# *Translocal Underground: Anglophone Poetry and Globalization*

*Alistair Noon*

The last few years have seen an increased number of Anglophone poets living, writing and publishing outside of English-speaking countries. *Bordercrossing Berlin*'s poetry editor Alistair Noon argues that the categories of national literature fail in many ways to apply to them, and that a new word is needed to describe the poetry they write: translocal.

Poetry has long been on the move. Its practitioners have been diplomats, soldiers, sailors, spies, exiles, refugees, immigrants, tourists, teachers and followers of where the rent is cheap, picking up new ideas and images along the way, or looking back afresh at where they've come from. Its texts have moved around via translation, influencing and changing literatures as they go. Some poets have imagined themselves into places they've never been. Others have moved around between different linguistic varieties, writing for example both in a "standard" language and in a dialect or creole.

Yet despite the many ways that languages and cultures can meld and mesh in poetry, there's still a tendency to view the art first and foremost through a national gaze. In the phrase "one of our leading poets" — a cliché of book blurbs and reviews — that "our" refers, implicitly, to the nation. There are a number of reasons why this particular way of categorizing poetry has so far had priority over others. Language is one: if literature is, as Ezra Pound said, "the news that stays news", it clearly gets around faster if it doesn't have to be translated first. But it's more than just the common language that's at work here: check the contributors' list in a US or UK poetry magazine and you'll typically find a resolutely national selection of American or British plus Irish poets respectively. Australian, New Zealand and Canadian poets often complain of the difficulty in getting a foothold in such magazines. Like everyone else, poets establish and maintain loyalty groups for the purpose of mutual support, with networking, publishing and event organization — at least until recently — taking place primarily within state borders. In spite of communications technology, it's still easier to co-edit a poetry magazine if all the editors can meet up in the same bar. A further factor, both a cause and an effect of the national gaze, is that most poetry funding — indeed arts funding in general — is organized around cultural institutes whose remit is to support writers and artists from the particular nation-state they represent.

It's also worth bearing in mind here the origins of national literature as a subject of study in schools. In the case of Britain, English literature began to be taught in the nineteenth century as a supposedly humanizing pastime for the middle classes, while the upper classes read Latin and Greek. Reading Keats didn't send British schoolboys straight to the trenches, but it did play a part in solidifying the national consciousness that would determine on which side of no man's land those schoolboys ended up. To paraphrase Wilfred Owen, who nicked it off Horace, Dulce et decorum est pro patria legere: it is sweet and fitting to read for your country. And language itself is conceptually bound up with the idea of the nation. Standard languages, currently the most widely accepted medium of poetry, came into being largely through the agency of nationally based states, whose ministries of education would send minority-language or dialect speakers to stand in the corner if they spoke anything other than the official variety. In the UK today, really existing multiculturalism and regionalism, with their integration of minority and regional languages and cultures, have only modified, but not negated, the centrality of the nation and national language.

Thus, the category of the nation has partially eclipsed other possible ways of typologizing poetry: poetry written by those with or without a university education, poetry written by women and by men, and also, increasingly, poetry written by those for whom, whatever national identity they may feel, their daily experience is shaped by a place and a state whose national norm is not their own. As part of what's been termed "globalization" over the last decade or two — not actually something new but rather the intensification of a process that's been going on for centuries — large numbers of people, with all levels of experience in writing poetry, have moved and are moving around the world. Some of those poets are to be found in the pages of magazines like this one, based outside the poets' countries of origin.

