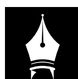

Around *Moon Palace*
A conversation with Paul Auster

by Marc CHÉNETIER[1]

Paul Auster, born in 1947 in Newark (N.Y.) has become over recent years one of the best-known voices of American literature in Europe while his reputation in the United States grows steadily. He studied at Columbia University, held a variety of jobs, among which house-sitting in Provence and working aboard an oil-tanker in the Gulf of Mexico. He is the translator of a large number of French poets and published many critical articles, most of which have been collected in The Art of Hunger. *His career as a poet (eight volumes came out between 1974 and 1993) marked him as one of the most promising voices of American poetry. He turned to fiction writing in the early eighties and has now published eight novels as well as several prose writings. His recent collaboration with Wayne Wang (*Smoke, Blue in the Face*) prolonged the film version of* The Music of Chance. *He lives in Brooklyn, with his wife, novelist Siri Hustvedt, and Sophie, their daughter.*

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This interview took place at Paul Auster's home, in Brooklyn, on July 18, 1996.

In a phone interview with the New York Times Book Review, *when* Moon Palace *came out, in 1989, you said it was your "first book, in a way, even though it was written later." Indeed, it wasn't your first book to be published. And going through your papers at the Public Library, I saw many versions of it, and some of them go back a long time. Could you trace the genesis of it?*

It's hard for me to put a date on it, but I think I started working on the book as early as around 1968, while I was still a student. The book was completely different at that time, of course. But always, *always* there were the three principal characters. That never changed. Their names changed, but the idea of a young man, and then the old man in the wheel chair, and then the fat man, was always there. But in different manifestations, different permutations. I'm not sure, this goes way, way back, but the original plan for the book was to write all in the third person.

Yes, told by Zimmer, at one stage, right?

Possibly, possibly. But this goes back so far—almost thirty years ago, some of it—that it's hard to remember all of the different versions. I do remember

writing out a long, crazy bit with the character who is Effing now, but I can't remember what he was called then...

From what I could see, the first versions had two fundamental parts. One had to do with the inherited books, and a part of the park episode. Then came Barber, who was Nathaniel then. But the part in-between was not there…

Right. But there was a long passage where the old man is out West having all kinds of crazy adventures, in Oklahoma, I think it was. It was all very sketchy, it was not–how shall I say?—formed. I was writing off the top of my head, trying to figure out where I wanted to go with it. The only thing I can remember with any certainty is that at a certain point it got so complicated, and the project was so much larger than anything I was able to handle at twenty or twenty-two years old, that I eventually just dropped it, put it off to the side. I never fully abandoned the idea of writing the book, but it was buried for a long time, and I can't even begin to guess how many years went by. Maybe fifteen years before I really picked it up again.

Was that in 1986?

Yes, I think it was '86 when I started writing it again in earnest. After I finished *In the Country of Last Things.*

We were together in Princeton, then, as I remember.

Yes. Was I just about to start?

You published In the Country of Last Things *in 1987, and you were working on* Moon Palace *then, I am sure, because one day we were walking back from the movies or something, and I had run into a problem in class because I had to tell a story which included a four-letter word, which I had to keep repeating for the story to make its point. But I couldn't say it: "political correctness" was setting in; and I said, "What would* you *say, Paul", and you said, "Well, why don't you say effing instead?" And that extremely strange smile came over your face. (laughter) So I know it must have been this...*

I know I must have been thinking about it, as I was certainly working on that novel, no question. But the conception of the book was much simpler by then. Instead of having three equal characters, there was one central character, and the story was told in the first person. Fogg tells everything, and what you know about the other two main characters, you learn through him. *He* is the narrator of the whole thing, for better or for worse. That was how I felt most happy and comfortable writing the book.

Among the early versions I saw, one is called "Columbus's Egg," and before that, there are two "Luna" versions. And at some stage, when it adopts the third-person stance, the narrator appears to be Zimmer, because he says at one point, in essence, "I'm only the scribe of that story; if it doesn't make any sense, it's not my fault, but I roomed with the guy for a year."

I don't even remember this. What I do remember is a long passage that was probably from the late 60s. Written out in single-space type. The action took place in Paris. Did you see that?

Not yet…

I remember an elaborate piece of business from that passage. The narrator, who is an earlier incarnation of Fogg, gets a job working for an old American. Since he has a lot of trouble waking up in the morning, he goes out and buys several different alarm clocks, which he uses to devise an elaborate system for waking himself up. I remember writing all that, but it was a different itinerary, somehow, the shape was altogether different.

The names underwent extraordinary evolutions. Fogg's originally was a diminutive of "Foganowitz". His original first name was "Lemuel", from Gulliver's Travels*; the idea of travel is already there, but for Foganowitz. And then you move on from Fogg to Phileas Fogg. At one point, he's called Peter, as in Peter Stillman, I suppose, somewhere else. And then, there's a version where the first person narrator is Quinn.*

Quinn popped up *all* the time. I started using that name as an undergraduate, and for a long time he was the hero of this book. I was so attached to the name, in fact, that at a certain point—I think it was the year I was a graduate student—, I wrote a number of book reviews under the name of Quinn for a small, give-away student newspaper that was being published around that time. I think it was called *The University Review*. There are no traces of it. No one can find a copy.

At Columbia?

No, but around there in the neighborhood. I can't remember who was responsible for it. Anyway, I signed all the articles: Paul Quinn. I don't know why, but it amused me to do it. Quinn, of course, eventually resurfaced in *The City of Glass*, years later. The names went through many changes. You don't happen to know the dates on the manuscripts, do you?

No, the dates are not indicated, except in the last stages. But there was another significant change. In the first versions, the mother of the protagonist is named Effie. Then she becomes Emily. And then Effing intervenes.

Well, you see how it all swirls around? You touch something, and bounce off another thing, and then a new constellation forms, then it finally settles, and then you feel it's right. It just takes a long time.

Another interesting thing in the development of the manuscript is that the central part is not in the same position at all. The original tale, the one on which you bank, ends up being the unpublished novel by Solomon Barber. This is supposed to be the core of the book in its incipient stage. It then is chucked into a corner and made into this bad novel by Solomon Barber. You also have a character that is absolutely essential—notes in your papers underline that "Jack Mooney" is "crucial". While he is only a marginal note in the final version.

Oh yes. There was a whole other part to the story. It all comes back to me now. The character of Kitty, you see, was originally somebody else.

Clio.

She was Clio, and she was an American Indian. And Jack Mooney was her father, and he was a crazy character. A kind of carnival character who, among other things, had some kind of underground sex act. He was a contortionist.

There's a touch of Mr. Vertigo *there, already.*

Yes. He was a very mean guy. And the Fogg character somehow falls in with them, and lives in their house, and falls for the girl. But all this evolved from one thing into another. But it was very sketchy, and not a lot of it was written.

No. But the funny thing is that what used to be the heart of your story ends up…

…pushed to the front and then shunted aside…

That's right, shunted aside as Kepler's Blood*, Sol's unpublished novel. While throughout many versions, it's the core of your story. And* Moon Palace *doesn't appear before very late.*

No. I re-thought the whole project.

The first child that Nathaniel, in the early version, fathers in the tribe—the fourth child, rather—is called "Moon Eyes". It disappeared afterwards. But in one

version, the girl, Kitty, who by then is either Mona or Clio or Vera, is Vera Moon. You seem to play around with all these things, to explore possibilities.

Yes, it's very organic, isn't it? It just kept changing. And then there was that *long* interruption. Because I just wasn't capable of doing it. And I think the reason why I couldn't write prose as a young person was that I somehow imagined that everything had to be worked out in advance. That I had to be consciously aware of, not just of every image in the book and every character, every twist of the plot, but of the spiritual, literary and religious ramifications of every phrase. If you work that way, you're putting so much pressure on yourself in preparing the book, that by the time you sit down to write it, there's nothing left. It's the problem of studying too many books in school.

In fact, in one note I found, which is obviously not a sentence from the novel, but belongs to the stage when you are going through the chronology and details, the arborescences of the whole thing, you write: "Reading back through all this, I see it doesn't make any sense". [Laughter] The extraordinary detail of the chronology moves me to ask you a question about the structure of the book. The manuscripts contain innumerable outlines, lists of parts, descriptions of the way things should hang together—reworkings of the organization. Could you comment on this? In particular, you said at one stage, "it has to have three, five, or seven parts".

I said that to you?

No, but you wrote it down at one stage. And in fact, Moon Palace *has seven chapters.*

I have never written a book with an even number of chapters, and the reason is that you need an odd number to have a center. This is very important. And I've never heard anyone talk about it, ever, except Joan Miro, the painter, who said that every series of graphic works he ever did, etchings or lithographs, came in an odd number, because, he said, an odd number gives you a center. I thought: "Good for you! I shake your hand through the grave, because I agree completely."

This is all the more important as, for some reason, some people insist on the "decentered" nature of your books. I always felt, on the contrary, they had a very strong sense of center.

It's a structural problem. It has to do with art in general. You want to feel, no matter how crazy the work is, no matter how eccentric it might be, that finally there is a shape to it, somewhere, buried under all the nuttiness on the surface. And if you're an attentive reader, or listener to a piece of music, or an observer

of a painting or a series of paintings, you're going to feel that shape, even though you can't articulate it or fully understand it. That shape is what grounds you, somehow, and makes the experience infinitely more satisfying and important to you. I can't defend this position. I don't know why I feel this way, but I do. In the end, it's fundamental to me.

I suggested earlier—and I don't think it's a joke—that one could describe you as being "The Wizard of Odds", "odds" combining various connotations: chance, evens and odds, balance...

That's true, it *is* important. It's a very good sentence…

Because in effect, it seems that the question of balance and equilibrium, with you, is constantly sustained and off-set by an inistence on odds and evens. For example, you never say, "it lasted for two hours", or, "it was 200 yards away", but always "two or three". Two or three hours, two or three hundred yards. An hour or an hour and a half.

Yes, always approximate, it's true.

You do that on purpose?

I do it all the time. I've noticed this. In fact, it might even be what you would call a tic. And I've been trying to control it a little bit. It has to do, nevertheless, with the vagaries of memory and the vagaries of perception. Because the truth is, you never know exactly how long it is. You don't walk around the world with a tape measure, and say, "Well, it was 172 feet from where I was standing". You know, it was somewhere between 100 and 200 feet away. You don't really know the exact distance. I try to represent as best I can what the actual perception or the actual memory feels like.

In one of the earliest typescripts, which you revised by hand, there is a sentence that's crossed out, and it says: "The likeliest guess is three". This sentence is then replaced by "Two or three days, I would think".

Yes. That's quite right.

This also happens to be where you chuck in the remark that remains, shortened, in the final version: "There are three wishes in every fairy tale. The Divine Comedy *is divided into three books, Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the whale. » This is accompanied, in the final text, by "three is a literary number".*

Yes, right, exactly. Yes, I remember exactly.

So there seems to be a desire for imbalance, in one way, while you keep harping on the necessity to achieve balance, an equilibrium between things. For example, the idea of getting even, of being on an even plane, of finding a balance, whether it's between inner and outer, or between two and three, or between chance and necessity. All these things seem to be working together...

But you see, the balance between two people, for example, is important. It really is the question of the "I and Thou"[2]; you have to be in equal relation to each other. I think it's in *Moon Palace*, but all of a sudden I can't remember whom it's referring to—Uncle Victor, maybe? Anyway it's a passage in which the narrator describes having a conversation with him, the other person, whoever it is, in terms of a baseball catch. Is this in the book?

Yes, it is. A commentary on a conversation between Fogg and Kitty.

Well, somehow, that's an important image to me. If you want to think about balance, consider how people who care about each other are constantly rectifying each other's mistakes, to keep something going, as we are doing right now. You know, when you have a baseball catch, you throw the ball back and forth, that's all you do. But sometimes, you make a bad throw, and if the other guy is good, he will catch it, so that the thing can continue. In a conversation, making an inappropriate remark can stop everything. But someone who's very deft, especially someone who cares about you, will catch the sentence in such a way as to make it O.K., to make it go on again. That, I think, is very similar to what we're saying about this other case...

Throughout the book, this imbalance is constantly rectified, to ensure some kind of communication.

You're right! I never thought of it in these terms, but, speaking of numbers, Uncle Victor has his little discourse on the number nine...

Which also comes back throughout the book. It of course starts out with the constellations, not in a symbolic or heavy-handed way, but as a mere sign, really, that travels throughout...

Yes, the planets, the innings… Well, Uncle Victor has a peculiar way of looking at the world. It's not true or false, it's just his particular method of perceiving things, and it certainly influences Fogg, who shares some of these traits later on. It is part of the way Uncle Victor talks. He's always finding euphemisms, or more florid expressions, instead of saying simple things. So he'll say "The Chewing Gum King" instead of saying "Wrigley" , the name of the owner of the Chicago Cubs.

So, odd number of chapters, three main characters, the young man, the infirm and the fat man. Three. Why two embedded stories within the principal one? Did you feel it was a way of putting it all in?

Effing's story and Barber's story, you mean?

Right…

This was a way to deal with the fact that all three are equally important, you might say. All three of these characters. I eventually settled upon Fogg as the central intelligence of the novel, so he is the medium through which we get the other stories. They are not peripheral at all, they're important, but they come in odd ways.

Odd again, then?

Odd! [Laughter]

Was that the reason why you kept the "bad" half-baked novel? You didn't want to make it so much better that it could have been published, for example?

No, no, no. It was, in a way, I suppose, a little tip of my imaginary hat to my old young self. After all, Barber is a young man when he writes this book. He writes it with great earnestness, but it's very bad. So I think I was saying to myself, "Well, what you started, years ago, when you tried to write this book, was also very bad, and we must acknowledge this and keep it in as part of the book"; but it is also, somehow, a skewered version of the novel in miniature. So... But I don't know why. Again, it just feels right when you do it.

But why should all the earlier versions be centered on a murder, while there is no such thing in the book itself, the closest thing to a murder being when Solomon falls into the grave?

That's just an accident.

You know it has been read, sometimes, as an outright killing...

Oh, really?

Yes, some see the gesture that makes him fall into the grave as rather aggressive.

Well, it is aggressive, but it's just out of anguish... And he's not intending to hurt him at all.

That's my feeling. So the murder which was crucial in the beginning is completely eradicated.

It remains in *Kepler's Blood*. There is the murder there, right? So that's the vestige; in the vestigial novel, the vestige remained.

Kepler's Blood *sprang from* Luna. *Is that another sign of the transition from the original versions to* Moon Palace*?*

Yes, but I never liked that title, *Luna*.

Is Kepler's Blood*, then, another trace of Thomas Harriot in the book, considering the Kepler/Harriot connection?*

Kepler certainly is associated with the moon, as far as I'm concerned. And, yes, there definitely is that connection. Weren't they in correspondence at some stage?

Yes they were[3]*. How important to you, at the time of writing, was the presence of what we might call this American prehistorical material?*

It was very important for me, and I had to do everything I could to repress it. I didn't want to overwhelm the book with this kind of material. So, in a certain sense, it's there now as a vestige, also. Barber *is* an historian, he's written about these subjects, and they are mentioned, but not in any great detail. It also serves as a kind of echo of many other things going on in the book.

Among the books written by Barber, one is on Berkeley and the Indians. One of your manuscripts includes a note in the form of a question: "Why did Quinn feel that he was perched on a stone wall in the middle of a forest? Did anyone hear the crash that shook the forest from end to end, and if not, did such a crash really take place?" That seems to imply Berkeley's ideas count as much here as the Indians.

Yes, of course. There's Humpty-Dumpty, and I was also reading a lot of Berkeley then…

The epigraph for one version of Moon Palace was a quote from Lewis Carroll.

Really? I can't remember.

The dialogue between Alice and Humpty on language as power.

Oh yes; it's quoted in *City of Glass* now. Stillman quotes it to Quinn.

Anyway, Kepler—as well as Tesla and his Long Island "Tower of Babel"—occupied a much larger space at one stage.

This must have been during the second stage of my working on it, though. In 1968, I didn't even know who Tesla was… I discovered him later. You see, Tesla is such a fascinating character, I got so absorbed in reading about him that at a certain point he threatened to throw the book out of whack. When I sat down to write the final version, I put away all the books I had about Tesla and made an agreement with myself: anything I could remember without looking up, would be free to use. But I wouldn't be allowed to go back to any book to find a sentence, an idea or a passage for the novel. That would have ben cheating, somehow, the wrong way to write the book.

You made abundant notes on Harriot too, that end up in the book. His work on the Algonquin language eventually provided you with the Indian words you needed and the five that are in Moon Palace *were selected way back, belong to previous stages of development...*

Every book goes through a series of purgings. That's how you find the musculature of a story. You don't know what's really important until you put it all down. And then things that might once have seemed important become much less so. And I think it's better, in the end, to keep less rather than more. Because then there's some strength to what you have, it's not just part of some flood of information that comes washing over you. But I should also say that the original idea for *Moon Palace* was so big, so pregnant with material, that much of it was put into *City of Glass*, which was the first novel I wrote. I used quite a bit. A lot of the material about Columbus, for example, and the theory expounded by the Auster character about Don Quixote. Those things were originally part of an early version of *Moon Palace*.

This is clear from your manuscripts. Many traces remain, though.

I stole from myself... Years later... when I sat down to write this other novel, I used that.

That stage also included reflections on story, authorship, Columbus, Don Quijote, Humpty Dumpty… and Quinn's in there too, as we saw.

That's right. There were so many different forking paths that I got lost in the labyrinth and stopped. And then I began pulling threads back towards me, much later, when I was older. I was better able to handle it then....

Talking of Columbus, there seems to be an abundance of round shapes side by side in Moon Palace*, including an unlikely number of words that have two*

"O"'s in their center. The effect is comparable to that of Dr. Eckleburg's glasses in The Great Gatsby*, as if one were constantly looked at by the words themselves.*

In some cases it just happened and in other cases it was conscious. It's like the sign on the restaurant, the two eyes of God.

You don't trust words very much, do you?...

Probably not... and yet that's all I have, isn't it?...

Much of your poetry indicates that there are things, outer as well as inner, that one is tempted to "capture" with words, but that the minute the word actually stops on the thing, it hardens into a barrier between us and the thing, so that the challenge consists in coming up with words that would not be wall-building, but wall-destroying... So far so good?

O.K., yes...

One element in the linkage between your prose and your poetry therefore appears to be that you deliberately opted for a "writing of speed", which of course does not mean that you write quickly but that you will not allow words to root, to do much more than slide over what they designate.

Somewhere I once said, and I sometimes feel—not always—that for me the ideal book would be one in which the language was so transparent that the reader would forget that the medium of communication is words... You would somehow be able to travel through the words into what the words were saying... This is impossible, of course. But on top of that, if one is to achieve this transparency, so to speak, it doesn't mean that the sentences can't be rich and knotty at times, and have a lot of sonorous texture to them... that's not what I mean. But I think that what you have to try to achieve, and this is what I *strive* for all the time, and what takes *all* the time, is to listen to the language very carefully, to hear it, to create a rhythm by which the reader is actually experiencing the language on a level below the intelligence, in the body; I think that the relationship of the body to the language in a book can provoke something extraordinary. I've often felt that people who like my books very much feel this rhythm, and people who don't like them at all—and there are many who think they're garbage—are not able to hear the language, or that this kind of experience with language is not interesting to them.

Musicality, then. "I liked the sound of those sentences, even if they were false" it says, p. 3 of your book, and elsewhere Fogg starts "to sing a crazy tuneless

kind of singing". The abundant rewriting of each clause and sentence in your manuscripts feels like the building of some kind of momentum…

That's right. It's like raking, raking all the time. You take the pile of leaves and smooth them out, and then start raking again. You do that with the sentence, with the words, but also with paragraphs and pages and chapters, at times with whole books... Purifying it, strengthening it. Every detail counts.

For example the first sentence of the book, the first paragraph actually, is reworked innumerable times, and what is now the opening sentence doesn't appear until way later...

I remember very distinctly when that first paragraph came to me. I was about to have lunch with an old childhood friend I hadn't seen for many years. In Jack's Deli, of all places, where Auggie Wren tells the Christmas story, and walking over to that restaurant—this must have been in late '85 or early '86—it came to me. Fortunately, my friend was a little late, and I was able to sit down and write out the first paragraph on a napkin before he came in. And then I had it. Just like that. After trying to find it for fifteen or twenty years.

For a long time, the first sentence remains: "There was a time in my life when I kept myself open to all the accidents of the universe", followed by a long development on the state of things in the '60s: Chappaquiddick, world events that only reappear around page 62 in the novel. So, in the new version, the emphasis seems to be placed more on signs than events...

Right. I remember. But I used just *one* event, the moon landing, to stand in for *everything*. Yes, I'm still attached to that opening paragraph... It's much better than the other ones.

Among all your books, is Moon Palace*, in your mind, the one that's most about America?*

Not necessarily. More overtly perhaps, but not at its heart. *City of Glass* is also about America. And certainly *Leviathan* and *Mr. Vertigo* are also about America. *The Music of Chance* may be less so on the surface, but that story, too, could only happen in America.

When it comes to chance, I take it to be related to your esthetics inasmuch as it is part and parcel of realism, for you.

Absolutely. That's it… and nothing more needs to be said about it really, because it keeps coming up in what is said about me and it's beginning to drive me a little crazy. I don't know what people think the world looks like. I

don't know what planet they're living on! If they think life moves on in an orderly, rational way...

On the other hand, the only counter force available, and necessary to make aleatory things stick together, is fictional power. We all tell our stories of the world as we think it is, giving the particular shape we choose to disconnectedness...

Definitely, definitely... I mean, it's what you can *see* that makes it interesting. Not everyone sees the same things. I suppose that's why we need artists. You know: to help us see things that we would pass over. This isn't to say that we don't have rational thoughts or that we don't have a will, or that we don't make an effort to organize our lives in as rational and satisfying a way as we can. I would never argue that. But we are not the masters of our own destinies. And the very fact that we are mortal is, how shall I put it?, a big impediment to making a world that we feel completely satisfied with. And, you know, death can come at any moment, for any reason.

Was it Jacques Dupin or Bonnefoy or Giacometti who said that the function of the artist is to tame the savagery of the world?

I don't know which one, but it's an interesting comment. But as for chance, even though I like the title of *The Music of Chance* very much, I'm also sorry that I used the word "chance" in the title—simply because people have jumped on it so much, to the point that I've begun to feel misrepresented.

Does that mean that when I say the "Wizard of Odds" I shouldn't include chance in "odds"?

