas and emotions...” With him we taste “that various, universal bliss, all elements together/ united with all.” (pg 101-102)

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Described by Tagore as ‘revelations of my true self to me’ (pg xv), there is no doubt that *Gitanjali* is the work of a deeply spiritual man. It is in *Gitanjali* (and his later songs) that we encounter his fully realized personal-poetic vision. In a letter to William Rothenstein, Tagore wrote about *Gitanjali*: “I can assure you they are not literary productions at all, they are life productions.” (pg liv) In another letter he wrote the poems (in *Gitanjali*) were “an expression of my inmost feelings, they were my humblest prayers, my sincerest *sadhana*, and a reflection of my joys and sorrows.” (pg lviii) The poems reflect a sense of creative rapture, emerging from a period of intense spiritual crisis and personal suffering.

Radice makes an important point in his ‘Introduction’: “A key concept in *Gitanjali* – and a recurrent phrase in the Bengali – is *sukh-dukh*, ‘joy and sorrow’, ‘pleasure and pain’. ... As the sequence develops more contrasting pairs are brought in such as man and God, world and spirit, adult and child, death and life, dark and light, male and female, land and river, earth and sky, etc. As the separate poems or songs go on adding these elements, the scales can tip one way or the other ... The point is that by the end of the sequence one should feel that the scales are equal.” (pg lxx)

This sense of balance is manifested all through his poetry. In some poems it comes across admirably, for example, when Tagore speaks of “this our planet with its treasure-store/ Of joys and pains – this place unknowable,/ Unfathomable – is – just like a mother’s/ Breast – fully familiar after all.” His image of life and death as the two breasts of a mother is simple, universal and powerful. “If I have loved this life so very much/ I’ll love Death too when I can see him clearly?/ A child – for fear of losing the warm touch/ Of his mother’s breast – begins to wail. But then,/ Moved to her other breast, he’s calm again.” (pg 92-93)

Yet it is not death that consumes him as much as life. “Let me pronounce these words the day I go: / Nothing compares/ With what I’ve seen, / With what I’ve come to know.” (pg 12) It is life that is celebrated. Appreciating the unreserved bounty of Nature, the Universe, God, and Life are all part of his developing self-consciousness: “O Poet, is it your wish to see your own, total reflection/ in my eyes?” The songs become a tribute: “Merging it with your love, lord, / you summon up all my songs/ By giving yourself to me, / You see your own self exquisitely portrayed.” (pg 34) Here God is portrayed as the lover pursuing him. But then the poet understands, even becomes God when he writes: “I see your *viraha* everywhere all the time.” *Viraha* can be described as the kind of loss and longing that Radha feels for Krishna; it represents human longing for divine perfection. For Tagore the world is a manifestation of God’s *viraha*. Sometimes, it fills us with joy, sometimes with profound pain.

To understand Tagore’s relationship with death – in one poem he invokes death to “Take me as your wife away. / Death, my death. / Speak to me, show me the way.” (pg 38) It is worth remembering that by the time he wrote *Gitanjali*, apart from his mother and sister-in-law, he had also lost his wife, his daughter Renuka, his son Samindranath, and his father. For someone who thought everything in life has a purpose, from everything there are lessons to

be learnt, one should read his *sadhana* as expressed in the *Gitanjali* in the same spirit of prayer and self-surrender.

He writes with a sense of calm and deep understanding: “You save me by denying me/ the many things I want/ You fulfil my life by looking after me/ so sternly.” In recognizing the power of grace which by sparing him from “overmuch desire”, “makes me fit for you”, “makes me yours” (pg 9-10), he is content. He has learnt to count his blessings. “So much of the unknown/ you’ve made known to me/ You’ve given me a place in so many homes.” (pg 11) It is through poetry that he can express best his realization – this strong sense of oneness with the Divine: “I’ve sought you beyond my mind/ In song/ My whole life long.// My songs have taken me/ From place to place/ In time and space.” (pg 42-43)

The faith and trust that Tagore summons from within him is not unalloyed, yet his sheer ability to sustain it frees him to live intensely, fully. He writes: “You watch me covertly, / You give me liberty.” And adds: “”You leave me to do what I want. / For you it’s enough/ to keep me in sight/ to check I’m all right.” (pg 48) It protects him when times are hard and life is harsh. “When the life in me dries up/ Come with a stream of kindness// When my miserable mind, huddling in a corner,/ meanly shuts you out/ Fling open the door, O generous Lord,/ and enter majestically.” (pg 27) His faith is deep enough to accommodate his doubting human heart: “So, even when it’s you I wound,/ I want you.” (pg 111) As we read the *Gitanjali* we experience the unfolding of all aspects of life and death, and by the end we reach a state of understanding, of grace.

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Kunwar Narain (1927- ) is probably India’s most highly-regarded living poet in Hindi. While being firmly rooted in the Indian literary and philosophical traditions, his work is recognisably cosmopolitan. This ‘internationalism’ is as evident in Tagore as among the younger generation of poets writing today. Indian poets typically were influenced by at least three traditions – that of the literature of their mother tongue, classical Indian poetry, and the avant-garde ideas of modern European poetry. Yet when reading Narain one comes across a distinctly modern sensibility.

Like Tagore, Narain came from a business family that wielded political influence. He also lost his mother, and his sister, when he was nineteen. He travelled to Eastern Europe, Russia and China and met with poets like Nazim Hikmet, Antoni Słonimskie and Pablo Neruda. Narain studied science before switching to English literature; he read widely – from “the Indian epics and Upanishads to Kabir and Amir Khusro, Buddhism and Marxism to mythology and history, Cavafy and Kafka to Ghalib and Gandhi.” (pg 15) The French symbolists, especially Stéphane Mallarmé, and poets like Jorge-Luis Borges also influenced him deeply.

