



What's Left? A Discussion on the Remains of Writing – and the Remains of Living – with Two European Authors

In a separate section of the current issue focusing on the “remains of writing,” we have invited two contemporary authors to join a discussion. While their styles are quite different, they appear equally tuned in to present-day issues, developments and threats. Recent East European history (differently shaping their respective biographies) has fundamentally marked their positioning with regard to the major topics of their writings – and their translations. The two authors we’re discussing here are prominent enough though, geopolitically speaking, they’re hailing from a world associated with backwardness – at least until recently. They write in – and, respectively, translate from – “lesser used” languages. Nevertheless, their voices are quite audible on Europe’s cultural scene. They seemed the obvious choice for a discussion on the topic of “remains” – be they literary, existential or linguistic...

Ioana Bot

Mircea Cărtărescu (b. June 1, 1956) is, doubtlessly, one of today’s most important Romanian writers. A poet, novelist, essayist, columnist, he is the author of an impressive list of works scoring constant success with an enthusiastic readership throughout the almost forty years following his first volume of verse, *Headlights, Shop-windows, Snapshots* (*Faruri vitrine, fotografii*, 1980). His books have been translated into quite a few languages (English, German, Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Swedish, Norwegian, Hungarian, Hebrew, Japanese, Basque, Greek, Serbian, Turkish, Russian, Dutch, Polish etc.) – which probably makes him the most translated Romanian author. He is a professor of Romanian literature at Bucharest University. In his turn, he has translated contemporary literature from English (Bob Dylan, for instance). During the last decade, he made himself constantly heard (in the media, on social networks, in interviews and lectures) as a voice – always highly discernible and, more often than not, extremely scathing – offering ethical reflections on current political events and every-day life in post-communist Romania. His books received awards from The Romanian Academy, The Romanian Writers Union, The Romanian Publishers’



Association, etc. He was awarded prestigious international prizes, among which the Internationaler Literaturpreis – Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin, 2012), the Grand Award of the Novi Sad International Poetry Festival (2013), the Swiss Spycher – Literaturpreis Leuk Award (2013), the Euskadi de Plata Award, (San Sebastian, 2014), the Austrian State Prize for European Literature in recognition of his entire work (2015). An extensive bibliography of his work can be found at <http://www.humanitas.ro/mircea-c%C4%83rt%C4%83rescu>.

George Szirtes (b. November 29, 1948) came to Britain from Hungary, as the son of a refugee family, in 1956. After studying fine arts, he taught art history and creative writing at British colleges and universities (he retired from the University of East Anglia, in 2013). He debuted as a poet in 1973. His first volume of verse, *The Slant Door* (1979) was awarded the Geoffrey Faber Prize. He won a variety of further prizes for his work, most recently the 2004 T. S. Eliot Prize, for his collection *Reel* and the Bess Hokin Prize, in 2008, for poems in *Poetry* magazine. His translations from Hungarian poetry, fiction and drama have also won numerous awards. Since 1982 he's been a member of the Royal Society of Literature. Following his first return to Hungary, in 1984, he started translating Hungarian literature into English (Imre Madách, Sandor Marai and László Krasznahorkai among others), which brought him the European Translation Prize alongside ample recognition and acclaim (in 2014, he was made Honorary Fellow of the Hungarian Academy of Arts and Letters and elected to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences as an Associate

Fellow). In 2015 he was the Man Booker International winner, as translator of László Krasznahorkai's *Satantango*. He's written children's books, co-edited translation anthologies and authored over twenty plays, libretti, and other texts for music. His collection of verse *New & Collected Poems* (published by Bloodaxe Books on his 60th anniversary, in 2008) came out at the same time as the first monographic study dedicated to his work, *Reading George Szirtes*, by John Sears. A poet, translator, visual artist, editor and journalist, he is also an extremely interesting and vivid presence in the virtual space where his low-key reflections and short texts articulately chronicle unsettling contemporary occurrences. For further information you can access the author's blog (<http://georgeszirtes.blogspot.ro/>).

MIRCEA CĂRTĂRESCU

How would you describe your writing routines? What's the ratio of what you do publish to what you decide not to submit for publication?

