Alistair Noon

Current Residence: Berlin, Germany
Birth City: Ashford, Middlesex, UK
Travels Significant to This Conversation:
1989: Berlin, Germany (six months)
1991: Voronezh, Russia
1993: Moved to Berlin
2000: Shanghai, PRC
2003: Wuhan, Hubei Province, PRC

KS: What made you decide to settle and write in Berlin? You're deeply involved with poetic events there—festivals, journals—so did the poetic possibilities when you moved there play into your decision? Or did you move there for other reasons and become poetically involved later?

AN: Settling in Berlin didn't have anything to do with poetry at first, at least not directly. Since a beach holiday in Yugoslavia in 1980 when I was ten, I'd been interested in Eastern Europe (and Berlin was still more or less subsumed under that term at that time). My plan was to spend a year in Berlin, and then move on to Prague and Moscow to improve my rudimentary Czech and rusty Russian. I got stuck on the first leg of the tour.

At the time, I'd started writing and performing sound poetry (as well as the more "conventional" poetry that I still do). I got to know Valeri Scherstjanoi, who's a leading sound poet and a Berliner. Apart from having fun with the aural aspect of poetry, doing sound poetry allowed me to engage more easily with the literary scene here—I wasn't reliant on finding an audience able to cope with the semantic density of a typical "conventional" poem in a foreign language.

Though I experimented with writing in German, I soon realized that I was always going to write a better poem in English than in German. If you're going to fully tap the resources of a language for poetry, you can't beat the language you grew up with, though there may be other political/cultural reasons for you to write in something other than your mother tongue.

When I arrived in Berlin in the early nineties there wasn't an Anglophone literary scene here as such. That changed sometime around 2003 or 2004. A critical mass of practitioners and audience was reached, and the internet and email meant that those people could quickly and easily get in touch with each other. Not only could you produce a literary magazine or put on a poetry festival in English, but you could be a lot surer that people would actually buy it or attend it respectively. More banally, it's a fact that living costs in Berlin remain lower than most other big cities in Western Europe (Berlin's in Western Europe now), which means you can get by on part-time work and still have time to write and read. Every time I've ever made noises about returning to the UK, my friends there have looked at me wide-eyed and told me to stay put.

KS: Has living in a place where they don't speak the language you grew up with affected your writing at all, and how, if so?

AN: Yes it has, but as my own understanding of poetry is still, I hope, expanding and deepening, I can only rationalize the effect in negative terms, in terms of what I don't do

rather than what I do. I don't write poems that play off current TV programmes in the UK—I don't watch them. I don't use very current British English slang expressions in my poems—I don't hear them. I don't, or at least don't consciously tap into current UK sub-cultures—I'm not a part of them.

Like most other poets I guess, I draw at least partially on what I see, hear, and do in the place where I happen to live, which just happens to be in a different country to the one I grew up in. Nothing special about that whatsoever, of course. But among some strands in British poetry, there seems to be some antipathy, or at least lack of interest, in poems by British poets that draw on non-British locations.

KS: I'd like to hear more about that antipathy: since it seems to rule out so much, why do you think people are attached to it? Have you encountered anything comparable in Berlin, or from any other group of poets? One of the things that you talk about in your essay "Translocal Underground" is "loyalty groups"; are people so attached to the idea of loyalties that they substitute new (stylistic, perhaps) provincialisms for the old, even when translocality dissolves their national/cultural rigidity?

AN: Few editors I think would be consciously aware of any prejudice they might have against poems in English that bring in experience and observation from outside of English-speaking countries, though the sometimes rather glib dismissal of the so-called "holiday poem" is certainly conscious. But if you look at the poetry that is most broadly disseminated, reviewed, bought, and funded in the UK, I think certain common elements recur frequently enough that you can work out the expectations that many editors and readers have. These would include a kind of everydayness and down-to-earthness, which tend *ipso facto* to preclude details that are recognizably non-British—the everyday, in this conception, is nationally based.

The reader should, according to this way of thinking, be able to "relate" to the poem. Poems are praised for being "contemporary" and "relevant". To my mind, these categories encourage the reader to stay within their immediate cultural sphere and thinking space. The immediate cultural sphere and thinking space are important places, but not the only important places.

I think the old provincialisms are alive and kicking. British national identity has changed over the last few decades as the most recent groups of migrants and their descendants have more or less established themselves. But the national identity hasn't dissolved; it's simply incorporated the cultural identities of particular migrants into that larger identity. For many practical purposes for migrants and their descendants, that's a good thing. But it doesn't challenge the idea of national identity itself, whose history and current practice are bound up with the global economic system and its inequalities.

KS: Not only did you spend a year in Wuhan, you wrote a book about it. Would you say that being there stimulated your writing, or that you wrote while you were there because you write everywhere, or what? In "Translocal Underground" you talk about "writing in" rather than "writing about", but many of the poems from ORIENT ALLY are "about" as well, or seem so. Did you feel more foreign in Wuhan, or more temporary, and did that change your writing? How did your writing change as you were there longer, if it did—can you point to some poems where you see that change happening?