Narain’s poems too allude to a range of experiences – they move from Kafka’s Prague where “a presence/ can be more present/ in its absence” to Alexander the Great who abandoned his conquest of India no sooner than it had begun; from Ayodhya, where the Hindu-Muslim riots in 1992 were a harsh reminder of the unreality of peaceful co-existence to “Nalanda and Bakhtiyar” where the barbarous conqueror, who destroyed the world famous Buddhist centre of learning, Nalanda, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, meets with his nemesis: “Shut in the dark room of his guilt, with shame,/ a victor’s dreams break down his strength, give way.”

In reading Narain we gain perspective on human emotions displayed over the course of history. In “Ibn Batutah,” Narain writes: “All this is not today’s/ history but/ of very long ago,/ of primitive savages,/ whose witness I am not.” This technique of using historical events to reflect on current affairs is deployed with great effect in the poem’s ending: “Sultan,/ permit me to leave,/ it is the hour for my prayer.” An open-ended quality, playful

irony, and a metaphysical intelligence cannot be missed. The poems are marked by a rare intuitive awareness. In “Falcon,” he assumes a falcon’s eye-view to convey his message: “A hyphen between land and sky./ Life from a valorous view.” Mediating between opposites – earth and sky, life and death, may seem characteristically Indian.

Yet holding on to opposites, observing the world with its complexity, is commonplace in Narain. He looks to Nature as an ideal – nature’s give and take is the give and take he aspires to. In “Trees” he says: “Whenever that grand old tree comes to mind/ the Upanishads come to mind: / comes to mind a clean, simple life-style; / in its ever-calm shade, a strange/ generous quality that gave/ coolness in summer/ warmth in winter.” Reality is a continuum – trees, flowers, rivers, rays, butterflies, elephants – figure in his poems as creation’s spectrum. When “the old tree that always stood to attention, / like a guard, at the door” to his house disappears, he reminds us of the “mortal fear of some common foe...” (The Killing of a Tree) “I do not imitate nature, I am nature,” he says, “we live in two worlds: one that each creates, one created by all together... *my* world may or may not differ from *ours*.” (pg 16)

One encounters in Narain a profound humanism. In a section titled “Humanesque”, in the poem, “When One Can’t Remain Human”, Narain writes about the limits of being human: “If times are bad, one can’t remain human.” Yet all he wants is to become human. He aspires to return “more caring for all/ I will return more complete.” (If I Return This Time) Yet that is the tragedy of our lives.

It is also the reason why his poem, “A Strange Day”, is a simple, yet potent, reminder of the fragility of our everyday assumptions: “I roamed about all day today/ and no mishap happened. / I met people all day today/ and was slighted nowhere./ I told the truth all day today/ and no one took it wrong./ I trusted everyone today/ and got swindled nowhere.// And the strangest miracle was/ that coming home I found not another/ but myself come back there.” The poem reminds us how our world is continually threatened, yet we take things for granted. Whether we return more complete or return home with our self intact, we are mortals who need a world each instant. (pg 25)

Asked by an interviewer what the role of thought and intellect should be in poetry, Narain is reported to have said: “Pretty much the same as in our life, namely, to enhance a better understanding of life, sensitivity and a sense of justice.” Narain’s faith in thought seems to be exceeded only by his faith in poetry, for which we may save “within ourselves a corner/ where the gap is the narrowest/ between the earth and sky/ between man and God.” (pg 13) For Narain who is fond of quoting Borges – “life is, I am sure, made of poetry” – the connection between life and poetry comes across thus in “Off Centred”: “I do not wish to flee life,/ I wish to connect to it –/ to jolt it/ on its imaginary axle/ at that very point where/ it is most vulnerable to poetry.”

## Will Stone

Will Stone, born 1966, is a poet, and literary translator who divides his time between England and Belgium. His first poetry collection *Glaciation* (Salt, 2007), won the international Glen Dimplex Award for poetry in 2008. A second collection *Drawing in Ash*, was published by Salt in May 2011 and won the 3am Magazine poetry book of the year award (2011). His published translations include *To The Silenced* - selected poems of Georg Trakl (Arc Publications, 2005) and *Journeys*, a collection of Stefan Zweig's European travel essays, (Hesperus Press, 2010) His translations of long neglected Franco-Belgian poets Emile Verhaeren and Georges Rodenbach will be published by Arc in April 2012 and a first English translation of *Rilke in Paris* by Maurice Betz will appear from Hesperus Press in June 2012.

## ***The Black Herald: a new literary magazine in Europe***

Paul Stubbs: *Ex Nihilo* (Black Herald Press)

Blandine Longre: *Clarities* (Black Herald Press)

January 2011, witnessed the birth of a significant new literary magazine in Europe, *The Black Herald*. This immediately refreshing bilingual magazine issued from Paris, which seemed fitting, since its pages held the work of poets, essayists and translators from across the European theatre of operations and beyond. Apollinaire's Eiffel shepherdess seemed the appropriate traditional rallying point for these disparate continental and island voices. *The Black Herald* Press editors put forward their commitment to multilingual inclusivity and a necessary avoidance of the 'island bound verbiage' or mainstream poetry workshop mentality that festoons so many literary magazines in the UK, quoting from multifarious sources including the German born, England bound poet and translator Michael Hamburger and the philosopher/writer John Gray. The *Black Herald* editors are a team. Paul Stubbs is English and Blandine Longre French. They live and work together in Paris and produce their magazine in an effort to bring forward new and original voices that have either been woefully or wilfully neglected, or have not yet found a way into print in translation. They champion valuable writing both prose and poetry that deserves readers in an increasingly atrophied monoglot self-referencing culture and that is all. They are not bound by subservience to the taste of any donor or benefactor. Naturally they publish what accords to their literary tastes, but also they go beyond this and publish what they think a readership deserves to hear, whether by established names from European literature or new voices.