Out of everything I wrote, I've left unpublished, so far, quite a few volumes of my diary. There are also lots of articles and interviews I've published in periodicals, which, as yet, I don't feel inclined to collect in a volume. I have but few literary attempts (unfinished texts, versions, separate poems) I haven't published, and neither am I going to do it (I'd rather have my posthumous works – whatever's worth of them – published while I'm still alive, the way Musil did). I'm writing in a very peculiar manner, without any editing, which means that a text, once completed can go straight



to the printers. That's the reason I never have "previously unpublished" literary texts to submit to magazines or whoever might be asking for them.

What happens to the "remains" obtaining in the writing process?

As I was saying, I have no remains to speak of – just a work in progress and the books I've already published. My interviews could make up a book, but they've already been published in periodicals. Likewise, my political and literary articles. My diaries are stapled on a bookshelf in my study, slowly gathering xylophagous insects and a resilient sort of fungus, faintly fading away to the point of illegibility. Once every seven years I publish another chunk of them (the fourth volume is now due), but I suppose the first ten-twelve notebooks (between seventeen and twenty four years old) will either never be published – although, in their way, they appear extremely interesting to me – or will not be published in time for me to see them in print. They are the urtexts no author ever reveals, a bit like that joke about being unable to exhibit a grownup's skull from an earlier age. The true "remains" in my study are the reviews. Reviews of my books by the hundreds, from 1980 until today, Romanian as well as foreign, filling up several IKEA boxes never touched by the sun. A few years ago, thank God, I've started saving them in digital format – not that they're going to be any use like that, either. I dread to think what those boxes might harbor. Earwigs, most probably, burrowing away through the sawdust, not unlike hamsters.

As an author translated into several languages, while being yourself a translator, and,

furthermore, as a citizen/reader living in a world subject to ongoing globalization, would you say the globalization of personal experience by means of literature (and translations) is possible?

To a certain extent, yes. However not without a host of filters generated by linguistic and cultural differences, by the collective vs. personal encyclopedia, as Eco puts it. Some things make it through the filters, others don't. I'm extremely privileged to have *The Levant* translated into Swedish, French and Spanish. Indeed, something did get through, mainly due to the brilliant efforts of the respective translators (occasionally verging on the genius). Nevertheless, the Swedish *Levant*, say, is, quite naturally, a different *Levant* than mine – the one Vikings would dream of reaching... Every book is subject to negotiations among the author, the translator and the reader, somehow akin to Chinese whispers – an act of betrayal, by force of circumstances, but also an act of creation. The readership of a translated book actually reads a different book than the readership reading it in the original language, just as, at the end of the day, no two readers read the same book. What does abide and makes it unaltered through the filters is the force of the writing, always residing in its generally human dimension, in the intelligence and grace of each page. We don't understand everything out of a translated haiku, but it touches us inasmuch as it is accomplished in itself, and perhaps that suffices.

Do you follow the actual way your writing has been translated into foreign languages?

No. And neither would I be able to, in most languages. As a matter of principle, I



do not check the translations of my books, not even in the case of English and French, which I *can* read. Translation is a matter of chance, up to a certain point, and of trust beyond that point. Translators from Romanian are so few and far between that it would be ill-advised to be fussy. When you are just starting, you accept the translator put forth by the publisher. Anyway, at that point, if you have both a translator *and* a publisher, you feel you're rubbing shoulders with the gods. It's a matter of pure chance whether you back the wrong horse or you win big time. Yet, over the past twenty five years, since, alongside other authors, I've also started being translated, I have witnessed the emergence of an elite translating from Romanian into most languages – at least, most European languages, that is. I am currently working with several translators who have already translated thousands of pages from what I've written. We're close friends by now and I fully trust them. I know they're the best. Some of them I work with, that is to say, on and off, I do help them unravel the odd conundrum in my text. With others I don't. It's only after the books come out that I delight in reading the translation in the languages I know.

Has it ever happened to you not to recognize yourself in the outcome of a translation?

And how! It's not only that I couldn't recognize myself, but, literally, I couldn't even recognize my stories. A couple of my early translations underwent such dramatic improvement at the hands of the translator's imagination that I ended up reading an entirely different book – a surreal tour de force which, personally, I don't feel up to. My poor books about kids among high-rise buildings had been made over into flamboyant histories

involving cannibalistic acts – there was this schoolboy eating a Japanese girl during the break, and some wild creatures standing atop of the Telephone Palace building.

Are you aware of notable differences between the translations of your work into different languages and their reception in different cultures? What are they, what forms do they take?

