

# Entretiens

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## Interviews

### *Hayden White on “Facts, Fictions and Metahistory”*

#### *I. Metahistory and Metafiction: Historiography and the Fictive in the Work of Hayden White*

##### An introductory essay

by Richard J. Murphy  
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Hayden White's work is usually thought of in conjunction with his key concept "metahistory," the critical philosophy of history which questions the foundations of the discipline of historiography and problematizes the unacknowledged ideologies which underlie all acts of history-writing. Yet the importance of White's work lies also in the fact that it is a broad and far-ranging meditation on the structures of meaning and on the sense-making tropes that govern and pre-formulate our understanding of the worlds—past and present—that we inhabit. For White questions the narrative conventions

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which underpin the seemingly “neutral” and confidently empirical forms of historical discourse and he uncovers their necessary implication in ideology. This has meant that his work has found even more of an echo in the realm of literary studies than in the field of history. And as I will show after an outline of some of the key problematics in his thought, White’s work is also of central relevance to the kinds of questions being raised in much contemporary culture in connection with the debate surrounding the “postmodern,” and particularly as regards that self-reflexive and history-oriented mode of writing characteristic of postmodern fiction which Linda Hutcheon has called “historiographic metafiction.”<sup>1</sup>

White’s main purpose is to reveal the way that even the most stringently positivist historian striving for pure objectivity necessarily relies upon a range of narrative forms and tropes by which to frame a story and convey its meaning. For “just as there can be no explanation in history without a story, so too there can be no story without a plot by which to make it a story of a particular kind.”<sup>2</sup> While conventional historiography aspires to a nineteenth-century ideal of scientific truthfulness and impartiality in re-presenting the “facts,” White demonstrates that even in the case of the most rigorous of historians, interpretation is unavoidable. He shows that forms of language and rhetoric are already burdened with moral and ideological implications, for there can be “no value-neutral mode of emplotment, explanation or even description in any field of events, whether imaginary or real. [...] [and thus] not only all interpretation, but also all language is politically contaminated.”<sup>3</sup>

Conventionally historians tend to take the position that interpretation is a weakness, a straying from the only righteous path, which is the impartial representation of pure facts. From this perspective interpretation becomes at best an unavoidable pitfall in the face of an incomplete historical record of events and can only be justified by the need to speculate in order to cover over the lacunae in the historical documents and make good their indeterminacies. Hayden White however views interpretation very differently. Rather than attempting to avoid interpretation altogether or cloaking the necessarily subjective component of interpretation in the disguises of positivism and objectivity, White advocates a position which turns the conventional wisdom on its head. For him interpretation is no longer an unavoidable by-product, a marginal supplement to the main process of piecing together the “facts,” but is instead central to the entire historiographic enterprise. As a consequence

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1 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988) 5.

2 Hayden White, “Interpretation in History,” *New Literary History*: 4 (1972-73). Rpt. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 62. This collection of essays is hereafter cited in the text as *Tropics*.

3 Hayden White, “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” in *The Literature of Fact*, ed. Angus Fletcher (New York: Columbia UP, 1976). Rpt. *Tropics* 129.

interpretation should be practiced openly and self-consciously. As Dominick LaCapra points out, the “distinctive criterion for [White] is the attempt to make interpretative and explanatory strategies—which remain implicit in traditional historiography practiced as a craft—explicit, self-conscious, and subject to criticism.”<sup>4</sup>

This reconsideration of interpretation is related to a further major aspect of White’s project: his inquiry into the extent to which language and discourse prefigure the historical account. Thus his valorization of interpretation simultaneously becomes a call to historians to acknowledge the rhetorical or “tropic” nature of their discourse, that which prefigures or constitutes the object they attempt to represent. For the tropic element is unexpungeable in the human sciences, however realistic they may aspire to be. Tropics is the shadow from which all realistic discourse tries to flee. This flight, however, is futile; for tropics is the process by which all discourse *constitutes* the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively.<sup>5</sup>