What are we to call such poets? If they are "American", "British", "Scottish" poets etc., then not in the same way as those who live in New York, London or Glenrothes. We can usefully begin by ditching the term "expat". It defines its subject negatively: you're outside of your patria. This is, at best, only half the story: you're also, to a greater or lesser extent, inside somewhere else — how else could you function on a day-to-day basis? "Cosmopolitan" implies a rootlessness that does not match the felt reality of those who live abroad for a longer period of time, as they cycle their bilingual children to childcare every day. "Intercultural poetry" might be useable, as long as it's clear that "culture" refers to something whose borders are blurred and whose shape is constantly changing (a concept, by the way, at odds with the static notion of the "national genius", a term now seldom used but still implicit in the idea of a national canon). The classic form of culture for many people is national culture, but gender, class, sexuality, occupation and other parameters may play at least as important a role in the way that people's beliefs, behaviour and hierarchy of values are socially shaped. There's a problem with the prefix "inter-" too — can anybody really be "between" cultures? Again, if we take culture to mean the changing set of procedures, assumptions and interpretations with which people lead their social lives, you can't not be right "in" at least one — admittedly polyfaceted — culture. "Crosscultural" and "transcultural" might be improvements as terms because of the dynamism implied in the prefixes, but still include that messy, misunderstandable and misusable word "culture". The term "transnational" concedes respectability to the category of "nation", a concept which is, at best, based on a number of illusions: though national myths attempt to suggest otherwise, nations weren't always there, they're never identical with state boundaries, and they're never homogenous. At worst, the concept of the nation represents a disastrous warping of the human need for group solidarity, having played a key role in many of the greatest large-scale inflictions of human misery in world history.

New times need new words. A term that some anthropologists and historians are now using to describe some of the processes and shifts of globalization is "translocality". Though you could also go and deconstruct the term "local", it has a whole deal less excess baggage than "national" and "cultural". We can probably all agree more or less on what we mean by a locality in a way that is much more difficult with the terms nation or culture. It can take in the mobility of both the English-teaching, experience-seeking university graduate in Prague on the one hand, and the migrant manual worker remitting wages from Dubai back to the Indian Sub-Continent on the other. The term's very inclusiveness makes it vulnerable to meaning nothing more than going on easyjet stag weekends to Riga, or watching films made in Los Angeles, so it's useful to distinguish between weak and strong translocality. Weak translocality is everywhere these days — fewer and fewer people never set foot outside of the locality in which they were born and brought up, or are never confronted by images produced in other regions of the world. Easyjet Stag revellers are translocal in this weak respect. A stronger translocality is more likely to emerge from a longer-term shift in location, and an increased sense of the self as having been shaped by more than one set of influences.

But why bother at all with a special word for this kind of poetry? The American poet Charles Reznikoff once wrote in a letter to a friend: "There is a learned article about my verse in *Poetry* for this month from which I learn that I am 'an objectivist'." He was referring to a special issue of the Chicago literary magazine, an issue edited by Louis Zukofksy, bringing together a number of poets as Objectivists, most of whom, like Reznikoff, were hitherto unaware that that was what they were. I don't wish with this article to co-opt unwitting fellow poets into a movement of translocalists, still less to posit stylistic affinities simply on the basis of either a negatively defined geographical setting (not the Anglosphere) or a shared (inter)cultural position. Berlin alone is home to Anglophone poets who could be labelled — with fuzzy and problematical terminology — as mainstream, late modernist, experimental, performance, post-surrealist, New New York School, and turbocosmopolitan. 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. Not all of them face all of these questions, and some of these questions are also faced by non- or weakly translocal poets. But strongly translocal poets will tend to be confronted by more of these questions, and to an increased degree.

First of all then, audience. Who am I writing for? Some poets say they don't think or care about this question, but this is a misapprehension. Consciously or unconsciously, every poet has some kind of reader in mind: if they didn't, they couldn't make choices about what goes on the page and what doesn't. What background knowledge do I expect my readers to have, what can I take for granted? For the non- or weakly translocal writer, the answers to such questions, if reflected upon, may be more self-evident: I write for people who know what Sainsbury's is, or where the Lower East Side is, for example. What if you are an Anglophone poet who shops at Kaiser's and lives in Neukölln? This is the stuff of your daily experience, and at some point is likely to find its way into your poetry. But there is a difference between mentioning Sainsbury's and mentioning Kaiser's in an English poem, at least in one potentially destined for, say, a British poetry magazine. "Sainsbury's" is a shared cultural reference for much of the readership of that magazine in a way that "Kaiser's" isn't. Metonymy — using a word to stand for a concept with which it is associated — gets more difficult, at least if you want to draw on your own experience for it: who, outside of Germany, is aware of the associations that the Berlin districts of Neukölln, Kreuzberg and Pankow have? A reference to a tram wouldn't strike many people who live in Berlin, Germany or Central Europe as odd — we all ride in the things from time to time - but with the exception perhaps of inhabitants of Manchester and Blackpool, that tram is a piece of exotica to a Brit Brit. And if it were somehow important to the poem that the tram is yellow, that fact wouldn't need to be stated for the Berlin Brit or any other Berliner, but would for other readers.

