

Resources, Multitudes

Soft Sift, Mark Ford. Faber and Faber, £8.99STG

Mark Ford is likely to be weary of being described both as an “American Philip Larkin and an English John Ashbery”, itself a pretty rare feat. The Ashbery connection is undeniable, and reinforced by the strong praise from Ashbery carried on the dustjacket. Ashbery has been a long time admirer of Ford’s work, as has Ford of Ashbery’s. He and Ford share an interest in Raymond Roussel, and Ashbery provides the foreword to Ford’s critical biography of Roussel which was published in 2000. There is, in short, plentiful evidence of an affinity of spirit and approach between the two poets and the example of Ashbery certainly informs these poems’ characteristic manoeuvres. Ford has praised Ashbery for his ability to “evade all single identities”, his Whitmanesque ability to “contain multitudes” and his deployment “of a staggering variety of dictions ranging from fragments of novelettish narratives to lyrical dream-visions, from the clichés of public speech to scraps of surrealist collage...”, all of which qualities can usefully be applied to Ford’s own work. The poems in *Soft Sift* studiously avoid a single authoritative consciousness and instead create a floating, freewheeling identity, shifting and elusive, “soft sift/ In an hour-glass—at the wall/ Fast, but mined with a motion, a drift”, as Hopkins has it. The point of view, the situation, the sense of what’s being said, are deliberately murky; their function is to provide structures for the voice to balance itself on, or jump off from:

The teapot slips from the hand. Some
Muscular ache lies patterned on the floor in irregular
Fragments of china...

(“The Great Divide”)

On balance it wasn't so much the cash
I was owed, as the attacks on my character; I
Prayed for deliverance and revenge.

("Contingency Plans")

The poise of the voice is very English, an exaggerated civility
and urbanity; the poems read as if they were a series of memos
written by a super-logical but slightly crazed mandarin:

in a quandary I seized
My innate Englishness, and practised
Wrapping it round me like an old army coat.

("Contingency Plans")

This is not a bad description of what the poems do: seize an
innate Englishness to wrap themselves in, layer upon ironic
layer. The effects can be very funny, as in

The Long Man

of Wilmington winces with the dawn; he has just
endured yet another mythical, pointless, starry
vigil. His ankles ache, and the weather looks
irksome and moody...

where a deflationary scepticism is allied with a clever conceit.
The speaker's self alignment with the Long Man seems
inevitable

I woke up feeling cold and distended,
my feet pointing east, my head in low-hanging
clouds. A stream of curious tags and sayings
flowed like a potion through my veins.

The consciousness that inhabits the poems always sounds like
this—articulate, self-aware, caught between an intense appre-
hension of the world's particulars and a sense of stasis or mean-
dering futility. Whatever the ostensible subject, the real subject
of all the poems is the nature of the mediating consciousness.
The poems' very slipperiness seems to reinforce their constant

suggestion that nothing can or should be taken for granted. The poems are as elusive as they are detailed; they're designed, for all their fastidious recordings, to slip through the fingers, leaving the print of their voice. If I keep coming back to the voice it's because I think it is the book's main achievement. Its consistency determines the shape and form of the poems; everything, from the relaxed prosiness to the calculatedly careless prosody, is governed by it. The long limbed, ruminative lines lend the poems a strange authority; again and again they lull us into an expectation of rational pleasure, but we very quickly find ourselves like the speaker of "IWish" "standing/ on a seemingly solid patch of cliff that suddenly/ starts to slide", never quite sure where we are or what we are listening to.

Part of their playful strategy is the use of third person narrative where the identities of the characters are mysterious. Pronouns are all equally mysterious and interchangeable, the poems issue from a floating sense of self. Abandoning the fixed point of view is part of the point, as "Snag and Syndromes" might be explaining "Under duress, our/ Verbs stammer and yield to an unknown third person singular". That poem seamlessly modulates into a first person pretend narrative:

Ignoring all this, I sauntered forth, past a dog
Rattling his chain, autumn crocuses, vacant benches,
And tree trunks scarred with initials...

meandering from exact observation through pedestrian banality

Continuing, I stumbled
Upon the "main drag", to borrow a term
Of my mother's.

to the gnomic climax of

Cats, shops and pedestrians merged
Into one: I heard my name whispered fiercely, excitedly,
In a voice I both dreaded and instantly recognized.

The stories they tell assume the forms of narrative even if they resist its customary satisfactions. Poem after poem offers a thickness of sensory information in an unspecified or semi-spec-

ified situation. Many poems run the sense from the title, which again is part of the deceptive casualness, but also a refusal to do the signposting job that titles often perform. The run-on title announces nothing, gives nothing away, merely initiates the movement, opens the door for the reader on a situation or a conversation that has already been going on for some time. To begin one of these poems is like stumbling into someone's conversation; reading is as much interruption as consumption:

One Figures

in his plans, but briefly, as a cupped hand
holds water, or as private and public spheres collide

and blur, overlap within his fragile, omnivorous
stare.

.....

She Spears

a tender asparagus shoot, nibbles at intervals, then embarks
on an equivocal theory of what happened and why...

.....

He Aims

his catapult, and broods. Quivering washing
festoons the neighbouring gardens, and the sky lours
like a rival consortium, poised to swoop.

Few books of poems achieve the consistency of tone, form and approach that's evident in *Soft Sift*. The poems are memorably and unmistakably Ford's; each one juggles with the same mix of confident rhetoric, in language that accommodates a range of registers from intimacy to management-speak; wit, irony, and a tone modulating from breeziness to regret—half sceptical, half longing. It's an attractive mix, and a marvellously accomplished book—the triumph of a particular, thought through and worked at style which is applied consistently. The poems have a very distinct collective as well as individual personality, and getting to know the voice is part of the pleasure. The difficulty, or the chal-

lenge, is one that faces all *sui generis* stylists: whether the template arrived at is various and adaptable enough to sustain interest indefinitely. Mark Ford's inventiveness suggests that whatever the manner of his future work, it will demand the same attentiveness and afford the same enjoyment as *Soft Sift*. In the meantime, work like this is a welcome reminder of the different modes available to the resourceful poet.