In White’s system the use of tropes is viewed as having more than a merely rhetorical or representational function. Tropes are associated with the very “structures of consciousness” (*Tropics* 1) with which we are always trying to discern and define the real. If understanding is partly a process of making the unfamiliar appear familiar, then according to White “this process of understanding can only be figurative in nature, for what is involved in the rendering of the unfamiliar into the familiar is a troping that is generally figurative” (*Tropics* 5). Tropes and tropic narrativization are thus integral to the figurative process of understanding by which unfamiliar events and data are presented and comprehended via familiar categories. In this way the unfamiliar is “assimilated by analogy to those areas of experience felt to be *already* understood” (*Tropics* 5). Since the events which the historian describes are usually far removed from us and thus unfamiliar and alien, the historiographer’s mode of narrativization has the effect of placing a set of events within a familiar framework. The figurative function of narrativization then is “to encode the set in terms of culturally provided categories, such as metaphysical concepts, religious beliefs, or story forms.”<sup>6</sup> (*Tropics* 86)

Alongside the process of familiarization, the alignment of the unknown in terms of what is already known, White also emphasizes the analogous movement of *defamiliarization*. For if troping is “a movement *from* one notion of the way things are related *to* another notion” (*Tropics* 2), then this also allows for an opposite effect, whereby tropic discourse offers “alternative ways of encoding this reality” (*Tropics* 4) so that an established and familiar version

4 Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983) 75.

5 Hayden White, “Introduction,” *Tropics* 1-24. Here 2.

6 Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” *Clio* 3.3 (1974). Rpt. *Tropics* 86.

of events can be opened up to new perspectives. This defamiliarizing function is important since it allows for the subversion of those discursive forms which, “because they are taken for granted either as natural or as established truth, had hardened into ideologies” (*Tropics* 22). In this way the function of figurative language as a means of recoding militates against conceptual dogmatism. At the same time the tropic function of discourse provides “protocols for translating between alternative modes” (*Tropics* 22), that is, for taking up alternative narrative versions and representational perspectives. This is crucial to the metahistorical consciousness advocated by White, since its widespread adoption would bring about the general recognition among historiographers that “it is not a matter of choosing between objectivity and distortion, but rather between different strategies for constituting ‘reality’ in thought so as to deal with it in different ways, each of which has its own ethical implications” (*Tropics* 22). If there are reasons for choosing one means of registering historical events over another—and Hayden White’s response to my question in the interview indicates that he believes that there *are* such reasons—then these criteria do not correspond to the usual ones prevailing in historiography, such as objectivity or closeness to truth.

One of the preferred criteria by which White measures history-writing—and this is possibly the distinguishing feature of his “metahistory” in general—is the degree to which historiography is willing to cultivate a certain self-consciousness regarding its tropological indebtedness and to concede the fictional bases of its explanatory moves. He observes that “one of the marks of a good professional historian is the consistency with which he reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events, agents and the agencies found in the always incomplete historical record” (*Tropics* 82). At the same time White points critically to those historians who display “a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (*Tropics* 82). His philosophy of history is clearly one which places the literary and compositional strategies of historiography in the foreground.

Far from considering the fictive element in historical narratives as a degradation of the discipline’s scientific aspirations, White finds support for his stance in a much earlier theoretical position which valorizes the fictional and the poetic as legitimate forms of knowledge in their own right. Since historians make sense of the past by imposing a narrative formal structure upon it similar to fiction, then “if we were to believe that literature did not teach us anything about reality” (*Tropics* 99) the fictional or figurative components in historiography could only detract from its value. But this is patently not the case. In point of fact we experience the “fictionalization” of history as an “explanation” for the same reason we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit along with the author. In both we

recognize forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it seeks to inhabit comfortably. (*Tropics* 99)

Thus history should not then be dismissed on account of its literary quality, such as its tropological or purely poetic elements, for from the earliest times "history, like other formalizations of poetic insight, was as much a 'making' (an *inventio*) as it was a 'finding' of the facts that comprised the structure of its perceptions" (*Tropics* 54).