Well, of course, chance has to do with the odds. If you're a betting man, you're very concerned with the odds. What do you say in French?

"La chance", "les chances", "les probabilités", depending on context... A poker game is the next thing we must organize…

There's no poker in *Moon Palace* though...

Since you mention French, your image as you know, particularly in France, is largely articulated around a certain number of recurring themes (chance, fathers and sons, etc), a situation which you seem to resent. What if I

proposed to you that the father-son relation, much like chance in fact, is not so much a psychological as a structural proposition?

I think there's truth to what you 're saying. But it's very difficult for me to understand why I do what I do. It's impossible for me to get a grip on it.

Which, I suppose, is "why you write"[4]...

Yes, probably. There's no question that certain—what?...—forces or obsessions, or preoccupations, come up with a certain frequency in my work. It's not that every time I sit down to write I'm doing the same thing, but there is what you might call a set of particularly important preoccupations that I seem to come back to fairly often. Why this should be so probably has everything to do with psychology. Everything to do with what happened to me as a child, pains, wounds and traumas of all kinds. But, so what? That doesn't seem to me as important as how these things are manifested in the work, as what I actually *do* with it. So I think you're probably right.

Dora Shamsky, in Moon Palace*, is not called that for a long time, she bears other names before she becomes Dora. In* Luna*, she is "Dora Sparks, née Witkowski". Considering the Freudian overtones of her first name did you change her last to signify Freud was a "sham"?*

[Laughter] No, but I have to say that there was a baseball player on the Mets named Art Shamsky, and I always liked this name very much. There was some business in *Moon Palace* about the 1969 Mets and Art Shamsky happened to be on that team. So, his name inevitably found its way into the book.

You have a whole list of players in one of your notebooks...

Do I?

Twenty five names or so, but only a few surface in the novel.

Well, Memo Luna for example, was a real player, and I got carried away with some of the funny names. I was looking through the baseball encyclopedia, and jotting down the ones that I was most attracted to. Virgil Trucks was one I just... [Laughter] Only in baseball do they have names like that... There's a guy on the Mets now named Butch Husky! Come on! How is this possible? There was another player, I used to love his name: Charlie Spikes; he was never very good but his name… It's fantastic, fantastic! There used to be, and still are, people who play games making up imaginary teams with funny names for the players. It's like a little minor sport in America. My favorite one is the "Body Parts Team". In it was a pitcher named Rollie Fingers, and another pitcher

named Bill Hands and Barry Foot, the catcher, and, you know, on and on. On the « Money Team » there was Don Money and Bobby Bonds, and Dave Cash. It goes on and on... [Laughter]

Some names just pass through the manuscript and don't reappear, some others stick. So, considering the importance you attribute to "what's in a name", did you see any particular potentialities in, say, the names of philosophers that pop up—Hume, Descartes, Bacon, Pascal...?

I don't think too much should be made of it. How shall I put it? These are real names. I mean, it's perfectly logical that the French would have named a ship "S.S. Descartes". It's not at all improbable; and Hume is a name, I've known people with the name Hume.

But Rita Hume is also a skeptic?

I wouldn't go so far as to say that. It juggles back and forth, you see. It's a delicate line that I'm treading, I suppose. On the one hand, we shouldn't think too much about the real names. On the other hand, if you want to think about them, then what it does is point to the artificiality of the book. It points to the fact that this is the work of someone's imagination; that it's not a piece of journalism in the newspaper; that it is possible to use your mind to organize reality in a certain way that will lead you into a certain way of thinking about things. In *Ghosts*, I used the names of colors. This is probably the most significant use of names to talk about in any of my books—Blue and Black and Green and White, and all the rest. The inspiration for this, again, was a sports thing. One morning I was reading the Sports page in the *[New York] Times* about the NFL, the National Football League. They had the statistical leaders in there... You know what football's like, right? And you know about receiving a pass, catching, a reception. So I looked at the receiving leaders, and their names were: Gray, Brown, White, Green and Black. Five guys. Real people who were playing in the NFL. I thought, "Well, isn't *that* amusing... I like this very much." And so, I started toying with this idea in a play I wrote back in '76—one of the plays that I haven't published yet but am going to publish now.[5] In another play I wrote around that time, a man and a woman and talking about language. They get onto a discussion about the word « blue ». And one of them says, "Well, you know, that's my favorite word. 'Blue, blue.'" And they start speaking the word.

For some, saying "blue, blue", over and over again, was a way to reach transcendance. Apparently it was the favorite syllable of Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson, their own sort of "Om".[6]

Interesting. I didn't know that. In any case, the point was, in this little passage in the play, that "blue" is a word that doesn't *mean* anything. In other words, you can't define it. The only possible way you could define the word "blue" is to call it a color. You could give the physical properties on the spectrum and the waves that it emits and so on, but you can't *see* that. So, in other words, unless you've had the experience of perceiving "blue", when someone uses the word "blue", you have no idea what that person is saying, right? That's obvious. I think what I was trying to do by giving characters the names of colors was not only to turn them into abstractions but to underscore the fact that you can't know a person until you've had the experience of that person—in the same way you can't know what a color is until you've had the experience of that color.

Incidentally, in the Brooklyn Museum, ten minutes away from here, on the fifth floor devoted to Contemporary Art, there is an extraordinary piece of light sculpture which would support your view. I don't remember the artist's name.

Is it Kossuth, maybe?

It may well be[7]*. It's a paragraph in blue neon that attempts a definition of the color blue, and fails to do so while being blue. But to go on with names, Effing's for example seems to be one that proclaims artificiality, preventing merely psychological readings.*

But Effing is a real name. There are people with that name[8]. It's not so uncommon. Originally, in the *Music of Chance*, Nashe's name was Coffin, which is an old New England name. But I thought it was a little too heavy in the end. In Italian, by the way, Pozzi means "a well" or "a hole in the ground". The coffin fits into the hole. I abandoned the idea however.

You bank on your reader's making these associations but you often include the interpretations yourself?

I do? Like what?

Like, say, a coincidence between two things made explicit after it has been merely suggested, or the explicitation of Fogg's names. At the same time your conception of story-telling also abides by more traditional rules, which begs

the question: "Where do you place yourself in contemporary aesthetics?"—on the side of proclaimed artificiality or on that of novelistic make-believe?

I don't feel I belong to either one. Over the years, I had several great revelations. The first revelation came after all my struggles as a young person, not managing to achieve the books I wanted to write, even though I was, as you know, bursting with ideas. I had a thousand ideas and I didn't have a way of organizing them. And I understood at a certain point that the making of art is not about the making of art. This was an important step in my growing up, not only as a writer, but as a man. That the desire to make art, the desire to do it, is a fundamental *human* desire and that the results are less important than the process of doing it, the propulsion into it. What you might call the *necessity* to do it. There's no book or poem worth reading that wasn't necessary to the writer who wrote it. The last thing to worry about is style. The style will take care of itself. You don't have to strive to create a willed, artificial style. After so much experience—I mean this only comes after years of doing it—, it's better to write in one's own way, to let it come naturally. Your style is like your thumbprint, you can't really get away from it. There are certain ways of writing for different people that come naturally to them. Proust wrote the way he did, Céline wrote the way he did. They are both great stylists, but the two styles have nothing in common. If you're Proust, you can't sit down and say I want to write like Céline, and vice versa. It would be a useless effort. That was, I think, the first revelation. And out of that revelation came the *Invention of Solitude*. It was with the experience of writing that book that I understood that I just didn't give a shit anymore. I had to say these things, and I was going to do it in the best way I could. And let everything else fall where it may. A kind of active indifference to the fate of the thing as an artifact, as a book, a work of art. The second revelation, I think, came as a result of thinking very carefully about what I like when I read books, what attracts me to books, what I care about in literature. Story-telling is crucial, and I believe that no matter how painful a book can be to read, no matter what dark territory it might take you into, it has to give pleasure; if it doesn't give pleasure, then you just don't want to read it. There are a lot of very daunting modern and postmodern texts that I admire a great deal. But I don't get any joy out of reading them. It's a big effort for me to sit down and slog my way through them. And I've come to the age where I don't care any more, I don't feel obligated to read these books, I don't feel that my life hinges on knowing what...—I can't even think of a name now—but somebody's novel, means. I don't care. I have to like it, I have to want to read it and it has to give me something. Therefore I realized that I owed it to myself to write the kind of books I like. So that's what I try to do. I'm my own reader, after all, before anybody else. And in a way, showing off, showing how smart you are, how much you know, how much you can manipulate language and juggle all kinds of things, is really not important to me anymore. When I was young, I thought that was what writing largely was.

It was the crushing presence of James Joyce; to me, as a youngster, he was the one that you had to emulate. And I think, in the end, that he went down the wrong road. *Finnegans Wake* took him seventeen years to write. One of the greatest literary minds we've ever had spent *seventeen* years writing a book that nobody reads, that nobody gets any pleasure out of. I find that sad. At a certain point, you realize that you don't want to do that. But I used to think that you had to start where *Finnegans Wake* left off, to go even further, to continue the progress. But there is no progress.

Works like Finnegans Wake*, or Duchamp's, stop things in their tracks. You can't go any further anyway.*

Definitely; it's a wall, and then you have to go back, return to something simpler. I think that's why Beckett was such a revelation to me. He, more than anybody else, was under Joyce's thumb. He worshipped Joyce all through his youth; and then he finally grew up and realized what his path was. He was forty by the time he really found it. Then he started all over again. Tiny, simple little stories, tiny and simple as could be. And I found that beautiful, that someone should have had the courage, after the education he'd had, the training, the background, the experience, to go all the way back and to become a simpleton again. Right? All these things have been important moments of discovery for me. They've made me who I am.

Talking of simplicity, Paul, one thing that strikes me is the extreme rarity of metaphors in your work.

Yes...

There is practically none...

Yes, I know, I know...

Would you comment on this?

Well, even in my poetry, which was written in a metaphorical realm, so to speak, there are no metaphors. I don't know how often I use similes in poetry, but I would say that you can probably count them on the fingers of one hand.

More similes than metaphors, certainly, but...

But even "like" and "as"... very rarely, very rarely; and I think that I was very conscious when I was writing poetry of the Jewish injunction not to use images. And there were times when I tried very consciously not to use images in poetry.

For ideological reasons or because it struck you as wiser?

So as not to hide behind the games and artifices of literature, to try to get down more deeply to something else. And I think when you get way down, what you find is narrative; this is the interesting thing: the words, the shapes of thoughts, the action, mental, emotional, spiritual, whatever, start to take the shape of a story. I can't prove this, but once you get into that realm, that seems to be what happens. It's very interesting... Did you ever see the movie "Brazil"...?

No, I haven't seen it.

This is a very interesting case. About narrative and metaphor and what happens when you tell a story. I thought it was an excellent film and I liked it very much. It takes place in a kind of imaginary post-World War II England. But everything is different. Sort of an Orwellian world. Vaguely totalitarian, quite scary, bureaucracies everywhere, weird things taking place. The film tells the story of a functionary who is the victim of a clerical error. A fly gets caught in some machine and the wrong name comes up, his name. He is pursued and eventually killed by the state. The narrative reality of this film is brilliant. The scenes, the set design, the art direction, everything is brilliant, and you're completely absorbed in it. Already we're one step removed from ordinary reality, but you accept it. In the course of the film, however, there are one or two moments when the main character, played by Jonathan Pryce, that English actor, dreams; these dreams are highly metaphorical, symbolic dreams. In one, I remember, he's flying through the air with enormous, metallic wings attached to his body. I thought these dreams were awful. They took the story one step too far, shattering the integrity of the world the director had gone to such pains to make us believe in. By going to another metaphorical level, the illusion was destroyed. It's what I would call too much of a good thing: you take a situation, and you find that bedrock, metaphorical level and then a story can develop; but if you take it farther, then it's not interesting anymore. It becomes contrived. I'm not expressing myself very well, but I suppose what I mean to say is that every work or art has its limits; they can be different limits, depending on what you are trying to do. But you have to know where the thing stops. You have to know where the wall is, otherwise you get into a fluid, open, disconcerting situation that doesn't produce the satisfaction I was talking about before. The pleasure that reading can give you, that we all felt as children. That's why we do what we do now, because we loved books so much when we were young. Siri said something amazing, years ago, when we were first living together. She had never read Céline, a writer I like very much, especially his first two books, and I got her to read *Death on the Installment Plan*. She read it with tremendous avidity, just ate the thing up. And when the

book was over, she shut the book and said: "This is better than life!" [Laughter] That's what a great book makes you feel. That it's better than life.

What's the place of Moon Palace in you mind, heart, whatever? In your career?

I would say it's a central book. I think of it as a source. First of all, it's the longest novel I've ever written. To tell you the truth, most of the other novels I'* written were first imagined as short stories or novellas. They just got longer and longer as I was working on them. I never intended them to be two hundred or three hundred pages. Always fifty pages. But then something always seems to happen, and there's more to tell and it keeps going on. But a book like *The Music of Chance*, for example, is very different from *Moon Palace*. It's much smaller...

Sketchier?…

I wouldn't call it that...

I mean, stylized, in the sense that it has less, say, cultural material for example, that it's closer to the bone.

Yes, it's more concerned with the action, the actions of the characters; hardly "sketchy", though. In fact it goes into great detail, great psychological detail and a lot of physical detail too. But it's all circumscribed. It's small, it's a very tiny universe, and even *Mr. Vertigo*, which is a large book, in many ways, I thought would be twenty or thirty pages when I started. But Thomas Mann thought *The Magic Mountain* was going to be fifty pages too!

Wrong again!

Right!

What about the various painters in Moon Palace*? Blakelock, Cole, Church, Moran, Ryder…*

Is Ryder mentioned in the book? Maybe just in passing.

Yes, in passing... But all are Luminists, or people that have to do with light, and that brings me to the exploitation you do of light in the text in connection with visions... the eyes and so forth.

It was interesting, I got a letter just recently, from a French professor, who's about to teach *Moon Palace* for this same program... A woman, I think from Paris, but maybe not from Paris, maybe another city, I can't remember.

Anyway, she said: I'm gearing up to teach the book and there's just one little question I want to ask you—about Chandler, the owner of the bookstore… This person was actually based on a real character named Salter, and I definitely wanted an "er" word.

You had him as Tillman at one stage, and Pepper at another, and Miller...

Yes Pepper—Salter, you see became Pepper, that was how it came about. There was a famous bookstore near Columbia called Salter's, up there on Broadway, where I myself sold many books, trying to roust up a little cash for myself. Anyway, she thought it had something to do with Raymond Chandler... but not at all, not at all... Chandler, of course, as you know, is a "candle-maker", which makes it just one more buried reference to all the light imagery in the book. That's all. So I wrote to her. Generally, I do *not* answer such things, but I thought, this time I'm going to do it, otherwise she's going to get up there and say the wrong thing, and I wanted to tell her what I was thinking anyway... But, you see, it's not as though she can't choose to believe that, after interpretation. The name Chandler is there, after all, Raymond Chandler was a writer, a writer I like very much, by the way, so... But I don't think that reading leads you anywhere. It's a dead-end. It wouldn't make any sense. You may want to assume that the names *mean* something, but you could easily ignore that whole question, and still get a great deal of fun out of the book...

But light, on the other hand, is a real theme.

It's a real theme. It comes up all the time: natural light, artificial light, moonlight, sunlight…

Vision…

Vision, yes... the eyes. We have a blind man, after all, we have the blackout, which is an event that has its importance...

It loomed large in the first version, that New York '65 blackout.

I was a freshman in college at that time. It was an amazing event. One of the most extraordinary things I've ever lived through. It took place in October '65, I think, just a few weeks after classes started. All of a sudden, the whole city went black, and it was an extraordinary thing. A kind of jubilation in the streets. Everyone was happy. And, interestingly enough, nine months later, more children were born than was statistically probable. People went home and fucked! [Laughter] The blackout-babies...

But you have an innumerable list of people speaking with their eyes, or speaking and doing something with their eyes...

Really? I'm not even aware of that. But that's quite normal, I suppose. People communicate through their eyes, don't they?

That compensates your remarks on your dream of language as a sort of intransitive medium... Saying is always spewing out, as if matter, physical matter *was coming out.*

But words *are* physical things. I feel that. I feel that language is a physical substance... Do you remember the little piece I wrote, "White Spaces"?

Yes, of course, and feel it's probably the text by you which I love best... Everything, everything is there, everything in your poetry and in White Spaces *makes sense in terms of the way you write fiction, the "leanness" and the "swiftness" of your writing, your notion of the status of the text, that notion of "speed", etc.*

I hope you can say that in your book[9], because writing that little thing was the breakthrough for me; *that* was the movement into prose. And it was a revelation. You know the circumstances under which it was written, right? I talk about them in the interview with Larry [McCaffery] and Sinda [Gregory]. This was a period when I wasn't writing at all. I really had nothing but troubles on every front, inner and outer; and for more than a year, a year and a half, I didn't write much of anything. One day, my dear friend, David Reed, who is really an important person for me—David was the one, just in parentheses, who took me out West, the person I explored all these canyons with. He was the one who introduced me to Mr. and Mrs. Smith, who appear in *Moon Palace*. They were real people. I didn't make up anything about them. They were not fictionalized at all. She *was* the great-granddaughter of Kit Carson. Mr. Smith... I can tell you stories about him, too. Fogg's encounter with the draft board, by the way, was directly based on David's experiences. I used David's story. He starved himself to get out of the draft, back in 1968 or 1969. David, who's an excellent painter, was also the person who told me about Blakelock. I didn't know anything about Blakelock until David told me about him. So anyway, at the time, back in the late seventies, December 1978, to be precise, David had a girlfriend who happened to be a choreographer. She was quite good. She'd been in the Twyla Tharpe company and had branched off to form her own group. David called me up one day to invite me to an open rehearsal of her new piece—which was still a work in progress. The event took place in a high school gym, somewhere in Lower Manhattan. There were only about twenty or thirty people there. Actually, [Jacques] Dupin was in town, and we went together. And David's girlfriend, Nina, got up with her dancers;

there were about ten dancers in the company, and she stood there on the gym floor, a little off to the side... There was no music, no set, no costumes, nothing, just her, trying to explain what the dance was. She would say something, and then the dancers would dance and I found what they did very beautiful. The movements, the gestures. They just moved around the floor, with no music to support them or tell you what to think. Ten bodies moving in space. I thought it was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. And she, standing there, with all her earnestness and sincerity, tried to explain what they were doing. And her words were so inadequate, they missed the mark so completely about what these bodies were doing right in front of her, that I started trembling in a kind of ecstasy, an enormous surge of happiness, realizing how inadequate language was in the face of such a thing, in the face of the world. It was as if the dancers were the world, and she was language. That was what inspired the piece. I went home, and that very night I started writing *White Spaces*. That was the breakthrough for me. It got me writing again. I hadn't been able to write for a year and a half.

It falls right in step, if I may say, considering the context, with what you seemed to be searching for in your poetry...

I think you're right. When I finally finished it a few weeks later, I thought to myself: "Good. At last I've written something that doesn't disgust me". It felt like a new step, a step in the right direction. It was a Saturday night.[10] I worked till about two a.m. and then went to bed. At seven o'clock, Sunday morning, the phone rang. It was my uncle, and suddenly he was telling me that my father had died during the night. Very odd, very odd indeed. Eerie.

The Elizabethan background in your novel is rich: Greville, Francis Bacon, Elizabeth, Wyatt and all this. This is a mere backdrop for the late 16th century American situation?

Yes, but I've always been very interested in that period. As early as my undergraduate days at Columbia. Fulke Greville, for example, is a completely forgotten poet now, but he's a master, a genius of a sonneteer and actually, in this piece I'm working on now, I quote a line from him. It's always struck me as one of the most beautiful sentences in the English language, "I write for those on whom the black ox hath trod". Think about it. "I write for those on whom the black ox hath trod". It's *so* beautiful. What one syllable can do...

He was a friend of Harriot too.

Yes, and a great friend of Sydney's as well as the patron of Giordano Bruno. They were incredibly brilliant characters, those men. Geniuses. And of course it's all connected with America. It is.

Kitty, as we saw, had all sorts of names before. Does she end up being Kitty because of Kitty Hawk?

Yes, the Wright brothers...

There is a note somewhere in the manuscript to that effect, and it falls in line with the flight imagery…

Yes, there was a moment when I was toying with her having a job as a topless go-go dancer, who performed on the stage under the name of Kitty Hawk, but I abandoned that idea quite early on.

There is hardly a whole *thing in your text. Somebody's always "half-literate". It's "mid-American" life, it's a "part-time" job in a bookstore, it's a "half-world". It's the "first half-hour" of a film or "limiting myself to one meal a day". It's a group of "half-naked" men. It's "half-finished", it's a "halfwit's voice"... This is not really a tic, as it seems functional. Does it fall in with the "two or threes?"*

[Pause]. Probably. I'm thinking about this for the first time. Um... let's see: something like "halfwit" is an entire phrase... right?

Yes, but you opt for such things...

"Half-way into the film..."

Or when you see a house it's a "split-level house" and if it's a motel, it happens to be called Comb Ridge…

Well, that's a real place.

But such systematic choices produce a stylistic effect…

Yes, that's true. There must be something that resonates in that approach that is important to me. But I don't know how to account for it...

What if I relaunched the question as "Your writing is very often a writing of paradox"...

I would subscribe to that.

Examples could include "at each moment there is the possibility of what is not", or "it was impossible to exclude either alternative", etc., or even finds like "Shut up and talk, boy"…

Yeah, I'm glad you picked up on that... I always liked "Shut up and talk!" [Laughter]

These paradoxical statements seem to cohere, stylistically with the halving, the evens and the odds, and the balance and the imbalance, etc., including your interest in Philip Petit!, to draw some sort of psychological map.

I think you're right. I think you're right. I think you're definitely right.

In a distinct area, what is your general view of history?

I'm just a great reader of history. I'm fascinated by it, and I find myself compelled, again and again, to read and read and read more and more books about history. It's what I like reading most these days.

Because that makes a good story too?

Since I spend most of my waking life living in an imaginary world, living inside my books and the work I'm doing, I find myself less and less attracted to reading fiction. It becomes harder and harder to step into somebody else's imaginary world. Reading about the real world, about things that really happened, is so stimulating, so generative for me, that I keep doing it. History interests me, and for once, in *Moon Palace*, I finally made up a character who was a historian.

Do you see history as fiction at any stage?

