explorations

Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

INTERVIEW

Take up your broken bicycle

Jacek Gutorow in conversation with Mark Ford

JACEK GUTOROW*: Mark, I would like to begin with your biography. You were born in Africa (Nairobi) and spent the first seven years of your life in such places as Sri Lanka, Canada and United States. Three continents, several climate zones and a rather broad spectrum of sights and sounds – it must have been strange to have a childhood like this. I'm just wondering about your memories of those places. Henry James, who spent much of his childhood traveling with his father around Europe, called himself and his brother William "hotel children." Are your recollections similarly centred around the theme of transitoriness and ephemerality*

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MARK FORD: We did stay in hotels quite often, but I doubt they were as luxurious as the ones that the James children grew up in. I sometimes wonder how different my sense of things would be if I'd grown up in one place. I'm just reading Karl-Ove Knausgaard's series of novels, and have been envying – despite his rather scary dad – the rituals and certainties involved in belonging to a specific community and going to the local school and knowing everyone. We lived in Nairobi until I was nearly four. My memories of it are mediated by the pictures that my father took, and the slide shows of these we used to have periodically when I was older. One picture I particularly remember was of me in a cowboy hat on a zebra, which I made use of in "Under the Lime Trees." I was lucky in having an older brother who was always the pioneer in anything new that we had to do, and I was able to tag along in his wake.

Yes, I can see in retrospect my experience must have been one of transitoriness and ephemerality. I went to five different schools between the ages of five and eight – one in Lagos, two in Chicago, one in Maidenhead (a town in Berkshire – we often had spells in England in between postings), and one in Colombo. I find it hard to understand why we had to move so often; it seems so inefficient and wasteful … My father worked for BOAC, and opted to be sent overseas, having grown up in what would be categorized as a lower-middle class household during the war and the impoverished post-war years. It was the late twilight of the British Empire; we were pretty low down the expatriate community's food chain, my father being only a duty officer at first, working the night-shift at the airport, but he set about mastering the skills needed to move up in the world, such as learning to play golf. A recent poem, "World Enough," which is set in Colombo, in Sri Lanka, captures, I hope, some aspects of our engagement with these countries, and lists some of the souvenirs we acquired, which still adorn my mother's house – my father died a few years ago …

I am, I confess, sometimes infuriated by the skittishness of my poems, and wish they could take up a subject, expound it, find a conclusion and be over – in other words be all about one thing, the way a poem by Seamus Heaney can be all about picking blackberries, say. I don't know why I can't write poems in that mode, and admire those who can, since I have good powers of concentration and attention. Your question makes me wonder if it is a result of my having continually to adjust to new circumstances when I was young.

JG*: In* Six Children *there are a number of moving references to Africa. Probably the most important example is the poem "After Africa" in which you contrast the wild exotic African landscapes with a rather bleak tableau of the suburban areas of south-west London, and then express what the reader must feel is a nostalgia for the former. The poem is a pantoum which adds up to a sense of enraptured hallucination and dream-like confinement but also of going round and round in a kind of vicious circle. Would you call it a personal poem? The Africa of the poem is almost like a figure of childhood, and the whole reads like a minimalist* à la recherche du temps perdu...

MF: I wrote that after overhearing my mother talking about our move from Nairobi to Surbiton to my brother a few years back. He was the one who found England bleak and unappealing, according, at any rate, to her – I can't actually remember my own responses. So that poem is mostly made up, and is an attempt to imagine how my brother, who would have been six, might have experienced this transition, rather than a transcription of

my own feelings. I expect my parents found life in Surbiton a bit dreary too, after enjoying the perks of late colonial life – I suppose I view our "buccaneering" so much through the lens of post-colonial theory that I can't disentangle the pleasures it afforded us from the guilt of being part of such a monstrous enterprise. I didn't approach such topics until my third book, *Six Children*, which includes a poem called "Wooster and Jeeves" that is a sestina on the Mau Mau rebellion. Actually, there's a poem that's all about one thing, and doesn't hop about, so I suppose I can occasionally write poems that stick to the point.

To return to your question, my parents tended to be rather negative about England, or Youkay – as expatriates like to call it – and to be scornful of unadventurous stay-at-homes who were content to get a job in the town where they'd grown up; my father's own father apparently hoped my dad would get a job in the local (i.e. Beckenham) branch of Barclays … But he wanted much more from life … cheetahs, colobus monkeys … Also I think in that poem I was trying to create the sense of contrast between one's home country and "elsewhere," in other words to reformulate the question that Elizabeth Bishop asks in "Questions of Travel": "should we have stayed at home / wherever that may be?"

JG*: In her comment upon "After Africa" Helen Vendler suggests that the family travel made your "Englishness" uneasy. I'd like to elaborate on this. So, what do you feel is the place of the traditional English literary idiom in your poetic imagination and sensibility? Do you have a sense of being cut off from such important strains of British tradition as the pastoral mode (because your earliest recollections had little to do with English landscapes)? Incidentally, G. M. Hopkins, whom you quote a number of times, is an interesting case in this context since his experimental diction and unusual word-formations might be also traced back to his uneasiness about what Ms Vendler calls "Englishness."*