Hayden White's position at this point comes close to the constructivism of Nelson Goodman. Like Goodman's insistence on the "theory-laden" quality of much of what is thought of as factual,<sup>7</sup> White views the traditional historian's reliance on hard facts with the utmost suspicion, arguing that "historical facts are in no sense 'given' to the historian but are, rather, 'constituted' by the historian himself" (*Tropics* 56). Even where the historian seeks refuge in the appeal to the apparent solidity of the chronological sequence or documentary record, White argues that this record is also necessarily "mythological in nature. For the chronicle is no less constituted as a record of the past by the historian's own agency than is the narrative which he constructs on its basis" (*Tropics* 56). The historical record which might appear as the "hard data" on the basis of which the historian produces the representation of the past appears from White's metahistorical perspective as little more than the result of a necessarily interpretative process of selection, the complement to the interpretative process by which the indeterminacies of the historical record are speculatively filled.

As we have seen, one of the essential characteristics of Hayden White's work is the idea that the historian organizes or "narrativizes" the material much like a novelist or playwright, and so creates connections between events in order to produce a story, and along with it, a meaning with an accompanying moral or ideological position. To characterize this process he coins the term "emplotment," defining it in *Metahistory* as "the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind."<sup>8</sup> Borrowing from the literary theorist Northrop Frye's classification of cultural archetypes White envisages four different forms of emplotment: Tragedy, Comedy, Romance and Satire. It is this process of emplotment as the "encodation of facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures" which transforms the material into paradigms already known to the readers, and so gives histories their "explanatory effect" (*Tropics* 83). For example, "when a given concourse of events is emplotted as a 'tragedy,' this simply means that the historian has so described the events as to *remind us* of that form of fiction which we associate

<sup>7</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978) 96-97, citing Norwood Hanson.

<sup>8</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973) 7.

with the concept ‘tragic’” (*Tropics* 91). Correspondingly, a tragic plot-structure will produce particular connotations in the reception, reminding the reader for example of “the resignations of men to the conditions under which they must labor in the world. These conditions, in turn, are asserted to be unalterable and eternal” (*Metahistory* 9). On the other hand a comic emplotment will more likely be associated with the theme of harmony and “reconciliation” (*Metahistory* 27). Consequently one could imagine for example that a particular series of events concerning say, the industrial revolution, could be emplotted either as the “tragic” demise of an agrarian way of life, or alternatively as the “comic” rise of a new industrial period, depending on the ideological position of the historian and the intended effect upon the reader. As White observes in a key passage in his important article “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact”:

*Historical situations are not inherently tragic, comic, or romantic. They may all be inherently ironic, but they need not be emplotted that way. All the historian needs to do to transform a tragic into a comic situation is to shift his point of view or change the scope of his perceptions. Anyway, we only think of situations as tragic or comic because these concepts are part of our generally cultural and specifically literary heritage. How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian’s subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind. This is essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation. And to call it that in no way detracts from the status of historical narratives as providing a kind of knowledge. [...] [For] the encodation of events in terms of such plot structures is one of the ways that a culture has of making sense of both personal and public pasts. (*Tropics* 85)*

In this way the narrative emplotment of the historical account calls upon the cultural repertoire of the reader, so that a history organized by means of a particular generic pattern produces not only a specific kind of meaning but also a specific kind of response. In other words, like an “extended metaphor” the narrativization “does not *reproduce* the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events and charges our thought about the events with different emotional valences” (*Tropics* 91).

