

fundamental humility, knowing that it had been written before, it would be written again and I was just knocking out a few notes as best I could. No reader or critic has ever noticed that and there is no reason why they should, but I come back to *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. There are quite a few quotes in both my books. For example, towards the end of the story with the monastery in Egypt, the protagonist is reading the Bible in the dark. The title of the book, *The Pleasant Light of Day*, is from *The Ecclesiastes*. Light appears in different stories, like the one you have mentioned, *Do You Believe in God?*, or in the last couple of pages from the very last story, *Time for Everything*. In the Second World War, a woman finds out she's pregnant. The latter part of that passage is a rewriting of a very beautiful part from *The Ecclesiastes*.

C.C.: Thank you so much for this interview!

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## POETRY

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### *Ruth Fainlight*

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Ruth Fainlight was born in New York City, but has lived in England since the age of fifteen. She has published thirteen collections of poems in England and the USA, as well as two volumes of short stories, and translations from several languages, including the first book to appear in English by the eminent Portuguese poet, Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen. Her translation of Sophocles' *Theban Plays*, in collaboration with Robert Littman, was published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2009. Books of R.F.'s poetry have been published in French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian translation. She received the Hawthornden and Cholmondeley Awards in 1994, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Her collection *Sugar-Paper Blue* was short-listed for the 1998 Whitbread Award. R.F. has also written libretti for the Royal Opera House and Channel 4 TV. Her *New & Collected Poems* was published in the UK by Bloodaxe Books in 2010.

#### **from: NEW & COLLECTED POEMS**

by Ruth Fainlight

Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books 2010, ISBN: 978 1 85224 885 7

### *Midland Contemporary*

i

If you stand on the path leading out of the village,  
with your back to the airport buildings, the pylons  
hidden, the bright motorway signs too far  
on the left to enter your field of vision  
and the last row of houses too far to the right,

the vista towards that distant line of hills  
sloping gently down to the muddy stream  
in the shallow valley that lies before you, gives  
little evidence of the present moment – seems  
a perfect nineteenth century English landscape.

But the moment you shift your head from that one angle

or let yourself hear the traffic-roar: the endless stream of cars, the HGVs, the freight-planes lifting off and the holiday flights landing, you know exactly when and where you are.

It is this interdigitation of rural and global, industrial and contemporary – this evidence of encroachment by an augmenting population and its wants: consumption and mobility – which fascinates and appals.

ii

Cattle in the shadow of cargo hangars and new-built terminals. Virgin, Easyjet and DHL. Sheep with fleeces darkened to the tarnished silver of clouds emerging from the power station's cooling towers.

And past the highway's wire-link barrier – and barely noticed by that Mondeo's only passenger – discordant acres of acid yellow rape fields coruscate like molten metal through an open furnace door.

### ***The Delphic Sibyl***

The tripod, the laurel leaves, the robe and style of a virgin, though I was an honest widow of fifty: because of my sober gaze and my docility, the elders of Delphi chose me and taught me what had to be done with the tripod and laurel leaves. They offered a drink from the holy stream, showed me the cleft in the rock where I must sit and breathe mephitic fumes and chew the leaves until my head began to swim and words came blurred. Those gentlemen of Delphi's best, most ancient families, our city's noble priests, quite overwhelmed me. I was a simple woman, obedient, eager to please, and honoured by the role. And even had I wanted to, been bribed to do, there was no chance to slant the auguries. Petitioners would proffer written questions first to them, and their interpretation of my drugged and mumbled ravings was determined by Apollo's demands and the city's political needs. I was an ideal oracle, they told me. Thus I grew old, though monthly more confused, appalled, exhausted, and in every way the opposite of all I once assumed.

### ***Again***

Suppose the prince who once had been a toad changed back after a certain span of years.

Perhaps it always was intended.  
Happily ever after only meant  
a few decades, and this return to earlier  
days inexorably programmed into  
the experiment. The kindly fairy's  
blessing lost its potency as princess  
and her golden hero aged together.  
Suppose one morning when he woke he felt  
the clammy stricture web his toes and fingers,  
his mouth begin to stretch into that  
recollected lipless grin; and when she turned  
to face him from her pillow, saw in her  
contracting pupils the reflection of  
cold warts and freckles surfacing like blisters  
on his muddy skin. He dared not speak,  
but waited, numb with hopelessness and dread.

Suppose that night she'd dreamed about the hour  
her ball had rolled and splashed into the pool  
and that foul toad had hopped towards her, croaked  
his arrogant demand, and forced her will.  
Yet afterwards, everything was perfect.  
As though the time between had vanished, now  
she smiled and clung to him, gazed deep into  
unaltered eyes. Who could guess the coming  
transformation? Let it all begin again.