Well, historiography is a very murky subject, I think we both know all the pitfalls, we don't have to go into that. But because history is such a delicate and difficult proposition, history keeps getting rewritten, and people keep going back to the same events and exploring them from different angles and coming up with new interpretations of what happened. *I* have been at events that are supposedly important, you know. I've been there, I've seen things happen, and never have I read an accurate account of what I have seen with my own eyes. Most of our contemporary history comes out of newspapers, people recording what happens; and they *always* get it wrong. It happens so consistently, that you learn that everything you read in the newspaper is wrong—even though the journalist is trying his best, is not purposely distorting the facts. So you have to read between the lines. I remember when Kennedy was shot. I was a junior in high school. He was somebody I liked very

much. A couple of my friends and I decided to go down to Washington for the funeral. We wanted to do that. And this was a very interesting thing to do: you know the common view of it today, that America was stunned, that everybody was grieving and there wasn't a dry eye in the nation? Well, what I found fascinating and a little disconcerting, was that standing on the street as the funeral procession was going by, a large number of the people there were only interested in getting good photographs. There were people climbing up into trees and yelling at each other about how to get the right angle. There was no sadness or bereavement that I could see. Just people out there in a kind of carnival atmosphere. It was very interesting.

As you were telling this story, you used an expression that keeps recurring in the text, which is "with my own eyes".

Well… "I saw it with my own eyes"... yes. It gives you a different perspective. Most of what we know comes from the eyes of other people. Most of what we know about history—and everything, for that matter. What's going on in the world today? *I* don't know. I'm not in Bosnia right now. I can only read what people tell me and watch TV and listen to what they're telling me, but I'm not really seeing it with my own eyes. But when you're actually there, wherever it may be, you're able to make your own judgment. You have possession of more facts than you would otherwise have. But even when I've been there, sometimes I don't understand what I'm seeing. The Columbia riots in '68 were another great example of how the press distorted what was going on. The details were so complex, there were so many factions, so many arguments, so many minute-by-minute decisions to be made. People looking from the outside had a broad view of what was going on, but no sense of the texture of things. Another example: 1989, Tienanmen Square, one of the horrible events of recent years. As it was happening, I followed it as closely as I could, in the newspapers. About a month ago, seven years after those events, they had something on PBS, the public TV station. It was a three-hour documentary about the students who participated in the Chinese democracy movement. And I realized, again, how complicated it was. How many fights were going on. How many differences of opinion. You look from a distance, things looked unified, everyone is together and yet they're not. Not to compare the two situations—what happened in China is much graver and more important than what happened at Columbia University, the consequences were not at all of the same magnitude—but the dynamics of the groups were the same. It's utterly fascinating. The closer you get to something, the more complex it becomes.

So that the way you put things together, the essential act of fiction, is crucial. Fogg is constantly told to "act as if he were a character in the novel of his own life"; that's supposed to be the David Copperfield connection. You have

to make sure you tell the story of your life before you can live it. Or to make it suit the story you have in your head.

Right. Though Fogg is not like David Copperfield, in that he's already lived the story. He's trying to tell it, he's trying to understand what he's been through. He doesn't really care whether he is the hero of his own life or not. Although in some sense, I suppose, he knows that he is.

In your mind, is he a lucid character?

A lucid character? Yes. Later. The man who writes the book is a lucid character of about forty. The younger self that he is describing is not at all a lucid character.

He's in the fog!

He *is* in the fog. He's a confused, complex but, I find, infinitely endearing young man [laughter]... so pathetically lost, and yet finally with such goodwill. He's looking for a place in the world. He doesn't know how to find it.

There are moments in the story when I felt you had simultaneously a desire to use a number of autobiographical details and a reluctance to do so. You think of doing it and then you sort of veer off...

How so? Give me an example.

Say, things like "My French was as good as his", or "The book was rejected by twenty-one publishers" or...

Right, right! [laughter]

You know, things of that sort. Or the similarities in age and dates, and even things such as "No matter how scrupulous and professional he was in treating them, there was always a personal motive behind his work, a secret conviction that he would still have dealings in the mysteries of his own life."

The fact that Fogg was my age, and that he went to the same school I went to...

Right.

Fogg is like an imaginary friend. A person I went to school with, but who never really existed. That's what he's like.

To me, an endearing aspect of the text is the parallel between the personal history of the character and the history of the country.

Yes.

A convergence, the same sense of loss...

Yes, he's caught up in the times, and even though he is very marginal to what is going on, he feels the zeitgeist pressing down on him. But it's strange that even though this book feels like an intimate autobiography, I would say this novel has less of my own life in it than any other book I've written.

Even vicariously, and in spite of sentences like "My own story stands in the rubble of those days and unless this fact is understood, none of it will make sense"?

This is not autobiography though, only the story of that generation which we both belong to... But doesn't everybody feel this? Every generation feels this. Everyone is marked by his time. But that was a particularly crazy time.

By the way, speaking of MS, it turns out that "emmes" in Yiddish or Hebrew means truth... You knew that?

No, thank you for telling me! That's good! That's great.

Do you intend to offer the reader a critical lime twig when you talk for example of a romance begun in "Valentine" or a wound received in "Needles"?

It's funny, you know, I never gave it a moment's thought. Needles, California, is the only town in that area. It's an important place in a small way, and I thought, well, he would be around Needles, California by now. So, it doesn't matter. But you can make the point if you really want to.

Not necessarily, but the readers constantly find themselves thrown into this sort of situation, lured on by details like this, and more often than not, you will eventually, a page later, two pages later...

... show my hand, yes.

Exactly. Which encourages me to say you take your reader for a partner more than for a victim of the "reality" you impose.

That's true, I do want the reader to be there with me. Whoever he or she may be.

Since you do often lead one on, let me come to a detail concerning the distribution of fifty-dollar bills in the street. Since "it was the only denomination that Effing would accept", one of the first things I did was check whose face appeared on the fifty-dollar bill, a detail I had forgotten; and it turns out it's Grant, a name that can be severally connected with dealing out money—grants or graft—particularly in a context where Effing advises Fog "not to to take anything for granted". You make that sort of temptation constant.

I see. But I'll tell you: this too, has an absolutely autobiographical source. The fifty-dollar bills, I mean. In fact, as I told you earlier, I've been writing this little book about money. I'm almost done, I have about two days to go; a 130-page autobiographical essay about money. *Hand to Mouth*—that's what I'm calling it. It's about my early days. "Hand to Mouth—A Chronicle of Early Failure": that's the full title. In the book, I talk about different experiences having to do with money. Lots of jobs, lots of people I met along the way, the stupidity with which I lived my life as a younger person, always broke, always in trouble, that freelance life of translating and hack work, of never knowing if you'll manage to pay the rent. Anyway, there's a passage in which I talk at great length about this experience. H.L. Humes, does the name ring any bells for you?

Yes, the guy who gave away his money in the streets?

He was a novelist. One of the founders of the *Paris Review*. And considered in the fifties as one of the most promising young American novelists. He wrote two novels... Harold Humes was his name. Doc Humes, he was later called. (Humes, Hume: You see: there you go.) One was called *Underground City*, an enormous book. And then another book with the wonderful title of *Men Die*. Anyway, in 1969, just as I was getting ready to graduate from Columbia, in the Spring of '69, this guy shows up on the Columbia campus, giving away fifty-dollar bills. I eventually got to know him. He actually wound up living in my apartment for about two weeks—but that's another story. He was a shattered, devastated character with all kinds of problems—shock treatments and so forth—and he couldn't write anymore. He talked obsessively. In fact, remember Charlie Bacon, with his radio plugged into his ear? That was Doc. I took it straight, again, from life: what the nuclear weapons are doing under the ground... The "thumpers", he used to call them.

Forgive me for interrupting you briefly here, but, parenthetically, I saw you had plenty of notes and xeroxes of books on the Enola Gay and bombing and nuclear bombs, etc. among your Moon Palace *manuscripts.*

Yes. There was going to be more, but it got stripped down. One of the currents of thinking in the book that atrophied as time went on. Anyway,

Humes had just inherited fifteen thousand dollars from his father, and he had this idea that he could go out and destroy the American economic system by giving away fifty-dollar bills to strangers, encouraging them to spend them as quickly as they could, telling everyone to tell the next person "Spend it as quickly as you can." He said "we'll create this amazing effect where there'll be so many fifty-dollar bills flying through the air, it will be like rubber balls bouncing against a wall, and pretty soon the walls will come tumbling down." I walked up Broadway with him one night as he was giving out money to people, and it was one of the most extraordinary things I've ever seen. Bums, you know, just as in the book. "Spread a little sunshine", he was yelling. He sounded like Tom Waits, that's how he talked. "Spread a little sunshine". He'd walk into Bickfords' and Childs', these down-and-out coffee shops, with bums sitting at the counter, and I used all that in *Moon Palace*. It was just wonderful—he'd slap the fifty-dollar bills down in front of all these guys... [Laughter] *That*'s where it comes from. That's an autobiographical element of the book. I mean, who could have dreamed that up? In *Hand to Mouth*, I must have written ten or fifteen pages about Doc Humes. And the bills *were* fifties.

One more detail. Why did you switch from the American Encyclopedia *to the* Humboldt Encyclopedia *between the manuscript and the published version?*

It was more subtle. Humboldt, the famous scientist and so on. It was just more interesting. Don't you think we should have a drink?

That sounds good. After all, a key sentence in your book, considering the situation we are in, is "There is nothing more important in this world than being good to your friends".

Who says this?

Solomon Barber, p. 267, to Aunt Clara.

Oh, to Aunt Clara, yes. The imbecilic old woman he's talking down to like a child. That's it, yes. And it is one of the most important things, that's for sure. Let's go.

1. I would like to thank Paul Auster very warmly for his availability, his patience and his help. Without Paul and Siri's hospitality under the pressure of busy and troublesome days, this and other work could not have been completed in time. My gratitude and friendship fly out to both of them.

2. Martin Buber's book.

3. Between 1606 and 1608.

4. *Why Write?* (Providence, R.I.: Burning Deck, 1996).

5. This play, *Blackouts*, was published in *Le Magazine Littéraire* (December 1995). It will be included in the forthcoming volume entitled *Hand to Mouth*.

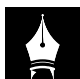
6. That point was made and developed by Professor Elemire Zolla, of the University of Rome, at the first Conference of the European Association for American Studies, in Heidelberg (1976).

7. I checked with the Brooklyn Museum, later on, and Paul Auster is quite right. It *is* Joseph Kossuth: "276. (On Color, Blue), 1993". (MC)

8. The Bronx phone book indeed lists one such name. The Manhattan and Brooklin books, none.

9. Marc Chénetier, *Paul Auster as the Wizard of Odds:* Moon Palace (Paris: Didier Érudition, 1996).

10. January 14, 1979.



Hamlet

Questions à René Girard

Interview réalisée par Thomas PUGHE
et Bernard VINCENT

Auteur de nombreux ouvrages, dont Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque *(1961),* la Violence et le Sacré *(1972),* Critique dans un souterrain *(1976),* Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde *(1978),* le Bouc émissaire *(1982) et* la Route antique des hommes pervers *(1985), théoricien d'un mimétisme découvert au contact des grandes œuvres littéraires, René Girard a également consacré un ouvrage à Shakespeare :* Shakespeare ou les feux de l'envie *(Paris : Grasset, 1990). Il est actuellement professeur émérite et* fellow *du Center for International Security and Arms Control (CISAC) à l'Université de Stanford.*

Thomas Pughe et Bernard Vincent sont professeurs à l'Université d'Orléans, où ils enseignent respectivement la littérature des pays anglophones et la civilisation américaine.
Entretien réalisé à Stanford, Californie, le 29 juillet 1996.

Dans votre ouvrage sur Shakespeare, vous consacrez huit chapitres au Songe d'une nuit d'été*, cinq à* Troïlus et Cressida*, cinq à* Jules César *et un seulement à* Hamlet*. Pourquoi cette différence de traitement à l'égard d'une pièce dont vous dites qu'elle « demeure aujourd'hui encore la plus mystérieuse de toutes »[1], malgré la quantité extraordinaire de travaux critiques qui lui a été consacrée ?*

Je réponds à ceci que, dans mon travail sur Shakespeare, il y a certains principes de lecture qui sont analysés, définis au départ, et qui portent sur le désir mimétique, la rivalité mimétique, et je pense que les premières pièces sont très favorables à l'analyse de ces principes, non seulement parce que c'est là que Shakespeare les a mis en œuvre pour la première fois, mais parce que souvent elles sont présentées d'une manière plus simple que dans les pièces qui suivent. Par exemple, s'agissant de certaines des choses que je dis sur les frères – les rapports entre les frères à propos des *Deux Gentilshommes de Vérone* – il est évident qu'on pourrait recommencer la démonstration avec les frères dans *Hamlet*, le roi et son meurtrier. Cette histoire de meurtre est une histoire de frères ennemis comme le dit Claudius lui-même : « O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven,/It hath the primal eldest curse upon't/A brother's murder ! », III, 3, 35-38) ; et la problématique des frères est très développée dans *Hamlet* par le roi lui-même et par d'autres encore. Mon chapitre sur *Hamlet* est donc un chapitre sur la vengeance – la vengeance qui, bien

entendu, fait partie du système mimétique et y joue un rôle considérable, puisque c'est à partir d'un certain niveau de violence qu'elle apparaît. Mais il y a toutes sortes de choses que je ne reprends pas à propos de *Hamlet*. Mon livre sur Shakespeare est incomplet : il s'agit d'une série d'explorations qui sont liées entre elles par les thèmes du désir mimétique, mais qui ne prétendent pas épuiser même les questions qui sont traitées le plus longuement.

Si Hamlet vous fascine, expliquez-vous, c'est parce qu'il est à notre image : il doute et s'interroge, il pense et fait volontiers du nombrilisme au lieu d'agir (sa tirade la plus célèbre est celle du « That is the question »). Comme l'homme moderne, et en tant qu'homme moderne, il est à la fois incapable de s'adonner à la vengeance et de la dénoncer ouvertement. Dans l'histoire morale de l'humanité, sa place est la nôtre : dans cette espèce d'entre-deux où nous rejetons la violence sans la rejeter tout en la rejetant. Diriez-vous que pour aller au bout du chemin, ce qui manque à Hamlet, comme à nous-mêmes, c'est un brin de sainteté – si toutefois celle-ci fait partie de notre bagage ?

C'est un thème, chez moi, qui s'est développé un peu tard, parce que je suis parti de l'idée connue, courante, classique que Hamlet peut être présenté comme une espèce de satire du revenge play. Comment faire durer le plaisir dans une longue pièce de cinq actes lorsque qu'on sait, dès le premier acte, ici seulement à la toute fin du premier acte, que la question de la vengeance sera résolue par la mort du meurtier, et sans doute du vengeur lui-même, ce qui est le cas dans Hamlet ? A partir de la difficulté qu'il y a à refaire un autre revenge play – un type de pièce qui à l'époque est on ne peut plus rabâchée –, Shakespeare se lance dans une méditation sur la vengeance. J'ai l'impression que les thèmes définis dans votre question n'étaient pas aussi clairs dans l'esprit de Shakespeare qu'ils le sont devenus à l'usage. Par usage, ici, j'entends la réflexion, l'improvisation shakespearienne dans les longs discours de Hamlet lui-même sur la vengeance, ses hésitations qui sont sensibles dès le début de la pièce, où son attitude vis-à-vis du fantôme de son père semble hésiter entre la confiance absolue – « Thy father's spirit » (I, 5, 9) – et une espèce de mépris, de moquerie à l'égard du fantôme qu'un instant plus tôt il respectait infiniment et qu'il traite de vieille taupe (« old mole », I, 5, 163). Il y a des à-coups extraordinaires et je pense qu'une bonne interprétation de Hamlet, au lieu d'essayer d'éviter ces contradictions, devrait les mettre en valeur. La plupart des interprétations cherchent à contourner ou à atténuer ces contradictions, et je crois que c'est une erreur, parce que le personnage de Hamlet est contradictoire. Au début, par exemple, il annonce qu'il ne va plus penser à rien, qu'il va se débarrasser de tout ce qui encombre son esprit (« all trivial fond records », I, 5, 99), pour faire place à la sainteté de ce commandement suprême qui désormais va le dominer entièrement, à savoir la vengeance de son père. Et trois secondes plus tard, il y a des vers où la répétition trahit une certaine mollesse précieuse – « Villain, villain, smiling,

damnéd villain… » (I, 5, 106) –, le fait aussi qu'Hamlet ressent le besoin de noter sa détermination dans un carnet : c'est son premier accès de faiblesse. Dès qu'il a prononcé ses premières paroles, pleines d'une violence extraordinaire, d'une fermeté et d'un esprit de décision considérables, il éprouve, à mon avis, le sentiment de son propre ridicule. Un fait est ici très important, à savoir que le père d'Hamlet est un personnage aussi douteux que son frère. L'identité des frères est une donnée essentielle : ils sont tous les deux meurtriers, ils sont tous les deux jaloux l'un de l'autre, ils ont peut-être depuis longtemps tous les deux couché avec Gertrude, etc. Dans la théorie mimétique, on appelle cela l'indifférenciation des frères, qui fait qu'ils ne se distinguent plus. Hamlet sans arrêt essaie de nier cette indifférenciation en faisant dire à sa mère, à ses amis : « mon père était une merveille absolu, alors que son frère est innommable », et à chaque instant on sent que cette volonté de différence s'effondre devant la réalité.

Dans le chapitre que vous consacrez à Hamlet *vous dites que Shakespeare s'est servi de la* revenge tragedy *pour se distancier de ce genre dramatique très brutal, basé sur la logique terrible de la vengeance. Cependant, au début du XVII*e *siècle, la « tragédie de la vengeance » était un peu démodée. Comment expliquez-vous l'intérêt constant de Shakespeare pour ce genre de pièce, intérêt qui se manifeste également dans* Jules César *ou dans* Macbeth *?*

Jules César date de 1599 : on est encore au XVIe siècle. Pour *Hamlet* aussi, on situe les premières représentations entre 1598 et 1601. Je ne suis pas assez compétent en matière d'histoire théâtrale anglaise, mais il me semble que, s'agissant de la tragédie de la vengeance, aucun tragédien écrivant au temps de Shakespeare ne pouvait se désintéresser de ce genre. On peut dire que les pièces tragiques, à l'époque, étaient essentiellement des tragédies de la vengeance, et on peut définir toutes les tragédies de Shakespeare comme des tragédies de la vengeance. Il est aussi vrai de dire, toutefois, que la seule tragédie de la vengeance au sens vraiment classique du terme, c'est *Hamlet*, car, dans cette pièce, le problème de la vengeance est posé *au départ* et défini comme le devoir du fils, etc. – même si le texte de Shakespeare constitue en réalité une critique de fond du tragique. Le plus étonnant, d'ailleurs, c'est que les critiques de *Hamlet* ne soient pas sortis de ce schéma traditionnel. Il me semble, par exemple, que la critique que Freud fait de la pièce reste basée sur ce modèle. Freud ne voit pas du tout que Shakespeare met la vengeance en question. Il pose le problème comme si Hamlet était un être réel qui n'arrive pas à accomplir un devoir dont la légitimité n'est jamais en cause. Il est de plus en plus difficile de poser la question de Hamlet de cette façon, mais on continue à le faire.

Donc, quand Hamlet *paraît, le genre n'est pas mort.*

Non, le genre n'est pas mort. Il y a encore à l'époque beaucoup de *revenge tragedies*, et il y en aura pas mal aussi au XVIIe siècle. Ce qui est capital avec *Hamlet*, c'est que c'est une tragédie de la vengeance au sens le plus classique, puisque c'est le descendant de la victime qui a pour devoir absolu de mettre à mort le meurtrier de son père. Tout est défini en ces termes. Il eût été très facile pour Shakespeare de changer ou de modifier cette définition, ce qu'il n'a pas fait. Si la tragédie de la vengeance était démodée à l'époque, on peut dire que Shakespeare est en plein dans le mille en ceci que *Hamlet* démode la *revenge tragedy* de la manière la plus géniale qui soit. Nous aurons, je pense, l'occasion de revenir là-dessus.

Quand le spectre demande à Hamlet de venger le crime commis par Claudius, il dit : « If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not » (I, 5, 81 ; it *faisant référence au meurtre du vieil Hamlet). L'éditeur du* Oxford Shakespeare *glose ainsi : «* nature: *natural feeling (such as a son should have for his father) » (p.190). Ne serait-il pas possible de voir ici un clin d'œil ironique de Shakespeare : le principe de la vengeance fait-il réellement partie des sentiments naturels d'un fils pour son père ? Poursuivant cet axe de réflexion, pourrait-on voir dans l'ambiguïté du mot « nature » la source de l'ironie tragique dans la pièce ?*

C'est le problème des sentiments naturels qui se pose, de la définition de la nature, et je pense en effet qu'il y a là quelque chose d'ironique. D'abord, le fait qu'il ne s'agisse pas vraiment de la *nature* tient à la question elle-même : « If thou hast nature in thee » donne à penser qu'il serait possible à un homme de ne pas avoir de nature en lui-même. Donc « nature » ici s'emploie au sens de courage, c'est-à-dire de nature mâle et aristocratique, et non pas de ce qui appartient à tous les hommes...

« Si tu es bien né »...

« Si tu es bien né » : oui, ce serait peut-être une bonne traduction. Ou encore : « si tu es digne de ta famille », n'accepte pas ça, « bear it not »... Cela veut dire que la plénitude, du point de vue du vieil *Hamlet*, la plénitude de l'humain, est réservée à ceux qui vengent leurs pères, etc. Que Shakespeare ait utilisé le mot de façon ambiguë, oui, cela me paraît parfaitement possible – même si cette ambiguïté arrive peut-être, dans l'histoire des idées, beaucoup plus tard. La richesse d'un auteur comme Shakespeare est telle qu'on peut faire porter au texte, d'une certaine manière, le poids de l'avenir du mot, et dire que la pièce tout entière met en question l'idée que la vengeance est un sentiment naturel. Le mot « nature », qui fait forcément partie du vocabulaire du vieil Hamlet, tout d'un coup est lui-même en question. Est-ce que pour *penser* ce que vous pensez là, il ne faut pas avoir derrière soi toute l'histoire postérieure du

concept de nature ? Peut-être. Mais cela n'a pas beaucoup d'importance, puisque c'est la force du texte shakespearien que d'utiliser le vocabulaire du vieil *Hamlet* et de faire en sorte que tout l'avenir du terme, toute la mise en question du mot « nature » soient présents *potentiellement* dans ce vers.