This act of predetermining the reader’s understanding of the historical account via the narrative form of the text is again evidence of the fact that there is always “an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality” (*Metahistory* 21). For any formal structure in the historical account necessarily has ideological implications for an understanding of events, since “commitment to a particular form of knowledge predetermines the *kinds* of generalization one can make” (*Metahistory* 21). The importance of this is that the ethical and ideological position of a particular historical account can no longer be held separate. For there is necessarily an ethical or ideological implication in the way that in every historical text “an *aesthetic* perception (the

emplotment) and a *cognitive* operation (the argument) can be combined so as to derive prescriptive statements from what may appear to be purely descriptive or analytical ones" (*Metahistory* 27).

Consequently White's analysis in *Metahistory* for example of nineteenth-century historical writing sets about describing the possible combinations of the four forms of "emplotment" with those of formal "argument," so as to reveal the third level: the "ideological implications" of what might otherwise pass as a straightforward "factual" account. White's model makes clear that particular choices and strategies are always involved in any act of historical writing, and that there can be no escape into the seemingly neutral realm of a "scientific approach." Indeed the choice of such an approach "represents only the statement of a preference for a specific modality of historical conceptualization, the grounds of which are either moral or aesthetic, but the epistemological justification of which still remains to be established" (*Metahistory* xii). The real motivation then behind the choice of a particular approach or of a particular perspective is revealed always to be "ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological" (*Metahistory* xii). It is this underlying conviction that the aesthetic or moral grounds represent the best, indeed the only reasons for choosing one particular perspective or mode of narrativization over another—such as the epistemological or the scientific-objective stance—that offer a particularly challenging, not to say liberating aspect of Hayden White's work for all those involved in the interpretation of culture, whether from a historical or a literary standpoint.

After this outline of the work of Hayden White concerning fiction, history and their interrelations it is worth indicating why, over and beyond his impact in the field of history, his work has been so relevant in literary circles, particularly as regards the recent debates on contemporary culture and poststructuralism, and those forms of imaginative writing that, for want of a better term, we have come to refer to as "postmodernism."

As in the work of White, there is a deep-seated scepticism in postmodern culture generally concerning both the status of historical accounts and all systems of reference. The postmodernist writers also direct their theoretical reflections, like White, towards the boundary dividing history and fiction, and the fundamental premises of postmodern culture are to a very large extent precisely those that underpin White's metahistorical approach to historiography. Both insist upon the central idea that historians and novelists alike do not so much reflect and represent the objects of their investigations as actively produce these objects of inquiry themselves. There is a shared suspicion in other words that facts are not given but constructed, and that random and contingent events are made meaningful and are transformed into sense-making entities—what we confidently refer to afterwards as "facts"—only thanks to such figurative conventions as narrativization. A common thread running both through White's work and through postmodernism is

thus a fundamental scepticism regarding the assignment of any authoritative status to one historical account over another, as well as a corresponding awareness of the ideological content necessarily implied by every narrative form as a fictional construct.

White's key term "metahistory" finds significant echoes in Linda Hutcheon's influential work on the postmodern where her central paradigm is the "historiographic metafiction." For Hutcheon this describes a range of self-reflexive strategies through which the text appears to register its own "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs."<sup>9</sup> As with White's criterion of the "self-consciousness" which marks out the "classic" historians, in "historiographic metafiction" there is an abiding metahistorical sense of the provisionality of all meaning, not least given the shortcomings of language. White's formulation of this self-reflexivity is very pertinent to the situation of the postmodern "metafiction." He maintains that there is an ironic recognition that any given linguistic protocol will obscure as much as it reveals about the reality it seeks to capture in an order of words. This *aporia* or sense of contradiction is present in *all* of the classic historians. It is this linguistic self-consciousness which distinguishes them from their mundane counterparts and followers, who think that language can serve as a perfectly transparent medium of representation. (*Tropics* 130)

Thus just as White envisages what he describes in the interview as a "philosophy of composition" (Lukacs) as integral to the process through which the historical account theorizes its own discursive position, so in the same way the postmodern text foregrounds its own sense-making activity, as well as its creation of what remain only provisional constructions of meaning.