What all this writing has in common is an edgy urgency and a latent visionary ambition. Take for example the searing, almost insupportable excerpts from 'Mouvement par la Fin' (Movement for the End') by Philippe Rahmy, translated from the French by translator and renowned Baudelaire scholar, Rosemary Lloyd. These anguished hallucinated reflections of a hospitalised terminally bedridden man would have gone unnoticed were it not for the courage and foresight of the editors to publish them. They are not only moving for their insight into the limitations of human deceptions in the face of the repulsive reality of sickness and death, but they are also significant works of poetry. Such powerful and unconventionally initiated works rarely find their way into the pages of establishment UK poetry magazines. And unlike some leading magazines, who rhetorically prattle their intent to reveal 'important new



voices', but in fact merely pander to the 'exciting discoveries' that a presidential publishing house deigns to secrete occasionally into the swamp of hopefuls, or who carefully hone a 'closed community' of endlessly repeating names whose backs are red raw from the backstairs acrobatics of mutual sycophancy, *The Black Herald* along with a few other notable exceptions such as *The Wolf*, *The Dark Horse* and *Agenda*, support genuine intellectual effort. All that counts for the Black Herald editors is the work. Social position in the UK poetry village, the ghastly term 'profile', credentials with the poetry 'business', the poetry 'school', the poetry 'master class', the poetry 'industry'? brownie points gained in the creative writing workshop kingdom in the shadow of self appointed 'facilitators', hobnobbing skills and other networking baggage are rightly irrelevant. Inside *The Black Herald* you will not find poems entitled 'Why I love my vacuum cleaner' or 'Ode to a potato' (the latter incidentally was deemed worth highlighting on the programme of the 'prestigious' Aldeburgh Poetry Festival.) Whimsy is not welcome here.

However, inside its pages one will also find works in translation by leading poets of the twentieth century such as Georg Trakl, Cesar Vallejo, Osip Mandelstam and Emile Verhaeren, alongside famous English language poets such as Hart Crane and WS Graham, published amongst new poetry or essays by poets and thinkers you may not be so familiar with, but whose work sits comfortably in such a milieu and serves as a contemporary echo to these influential titans. Much care has been taken with the way the collection is arranged, so there is a rhythm of a kind as one peruses the pages. Each title is given a wide boundary of bare page around it and appears in a finely framed box. Most works are presented in their original language on the left and their English translation on the right. The translators are various, but the names of Blandine Longre, herself a prodigious translator from English to French and the writer Anne-Sylvie Homassel predominate. Often the English language reader without knowledge of the foreign language feels insecure on reading translations, unable to discern if they are faithful to the original and actually bring across the best of its architecture and music, or at best its true meaning. Have no fear for these translations are competently wrought and finely judged. They are translated by admirers of the original works, almost always writers themselves and through the act of translation are seeking a deeper reading of the text.

*The Black Herald* is also an attractively produced magazine, having the feel more of a book, with its sleek gloss covers in classical black and white, each containing a photograph carefully selected to reflect the essence of the work within. Volume one's cover, for example, carries a still from the film *Cobra Mist* (2008), by the English experimental filmmaker Emily Richardson. It shows the silhouette of the old lighthouse on the now abandoned shingle spit of Orford Ness in Suffolk, England and in its now stark, now vague shades and depths somehow reflects the design of the black and white cover. Its melancholy resonance effectively prepares the reader for the content within. At the rear of the magazine, a generous space has been allotted for the contributors, so rather than the customary brief line, a whole paragraph on each writer gives a sense that the editors care about their contributors and wish the reader to know more about them, so they might seek out their shoots from the vast and ever shrieking jungle of fast sprouting expression.

Beyond the magazine *The Black Herald* is a press and has produced to date two formidable collections of poetry by the hands of its poet editors. It is to be hoped that further publications will be announced, as these small pocket sized poetry books are handsome and practical in design. They bear the same black and white decor of the magazine and so all appear like members of the same family. The covers are inspired, being brilliantly simple, a large black vertical rectangle with a narrow white border, with the title and author in white on the black rectangle. Pure, unadulterated and stylish, they seem to echo the famous city lights books made famous by Alan Ginsberg's *Howl*. Their relative briefness also accentuates the quality

of the work on their pages. These books have been thoughtfully designed with the accent on clarity, luminosity framing of the text and ease of access. They are perfect to be carried in a jacket pocket and unsheathed on the go in the modern metropolis. Their tough laminated covers seem prepared to resist the most unforeseen violations and should cause the imp of degeneration to think again. The two collections were published together in September 2010.

Paul Stubbs's *Ex Nihilo* is a pocket sized rumble of literary thunder, the first feelers of a language storm that makes the susceptible reader who first opens it, look up at the sky ominously. Holding a copy of *Ex Nihilo*, the reader is obliged to repeatedly take new bearings, constantly rechecking a mental compass whose needles quiver wildly in all directions, for the long poem within is unlike anything else found on the bookshelf of a smugly stocked Waterstones. In fact it won't be found on the shelf of Waterstones at all, because it is far too radical and incendiary to sit alongside the bloated dignitaries and carefully positioned courtiers of the Bloodaxe, Faber and Carcanet fiefdoms. The infernal heat given off by Stubbs's constantly firing cannons means this book must be held in a secure area, away from the carefully tended prize beds and gentle rustling of self assurance inherent to the poetry 'business', the poetry 'society', the poetry 'school', the poetry 'prom', poetry 'please', the increasingly predictable production line of the poetry 'industry' in the United Kingdom. No, it must be held in the head only, and from there a realisation of *Ex Nihilo*'s importance departs and like a flaming beacon lit from peak to peak, communicates from one reader to another. This is an underground book because it does not seek to flatter tastes already established, rather it seeks to leave a skin even as it grows a new one, to lift the bark suddenly, catastrophically, so the creatures beneath are forced to run madly, blindly into the new light that interrupts their slumber, and that's the way Stubbs wants it. Stubbs's is a restless deception-proof poetry that keeps moving on from the page, or indeed off the page, as if this white space is a laughable plot on which to establish a permanent settlement. 'Only a word thin fragility, this page, bearing again only my own footprints...' For here passes a tireless vagrant with a weighty sack of religious doubt and existential horror knocking at door after door, where he has been assured a meaningful response will be forthcoming, but behind which only an icy wind blows...