La vengeance d'Hamlet est un ordre reçu de son père (première apparition du spectre) dès le début de la pièce (« Revenge his foul and unnatural murder », I, 5, 25). A nouveau en présence du spectre, Hamlet évoquera, deux actes plus loin, « [his] dread command » (III, 4, 108). Entre ses deux rencontres avec le spectre (la seconde étant, littéralement, un rappel à l'ordre : « This visitation/Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose », III, 4, 110-111), Hamlet a eu la confirmation « théâtrale » (scène du « Mouse Trap *») que son oncle était bien coupable. Où donc alors est sa responsabilité propre, sa part propre dans l'acte qu'il va commettre ? Est-ce un homme libre qui va tuer le roi, ou bien Hamlet n'est-il que l'instrument, le jouet de la juste colère de son père ? « I must be cruel only to be kind », reconnaît Hamlet après avoir « par erreur » tué Polonius (III, 4, 178).*

C'est la question qu'il se pose (« Suis-je le jouet d'une tradition ? »), et la raison pour laquelle il ne peut pas s'exécuter, c'est précisément cela. Il est important d'observer que Shakespeare n'a pas voulu créer en Hamlet un être dépourvu de courage. Hamlet accomplit sans peur toutes sortes de prouesses, mais il se sent prisonnier d'une certaine tradition qui exclut le type de jugement personnel auquel il s'adonne lorsqu'il constate qu'entre son père et son oncle il n'y a pas de différence, que son père lui-même est un homme de sang. Tout ce qu'il dit du père, des crimes du père, du fait que le père a été tué en état de péché et qu'il est en train d'expier ses fautes, tout cela est à mon avis essentiel, car il s'agit justement du phénomène sur lequel Shakespeare entend mettre l'accent, celui de la continuité de la vengeance. Autrement dit, à partir du moment où on se met à penser la vengeance comme il faut, c'est-à-dire comme un phénomène de répétition, la tragédie devient sans limites, on remonte dans l'histoire de la Norvège, on ne sait plus où on va, on ne sait plus vers quoi on va. Hamlet n'est plus qu'une espèce de maillon dans une chaîne où il n'a aucune part de responsabilité. Et je pense que c'est une des raisons principales pour lesquelles il ne peut pas commettre ce crime. Il lui manque le côté affectif de la chose. Il ne peut pas croire – c'est toujours ce même problème de la différentiation – il ne peut pas croire en sa propre tragédie. Il y a de la vengeance partout. Pourquoi celle-là plutôt qu'une autre ? Et pourquoi la commettrait-il ? C'est donc bien cette mise en cause du problème de la vengeance qui l'empêche de penser la chose comme il devrait. C'est très important. Il a l'impression de jouer un rôle, et la scène de l'acteur en apporte la preuve : cet acteur qui peut verser des larmes véritables pour Hécube, etc., alors que lui, qui se blâme souterrainement à chaque instant de ne pas être comme l'acteur, est incapable de ce mensonge, incapable d'être un vrai

gentleman, c'est-à-dire un homme qui ne pense pas. D'ailleurs, dans *Hamlet*, c'est une des choses qui font que je ne crois pas du tout à la thèse d'un Shakespeare aristocrate, au sens où certains amateurs de l'énigme shakespearienne l'entendent. A mon avis, Shakespeare pense en homme des classes moyennes, en intellectuel moderne. Ce n'est pas du tout l'ultra-conservateur qu'on dit. Cela ne signifie pas qu'un aristocrate de l'époque n'était pas capable de mettre la vengeance en question ; cela se double, chez Shakespeare, d'une certaine hostilité vis-à-vis de l'aristocratie, qui reparaît dans la guerre de Fortinbras, lequel part pour la Pologne et s'en va faire tuer tant d'hommes sur un si minuscule bout de terre qu'il n'y aura même pas la place de les enterrer tous ! Là aussi, le spectacle qui devrait donner du cœur au ventre à Hamlet, en fait, le décourage. Il le décourage parce que la satire de la vengeance, à ce moment-là, se démultiplie en une satire de la guerre proprement dite. Il y a d'ailleurs toute une satire de la diplomatie et du gouvernement dans *Hamlet* : par exemple, cette ridicule mission de Valtemand et Cornelius, qui s'en vont, qui reviennent, qui expliquent qu'ils ont parfaitement réussi dans leur mission qui était d'empêcher le jeune Fortinbras de s'attaquer au Danemark. Ils ont parlé à son vieil oncle et l'oncle a dit qu'il allait faire tout le nécessaire. Si on y regarde de près, ce nécessaire consiste à permettre à Fortinbras de faire tout ce qu'il désire – avec, en plus, la permission de Claudius lui-même, permission qui est sollicitée et qu'il va donner de faire traverser le Danemark par ses troupes (« an entreaty [...] to give quiet pass/Through your dominions », II, 2, 76-78). On a donc là une espèce de langage double qui est absolument admirable. On a l'impression qu'on a déjà affaire à une diplomatie devenue folle, à une bureaucratie qui prend les solutions purement verbales pour des solutions réelles. Car, de toute évidence, l'expédition militaire de Fortinbras vise surtout le Danemark. C'est bien pourquoi ce prince est déjà sur place, tout prêt à « pick up the pieces », dans les dernières lignes de la pièce.

Le modèle de comportement humain à l'opposé du principe de la vengeance est la charité chrétienne. Cependant, il n'est pas aisé de définir le rôle de la religion chrétienne dans Hamlet. A certains moments de l'intrigue, la religion semble s'inscrire dans la logique même de la vengeance. L'exemple le plus marquant est la scène III, 3 : Hamlet ne profite pas de l'occasion de tuer Claudius parce que celui-ci est en prière. Il retarde l'heure de la vengeance jusqu'au moment où « he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,/Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed,/.../Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven,/And that his soul may be as damned and black/As hell, whereto it goes » (III, 3, 89-94). Ici l'idéologie chrétienne sert à renforcer la logique terrible de la vengeance. Pouvez-vous commenter le rôle de la religion dans Hamlet ?

Dans *Hamlet* il y toute une religion de façade. Je ne sais pas jusqu'à quel point il faut prendre au sérieux le fait que, lorsque Horatio dit à Hamlet quelque

chose comme « Ne suis pas ce fantôme car il pourrait t'entraîner dans des aventures épouvantables », Hamlet répond que son âme est immortelle, comme celle du fantôme, et qu'il n'y a rien à craindre. Il y a des choses comme cela qui sont des références chrétiennes. Il y a notamment une idée du purgatoire : le vieil Hamlet nous dit qu'il est puni jusqu'au jour où il aura purgé ses fautes. On trouve ainsi toutes sortes de notions qui font partie du christianisme officiel de l'époque, mais qui ne vont pas très loin. A mon avis, l'élément le plus chrétien dans *Hamlet* est aussi le plus profond, et c'est la mise en question de la légitimité de la vengeance, de l'identité individuelle fondée sur la vengeance. Mais je ne suis pas sûr que Shakespeare, si intelligent, si génial soit-il, ait compris que c'était fondamentalement un problème chrétien. Je n'ai pas d'opinion vraiment fondée sur l'attitude de Shakespeare vis-à-vis du christianisme. Il se peut que Shakespeare ait été assez anti-chrétien à l'époque. Cela ne m'étonnerait pas. Mais je pense qu'on ne peut pas le savoir, car Shakespeare écrivait dans un milieu où, sur le plan religieux, il ne lui était pas permis de mettre en question certaines choses. Je suis tout à fait en désaccord avec ceux, comme Cornélius Castoriadis, qui affirment que dans Shakespeare il n'y a pas un gramme de christianisme. A mon avis, il y a une pièce chrétienne, qui est *Le Conte d'Hiver*. Je dirais qu'il y a aussi des éléments chrétiens dans *La Tempête*. Autrement dit, dans le dernier Shakespeare. Le thème fondamental du *Conte d'Hiver* est le thème chrétien de la résurrection – je pense évidemment à la « résurrection » d'Hermione, qui ne fait qu'un avec le dépassement de la jalousie par le personnage de Léonte. Dans *Hamlet* nous n'avons rien de tel. Le problème est posé au niveau du théâtre, au niveau de la vie sociale, où la mise en question de la vengeance a quelque chose de subversif par rapport à ce christianisme officiel qui pourtant reste opposé en principe à la vengeance. Il y a cette scène assez comique, au fond, où Laërte propose à Claudius de tuer Hamlet à l'église ; et Claudius, qui pourtant n'a pas froid aux yeux, est terrifié à l'idée d'une action aussi impie. Mais, de même qu'Hamlet, il ne peut s'empêcher d'admirer le fait que Laërte, le contraire d'Hamlet, place la vengeance au-dessus de tout. Donc il est le parfait gentleman. Et je crois que c'est Laërte finalement qui décide Hamlet à se venger, un Hamlet saisi par la rivalité mimétique. Témoin ce *speech* extrêmement comique, mais d'un comique assez macabre, dans la tombe d'Ophélie, où Hamlet dit en substance à Laërte : « Tout ce que tu peux faire, je peux le faire aussi bien que toi, avaler de la ciguë, manger un crocodile » et autres choses de ce genre (V, 1, 257-256). Je crois que finalement, si *Hamlet* réussit à se venger, ce n'est pas parce qu'il se soumet au conformisme de l'époque, c'est parce qu'il est saisi de rivalité mimétique à l'égard de Laërte. Il dit lui-même que l'attitude de Laërte l'exaspère. Et ça, c'est très moderne aussi, car c'est le côté conventionnel de Laërte qui l'exaspère, le fait que Laërte soit, n'est-ce pas ?, une sorte de jeune Polonius, parfaitement capable de massacrer tout le monde à l'instant voulu, et de pleurer pieusement les victimes de son massacre un instant plus tard.

Dans les « tragédies de la vengeance » traditionnelles le héros-vengeur souffre souvent de ce que certains critiques ont appelé « la folie du vengeur » (the revenger's madness). *Cette folie n'est d'abord qu'une stratégie dont le vengeur se sert pour dissimuler ses intentions, mais, au fur est à mesure que l'intrigue évolue, la frontière entre stratégie et folie devient floue. On peut observer cette évolution dans* The Spanish Tragedy *de Kyd ou dans* Titus Andronicus *de Shakespeare. La folie de Hamlet s'inscrit bien sûr dans la tradition que nous venons d'évoquer, mais on voit facilement que Shakespeare est allé au-delà de cette tradition. Comment interprétez-vous la folie d'Hamlet ?*

La question se pose en effet, car Shakespeare approfondit tous les thèmes. Hamlet est confronté sans cesse à sa propre hésitation face à la vengeance, mais il ne peut pas admettre la légitimité de son hésitation. Il y a des moments où il paraît sur le point d'affirmer audacieusement : « Il est légitime pour moi de ne pas vouloir me mêler de cette affaire », mais le plus souvent il ne le peut pas. Il éprouve sa propre hésitation à l'égard de vengeance comme une attitude coupable. Il tend alors vers le ressentiment, un ressentiment qui s'exprime sous une forme bouffonne. Il est l'homme qui ne fait pas son devoir. Donc il se moque de lui-même, il s'insulte, il ne se respecte plus. Et sa folie est une façon pour lui de ne pas se prendre au sérieux, de ne pas prendre le monde au sérieux. C'est un effort pour trouver l'attitude existentielle qui corresponde à la complexité de ses sentiments à ce moment-là, à l'inconfort qu'il éprouve à son propre égard. Si Hamlet réussissait vraiment à se dire « la vengeance est une abomination, je n'en veux pas », s'il était véritablement capable de prendre position sur la vengeance, il n'y aurait plus de drame. La personnage disparaîtrait. Il est tout entier fait de cette hésitation qui ne peut se justifier elle-même. Cette absence de justification, c'est pour Hamlet la perte de l'identité aristocratique et l'impossibilité de la remplacer par l'identité du véritable intellectuel moderne qui assumerait ses responsabilités face au refus de la vengeance – refus qui serait peut-être une nouvelle forme d'héroïsme. Cela est impossible en 1600. Donc la folie, c'est ce qui permet à Hamlet d'aller plus loin dans la critique de son propre univers, sans en même temps jamais trouver la position philosophique, morale, religieuse qui lui permettrait d'accomplir pleinement cette critique. Il faut situer tout cela historiquement.

Dès le début de la pièce (« O that this too too solid flesh would melt », etc., I, 2, 129) Hamlet songe au suicide parce qu'il voudrait échapper à un monde devenu insupportable. Dans la dernière scène de la tragédie, lieu traditionnel de la vengeance sanglante (Cf. Titus Andronicus*), le comportement d'Hamlet, qui laisse l'initiative à ses ennemis, ressemble étrangement à un acte suicidaire. Pourrait-on dès lors considérer le thème du suicide comme un instrument critique servant à dénoncer la vengeance, forme de suicide moral et social ? Dans cette optique, la fin de la tragédie où Hamlet désigne*

Fortinbras comme successeur de Claudius sur le trône danois serait très pessimiste. En effet, non seulement Fortinbras est norvégien (et donc étranger) mais il représente également, comme Laërte, l'ordre patriarcal, celui de la vengeance. Hamlet a-t-il souffert « pour rien » ? La victoire de Fortinbras fait-elle plus que jamais du Danemark une « prison », pour reprendre la phrase de Hamlet : « Denmark's a prison » (II, 2, 242) ?

C'est une réponse ! Je suis assez d'accord. Mais alors je dirais que, pour Shakespeare le tragédien, ce suicide est un peu le suicide avant la lettre, car il ne faut pas aller trop loin non plus. Après *Hamlet*, il y a encore des tragédies qui sont très puissantes et plus ou moins classiques. Il y a *Othello*. Il y a *Le Roi Lear*. Il y a *Macbeth*, *Antoine et Cléopâtre*. Je crois que *Hamlet* représente le sommet de la carrière tragique de Shakespeare, et qu'à partir de là, même s'il m'est difficile de justifier cette appréciation, il va vers autre chose que la tragédie. Sa dernière tragédie, *Timon d'Athènes*, n'est plus une tragédie. Elle n'a pas la complexité des pièces antérieures. J'ai l'impression que même *Othello*, *Coriolan*, etc. sont des exercices de style, d'une puissance certes extraordinaire, composés par un homme qui avait besoin de produire des œuvres pour des raisons de toutes sortes, mais il me semble qu'*Othello*, par exemple, est une première mouture, en moins bien, de ce que Shakespeare va réaliser dans *Le Conte d'hiver*, qui constitue vraiment dans son œuvre la pièce de la jalousie suprême. Ces appréciations sont bien sûr liées à ma vision personnelle.

Mais en quoi le comportement d'Hamlet peut-il être vu comme suicidaire ?

Je n'en suis pas si sûr. Hamlet ne sait pas, quand même, que les deux épées ont été traficotées, etc. J'ai l'impression qu'il n'a pas envie du pouvoir. Il n'a pas vraiment envie du pouvoir.

Il n'a pas envie de la vie. C'est peut-être ça, sa dimension suicidaire ?

C'est peut-être ça. Mais alors, « n'avoir pas envie de la vie », il ne faut quand même pas mettre cela au premier plan et en faire une valeur en soi, ou une anti-valeur, dans la mesure où cela ferait perdre au problème de la pièce un peu de sa substance.

La tradition de la critique romantique représente Hamlet comme un héros « sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought » (III, 1, 86), donc comme un intellectuel ou peut-être un poète incapable de faire face aux exigences pratiques et physiques de la vengeance. Mais cette vision du héros occulte le fait qu'Hamlet est capable d'agir et de tuer avec une froideur remarquable. Le cynisme avec lequel il commente les meurtres de Polonius, Rosencrantz et

Guildenstern est assez effrayant. Comment expliquez-vous, sur ce plan, la double personnalité d'Hamlet ?

Je ne crois pas qu'il soit si « sickly ». Ce qui manque à la vision romantique, c'est une interprétation historique de la vengeance. On est encore à une époque où les hommes sont incapables de mettre en question le devoir de vengeance. Les tenants de la vision romantique se transportent en quelque sorte au XVIe siècle et ils ne voient pas qu'Hamlet est beaucoup plus moderne, qu'il est un personnage, comment dirai-je, qui a tout le bon du romantisme sans en avoir le mauvais. Il est physiquement courageux, capable de prendre les risques les plus grands, et donc son problème est vraiment dans son rapport à l'univers qui l'entoure : l'idée que le Danemark est une prison, que c'est un pays pourri lui paraît absolument fondamentale. Elle ne doit pas s'appliquer au seul Danemark ; elle s'applique à toute cette époque, qu'on est obligé de définir comme une époque de transition. La vengeance va cesser d'être le devoir absolu qu'elle a toujours été. Dans l'univers bourgeois elle n'existe plus qu'au niveau collectif de la guerre nationale. Il est intéressant de noter que, si notre univers commence à mettre en cause les guerres nationales de la même manière qu'Hamlet met en cause la vengeance aristocratique, il n'a pas encore produit, sur ce problème, une œuvre comparable à *Hamlet*. Mais Shakespeare est si grand, justement, qu'il anticipe aussi ce problème-là. Lors du passage des troupes de Fortinbras, Hamlet est là, pareil à un homme qui assiste à une revue ou à un défilé militaire pour se donner du courage, et il ne tire absolument rien de ce spectacle. Il considère même Fortinbras comme un personnage un peu grotesque...

On a souvent fait remarquer qu'Hamlet semble plus horrifié par la trahison de sa mère (devenue sa tante) que par le meurtre de son oncle. Quoi qu'il en soit, « l'inceste » de Gertrude le perturbe profondément. De façon plus générale, la sexualité féminine (celle de Gertrude ou d'Ophélie) semble incarner pour Hamlet un monde peu fiable et abject (« out of joint »). Quelle est votre interprétation de la « sexualisation » du conflit tragique dans Hamlet *?*

Sexualisation par Shakespeare ou sexualisation des mises en scène ? C'est un des thèmes sur lesquels que je suis en réaction contre l'attitude générale. Il est presque impossible aujourd'hui de voir un *Hamlet* où la scène entre Gertrude et Hamlet ne se passe pas sur un lit, où Hamlet ne se précipite pas quarante fois sur sa mère, montrant qu'il a manifestement envie de coucher avec elle, etc. Je trouve cela absurde et insupportable. Je crois qu'Hamlet utilise beaucoup sa mère par rapport au but qu'il poursuit : elle doit, elle aussi, servir à le convaincre qu'il doit accomplir sa vengeance. Il est évidemment horrifié par la trahison de sa mère, cette trahison lui faisant venir à l'esprit l'idée, justement, que sa mère est un être sexué. Il me semble qu'il serait plus raisonnable d'interpréter Hamlet comme un personnage qui a toujours

respecté sa mère, qui donc n'a jamais pensé à elle comme épouse, maîtresse, amante, etc. Que d'un seul coup, comme cela, il y songe, en faisant fi de son âge, de son expérience, non ! Claudius, dès le début, parle d'elle comme si elle avait une importance politique formidable – « Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state » (I, 2, 9) : il est le frère et elle est le lien, au fond. Je trouve, dès lors, qu'il serait raisonnable de voir en Hamlet un personnage scandalisé par sa mère, et je ne dis pas cela dans un sens psychanalytique. Ce qu'il voudrait, selon moi, c'est continuer à faire de sa mère ce qu'il a toujours fait d'elle : il l'a toujours respectée, il l'a toujours perçue comme une force de stabilité dans sa vie, et l'idée qu'elle est toujours là est importante ; elle a sur lui une autorité certaine. Et alors, il est abominablement choqué, il essaie de lui faire dire que son père était très supérieur, mais en même temps il n'en est pas convaincu lui-même. Donc il se trouve dans un situation très difficile. Étant donné qu'il parle à sa mère franchement, il se trouve aussi dans une situation de demi-complicité avec elle, dans la mesure même où il ne se venge pas. C'est une situation qui le choque profondément et dont il ne veut pas. Que cette situation soit pleine d'ambiguïtés sur le plan sexuel, je suis parfaitement d'accord, car elle met Hamlet de plain-pied avec sa mère, ce qui n'était jamais arrivé auparavant. Il y a là aussi une espèce d'abolition des différences qui, à mon avis, est très importante et que j'interprète à ma manière. Mais on fourre toujours des masses de Freud là-dedans. Comme s'il y avait de l'inconscient – mais où est-il, cet inconscient ? La façon dont on interprète la chose aujourd'hui – avec toujours, je le répète, Hamlet se précipitant sur sa mère, farfouillant sous ses jupes, etc. – repose sur une interprétation parfaitement grotesque.

Il y a un passage magnifique de Joyce sur *Hamlet*, qui dit : comment croire qu'Hamlet est amoureux de cette femme qui est tellement plus vieille que lui ? – un passage qui est un appel aujourd'hui nécessaire au bon sens le plus banal, le plus irréfutable, contre ce qu'il faut bien appeler la folie psychanalytique[2]. Si Shakespeare avait voulu donner l'impression qu'il y avait chez Hamlet un désir pour sa mère, il y aurait des vers ambigus, des vers qui nous diraient l'élément incestueux, non de façon conceptuelle, mais par des allusions sexuelles à la mère. Or pas du tout. Gertrude n'a aucune réalité physique. Ophélie, elle, en a une. Il y a des moments de sensualité, par exemple quand elle est entre les jambes d'Hamlet. Rien de tel pour Gertrude, elle n'est pas un personnage sexué, ou si elle le devient, justement, c'est dans la gêne, dans le scandale, mais un scandale qu'on ne peut pas interpréter à mon avis psychanalytiquement. Qui est le fils qui verrait sa grand-mère s'envoyer en l'air sans protester ? (C'est ce que dit un peu Joyce). Ça ne l'exciterait pas du tout ; ça le scandaliserait.

Le théâtre aujourd'hui est si influencé par le freudisme que je me demande ce qu'il faudrait faire pour jouer cette pièce comme il faut. Il faudrait certainement accroître un peu la distance entre Gertrude et Hamlet. Celui-ci est secrètement d'accord avec Gertrude sur le fait qu'il n'y a guère de

différence entre Hamlet père et Claudius. C'est bien pourquoi Gertrude est toujours prête à épouser celui des deux qui est au pouvoir. Elle me donne l'impression de mettre la couronne au-dessus de ses deux maris. C'est ainsi qu'Hamlet, sans doute, l'interprète ou est tenté de l'interpréter, et on a le sentiment qu'il a raison. Tout cela le révolte, il se met en colère contre sa mère. Et en même temps il ne peut pas complètement la blâmer car, secrètement, lui non plus ne voit aucune différence entre son père et Claudius. Donc il est horriblement gêné avec elle, et il réagit par des coups de boutoir, des formules excessives, etc.