The postmodern text not only draws attention to its own semantic provisionality. In the very language and mode of representation it employs it frequently points also to its own ethical interests and ideological investments. Both metahistory and metafiction alike inscribe into the text then the sense that their accounts are only fictional and provisional, and that they exist moreover in a pluralistic relationship with alternative accounts, whereby no single fictional account is more valid than another. White correspondingly accords a particular status for example to those historical accounts which attempt to "come to terms with other plausible emplotments." For it is "this dialectical tension between two or more possible emplotments that signals the element of critical self-consciousness present in any historian of recognizably classical stature" (*Tropics* 94). This productive pluralism in White's thinking finds a parallel expression and takes an imaginative form in many postmodern texts with their themes of the co-existence of other possible worlds, or of

<sup>9</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988) 5. See also *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York & London: Routledge, 1989).

multiple and often contradictory versions of the past in which mutually exclusive events and outcomes proliferate and intersect.

Finally there is an important link between White's emphasis on the historical text as a narrative and figurative construct made of a combination of plots and arguments, and the way that many contemporary texts foreground their own condition both as highly constructed entities resulting from a complex process of textual intersections. The shared conviction emerges that it is only through the textualizing process, as that which imposes figurative form upon the chaos of events, that we can produce meanings. This characteristically contemporary position is important for the art of the present day, as can be seen in the way that the postmodern work misses no opportunity to highlight its own textuality, and to point to the all-pervasiveness of the text- and image-culture from which it springs. For if it is true, as White implies, that we can only accept as knowledge that which has first been turned into a text and rendered as familiar and acceptable paradigms by the process of narrativization, then the implications of this position for a characterization of the postmodern imagination are crucial: it leads directly to the all-determining and increasingly important awareness—an awareness which Hayden White's work articulates as powerfully as anyone writing today—that history itself can ultimately only ever be encountered *as text*.

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## II. A Discussion with Hayden White

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*Maybe a good place to start would be with a key term of yours—narrative “emplotment.” You say that, depending on which narrative plot or genre is chosen—Tragedy, Comedy, Romance, and Satire—the historian can emplot the “same” set of events, and presumably produce very different effects upon the reader. Are there other consequences of emplotment—that is, over and beyond the hidden “ideological implications” of narrativization that you discuss—for example, emplotment as a way of positioning the recipient?*

Sure, sure, I mean, from Hegel on through Marx down to Fredric Jameson most recently, the ideology of form and the way in which a given set of generic conventions carry their own ideological burden with them, just as form: there’s a content in the form itself that isn’t perceived if you think of the form just as kind of an empty container into which you can put any variety of subject matter. Marx in *The 18th Brumaire* begins by saying that Hegel remarks somewhere that every event occurs as it were twice, but that he neglected to mention the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. The opening of *The 18th Brumaire*, the first few pages, are about why the genre chosen by Hugo and Proudhon is the wrong one in which to represent the events of 1848. It’s a generic confusion. And he goes ahead to emplot those events as a farce, which is his way of setting them over against—in terms of their seriousness, their implications, and so forth—the earlier revolution of 1789 of the bourgeoisie. That was a heroic phase, this is the phase at the beginning of their demise. Well, he was wrong about that. But in any event the question here had to do with what’s the appropriate *form* in which to represent these events. And he suggests that both Victor Hugo and Proudhon have chosen the wrong genre. They still think this is heroic or tragic, one or the other. Proudhon thinks it’s an heroic set of events that he’s portraying, Victor Hugo thinks it’s a tragedy. Marx says it’s neither, it’s a farce. And he goes on to show you why that’s the best way of emplotting it. So this has to do really with the idea of the ideology of form and the idea that the form itself is the ideology. Now this is what Fernand Braudel effectively argues in one of his essays when he says, We in the Annales-group want to get rid of narrative. Why do we want to get rid of narrative? Not a specific narrative, not a specific genre or mode of narration, but narrative in general. Why? Because narrative itself is what’s wrong, is what makes this into a bourgeois ideology. A narrative satisfies all our desire to think that things can be wrapped up neatly, that a certain kind of heroism is possible against the great forces of history and he says this deludes us. It’s exactly the argument that Brecht had against classical theater, over against which he sets epic theater. The classical theater seduces the reader into