Just as with jokes, explanation is the death of poetry. There is, thus, a tension between the idea of poetry as compressed language and the probable cultural knowledge of its probable audience. It's a challenge for any poet to take their local knowledge and observation and make something larger from it, but the challenge is greater for strongly translocal poets: to be able to name and use their local, everyday, physical experience, without exoticizing it (if they do exoticize it, they help perpetuate modes of seeing that are insular and, ultimately, xenophobic). Even more than the poet who stays more or less put, the poet who moves may have to learn how to write "from" rather than "about" a place, if their poetry is to find a wider readership.

On one level, none of this matters. Different people understand the same poem in different ways, and that's part of the appeal and power of poetry. But some ways of understanding, or even not understanding a poem, have more cultural clout behind them than others — for example those that do not challenge a stable notion of national identity. Compile a special issue on Australian poetry, and non-Australian Anglophones will often put up with — even enjoy — some unfamiliar cultural references, bits of slang, images, names of birds they don't know. It's in English, but it can be typologized as an "Australian" poem. A kind of unconscious labelling may go on in some readers' minds: is this a domestic or a foreign poem? A foreign-looking name and the knowledge that a poem is in translation may also create a willingness to accommodate the unfamiliar, for example when reading Russian poet Nikolai Gumilev's "The Lost Tram".

There also seem to be, in the British poetry scene at least, some residual prejudices against and/or lack of sympathy for writing that comes from "foreign" experience, at least if the poet is marked as being "one of us". Note: not the experience of being or feeling foreign — magazines are full of this, the dreaded "Holiday Poem" that fails to go beyond observation and simply exoticizes its "foreign" particulars — but experience which just so happens to have taken place outside of the Anglosphere. Philip Larkin famously wrote: "Nobody wants any more poems about foreign cities" (he was using this as a stick to beat the Modernists with, but the formulation betrays his own prejudices). Thing is, Phil, some poems in English are written by people living in those cities, for whom they simply aren't "foreign" any more. A strongly translocal poet is not using images picked up on the run, but the stuff of their day-to-day experience: the Berlin TV Tower is visible from all over the city.

Reception is tied up of course with publication. Short of doing a quantitative study of the percentage of Anglophone poets living outside of English-speaking countries published in prestigious places, compared with the percentage of those living in the "Home" countries, it's difficult to make a statement about this. Leaving aside subjective perceptions of quality, networking is an issue here. In spite of cheap and environmentally unfriendly air travel, broadband internet access, and the greater prominence of poetry from Anglophone peripheries in the last few decades, it's still advisable to work at an American university or drink in London pubs if your game plan involves becoming a prominent English-language poet. The stipulations of funding, prizes, grants etc. tend to work, if anything, against the Anglophone poet living outside of the Anglosphere: the Eric Gregory Award, one route into publication for young British poets, stipulates "ordinary British residency" as a condition, begging the question of what "ordinary" might mean. This wouldn't be so much of a problem if it weren't for the fact that the funding bodies of the country of residence may well be equally unresponsive to funding poetry written in that country but not in the national language, or a recognized minority language. This kind of poetry can't easily be pressed into service as an extension of foreign policy and as a tool for increasing the nation-state's cultural capital.