Vous êtes très critique envers Ernest Jones et sa classique étude psychanalytique de Hamlet. *Mais peut-être ne devrait-on pas rejeter les interprétations psychologiques de la tragédie trop rapidement. Vous-même abordez par exemple la question des doubles dans la pièce : Hamlet père et Claudius, Hamlet fils et Laërte. L'interprétation psychologique ne se révèle-t-elle pas utile ici ?*

Cette interprétation des doubles a une dimension psychologique, mais, à mon avis, elle n'est pas fondamentalement psychologique. Elle n'est pas sociologique non plus...

Elle est ... ?

... anthropologique. Parce que là, on est vraiment dans le classicisme shakespearien, le classicisme des doubles, opposés les uns aux autres. Et ce classicisme shakespearien, c'est un classicisme qui dépasse Shakespeare lui-même, parce qu'il est là aussi chez Sénèque le tragique, qui a certainement servi de modèle à Shakespeare plus que les Grecs. Peu importe au demeurant, car Sénèque le tragique, même si c'est moins parfait que les Grecs de notre point de vue, ou moins bien que Shakespeare, c'est quand même la même théorie, la même vision des doubles. C'est-à-dire la vision d'un monde où les êtres ont le même désir, s'imitent le désir les uns des autres, donc deviennent les uns pour les autres des obstacles aussi bien que des modèles : des rivaux. Et dans le cas de Laërte, c'est très important pour la seconde partie de la tragédie. Dans le cas des deux Hamlet, c'est très important pour la première partie de la tragédie, parce qu'on peut dire que c'est fondamental dans la conscience du fils. Celui-ci a conscience des doubles, une conscience multiple. Hamlet sait tout ce que sait Shakespeare, ou le pressent. Il a le savoir de ces grands personnages que Shakespeare a créés. Donc il a conscience de ses rapports de double avec son père – ainsi qu'avec Claudius. Et avec Laërte, bien sûr. Ce rapport est un rapport auquel on ne peut pas échapper ; c'est quelque chose d'infernal dans la mesure où on est pris dans toujours plus d'identité, si l'on peut dire. Dans le cas d'Hamlet, c'est très net : car ce qui caractérise

Laërte, c'est sa capacité de vengeance, et c'est à Laërte qu'Hamlet emprunte finalement cette capacité de vengeance, pour la faire sienne.

Selon vous, quelle est la fonction dramatique de l'intrusion des « comédiens » dans la pièce (II, 2, 402 sq.) et de l'échange qu'Hamlet a alors avec eux ?

C'est un passage d'une grande richesse et qui joue sur plusieurs registres. Cela joue sur le registre tragique puisqu'Hamlet se compare aux comédiens qu'il fait jouer. D'autre part il leur donne une leçon de théâtre. Il joue le rôle du metteur en scène. Il leur explique comment ils doivent jouer la pièce. La conception hamlétienne du théâtre n'a rien à voir avec l'intérêt que Polonius manifeste pour la littérature, avec son souci extrêmement formaliste de distinction des genres, etc. Ce qui intéresse Hamlet, c'est d'avoir une influence sur son public et une influence très directe puisqu'il s'agit de donner à celui-ci le sentiment de sa culpabilité. C'est là quelque chose qui m'intéresse beaucoup parce que, par l'intermédiaire de la *revenge tragedy*, Hamlet aborde une problématique extrêmement moderne – celle de l'écrivain qui écrit contre ses lecteurs dans le dessein de leur donner mauvaise conscience, comme on dit aujourd'hui. C'est sans doute Sartre qui a le mieux défini le rapport de Hamlet au théâtre, lorsqu'il a affirmé que le véritable écrivain écrit contre tous ses lecteurs. Et ici le véritable homme de théâtre fonctionne contre son public – et son seul public, c'est, bien sûr, Gertrude et Claudius. Là, je pense que Shakespeare nous parle de lui-même. Il nous parle du fait qu'il a écrit toutes ces œuvres où il se moque de la jeunesse de la cour, toute cette satire qui est déjà présente dans le *Songe d'une nuit d'été* mais qui est là aussi dans *Hamlet*, où il y a toute une imitation du langage précieux des courtisans, imitation destinée à ces mêmes courtisans. Exactement comme Molière dans le théâtre français, Shakespeare, ici, écrit contre ses lecteurs. Il le fait par l'intermédiaire d'Hamlet et à partir du désir qu'il a, selon moi, de parler de ce problème. Il y a certes un vague lien avec le problème de la vengeance, mais à ce moment-là Hamlet n'a plus besoin de se convaincre que Claudius a tué son père. Depuis la fin du premier acte, il n'a plus aucun doute. Shakespeare est le premier à avoir inscrit ce thème dans la littérature, et sans doute plusieurs siècles avant ceux qui l'ont suivi. Tous les écrivains du XVIIIe siècle, tous les satiristes du XVIIIe siècle écrivaient certes contre leur public aristocratique, mais ils ne le disaient pas, il n'y avait jamais cette *self-reference* qui est surtout un phénomène du XXe siècle, mais qui est déjà présente chez Shakespeare. Je crois que ce qu'il y a de plus extraordinaire dans l'œuvre de cet auteur, c'est que toute la réflexion de la littérature sur elle-même, du théâtre sur lui-même, y est anticipée, et même développée de manière prodigieuse.

S'adressant à l'un des « comédiens », Hamlet évoque une pièce d'« excellente » qualité mais condamnée à l'insuccès car trop élitiste : « The play I remember pleased not the million, 'twas caviary to the general » *(II, 2, 415-416).*

Peut-on extrapoler et s'interroger sur la nature – élitiste ou non, populaire ou non – du théâtre de Shakespeare et de Hamlet *en particulier ? La question semble d'autant plus légitime qu'à l'acte suivant, Hamlet revient à la charge et confie à l'un des « comédiens » que l'avis d'un seul spectateur informé et lucide (« judicious ») vaut plus que tout le reste de la salle (III, 2, 24-26).*

Cela est très intéressant, car là Shakespeare parle certainement de lui-même. Je crois qu'il a un talent extraordinaire, qui est de jouer le double jeu, c'est-à-dire de présenter les choses sous des aspects extrêmement gros – par exemple, la présence du fantôme sur la scène, qui *appeals to the populace, to the mechanicals* – et, en même temps, de développer des thèmes profonds en filigrane. Si on résume *Hamlet*, on peut avoir une pièce de vengeance extrêmement banale, une sorte de polar, et alors rien ne transparaît de la puissance extraordinaire de la pièce. Cela est très important s'agissant de l'art théâtral, évidemment, parce que tous les spectateurs sont rassemblés dans le même théâtre. Ils doivent rire ou pleurer en même temps, ou réagir de la même façon. Cela exige des tours de force absolument gigantesques. Pour bien comprendre *Hamlet*, à mon avis, il faut voir que les effets les plus puissants, de ce point de vue, sont toujours les effets comiques. C'est vrai de toutes les grandes tragédies de Shakespeare, tout autant que des comédies. Mon sentiment est que Shakespeare n'a guère créé de personnages aussi comiques que Polonius. Et Polonius est très moderne, en ce sens qu'à l'évidence la majorité du public ne devait pas percevoir le comique de son personnage et devait trouver injustes les remarques d'*Hamlet*...

... Seuls quelques uns, derrière le masque qui pleure, percevaient le masque qui rit...

... Percevaient le masque qui rit. Et d'être arrivé comme cela à créer un meurtre comique au milieu d'une pièce malgré tout tragique, c'est la chose la plus extraordinaire qui soit. Le meurtre de Polonius est cocasse d'un bout à l'autre. Il fait rire. Et on a l'impression que c'est Shakespeare qui dit : « Maintenant ça suffit, j'ai tiré du personnage tout ce que je peux et on va l'embrocher ».

Dans la scène des « comédiens » de l'Acte II, Hamlet récite si bien la tirade décrivant Pyrrhus en train d'assassiner le vieux roi Priam que Polonius s'étonne d'un tel talent : « Fore God, my lord, well spoken, with good accent and good discretion » *(II, 2, 445-446). Comment se fait-il qu'Hamlet soit si bon acteur ? Quel est le ressort dramatique de ce don inattendu ?*

L'art du comédien est un art mimétique et Hamlet est extraordinairement mimétique. Cela ne veut pas dire que tous les personnages hypermimétiques sont nécessairement de bons acteurs. Mais il y a un type de personnage hypermimétique qui l'est et Hamlet joue sans cesse la comédie. Il joue la comédie avec Ophélie, il joue la comédie avec Polonius, il joue la comédie avec

à peu près tout le monde, sauf Horatio. Cet art du comédien et la folie qu'il feint sont deux choses proches l'une de l'autre. Et on peut dire, là aussi, que c'est extrêmement moderne. Voir la vogue de *Hamlet* à la fin du XIXe et au début du XXe siècle. Il y a un *Hamlet* assez prodigieux par certains côtés et très limité par d'autres, mais qui est un texte de génie, qui est le *Hamlet* de Jules Laforgue. C'est une espèce de parodie de *Hamlet*, qui insiste sur ce côté acteur, qui fait d'Hamlet un personnage bouffon. Il est très facile, bien sûr, de pousser cette bouffonnerie, et Hamlet lui-même la pousse au dernier degré, même dans les passages en principe les plus dramatiques, par exemple lorsqu'il se décide à tuer Laërte. Ce qui l'irrite chez Laërte, c'est qu'il soit toujours si disposé à faire les choses qu'exige la société, à tuer le meurtrier de son père d'abord et, trois minutes plus tard, à pleurer à l'enterrement de sa sœur et à réclamer plus de « ceremony ». C'est un homme qui vit entièrement dans la machine sociale, un homme qui appartient complètement à la convention de son époque. Hamlet est, lui, capable de *jouer* cette convention. Son rôle consiste toujours à la jouer, à forcer un peu le ton, donc à mettre les personnages comme Polonius, qui croient en cette convention, dans une situation un peu ridicule. Vis-à-vis de Laërte, Hamlet fait la même chose dans la tombe d'Ophélie. Là, c'est tellement gros qu'il est difficile de ne pas voir la rivalité mimétique. Je pense que c'est la clef du dénouement, je veux dire ce discours adressé à Laërte dans la tombe : « Tout ce que tu peux faire, je le ferais mieux que toi ». C'est l'hypermimétisme d'Hamlet qui fait qu'il retombe dans la vengeance. La vengeance, effectivement, c'est du mimétisme, mais à un niveau beaucoup plus primitif. Il y a là, sans doute, des couches successives de notre histoire culturelle qui sont pour Shakespeare comme un clavier sur lequel il joue. Il peut passer des chroniques relatives aux premiers rois d'Angleterre, c'est-à-dire de choses proches des sagas islandaises, où la vengeance est à son état le plus grossier, pour arriver à des formes de ressentiment d'un modernisme nietzschéen ou post-nietzschéen. Shakespeare peut passer d'un extrême à l'autre en un clin d'œil.

Bon acteur, Hamlet s'interroge sur son aptitude à être agissant. Il se décrit comme un « John-a-dreams » (II, 2, 545) et ajoute : « am I a coward ? » (II, 2, 549). On a beaucoup glosé sur cette lâcheté. Comment la lire ? Et, surtout, comment lire la conscience qu'il en a et l'aveu qu'il en fait dès lors qu'il est seul, face à lui-même (« Now I am alone », II, 2, 525) ? Plus loin d'ailleurs, dans la tirade « to be or not to be », il dira : « Conscience does make cowards of us all » (III, 1, 83) . Et au quatrième acte, face au courage des soldats de Fortinbras (prêts, eux, à mourir pour rien), il fera une part plus précise des choses, imputant son inertie et aux atermoiements de la raison (« god-like reason », IV, 4, 38) et à sa lâcheté (« one part wisdom [...] three parts coward », IV, 4, 43-44). Pouvons nous y voir plus clair que lui ?

Non, pas forcément. Je pense que ce qu'il dit est ambigu. C'est toujours cette même question qu'Hamlet se pose : est-ce que mon hésitation, etc. Il ne faut quand même pas oublier qu'Hamlet, ce qu'on lui demande, c'est de détruire sa famille tout entière, de mettre à feu et à sang tout son univers. Alors, il hésite peut-être un peu plus que dans le cas de Rosencrantz et de Guildenstern, mais je pense que l'idée de *cowardice* est une idée qui est liée à l'impossibilité d'exprimer les hésitations, parfaitement légitimes, qu'il éprouve devant la vengeance. Shakespeare, malgré tout, les formule, ces hésitations, il les formule dans sa satire des personnages qui sont autour d'Hamlet – Claudius et les autres. Hamlet, lui-même, ne peut jamais exprimer jusqu'au bout les sentiments réels qu'il éprouve pour son père. Et ces sentiments, à mon avis, il ne faut pas les psychanalyser non plus. La question du rapport entre Claudius et Hamlet nous ramène au problème des doubles. Shakespeare a au plus haut degré le sens du tragique, la conscience de l'auteur tragique, qui sait qu'il n'y a pas de différence entre Penthée et Dionysos, entre Œdipe et Créon, entre tous ces personnages. Dans la tragédie grecque, l'auteur ne nous dit jamais cela ; Shakespeare nous le dit. Il nous le dit à demi ; il le dit parfois complètement. A mon avis il ne le dit guère complètement que dans les *romances*, et en particulier dans *Le Conte d'hiver*. C'est pourquoi j'ai tendance à mettre *Le Conte d'hiver* tout à fait au sommet de l'œuvre shakespearienne. Mais peut-être que, dramatiquement, ce n'est pas vrai. Parce qu'à partir du moment où l'auteur dit cette vérité-là, il n'y a plus vraiment de drame. Le drame exige cette ambiguïté, cette impossibilité pour Hamlet de se définir. Ou bien c'est un homme de l'avenir, ou bien, s'il n'est pas un homme de l'avenir, s'il ne peut pas formuler cet avenir, il n'est effectivement qu'un poltron, un homme qui n'ose pas. Il ne peut pas s'interpréter autrement. Il est dès lors permis de dire que toute la critique, pendant des siècles, est restée prisonnière de cette fausse évidence qu'est la lâcheté. On a essayé de l'expliquer par des moyens seconds, des inconscients, des choses comme ça. Moi, je préfère l'expliquer par l'illégitimité de la vengeance qui transparaît à toutes les lignes.

« Purposes mistook/Fall'n on th'inventors'heads » (V, 2, 366-367). C'est ainsi qu'à la fin de la pièce Horatio résume l'intrigue. Ce résumé vous satisfait-il ?

Il y a aussi « to have the enginer/Hoist with his own petar » (III, 4, 216-217). C'est très important pour tout Shakespeare. Parce que c'est un peu ce que les critiques appellent la *poetic justice*, et j'ai un mot à dire là-dessus. *Poetic justice* pour les critiques, cela veut dire une justice seulement poétique, le fait que le malfaiteur voie sa mauvaise action punie se retourner contre lui. Cette justice est considérée par les critiques comme *poetic* parce qu'ils ne la tiennent pas pour réelle : « Poetic justice = literary justice = which doesn't happen in reality ». A mon avis, c'est une vision complètement fausse, car on est toujours dans un univers de vengeance, le vengeur va toujours sortir de quelque part, si bien que finalement toutes les situations ont tendance à se retourner contre

ceux qui en ont responsables. Ce que les critiques appellent *poetic justice*, c'est leur refus (exprimé ici par le mot *poetic*) de voir que les mécanismes mimétiques fonctionnent, que les rapports humains sont circulaires, qu'on ne peut pas, lorsqu'on commet certains crimes, d'une certaine façon ne pas les payer. Il arrive qu'on ne les paie pas, aussi, mais le fait qu'on les paie n'est pas dû le moins du monde au respect par l'écrivain d'une certaine convention morale ; il est dû au fait que les actes font surgir les vengeurs sous les pas du criminel – exactement comme dans le mythe de Cadmos, lorsque celui-ci sème les dents du dragon et que les dents du dragon se transforment en guerriers qui se mettent à se tuer les uns des autres. A mon avis, dans l'expression *poetic justice*, c'est-à-dire dans le refus du retour de la vengeance sur le vengeur, il y a simplement un refus de *voir*. Ce que ces critiques appellent *poetic justice*, c'est précisément la répétition contre laquelle Hamlet se révolte, cette circularité constante où l'on se dit : « Je suis exactement comme un cheval de cirque, je vais faire mon tour de piste : je vais tuer Claudius, puis je serai tué par untel, et ainsi de suite ». C'est dans ce cercle qu'il ne veut pas entrer.

Un cheval de cirque, faisant son numéro...

Faisant son numéro, oui.

La pièce se termine sur un éloge d'Hamlet formulé par un personnage irréprochable (mais norvégien et qui ramasse la mise de toutes les vengeances), Fortinbras : « For he was likely, had he been put on,/To have proved most royal » (V, 2, 379-380). Est-ce là, selon vous, le jugement final de Shakespeare, un jugement plus tendre et plus positif que celui que certains critiques ont porté au fil du temps ?

D'une certaine manière, oui. Mais il est très shakespearien de terminer sur ce genre de note. C'est particulièrement net dans *Jules César* où Octave et Antoine font un éloge de Brutus qui annule certains aspects de la pièce et qui réconcilie Brutus et César. Cet élément fait partie, chez Shakespeare, de ce sens du théâtre formidable qui est le sien.

Peut-on parler de happy end *?*

L'élément *happy end* est l'élément cathartique. Hamlet n'est pas mort pour rien, il nous fournit une leçon, etc. C'est peu de chose, car l'allusion est très rapide. Mais il faut voir que cela se situe juste au moment où les gens vont partir. Ils vont donc rester sur cette note, et cela efface un peu tous les mauvais coups multipliés au cours de la pièce. Je crois qu'il y a ce côté-là chez Shakespeare – cet encadré. Il y a un peu la même chose pour *Richard III*, mais à l'envers. Au début il arrive et dit : je suis tout bossu, bancal, méchant, infect,

etc. Et ensuite il dit la vérité de tout le monde, il montre que toutes les femmes autour de lui sont bien pires que lui, avant de redevenir à la fin le personnage infect dont on se débarrasse volontiers. Il y a là cet élément de *scapegoating* qui est, je crois, légitime et nécessaire au bon fonctionnement du théâtre, au plaisir du spectateur qui s'en va en disant : « Justice est faite ».

Tout comme Laërte (« The rabble call him lord », IV, 5, 100), Hamlet est populaire. Claudius le constate amèrement, deux fois : « he's loved of the distracted multitude » (IV, 3, 4) et « the great love the general gender bear him » (IV, 7, 18). Comment interprétez-vous cette présence, à l'arrière-plan, d'un peuple plutôt protecteur de l'innocence et de la justice ?

Je pense qu'il y a une vérité psychologique de la chose. D'abord. Hamlet est beau parleur. Il est jeune ; il est décrit comme élégant et beau par Ophélia. Et le peuple vit la succession des rois avec le désir, toujours, de se trouver sa vedette : on sent qu'Hamlet peut fournir cette image. D'autre part, Hamlet est certainement à l'aise avec le peuple ; il a une facilité de contact que son côté théâtral vient même renforcer. Donc, il y a une vérité psychologique de la chose. Mais je pense que sa popularité est un peu nécessaire aussi sur le plan logique pour justifier le niveau d'inquiétude qu'il suscite. Claudius, d'un bout à l'autre de la pièce, est motivé par la peur qu'il a d'Hamlet au regard du peuple. Enfin je pense qu'à l'arrière-plan de la tragédie, il y a toujours la foule, et chez Shakespeare, même si cela se manifeste relativement peu dans *Hamlet* par rapport à *Jules César*, une conscience aiguë du rôle de la multitude.

Statistiquement, Hamlet *est, aujourd'hui comme hier, la plus jouée des pièces de Shakespeare. C'est probablement celle sur laquelle, depuis toujours, on a le plus écrit. C'est aussi celle qui semble s'attacher le plus spontanément au nom de Shakespeare – comme* le Misanthrope *à celui de Molière ou* le Cid *à celui de Corneille. Comment expliquer ce statut particulier de* Hamlet *dans l'œuvre shakespearienne ?*

Ce statut, pour une pièce jouée depuis quatre siècles, ne peut pas être une erreur. Je crois que *Hamlet*, d'une certaine manière, pousse certaines qualités de Shakespeare à leur maximum. Il y a cette puissance de création, ces personnages extraordinairement vivants et complexes, et qui en même temps sont accessibles au public moyen. Shakespeare est capable de réaliser cela à l'intérieur de son texte. Il est capable d'être extraordinairement moderne à l'intérieur d'un cadre qui reste celui de la tragédie classique, qui a la forme essentielle de l'art et du religieux occidentaux, c'est-à-dire la forme de la crise mimétique résolue par le meurtre, la vengeance, au moins temporairement. Il réussit à faire cela. Shakespeare peut faire jouer les ressorts du tragique, du comique, les effets traditionnels les plus classiques et, en même temps, les mettre en question de la façon la plus audacieuse, la plus radicale, la plus

moderne, sans que cette mise en question empêche leur fonctionnement. On pourrait même dire souvent qu'elle le facilite et le rend plus efficace. C'est cela qui me paraît le plus remarquable.

Oui, mais pourquoi – je reviens à ma question –, pourquoi est-ce que c'est cette pièce, Hamlet*, qui s'associe dans l'esprit de l'homme de la rue ou de l'homme cultivé le plus spontanément à Shakespeare ?*

Dans les High Schools, ici en Amérique, ce n'est pas *Hamlet* qu'on étudie le plus, c'est *Jules César* parce que la pièce est plus facile à lire aujourd'hui, peut-être. Il semble cependant que ce que vous dites est vrai au niveau d'une certaine élite shakespearienne qui, de siècle en siècle, trouve des valeurs nouvelles dans *Hamlet*, interprète *Hamlet* différemment. Mais peut-être est-ce une question à laquelle on ne peut pas vraiment répondre. Peut-être que le sujet de la pièce – cette mise en cause fondamentale de la violence – est aujourd'hui particulièrement vivant au point d'être ressenti par le public, même si celui-ci est incapable de formuler explicitement ce qu'il ressent. La pièce a donc une dangereuse *relevance*, une *relevance* ou une actualité plus grande que *Macbeth* par exemple. *Macbeth* est la tragédie d'un roi, un drame archaïque qui a certes des profondeurs remarquables, mais qui n'arrive pas au niveau de *Hamlet*. Si *Hamlet* a toutes les qualités d'une tragédie et nous dépayse complètement, c'est en même temps une pièce qui est au centre de notre destinée. Voilà peut-être ce qu'il faut dire.

