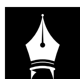

Charles Dickens

An interview with Peter Ackroyd

by Catherine BERNARD and Marc AMFREVILLE

Peter Ackroyd is one of the most prominent figures in contemporary British literature. He is famed both for his biographies—among which: T.S. Eliot (1984), Blake (1995)—and his novels in which he relentlessly explores the Englishness of English literature by resorting to a subtle and masterful blend of pastiche and intertextuality. If The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde (1983), Chatterton (1987), English Music (1992) or his latest novel Milton in America (1996) are particularly characteristic of his "ventriloquism", The House of Doctor Dee (1993) or Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem (1994) testify to his interest in occultism and in the dialogue between past and present.
*The figure of Dickens has occupied a central place in his work and in his private cultural Pantheon as testify not only the biography he devoted to Dickens (1990) but also his first novel (*The great Fire of London*, 1982) which is inspired by* Little Dorrit *, or the chapter of* English Music*, in which the hero Timothy Harcombe meets the great English novelist and several of his characters.*

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The interview took place on September 7, 1996 at Peter Ackroyd's London residence

In one of the fictional chapters of your biography of Dickens, you imagine an interview of yourself in which you seem to want to forestall certain questions, for example you obviously don't want to be asked whether you like Dickens or not. So let me ask you instead why you chose Dickens?

I think I chose him primarily because, since childhood, I have known about him and to a large extent also, I have known the London which was Dickens's London. But in retrospect, I think the more interesting reason would be that he is in a long line of what one called "Cockney Visionaries"—I've written about Blake, I'm writing about the painter Turner—and I've been trying over the years in both biography and fiction to evoke a pattern of sensibility and inheritance which perhaps still exists, and Dickens is perhaps the greatest example of a visionary novelist in the English language. So, for all sorts of personal and literary reasons, he was the obvious choice.

When you think of a pattern of sensibility, do you mean a sensibility that's also close to yours?

I believe so, yes. Certainly, you can detect within Dickens's writing and in some of his contemporaries—again in Blake—an interest in the pantomimic and the spectacular and theatricality, and a sort of ability to combine pathos and comedy within a single page. It's a sort of activity vaguely equivalent to the pantomimes and music halls of the nineteenth century. That kind of sensibility has always attracted me very much. I believe it to be a particularly urban sensibility that may well be particular to London, although I am not quite so certain about that.

Even apart from the biography you dedicated to him, he does come back from time to time in your fiction as well, as if he were haunting you in a special way.

Yes, I always find when one writes, all the figures one has written about tend to congregate in one way or another within each succeeding book.

What is the purpose according to you of Dickens's theatricality, is it a way of controlling pathos for instance?

Yes, it's a way of transcending sentimentality, I suppose, of which he also had a large share. It's very difficult to pin down exactly what I mean, but there is an art of the surface, an art of the extravagant gesture, and the extravagant speech, which strikes me as being essentially Dickensian.

This is something you also touch upon in your biography of Eliot when you talk about parody for instance. You insist that an element of formal or generic play may be a mode of self-discipline, a way of imposing discipline on one's writing.

Yes, I think the case of Eliot would be very different though, because of his American roots and his rather patrician and sophisticated background and education. I wouldn't be able to place him so firmly within the traditions of Blake, Dickens and Turner.

From a more personal point of view, perhaps, do you see common points between Dickens and yourself?

No, no, I wouldn't be so presumptuous as to think that.

But I'm thinking, for example, in terms of volume of production.

Well, he produced far more than I have done. By this time in his life he'd written, what, twelve novels?...

You've produced a lot as well.

Well, yes. But he began very early, I believe *Pickwick Papers* was written when he was in his early twenties. In any case, this seems to be characteristic of the nineteenth century, whether one thinks of Ruskin, Carlyle, Tennyson... they all wrote massively, and continuously. It's only in the present century that lack of productivity is often considered more interesting than the opposite.

Now, speaking of David Copperfield*, Dickens himself, and several critics like Sylvère Monod for example, considered it to be Dickens's best novel. Now however hard I tried when reading your biography, I couldn't tell your personal preference...*

I never really had one. Each one, at the time I was writing the biography, was fascinating. As far as I'm concerned, his books all, in the end, comprise one single book; each one being a chapter of a vaster book. So I don't think one of them stands out from another in that sense.

Perhaps in the sense that this one, David Copperfield*, is the most autobiographical and you have a special interest in biography?*

Yes, I suppose so. There are autobiographical elements in *David Copperfield*, but Dickens was capable of great self-dramatisation, so his biographical episodes don't strike me as any more interesting than the fictive episodes, quite frankly.

Would you mind, though, retracing some of those episodes that you do know are autobiographical?

I believe the bottle warehouse episode is the main biographical section[1]. The King's Bench Prison, of course[2]... The motif of the prison itself occurs again and again in his fiction. Marshalsea is most eminent in *Little Dorrit* of course, where Little Dorrit emerges from that prison. When he went abroad, he insisted on visiting prisoners in America, for example and was very interested in the penal system. This is partly due to his early experiences, but it's also possible that that particular urban vision, the London vision, which is often one of oppression and constriction and darkness finds one of its metaphors in the world of prison. And I think that Dickens had both a private and a public interest in this motif.