The poet Stubbs has two significant previous collections to his name. *The Theological Museum*, 2006 (Flambard) and *The Icon Maker*, 2008 (Arc). In these works Stubbs cemented his reputation for unconventional 'unscripted' unremittingly challenging forms. These sometimes sublime sometimes disturbing poetic architectures, over which deep space blizzards seem to continually rake, cast a sometimes majestic sometimes bitter beam into a future void of darkness, a beam whose exact trajectory and final target defies any coherent conclusion. *Ex Nihilo* should be passed from hand to hand and by word of mouth. It should go under cover of the night in which it was born, so as to avoid being stopped and searched by the poetry society police. This book is so far from the habitual workshop 'facilitated' fare, with their deathly diamond precision and priestly obedience to nurture a language they know and feel safe in, which in fact screams to be let loose and to turn savagely on its creator. Paul Stubbs states with visionary confidence and an absence of pretension at the outset of his poem, 'I begin alone, waiting for my eyeball, like a sun, to rise, and cast out my own shadow from the shape of everything...' and he ends thus 'And so imagining how my slack breathing it still sways the grass of a world I no longer have access to, I think on...' For Paul Stubbs is above all else helplessly corporeally integrated with his poetic utterances. His body and his mind are locked in a fusion that has somehow through virtual existential annihilation constructed a fantastic makeshift raft of language, a useful object to support his mind for the duration, with branches felled from the forest of eventual silence, a platform on which to lie exhausted and drift through whatever remains, after the sanctioned insanity and myopia of his epoch finally give way. One can only think of Klaus Kinski as the jungle inexorably closes in

during the finale of the Herzog film 'Aguirre Wrath of God', staggering about his half drowned raft and holding up a tiny monkey in his gloved hand to heaven. Paul Stubbs is one of the few genuinely original poets operating at the moment, and his work deserves a wider distribution. Stubbs's next collection of poems concerns the paintings of Francis Bacon, as interpreted through Stubbs's vision. An enthralling prospect indeed.

Blandine Longre is a distinguished French translator of English texts, but here in her first collection *Clarities*, she has turned to poetry. But interestingly and crucially, Longre has not chosen to write in her native tongue, but in the English language, which therefore is one thing, but not the only thing that makes this poetry significant and worthy of English scrutiny. How many of our native English poets of either sex can even begin to attempt to hold a conversation in a foreign language, let alone write poetry? A handful at best. Of course Rilke famously wrote some four hundred poems in French, but none of them are considered to be amongst his most revered and celebrated works. But Rilke was a spectacular exception, a manifest aberration lodged in an impossible to locate space between objectivity and inwardness, whose true nature has still not been properly established, despite the prodigious amount of secondary literature devoted to him.

For most poets there is no recourse but to launch forth in the language they first mewled as, armed with their embryonic calling, they exited the womb. But Longre has other ideas. She rejects French as the vehicle for her unconscious linguistically screened utterances and produces a collection of poems of extraordinary imposition and depth in the Anglophone. She is as Anne Sylvie Homassel suggests, 'A gifted intruder into a language which is not her own...' Furthermore these poems seem to owe little to modern English poets, but take their cue rather from the likes of John Donne, a reverence for whom Longre makes no secret of. She includes at the opening a quote which is perhaps most prescient in terms of her own poetic. 'For his art did express a quintessence, even from nothingness...' On the rear of the book there are two blurbs, one from Paul Stubbs who states 'Her 'subject' is only the incontrovertible will to spew forth the chippings of a language not yet fully realised...' Yes and we might well say the same about him! (see above). But what Stubbs means in his mechanical shredder metaphor, is that Longre takes the neat and complete language bricks as they are offloaded at Calais and deliberately smashes them, then reconstructs them to make another kind of brick which will better advance her own personal structure. Instead of following documented paths in the construction of this language, she has it work hard for its expressive credentials, goading it to make it perform in ways it could never imagine, to make it perform with authenticity for her alone. Words end up trussed, bound together and thrown mercilessly into the sea of the page. Sink or swim instructs the poet. 'Notimeness', 'clock-mauled' 'steel-etched' 'oughts-to-be' and the wonderful 'twitchy-thorny', are all thrown over the side. Either they adapt or die. In this sudden and treacherous struggle for survival, a new language forces its way through the shell to the initial distrust of the page and a metaphysical breakthrough of a kind is achieved.

Longre does not want to express herself with someone else's borrowed voice or appear on the stage of her feelings dressed in hand me down clothes. Therefore she always makes and dons her own haunting attire. 'I am a field, a realm and a route / an expanse of everdark crops / awoken and unadorned and brambled / yet hardly maimed by the too still rivulets of reality...' From 'Avoiding the Blackest Eye of Might'. Longre seeks to transmogrify the ardours and ecstasies of the flesh into language. Within this ambition is attendant pain, loss and a grim awareness of the scraps of transcendence that may be gathered in, despite relationship implosion. In 'Épouvante', ironically a poem titled in French, she writes the morbidly majestic and almost phantasmagorical line, 'Wreck-born snakes refusing to embrace their wet doom...' and later in the same poem the uncanny 'Aside a vertigo, the secret pledge of their cluttered selves: / built on an acidity of presages and their own /

bisecting truth – horrendous.’ What is one to make of this? The inevitable response to Longre’s poetry from a UK audience would be that it is ‘difficult’ and ‘hermetic’, or that it is ‘surreal’, ‘chaotic’, ‘confusing’, ‘delirious’ etc. But this shuffling of the dreary pack of suspicion should be music to Longre’s ears, because it is wholly predictable and perhaps necessary. These are all traditional knee-jerk protective mechanisms that the island nation employs to quickly face its pointed stakes out to anything that may cause it to lose equilibrium.