### ***Passenger***

Not watching trains pass and dreaming of when  
I would become that traveller, glimpsed  
inside the carriage flashing past a watching  
dreaming child, but being the passenger  
staring out at tall apartment blocks  
whose stark forms cut against the setting sun  
and bars of livid cloud, balconies crowded  
with ladders, boxes, washing, dead pot-plants,  
into lighted, steamy windows where women  
are cooking and men just home from work, shoes  
kicked off and sleeves rolled up, are smoking, stretched  
exhausted in their sagging, half-bought chairs,  
under viaducts where children busy  
with private games and errands wheel and call  
like birds at dusk: all that urban glamour  
of anonymity which makes me suffer  
such nostalgia for a life rejected  
and denied, makes me want to leave the train,  
walk down the street back to my neighbourhood  
of launderettes, newsagents, grocery shops,  
become again that watching dreaming girl  
and this time live it out – one moment only

was enough before a yawning tunnel-mouth obscured us both, left her behind.

### ***Handbag***

My mother's old leather handbag,  
crowded with letters she carried  
all through the war. The smell  
of my mother's handbag: mints  
and lipstick and Coty powder.  
The look of those letters, softened  
and worn at the edges, opened,  
read, and refolded so often.  
Letters from my father. Odour  
of leather and powder, which ever  
since then has meant womanliness,  
and love, and anguish, and war.

### ***The Anxiety of Airports***

Waiting for someone due on a certain plane  
and the plane arrives and you strain to scrutinise  
every stranger coming through the swinging doors,  
wondering if you will recognise him;  
your tension increasing, the anxiety level rising;  
then only the last few stragglers....  
But the person you came to meet does not appear.  
(And the explanation only days later.)

Or flying half-way around the world, a journey of  
*longueurs* and transfers stretched across so many time zones –  
wakeful hours in hotel bedrooms and the 4:00 am call –  
until, under flickering neon, adrift along  
the static-crackling carpets of inter-terminal  
connecting corridors, you're not sure if it's day or night.

And after you've struggled to drag your luggage off  
the carousel, negotiated Immigration,  
stumbled past the barriers where hotel touts  
and drivers holding cards with other people's names  
surge forward, and family groups, welcome smiles  
set hard, suddenly relax and start to laugh and talk –  
the one who should be there for you is nowhere in sight.

So you stand to one side, with the suitcase you're obliged  
to guard – though you wouldn't care if it were lost or stolen –  
dazed by exhaustion, while the Arrivals board goes blank  
and this part of the airport empties of staff and passengers  
like water draining down a grating, leaving  
only twists of silver paper from candy wrappers,  
adhesive shreds of clingfoil like sloughed snakeskins,  
and mysterious lengths of white and orange plastic twine.

This is more than childhood fear, this is far worse:  
an infant's pre-birth terror of falling through space,

endless abandonment or random malice. But you force yourself to move, join the queue for a cab, give the driver an address (though it doesn't sound right); then sit as far back as you can and stare out at water-logged fields and grey suburbs, uncertain what to expect when you get there.

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**Christopher Norris**

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Christopher Norris is Distinguished Research Professor in Philosophy at the University of Cardiff, where he taught English Literature before hopping across the disciplines via critical theory. He is author of more than thirty books on various aspects of philosophy, literature and music including - most recently - *Re-Thinking the Cogito*, *Derrida, Badiou and the Formal Imperative* and *Philosophy Outside-In*. His first volume of poetry, *The Cardinal's Dog*, will be published in 2013.

***The Winnowing Fan***

I will tell you, hiding nothing, though your heart will gain no pleasure from it, and nor does mine. Teiresias told me to travel through many cities of men, carrying a shapely oar, till I come to a race that knows nothing of the sea, that eat no salt with their food, and have never heard of crimson-painted ships, or the well-shaped oars that serve as wings. And he gave me this as a sign, one I could not miss, and now I tell it you. When I meet another traveller who says that I carry a winnowing-fan on my broad shoulder, there I must plant my shapely oar in the ground, and make rich sacrifice to Lord Poseidon, a ram, a bull, and a breeding-boar. Then leave for home, and make sacred offerings there to the deathless gods who hold the wide heavens, to all of them, and in their due order.

And death will come to me far from the sea, the gentlest of deaths, taking me when I am bowed with comfortable old age, and my people prosperous about me. All this he said would come true."

'If the gods really intend a more pleasant old age for you,' said wise Penelope, 'there is hope this will set an end to all your troubles.'

So they conversed . . . .