The best answers to these questions are to be found in the actual practice of poets. Swiss-based Irish poet Padraig Rooney's "The Released Starlings" (published in full in Issue 2 of Bordercrossing Berlin) begins:

Outside the marble gates of the temple
the karma seller stands. His cages
surround him, one-bird wicker cages
the visitors to the temple pay to open
and release the starling chirping inside.

And continues:

And why wouldn't they break into song,
these conductors of karma, birds
whose souls fly free for a few baht?

If you know your currencies, it's not hard to work out that the setting is Thailand. Just the word temple is enough to place it outside the Anglosphere. But by hanging back with details such as the name of the temple, the poem gets a balance of specificity and generalizability that should satisfy both the weakly and the strongly translocal reader. I like the way that the poem has starlings in it rather than a myna or a munia — familiar birds may also live in unfamiliar places. There is a sense throughout the poem, lacking in the typical holiday poem, that Rooney knows what he's talking about. He can get away with the word "soul" because it is the right word for the cultural script that he is presenting, but not, not assuredly, exoticizing. The "foreignness" is almost incidental. The poet is looking at the action neither with the gaze of the Orientalist, seeing in the "East" some inscrutable, strange, untrustworthy, backward Other, nor is he flattening the scene into something that could have taken place outside of Sainsbury's on a Saturday morning. His attitude is a different one altogether: a translocal one. Similar tactics are used in a poem by John Hartley Williams (interviewed elsewhere in this issue) which makes use of the tram as an Image: "Lament for the Subotica-Palić Tramway". A poem which itself says something about one possible translocal mind-set is Gael Turnbull's "A Landscape and a Kind of Man", republished in this issue.

One — partial — answer to the problems of audience, reception and publication is the internet. It might not have turned out to be quite the democratic, levelling forum it was once hyped up to be, and too much looking at a screen is still bad for your eyes, but it's noteworthy that web-based magazines tend to break through national barriers more frequently than print magazines do. Money is another thing. Perhaps we could do with an EU fund that doesn't deal with the Arts as if they're an extension of national foreign policy. But then that's what much Arts funding, at the end of the day, actually is, and I doubt EU funding would have much to offer poets who were born in Zimbabwe, Argentina or the United States but are resident in the EU. Translation is another (related) issue. "Host" countries could look to the communities within their own borders for poets to translate, rather than taking their cues from the nationally anointed poets of other countries. This has begun to happen recently, for example with the Poetry Translation Centre in London, which has initiated translations of poets from refugee communities in the UK.

Another solution can be to write to and for a translocal audience. It's possible that this strand of poetry, in its various forms, appeals more to those who, themselves, have undergone the experience of encountering and adapting to a new cultural environment. This requires infrastructure, of which the magazine you're reading is a part. A translocal poetry scene needs to be named (it exists already) for it to be taken seriously as a simplifying but necessary label. Perhaps the homogenizing aspects of economic and political globalization are such that poetic globalization will become easier: there are Lidls in the UK now, Kaiser's may follow. It may also be helped by the increased awareness today that cultural identity isn't, never has been and won't ever be subsumable to the identity of a state.

Without wanting to suggest that the new Shakespeare is just waiting to be found somewhere in Central Europe or Southeast Asia, I'd also like to try and show how the activities of strongly translocal poets are not nearly as marginal as they might seem to be if you take the mononational, monocultural, monolocal poet to be the norm. I'll do this by making what is probably a provisional and perhaps less than watertight taxonomy of translocality in relation to poetry. One part of translocality is physical, involving the simple fact of having moved from one place to another. Poetry's full of this: Ovid at the Black Sea, Du Fu all over China, Heine in Paris, Goethe in Rome, D.H. Lawrence in Mexico, Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil, W.H. Auden in the US and Austria, Sylvia Plath and T.S. Eliot in England, not to mention the hordes of writers and poets on the Rive Gauche in the 1920s. The move need not be international, it can be interregional: WS Graham's poetry, written mostly in Cornwall, draws on his Glasgow childhood. In fact, the move might not, in physical terms, be very far at all for it to play a big role in the poet's work.