MF: Hopkins was on the whole pretty patriotic – he just wanted England to return to the faith that Henry VIII had made it abandon! "Our King back, Oh upon English souls! / Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cresseted east, / More brightening her, rare-dear Britain …" As if the wreck of a German passenger ship would make Britain Roman Catholic again! Obviously his unease derived from the conflict between his Jesuitism and his Englishness… But anyway, in terms of my poetry, I would say that *Landlocked* illustrates a fairly common instance of "reverse imperialism," that is, the colonization of my language and imagination by America; that fascination with "something we have that they don't," to borrow an Ashbery quote that I used as the title of an academic book of essays that I co-edited on the topic. In *Soft Sift* I was, I think, trying to recreate the kind of fusion of personal anxiety and national crisis that you get in early Auden – perhaps rather too obviously. In fact I think I remember Helen saying in a letter to me that the last lines of "Brinkmanship" – "body / And spirit tear apart, scatter like sticky seeds caught / In the fur of animals, or the soft feathers of birds" were too like Auden. Now, how English, even typically English, were Auden's attacks on England? – his diagnosis of the ills afflicting "this country of ours where no one is well." The English love moaning: Alan Bennett is our national icon precisely because he is so good at moaning; when asked the other day to pick out something in which the English are preeminent he came up with "hypocrisy" – i.e. turned the question

into an opportunity to moan, and his answer struck the inner chord of Englishness so exactly that it made the headlines. Self-deprecation, I would say, is our default position.

To return to your question, I love lots of poems set in the country – Wordsworth and John Clare and Thomas Hardy, etc. – but have spent nearly all my adult life living in cities, mainly London. I think Helen also – either in a review or a letter – suggested that "Penumbra" offered a somewhat disenchanted view of the countryside – "Crops, / Sludge, restless drifts of leaves absorb / The haggard light …" A bit melodramatic, that "haggard," I think now. But the drabness of the pastoral aspects of *Soft Sift* were possibly also a form of resistance to the charisma and glamour of certain American models of poetry – an attempt to escape the theatrical grandeur of, say, Lowell, the "moonstruck eyes' red fire" of his skunks, and the sophisticated post-pastoral of Ashbery, where all is grist to the mill of contingency's metaphors – sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow… The poems in *Soft Sift* were written on my return to England after two years in Japan, and their pastoral is, perhaps for that reason, somewhat abstract and alienated – I think of these poems as "blindly probing through the endless rain / For openings" ("Looping the Loop"), or as peering forth, like the "strayed mole through a cliff-crevice" from the same poem, on "the unfamiliar scene."

JG: *What made you a poet? Biographical matters? Pressure of reality? Poems you read? Urge to do something with language?*

MF: Probably all of the above. It happened quite out of the blue. I woke up one morning having had a dream about coming across a swimming pool full of peanuts, and wrote that poem in about half an hour. I felt in the grip of something. I was twenty-one, and had finished my undergraduate degree, and at the time was staying with my parents who had recently moved to a suburb of New York called Mamaroneck. It's in Westchester County, prime commuter belt. I think the fact that the poem came so quickly and easily played a big part in my thinking that writing poetry could be a part of my life. Before that I'd probably fooled around with sub-Eliot or sub-Larkin effusions, the kind of attempts that make you feel very strongly that you are not a poet… Yes, there is the urge to "do something with language," as you put it, but there is also the urge, particularly when one is twenty-something, to emerge in some way, to be somebody, to translate the tensions and energies and conflicts that are making life so difficult into some kind of narrative, to give them some kind of expression. By the time I wrote "A Swimming Pool Full of Peanuts" I had read quite a lot of poetry. Keats was my favourite at school, as well as Donne and Marvell, and Auden, and I read *The Prelude* when I was seventeen and that prompted a passionate nature phase. I went climbing mountains, in New Zealand, in the Italian Alps, trekking in the Himalayas and the Andes. I think writing poetry was a sublimation of that urge to get to the top of a mountain or a ridge and to see a whole new landscape on the other side, more mountains and ridges which one would love to climb as well. Anyway, I was pretty surprised when I found I'd written that first poem, which is the only one of mine which is generally liked, though a reviewer in *The New York Times* called it my worst poem the other day … I was surprised because it didn't come about by hammering and chiseling but, as Keats said poems should, as naturally as the leaves to a tree. But around that time, when I was twenty-one or twenty-two, I was also pretty much on the edge. I had no idea how my life would work out, and I was trying to deal with all the emotions that had been suppressed during my teenage years and university years.

Having been at an all-boys boarding school from the age of 8 to 17, I had missed out on an awful lot of the experiences which form a bridge between adolescence and maturity. I was mainly just fearful. I'd spent all this time studying, and that was proving not such a great preparation for living. I don't mind admitting I suffered a real crisis in my very early twenties – and writing poetry came out of that crisis, and was to some extent a solution to it. It was as if I had been hiding behind a tree or camouflaged behind bushes up until that point, and writing that poem felt like I was suddenly leaping into the open and declaring – "Here I am!"

1983, Udaipur

JG: *You published your first book in 1992, more or less at the time when such poets as Simon Armitage, Glyn Maxwell or Don Paterson, called a bit later on the New Generation Poets, came out with their debut collections. Were you aware of them at the time? Did you have anything like a sense of new refreshing poetry being written and published in England? And was it encouraging to you as a poet?*