He seems to have advocated a more repressive prison system?

Yes, he wanted harsher punishments for convicts. And he disliked the more liberal regimes of certain prison governors of the period. He was in many senses a strict authoritarian, a disciplinarian with his family, and in his own life he was rather a martinet, people said he had a military air, a military gait about him. And there's no doubt that his instincts were often very repressive.

How come then, that the myth that seems to survive on the contrary, is one of Dickens as a philanthropist and a sort of radical?

Well, he was that too. But you often find that he has sympathy with the victims only when he can identify with them personally, in the case for instance of a suffering child, or of a boy in the bootblack factory. But if the victims are beyond his private experience, he tends to be rather severe in his attitude towards such people.

So, does that mean that his relationship to society at large depended on his own involvement?

Yes, to a large extent that would be true. Certainly his own attitude towards the family, you might say the family he never really had, involving the image of a warm, glowing hearth and of happy children. He tended to see English society in those terms, and you'll find that in his speeches and in his journalistic writing he tends to think of the country as being theoretically one happy family. He tends to see it in those terms. He was a radical in the sense that he championed those people who had, as it were, been rejected by the family, or who were despised, or who had been neglected by the family, as he had been. But as a radical he had no particular philosophy of his own. He was not a radical in an industrial sense, because he often championed the rights of manufacturers, as well as those of the workers, but was rather opposed to trade unions in general. So his is a rather strange, private sort of radicalism.

How can we explain then that the myth that has developed is, on the contrary, one of somebody who is a radical, who can sympathise.

Well, I think that's partly the work of certain biographers in the past, like the American Edgar Johnson. It's partly a false reading of his political sentimentality. Certainly, in his own lifetime he wasn't necessarily considered a radical. He supported the South in the Civil War, for example. And there was the case of the Governor of Jamaica, who was killed... Eyre. He was on the side of Eyre rather than of the liberals who opposed Eyre. So, his radicalism is very hard to properly define, even if it exists at all.

This precise example even verges on outright racism. He seems to have believed in the inferiority of the non-White ethnic groups.

Yes, he definitely was in our terms, what you would call a racist. And also what you would call, in our terms, a sexist, I suppose. The women in his novels, as we know, are sentimental heroines or rather ghastly old parties like Mrs. Gamp or Mrs. General, who are like stereotypes of women.

What about his attitudes as regards the Jews?

Antisemitism is one thing we can't really accuse him of, because he repented of the portrait of the Jew he made in *Oliver Twist* and he apologized for his portraits of Jews and he later created, in *Our Mutual Friend*, the figure of the benevolent Jewish patriarch as an apology.

But that's something which he keeps doing. I mean that he will use certain ethnic types maybe less as emblems than as caricatures, narrative stratagems, to some extent.

He existed in the realm of caricature altogether. That's I suppose what I meant by theatricality. His people are never—apart maybe from the images he created of himself—realistic as we may expect them to be in realistic novels. They're not the characters of George Eliot, for example. Or even of Jane Austen. They tend to be theatrical caricatures, pantomimic stereotypes, and his fiction is that much closer, I suppose, to the stage, than it is to the tradition of social realism, for example. So although you could accuse him of creating stereotypes, he had no wish to do anything other. He had no interest, as far as we know, in creating the kind of realism which is so effective in psychological realism. In fact I think he probably rather despised it. You have to remember his whole education and training came from the stage. He began as a playwright, then as a theatrical reviewer for a while, his friends were always actors. He appeared in plays all his life. He had his own stage company. So his real instincts were towards the theatre rather than towards what we would call the novel. I don't think he was really interested in novels at all, apart from his own.

Would you say the readings at the end of his life were part of that inspiration?

Oh yes, definitely. I mean they were the epitome of him as an actor. He was apparently a very forceful actor in the plays he produced himself. And as a child, of course, he performed for his father's friends.

The chapters you dedicate to those readings are particularly enjoyable. Could you perhaps try to recapture the atmosphere?

Well, they were extraordinary public events. He toured the country, and also, of course, America. He recreated a stage version of some of his most famous novels, and recreated, in his own person, some of his most famous characters. He played all the parts. The effect was apparently tremendous. People wept and fainted and laughed, wherever he went. The townhalls were bursting with people. And his relentless need to perform, materially hastened his death, according to John Forster and other contemporaries.

Do you agree?

Oh yes, there's no doubt that his physical health suffered enormously, from the effort of performing in public. But he didn't seem to want to give it up.

But on the other hand, you seem to suggest, in the biography, that had he been inactive, it would have been even worse.

Yes, he was one of those people who needed to keep on propelling themselves through the world. He didn't want to stop and think or stop and rest. I think he said once, "If I rested I would rust and go to pieces", or something to that effect. He had this extraordinary native energy, the energy which led him to walk twenty-six miles without even thinking about it and of editing a paper while writing a novel, plus producing stage plays, all at once. He had four different careers at the same time. So that energy was something which probably didn't let him rest at all. He had to keep on going.

Like Victor Hugo, to a certain extent, in France.

Yes, exactly.

To carry on with the theatricality, would you say that this love for the theatre also determines to a large extent the structure of his works?