Nazareth-based Taha Muhammad Ali's poetry is rooted in the village of Saffuriya, from which he was displaced in 1948: Saffuriya is only 2 km north of Nazareth, but it figures very much as a different place to that from which he is writing. This leads onto the second element of translocality, the imaginative: the production of poems in such a way that more than one locality is involved. This may emerge from physical translocality in some of the ways I've been describing. Or it may derive from other sources: typically, an encounter with other locations via texts — Shakespeare, in his plays, makes use of contemporary and classical historiography; Charles Reznikoff draws on Jewish history — or, more idiosyncratically perhaps, via Class A drugs, as with Coleridge and "Xanadu". The impact may be on both content and form, as in Chaucer's use of French and Italian tales on the one hand and his Anglicization of iambic pentameter on the other. Finally, there is a linguistic translocality: making use of more than one linguistic variety in poetry. This may mean writing poems in both "standard" British English and Scots or Caribbean English, or — far more rarely — successfully writing in a second language. The term also covers the incorporation of words from different places and times into one poem, not only as some of the Modernists loved to do, but as poets from the Middle Ages onwards have done by raiding Latin, Greek, French and Italian for words with which to pep up English.

Physical, imaginative and linguistic translocality are aspects rather than categories: in practice, the three types merge and blend into each other. Johannes Bobrowksi, a German-language poet writing from East Berlin, reimagined part of pre-war East Prussia, now Lithuania, making use of words from the extinct language of Old Prussian. David Dabydeen has written about slavery — a brutal, enforced translocality in itself — partly in song-like Guyanese creole, partly in lines that jam off iambic pentameter. Translation is poetic translocality par excellence: linguistic in its method, imaginative in its transference of a new set of ideas, and physical in the likelihood that the translated texts will be read in a different geographical setting to that in which the source texts were produced. Typically, physical translocality leads to imaginative translocality: the poet moves on, away or abroad, and alters their imaginative landscape. It can work the other way round though, too: Basil Bunting learnt Old Persian in order to be able to translate medieval epics into English, on which basis he got posted to Persia during World War Two as an interpreter and spy.

The figures on the Persian art upstairs in Berlin's Museum of Islamic Art are East Asian in their facial features. At Hangzhou, where China hits the Pacific, there are some Buddhist wall figures whose style derives from Indian sculpture, with influences from the Greek art which Alexander the Great brought with him on his imperial conquests. Footnotes in editions of Milton refer back frequently to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *The Bible*, Virgil, and other "foreign" sources. Chinese and Japanese poetry kick-started 20th century Anglophone modernism. Chicken Tikka is believed to have been invented in Birmingham. This stuff is only hybrid if you conceive of cultural products as ever having had some kind of primordial essence, such as national genius. They don't: synthesis is inherent in the process of creation. Whole groups of poets now live in one place but think in two (or more). In some respects, re-recognizing the existence of the translocal in poetry is one more chapter in the tussle of periphery and centre, and a further problem for the idea of a national canon. Padraig Rooney: "I wanted to solve the problem of the poet who does not have a natural constituency, rooted in the local and national, such as Seamus Heaney began with. My aim was to draw together different strands of my experience without falling into the trap of the exotic, of merely local colour." One person's exoticism or local colour is another person's lived, felt experience and observation.

*Other people's work I've drawn on in the writing of this article includes Jonathan Rée's essay "Cosmopolitanism and the Experience of Nationality" (in Cosmopolitics: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Arjun Appadurai's "Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization" (University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Edward Said's "Reflections on Exile" (Granta Books, 2001); Ulf Hannerz's "Transnational Connections" (Routledge, 1996); and Jeremy Hooker's "Reflections on Ground" (Free Poetry, Vol.1 No. 1 March 2005). Thanks to Felicitas Macgilchrist, Ken Thomson, Ian Almond, Fiona Mizani and Chris Jones for their comments.* ¬