The differences concern mainly the styles of those masters of the word who are the translators. Between two translations of the same book rendered in the same language by two different translators, there will always be significant differences as concerns the tone, the phrasing, the degree of fidelity to the letter and spirit of the original. I'm convinced that my novel *Blinding* conveys different feelings in Swedish and, say, Italian. I once read side by side two Romanian translations of *The Catcher in the Rye* – they felt quite different. One of them I liked, the other got on my nerves.

You are yourself a literary translator. In what respect does such an experience differ from that of being an author?

In every respect. Translation is another country. I only translate for my own pleasure and somehow randomly. My translations are not creative. Their merit, if they have one, consists in their faithfulness to the original. Making the text sound natural in translation is perhaps the hardest thing to achieve. I happen to have a sense of language and prosody, so it's not difficult for me to translate verse. Anything else – I haven't attempted to translate.

What does it feel like to be translating from a foreign language into your mother



tongue and the other way round? What are the criteria prompting you to decide a language is – or not – foreign to you?

For me, English is the only foreign language I dare speak (but I also read French without difficulty). It's not an entirely foreign language – it is my second language of communication. I neither speak it nor write it perfectly, but I express myself, as they say, fluently in it. I do not encounter great problems when translating into Romanian – I'm currently struggling with *Finnegan's Wake*. However, when it comes to translating from Romanian into English, neither do I have the ability, nor do I feel inclined to. And I'd find it preposterous.

What is your position with regard to the two extreme posits "everything is translatable" and "nothing is translatable"?

At least something *is* translatable.

Is there anything you wish you'd be translating in the future?

I've no longer got the time for my own books, let alone for translations. I'll keep on translating, perhaps, just for the fun of it. I've had tremendous fun with Bob Dylan, Cohen and Brassens, but for the time being, I'd rather refrain from translating serious poets.

Are you aware of any differences in the reception (assessment) of your literature at national vs. international level?

There are two different ways of reception. A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country. Here, people flip over any foreign author while finding fault with all their Romanian counterparts. In a way, that's normal: how are you supposed to see the merits of this or that person who started

on a par with you, when you're all too familiar with their development, attachments, likes, dislikes, ideological options and literary allegiances? Romanian authors are competing against one another while critics carry out literary policies in their own personal fiefdoms. If Dante Alighieri were living in today's Romania, he'd have to put up with countless frowns: well, yes, the *Divina Commedia* does have its good parts, but on the whole, it's a failure... Or, yeah, it's OK on the whole, but when it comes to details, it's full of blunders... Abroad, you're treated with the (occasionally condescending) deference – frequently tinged with indifference – due to a sojourner on foreign shores. Out there, no one has anything against you. You're not competing against their own authors, neither are you interfering with the mechanics of local criticism. Consequently, you're entitled to expect fair treatment. Sometimes even a touch of enthusiasm. That's why I have such great admiration for the Romanian critics who've kept a clear mind and a clear eye, who can still discern between a genuine piece of jewelry and a fake.

Have you ever been confronted with a "meaningful misunderstanding" of your writing?

My "show-off" books (for I did write a couple of straightforward ones) are still so complex (in intention, at least) that they allow for a pretty wide range of plausible interpretations. They also allow the possibility of no interpretation at all – hermeneutics may be blocked in favor of an erotics of art, as Susan Sontag suggests. And even a creative misreading, a case of serendipity, as our snobs would put it. For instance, you can see in *Blinding* a cosmic and a visionary book, completely overlooking the humor, irony, the grotesque and the sarcasm in it. Or you may talk



about the book as a failure, pointing out the very grotesque and absurd elements of some pages. The most difficult book to interpret will always be *Solenoid*, which functions as a parable pregnant with many further parables.

Are there things about your writing – or yourself – that, in your opinion, you'll never be able to explain to any readers?

Yes, the ones I can't explain to myself – my first reader. What are they? I cannot mention them here, just like I haven't been able to take them full circle, to their ultimate consequences, even there where they become overwhelming – in *Solenoid*. This book contains its own enigma, which may be my own enigma.

Do you ever feel subject to the stereotypical (mis)representations of readers (reading you either in the original or in translation), of the type "East European/import" writer?