Yes, they're very episodic, picaresque, rambling. They tend to be conceived almost in terms of stage performance. Certainly they tend to end in the manner of the English melodrama, where all the characters come together on stage, and are left in harmony at the end of the piece. And I presume his excessively theatrical imagination might not have been altogether successful on certain occasions. In his later novels you see quite clearly how he realises that his grip on structure had to be strengthened. He goes to great lengths to control the structure of his novels. His "darker" novels—although I don't suppose they're any darker than the earlier novels—are more elaborately

contrived and planned. So he obviously realised this apparent weakness in himself and went to steps to remedy it quite often.

You have just mentioned melodrama. Could you possibly expatiate on that, because the operatic dimension of his work is quite fascinating?

It's very difficult to put it properly. I would say that it's a very English phenomenon. It has to do with the inability to sustain one's feelings for very long, and the ability to switch moods very quickly. Furthermore, melodrama, as far as I know, is always teetering on the edge of becoming farcical. It's both serious and farcical at the same time, according to your taste or mood. You can see it as very serious drama, or as absolutely ridiculous. And that particular balancing act between pathos and farce, or tragedy and farce is very much in the centre of his own writing. Just as it was at the centre of his own personality too.

Could that possibly also explain the structure of his works, the fact that they're both episodic, as you said, and that certain motives, certain themes keep coming back, which structure the overall work?

Yes. I should think that would be the case. But I believe we have to make a distinction between his earlier novels and his later novels. The earlier novels are almost always episodic. Of course, the fact of writing in monthly or weekly instalments obviously didn't help. And there is only so much you can plot and plan, for the rest, the words just came out.

As if language was taking over.

Exactly. I'm sure in his case it often did. It was in that sense a mastered language. And yet at the same time, he was its victim, because he was pulled along by it...

There is indeed a very strong sense of rhyme in his fiction, rhyme in the sense of structural rhyme, things keep recurring...

Yes, that's true too. But how much that can be a conscious activity I'm not sure. And I don't really believe it was in his case. That is rather something he learned to his cost in his own life.

Could we move on to the question of the darker side of his fiction? You quote a letter from Dickens to Forster, written after the completion of David

Copperfield*, in which he said: "I seem to be sending some part of myself to the Shadowy World".*

For one thing he was being despatched into the world of other consciousnesses who might interpret his own private experience in different ways. Also, I think he believed that his creations in his novels were part of some world beyond his control, once they had left his pen. They created some sort of alternative world, over which he could no longer have any control once he'd finished with his book. That's why in a fictional chapter of my biography I put all the characters together at one point. It's quite clear that to him they were real people, or real events, real actions which were suddenly no longer under the domination of his own will and existed in what he called "the shadowy world".

Don't you think in this special case it might actually reveal the autobiographical quality of David Copperfield*, I mean an autobiographical quality that would perhaps go beyond the factual episodes we mentioned earlier?*

Oh, yes certainly. You have to remember that when he wrote those passages about the blacking factory and about Marshalsea, no-one apart from Forster knew that these were indeed his own experiences. It may be in despatching part of himself that he was mythologising himself to such an extent that part of him ceased to be real to himself.

For instance, page 597, you ask "and yet which for him was the world of shadows and which the world of reality?" So there is what you would call a cross-fertilisation...

Oh, absolutely. He found it very difficult to distinguish between the two at certain moments of his life. He tended to pattern his life as if his closest family were his characters whom he could control, for all his life. And also, the funny thing was, when people met him, they tended to behave in a Dickensian fashion. Such was the power of his will, that they felt they had to make their manner appealing to him. And he used to say, when he was walking down the street, "there comes Scrooge" and "let's go round the corner to avoid her". There is no doubt that that made him a bit playful. There's no doubt that he found very great difficulty in separating his imagined world from the world around him.

So could we go as far as say that he was possessed by the shadows of the past and by his own character?

He must have been most possessed to write so fluently and so persuasively and powerfully. There's no doubt that he felt the sense of something beyond his

control. There were even times when he said that certain characters became too importunate, too grieving. So there is no doubt that he felt himself to be, as it were, a medium through which his visions were transmitted.

There are strange occurrences as well. Take the moment when he says "I've got to kill Dora", thinking of David Copperfield's first wife. And of course he has a daughter called Dora who dies a few months later... There is what he controls in his novels and what happens, almost in spite of himself.

Yes, exactly. I think that his deepest instincts are always very veiled from him. He's not a self-conscious man, not a man who probed his own psyche. It may well be that he was possessed by the more intimate or darker forces of his own psyche and bared things which he didn't expect. That's the point where his most intimate impulses come to the fore and he, we might say, dresses them up as a sort of theatrical *dénouement*, but he really didn't know what was happening, or what was going on at those points.

So, theatricality—to go back to theatricality—could be seen as a sort of private catharsis?

Well, yes. it is the same with an actor playing a part. Sometimes the part takes over from the actor. Theatricality doesn't mean that it need necessarily be superficial or contrived. Theatricality may be a very deep instinct in human beings. When one plays a part, one's actions are not susceptible to analysis.

But it does suggest the idea that one may be playing with a mask, which both hides and possibly reveals truth.