Longre’s poetry, if it was allowed entry, would be a French fox with Anglo-Saxon teeth, let loose in an English henhouse. Confusion and panic must ensue when lines like ‘Alien to its own words (meaning-gouged, spewed out, led astray) / a gorgoned mouth turns its clammy / stares beyond my charred eyeballs, / at the flying dampness of / those medean tears of mine’ peer hungrily around the door. But the power here is not so much in the horror soaked central section which almost shreds itself to vacancy in the combines of inner rage, but in the indefinable beauty of the last line ‘at the flying dampness of / those medean tears of mine’ which seems to soften and slow like a brake in its alliteration and rhythm the harsh imagery that precedes it. There is something lurking within this seemingly brazen poetry, which is tender and precious, like an injured bird you kept in a cardboard box that you hide from others and desperately hope will not die. Though there are influences of Sexton and Plath here and these poems could be said to be aligned to a woman’s pain and toil endured by the blundering machinations of the opposite sex, these poems are more about a wider broken trust, the disintegration of promises and aspirations, which could apply to anyone. Therefore they are for everyone. So it is to be hoped that these white hot poems, which resist, with good reason, categorisation or critical platitude, will find readers who can appreciate their unorthodoxy and existential agility. Or will the Anglophone reader once again revert to type and hold the foreigner at the turnpike for deigning to ‘re-speak’ their hallowed language? Perhaps Longre herself has glimpsed a possible future in that regard in the acerbic ‘heroism’ of the poem ‘Shame-faced’.

Reading your dumb face as never before  
yet unable to decipher the fleshy  
meaning of its loathsome features  
watching cheeky letters undulating  
deep down you blurry eyes

though I know your cursed tongue  
by heart it is bound  
to remain a bitter foreign language.

## Belinda Cooke

Belinda Cooke completed her PhD on Robert Lowell's interest in Osip Mandelstam in 1993. She has published three books to date: *Resting Place* (Flarestack Publishing, 2008); *The Paths of the Beggarwoman: Selected Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva*, (Worple Press, 2008) and (in collaboration with Richard McKane) *Flags* by Boris Poplavsky, (Shearsman Press, 2009). She and Richard also have a collection of Boris Pasternak's later poems forthcoming.

## Turning and Returning

**Peter Robinson:** *The Returning Sky*, (Shearsman Books, 2012).

For those whose *Desert Islands Books*' choices might include *The Bible* or Shakespeare, Peter Robinson's *The Returning Sky* offers the ideal compact alternative, for here, his words, like an endless array of iceberg tips, reveal more of themselves on each fresh encounter. This is nowhere better evidenced than in the book's title, which along with alluding to his return to England after years of working in Japan, (a departure explored in his earlier *The Look of Goodbye* (Shearsman Books, 2008) shows the sky to be his most faithful of muses, 'turning' and 'returning' with momentary and daily shifts, one instant an open panorama the next viewed peripherally via interstices – chinks, fence palings or various gaps in the urban landscape – triggering both meditation on human loss and gratitude for one's own survival. His own cover painting, with its sky-backed high-rises viewed aslant via a domestic interior of a clothes strewn chair, further reinforces his sky as very much of this lived-in world rather than a mystical sky of otherness.

Alongside this, the collection is much focused on the world's current state: the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity along with the proliferation of global conflict. At the same time as he interplays notions of personal and financial worth, he notes how in the necessary process of living our own lives we unavoidably block out daily news of wars and the dead. This is difficult to acknowledge without feelings of guilt yet those who are observers of conflict can only try to balanced views of life, searching for the meaningful – if anywhere – in the unobtrusive small pleasures of the every-day.

Because of the seemingly endless network of connections between Robinson's collections and individual poems, one sometimes wonders how far they are engineered rather than occurring naturally. His combination of craft and inspiration means both will be happening, but this question is particularly in mind with *The Returning Sky* when one places it in the context of its publication history. Robinson returned to England in 2007 to take up a professorship of English and American literature at the University of Reading and, true to his prolific form, soon published *The Look of Goodbye* (2008) and was proceeding to find inspiration in his new location. The outcome of this was *English Nettles and Other Reading Poems* (Two Rivers Press, 2010), a limited edition hardback that includes some delicately coloured pen and ink washes by Sally Castle of the poems' settings (particularly illuminating for readers unfamiliar with Reading). These *English Nettles*' poems have now been absorbed into *The Returning Sky* and it is fascinating to examine the way a distinct subject – his

experience of Reading as a newcomer – has now become woven into a much vaster canvas of his experiences over the past four years.

Thus one is struck by the way that the first six poems of the collection set variously in America and Italy serve to establish many of the themes and motifs running throughout the collection. His brief trip to America triggers poems with an economic thread, in particular how it impacts on human dignity. ‘Westwood Dusk’ starts with someone left for dead on an L.A. sidewalk; from here it moves on to the idea that life is stranger than fiction before finally showing this idea played in reverse in Robinson’s hotel room in ‘Enigma Variations’ where he feels like he is in a movie as: ‘the room’s slatted blinds’ become ‘film noir shadows across bedcovers’. In the sequence ‘South Shore Line’ he imagines a conversation with his grandfather who had worked as a waiter out of Chicago, which includes wordplay on physical and mental journeys and social success: ‘You’d never have believed I got this far’. The sequence goes on to provide us with the view out of the train of ‘rust-belt squalor’ and For Sale signs on houses bought with subprime mortgages before reaching its suitably bleak conclusion: ‘and at gateless crossings we had to slow / and the engineer made his lonesome horn blow’.