I don't really care for being squeezed into categories, as long as they're not of the largest possible kind. I see myself as a European author, an inheritor of the genetic spiral connecting our age to the one when *The Iliad* was composed, that is the recipient of almost three thousand years of art and culture. I also see myself as a Romanian author, from a tradition starting some three hundred years ago with the *Hieroglyphic History*. I also have allegiances pertaining to modernity and postmodernity as well, in both traditions. As regards the system of values, I've always been a man of the centre, balanced and cautious, at times exceedingly doubtful, a virtual victim of all extremists, that is.

What, would you say, are the losses and gains, as far as your rapport with your readers is concerned, in view of your presence on social

media or in the wake of the electronic circulation of literature?

Well, on Facebook I'm not the author, but simply M.C. the man. My readers don't look for me there, but in bookshops. On Facebook I have fun, I relax, I get angry, on and off I give my opinion on all sorts of hot topics... Facebook is a vice of sorts, one I know I ought to give up, but, for the time being, I don't feel strong enough.

How do you read what's being written on your literature?

Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. I've learned, with time, to protect myself. I no longer read ill-wishers, the ones who, for decades, have been harassing me with ever-increasing strength. I've also given up reading inane critics.

You've been teaching/lecturing on literature. Why have you chosen to do that?

That's how I make a living.

What literature have you been lecturing on and what literature, do you think, would you never embark upon teaching?

I teach whatever I have to. I've been lecturing on all periods, giving all sorts of lectures. What matters is not the literary genre you teach, but doing whatever you do in an honest and personal way. I'm the kind of teacher that does not teach a subject, but rather teaches himself (since there's nothing else he has to show the world). I'm not imparting knowledge, but a certain way of thinking and living in literature.

What do you find essential to teach to your students?

The essential thing is *not* teaching them, breaking the smothering circle of



teaching and learning. I only remember those of my teachers whom I perceived as friends. Friend never lecture you on anything over beer or coffee, but their conversation and personal charm penetrate you osmotically and stay there.

Is there anything about literature you think you'll never be able to explain to either your students or your readers?

Yes – what literature is, what poetry is, why a sequence of words leaves you cold while a different one touches you deeply. That's what each of us has to discover on his or her own.

I'm So Sad

I'm so sad.
it's just a lousy day in creepy November.
all I hear is the buzz of the fridge here
in the kitchen
and the clock going tick-tock. I am
terribly,
terribly sad.

I no longer want to write literature
won't pretend any more I can see the
cosmos.
I'll live for another 30 years
then agonize and then die
and be no astral body in another
world.

I'll be happy for another 30 years,
but my happiness will be sadness, limitless pain
for I can't, I just *can't* write any more
and even if I were to write at all, even
then,
it would all be just fake and just creepy.

I have come to my senses.
now I know who I am: I'm nobody,
nobody!
not even you will I know – never ever
(you chose me not, nor *could* you ever
choose me).
I've run wild, far away from all things
and all people,
In this den with no phone,
In this ugly block of flats that's not
good for me.
out of my window I can see further
blocks huddled up in the cold, all
adrip
and the two...

nah, it's pointless...

(Translated from Romanian
by Florin Bican)



GEORGE SZIRTES

How would you describe your writing routines? What's the ratio of what you do publish to what you decide not to submit for publication?

My writing is frequent but not really subject to a routine unless I am translating or working to a given deadline. Everything is entirely consuming at the time I am engaged with it. The fact is I am very productive as many have remarked but I am not thinking of specific publication at the time I write it in the case of poetry. At this stage of my "career" as a poet I am often asked for work or commissioned to write. I love it when that happens. I work with



visual artists, photographers or composers, or indeed with other poets, because they suggest themes and make me think. Just a week ago, for example I received the first copies of a book co-written with a very different poet, Carol Watts. I learned a great deal from the experience and am very happy to have worked with her. Apart from all this I have been writing a lot of short but cumulative texts on Twitter that small presses have published, but a good deal of unpublished material remains

My productivity increased considerably after the 2008 publication of my *Collected and New Poems* at which point I was determined to work in as many attractive fields as possible, and even more after I retired from teaching at the university in 2013. The constraints on my day, in other words, are now chiefly those I make for myself. I am generally at my desk from roughly 9 am the whole day, with breaks.

It wasn't always so. I married very early and we had children early so I had to work for many years as a full time school-teacher of art and art history. During those years I set the alarm for 5 am and wrote or redrafted or read productively for two hours before breakfast and teaching.