MF: I'd probably read some of their work – in fact as an editor at *Oxford Poetry* I think I was one of the first people to publish a Glyn Maxwell poem. I can't remember

which one it was, but I can remember thinking it was very good. There is always "new refreshing poetry being written" and New Generation, Next Generation, Next New Generation, New Next Generation are just the application of advertising techniques and marketing formulas to what is an amorphous and ongoing process. I was a board member of the Poetry Book Society and understand how the whole Arts Council funding process and the marketing initiatives that result from it end up being devised… Mick Imlah was the first proper poet I ever met. He had been an editor at *Oxford Poetry* but left to become editor of *Poetry Review*, and I was invited by Nick Jenkins to replace him. I remember meeting Mick in the King's Arms in Oxford and thinking he was an impossibly glamorous and charismatic and attractive figure and that contemporary poetry could be cool and appealing rather than something for nerds or somewhat unhinged types. But in my twenties I also had a sense of wanting to be iconoclastic and avant-garde – like John Ashbery really – and was drawn to poetry that was anti-mainstream. In 1985 Allen Ginsberg visited Oxford and I arranged to interview him for *Oxford Poetry*. His stuff seemed to me, at that time, hopelessly naïve and unsophisticated, and the subject I really wanted to get him on was Bob Dylan, whom I worshipped then – indeed I still do. In fact, to go back to your previous question, writing poetry was – as it has been for so many young men since the early sixties – a way of coping with the fact that we couldn't be Bob Dylan! Ginsberg was friendly enough, indeed all too friendly – it dawned on me soon after we met and he started showing me pictures of himself naked in bed with a young chap that this manner of brush with fame was on offer to me too… Then Nico showed up at the performance that Ginsberg gave in St John's College gardens. It was a beautiful summer evening. I wish I'd been able to relax more, and savour the sense of the legendary the event has now assumed in my mind… Anyway, since I was writing a PhD on John Ashbery most of the poetry I read was American rather than English. That was probably true of the poets you mention in your question too. But there's always a new generation bursting through – nowadays it's Emily Berry and Jack Underwood and Heather Phillipson and Oli Hazzard. "Is there something happening in poetry?" O'Hara was once asked by a *New York Times* reporter who was quizzing him in a bar; "Yes, there is," said Frank, "otherwise you wouldn't be buying me this drink!"

JG: *Can you say something about your preoccupation with contemporary American poetry? Your poems have been often interpreted in the context of Frank O'Hara and other New York Poets (but there must have been other fascinations, too). What attracted you to those poets in the first place? I remember Simon Armitage telling an interviewer how Geoffrey Moore's Penguin Anthology of American Verse turned his attention to contemporary American poetic idiom. Did you have similar experiences?*

MF: My moment of initiation occurred in a bookshop in Oxford. A friend of mine had a brother who staged some plays by Frank O'Hara at the Edinburgh Fringe. I was in Edinburgh acting with an Oxford theatre company, and was directed in a play called *The Bed-bug* by Vladimir Mayakovsky by a feisty American called Carey Perloff. She said her mum, who was an academic, was crazy about O'Hara, and we should go and see them and we did. One of them was *Try! Try!* and I can remember its dead-pan cool now. Anyway, the brother of the director mentioned O'Hara's friend John Ashbery, and back in Oxford I went into a bookshop and found *Houseboat Days* and started reading it and found myself utterly entranced. It seemed to have all the blank verse energies of *The*

Prelude but abstracted in a way to make it seem as sophisticated and impassive as an Andy Warhol silkscreen. And New York, because of Warhol, and the Velvet Underground, and Dylan, had the status of a fantasy paradise to me – I think Ashbery's stuff seemed a way of accessing it in terms of poetry rather than music or the visual arts, areas in which I could never be anything but a spectator or fan. I wrote my undergraduate thesis on Ashbery in 1982/3, and the kinds of criticism his work elicited, from such as Harold Bloom and Carey's mum, Marjorie, and Douglas Crase opened my eyes to a whole new way of considering poetry, and to the validity of poetry as a contemporary art form, rather than as something written by greats in the past. I think in some ways I was lucky – one of the great things about Ashbery's poetry is the way it makes you as the reader feel part of the poetic process and the subtle encouragement that this gives you to try and be a poet yourself; but I sometimes wish I'd happened on someone whose work hadn't proved so influential on so many other poets too! Gone for an Eliot-Laforgue dynamic, so to speak, or a Hart Crane-Samuel Greenberg! Alas, I don't keep up with what is happening in poetry in America so much these days. A book I'd like to mention that had tremendous influence on me back then was David Kalstone's *Five Temperaments* – which consisted of five essays on Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, James Merrill and John Ashbery. They – plus O'Hara, and, to be honest, minus Rich – became "the canon" of great post-war American poetry for me.

JG: *I cannot help thinking that the title of your first book (*Landlocked*) points to a sense of oppression and separation. Was it deliberate, though? I mean, was the title supposed to suggest something potentially present in the collection and permeating the poems or was it just a word you thought might work as the book's letter-head? Incidentally, did you have any idea of the volume as a whole? For example, there are quite a few poems about America.*

MF: Aagh – titles, man! They are pure agony. Why are they so hard to find and like? In fact *Landlocked* is the only one of my poetry book titles that I *do* like – though of course after choosing it I found out that it was also the title of a novel by Doris Lessing. I decided that didn't matter. I wanted to call my second book *May*, a word that crops up in one of my versions of a poem by Charles d'Orléans, but Paul Muldoon had just published a collection called *Hay*, and when I asked him if he felt it would be a problem he said yes, he thought it would. I later wished I hadn't mentioned it! "Soft Sift" is actually the title of a poem in my first book, which therefore has two title poems – which perhaps indicates the dilemma finding an overall title always throws me in to. Yes, a lot of the poems in *Landlocked* dramatize states of paralysis, often adolescent – "the angry young / mattress nailed to the floor" – though I'm also spoofing the whole angry young man genre in that line by making it ridiculous in a Monty Pythonesque sort of way. "Landlocked" itself takes another staple genre, the American road-trip, but rather than have the protagonist make it with his buddies, it imagines a young woman doing it with her dog, and failing to get to the end point of Kerouac-style road-trips, i.e. the Pacific Coast of California. He's back on the East Coast and periodically receives postcards from her – I suppose, looking back on it, it was a metaphor for whether an on-again/off-again relationship was eventually going to be on or off. Failure, trauma, dismay, occur regularly in the book, as in nearly all first collections… Thematically, the book is fairly unsurprising, but, again looking back on it (its first poems were written over thirty years