Well, it gets very confusing at this point, how much is mask and how much is reality, how much is artifice and how much is truth. The greatest artifice may be the greatest truthfulness, you see. Take the example of Oscar Wilde who talks about the mask as being the real person. You can put on a mask and become more real.

In order to acquire unexpected depth?

Yes, the most superficial instrument might be the one which conveys the most depth in the end.

You use the metaphor of the sea to speak of Dickens's shadowy world, of what lies concealed beyond the surface and more specifically of death.

I think I got that from Carlyle, but Carlyle said there were depths of blackness, I think, wasn't it, in his character? One may also mention such characters as

Paul Dombey who listens to the waves. You also get the impression that there are times when Dickens thought of himself as a great ocean, with things within it which he never saw.

Talking about possession, there is an element in Dickens which is very rarely tackled, it's nostalgia. He seems to have been a haunted man.

Yes, he's endlessly haunted by his past. There are two ways of looking at it. In *A Christmas Carol* he displaces a lot of his images of the past. There's a little red brick school, there's a little house, there's an invalid child. There's nostalgia for the past he never knew, which is artificial, and there's a sort of strange insistent need to go back to his own real past, because that's where the secret of his being lay. So you find what may be called a double mood. I believe he was ashamed of his past. There's no doubt that he tried to exorcise it in as many ways he could, but he knew he could never escape it and time and time again he goes back to those early years of his own childhood, and extrapolates it in different forms. Again I think that was instinctive, that it is something he couldn't control. In a way it was one of the secrets of his genius as a novelist, that in a way he kept that part intact. When he was a rich and famous man, he used to say he dreamt of his childhood. His fame meant nothing to him. And he went back to the Marshalsea when he had finished writing *Little Dorrit*, funnily enough, not before he wrote that novel. So there is a strange, almost indescribable mixture of fantasy, need, horror and energy. He knew very well that his energy and his need for success, his appetite for fame and glory, came from his experiences of rejection and poverty as a child. He must have known that it was the most obvious thing in his life.

Is that what you mean, when you say, for example, that he was always "exhilarated by low life"?

Yes. It was the seedbed of his own genius. There's a sense in which it was more real to him than anything which happened to him in later life, all the fame and the success, meeting famous people, the big houses he lived in. All that often seems to him to be a sort of fantasy. The only reality he ever really knew was that which had been inflicted upon him as a child. So to go back to that was in a way to sustain it. It was a way of getting back to his origins. As he used to say, he had to walk the streets of London in order to feel happy. He went back to where he came from to re-inspire himself, as it were.

And yet once more, would you say that his vision of London, his recreation of London is also romanticised, is almost a cliché?

Ah, but there's a difference here. We expect London to be as he shows it. But it was he who created it. So it wasn't a cliché in that sense. He created the

London which you now call Dickensian, obviously. He created the cliché, but it wasn't a cliché then, although, on the other hand, it was a romantic vision of London. You have to think he was living in the same era as Wordsworth for instance. He was a sort of prose romantic in that sense. He is more like De Quincey than he is like Shelley. He's more like Wordsworth than like Jane Austen. Everything is viewed with this extraordinary myth-making power. Everything is personalised—just as Wordsworth, I suppose, in that sense, personalised what may be seen as extrapolations of himself from the outside world. Wordsworth had his lakes and mountains and Dickens had his streets. But in fact it's more or less the same process at work.

A mixture of the personal with the emblematic?

Exactly. As if they were turning their experiences into emblems of the universe. And to that extent Wordsworth and Dickens are quite close.

And also, he kept reverting to the past. You do suggest that, in that sense, the London he described of course, was not utterly realistic?

No, not at all. He always went back a bit. One obviously thinks of him as a modern novelist of his time, of course, as though he were writing about the conditions of his time. In fact he never really was. There are very few novels which are set in his own period. He tends to go back twenty, thirty, forty years, to the era of childhood.

And you point to an interesting tension in Dickens. You say at some stage that he's a pre-Victorian writer and a Victorian character. This ties in with what you said about Dickens fictionalising himself and the period as Wordsworth did. You seem to have picked the word on purpose. Because you begin by suggesting he is "early-Victorian"...

Oh, yes, but that's a different thing...

And then you say "No, no, we should rather say a pre-Victorian writer".

Yes, I assume that's right. But there's another point which has to be made which is that early Victorians are quite different from mid-Victorians and later Victorians. They had this extraordinary animation and energy, diversity and theatricality, which of course got lost by about 1850 to 1860 when the myth became much more stuffy, but this generation of early-Victorians definitely had this extraordinary vivacity.

Very much like Thackeray to some extent.

Yes. Of course Dickens and Thackeray never got on. And I don't think Dickens ever read any of Thackeray's novels.

And yet, Dickens seems closer to Thackeray than, say, to George Eliot. This may have something to do with the energy of their work.

Yes, I see what you mean. Yes that's certainly true. They were, of course, both London writers too. They both shared "this London quality", this sort of energy and splendour. Furthermore, Thackeray, as far as I know, was very interested in the theatre. George Eliot was not of that kind at all.