Homer, *The Odyssey*, Bk XXIII:247-299, trans. A.S. Kline

Just like the last time, and the time before,  
And times as many as the years that ran  
Back to the time his wanderings began  
The second time around. He'd kept the score  
Since then, the tally that he'd often scan  
Despairingly, of those by whom his oar,  
Though pluripotent as a metaphor,  
Was never taken for a winnowing fan.

Teiresias the seer it was, 'old man

With wrinkled dug's, etc., who thrice swore  
That fate would drive Odysseus from the shore  
Of Ithaca again, despite his plan  
To quit Penelope's embrace no more  
Throughout the remnant of his mortal span.  
No chance, the prophet said, since other than  
Her having been his patient guarantor  
Of hearth and home, she could impose no ban  
On his fresh-kindled impulse to explore  
Way past the bounds of all that heretofore  
Restrained his *Wanderlust*. From frying-pan  
To fire, he knew, and something they'd deplore,  
The *nostos*-lovers and their landlocked clan,  
But his last chance to stay out in the van  
Of sea-adventurers and not close the door  
On other lives and loves. Still it was not  
Just down to him, this renegade desire  
To sail, but what the rules would soon require  
As part of any well-formed epic plot  
Once Homer got to work. Although he'd tire  
Of wandering and lament his vagrant lot,  
They fixed it that he never quite forgot  
How blind Hermaphrodite could inspire  
Yet further odysseys, until the knot  
Of his old love pulled loose. Lest we admire  
Too much the seeking-out of perils dire  
In lands unknown, let's just recall that what  
First set his curiosity afire  
Was old Teiresias' cryptic parting shot,  
The bit that said no X would mark the spot  
Where he could put his oars up and retire  
From journeying until at last he got  
To some place where the natives would enquire  
Whether his winnowing-fan were now for hire,  
Since the gods fixed this season as the slot  
For threshing. When he reached that furthest shire  
He'd know these inland folk cared not a jot  
For sailors' tales so long as he could pot  
Fine grain from chaff and keep the yield entire.  
The point was, they'd no use for things that fell  
Under the heading 'oar' when so defined  
As to pick out just objects of the kind  
'Long paddle, mostly wood, used to propel  
Water-borne vehicles'. Though once designed  
Solely for that, as means to brave the swell  
And give the traveller yet more tales to tell,  
Now they revealed him strangely more inclined  
To see them as proclaiming his farewell  
To all those tales he wished to leave behind

As relicts of a distant time and mind.  
Here we might think him mastered by the spell  
Of Dionysus, lately intertwined  
With winnowing-fans and a new clientele  
Mad keen for any psychotropic smell  
Of Eleusinian mysteries. Resigned  
No longer to drop anchor, but to dwell  
For keeps in this safe haven, he'd the blind  
Sooth-sayer now to thank who'd once divined,  
Way back, how no port in a storm could quell  
His storm-tossed soul. Still we might wish to find  
Our twice-born hero with a mind to sell  
His oar as winnowing-fan, and so dispel  
The hormone-heavy *mythos* that assigned  
The straying male to zones remote while she,  
Stitched up and stitching, hangs around and waits  
For him to call. Agreed, spot-checking dates  
Seems like the merest piece of pedantry  
Compared with everything the hostile fates  
Contrived for his undoing. Yet we'll see  
The whole thing in a different light if we  
Switch angles and enquire how that stuff rates  
Against a counter-myth that might just be  
The one that most convincingly translates  
Into a tale that he and his shipmates  
Would scarcely relish though it held the key  
To their deliverance from the rocky straits  
That presaged doom each time they put to sea.  
On this at least the oarsmen might agree:  
That just as 'beat your swords to ploughshares' states  
A precept kindlier than the harsh decree  
That drove them on, so when this yarn relates  
Their oarsmanship to harvest, or equates  
His strong-arm stuff to skilful husbandry,  
The truth of what that counter-myth narrates  
Lies in its georgic turn. His epic spree  
Might then end up not with Penelope,  
Whose fabled constancy perhaps now grates  
On his promiscuous ear, but with him free  
To find his *nostos* far beyond the gates  
Of those uncivil realms where war rotates  
From clan to clan in perpetuity.  
That scene he now uncertainly locates  
In some half-known, half-dreamed pre-history,  
Or some inextricable potpourri  
Of fact and fiction, as his mind conflates  
The mythic tales with images that he  
Finds redolent of past-life loves and hates.  
And so blind Homer's story-line creates,