ago), there is a freshness and lack of inhibition in the idiom, in the rhythms and imagery, something gleeful indeed, which is rather delightful. I got so crabbed later on! I think that came out of the fusing of British and American poetics and culture and argots, which created something both freewheeling and paranoid. The glee is probably an expression of my sheer amazement that I could do this stuff, I mean write poems, the unblocking of my poetic chakras, to use an image from acupuncture, which I had for a spell in my mid-twenties. The best poems in *Six Children* were in fact written after I took up pilates, which I alas no longer do – I need a new alternative practice or therapy, maybe Qigong… But the title *Landlocked* also caused me headaches because I found that wonderful Fairfield Porter picture for the cover – a detail of *Broadway South of Union Square* – but then, as John Ashbery pointed out in his review of the book for *P.N. Review*, Manhattan is very far from being landlocked. He wonderfully and ingeniously suggested that I was "merely radiating insouciance – but that's the wrong word, for it implies enjoying oneself at someone else's expense; make that a fine and generous lack of consequence." There is an inbuilt dissonance between picture and title, but, as with the previous use of *Landlocked* by Doris Lessing, I decided I had to live with it. I think the wackiness of those poems, which is why they appealed to John, and is something he captured brilliantly in his review of the book, does license what he calls a "generous lack of consequence." Of course I had precedents and precursors that made me feel that what I was doing was part of a tradition – obviously John's own work, O'Hara's, the surrealists, *Blonde on Blonde* – but I was also excited about feeling iconoclastic, alternative, part of an English *nouvelle vague* of one! And as your question suggests, like so many young Europeans, I was in love with America, with *Twin Peaks* and Lou Reed and Tom Waits and Jim Jarmusch and Emerson. I still am… I had no sense of the book as a whole, just moving on from poem to poem as footballers always take it one match at a time – beyond a sense of wanting variety in the book, poems in different shapes and sizes.

JG: *Do you have any second thoughts upon* Landlocked *after more than twenty years? A naïve but perhaps inevitable question: what kind of advice would you give to the young author of that book?*

MF: Hmm, enjoy it! Except I was prone to feeling tortured and underconfident … but enjoy your beginner's luck, and the time in your twenties when first thoughts really are so often best thoughts. In the wake of my interview with Allen Ginsberg I remember joking with my Oxford pals about his "First thought, best thought" mantra, but at times it really worked for me. On a couple of occasions I felt I was writing a good poem and it turned out to be rubbish, but in general when the urge came I was able to do it fast and pretty much to my satisfaction. When I look back on that period I feel I understand the concept of the muses. Nowadays I wouldn't allow dozens and dozens of things that occur in the poems in *Landlocked*, though I also don't really think they mar them – their "insouciance" lets them get away with things that I would nowadays correct. Perhaps some of the poems, like the one with the angry young mattress in it, "My Shoulder-Length Hair," seem a bit throwaway, but, on their own often somewhat peculiar terms, I feel that in general they work – in other words are poetry, have got through the looking-glass.

JG: *You have published three collections of essays. You write reviews and articles for* The New York Review of Books *and* London Review of Books. *You have edited many books of poetry (Allen Ginsberg, Mick Imlah, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, to mention just some of them). I'm wondering if you could tell us something about your vision of decent (competent, well-conducted, authentic) literary criticism. Is it all about making the reader understand a poet and his/her poems? Or is it more instinctive, a need to give justice to something deeply felt? Does a critical perspective help you as a poet? I can imagine quite a few poets would claim the opposite.*

MF: To start with your last question – that's the road not taken in my life. What if I'd committed myself utterly to the business of writing poetry, so that rather than a guilty pleasure (or frustration) or something in the corner of my eye that I periodically get on with, I had made it what I do every day for eight hours or whatever? I suppose if I'd gone down the Creative Writing route I might have had a life like that, reading other people's work, engaging in subconscious combat with them, and I wonder if it would have spurred me on to write much much more than I have done, and in a way for which there was more market, so to speak. Someone like Simon Armitage would be a good example of a really successful professional poet. Perhaps I've always felt my talent was fragile or whimsical, something not to be relied on, a version of the descent of grace rather than a solid craftsman-like skill that could be applied to anything. The few occasions I've been offered commissions I've always turned them down. Yet I can churn out all this prose on commission. Reflecting on his career as an art critic, John Ashbery once said that he learned from it that he could sit down and write a poem just as he could sit down and write a review. I can sit down determined to write a poem, and after hours of head-banging, may have chiseled out a line, but it invariably gets scrapped – and I always end up ruefully reflecting that I should have been getting on with that piece on Baudelaire that is overdue. And probably the self-consciousness that comes from reading other people's poems and writing critically about them doesn't help. On the other hand, there is rather more of a market for a 4,000-word piece on Ezra Pound in the *New York Review of Books* – I mean their readership is 100,000 or whatever, and so it's more likely to be read. I've always loved review-essays, by such as John Bayley or Helen Vendler, and was delighted when I found myself writing for the *TLS* and the *London Review of Books* and then the *New York Review of Books* – and of course these pieces pay much better than poems do. Also, I cannily collect them in volumes of essays, as you note, books of which I am really very proud, and they also help flesh out my research outputs for when these things get measured. I'm currently writing a proper critical book on Thomas Hardy, which is a new thing for me – writing a whole monograph on a canonical British figure, and have been really enjoying it… Literary criticism, like any other kind of writing, has to be interesting; to an extent one is using the subject, or the book in question, as a springboard to come up with something that readers of the kinds of publication I write for will want to keep on reading. Here I do feel I have a craft that can be applied to anyone, from the most canonical, such as T.S. Eliot, to minor or unknown people like Samuel Greenberg or Joan Murray. Yes, I try and do justice to them, but also outline all the pressures – historical, biographical – which made the work what it ended up being, and the cultural fashions and literary critical modes which shaped its reception at the time it was written, and shape its interpretation in the present. The idea is to package the writer in question, to make what they did – or didn't do – interesting (I'm afraid I can't come up