C'est dit. Mais je prolonge ou reprends ma question. Hamlet*,* Le Misanthrope*,* Le Cid*...*

Le Cid c'est autre chose.

Mais est-ce qu'il n'y a pas entre ces trois héros quelque chose de commun qui se conjugue pour en faire des hommes modernes qui nous parlent ?

Entre les héros de *Hamlet* et du *Misanthrope* je dirai oui. Parce que ce sont deux figures de l'intellectuel moderne, et qui par certains côtés sont assez proches l'une de l'autre. Le Misanthrope est, lui aussi, un homme qui ne peut pas se décider, qui reste là à se ronger les ongles derrière le canapé de Célimène. Il cesse d'être ridicule à partir du moment où il décide de partir. De la même manière qu'Hamlet lorsqu'il casse tout. Dans le cas du *Cid*, je vois le succès de la pièce un peu comme celui de *Cyrano de Bergerac*...

Quand on lit Le Misanthrope*, par exemple, on retrouve énormément de vers ou de portions de texte qui sont entrés dans la langue. Est-ce qu'il n'y a pas la même chose dans* Hamlet *?*

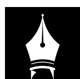
Oui, certainement. Je citerai l'exemple de cette femme du village de l'Indiana où ma propre épouse est née, et qui disait : *« Hamlet, well, all it is is a bunch of quotations all strung together »*. Je trouve cela absolument admirable. Car cela veut dire qu'elle connaissait tout *Hamlet* sans l'avoir jamais vu, ni lu ! Et lorsqu'elle l'a vu ou lu, elle a eu ce sentiment de déjà vu. Formidable, non ! Il y a un autre grand texte en anglais qui donne cette impression, et c'est la Bible. Très souvent les gens se demandent, ou se demandaient naguère, si telle ou telle expression qu'ils viennent d'utiliser appartient à la bible – la King James Version – ou à Shakespeare. C'est la même époque. Et de ces deux œuvres est née une masse énorme de phrases proverbiales...

Qui en l'occurrence ont contribué de façon importante à la formation de la langue et de la culture anglaises...

Oui, c'est pour cela que cette manière qu'on a en France de dire que l'anglais est une langue commerciale est, à mon sens, assez comique quand on pense qu'elle est construite sur Shakespeare et sur la *King James Version* ! Remarque : Shakespeare est très fort en matière de métaphores commerciales, mais il les utilise de façon délibérée et dans un but précis. Il y en a une que je me rappelle avoir citée. C'est dans *Comme il vous plaira*, à propos de la fille narcissique qui se refuse à Silvius, etc. Rosalinde dit à Phébé : « Sell when you can, you are not for all markets » (III, 5, 60). Il faut se vendre *when the stock is high* : ce que Shakespeare dit là, c'est que l'univers de la coquetterie et des rivalités mimétiques fonctionne selon les mêmes lois que la spéculation économique et financière. Je trouve cela admirable aussi.

1. *Shakespeare ou les feux de l'envie* (Paris : Grasset, 1990, trad. B. Vincent) 32.

2. « If you hold that he, a greying man with two marriageable daughters, with thirty-five years of life, nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita, with fifty years of experience is the beardless undergraduate from Wittenberg, then you must hold that his seventy-year old mother is the lustful queen. No. » James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York : The Modern Library, 1946) 205.



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.*

Catherine Bernard and Marc Amfreville are Maîtres de Conférence respectively at the University of Paris VII-Jussieu and at the University of Orléans.
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?

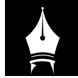
I don't know. It's just the way it happened... I can't describe it to you. Well, of course, if I was a genius like Dickens, I would have done much more. In most of it, it is just instinct, you see. It's nothing one can actually describe or explain.

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.

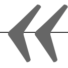


David Copperfield
An interview with Michael Hollington

by Marc AMFREVILLE

Professor Hollington currently teaches English Literature at the Université de Toulon et du Var. He formerly taught in England (University of East Anglia), in Norway and in Australia (Griffith University and the University of South Wales). He has published Dickens and the Grotesque *(London: Helm, 1984),* Charles Dickens: Critical Assessments *(London; Helm, 1995, 4 volumes, c. 3000 pages), and written over twenty articles on Dickens. He is preparing* The Companion to David Copperfield *for Helm Information.*

Marc Amfreville is Maître de Conférences at the University of Orléans. The interview took place on September 19, 1996 in London.



The first thing I would like us to try to do, is define Dickens's place in English literature. Do you consider him a Victorian writer?

Yes and no, I think. He really transcends Victorian writing in my view. And I think, like Angus Wilson and some other people, that his closest relatives are European writers, rather than other Victorian writers—that's to say people like Dostoievsky, Balzac or Gogol—and that he belongs in a kind of European league that rather transcends the characteristic preoccupations of Victorian fiction. And one of the things Angus Wilson said is that he's got a bigger sense of evil than most people, than most Victorian writers. And I believe that.

But there have also been suggestions among the critics, that he was a pre-Victorian writer in many ways.

Well, perhaps that's part of my answer. Donald Fanger has a very good book *Dostoiesvsky and Romantic Realism*, about Balzac, Dickens, Gogol in relation to Dostoievsky. And that's the sort of way I would approach Dickens, not as a realist in a Henry James sense, or even a George Eliot sense, but in relation to those kinds of writers, and therefore the word *romantic* almost inevitably occurs with the word realism.

Do you still perceive, I'm thinking of David Copperfield in particular, do you still perceive shades of romanticism in Dickens's work?

Absolutely, yes. I don't think I believe in some absolutely fundamental shift between romanticism and realism anyway, I don't see those as simply in opposition. But the case of Dickens would be one where there is a complete muddying and intermingling of those two things.

Now, to say that in a way he is also a realist writer leads us to the social dimension of David Copperfield*.*

I think it's very important. It has been underestimated. It's one of the things that I feel reasonably strongly about. In other works by Dickens the social element is overt and you can't mistake it. *Oliver Twist* is about the Poor Law and *Bleak House* is about the legal system and various novels have a specific social target. *David Copperfield* obviously doesn't, and yet it seems to me thoroughly mistaken not to see it in relation to the social world. And the whole sets of questions that I'm sure you are going to ask about development and the individual, in my view, can't be answered just in individual terms. If you try to think about the individual realising his or herself, that can't happen in a vacuum. It's bound to happen in a society and family.

Would you go as far as to say that there is a political, a polemical dimension to David Copperfield*?*

I would. Although it's not overt. It's less overt in that novel than in almost any other novel by Dickens. But I'm always very interested in the fact that what triggered off Dickens's re-visiting of his childhood was actually a revolution that he witnessed in Geneva in 1846, and he says at that moment one must be devilish careful, or something like that, with what one does to children. "I thought of that in Geneva", he writes to Forster. And I see a very interesting kind of connection that at the moment he started writing about his childhood, it was in the middle of writing *Dombey*, and then he went on to *David Copperfield*. The specific political circumstances, relatively speaking, take a back seat. But they are there. Jack Malden, for instance, talks about "the unrest in the North", Dr Strong asks him what's in the news at breakfast, and he says, "Oh it's just the same old story about unrest in the North". And we're seeing, through the negative figure of Jack Malden, a view of how one should actually be concerned about these social questions.

And yet, if I remember correctly what I read in Ackroyd's *biography, Dickens seems to have been insensitive, for example, to signs of upheaval in Italy, although he lived there for a while.*

I think absolutely the reverse. Dickens was an enormous supporter of the Italian Revolution. And he did a great deal on behalf of the Italian people. He was a friend of Mazzini's. He was a major figure amongst the English supporters of the *Risorgimento* in Italy. So now, I refer you to an article[1] I wrote myself on Dickens in Italy, in a journal of Anglo-Italian studies for that kind of background, but I'm not the only person to draw on for that. He was a very committed figure on behalf of the Italian political cause.

Still in this socio-political context, how do you view the emigration of various characters to Australia? Would you say, in the way some critics have considered it, it was just a convenient way of getting rid of the Micawbers, Emily, Mr. Peggoty and the rest?

No. I think it's more than that. What it's most closely related to, in my judgement, is Dickens's activity at that time, on behalf of Urania Cottage, which was a place with the aim of reforming prostitutes and then sending them off to the colonies. There was a scheme run by a lady called Caroline Chisholm that Dickens very much supported. There was a perceived need for women to marry, to settle; now transportation was in the past and there was the Gold Rush starting about 1850, the discovery of gold and the idea of settling families which led to the founding of Melbourne, and Dickens was very much active in that move to resettle. Two of his sons died in Australia, by the way. So that he at one stage intended to visit Australia, but the negotiations broke down and he wanted too much money, he wanted his daughter and son-in-law to go with him as well. No, I certainly don't think they were just sort of sent off to nowhere, I think that Australia is a theme in his work as a whole. It has, in my view, a redemptive kind of level. Always people come back from Australia; even in *David Copperfield* you get the return of Daniel Peggotty at the very end. And they have reformed. They have made themselves down there. Magwitch, of course, in *Great Expectations*, is really very, very important. But even in the earlier texts, you'll also find this return pattern from Australia. So now I think it belongs in the whole series of symbolic journeys in *David Copperfield*. You could see the novel as punctuated by journeys.

Would you say that David Copperfield *also constitutes an apology for Victorian values?*

That's an interesting and difficult question, I think. [Laughter]... Angus Wilson, for example, sees it as his most bourgeois, most conformist novel. Mario Praz

is another example, seeing this in the light of a kind of Biedermeier ideology in this novel. And there seems to me no question that at some level that is there, in the novel. The case, to me, is how important is it in relation to the novel as a whole. I always want to stress the fact that David is a writer, and is becoming a writer, and this is what is important, and the kind of writer he is becoming is to be a socially critical one, not someone who simply accepts that ideology. And then we have figures in the novel who are not at all Victorian, such as Micawber, who are so vital and important. And they are vital precisely in terms of the education of an artist, because of Micawber's love of language and his extraordinary prolix and vital verbal activity. I think one can over-emphasise the bourgeois, Victorianness of *David Copperfield*. If one does, it turns out to be a novel that one doesn't rank as highly as some of the others. Angus Wilson seems to me to draw the right conclusion when he says it is very much more bourgeois than a lot of Dickens's fiction, very much more Victorian...

I was thinking of precise elements, like the work ethic...

Yes. Unquestionably, Dickens was a believer in the work ethic and got that from Carlyle and so on. But put it this way. Supposing one thinks in terms of what is the central essence of the Victorian work ethic values. You remember Samuel Smiles's book *Self Help*, I don't think that Dickens puts it as crudely and simply as that. The idea of self-help being anybody can make it, you know... the American Dream in Victorian England. I don't think Dickens believed in that. I believe that he saw society as constraining for us. And you couldn't, in fact, realise yourself if the society was rotten or had no means of allowing you to realise yourself. And it seems to me that those two are intertwined. He doesn't believe in simple self-help in Samuel Smiles's terms in his work. Even though he accepts considerable aspects of Victorian ideology...

Are you thinking of Victorian prudery, for example?

I think I agree with Graham Storey when he says there's a surprising amount of covert and overt sexuality in *David Copperfield* and it's just a case of where you look and what you expect to be the symptoms. You won't find Dickens going into people's bedrooms and describing in detail their activities, what they do with each other. You'll find indications, and one for instance is Littimer: when little Emily is abandoned, or cast off, you'll notice that he "licked his lips". All kinds of people do that... Uriah Heep's another, who talks about "plucking pears" and licking his lips over Agnes. Miss Mowcher is a character who is full of sexual reference. Rose Dartle in another way. There's a huge analysis, I think, in this book of various kinds of perversity. In Creakle you've got a kind of paedophile figure, I think. Someone who really loves chubby boys' behinds. You've got Murdstone's love of hurting, twisting David's neck or head, under his arms. Miss Murdstone... and Rose Dartle, it's

quite extraordinary, I think, how she wants Emily whipped and so on. There are other Victorian writers that are more outspoken than Dickens, that's for sure. But none will deal with sexuality in the way writers do nowadays.

One does perceive in the text echoes of other works. Could you tell us something of David Copperfield *and intertextuality?*

Yes, what's very often said, of course, is that it's most connected with *Tom Jones* because the only son who really made it big, Henry Fielding Dickens, was born in early 1849. He was going to call him Oliver Goldsmith Dickens, and then he changed his mind and called him Henry Fielding Dickens instead, and many people said, Ha, ha, this is because *Tom Jones* was on his mind... and then of course, *Tom Jones* is mentioned in the text or David imagines himself as a child's Tom Jones, i.e. an innocent and not a sexually voracious Tom Jones. So that certainly is an element. He loved all these eighteenth century writers. He loved Smollett, the picaresque form was something that mattered to him very much. The loose structure with the central hero passing through a series of encounters and so on. There is a great deal of Dickens that is obviously indebted to the eighteenth century novel in England.

Hamlet?

Yes. Well, *Hamlet* is an obvious presence in the novel and right in the first chapter he has Mr. Chillip, like the ghost in *Hamlet* . Mr. Chillip is a wonderful non-aggressive male, he's very much female-dominated, and mild, the real male in the first chapter is Aunt Betsey. And he walks so softly, he's like the ghost in *Hamlet*. And then that immediately gets taken up with David's fear of his own father, resurrecting from the grave. And Mrs. Copperfield reads the story of Lazarus and he's scared that it means his father will come back as a ghost. If you just look at the word ghost, for instance, in connection with *Hamlet*, it's there over and over again in the novel. There is a lot of inter-textuality, it's a very literary book and Dickens is a very allusive writer and there are characters who are very allusive, such as Micawber, constantly quoting from a whole range of English literature. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is certainly the text after the Bible that everybody, even the poorest family in the nineteenth century, would own a copy of. And Dickens is always, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* for instance, following this kind of allegorical path of the hero or heroine towards salvation or their goal, and that's another key text. But one could mention lots and lots of texts that have a connection. Recently I've been very interested in the connection between *David Copperfield* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. Wilhelm, as a child, is in love with puppet plays, and the play that he loves above all is "David and Goliath". And it suddenly struck me how much David and various Goliaths can be seen in the novel; his confrontation with Murdstone can be seen with that kind of figuration in mind. Chaucer's

Canterbury Tales also figures in the book. The town of Canterbury has such prominence in the novel—and the journey metaphor, through and to Canterbury. Micawber quotes Chaucer, he quotes almost every English author. He stands for the English literary tradition, I think. He's a kind of father of David as a writer. By handing over to him all kinds of writers; Burns is a good example—he stands as a joke embodiment of a literary patrimony.

Which is interesting, because it's also been suggested that he was also partly a caricature of Dickens's father.

Unquestionably. I think it is a complex representation but eventually a tribute to his father. I can't make any sense of this in any other way, you know. A kind of very, very mixed one, of course, whose nearest equivalent is perhaps Naipaul's representation of his father in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The Micawbers are, as Graham Storey says, certainly the only real family that David discovers in the first half of the novel, at least until he discovers the very eccentric family of Aunt Betsey and Mr. Dick.

One does perceive, however, some distance taken from his father, in his reprentation of Mr. Micawber's bombastic style, don't you think?

Yes, well, obviously...

Not to mention his relationship to money, of course, which is one of the points he might have wanted to reproach his father with.

Yes, yes, yes. I mean the downside to Dickens's father of course was his way of getting into debt but if you look at the autobiographical stuff, it's the mother he's most angry about, because the mother wanted him to work and he says "I shall never forget her being warm for my going back". The father actually pulled him out of the blacking factory, maybe not for the best of reasons, because he was angry that he was on display in a window, so that people could see his boy working there, but the father was more active in getting him out. The mother wanted him to continue. She thought of the cash. So, I think Dickens was harder on her, really, in his assessment of who was to blame, than he was upon his father. That's my reading of it anyway. With Mrs. Nickleby in *Nicholas Nickleby* he really gets at his mother. It's interesting that Mrs. Micawber, by comparison, is much more attractive, really loveable in lots of ways in this novel, and of course, there is her total devotion to her husband [laughter].

Aside from this blacking factory episode you were mentioning, do you see other significant autobiographical details?

Obviously, that's got to be the main one, because, as we know, not long before *David Copperfield*, for the one and only time in his life, Dickens confessed. It was an accident. Forster said that someone called Dilke remembered having seen him as a child, and Dickens said, "Oh, yes. I knew him generally," and Forster added, "Ah, but he saw you in a particular place," and then finally Dickens confessed. So that's got to be the main autobiographical element. But no, there are lots of others. Dora is related to Maria Beadnell. Personally, I find Dora a very attractive and interesting character in *David Copperfield*, a rather sexy person: again, if you want to think in terms of "is there sexuality in *David Copperfield*?" I think undoubtedly yes. And that's one of the problems with Agnes, because she's totally lacking in this respect. But there are many things that one can relate to Dickens's autobiography. Whether that's the most important thing to do, however, I'm not sure.

But would you say this is the most autobiographical novel?

I think you'd probably have to say that, yes.

Perhaps more in terms of tone and general feeling towards his novel writing than actual facts...

Yes. I'm a little bit resistant to the notion that an autobiography explains *David Copperfield*, because I really don't think it does. And in a way, I think it can lead us up the wrong path. How pervasively, for example, so many critics of *David Copperfield* completely neglect the social level because they're so interested in the autobiographical set of issues. And then another danger, I think, is that one almost unconsciously thinks that David is Dickens. That seems to me a very dubious assumption—that because he is the narrator in the novel, he is also the author. Dickens doesn't identify himself with David. He's much more critical than David. David is a device, really, in terms of the Bildungsroman for instance and the device, as in *Wilhelm Meister*, is to make David, in some sense, a fool, which I don't think Dickens was.

Do you think Dickens has used all the possibilities of this first person narrative? I'm thinking in terms of comparison with American writers of the same period, for example. Do you think he makes a satisfying use of the possible resources of the unreliability of David, or of dramatic irony?

Oh, unquestionably. He certainly uses such devices. If you want to study that, you can look at the notes for the number plans. This is one of the reasons why

I tend to resist the critical emphasis on the earnest, bourgeois, Victorian work ethic. At the point where David is thoroughly into that kind of thing, if you look up the notes, you'll find Dickens saying "overdone," David's throwing himself into work is overdone. So you can very much see there's this gap between the writer and his character, when we get, for instance, David seeing a stone breaker out working on Highgate Hill, and he says "I wish I could take the pick from him" so as to build a path to Dora. It's quite obvious that he's being mocked. So the question about the unreliableness, though, is that we've got a mature narrator, haven't we? The mature narrator is himself aware of the mistakes of the younger David, and clearly that's not the same in American fiction, in *Huckleberry Finn*, anyway.

In that case, this may be one of the successful aspects of the novel itself?

I think it is... I mean one of the most brilliant things, surely, about this novel, is the handling of memory, the extraordinary fluidity in which it moves between now and then, often with wonderfully ambiguous effects. The moment of the announcement of David's mother's death on a foggy day: "I can see the hoar frost, ghostly, through it." And you first of all think, is that ghostly because he can't remember well enough, or was it ghostly at the time? And you realise that, because of the fog, it had to be ghostly at the time, but at the same time, there's a kind of way in which it's a prolepsis that he's worried that she is dead. He has a premonition, some brilliantly fluid movement between now and the past, and then the time in between. And that, it seems to me, there are very few writers who have managed that. He has a notion of *mémoire involontaire*, very Proustian, of course; it's never theorised as such, but how easily in Dickens this is done—how it's not something that occurs in privileged moments, when one happens to feel a particular twinge, but is there all the time. It's happening all the time. And we're moving so fluidly and easily between past and present. I do think of *David Copperfield* as a very remarkable book, from a formal point of view. On a comparative scale there are certainly later, subtler uses of the first person narrative. Joyce, for instance, makes a splendid use of his first person narrator, but it's surely the case that *David Copperfield* is one of the major breakthroughs. Certainly for Dickens, anyway.

Now, to turn to other characters. There have been reproaches of inconsistency in certain characters. I'm thinking of Miss Mowcher*, for example.*

Well, yes, absolutely true, of course. Miss Mowcher, on the first occasion we meet her comes across as an extraordinary figure, very remarkable. And the second time, after Dickens got a solicitor's letter from a dwarf lady, saying how distressed she was at the representation of Miss Mowcher, he obviously completely changes that figure. And she loses her power, pretty much anyway, in that second appearance. I don't think, however, that it is an isolated case.

One of the things it shows, of course, is that Dickens was very sensitive about middle class reactions to his novels. He didn't want to offend, and the idea that he was offending troubled him. That would be one case of inconsistency in Dickens. However, there's an almost deliberate kind of inconsistency in Dickens. His use of pantomime effects, of transformations. If you take Miss Mowcher, she transforms, doesn't she, in this sense. Yes, I'm trying to build a defence, although I don't really believe in it. I mean, it is a pity that he changes Miss Mowcher. But you get these characters like Mrs. Gummidge, who transforms. You might say, it's inconsistent, "she's only a poor lone creature", then all of a sudden, she becomes this heroine. But it happens regularly in Dickens that people transform because of the pantomime structure of his writing, that is non-realist, if you like...

Now, on the other hand, a character like Uriah doesn't transform.

Interesting. It seems to me that that's connected with his theology. You know, he's a Calvinist, it's a mistaken view of the soul and its destiny and its possibilities. He denies freewill. The two major Calvinist figures, puritans, are Murdstone and Heep and they are clearly related. And, you know, their nature is much more imprinted in them, in the onomastics of the names for instance... Murdstone/murderer, his personality hasn't got as much fluidity in it as David's of course, and this is again this conception of the *Bildungsroman*, the central figure must not be too definite.

Would you like to add a comment on the onomastics of Uriah, perhaps?

Yes, well, biblical, fundamentalist, bible-reading. His father is a sexton, if you remember. And Heep is a wonderful name, of course, that Micawber picks up on. Heap... pile... and those characters have fixed identities to a greater extent. Even in the end, Uriah Heep is utterly a hypocrite, even when he goes to prison... he doesn't reform. This is where the Australia thing comes in... Only because Uriah should have been transported, in a way...but Dickens doesn't want that notion at all, Uriah is not capable of remaking himself.

I was trying to suggest that perhaps characters like Uriah Heep are ultra-simplistic, types, almost, as opposed to characters?

Yes.

One-sided villains, if you wish.