AN: I certainly had time to write in Wuhan. I was teaching oral English classes, and as I had a fair bit of experience under my belt, I was able to do that with a minimum of preparation. Yes, I write everywhere. Though I certainly experienced frustrations and was party to

conflicts that could be framed in terms of "intercultural encounter", I'm not sure that "foreign" is the right word to describe my sense of living in China for two years. Clearly, I wasn't a local and the majority of my Chinese acquaintances perceived me—to varying degrees—as foreign and exotic. Perhaps by spending most of my adult life outside of the country I grew up in, I've experienced at first hand what theorists have told us regarding how fragile and constructed identities such as British, German, European, Western really are. They don't fall to pieces as soon as you touch them, but neither do they remain set in stone.

I'm a reasonably experienced and efficient language learner, which means that I acquired enough competence in Chinese to gain a sense of—if not belonging—then temporary "at home-ness". The economic and social status of being a foreign teacher in China—which is quite high—must also go some way to cushioning the landing.

Did I say "writing in"? I think I meant "writing from". The poems in the manuscript you mention have been jostled and shoved, beaten up, hospitalized and discharged several times since you saw them. The revisions may or may not have much to do with the original impetus for the poems. I don't doubt that many of the poems I wrote in China, and elsewhere, are poems "about" rather than "from". I'm generally trying to move from poems "about" to poems "from", but that's got less to do with avoiding exoticization and more to do with trying to write poems that go beyond an initial fascination with their materials in order to express something wider.

KS: I would love to see an old version and a more recent version that took the poem from "writing about" to "writing from", and see your comments about why you made those changes.

AN:

The Iron Tree Blooms

You quarry thoughts
in a coaldust town,
smelt them in pluming
blast furnaces, pylons
buzz brain cells
and the blackened leaves
slowly crumble to coal.
You pant up steps
solid in concrete,
ignited with a butterfly's
wingspan, blended
yellow and black.
As you approach, the wings
float into ferns
old as the last groans
of the great lizards.
…
And rocks curl mouths
and noses, cheeks

in a shaft, forehead
in a foundry, awarded names
that mean nothing to the library
so give them other names,
but give them names.
From this hill
you see the next,
hear the New Year crack
crack crack where the trees
are done up in black.
High on the hillside
the iron tree blossoms.
Expect fossils.

In that first version I make a few swipes at wider significance beyond the observed details—"give them names" etc.—but they're kind of tacked on. The details stay really more or less at the level of description. Here's a newer version:

The Iron Trees Bloom

It's a coaldust town where we quarry and smelt,
and bushes preen their black feathers.
Only the next hill is there as detonations
splash round the ridges. No time to rest:
the panting trucks reverse to spill rocks.
New Year cracks and whistles in the haze.
From out of ferns the great lizards trod
thin yellow wings ignite concrete steps
up the hillside where iron trees blossom
once in a century. Expect fossils.

Besides having got rid of various inaccuracies, I'd like to think that the newer version is more allusive, less viewy, more lyrical. The first version had lots of observed details that weren't really doing anything. In the second, I hope the details left over are suggestive enough to do some work in the reader's mind.

KS: Westerners going east often end up exoticizing what they see and feel— not always even consciously. Did you have that possibility on your radar while writing in China, and what did you do about it?

AN: Exoticization is probably the default setting. Western culture and society exoticize Chinese culture and society most of the time (it works the other way round too of course). I wasn't consciously aware of trying to avoid it as such, though. The first poems I wrote in China were a sequence of short urban observations called "Across the Water":

1
Why I disagree

Who says the sun's
a single thing?

That welder saw
two of them rise
this morning:

one from the trees,
one from his torch.

2
Parade day, sunny and warm–
best get the flags out to dry.
…

4
Locals, unfriendly,
like a contourless map

–that boatman,
pole in both hands,
who wouldn't wave back.
…

(published in *Litter* magazine, 2005)

—basically me trying to be Charles Reznikoff in Shanghai… Reznikoff was a sharp observer of New York and that was what I was trying to emulate. I can't say if they're good poems, but I don't think they're exoticizing poems. Apart from anything else, huge elements in Chinese urban living aren't to any significant degree different from typical Western urban living—motorways, tower blocks, supermarkets, consumer goods…

EB: In "Translocal Underground" you write, "But poets in this position, i.e. who are strongly translocal, are often faced with a stock of interrelated questions concerning audience, reception and publication." Can you talk about how you work with/toward those questions?

AN: I probably have in mind as an ideal reader a competent speaker of English who doesn't demand "relevance" from poetry—relevance is often code for wanting the poem to reinforce rather than challenge the reader's sense of self and the world, which have become tied up for many people with national identity. As regards reception, "Translocal Underground" and some of the reviews I've written (e.g. of Gael Turnbull and Kelvin Corcoran) have been attempts to draw attention to the translocal in contemporary poetry. With publication, I've found it easier to get things published in magazines, both print and online, that are avowedly international in scope.

EB: Can you point to "translocal" moments in your own poems?