with a more telling word than that), to show why they haven't, or shouldn't have, ended up in the wallet of oblivion at time's back to which literary history consigns 99.99999recurring% of writers – to adapt an image from Ulysses's great speech in *Troilus and Cressida.* Before I die, if no one else does it, I may well sit down and write one of these essays about myself!

JG: Soft Sift *opens with a quote from Georges Perec's novel* La Vie mode d'emploi. *I read it as a nod to Perec's more general message: the puzzle is a liberation of and a challenge to our imagination, sensibility and attentiveness, yet the freedom of interpretation is constrained as each piece is unique and must be put in one particular place. Such a vision of disciplined and highly ordered art may be also found in the works of Raymond Roussel. You mentioned your early interests in the New York poets, but how about those French experimental writers? Weren't they a kind of counter-inspiration? There are affinities between (for example) Roussel and Ashbery, but there exist obvious differences between, say, O'Hara's practice of spontaneous poetic writing and Perec's ideal of literature as a perfectly programmed mechanism. Is it fair to say that as a poet you are attracted to the two modes of writing: the one seeking after unconditional freedom ("write what and how you like," "I do this I do that," etc.) and the one finding freedom in mathematical formulas, linguistic patterns and all kinds of imposed rules? Do you perceive this duality (if this is indeed duality) in your poems?*

MF: They are antithetical, as you say, but also complementary. The first poem I read that might be classified as Oulipian was probably John Ashbery's "Into the Dusk-Charged Air," which contains the name of a river in every line. And then there were his sestinas with Kenneth Koch which had Oulipian-style rules, such as pieces of office furniture as end-words while each line had to include the name of a famous woman as well as of a game, and so on. I became interested in Roussel via Ashbery, and wrote an essay on Roussel's influence on Ashbery in my first year as a graduate student, which was the first critical piece I ever had published. Both "unconditional freedom" and Oulipian rules are enticing antidotes to the "same-old same-old" habits of thought and composition that produce run-of-the-mill poems full of clichés – but they only get you so far. As Roussel himself said of his *procédé*, it can be used to produce good works and bad works. I've a number of poems that have an Oulipian-style concept – like "Early to Bed, Early to Rise" in which each two-line unit involves a mix up of two people with the same surname (George and Zbigniew Herbert, for instance), as well as a city and a film. A bit gimmicky, perhaps, but good for a laugh in performance, I have found. But overall I feel much more in dialogue with the odes of Keats, or poems such as "Frost at Midnight" or "Tintern Abbey" or Tennyson's "Ulysses" or Stevens's "Sunday Morning" than I do with the experiments of the avant-garde. I've never been able to follow Pound's advice – "To break the pentameter was the first heave." However attenuated the link, the poems I've written that have given me most pleasure tend to shadow the pentameter – though recently I've been finding myself compelled to play off short lines and long lines. I just can't stop this, and am almost worried – how long is this "phase" going to last? The trouble is that doing it satisfactorily is incredibly difficult and time-consuming… it feels like walking a high-wire without a safety-net – and yet all the agonies involved in getting the rhythm right, choosing to break the line here or there (which sounds simple, I know, but can lead to terrible quandaries and uncertainties) is completely hidden from the

reader. Well, that's "Adam's Curse," as Yeats called it, though in fact he always liked to make readers aware that writing poetry was hard work… The notion of spontaneous composition, "First Thought, Best Thought," etc., and the Oulipian puzzle are both very appealing because they make poetry feel possible, while reading someone like Yeats can make you feel that it isn't, at least not for you… but then he in fact once described his compositional processes as like making a blot and pushing it around. I probably chose that epigraph from Perec and the one that introduces the second half of the book from Dickinson – "And through a Riddle, at the last – / Sagacity, must go –" to signal my distance from the traditions of the middle-of-the-road English poem, or just to flag up that there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. And probably I was just trying to cut myself some slack – the poems only work with a bit of negative capability on the part of the reader, the suspension of irritable reaching after fact and reason. As I've got older I've become less tolerant of things than don't make sense in poems, and suspect I need to fight back against the Little Englander skepticism that has perhaps crept into my responses to things. After all, at the end of the day, as football managers put it, it's really all about the effort to create a new and original mode of verse, that's all that counts – it really doesn't matter whether the poem makes sense or not; what does matter is whether or not it's convincing, whether or not it works.