Another point I would like us to evoke is the element of "sorrowfulness" in his work. You note "a self-contained sorrowfulness in certain aspects of Dickens's life", and you add that "the same sorrowfulness can be glimpsed at the heart of his narratives."

Well, this is something which one does detect in his personality. Certainly, throughout his life he always evoked "a sense of something missing, some part I never had". There's also a sense of insufficiency from loss and lack, which he carries around with him everywhere. His fictions are suffused with a sort of morbidity, and melancholy on one level...

But this is perhaps the aspect of his works traditional reading is least sensitive to?

Yes. Take for instance Arthur Clennam in *Little Dorrit*, who is the archetype of the lonely soul voyaging through the world. In many of Dickens's novels you have a character who plays a similar role, that of the lost creature who feels apart from the world, who is estranged from the world around. Martha Endell in *David Copperfield*, for example. That's very much I think part of his own personality. He wasn't very happy in nineteenth century civilisation, although of course, he was a great master of it.

Miss Havisham, also, in Great Expectations *is a picture of melancholy.*

Yes. There are always two or three characters who have this extraordinary isolation around them. In *David Copperfield* we find those extraordinary scenes with the first wife and his love for her, and she dies. That sense of the one partner he never had is brought to life in those particular scenes where the partner goes.

Could we link this feeling of sorrowfulness and absence and loss, etc., to his mistreated sense of filiation. He's desperately looking for a sense of belonging.

He never really did belong, that's the trouble. He was always set apart from his contemporaries and even from his own family. He never got to know them well. There's a sense of him being the most strikingly lonely person in the whole of Victorian literature, as a man and as a writer. He was always an extraordinary creature whom people were frightened of. And in his writing, you get the sense that he had to create a family of his own each time he wrote a novel, he created some new family to which he could belong.

Which is surprising when you think of his worldly fame. The way he met success in America, for example, is quite amusing.

Well, the extraordinary thing about his life was that he was so successful so early, that within about three years of starting to write he became the most famous novelist in England and he remained the most famous novelist in England until he died. Similarly, when he went to America he was greeted at the shore by thousands of people, and throughout his stays in America, he was treated as the most popular living writer. And he enjoyed his fame, I think he actually wanted more of it, more attention, more applause, more recognition, because at the centre of it all there's a sort of emptiness. He needed continually to be encouraged and applauded. And when he was alone, this is obvious in his letters for instance, he lapses into a sort of extraordinary melancholy. He needed the stimulus, not only of other people, but of his own characters and he needed their inventions to keep himself together, as it were.

The man was created by his creation?

In a sense that's true. And also he was, in a way, killed by his creations. Because it's the act of revivifying the public speech, the public reading that actually did destroy him in the end. So his is the most remarkable history of a man who lived and died in his imaginary world, which he created.

Talking about filiation, you as writer are deeply aware of the anxiety of influence, and of the fact that writers are haunted by the literary past. Would you say that it is true also of Dickens?

I doubt that. I don't think he felt that. There's no sense in which he ever felt oppressed or threatened or affected by his predecessors. He read Smollett, Defoe and Sterne. But you get the impression that he was almost self-created. He was self-created as a man and his fictions were also in a way self-created. He never was bothered about his contemporaries or about his reputation in that sense. I think he had a real sense of his power and never looked out of it.

Is that true also of his voice, as a writer? Would you say that he managed to create a truly original voice?

Oh, I think so. He's never been rivalled, in English at least. The only writers who were like him were his disciples and I genuinely believe that he never doubted one minute his powers.

His was a voice out of nowhere, almost...

Well, it was. It's as if he came from nowhere. From this extraordinary background he became, aged twenty-two, the most famous novelist in the world. People talk about the fairy-tale quality of his fiction, and in a sense he saw his own life in the same way. He enjoyed an extraordinary success, and he lived in a world of violent contrasts which he recreated in his fiction. In a sense you could say that one admires Dickens only because the actual manner and bearing of the man are to be found in his fictions. The energy itself, the extraordinary length of his books and the genius of the man tend to show there's a very real correlation between himself, and what he wrote, which is not necessarily always the case with other writers.

Would you agree to say that there is almost a sense of innocence to that extent, that his voice is innocent, almost Arcadian?

Yes, well I think that's partly because, as I said, he had no self-consciousness as such. He never questioned what he was doing on that level. There was no sort of subtext, as far as he was concerned. He was so unwilling to look into himself but he'd just draw into the darkness of himself and bring out another character. He remained completely blind to his own nature. But for good reasons, because that left him inchoate inside, and he could just pluck out characters and put them into the world. There's no doubt that all of the characters in his books are little bits of Dickens. I noticed in his letters and sometimes in his behaviour that he tended to become like the people he was just writing about at that time. He'd use the same phrases as them, and his behaviour was slightly changed. So in a sense, each novel for him was a process of self-discovery. Because he was inventing parts for himself each time he wrote a novel.

In a Freudian sense you mean?

It's more extraordinary than that. He literally had these people within him which kept wanting to come out. So he is Mrs. Gamp, Scrooge, he is David Copperfield, as well as Miss Havisham. He's all of them. And that's why they're so powerfully alive, because they are instinctual.