Robinson is wonderful at conveying very subtle human emotions that we can connect with but wouldn’t even think to voice as poetry. ‘Enigmas of Departure’ provides ample example of this with its ambivalent attitude to both locations of travel and flying. Space and confinement are presented as the choice between a rock and a hard place, as he walks out to the plane: although there is a momentary ‘sense of release’ before one is ‘cabined, cribbed, confined’, his attitude to the place he has just left is if not negatively, certainly – as the title suggests – enigmatic:

What I would fleetingly feel  
from another winter’s journey in the vastness  
was an isolate air around framehouses  
in yards out beyond wide sidewalks and a green  
expanse, right, then a grey one

The delightfully mysterious and haunting phrase, ‘isolate air’, with its suggestion of existential isolation, prepares us for numerous later poems in the collection which show shifts between an open and enclosed sky. This is seen most notably in ‘The Returning Sky’ where the space of open skies triggers thoughts of people, such as serving military personnel, who have already died, once perceived in the open space then caught, it seems, in these confined spaces:

Now our lately dead are in the air.  
An overcast grey-scale dusk’s  
shot through with thin red cloud streaks;  
and, look, they’re everywhere  
in privet hedges, like a private grief  
for the targeted to die.

‘Peripheral Visions’, which deals with his family’s regular returns to Parma, Italy, prepares for Robinson’s discussion of readjustment to a new location that will dominate his move to Reading as well as his ongoing interest on how we perceive:  
I see it’s like this any time

we arrive from elsewhere and are lost  
by slip road, lorry-park, by-pass:  
the signs have too much, or no sense at all,  
like an eyeful of how things appear  
when we're not used to them...

The poem concludes by shifting from physical to mental readjustment suggesting how we make less and less sense of our accumulated memories where: 'we'll be lost once more / among growth rings, ripe stains / of year after year after year.' The notion of peripheral vision dominates this collection and is set against the exile's experience of having to deal with things too much head-on such as in '165 King's Road' where he tells us how 'everything shrieks at me' and it's 'like being in a daze'. Likewise the necessary disruption of relocation leads to light moving in on privacy in the process of house repair. Robinson pulls together all these references to peripheral vision in his poem 'World Enough' where 'reality / slips past on a warehouse / without the slightest emphasis' and manages to include a little light humour in the process:

Such as it is, and everywhere,  
it comes at us sideways  
from bits of grey sky  
as when a bureaucrat asked me  
where did I plan to be buried,  
I wasn't planning to die.

Once we come to Robinson's Reading poems it becomes clear that his new locale is particularly suited to his fondness for urban settings where nature is alive between the cracks: the mix of brick and fauna, house gardens, gas holders above canals, and period buildings, as he tells us in 'Huntley & Palmers': 'no I wouldn't be without it, / looking at what's left and gone.' The collection is dotted with some delightful description of this setting such as these cute cygnets in 'Pension Scheme': 'swans / with cygnet balls of fluff beside them / float on their reflections –' Added to this, he clearly relishes Reading's well-known (Wilde) and less well-known (Rimbaud and Pope) literary associations. His return coinciding with the collapse in the economy provides him with lots of scope for punning and dark humour in his titles: 'Pension Scheme', 'Personal Credit', 'Ode to Debt' and 'Owning the Problem'. In 'Personal Credit' he describes how he and his wife are being tempted to apply for additional borrowing: 'They're offers to let us pay back our way. / Although we have no history,' yet he still finds self-validation, his own 'personal credit' where 'half-woken' he can 'lend something of a mind' to make poetry of 'gasholders, flood pools, lemon verbena'. Throughout we see Robinson having to go through many practical worries and adjustments but his engagement with an urban landscape that he enjoys does seem to carry him through.

In *The Look of Goodbye* there had been a dominance of poems' titles and phrases suggestive of the conditional and the hypothetical, numerous uncertainties and maybes. As one works through the substantial collection that makes up *The Returning Sky*, in spite of an increasing reference to death – of friends and loved ones as well as victims of war – one does get a sense that Robinson has settled into his new life in England and that he is writing with a certainty that is particularly fruitful for his poetry. This is not to decry his earlier expressions of uncertainty in his poetry and indeed Robinson is not the kind of poet who sets out to produce poetry that provides immediate access or attempts to dazzle. Indeed it is the

subtlety and complexity of his ideas combined with his finely nuanced language that is most valued by his loyal readers. This said, there are a number of poems that have a little more of a stand-alone quality that may be enjoyed by such readers especially as well as helping to gain him an even wider audience.

A group of particularly memorable poems in this vein are three which all include a war theme: 'The Returning Sky', 'Life in Glimpses' and 'Shadowy Nobodies'. In these poems Robinson is perceptive and relevant about the wider world but at the same time avoids didacticism or simply writing 'about' war. This puts the poem at risk of being misconstrued as 'simply' personal, and in the collection there are a number of poems attempting to walk this fine line, as in 'The Returning Sky' where the dead may be those being repatriated from Afghanistan (as they are at one point in 'Epigrams of Summer' and in the forgotten war of 'Recovered Memory'), while 'Life in Glimpses' and 'Shadowy Nobodies' are both poems occasioned by the winter 2008-9 attack on the Gaza Strip.

By way of example and conclusion here is the beautifully constructed 'Shadowy Nobodies', which shows Robinson attempting to establish a balance when considering life's daily irritations set against the life and death realities of war, drawing on this epigraph from a letter of Coleridge's 'such shadowy nobodies, as cherub-winged DEATH...& simpering PEACE...' for his purposes:

As from a back bedroom window  
like living the form of a dream,  
a dream dreamed lifetimes or centuries ago,  
you imagine yourself in that view  
when the abstract threats in person  
make themselves felt from beyond its frame.  
They push through your deadlines, your daily distraction,  
but forget them is all you can do.