When I die there will be a great deal of material left, including song lyrics, plays, libretti and so on. I imagine I will have published some 70% of so of my writing by then. It depends on how long I live.

What happens to the "remains" obtaining in the writing process?

See above. It is lying in corners, in notebooks, in files on computers, in folders of various projects. Very occasionally some fragment of it is taken out and considered for redrafting.

As an author translated into several languages, while being yourself a translator, and, furthermore, as a citizen/reader living in a world subject to ongoing globalization, would you say the globalization of personal experience by means of literature (and translations) is possible?

I suppose there are certain basic human experiences and states of mind that are universal at one level; we are born, we become children, we have parents, we look at clouds, we break limbs, we lie on the grass... etc., etc. Of course the conditions for those events varies but most of the time we have enough in common to be able to relate to each other. In that sense we are already globalised and always have been. On the other hand I know from experience that sometimes the simplest poems are hardest to translate because specific languages and literatures have specific histories of their own. What we understand quite early is that in language there is no final or perfect translation and that all we have are a series of provisionalities. One of the great paradoxes of translation is that it is impossible but we do it and gain immensely from it.

The other sense of globalization, that is to say that available through instantaneous forms of communication – the ever faster circulation of information, symbols, and values, the development of multi-national corporations, the rapid shifts and concentrations of capital and all that entails – through these we become slowly sensible (slowly because it takes us longer to adapt to our conditions than for those conditions to arise) of both its opportunities and dangers. The uncertain balance between them becomes part of our psychological landscape. It destabilizes us and presents us – even to ourselves – as



fragments. That which the romantic poets deployed as the lyrical first person singular exists on a common enough level, but is far less assured in literature.

But we coped with flying machines and atom bombs and fast food outlets and will cope with this.

Do you follow the actual way your writing has been translated into foreign languages?

I haven't followed the progress, if any, of my work in foreign languages because I only properly speak one other beside English and that is Hungarian, so cannot form any opinion of the other translations and even those of my poems translated into Hungarian are far from easy to evaluate. I grow dizzy and word-blind when I read the Hungarian versions. In other words I am deeply grateful to the translators and trust my work to them entirely and will only intervene if they ask me.

Has it ever happened to you not to recognize yourself in the outcome of a translation?

I never recognize myself in translations, but the important thing is not that I should recognize myself, and even less that readers in other languages should recognize me. What after all, is that "me" to others? I hardly know myself. I am pleased that readers should receive an experience that they recognize as poetry. Even more, of course, if they recognize it as valuable poetry. That is the whole object as far as I am concerned.

Are you aware of notable differences between the translations of your work into different languages and their reception in different cultures? What are they, what forms do they take?

Reception of one's work is a different matter. I am surprised to learn that my

work has a certain currency in, for example, India. But I only hear that from those in India who already value it, so it may be very limited and misleading. I am, of course, grateful for my Romanian translations. Frankly, I cannot tell about the reception. I am delighted to be invited abroad occasionally. I am glad to be received at all.

You are yourself a literary translator. In what respect does such an experience differ from that of being an author?

A translator is an author, but not an independent one. The translator's work and importance is secondary. There can always be another translator of the original text, which remains original in its own language, although even in that language a great many different interpretations are bound to exist. The source of those interpretations is, nevertheless, stable (subject to the work of textual editors, of course.) Walter Benjamin believed that a work expanded and grew in depth by being translated and that, I think, may be true. The translated work is not a copy of an original work but a new work that has grown into and out of the receiving language. It emerges as its own plant. The flowers of that plant will turn their faces in the direction of the original, but to the reader they will be a kind of original, grown out of the reader's soil, simply facing elsewhere.

What does it feel like to be translating from a foreign language into your mother tongue and the other way round? What are the criteria prompting you to decide a language is – or not – foreign to you?

One never has full familiarity with a language and that is not only a good thing but the only condition under which literature



can survive. The best writing is never quite comfortable in bed. Of course there are familiar words, familiar phrases, familiar rhythms, patterns, associations, habits, and traditions but it is their sudden unfamiliarity that makes poetry. In that sense all languages are – and should be – foreign to us. I recognize most of the familiar notes of Hungarian poetry and fiction of course because they touch something in my early memories and that, I think, helps in the act of translating but it is hard now to say which is my mother tongue. That mother and I separated almost sixty years ago and I have become the adopted child of a new mother who has performed the maternal role pretty well perfectly. By the time I returned to Hungary in 1984 that first mother had changed. We continue to have a certain natural relationship so it is the language from which I usually translate though, given help and a reason, I have translated poetry out of various languages I don't actually speak, such as Russian, German, Italian, French, etc. But that is a different task with different responsibilities.