So the opening chapter of Great Expectations *could be a good metaphor for his entire work, since this chapter describes how fiction gradually emerges out of that inchoate world.*

Yes, exactly.

The word Freudian gave me another idea. You did mention in an interview that you were not Freudian. However, in one of those fictional passages you insert a dream in which you fear Dickens might attack you.

I think I did have that dream. When you are writing either novels or biographies, you're so concerned with the central figure that you are in a way trying to refantasize their lives for them and do feel on occasion, at least, a sense of inadequacy or guilt I suppose. Here you are, recreating this figure for another generation and you know that what you're doing is creating another novel out of him. And there are moments when you think, what would he have thought of that?

Are there any specific instances now, that would make you say that you have, although this may be too strong a word, "betrayed" him? A specific issue?

I don't think so, no. At the beginning of this conversation, you said you had wanted to ask me whether I liked Dickens or not and the only way I can answer the question about faithfulness is by answering that question. You don't tend to like or dislike Dickens or Blake. What you try and do, as far as I'm concerned, is turn him or her into a plausible character and, in that sense, I don't feel I betrayed him or wronged him because, I think I did create a coherent and plausible character. I would have betrayed him if I had written a bad book. I would have betrayed him if I had falsified him. I would have betrayed him if I'd written an incoherent book.

Which you certainly didn't. But I'm thinking of a particular example. You interpret in your own terms for instance the episode with Ellen Ternan.

That was I suppose an accident of fictional reconstruction. I was relying upon the evidence of his own fiction and upon his obsession with the innocent woman, the innocent girl. Because of the recurrence of this figure in all of his work, it suggested to me that, since he was so much a victim of his art, he might have wanted, as it were, to create a novel out of his relationship with her or impose his fictional strengths upon the whole situation. I know most people don't agree with that. But at least it was plausible to me at the time.

I have no preconceived opinion on the subject, but you do turn him into a sort of sexless character, in a way...

Yes. Which is a mistake, as he had so many children [Laughter]. But I suppose one might say he was sexless to some extent. And I suppose the Ellen Ternan episode could be interpreted quite differently. But I got so enchanted by his own mythologising fictive powers that I suppose I wanted to interpret his own life within his spirit.

It reminds me of your interpretation of Oscar Wilde's sex life. You had a way of softening it in the public eye, of playing it down...

I think there's a variety of reasons for that, some of which will probably be completely mysterious to me. But I found in all the novels and biographies I've written that I have left that aspect of human behaviour to one side. Now, theoretically, one could say that it's because that kind of behaviour is so universal that it doesn't necessarily reflect upon the actual character of the person while not everyone writes like Dickens or Oscar Wilde. But it may also be that my own sort of squeamishness about the subject leads me to diminish its importance in the books I write. Although, having said that, it does occur in some of my novels.

In the first ones, especially, in The Great Fire of London*.*

Yes, and also in the latest one, *The House of Dr. Dee*. Yet this absence may be explained by my own inhibitions.

Would you say that's another common point with Dickens?

I believe so, yes. Because there's no sex in Dickens's novels.

And do you think the fact that there is no sex in Dickens is entirely due to the so-called Victorian era?

No, no, no. It was part of his instinctive expressiveness. There is a reluctance in his fiction to deal with these matters, suggesting that he was in many senses a deeply inhibited man, I imagine. That's my instinctive vision of him, anyway.

From a literary point of view, could it be also that he was such a sort of empathetic writer that he could empathize with both sexes at the same time?

Oh yes, that's definitely so. As I said, every character of Dickens has a bit of Dickens inside him or her. There's no doubt that like many great writers, he

had this extraordinary ability to transcend the sexes. Except, of course, having said that, that the women in his novels are fairly stereotypical.

How about Aunt Betsey, for example? She's not that stereotypical.

No she's not. And I suppose Mr. Dick isn't either in certain ways stereotypical. He's quite a good case study in a certain kind of psychosis, isn't he? Which means we have to re-evaluate what we just said before. There are occasions when he is suddenly able to create strikingly human individuals. Even women. And that may be when he lets it go a bit and he goes a little deeper.

He goes beyond the limits imposed by stereotypes.

Yes, and by his *own* stereotypes, you see. And I couldn't begin to fathom the sort of creative powers available to him at that point. But it's certainly true that he doesn't create just stereotypes, he does create recognisably individual people. Like, even Mr. F.'s aunt in *Little Dorrit* is obviously a case of Alzheimer's disease that he caught perfectly. He must have recognised that in people around him and perhaps recognised it within himself strangely.

I'd like to move on to a far more technical question. It has something to do with the subject of authority. In the chapter of English Music *in which you parody* Great Expectations*, you insist on the authoritarian quality of Dickens. Could you pick up on that?*

Well. Let's begin with him, and move on from him. He, as I said to you earlier, did have this military bearing, he was very authoritarian in his relations with other people. He insisted on being in control of all situations. He wanted to be the director and producer of all his plays. He treated his family as if they were bits of himself which had to be put into line. He once said of one of his sons "He must realise that his name is his best possession". In his relationship to the poor, in his relationship to prisoners, there's no doubt that he treated them in a sort of paternally disciplined manner. He helped to run Urania cottage, which was a home for fallen women run by Mrs. Morson. He even designed their dresses for them. He exerted extraordinary control over his environment. Now how do we extrapolate that into his fiction as well? The fact he was a novelist suggests he had this need to control, to create a world which was self-sustaining and well-disciplined.