Now the more indifferently far they are  
the more I can't explain  
or justify ordinary domestic tiffs,  
our self-consoling griefs  
as a daughter's convulsed by the ring-tone  
from her importunate phone.

The sun-suffused clouds press on,  
pointed at by aerials  
and chimney pots in an afternoon sky;  
they move above rooftops as burning anguish  
and you try to forgive yourself for that too  
now embattled land-strips with bull-dozed houses  
are finally harmless of access. You wish.

Robinson leaves his readers with instantly recognizable experiences and strangely comforting ways of dealing with them – there is something helpful in telling us honestly that we have no choice when it comes to blocking out our thoughts of the war dead: 'forget them is all you can do'. Robinson leaves us with a full account of his own daily difficulties, his own fears for himself, his family and the world beyond his control. He charts efforts to



remain responsible while preserving a peripheral vision for himself and his readers. Within its plain sense of the world's intractable predicaments, his poetry has such a therapeutic strain.

## Martyn Crucefix

Martyn Crucefix's poetry has won numerous prizes, including a major Eric Gregory award and a Hawthornden Fellowship and has been praised as "urgent, heartfelt, controlled and masterful" (*Poetry London*). His collections include *Beneath Tremendous Rain* (1990), *At The Mountjoy Hotel* (1993), *On Whistler Mountain* (1994), *A Madder Ghost* (Enitharmon, 1997) and *An English Nazareth* (Enitharmon, 2004). His new translation of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* was published by Enitharmon in 2006 and has been hailed as "unlikely to be bettered for very many years" (*Magma*). He is a founder member of the group ShadoWork, specializing in performing and writing collaboratively. For information on his work visit [www.writersartists.net](http://www.writersartists.net).

## A Way of Seeing

Shanta Acharya: *Dreams that Spell the Light* (Arc, 2010)

In 2001 Shanta Acharya published her doctoral thesis on the influence of Indian thought on Ralph Waldo Emerson and for the anglophile reader this remains a good way into her poetry. In his essay, 'Nature', Emerson celebrates those moments when "inward and outward senses are . . . adjusted to each other" and we move through the world as if through a "perennial festival". There occurs a dissolution of the self such that "I become a transparent eyeball . . . I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me" (*Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. Ziff (Penguin, 2003)). There is an abundance of such engaged observation in Acharya's new collection, as when describing the Sundarbans National Park in West Bengal: "Birds colonise the tops of trees, / breeding in the heart of bustling shanties, / black and white wings hover like clouds" ('The Sundarbans'). Or closer to home, in north London's Highgate Wood, the narrator experiences "A moment of jubilation when the sunlight / streams in starting plants growing / wild in their coppiced site" ('Highgate Wood').

Acharya welcomes and records the phenomena of the natural world in part for themselves but also, as Emerson suggests, because they can be read as the language of the "Universal Being". In 'Aspects of Westonbirt Arboretum', we luxuriate in honeysuckle, flowering cherries, primrose, bluebell, orchids and wild garlic but it is no thoughtless or faux-Romantic personification when we are told we might hear "the laughter of Silk Wood ringing through The Link". It is wholly characteristic that Acharya does not make a big fuss about these metaphysical aspects of her work; they simply are an essential, even habitual, part of her way of seeing:

Language that is water, air, light, earth  
shining nerves spread out like angel wings;  
sun in water shimmering, the aura of kings,  
earth a mirror for what cannot be seen . . .  
'It'

The combination of natural understatement and an Emersonian extinguishing of the egotistical self can run some risk – in these days when poets are expected to trumpet

themselves and the authentic individuality of their experiences – the risk of sounding disengaged, even remote. The opening lines of the book are coolly uninviting in this way: “How does one accustomed to the cold candour of stones / bend one’s knee in reverence” (‘Italian Prayer’). But bridging the gap between the individual and the universe is nothing if not ambitious and it is interesting (not to say brave) that ‘Communion’ presents God addressing the human race and lamenting the fact that he “cannot generate between us / a conversation in a language that you understand”.

Nevertheless, there are poems of a more conventional personal nature here too. In ‘Bryce Canyon’ the presence of a brother grounds the experience of glimpsing mystery through the phenomena of the world, an activity, “More sophisticated than any of our childhood / games . . . unpacking the gift of miracles in our daily lives”. There is a touching poem about returning home to Orissa only to find it changed and “strange” – the kind of East-not-meeting-West experience that other writers have built whole careers upon. ‘Delayed Reaction’ is a detailed childhood narrative of an assault on a mother, one of the wholly convincing memories of the traumatic event being “the rickshaw-wallah’s glistening sweat, a familiar / odour of fermented water-rice and garlic”. But such personal material is not really what distinguishes Acharya’s work. Her poems are about seeing and, again reminiscent of Emerson’s dictum that “the health of the eye seems to demand a horizon”. There is much rambling, meandering, strolling and walking in this collection and the scene changes from St Petersburg to Rome, Venice, the Great Wall of China, Lahore, Orissa, London and parts of the UK.

But ‘Somewhere, Something’ is an important poem that argues that we do not travel “to explore another country / but to return home fresh, bearing gifts”. In fact, these gifts are for the self because all true experiences – thus discounting those of the ‘mere’ tourist – inevitably change us. The poem concludes, “Let’s fly free, not nailed to a mast; / see the universe with new eyes / not blinded by shadows that light casts”. Acharya’s natural form is not narrative but rather the kind of delicate perceptual lyric that records epiphanic moments, as suggested by one of the epigraphs to the collection from Proust: “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes”. The lines quoted above from ‘Somewhere, Something’ contain one of the many occasions when one of Acharya’s poems seems to want to move towards rhyme. This is in part perhaps to pleasure the reader but also as a reflection of the kind of harmonious metaphysics that seem to underlie her vision. Another such moment occurs in ‘The Trees of Nanjing’. Set in the Jiangsu province of China, the trees – sycamore, snow-pine, cypress and plane – shelter and comfort the travellers and the final lines rise lushly and paradoxically towards an inclusiveness with the use of a triple rhyme: “Translucent like jade, radiating warmth to the viewer, / remaining cool to the touch, but always a forced voyeur, / the leaves of these plane trees ask the sun to move over.”