What is your position with regard to the two extreme posits "everything is translatable" and "nothing is translatable"?

Nothing is translatable but we translate and what we call translation, in any of its various forms, is of enormous value.

Is there anything you wish you'd be translating in the future?

There are a couple of contemporary Hungarian poets and a translation I have already done but would like to revisit. Over the last fifteen years or so I have translated more fiction than poetry. I would like to translate more poetry. My head is full of possible projects.

Are you aware of any differences in the reception (assessment) of your literature at national vs. international level?

That is hard to tell. Sometimes it seems my work is valued more highly abroad (though not necessarily in Hungary, except as a translator) than it is here, but then I consider my good fortune, the list of publications, prizes and privileges I have received here and I truly cannot complain.

But reception is more than valuation or assessment. Each language or culture will receive a translated work in a different way depending on its own current and past concerns. In England I have long been regarded as, in some sense, a foreign poet, all the more foreign for not being associated with the country's colonial history. I am sure I had one kind of understanding in the Cold War here and another later. One is always being read in the light of the most recent and successful mainstream historical/ literary development. I suspect I hold more interest now for those twenty or thirty years younger than for those ten years younger. But I may be imagining that. In any case it is nothing one can do about. You shrug and continue.

Have you ever been confronted with a "meaningful misunderstanding" of your writing?

I am not sure whether "misunderstanding" is a very good term. I don't myself have an "understanding" of what I do. I have no firm program and am as fascinated and intrigued by the meanings of what I write as another reader might be. One makes instinctive decisions all the time. No doubt those instincts have been informed by time, reading, and practice but they continue – and have to continue – to work



on the intuitive principle. I don't think a poet thinks something then writes it. The thinking is in the writing, in the intense listening to the words as they appear and in following their lead. Certainly there have been occasions where someone says something stupid about this or that detail in my own work, but the chances are that mine are not the only lines they have been stupid about. Sometimes, of course, they are right.

Are there things about your writing – or yourself – that, in your opinion, you'll never be able to explain to any readers?

The sheer compulsion of writing is inexplicable. The delight and relief of it. It is the instinctive decisions that are inexplicable, or at least inexplicable to me at the time I make them. As regards myself as a person I think, like any writer, I am a certain person in the writing but that that person doesn't simply transfer to the figure in life. Through a fairly chaotic process one somehow constructs a writing self, or rather selves, that can be gathered together to form the impression of a unitary being but the fact is I don't really know what I am or how I am perceived by others. Reading my work in retrospect I myself begin to get the sense of a person and a voice, but that is retrospective. I wouldn't want to have to be faithful to that retrospective impression. I suspect it might be merely habit. And when it comes down to it I am not even all that interested in that retrospectively discerned person except as one of many billion phenomena in the world, albeit the closest to me: it is the world I am interested in. And language.

Do you ever feel subject to the stereotypical (mis)representations of readers (reading

you either in the original or in translation), of the type "East European/ Hungarian/ import" writer?

Yes, that can be wearisome, but it is to be expected. I have been "a Hungarian-born poet," "a Hungarian poet," "a Hungarian Jewish poet," "Hungarian Jewish post-Holocaust poet" and, more recently, "a refugee poet." I can see why this happens. People, myself included, read in filters and categories, then, after that, they go on to discriminate. For publicists and organizers a label seems to be helpful if only because it is brief and easily recognizable. Salman Rushdie was kind enough to write the back copy of one of my recent smaller publications, "Notes on the Inner City," in which he talks about "the Europe of fantasists, fable-Europe, the Europe of Schulz and Singer and Chagall." I am very happy about that. I like the idea of being European. That's the one that fits best. I love Schulz but much of my work is not in the least like Schulz.

What, would you say, are the losses and gains, as far as your rapport with your readers is concerned, in view of your presence on social media or in the wake of the electronic circulation of literature?