This may be felt also in his control over the structure of his novels...

Definitely in the structure, and towards the end of his career, as is obvious in the edition of his working notes I have here, he went to great lengths to

systematise and discipline the order of events. It is also obvious from his demand that things should almost always end happily.

He exerted immense control over his characters. In the chapter of English Music *in which you parody him, the characters are desperately trying to get rid of him in order to outlive him.*

You often feel that about Dickens's characters. They're so real that you often think they must have chafed at the restrictions that have been placed upon them. Some of his characters just take off, like Mrs. Gamp, and you feel that he's enjoying himself. He's really letting go again. But then he gets clamped down. There's another scene with a different kind of mood. So he's in constant control of the tempo of the novel.

He also controlled the illustrations.

Yes, he controlled very carefully what was the illustrated material. And the illustrators, Phiz in particular, used to have to present him with their sketches and then he'd change them or tell them how to change them. And of course, in his relationship to publishers, he always remained very strictly in control over what happened to his books and how they were disseminated and how they would be bound and so forth.

He even tried to convince Americans to pay him copyright.

Yes. But that was a different thing. He almost plays the part of an aggrieved novelist who got no money out of these hundreds of thousands of copies flooding the American market. He also needed to control audiences. The public readings were an exercise in what some people saw as mesmeric power. He was a mesmerist and he practised on friends. There was for instance a Madame de la Rue who suffered from various nervous afflictions of a psychotic nature, and over a period of some months, he successfully mesmerised her. I don't think she was ever completely cured, but he certainly helped relieve the symptoms and he was fascinated by mesmerists although he never allowed himself to be hypnotised, you see, which suggests again this overriding need to control everything around him. I am not sure we can extrapolate this into his fiction apart from the way we have just done.

I think we could, by insisting on his handling of structure.

Yes, his novels are so elaborate and so luminous, that his control over books like *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend* is astounding, if one thinks of the wealth of characters and how he kept them all, as it were, in the air together. It shows a remarkably powerful synthetic imagination.

Especially if you think in terms of instalments…

Exactly. The effort needed to maintain that kind of incredibly intricate world, to keep it going...

Without the possibility of re-writing...

Without the possibility of re-writing and having to write so quickly. It's an astounding feat actually.

It required controlling the micro-structure of each instalment and the macro-structure of the whole book.

In fact that's exactly what he was trying to do in the working notes he based his novels on. The micro and macro-structures had to be very firmly aligned and without any possibility of something going wrong. Because, as Marc said, he couldn't change it. There were times when I think it did go slightly wrong. He admitted that he himself didn't understand the plot of *Oliver Twist*, because it had got so complicated. But as he got older he was much better at keeping everything in order. In *Pickwick Papers* which is the first one, he can just let rip. He would go on and on and on until it stopped.

You show in your biography that he's gaining more and more control over his art and needs less and less formal control over things like illustrations. For the last novels, he left his illustrators fairly free.

I think that's partly due to the waning of his powers, to his exhaustion. He also realised in the end that his control was such that his abilities were at least vouchsafed to him, I think he just lost interest in that side of things.

In another of your famous fictional passages, you imagine Dickens worried with his yet unwritten books, the characters that will remain unborn. You later suggest that the latter of those characters will migrate, "to the imagination of other writers"...

That's certainly true. And all the way through our discussion, it's occurred to me that, just as he reinterpreted himself in terms of his characters, the biographer reinterprets himself in terms of Dickens and in terms of Dickens's characters, the endless process of reinterpretation, of regurgitation goes on. This may be the most plausible explanation for this image of the migration of characters.

But may you also have meant that you were one of the writers to whose imagination his unwritten characters might have migrated?

It's possible. I didn't think that at the time. It's certainly possible, because when I was writing that biography I did write a novel which had that sort of element to it.

One may also mention the Great Fire of London*, which is highly Dickensian.*

Yes, I see what you mean. Furthermore, in *The Great Fire of London* I have a character who is making a film adaptation of *Little Dorrit, so*... Then one becomes a character in one of one's own novels.

So are you giving up on Dickens now?

Well, I have written a *Life of William Blake* and I'm now writing a biography of Thomas More; so in a sense, Dickens does fade into the background and other interests or other themes come to the fore.

What are your projects?

Well, I've just finished a novel called *Milton in America* which is heavily indebted to Milton himself.

Now of course, Milton in America *is bound to be entirely fictional?*

Well, it's entirely fictional as it tells the story of how Milton flees from royalist persecution when King Charles II returns to England and establishes a colony in New England and it all goes very badly wrong. Milton is another London visionary.

You were talking at some stage about writing a biography of Shakespeare. Will you do that one day?

I'm not so sure about that anymore. Because he's almost unfathomable... I'm not sure I can do Shakespeare really.

Isn't there also a problem of material, I mean, with finding sources?

That would be a problem, but I met the same difficulty with William Blake, about whom very little is known. And it's not so much that as the enormity of the task. And also to read everything written about Shakespeare would be very large...