JG: *Can you say something about your fascination with Raymond Roussel? In 2000 you published* Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams, *a biography of that shadowy Parisian writer, and in 2011 you astounded many readers with a beautiful rendering of Roussel's* Nouvelles impressions d'Afrique, *a strange and seemingly untranslatable (for some even unreadable) poem written in rhyming alexandrine couplets. Both tasks must have been backbreaking!*

MF: Yes, but also fascinating. As I mentioned, I wrote an essay on Ashbery and Roussel while at Oxford – that would have been in the spring of 1986. Then in 1989 the trunk containing his papers was found with all these new works in it, and the time seemed ripe for a book on him. I started it on my return from Japan in 1993, though didn't properly get going until a few years later. I was surprised to find I still had no English or American rivals in the field of Roussel studies, since his work is so intriguing and his life makes such a good story… It was a wonderful challenge, and I felt very intrepid, as the first English-speaking person to read all this new material, which I did in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, and it all took me well beyond my comfort zone. Something in me loves the almost autistic logic that drives Roussel's work, the different set of rules that he applied to the business of both writing and living – they offer such a delightful, enchanting, and self-reflexive escape from the mass of competing impulses, the incoherence, to paraphrase Yeats again, that we are when we sit down to breakfast, an escape, that is, from one's own ordinariness. The Rousselian text is beautifully polished, and satisfies its own inner criteria so perfectly, and with such ingenuity and self-delight, that it quite sweeps you off your feet – or it did, and still does, me… alas, not all that many agree. Translating *Nouvelles impressions* was indeed backbreaking, particularly as I strove for absolute fidelity to the original, perhaps somewhat in the mode of Nabokov's translations of Pushkin. A previous translator had taken all sorts of liberties, perhaps thinking Roussel was a bit wacko and it didn't matter much if his sense got mangled since the whole poem was pretty crazy, but I wanted to show how every image and

comparison *does* make sense, that there's a solution to each vignette as there's always an answer to the clues in a crossword puzzle. That said, it did drive me nuts – having to get onto his wavelength each day, working out the exact point of each example of the hundreds that the poem offers, and then finding wordy English equivalents for his fanatically precise and compressed language. But I pride myself on thinking that any English speaker with average French can now read that poem, understand each image, and therefore, with a bit of dedication and application, experience what is one of the most unique experiences that literature has to offer.

JG: *A quick one: are there any other authors you would like or are about to translate?*

MF: No, I'm done with translating – it's too much like being chained to a corpse! I hope you don't agree…

JG: *Well, I hoped you would go on with Roussel! Don't you think, by the way, that translating is an essential and somewhat hygienic effort for every poet? I mean, coping with a different language may be helpful as it opens to other rhythms and tones and makes one transcend his or her natural, repetitive and sometimes quite tautological way of speaking. Also, translation may be an efficient means of overcoming writer's block. Translate a good poem and, because it necessarily involves speaking and thinking in a different key, you are already on a different track, taking the road not taken before (so to speak).*

MF: Fair enough. I did in fact arrange to translate Roussel's *Textes de grande jeunesse ou textes-genèse* for Dalkey Archive, but found I just didn't have the energy, but then again I have recently considered trying to translate the episodes excluded from the final version of *Locus Solus* which have now been published in their entirety by Pauvert-Fayard – and possibly some from *Impressions d'Afrique* too. Some of these episodes are as enthralling as those that did make it in to the novels – I wrote about them in an article published in the *London Review of Books* and collected in *A Driftwood Altar*, a piece I called, borrowing a compliment paid by Cocteau to Roussel, "Genius in its Pure State." I agree that translation is good for you, for all the obvious reasons, and indeed the history of the development of poetry in English from Chaucer to the present day is in many ways the history of translation… I was just recalling the anguish caused me by Raymond's *casse-tête*. And, as you'll be aware, *Six Children* contains quite a lot of translated work – passages from Lucretius, Pliny, Basho, Catullus, Sappho. They are all acknowledged at the back of the book, and I've also turned into verse some Silver Latin prose, i.e. Petronius ("The Casket") and Tacitus ("Gaius Suetonius Paulinus"). So I would agree that translating is, if not essential, a tremendous resource – and I like to remember that even Philip Larkin, who made a thing about not reading foreign poetry and poured scorn on the notion that his work could be put into French ("*Haut fenêtres!* Good God!") did, in his youth, quite a good translation of Baudelaire's "Femmes damnées." His distrust of the foreign was part of his reaction against Pound's polyglot version of international modernism – as with all aspects of the poetry-writing business, it is horses for courses: some poets, like Pound, come good by creating versions of other people's writing, while some, like Larkin, find a voice by fashioning a persona who deliberately excludes, or at

least seems to, awareness of poetry in other languages – but then references to Mallarmé and even Gautier have been spotted by critics in *Haut fenêtres*!

1984, Boston

JG: *I find* Soft Sift *(2001) the most mystifying of your books. The volume has been described as revealing an "original sensibility concerned not with self-display but with a general comedy of wrong moves." To me, this is an accurate description: the poems are*

full of false starts and false culminations, alternative trains of thought as well as dazzlingly meandering assertions and quasi-assertions. Also, the figure of the narrator seems less definite than the one discernible in Landlocked. *Did you feel, while writing the poems, that this was going to be something rather different than your first poems? But, first of all, do you agree that* Soft Sift *complicated (beautifully complicated, I think) the terms under which we are to read your poems?*