This is also hard to answer. I was persuaded into both Facebook and Twitter. I immediately took to Twitter as a literary form. Instead of 14 lines as in a sonnet, you have 140 characters. That limitation, like all limitations, can be extremely productive. It helps one to invent and to discover new registers and shapes. I have, over the years, written literally hundreds of sonnets. The Twitter "micro-sonnet" requires the auditory imagination to discover itself in another form, more proverbial, more



enigmatic, more dreamlike, more magical, more fragmented and more detached. Rushdie, above, was in fact speaking about a collection of my Twitter work. Facebook is different. It is essentially a social medium. It can be verbose, chatty, confessional, polemical and much else but it is addressed with an expectation of reply and that is what makes it social. Twitter is more concentrated, less conversational, less inviting of conversation. For all its use as a political, sometimes demagogic tool the conditions of its existence are essentially solo. It is one voice addressing the moon in a starless sky, not a crowd in a bar or a stadium. I seem to have built up a large readership in both media, probably because I find pleasure in both, but all the drafting of the creative work is done in Twitter.

How do you read what's being written on your literature?

Like everyone else, with hope and trepidation, and that never changes. But also with gratitude, firstly that it is being talked about at all, secondly, that it is (as it sometimes is) considered to be of value. In 2008 Bloodaxe published a book-length study of my work by John Sears. That was almost too much to cope with. I have to hide my face when I am reading it. I am immensely grateful that it exists but I have a certain terror of it.

You've been teaching/lecturing on literature. Why have you chosen to do that?

I began by teaching art in schools because art was my qualification. I dropped English Literature at the age of fifteen and studied Physics, Chemistry and Zoology first (but rather incompetently) before starting Art in the very last term of my

school education. So I went to art school, met my wife there (she is still a working visual artist while I am not), we got married and had children very early so I needed to earn money to provide the traditional financial support. I had no previous ambitions to teach but once I was doing it I found it very rewarding most of the time. I taught art in three or four different schools for eighteen years and was in my early forties and had written some six books and translated a few by the time I was invited to teach creative writing at an art school, then at UEA, the university that began the creative writing MA boom. Curiously, but maybe appropriately, the moment I moved to art school I never taught art again. It seems strange to me now, and always has, to have spent so much time in teaching. I am not a fully institutional sort of man so if I did I good job (and many of my students went on to publish so it can't have been too bad) it was because I found the process of talking about poetry engrossing and properly social. The fact that that was in the context of a university and its formal requirements regarding grading and examinations was secondary. To me the institution was a room with a dozen bright young people all of whom had some talent. Mostly it seemed more pleasure than work.

What literature have you been lecturing on and what literature, do you think, would you never embark upon teaching?

The literature I brought to classes was that which I thought a developing poet might find interesting. I was originally asked by the art school to devise a five term course in poetry so, without any experience, I planned one based on genres taught comparatively, not historically (though



ideally there would have been a historical course too). I think that worked rather well judging by results. But I often felt I should remind people that I myself never went through formal education in literature and that an art school education, such as I had, did not qualify me in the least to teach the nineteenth century novel or American poetry between the wars. I felt rather intimidated by the academic set-up at first but persisted through reading, enthusiasm and a certain untutored intelligence. If I taught anything now it might be something comparative, such as developments in Europe, America and Britain in the early 20th century, but I am just as interested in the writing of the internet age. And indeed in every other period of English-language poetry.

What do you find essential to teach to your students?

The most important thing for a young or developing writer is to listen with close attention, to suspend pre-judgment and to accept the text on what appear to be its own terms before applying specific preferences or set critical lens though those things are useful and relevant. But not as a first stop.

Is there anything about literature you think you'll never be able to explain to either your students or your readers?

Everything is worth trying to explain. Not to explain away but to explore. Everything ends in failure, of course, but there is, as Beckett said, a case for failing better. Explaining personal preferences is a matter of courtesy, not a mission. One tries to transmit the greatness of what one admires. Explanations can come later.

A Low Flying Plane

Somewhere in a sky
purring with cloud and light,
planes talk to each other.

What is the language
at the bottom of the throat,
that deep-lying growl?

When does it enter
the hangar of the stomach,
how does it park there?

From nowhere at all
the planes appear. The sky cracks
under them and bursts.

I'm trying to hear
the subtext of this, the blown
language of such noise,

the sense of low flight,
the way it presses dense air
into liquid shape.

Then the plane is gone
but things have changed. The tongue,
the ear, the dead sound.