That doesn't seem to have stopped you before...

No, but I'm getting a little bit older and there's so much written about Shakespeare, and even more about him than about Dickens. There are whole libraries in the Shakespearean world, like the Folger Library in the United States.

Do you really feel that you have to read everything that's been written, all the secondary sources, the way you proceeded, I believe, to write your Dickens*?*

I did, yes. Until recently. You always feel otherwise you might miss something, so you have to sort of plough through it.

Could we move on to question about your own work and more specifically to a question about what Harold Bloom describes as the anxiety of influence, which seems to be a central theme in your own work. I am thinking more particularly of English Music*, and of the feeling that the past is the present, a typical Eliotian theme. Would you say that there is no room left whatsoever for originality?*

No, I wouldn't. I would take issue with the description of anxiety, because I don't think it causes anxiety. It causes great pleasure. One is overjoyed to be able to revive or use the past... Because, as you know, for many hundreds of years the nature of written literature was on the basis of re-writing the works of the past. So, I find it actually rather an exhilarating feeling to do so. I think certain writers come from a different culture and a different context, where it might cause anxiety, but it certainly doesn't for me.

And, I think in your biography of Eliot, you talk of the constant adjustment of the experience of the past to meet the changing moods of the present. Would you say that it's a possible definition of writing at large?

Well, for me it would be. But, you see, I've been rather a special case. I don't think contemporary English writers would necessarily agree, but for me, the most important aspect of, at least, what I try and do, is this attempt to understand the present in terms of the past rather than recreate the past as such. Although, of course that's part of the effort...

That makes me think of what your friend A. N. Wilson said. "Peter is not a romantic artist drawing on his own experience"...

Not at all.

Everybody would agree on that, but would you say that integrating fiction from the past is perhaps a definite, secure way of moving away from possible intrusions of emotion?

I think that's possibly the case. It's certainly true that I am happier working in, what you might call, a more objective world. But presumably that's because I have no particular interest in my own experience as such. I feel no need to fictionalise my life, or what has happened in the past, or my friends or my family. But having said that, I think it might well be the case that in surreptitious and implicit ways, every book one writes is the projection of one's personality. But as I said to you, Dickens in fact only wrote about himself, I'm sure that in one way or another, I recreate all these people in terms of myself, which is a very selfish way of thinking, but you know what I mean… One describes oneself in one's world in those terms rather than in overtly realistic or autobiographical or subjective terms.

It says something crucial about the status of truth, the value of truth in writing. You seem to suggest that truth is fiction and fiction is truth.

Yes, exactly. I wrote a book called *Chatterton* which is more or less about that, about the idea that parody or pastiche or whatever you want to call it is actually truer than a sort of overt subjective affirmation of something. And I think that if you look at a lot of contemporary fiction, or even past fiction, you realise that those who dwell upon their own experiences and personality tend not necessarily to be the best writers, or the most interesting writers.

That brings us back to what you were saying about Dickens's use of masks.

Yes, quite. I don't understand why people don't see this more clearly. Because one's always being accused of historical reconstructions or period pieces or whatever. And of course, they're really not. It's just a different way of describing experience.

So you're saying, in other words, that a careful biographer, the way you are a careful biographer, might one day reconstruct your life from your fiction?

Yes, you reconstruct, and you reinterpret your own life in terms of other peoples' lives, I suppose, on one level and you interpret your own personality in terms of the people you're writing about.

But are you aware of leaving signs?

No. Well, occasionally, yes. I suppose that process is really in itself an explanation, a little self-investigation. But I wouldn't want to put it on too high

a level. It's just casual... There must be part of that, because, when I look back at my books... at the time I thought I was in perfect control of them all, and sort of doing it from my notes and stuff, and when I look back I think, Oh God... who wrote this book?

And this is true of both biographies and fiction?

Yes. When it's finished, it's gone. At the end of a book, one never knows exactly what is said or not said. It doesn't matter.

I have one last question about your Pantheon of English Literature. Why only one paragraph devoted to the Brontë sisters? [Laughter] I'm sure it's a question which you been asked over and over again?

I don't know. It's just the way it happened... I can't describe it to you. Well, of course, if I was a genius like Dickens, I would have done much more. In most of it, it is just instinct, you see. It's nothing one can actually describe or explain.

Maybe they don't fit in with the image of "the serpentine line" as perfectly as other writers.

Well, certainly the Brontës were so autodidatic and so freakish, although it is the wrong word. The writers I tended to write about in that book, as far as I recall, are writers who either had a very strong sense of the past or a very powerful presence in English Literature. And I think possibly, in explanation, I would give you that one. I think it's probably more or less correct, whether it's Malory or Dickens or Hogarth... They deliberately put themselves inside the tradition, they were very conscious of the tradition from which they came. English music, Purcell said, was simply a sort of sub-plot of music. And again, the writers I chose are actually rather alike, like Lewis Carroll, Charles Dickens, and I liked them enough to be able to try and recreate their worlds and their voices.

1. The Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse is a transposition of the blacking factory in which Dickens worked for about a year when he was a child.

2. In the same way, the King's Bench prison is a transposition of the Marshalsea where Dickens's father was imprisoned for debt.