I think it's a case of what you are looking for. Obviously you would be disappointed if you want a study in realist psychology. There's something essentially symbolic and demonic about Uriah Heep. I don't think you're likely

to meet individuals like this. He doesn't impinge upon your sense—ah, I know someone like that—if that's a criterion of realism. One of the significant things about him, though, is the way in which he is related to David, and the purity and intensity of his evil. The problem is that someone like David is, in a peculiar way, attracted to him. They have a sort of relationship...

Doppelgängers in a way?

Yes, certainly. Remember when he stays the night and David can't resist going in and looking at him as he's got his mouth open, he's fascinated by him. It's what he called, I think he even uses a phrase, the attraction of repulsion. So he may in himself be simple, if you like, but he has a function in relation to other characters who are not simple.

There remains for us Agnes to discuss. Q.D. Leavis suggests that Agnes is only, I quote, "a willed concession to the Victorian ideal". Whereas, I think, Dickens himself wrote that she was the real heroine.

Either way, Agnes is a great weakness, if not the major weakness of the novel. Q. D. Leavis is perhaps saying, yes, this is true, but in the end it's not that important. But perhaps you're saying, "ah but he thought she was the heroine of the novel", and I agree if that is so, it's a pretty serious problem for the novel that Agnes is so awful, really.

You mean perfect?

[laughter] Yes. But I have a lot of sympathy with Q.D. Leavis's view. I think it's a terrible pity at least if one allows the failure of Agnes to have too much weight in one's reading of *David Copperfield*, of the novel. And she is, on the whole, confined, even if she's given a central role. She isn't there that often, not to be a major, really major problem, so that I'd probably side, relatively speaking, with Q.D. Leavis, in the sense that she's saying "well in the end it doesn't matter, that's not what the book is about".

In the same light, do you consider the happy ending an aesthetic flaw?

Yes I *do*. Insofar as it is concerned with the marriage of Agnes and David. It's so inert. There's nothing there, is there? In fact this wonderful analysis of the relationship with Dora, the marriage with Dora, it just doesn't exist in the end and by the way I'm very much on the side of those who think Dora is an important and interesting character.

Really?

Yes. [laughter]

She may be interesting as a literary device, I am not sure she is psychologically fascinating.

It depends on what you mean by fascinating. Firstly, Dora's problems, it seems to me, have to do with conceptions of women in Victorian society. And these are understood and criticised, and her father is, like most Victorian men, out to sell her to the best bidder, to the highest bidder. Notice how, when David loses all his money, he gets very angry that he should have any relationship with his daughter. But up until then he'd been quite happy with this because he thought David was going to inherit a tidy sum, you know. And then the whole notion of how she is educated, of what she should do and what her role in society is. I think they help explain her inadequacies, if you like. I personally don't find her boring. First of all, she's funny, she's amusing. What she does with a dictionary, she turns it into something to pretend to fight Jip with, as if he were a lion or something. His pagoda, the dog's pagoda, and so on. I may be trying too hard for her, but she's interesting, I think. There's an article by Margaret Darby who puts the case for Dora and I think she is right in many ways. Certainly, I prefer her to Agnes, oh yes.

So let me ask you something totally different. We asked Peter Ackroyd the same question two weeks ago and I would like to have your opinion as well. Do you believe, along with Dickens himself, Virginia Woolf and several critics, that David Copperfield *was his best novel?*

Probably not. The first fifteen chapters of *David Copperfield* are incomparable of course. I don't think all of the rest of the novel is quite of that quality, although there are some absolutely wonderful things in it. Another novel that I like very much is *Dombey and Son*, and it has things in common with *Dombey and Son* in that respect, and again, I think that until Paul's death, *Dombey* is utterly brilliant, and they're both at the mid-point in Dickens's career. But were I to say which was the greatest novel, it seems to me that the later ones are the more sustained... Probably I would accept the idea that *Bleak House* is his greatest novel. It's a very commonplace view, but the book is so profound, it seems to me that with this central question of the law, so much is brought out of that: it's a metaphysical novel. So I prefer the late, great, social novels in the end and they're the finest... that's to say *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend*.

But you do seem to suggest that David Copperfield *marks the turning point in Dickens's consciousness of his craft?*

Certainly.

So, perhaps we could tell us a bit more of that turning point in terms of structure, repetition, characterisation. Don't you think there is a sort of maturity of this talent that was not perceivable before?

Oh yes. Although, again, I think *Dombey* is the first mature novel. And *Dombey* has more overt social dimensions, it's about the railways, and it's about business in a more developed way than is *David Copperfield*. It's the first modern novel in Dickens, about now, about contemporary England. And that would be its strength against *David Copperfield*, the fact that the social side is so overt. They are both marked by a wonderful development in the representation of the child, I think. Kathleen Tillotson and others have remarked how earlier on, he wrote more, quantitatively, about children. Oliver Twist is always a child, throughout the novel from beginning to end; but Dickens has a much deeper understanding of the child now, partly because of seeing it in a developmental pattern. Oliver doesn't develop, Oliver is just a static notion of an essence and no, environment doesn't impinge upon him at all, but in Paul Dombey... and even more so, in David, there's a much subtler understanding of how environment affects the personality.

Would you say Dickens is the first writer to have laid so much emphasis on child psychology?

Not the first, no. I mean, the book that has to be read here is Peter Coveney's *Poor Monkey*, which first appeared in 1957 and then later was re-titled *The Child in Literature*. Of course, Coveney takes the child theme back to the romantic period. It has to be connected with Rousseau and in England with the Romantic poets in particular. Wordsworth, of course, in the Prelude, has an enormous, complex, psychological study of his own development and his own nature as a child. So not the first...

What if I had said "English novelist" as opposed to just "writer"?

Well, then, probably, yes. What is interesting is to look at it the other way round. One of the writers who thought that Dickens was incomparable in representing children is Turgenev. His great story "Bezhin Meadow" in *The Sportsman's Notebook* is a homage to Dickens's representation of the child. And Turgenev said, I couldn't do it as well as Dickens. But he was trying, that was what he wanted... Dickens was the model for him. So that's a way of saying, yes, Dickens's was the first great representation of the child, in prose.

And it's more than just representation. It's also perhaps, in a Wordsworthian fashion, the way he makes David the child the father of David the adult?

The child who is father to the man?

Very technically, I mean.

You mean in terms of the *Bildungsroman*.

Yes.

This is a complex question, isn't it? That militates against notions of development. If you say that the given aim of one's life is to be an artist... You will remember that passage in the second chapter in which David says "I'd rather retain certain features than acquire them," and the passage which stresses that "the power of observation in numbers of very young children is quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy. I think that most grown men who are remarkable in this respect may with greater propriety be said not to have lost the faculty, than to have acquired it." This maybe is the technical sense which you are referring to; i.e. that the mature narrator cannot narrate without the fresh perceptions of the child. And that includes a particular attitude towards language, a particular innocence and seriousness about language.When David sees in the Dolphin Inn the dolphin on the door, he thinks there must be a Mr. Dolphin within. Or take the case of "Mr. Skylark", you know, when he sees the word "skylark" on his chest, he believes he must be called Mr. Skylark. Or the child's capacity to see analogy, weird analogy which starts right at the beginning at Pegotty's finger that he compares to a nutmeg grater—its rough edge is like a nutmeg grater. These kinds of unprejudiced, non-conventional linkages are the conditions, I think, in Dickens, of being a writer and they are certainly represented most strongly in the child. The adult artist has to be able to retain that capacity rather than acquire it.

Would you say that David Copperfield *is also a sentimental education? I'm thinking of Mrs. Strong's phrase "Undisciplined heart." Would you say that David's story is that of a sentimental education?*

Yes. I think that may be the conception, but I'm not sure that that is a strong part of the novel. There's this famous article by Gwendoline Needham, "The Undisciplined Heart", which really holds so many critics enthralled. Lots of them have followed it. If you find that, then you come up against the Agnes problem, don't you? You say, "But I'm not sure I want this to be the main theme!" It certainly wouldn't work in the Flaubertian sense, anyway, if Agnes is the aim of the sentimental education. Many critics have noted, I think quite

well, that there are two types of women, and they are there right at the beginning of the novel. That's to say: the mother and Peggotty.
Peggotty has got no shape at all, we are told, in the beginning. The mother and the nurse, and the child walking between the two, is the very first image, isn't it? They're both down on their knees and the child goes from the one to the other, and you could say, well, that's what David does, he ends up with the nurse... [laughter]... But that's not a real sentimental education, is it? You want to end up with a nurse? I mean, I don't, anyway. [Laughter]

Sentimental education has to do with moving away from the mother and Dora may be considered, as you suggested, as a repetition of David's mother figure.

Yes. Certainly. There is no doubt that he is seeing in her the same sexual attractiveness. But I think one of the powers of this novel is actually the very unbuttoned rendering of love of the mother, the purity, the intensity—that is the word I should stress—of David's relationship to his mother, which is rendered with so much power and conviction. That's the stronger side of his relation to women. [Laughter]

So this leads us to the central question of the Bildungsroman as a genre. Do you think that David Copperfield *fits the definitions given by Suzanne Howe, Jerome Buckley, among others?*

The whole question is a difficult one... First of all "Bildungsroman" is a German word, and it's a German concept. And when Jerome Buckley uses it in the English context, he almost completely drops the German side of this term. And yet, there's a very specific reference in German literature; by the way, the person who really promotes and popularises this term is Wilhelm Dilthey, in the imperial period in Germany. It is very much connected, in that period, with nationalism; the Bildungsroman for German nationalist critics around 1900 is *the* Germanic form, nobody else can do it... Then later that term becomes widespread, it's one of the few German terms to have an international currency and then people want to see lots of English novels in relation to it. I'm a bit dubious, I have to say, about that whole enterprise, that's to say Jerome Buckley's enterprise. I think he has some interesting things to say about the novels, but whether they can actually be called Bildungsromane, I am not totally sure. Certainly a German would not think of them as such. I think he would call them something like Entwiklungsromane, novels of development. But Bildung is such a specific concept in German, it means something like self-cultivation, conscious self-cultivation, as it were...

This is precisely Suzanne Howe's definition...

Is it? Yes. That's the old Suzanne Howe of *Wilhelm Meister's English Apprentices*. It's a very useful book, at least sixty years old...

I'm sorry to use a German term again, but would you say that it is closer to the Künstleroman *perhaps?*

I think I'm quite attracted to the *Künstleroman* idea. Irène Simon is one of the people who I think puts that case rather well. The problem is this: Barbara Hardy says it can't be a *Künstleroman* because it doesn't talk about "art" consciously, it doesn't talk about technique, as such. Irène Simon answers that objection, I think, rather well. She says "what do you expect in Victorian fiction?" Victorian fiction does not talk about technique as such; just as in the modernist period, self-consciousness about art is of the essence, so in the Victorian period one would not overtly talk about techniques of fiction and so on. And again, if you go back to *Wilhelm Meister*, what is Wilhelm but an artist? The whole novel is about finding his role; I mean he goes into the theatre first, and discovers that it is not his "métier" but that nonetheless he has a central role as the creative transformator of the given. So I think that that element is one of the strongest elements, paradoxically arguing in favour of *David Copperfield* as a *Bildungsroman*. If you just take it as being about sentimental development, for instance, I don't think that is really Bildung in the full sense. In my view, anyway.

How about the Erziehungsroman*, then?*

The *Erziehungsroman* would be something rather narrow, specifically about education. With Rousseau's *Emile* as the obvious model, there. Obviously, "Erziehung", education, as such, is only a small part of *David Copperfield*. *Entwicklungsroman* is a novel of development, more general development. I think you could definitely say that all the novels that Buckley calls *Bildungsromane* are certainly *Entwicklungsromane*. But whether they're *Bildungsroman* as well, is a moot question—mind you, in Germany itself, there's a whole argument about whether this isn't even a phantom genre that hardly exists, you know. Maybe whether even *Wilhem Meister* itself is a *Bildungsroman*!

Now, of course there are optimistic connotations to the idea of the Bildungsroman*. Wouldn't you say that in spite of the happy ending, there is an undercurrent of melancholy in* David Copperfield*?*

Yes, I certainly would. And this is another complication, isn't it, for thinking about it as a *Bildungsroman*. *Bildungsroman* implies, I think, free will, it's an

enlightenment idea, about the perfectibility of man, that you can fulfil yourself to your limit, and *David Copperfield* has that strand, yet I think it's a multiple structure. It's not simply a linear structure as a novel. It's certainly also a cyclical structure, it wants to return, it wants to go back, and there's the melancholy, isn't there, in that other structure, the structure where the loss of the mother is the most profound event of the novel. And forever. And that's why, if you like, he can't get beyond the mother in terms of fulfilment in relation to women. But that this return, this constant return to the wish to be with the mother and the other child, the little infant, seems to me the source, the major source anyway, of that melancholy strain within the novel. Kingcaid is one of the very good critics on that.

Andthts becomes particularly interesting if one relates it to what you said earlier about too much having been made of the autobiographical elements: the death of the mother has nothing to do with Dickens's personal history. So it would be in the entirely fictional parts that he would be, perhaps, the most melancholy?

Yes. John Lucas has a book called *The Melancholy Man* about Dickens. I think you can overdo that, because there's such a wonderful exuberance as well, in Dickens. He is this rounded person. His novels have to be seen as encyclopaedic in their form: they contain lots of different modes and moods. That's one of the reasons why to only study *David Copperfield* as a Bildungsroman is a limitation. Kingcaid has a three-fold structure to the novel which I like, and he sees three types of pattern. One is the linear, optimistic, freewill pattern of the *Bildungsroman*, the second is the cyclical return to the mother, to the dead mother, the third is the catastrophic, you know, the discontinuity, that's to say, the tempest scene, or the elopement with Emily. I like to think the third mode has a comic form, which is the pantomime transformation we spoke about earlier, where you pass from one state to another without continuity, and without growth, because the *Bildungsroman* is essentially an organicist form, I think, corresponding the Foucauldian model of the nineteenth century, which stresses organicism as its episteme or as its essential view of life. And it seems to me that's what's there. And it's certainly there in the line that goes from Goethe to Carlyle to Dickens. But, in addition, there are these other modes because the Dickensian novel, to me, is plural, it's not single and doesn't conform to one pattern, it has many patterns.

We can finish then on the happier note of humour in Dickens and in David Copperfield *in particular...*

Yes. Absolutely glorious, of course, and this is where you go back to the question: who is the hero of my own life? You might have to say Micawber, mightn't you, in that way, because he's the greatest comic creation in this

novel or in almost any other novel. But there are so many of them. Little figures who just appear for a moment or so, in a novel. I mean, wonderful scenes with Dora's aunts, the Misses Lavinia and Clarissa Spenlow who make themselves out to be great experts on the "heart" because there's a rumour that one of them had an admirer many, many years ago, and they go through this wonderful comedy of giving their opinion as if they were some sort of oracle on questions of the heart.

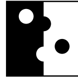
Aunt Betsey too to a certain extent...

Yes, Aunt Betsey is a complex figure, isn't she? She's not just a comic figure, I think Lavinia and Clarissa Spenlow could be said to be more purely comic, but Aunt Betsey has this tragic marriage, of course, that has in some ways maimed her personality, and distorted it. But I think Dickensian humour is, in itself, multiple. It is not just one kind of humour and not necessarily, not by any means always innocent, and certainly not pure. There are many many admixtures to it, black humour for instance, or the grotesque, which is certainly a thing that I am very interested in in Dickens, where the laughter is uneasy, complex, you know, and then the sheer hilarity as well is wonderful.

You wrote an entire book on Dickens and the Grotesque. Could you summarise the general line?

I was interested, say, in Bakhtin on the one hand, who has an idea of the grotesque as something that has been lost in the European tradition and it's a very exalted idea. And on the other hand Wolfgang Kayzer's book, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, which sees the grotesque in a much more disturbing light, as close to tragi-comedy... and certainly I think there's that side as well. You mustn't just think of the grotesque, in Dickens at any rate, as sheer hilarity. It's a mixture... you know if you take a wonderful little character, the Orfling, who is the servant of the Micawbers, and the whole relationship with name, her very name is absurd and makes you laugh. And her relationship with David. But the moment of departure is this moment where she goes back to the workhouse and where David goes off to Dover. There's a tragic side to the figure of the Orfling, and there's that element in Dickensian humour, as well. It's very mixed, and there are very many different kinds of humour, so that he has to be one of the greatest humorists, certainly of the English tradition, but of world literature too, I think.

1. Michael Holligton, "The Representation of Italy in Household Words and All the Year Round," *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* I (1991): 126-36.



British Society During World War II

An Interview with Michael Foot

by Norma DENNY

Described as "unique in British politics, more in the mould of heroic reformers of the last century than the frequently grey politics of today" [Mervyn Jones, Michael Foot *(London: Gollanz, 1994)], Michael Foot is said to have had a career as a statesman, orator, writer and polemicist which reflects the history of the British Left since the 1930s. Born in 1913 into a political family noted for their liberal reformist standpoint, by the outbreak of the Second World War he was an outstanding journalist, recommended to the newpaper publisher Lord Beaverbrook for the post of editor of the* Evening Standard *by Aneurin Bevan of the Labour Party. He was the joint author of the famous critique of appeasement* Guilty Men*, and sole author of two more political pamphlets in the war years. He entered parliament in the "silent revolution" of 1945, and became a cabinet minister, the Leader of the House of Commons, and finally the Labour Leader in the 1980s. Michael Foot is best known however for his association with the "Keep Left" group within the Labour Party and his connection with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. This has earned him the epithet "the conscience of the Left through the years of the Aldermaston marches and the Vietnam War" (Jones,* supra*) and "The Incorruptible" (Anthony Howard).*

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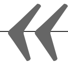
The interview was conducted in the offices of the left-wing newspaper *Tribune*, at King's Cross, London, on September 24, 1996.



The recent 50th anniversary of the Second World War has highlighted the huge amount of diaries and journals written by British people in that period. It has been suggested by Ronald Blythe in Private Words: Letters and Diaries from the Second World War *(1991) that war provided a huge stimulus to writers. Did war encourage you to become a journalist, or had that particular part of your career already begun?*

I'd already started out as a journalist before the war, but of course, the war gave a tremendous opportunity to journalists, and especially for people who were working in London. By that time I had joined *The Evening Standard*. It was right in the war from the beginning, especially, of course, when it became involved in the Blitz and the war itself was in London, and London journalism became of great importance. So, I was seeing it right from the beginning.

Historians like Gilbert, Calder, Roberts et al are constantly revising, and to some extent rewriting, the history of Britain between 1939 and 1945, particularly at the levels of individual politicians and of popular experiences. As someone who lived through these years and observed British society with the trained eye of a journalist, what are your views on the "London Blitz"?

Philip Ziegler is a very fine reporter on these matters—not just a biographer/journalist; he has also got a special eye for the way people and communities behave, which he's written in some of his books. But 1940 was, I think, the most exciting year in British history in the whole of this century. It was the turning point for Britain, because up till that point we'd been pursuing a highly dangerous policy of so-called *appeasement* of Hitler and Mussolini and the forces of fascism in Europe. And right up until the twelfth hour, as you say, almost the thirteenth hour of 1940, they'd been running that policy but, at last, they threw out the terrible government we had then, one of the worst governments we've ever had in British history, to compare only with the British government that lost the American colonies many, many years before. They had put the country in a terrible plight, but the British people themselves, when they got the chance, revolted against this kind of procedure. From the change of government in 1940 there was a tremendous excitement in London itself, in the other cities that were under attack too, but in London especially because London was the most important place where the battle was being fought. So I don't believe there is any exaggeration in the talk about what happened there and the importance, from Britain's point of view as well as for the whole future of Europe and the world, of what happened then. I do believe that that resistance was of tremendous support, and of course that people themselves, the people of London, played a very big part in it.

Just after the Blitz started—the real attack—I remember going down to the reporting, down in the East End of London, and going through the streets then, and seeing the devastation that was being spread by the bombing, and it looked as if that kind of attack could succeed. But within a matter of a few weeks, almost, the British people, especially the Londoners who had, we thought, great gifts of improvisation, were looking after themselves and their families, liberated from the belief that they were going to be beaten in the war. That was when they decided to go into the Tube, to take over the Tube, and for the next four or five years that was where a lot of people spent their working nights, in preparation for the work they were going to do during the day, and London did save the world in that sense. It did give a tremendous example to the rest of Britain, to the other cities that were attacked, like Plymouth, my own home town of Plymouth, or Coventry, which were furiously attacked, but in those places too, people recovered within a few weeks, by improvisation. The British people are very bad at some things, but they are very good at improvisation at the last moment, and that's what they showed during the war.

It was a real spirit of comradeship, I believe. I didn't know my wife then, she was working up in Hampstead where they were running the air-raid shelters and the rest. All the different sections of the community came out there—the crusty, old lawyers and God knows what (I don't know if lawyers are the most crusty), but there was a whole assembly of different lots of people who came out, and were trained in the air-raid precautions. Very often they found that leaders of the air-raid precautions were working people who had natural abilities of leadership, and all these people came out in the war. So I think the London Blitz was of paramount importance. I also learnt at the same time, of course, what was happening in the actual Battle of Britain. I did know many of the pilots who were flying then. One of them was Max Aitken, son of the proprietor of *The Evening Standard*. He had already gained more flying experience before the war than any other pilot. He said this was one of the reasons why he survived the war-training. He kept flying all through that critical period. He was going out night after night and then coming back and reporting to his father, who by that time was in the War Cabinet, what were the realities and dangers of the situation. So, we in *The Evening Standard* thought we were "in the thick of it": partly we were seeing what was happening in the Blitz, partly we were seeing what was happening on the streets, and partly also we were hearing the reports of what was happening in the aeroplanes.