Elsewhere Acharya’s fierce intelligence and critical faculties predominate, inclining her rather to look coolly and rationally about her, perhaps even on occasions to button up an evidently lyrical bent, on occasions to derive too pat a moral conclusion from the plethora of experience, even to resort to a plainness of language that flirts with the over-familiar. So the ‘Mosque of Wazir Khan’ is slackly described as a “sheer celebration . . . now sadly fading . . . a thriving enterprise . . . [that] has lost its calling”. Of course, such profound divisions within the creative individual are often the root of her creative energies, but it would be fascinating to see Acharya allow a little less of the critical cold eye and a little more of singing and heat so we may enjoy more passages as thought-provoking and sonically beautiful as this:

I have learnt that wishes are milestones  
on our journey back home.  
Nothing disappears without a trace,  
only our pilgrimage transforms as we learn

to celebrate our brief passage with grace.

‘Wishes’

## Will Stone

### A Tribute to W.G. Sebald

In the summer of 1996, I made a call to UEA enquiring about the MA in Literary Translation. Being the holiday period there were few staff present, but I was finally put through to a professor of European Literature, a man with a German accent, and a rather dry turn of phrase. This professor did not come across in the conventional manner of pre-occupied academics keen to furnish the basic information and retire. Everything he said seemed to be well judged and carefully applied to the conversation, as if anything thrown in carelessly or casually might have the most terrible repercussions. I remember he made a strange case for both following the course and not following it...he displayed a curious blending of ‘not suffering fools gladly’ directness, offset by genial sensitivity to this unknown caller, flailing in the no mans institution, but with one hand resting lightly on the lever of suspicion towards all he was saying. Two years later and now enrolled on the course, I witnessed this faintly mischievous honesty again, along with that reticence to impose any rhetoric on the listener, an unwillingness to let the wagons of language travel out from the speakers mouth half empty, even in the most conventional day to day conversation. From time to time this Professor Sebald would appear in our MA seminars carrying sheaves of his works in translation and instead of teaching us, suggested we look through them and give him our opinions as fledgling translators. At last a substantial meal after the thin gruel of literary translation theory.

It was 1998 and *The Rings of Saturn* had just appeared. This book was not only most relevant to me as a Suffolk coast dweller, by the tenor of its melancholy refinement, its intricate soundings into literature and landscape, but also because these locations had been places which had infected me in turn and which I had felt obliged to respond to in my poems. I was in effect reading a coastal journey I had already made or was making, albeit in reverse or in separate sections. Further to this was the recollection of a visit to the poets Michael Hamburger and Anne Beresford, at their house *Marsh Acres* in Middleton. The photo images Sebald chose for this section were already framed on my mind’s lens from my own visits to the house and it was if Sebald had suddenly emerged to tap unconsciously into my own poetic visual itinerary. This overlapping, this sense of shadowing occurred again even more fatefully when Austerlitz was published, with the fort Breendonk in Belgium and particularly the ghetto town of Terezin, where Sebald’s experience, even down to the antiquated bus he took back to Prague and the ‘lady of uncertain age’ he encountered in the otherwise empty ghetto museum, were bizarrely, implausibly, yet truthfully replicated in my own experience, as if Sebald, through his meticulous probing of the overlooked space, had made visible a kind of eternal recurrence of ghostly performances, a mutually interdependent dream theatre.

In November 2001 I was back at UEA, not as a student, but as translator in residence. I remember visiting Max on several occasions in his narrow office on the lower floor of the arts building, once with a copy of Austerlitz for him to sign. We sat wreathed in a pall of

bluish smoke from a brand of cigarette I could not identify. Computer equipment had just been delivered, ready to sweep the now famous author into the new millennium, but it lay there stillborn, embalmed in bubble wrap, the plugs still bound in plastic. He gestured at it all and dryly remarked on the determination of the powers that be to modernise a recalcitrant dinosaur. From the wall Walter Benjamin looked down with conspiratorial alertness. Max complained that he was now in constant demand to give talks and attend ceremonies abroad. He was off again tomorrow, he sighed. 'To tell you the truth, I would rather be in Stowmarket...' he memorably added. For anyone who knows Stowmarket, this is a most revealing statement. Our final meeting that November took place over a bowl of lacklustre soup in the UEA cafe. Max encouraged me to set aside poetry and to 'write my own tales'. I remember that he tellingly chose the more antiquated word 'tales' rather than 'short stories'.

Barely a fortnight or so later I received news from Michael Hamburger of Max's tragic accident. Following his attendance at the funeral in Norfolk, Michael, who had been understandably withdrawn since Max's death, sought to express the severity of the loss, to articulate the onerous sense of vacancy left by his passing. He said how a light really had been extinguished with Max's passing and it seemed, as he put it, as if the world had 'visibly darkened'. These were the words he chose, singled out as it were, and they seemed so apt I remember thinking. This was no rhetoric about the dying of the light or a candle snuffed, but Michael sought to express how in some tangible yet hard to define sense the light really had dimmed, that some unique flowering could never be replaced, that communal extinction flexed with anticipation at the moment Max swerved across the road. I imagine Michael distrusted resorting to words of lofty emotion, which in their race to lower the most ornate wreathes before a catastrophic event, can irreparably damage that incubus of silence, in which some truth may shyly be forming.

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