Like blind Teiresias, the narratee  
Of this first-person tale who now awaits  
His own denouement or peripety  
As one no prophet ventures to foresee  
Or final twist of epic plot dictates  
By law of genre. That whole odyssey  
Then seems to him a tale that conjugates  
The factual with the fictive, and mandates  
No sifting of his true life-history  
From what Homeric scholarship notates  
As one part truth to nine mythology,  
And therefore not at all the cup of tea  
Of inkhorn types for whom that designates  
The grossest kind of impropriety.  
My point is, all these late-born rustic traits  
Are of a pastoral kind that elevates  
Him far above his old-time company  
Of rabid sea-dogs ravaging the baits  
Of treasure, sex, and all the wild whoopee  
That came of voyaging. Apostasy  
Of this sort's no bad thing. The tale updates  
In ways unknown to that old poetry,  
As new-born georgic gently intimates  
How he'd do best to tend his own estates  
And make the most of what long vagrancy  
Did to ensure that their coordinates  
Should intersect far from the territory  
He once called home. Or, less nostalgically,  
It says: see how Odysseus navigates  
With an oar cut from some familiar tree  
Whose strength and suppleness he estimates  
By gift of peace-bred skills, and so negates  
Those martial arts their one-time devotee  
Set sail to prove. Now the old mood abates,  
That mood of troops waved off from many a quay  
By many a cheering crowd when victory  
Abroad meant peace at home between the spates  
Of civil strife. So he's no detainee  
In a new land where *physis* regulates  
The *nomos*-driven will that else inflates  
To claim all lands as sovereign property.  
This then seems fit conclusion: that the greats  
Of our and their blood-chequered history  
Are those who get the thing off to a t  
When whittling oars to fan-shape indicates  
Not some retreat to mankind's infancy  
Or lotus-eating pastime that sedates  
The warrior-spirit, but what correlates  
With every real advance in the degree

Of man's humanity to man. Let potentates,  
Swashbucklers, sea-wolves, and all wannabe  
Odysseus-types heed well this allegory  
Of pure nostalgia that no *nostos* sates.

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## CONFERENCE REPORTS

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***Re-Inventing the Postcolonial (in the) Metropolis. The 24<sup>th</sup> Annual GNEL/ASNEL Conference***, Chemnitz University of Technology, 09-11 May, 2013

***Carla Müller Schulzke***  
Humboldt University Berlin

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This year's annual conference of the ASNEL, the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English, took place at the Chemnitz University of Technology.

Not only did the university provide a suitable venue for the conference, but the rich and diverse history of the city itself made attending the conference worthwhile. Called "Manchester of Saxony" before World War II for its high standard manufacturing industry, the city was officially renamed "Karl-Marx-Stadt" during the cold-war period. The gigantic bust of Karl Marx, situated in the centre of town has now become a trademark of the city.

This year's conference theme, "Re-Inventing the Postcolonial (in the) Metropolis", was explored from a broad range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. With 140 participants from 14 different countries and 59 presentations in 21 panels, three keynote lectures, as well as poster presentations and readings, the ASNEL conference once more provided an unparalleled forum for researchers, students and teachers in the field of postcolonial studies in the German-speaking countries and beyond.

The growing importance of (theories of) spatiality in postcolonial literature and culture was reflected in this year's conference with regard to the contested space of the Postcolonial Metropolis. Against the grain of over-simplifying and problematic conceptions of the Postcolonial Metropolis as either a purely Western concept or an umbrella term for the mega cities of the Global South, the keynote lectures as well as the panel discussions investigated the postcolonial city as a multi-faceted site of literary, but also visual and sonic narratives and performativities.

The bracketing of the theme "Re-Inventing the Postcolonial (in the) Metropolis" thus proved productive in tackling the various and conflicting meanings and implications of the metropolis. Questions which emerged from this included: How can received concepts of the postcolonial city be critically investigated and productively extended? How can concrete literary, but also visual and sonic forms of cultural expression be analysed which explore, interact with, and reconfigure the postcolonial (in the) city? This spectrum was reflected in thought-provoking ways in the keynote lectures as well as the panel sessions.

After the official opening by conference convener Prof. Dr. Cecile Sandten, AbdouMaliq Simone, Professor of Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London, delivered the first keynote lecture on "Black Beach: Just the City", in which he called into question any rigid conceptualisation of the postcolonial city. Instead, he promoted an ethnographic perspective drawing from his own fieldwork in North Jakarta's neighbourhood Black Beach. Sharing his observations of the discontinuous, experimental and trial-and-error based strategies of survival of people living in these neighbourhoods, he emphasised how the everyday struggles of people to find, settle down and maintain a place to live within the city cannot be represented in any given definition. Providing such a thought-provoking keynote right at the beginning of the conference proved productive in setting the tone for a critical stance regarding the conceptions and methodologies that aim at coming to terms with the Postcolonial Metropolis.

The second keynote lecture, given by Rolf Goebel, Professor at the University of Alabama, detected a paradigm shift in the field of postcolonial studies from Bhaba's notion of the subversive inscription of non-Western voices into the dominant discourses of the metropolitan centre to Han's