MF: Well, after *Landlocked* I was quite stumped about how to go on. *Soft Sift* makes best sense to me as my version of the iconoclastic turn taken by Ashbery in *The Tennis Court Oath*, and indeed it almost inclines me to believe in Harold Bloom's theories about misprision and the anxiety of influence. None of this was deliberate of course. Its difficulty can look willed, but it really was compulsive, a kind of pulverizing I just *had* to get on with to allow the material to flow from one neck of the hourglass to the other. Endless crushing and sifting – I'm thinking of a comment of D.H. Lawrence's on Edgar Allan Poe whom Lawrence saw as "doomed to seethe down his soul in a great continuous convulsion of disintegration, and doomed to register the process." That all sounds a bit grand but I think certain kinds of romantic poetic career do involve undertaking a break-down of the rhetoric one started out using unselfconsciously, and in fact Lawrence makes exactly this point in his essay on Poe: "For the human soul must suffer its own disintegration, *consciously*, if ever it is to survive." On a biographical level, I wrote the poems in *Soft Sift* some years after my own life had pretty much disintegrated, and while I was desperately trying to put it back together again … In fact in my case unhappiness never results in poetry – if I am miserable I don't even try to write, I'm concentrating too hard on surviving to tell the tale! Five years – two of them spent largely on my own in Japan – elapsed between finishing *Landlocked* and completing the first poem in *Soft Sift*, "Looping the Loop," whose title really says it all. Probably the unhappiness the book was attempting to transmute resulted in its somewhat relentless, looping the loop-y drive – there aren't that many obviously funny poems in the book; although I agree it charts a general comedy of wrong moves, and on occasion the earnest intensity of the poems can seem in surreptitious dialogue with a quirky, subterranean humour. The urge to be serious, the urge to be funny – my poetry swings between those two, and at its best is both at the same time… Anyway, having recovered what felt like self-belief, or poetic conviction, I was wary of letting it go, as if I'd caught a tiger by its tail and needed to hang on wherever it went. I think this did allow me to plough under, or perhaps through, both my literary and my real-life or existential anxieties, but the energies of *Soft Sift* verge, perhaps too often, on the destructive. If *Landlocked* captured paralyzed adolescence, the speaker of *Soft Sift* is exploring what it feels like, and means, to be an angry young man – in the full knowledge that being an angry young man is completely unacceptable!

JG: *How do you write a poem? Could you please say something about the mechanics of the writing – the medium (handwriting or not), the length (how long does it take to complete a poem) and the editing process (revising the poem, etc.)? How conscious is the whole thing for you?*

MF: It varies from poem to poem. Concept poems, when I have a set idea, like "Six Children" or "Adrift" or "The Death of Hart Crane" or "Early to Bed, Early to Rise" I can

do pretty quickly – you have your *donnée*, to use a Jamesian term, and simply work through it. But my more ode-like poems take many months. I feel I'm making everything up, as if I'm reinventing the wheel… I'm spinning in a void with no handholds in sight. I write them by hand with endless crossings out in notebooks, and when I have five or six lines done I print those lines out, cut them out, and stick them into the book. Seeing what you've written in print makes you reconsider and edit and revise – and then I try and work out what should come next. "Under the Lime Trees" took months and months – I mean I'm not working on them the whole time, at all, indeed for some reason I tend to have a look at whatever poem I've got "on the go" on Sunday mornings… Perhaps having a poem one is working on is bit like having a box-set "on the go," *Breaking Bad* or *Mad Men* – I do it episode by episode, trial and error, thinking what moves are possible, which ones aren't, and making use of whatever comes to hand – a line from Coleridge or from a TV advert, a memory… there is a collage-element to it, for me, placing this here and that there like Joseph Cornell putting together a box. In the end it is mainly a matter of instinct, gut-feeling, following a hunch, a sense that this works, or, far far more often, that this doesn't, and has to be scrapped or modified or pulverized. But the pleasure I get when the thing is done, got clean away from the marble, is like nothing on earth – my private version of winning Wimbledon or the World Cup!

JG: *One of the most striking things about* Six Children, *your third book of poems, is its autobiographical dimension. The volume is dedicated to the memory of your father, and there are a number of poems which more or less obviously touch upon the time and themes of your childhood. This is rather surprising, especially after* Soft Sift *where you seem determined to reveal and disassemble the fictions of so called life-narratives in general, and the autobiographical mode in particular.* Six Children *reads almost like a series of tentative and nostalgic sketches towards poetic autobiography. Was it conscious? Did you want the book to help you travel in time?*

MF: I wanted it to be as different as possible from all the poems I had written before. Quite a few years elapsed after the publication of *Soft Sift* before I began writing again, and personally I find, painful as periods of blankness or writer's block are, they do mean that when you get going again you're doing it *ab ovo*, so to speak, as if writing for the first time. And by then I was forty-something, and suddenly the whole taboo on making use of personal experience or details from my life seemed absurd – a form of Puritanism… Avant-gardes, don't you think, can be so holier-than-thou? Also, I was never under the impression that anyone took much notice of what I was up to, so it seemed to me not a problem to start trying to be more confessional. In fact the personal elements are nearly always bound up with fictitious ones, and I think of them more as spoof-confessional poems than heart-on-sleeve ones, though something like "In Loco Parentis" is a fairly straightforward transcription of my experiences as a child being sent away to boarding school – the "house of desolation" to borrow a phrase of Rudyard Kipling's. Mind you I was eight – he was only six and his sister three when they were dispatched back to England for their education. What is undoubtedly true is that if I don't write down details about my life and experiences, no one else is going to, and since you only live once… to me it felt like expanding the range of tones, vocabulary, styles, the choices available, and so making my stuff more various. I wonder if, unconsciously, it had anything to do with the death of my father, or maybe the births of my children; a

sense I no longer had to, or indeed was able to, figure myself as rebellious iconoclast and accordingly I could experiment with more straightforward kinds of narration. More likely it was just an instance of the fact that to stay interested in poetry you have to be like a shark – you have to keep moving to survive. Also, I realized that my early years in Africa, though I can barely remember them, opened into a fascinating terrain, and it felt exciting to explore my family history from various angles that might be called post-colonial.