AN: Have I got space here to quote in full a poem of mine that was published in an earlier version in the magazine *Magma*?

The Disappearing Houses

Disappearing houses are the band's livelihood:
the gig they play with each long swung hit
that perforates weak-link walls and roofs:
less is more. They chip away at the reefs
whose fish have left, their muscle breaks
recordings of habitat into albums of bricks
to be parcelled and packed off to market.
Life, the lucky say, is what you make it.
Clutching barebacked trucks, they tour from site
to wreckable site where, thin air for seats,
they drum in public, and expect no fame.
Invisible walls padded with foam
absorb their labour, pavements toss few looks.
In interviews, locals blink at their dialect
as they negotiate vegetables for the evening's wok.
They doss under plastic, each morning wake
from covers massed like leaves, on mats unrolled
on planks, to taxi horns and treetop trills.
With the buildings bled to their foundations,
outlines become bare for producers' decisions.
When plans are girder and concrete, there'll be a plinth
of names, not theirs, in the foyer. Beneath
what will be shadows of that unbuilt tower
they load their pans and bedding, and vanish, too.

… I saw this scene going on for several weeks on a university campus in Wuhan. I'd also frequently seen similar scenes in Shanghai and other places I'd visited. Over a couple of years in China, I'd amassed a certain amount of observational detail and contextual knowledge that enabled me to do something that I hope exceeds a completely superficial take on the subject. I'm not claiming to have transcended a "Western" perspective— I think that's impossible. The thread of the rock band running through the poem could be marked as "Western" (though it's not as if there aren't rock bands in China). In order to write the poem, I am of course standing outside of the scene as an observer. But, I would hope, not a completely clueless one.

KS: You mention a "temporary 'at-home-ness'" that you took on during your time in Wuhan. This is similar to a question I asked another contributor, and related to your comment about the fragility of national identity: do you feel that poets should resist feeling "at home" and keep their "at-home-ness" (sorry if all these coinages are irritating you) temporary rather than permanent?

AN: I'm not really sure how any poet, or any person for that matter, could or would resist that feeling of "at-home-ness" when it comes— unless they're members of the diplomatic corps and for professional reasons refuse to eat with chopsticks when in China (this example is real).

Plenty of people the world over have a sense of belonging in more than one place. It may be a problem for them, or it may equally well be no problem whatsoever.

Does a permanent feeling of at-home-ness equate with an uncritical acceptance of national identity? The two may correlate to a degree but aren't necessarily causally linked. National identity is simply one possible, if historically highly successful (and yet often disastrous) construction of the human need for group solidarity. I doubt it's controversial to suggest that some familiarity with a subject is useful to writing a poem about it. Feeling "at home" somewhere, in whatever way and to whatever degree, may be symptomatic of having enough knowledge of and empathy for a place to write about, from, with or out of it.

I don't want to suggest that a huge amount of intimacy is always necessary to write a successful poem about or from something or somewhere. Other experience and knowledge can probably compensate for it too. I don't know which of Elizabeth Bishop's Brazil poems were written exactly when, but "Arrival at Santos" seems to be the poem of a tourist, or a tourist recollecting her tourism, and yet there's great depth to the poem.

EB: I'm most interested in seeing more actual examples from your poems. For example, you say: "I draw at least partially on what I see, hear and do in the place that I happen to live in, which just happens to not be in the same country as the one I grew up in." Examples? And how is the self in this—observing in estranged wonder, or a participant? Is foreignness an element?

AN: The term "foreignness" doesn't get me personally very far. Because of the associations it has with different ethnicity, language and culture, it suggests a belief that feelings of belonging and not-belonging stop and start at state borders. Ask someone to imagine when they might feel "foreign" and they'll probably think up a scenario in some far-flung country. But very similar feelings of uncertainty, disorientation and distress might set in if someone with little formal education suddenly sat in the midst of a group of young graduates who live in the same city as that person. The sharpest cultural divide, or feeling of "foreignness" if you will, that I experienced in China was with American missionaries posing as English teachers who thought that George W. Bush was a great president. As regards examples, how about the following, part of a longer sequence based in Berlin.

11 /On an East Berlin Street/

Where the Roads Department pulled down signs
to put up the new, you pad your way, not
quite steadily, thin-jacketed in Spring.

Cousins once removed ask what fibres you wove,
knots you tied and threads you broke,
want a list of all your complicities.

The specialists who looked in on you as you lay
in a waking coma—so they diagnosed—

want to know what you were thinking
but can't quite believe you remember anything.

It should, I hope, be evident that this poem has something to do with post-Unification tensions between East and West Germans. That's a political context within which I've lived for the last 15 years, a political context that impinges on me. So if I'm going to write a political poem in English, it's quite likely to derive from German political issues. I think I'm neither a participant nor engaging in estranged wonder but attempting interpretation—perhaps both in the sense of forming my own understanding and also in the sense of trying to convey that understanding to those outside of the immediate cultural and political context.

Alistair Noon was interviewed by Kate Schapira and Elizabeth Bradfield.
First published in *Mantis* (2009)