Together with journalist friends you expressed your criticism of the conduct of the war in pamphlets written anonymously, notably Guilty Men*, by "Cato", in July 1940. Who were the men singled out for blame in this pamphlet, and what exactly did you and your friends think them "guilty" of?*

It was because of all that happened that we wrote the book called *Guilty Men*. In 1940, the British army was thrown out of the continent of Europe, thrown out of Dunkirk, scrambled back into this country. It was a terrible military defeat, but it was a military defeat which the British turned into a kind of victory. That is to say they saw the shame of the defeat and made something out of it. They were not going to surrender. It had exactly the opposite effect. And so it was out of that—hearing the reports of what had happened to people on the beaches of Dunkirk, and hearing what had happened to that British army that was straggling back—that we wrote the book. Three or four of us sat down one afternoon at *The Evening Standard* office (we used to go up onto the roof there because we could see London), and decided to write the book. It was critical of the existing government while praising the ones who were really doing the job of saving us—Churchill was number one amongst these, and Beaverbrook himself. He had not had a good pre-war record on appeasement, but in the war he had a good one, and he was in the Cabinet, so we were naturally favourable to him[1]. The "guilty" men were those whom we thought should not be allowed still to stay in the government, because of

their appeasement records before, and because of their incompetence then to deal with the situation, and of course because of the new people who were coming in, who should really be taking over the job.
Several of the new faces were Labour ministers who had come into that government—Herbert Morrison[2], Ernest Bevin[3] and some of the others. But all we wanted to do was to clear out some of the most guilty. The head of our list was Lord Halifax, who was still in the Foreign Office then, and who was still, although we didn't know it at the time, thinking of a negotiated peace. And of course, some of the historians who wrote much later about it, in particular Andrew Roberts, a very clever historian, confirm that Halifax, even after the change of government in 1940, when he was Foreign Secretary, was still arguing in favour of a new peace with Hitler. If we had known it at the time, if the British people had known it, his house would have been torn down, I'm sure, because, by that time, the British people were absolutely resolved to fight the war and win the war, in the spirit that Churchill represented.
My memories of it are very exciting. I had been a journalist beforehand, but I hadn't thought of writing a book like this. *Guilty Men*, when it came out, was thought a disgraceful book. And there were some people who tried to suppress it, including Smith's who were the distributors, i.e. W.H. Smith, the bookseller. They were trying to stop the distribution. But they couldn't succeed and when they tried, we sold the book on barrows, up in Fleet Street and elsewhere. And so the book *Guilty Men* did represent, I think, the spirit of the time, the spirit of resistance. It was not only an attack on the guilty men, it was saying how we could fight and win the war.

Also, as someone who lived through 1939-1945, how do you react to the continuing debate upon the strengths and weaknesses of Churchill as a war leader?

Churchill did represent the spirit I mentioned above in a special way—in the way in which he spoke throughout the whole of the Blitz period, and also in the way in which he had gone to France, and spoken to France, where he had friends, just as we [the Left] had associations with some of the French people who were also leading the Resistance, such as Léon Blum. He was of course tried by the Vichy régime, and we in *The Standard* were attacking that régime. When De Gaulle came to London, he got a good reception from us (i.e. from *The Evening Standard*) and from most of the British people, although there were some who were critical of him for other reasons, but nobody could doubt that he was a symbol too of fighting Nazism and Fascism, and trying to restore a decent Europe. There was plenty of kindred spirit. I, as a journalist, while writing about the English Resistance, was also reading about the French Resistance—that is, the French Resistance at the time of the French Revolution, and how the whole course of the French Revolution had been altered by popular Resistance. We thought something similar was happening in our

London at that time, and we had lots of parallels drawn between our resistance in that period and the French Resistance to invasions during the Revolution. I read Michelet. There was a tremendous inspiration to be drawn from the way in which he wrote about French patriotism and how popular patriotism had saved the Republic. In the same way, I think, the English popular public revolt against Hitler, against the appeasement policy, did save us too.

French readers who know your name from the post-war Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (C.N.D.) might presume that you did not fight in World War II because you were a Conscientious Objector to war. In fact this is not the case. Serious health problems prevented you from being a volunteer or a conscript. Had the situation been different, given the British people's tremendous determination to fight, do you think you might have served in the armed forces?

Yes indeed. I went along as soon as the war was declared, but I was turned down because I had asthma, chronic asthma. Yet I was in London throughout the whole of the Blitz, and I was doing, I think, an important job. I was not a Conscientious Objector because I had never been. I respect Conscientious Objectors, but I'd never taken their view about war resistance. In the First World War, those who refused to participate had, I think, a much stronger case.

As far as resistance goes, I had been part of the Labour Party which was in favour of a much earlier resistance to Hitler, and had been opposed to the Munich agreement, and indeed in *Tribune* we had great headlines across saying that Hitler's Germany meant war and that we must resist it, and the only way we could resist it by then was by military means. The same at the time of the Spanish Civil War. We in the *Tribune* had all been strongly in favour of supporting the Spanish Republic against the fascist attack, and so there was no doubt about my position or our position on that matter. "Nuclear weapons" is a quite different question, in my opinion. They involve the destruction of everybody and the whole of the universe, and so we always drew a sharp distinction between a proper use of weapons in the Second World War to resist Hitlerism and the nuclear weapons which have got to be abolished altogether if the world is going to be saved.

Historians have been writing recently about the treatment given to the conscientious objectors and indeed to aliens. One particular article of yours, I noticed, was entitled "Why not lock up General De Gaulle?"... Did you feel at the time, then, very sensitive to this question of the treatment of foreigners?

Yes. What the British government did was all the more reprehensible as some of the people who were doing it were people who themselves had been

appeasing Hitler and apologising for Hitler and Mussolini in the previous years, like the chap Anderson, who was the Home Secretary for a while. And so, when he locked up a lot of people overnight in the crudest possible manner and sent some of them off to the Isle of Man—most of these were Jewish people, though not solely Jewish by any means—we thought it was quite improper. There were large numbers of people among them who helped us in the war and who, once released, were eager to help us again: they should never have been locked up. So we on *The Evening Standard* attacked the whole of this policy of locking up our friends and doing it in such an indiscriminate way, and that's why we had the headline "Why not lock up General de Gaulle?". De Gaulle was just arrived as a very popular leader from France, and of course, he was a symbol of resistance: so we said "Alright, if you're locking up these other people, you might as well lock up de Gaulle himself." That was how fiercely and strongly we were attacking our own government for its misdeeds during the war itself, and I think that people who now look back at the whole story will see that we were right in that objection. You see, sometimes they tried to compare the situation in that war with what had happened in the previous war, in 1914. At the outbreak of the First World War, there was a deep suspicion—not a proper suspicion in my opinion, but a deep one—of anybody with a German name who was living in this country, and lots of them were locked up, lots of them were pilloried.

This was an international war. There was a big division in France, just as there was in this country, between the people who wanted to appease Hitler, and the people who wanted to resist him, and we wanted to make it clear that our association was with De Gaulle, and those who were carrying out the resistance, although we knew there were some others, as well as De Gaulle, who were carrying out the resistance. There was very close interest in what was happening in France and what was happening here, and Churchill, to do him credit, was conscious of that, and, at one stage during the time when he was trying to keep France in the war, he suggested that we should establish a joint citizenship between Britain and France, which was a pretty revolutionary proposal at the time, and a very good one.

And then, I remember it all so vividly, when action was taken in France by French people to stop the French fleet from leaving Toulon—actually there were some people there who were on our side—we wanted to celebrate. And so we had an issue of *The Evening Standard* one day which printed the "Marseillaise" on the front page, in order to show our solidarity with the French Resistance which was, of course, of great importance to us as well.

The wartime diaries of ordinary British men and women reveal that, irrespective of their political viewpoint, they recognised a great deal of government-inspired propaganda for exactly what it was, yet tolerated it as an inevitable aspect of wartime life. (One thinks of Mrs. Milburn's Diary, *Maude Ceeley's* The Wartime Diary in Town and Country, *and especially the journals of*

George Beardmore.) What was the journalistic attitude to propaganda in general, and the efforts of the Ministry of Information in particular?

At the very start, we were very critical, in *The Evening Standard*, about the Ministry of Information. We didn't like the interference and the censorship and all the rest, although we knew there had to be forms of censorship because of the military precautions. But we did have writing for us on *The Evening Standard* some of the leading military commentators of the time, Commander Liddell Hart and General Fuller, who himself had a very long-standing record of having been one of the people who discovered and devised the tank in the First World War. So our military comments, we thought, were more apposite and justified to be published than many others. We were really scrupulous in trying to give a proper, military account of what was happening. *The Evening Standard's* circulation went up, it was a wonderful paper during the war. The other papers were quite good too, but we thought we were better still, because we were really the "London paper", we were really telling what was happening in London, and we had indeed recruited a whole range of people who were bringing a new kind of information to bear on the subject.
There was Wingate, General Wingate, who wasn't a famous general then at all (he was almost thrown out of the British army because of his misdeeds, but was finally promoted). But we knew him in *The Evening Standard*: he had been writing for us and we had been writing about him before he was even a General. The same applied to Deutsche, Issac Deutsche, who wrote eventually the authoritative work on Trotsky. He had come from Poland, and he was writing about what was happening in another part of Europe. We indeed, in *The Evening Standard*, were not only reporting what was happening in London, although that was very important, but we also had access to what was happening across the world. We did have several leading articles, some of which I wrote, which were saying that this was not just a national war, but an international civil war. We had allies in some places across Europe and we must make sure that we looked after them. In particular, we had some very important allies in France and in Italy, and the latter eventually overthrew Mussolini in 1943, because we had kept contact—not only us, but the government. The British government at that time did have some too, after a while: there had been a hysteria, say, in 1940, in the earliest period, but they overcame the hysteria after a while, and they did so partly because people were writing about all these things from very different perspectives. We had people of all nationalities—Poles, Italians and the rest—writing for the paper, showing that it was an international civil war, and it was because the British government, though it took some time, finally had the intelligence to fight the war in that way that we eventually won it. Another person, by the way, who came to advise us in *Tribune* office on these matters, and who advised the British government on it too, was Juan Negrin. He had been the Prime Minister, the resistance Prime Minister in Spain, and had led the opposition to

fascism in his own country. When he was defeated, he came to Britain. He wouldn't attack the British government here, although sometimes exiles in such circumstances would. No, he came and said to us: we've got to fight this war properly and win it, and we're going to do anything we can. And he gave very intelligent advice to us all about how we could learn from the Resistance and how our action should be associated with the Spanish Resistance too. The war had become a real international crusade.

Now, you also wrote another anonymous pamphlet entitled The Trial of Mussolini *(1943). It attacked the politicians who had encouraged Mussolini in the 1920s and 1930s, i.e. Hoare, Simon, Halifax, Hore-Belisha—and also Churchill who had visited Rome in 1927. George Orwell's comment on your pamphlet was that "the attitude of the Left towards the Russian régime has been distinctly similar to the attitude of the Tories towards Fascism." One could also add that this was hardly "news". What therefore were the aims and objectives of this pamphlet?*

Well, the *Trial of Mussolini* was just like the other things we had written then, like *Guilty Men*, although more deliberately emphasising the international scale of the war. There had been a lot of people in our country who had been grossly misleading the public about Mussolini and the nature of his régime. It is true that Churchill had been guilty of this wrong too. So when we were writing about Mussolini, we did include that in our book. It wasn't because we were wanting to attack Churchill himself—we actually believed that he was doing a very fine job in the war—but we did manage to combine writing that and writing an ending of the book which Churchill himself would have approved of. *The Trial of Mussolini* aimed at underlining afresh the international character of the war and how we must continue to resist the reappearance of fascism. There were some people who were saying you can just prop up Mussolini or have the Italian monarch established there. Sometimes Churchill was a bit fond of some of these kings, the one in Italy and the other one in Greece, where we got into further trouble a bit later on.
So what we were doing, and I think quite rightly, looking back on it now, was to emphasise the international dimension of the war and how there was a fight between the democratic and the fascist forces in probably every other country in Europe. Sometimes the British government was sensible enough to realise it, sometimes it wasn't. Greece, I'm sorry to say, was a tragic example of this: because the British government was not fully aware of the nature of the Greek resistance, we sent in British troops, and British troops were involved in battles with the progressive forces there. Some of them were communists—there is no doubt about that—and were engaged in activities that the British government did not like, but it didn't alter the fact that the overwhelming majority of the people in Greece who were resisting fascism were the same people who had

resisted Hitler when the first attack was made on Greece. It was therefore pitiful that even our own leaders had not learnt that lesson then.

Now, in 1944 you moved from Beaverbrook newspapers to work more on newspapers like The Daily Herald *and one of your first columns there spoke about the guilt of "much scorned idealists vis-à-vis the realist appeasers who held power in the thirties." With the benefit of hindsight now, what could or perhaps should have been done by the idealists?*

We could have combined a bit sooner. There were differences, many differences amongst those in the Labour Party. Some of them should have been recognised earlier, about Spain, for example. At the time of the Spanish Civil War and then the outbreak of the war, the Labour Party, or sections of it, were slow in understanding how strong the resistance was. Eventually that was changed, because Atlee himself, leader of the Labour Party, went to Spain and gave absolute support to the Spanish Republic. It is true that, looking back, we could have been stronger in our resistance earlier, but I think it doesn't alter the fact that the "left" in Britain and the "left" in France and several other countries in Europe had a much better record of resistance to fascism than the right wing. And if it hadn't been for the existence of the appeasers and the traitors, as we believe they were in the way they were approaching this grave problem, we could have solved it earlier.

Towards the end of the war you wrote another pamphlet, Brendan and Beverley *(1944). To whom exactly did this refer, and what was your purpose in writing?*

Brendan and Beverley was a continuation of the attack upon the Conservative leadership of the country. Brendan was the name of Brendan Bracken, who was one of Churchill's close advisers, and Beverley was Beverley Baxter, who had been the editor of one of Beaverbrook's papers earlier, but who had now become one of the apologists for the Conservative Party. The two of them, then, Brendan and Beverley, were apologists for the Conservative Party, and therefore the book was written as a kind of satire on the Conservative Party and of how incompetent either of them would be to deal with the post-war problems. By that time, of course, the prospects of what we could do after the war were beginning to dominate or become more and more influential in our discussions, although we, on *Tribune* and *The Standard*, never let them dominate altogether, because we wanted to win the war successfully too, and that was the first objective. So *Brendan and Beverley* was trying to combine those two things. It finishes up with a speech that Churchill might have presented to us at the coming General Election. It is a kind of parody of a Churchill speech, but it's not a fake. My reply is the speech of the Labour, of how Labour could answer. Most of what I said, I think, was adopted by the

Labour leadership later, but not all of it, because I said several things in that document that carried the argument a good deal further, in particular about India.

We were deeply concerned about the failure of the British government at the time to understand, particularly as we were supposed to be fighting a war for freedom, that the Indians had as much right to freedom as anybody else. And so, the idea of locking up some of the Indian leaders at the same time was, we thought, outrageous. So *Brendan and Beverley* was partly a protest about that kind of policy, but also a way of declaring that the new Labour government would certainly, as one of its first tasks, carry through the liberation of India, independence for India, a plan which had been in the Labour Party's programme before, but which Churchill had previously done his best to thwart. That book, I think, was prophetic in that sense too.

*The "myth of the Blitz" debate features an old school of 1940s and 1950s historians, who stress the social unity and consensus encouraged by the war effort and common determination to fight to win, and a younger generation who, like Ziegler, have pointed to continuing class divisions and even the existence of a blackout-assisted crime wave during the Blitz. You were telling me earlier that you profoundly disapproved of the historical revisionists who make light of the dangers to Britain in 1939. I wondered what your opinions are therefore of the historical revisionists who talk about the "*myth of the Blitz*" in terms of stressing the way in which a mythical social unity and consensus seemed to disguise profound social divisions and a real need for a Welfare State?*

What happened in the Blitz itself was a most astonishing development, especially in the light of the failures of the previous government to prepare properly for such a war. But there was no doubt at all about the solidarity of the British people as a whole. What the poor people of the East End of London had to stand up for—and I was reporting what they were up to all through the war—was, of course, much worse than the rest: they could not protect themselves as the rich could. But nonetheless there was a real, much greater understanding of solidarity between different sections of the community and, indeed, the rising strength of the Labour Party symbolised that growing power of the popular feeling during the war. I'm not saying it was idealist, it was a real thing as well. But, speaking as a Socialist, the way Britain behaved during that period, between 1940 and 1945, was the nearest thing I've ever seen to Socialism; in my opinion, it was a real combined effort to try and achieve a good result, and to do that for high community purposes. And we did it. Now, at the same time, we were also trying to make decent preparations for what happened afterwards, and it was during that period that the ideas of the so-called Beveridge Report and the National Health Service were born, and especially the idea that, when we came to a new society, it should be one

where there was full employment, not one that would go back to the mass unemployment which we had known in the previous inter-war years. All that spirit, I think, was coming forward too. I don't think it was a fake, I think it was real. Of course it wasn't translated into the full legislative implementation that everybody would have liked afterwards. But what was implemented was pretty considerable and the Labour government of 1945 did have great social achievements to its credit, in part because of what had been arranged in the war.

Now some people say that it was all fixed up by the Ministers behind the backs of people during the war. That is a very strange tale. It was much more due to the pressure from the Labour Party, to its efforts to sell, for example, the National Health Service,[4] an institution which was founded and carried forward on much more far-reaching socialist principles than had been thought of during the war. Indeed, there were tremendous arguments about it inside the Labour Party itself, if only because Aneurin Bevan,[5] who was the most radical and revolutionary of the Labour leaders, had charge of that task, but he carried it through so well that it still prevails, even though some would like to try and weaken it now. But, originally, I do think the social impulse that was unleashed in the war was the real thing. It did not carry through everything we wanted, and no doubt there were defects in it, but it was a very big driving force.

Concerning the revisionists, they seem to be directing a lot of their hostility and criticism towards Churchill himself, trying to suggest that Churchill could have behaved differently. All that is a very deep kind of recrudescence or recreation of the old Chamberlainite appeasement idea that there could have been a settlement in Europe without the resistance. That's all wrong in my opinion, and I think that the more people look at it, the more they see how Churchill did play a very important part in enabling the government to be carried through successfully, but also in enabling many of the best liberal instincts, to use the word in its best general sense. Churchill had in him streaks of liberalism, as well as his toryism. He was to some extent a tory, but when it came down to it, he had a deeper sense of what had to be done for the sake of the British people. He didn't know much about how British people lived, because he had hardly ever seen it. He lived in places that were so different. He used to talk about the British people living in their "cottage homes", and thought that every working person lived in a cottage home. Well, it was not the case, and many of those "cottage homes" had been destroyed, by the way, in the war. Churchill was unrealistic in that sense; he was romantic almost, and I'm using the word partly as criticism, partly not. He was romantic in the way he looked on these matters. But still, so desperate was our situation in 1940, that a touch of romantic idealism was necessary too. And, to do him credit, he dragged the rest of his wretched party into doing what it should have been doing long before—that is, a real, proper, coherent, democratic resistance to the attack on democracy that was happening in Europe.

We should have learnt the lesson before, we should have learnt it *again*, by the way. In that respect, the United Nations Charter was one of the best things that came out of the war. It wasn't perfect, but one of the main objectives of the Charter was precisely to stop aggression, and to have a definition of aggression which would really work. I remember vividly going as a journalist to the 1945 government conference in San Francisco, which set up the United Nations Charter. We were arguing then, and other countries were arguing, how you could make an effective charter against aggression. To some extent, that happened, although of course the divisions between us and the Soviet Union made it very difficult to work out. But still a framework was set up.

In a recent Times *interview, Lady Glendevon, daughter of the writer Somerset Maugham, said "we partied throughout the 1930's [...] Then the war started, and nothing was ever the same again."*[6] *The extent to which the Second World War, or indeed any war, can constitute a complete watershed, emphasising change rather than underlying continuity, however, is the subject of great historical controversy. On a personal level, a common sentiment in wartime reminiscences is the impression that adulthood, or "real life", began for many people with the outbreak of war in 1939. Yet your own career as a politician really began more with successful candidature for the Devonport parliamentary seat at the end of the war in 1945. Do you regard the war years as a catalyst in your own life, or in any sense a watershed for British Society?*

I certainly think it was. It was a very important event. Even though the crimes and follies that are being committed by our leaders in recent times are pretty considerable, they are not as great as what was perpetrated in the 1930's. That's why some of us felt so strongly about how we got into the war, how necessary it was to fight the war, how dangerous it was for people to think that we didn't have to do it, and that we could have avoided it. And when I read historians trying to write as if the war itself could have been avoided—usually in an attempt to excuse the way in which the British governments and French governments, I'm sorry to say, behaved in the 1930's—my view is that there is no excuse for what they did. There were some people then who realised the dangers of the nature of fascism and said the only way to do it was to resist. Not only the Spaniards, although they were very good and gave a lead to us, but also the Austrians. The Austrian socialists resisted the imposition of fascism in their country; they did not succeed, but resisted it, and showed us indeed that, if you're going to stop it, you've got to fight, and if you don't, then you're going to be plunged into a dictatorship. We should have learnt this, by the way, from the First World War, so horrific was the killing and the destruction in that conflict. And some people did.
H.G. Wells, for instance, who wrote about it right in the midst of the 1914 war, was warning us of how we could avoid another war, and of the necessity to

establish an international authority of sufficient strength in order to do it. We've had people in our country, and in France too, advocating this as a lesson from the First World War. And if we had learnt it properly there would never have been a Second World War. It looks as if we've got to preach those same doctrines again, and get converts to it again, because we're drifting again into a situation where people say "Oh, you don't have to worry about what's happening in the Balkans or Africa or other places, because that's a long way away." It's not a long way away. Also, coming back to the question which you put to me right in the middle about the nuclear weapons, I would say that one of the reasons why some of us felt so strongly about them was that the only solution regarding nuclear weapons is their being held by an international authority—their being held by an international authority or their being destroyed, or the two together (maybe one is interchangeable with the other). Anyhow, it seems that the great powers have abandoned even that objective. That's insanity. Absolute insanity! And the same rule applies to the other kinds of aggression, to the other wars that are taking place: we must have a much greater international authority than so far our rulers have been prepared to contemplate. And when I see British governments, Foreign Secretaries, showing no interest in this subject at all, and indeed sabotaging the real kind of agreement that should be got on these matters, I think it's most deplorable. They should go and read some proper history!

1. Beaverbrook, 1st baron, title of William Maxwell Aitken (1879-1964), the Canadian-born newspaper owner associated with *The Daily Express* and *The Evening Standard*. A Conservative politician, he became Minister of Information (1918) and Minister of Aircraft Production (1940-41).

2. Morrison, Herbert Stanley (1888-1965), later baron, a British Labour statesman, Home Secretary and Minister for Home Security during 1942-1945.

3. Bevin, Ernest (1881-1951), British Labour statesman and trade unionist behind the creation in 1922 of T.G.W.U. (Transport & General Workers' Union), and postwar Foreign Secretary (1945-1951).

4. Created in 1948.

5. Aneurin Bevan (1897-1960), known as Nye Bevan, a Welsh-born British Labour statesman, noted orator, and the 1945-1951 Minister of Health.

6. *Times* (19 Aug. 1996): 15.