JG: *How about all those classical citations and allusions in* Six Children*? Sappho, Pliny the Elder, Catullus, Tacitus, to mention some of the strongest reverberations… There are so many references to ancient texts (not only poetic) that they constitute a separate thread running throughout the book. I'm curious how those distant echoes enter your poems. Is it instinctive? Does it go back to your upbringing and education, perhaps?*

MF: Probably. Translating a bit of Caesar or Ovid either in class or for homework (though for a boarder homework was of course done at school) was a fairly safe thing to be doing – one wasn't going to be pounced on by an angry matron or teacher, or have to defend oneself from teasing by older boys or whatever. That's what a boy's boarding school was like in the seventies – a mixture of terror at an imminent swoop by authority figures and feral jockeying for power among one's peers. Reading was a safe haven from that. I suppose they offer a safe haven from the present too – from both our complacencies and our quandaries. It's hard to overestimate the shaping power of the classics on our present-day culture, as, say Alice Oswald has recently demonstrated so movingly in *Memorial*, and I wanted the vision of the British Empire presented in *Six Children* to have its relationship to the classical education received by its ruling classes clearly signaled. And of course the weirdness of, say, Pliny is both a delightful escape from the complexities of whatever is happening in the moment, and a correction to our hubris: we believe our understanding of the world is somehow the only one possible – but so did he ….

JG: *One final thing about* Six Children. *What puzzled me as I was leafing through the book for the first time was its suggestion of the after-life of poets. I'm thinking here of two memorable poems: "Six Children," where the spirit of Walt Whitman seems to revisit the world via his imaginary children, and "The Death of Hart Crane" which ends with a vision of a bizarre community of present-day clones of the American poet. Both texts seem informed by a strong sense of poetic continuity and the firmness, indeed indestructibility, of the poetic voice. Can we treat it as your critical credo?*

MF: Not really – well, I suppose there's a "Lycidas"-style element in any poem about another poet, a hope that some poet in the future will favour one's own destined urn with lucky words. Possibly I felt I received permission to do poems in this mode by Mick Imlah's great sequence, 'The Afterlives of the Poets', which focuses on Tennyson and James Thomson. Both of mine are concept poems – after I'd had the idea it was quite easy to follow through on it. The Crane poem had its origins in a dream, the Whitman in the remark in his letter to Symonds that I first read in a student's essay … Isn't it striking that so many canonical American poets, from Whitman to Crane to O'Hara to Ashbery to Merrill have been gay – and all, in their various ways, sort of epic poets too? It's hard to

say why that is… the end of the Crane poem was a literalization of his vision of a democratic America of the likeminded, and I suppose one of the paradoxes of the democratic epic, in the hands of both Crane and Whitman, and of Ginsberg too, is that while it purports to celebrate diversity, everyone in it is, to some extent, a clone, to use your term, of the author, a projection of the poet's ideals rather than an independent, active character in the manner of a Ulysses or Aeneas. As for my views on poetic continuity, they are – that it keeps happening!

JG: *Let me conclude with a question concerning your most recent book: the 2014* Selected Poems *(published by Coffee House Press). Such publications invite serious questions. Did you intend this* Selected *to be a culmination of a certain period that you thought had come to its close? Or maybe you see it as a kind of pause? An opening, perhaps?*

MF: Well – the American publisher of *Soft Sift*, Harcourt, cut back on poetry and didn't want to do *Six Children* so I began casting around for a new US publisher, and since my books are quite short and *Soft Sift* was out of print there I thought I might as well make it a *Selected* – and then as Coffee House said it would be OK to include new work I used that as a spur to come up with some fresh poems. "A damn serious business" is how Wallace Stevens, as you will of course know, described the business of publishing a book of poems, and yes, I suppose a *Selected* invites "serious questions" – but I haven't heard that many of them raised myself. Yes it's a damned serious business, but it's also like dropping a petal into the Grand Canyon and listening for the echo. Any publication in book form tends to introduce a hiatus into my writing of poetry, and this *Selected*, alas, was no exception, but I got to read at the 92 Street Y with John Ashbery, which, for me, was like an aspirant footballer getting to play in the World Cup, so I wouldn't say I regretted it. It's a lovely book as well, and being somewhat mean I tend to buy a poet's *Selected* rather than an individual volume as you get more for your money, and the idea is the weaker pieces have been winnowed out. And the book's last lines, from "Under the Lime Trees," probably are as close as I've come to a poetic credo, although one that might be glossed as simply "keep on keeping on":

> "Follow,"
> he confided, "the scent to the vixen's lair … take up
> your broken bicycle, and with both hands hurl it as far … as far …"

INTERVIEWEE'S BIO: Mark Ford (born 1962 in Nairobi, Kenya) is a British poet, critic and translator. He has published three books of poems: *Landlocked* (1992), *Soft Sift* (2011) and *Six Children* (2011). In 2014 Coffee House Press released his *Selected Poems* in America. Ford is the author of three important critical studies: *A Driftwood Altar*

(2006), *Mr and Mrs Stevens and Other Essays* (2011) and *This Dialogue of One: Essays on Poets from John Donne to Joan Murray* (2014). He has edited books by Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery and Mick Imlah, as well as an anthology of poems about London (*London: A History in Verse*, 2012). He teaches American literature at University College, London.

E-MAIL: m.ford(at)ucl.ac.uk

INTERVIEWER'S BIO: Jacek Gutorow is Professor of American Literature at the University of Opole. His academic interests concern American and British modernism but he also writes extensively on contemporary Polish literature. He is the author of five critical books, recently (2012) *Luminous Traversing: Wallace Stevens and the American Sublime*, and six books of poems. He has translated American and British poets (Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery, Charles Tomlinson, Simon Armitage, Mark Ford and others). Currently he is working on a study of life forms in the later writings of Henry James.

E-MAIL: gutorow(at)uni.opole.pl