thinking, Ah! all's right with the world because what I'm watching here in the darkness of the theater can be resolved, equity can be achieved, distributive justice is possible, and so forth. Brecht wants to turn on the lights. Show what's backstage, the props and everything, jolt the audience out of their somnolence, so I think that that's one of the things that the Annales-group tried to do when they wanted to shift not only the content of historical writing from the turbulence of the short political conflict to the *longue durée*. But they also said you must change the form.

By the way, this was exactly Lukacs's idea when he asked the question "To describe or narrate?" Now he thought narrative was absolutely necessary for a realistic representation of history. I think he was wrong. Wrong first of all in posing the question as the matter of a choice between description and narration. But he was certainly right in highlighting what he called the "philosophy of composition." That was absolutely necessary for an historian or novelist or what-have-you. The real problem of course with people like Lukacs and so forth is they didn't really problematize historical writing. They thought that could be taken as a kind of neutral place where you could then assess the relative realism of different novelists or literary writers.

*You said Braudel wanted to get rid of narrative? Isn't the idea of trying to get rid of narrative similar to the aims of those historians you refer to in Metahistory, who try obstinately to stick just to the chronicle, to the "documentary" record?*

That's right. You see the naive person would think that a simple chronicle of events is a history. Every historian knows that a chronological ordering of the events is only preliminary to the emplotment of those events in order to transform them into a history. An ironic move beyond that would be to go back to chronicle very self-consciously in order to *dis*-emplot, in order to show the way in which the given emplotment was a construction. So that's what I had in mind. It's rather like Robbe-Grillet, you know, get rid of characters, get rid of events, get rid of the plot, and see what you've got left. [Laughter].

*Well, what do you have left then?*

Well, one of the things that you have is some facts. You have the discontinuous forms and one of the things that you show also is that a chronological sequence is itself relative to the culture because there are different chronologies and different chronological conventions. So there is what is regarded as a kind of a zero degree against which you can measure emplotment, the chronological sequence. Then there are various distortions of it or fiddlings with it that give you certain distinctive novelistic effects, let us say, or dramatic effects. Let's take out all the dramatic effects until you get

down to the point where you have nothing but chronology. *Then* you can see the chronology itself is a construction.

*So there's no real raw data since it's always a construction?*

How could there be? I mean, the notion of raw data is something that no scientist would believe in.

*What about Waterloo, 1815, that kind of stuff?*

Well, "1815" is the chronological designation, right? "Waterloo" is the place. "Battle" is the generic characterization of those events that occurred there. But, when you think of [Stendhal's] *The Charterhouse of Parma*, you remember that Fabrice wants to go to join Napoleon, and what happens? He goes there and he wanders onto the battlefield and he's completely confused and when he leaves, he's told a great battle was fought and he says, "Oh, is *that* what that was?" He sees instead a series of farcical events. Well, I think that that notion of raw data is what you get when you collapse the idea of "event" into the idea of "fact." Many people say "But what are the real facts?" Well, a fact—and here I follow Barthes—is a linguistic phenomenon pure and simple. It is a statement, a predication, that so-and-so happened or so-and-so was or so-and-so did x at time, place, line z. The fact therefore is a result of a reflection on something that you can designate as an "event." The event comes self-designated in the documents as a battle that occurred. But that designation itself is a construction. So the document is already a construction of what will constitute the event. And then the fact is that which is a result of critical reflection on the adequacy of the documentary account. So for me there is no raw data.

*Not even in the sense that there might be raw data but it doesn't yet mean anything because it hasn't been given a meaning?*

Yes, of course "things happen"—and using that locution we're already in trouble... [Laughter]. But the scientific notions of event can't separate the idea of fact from event because according to the philosophers that work on these questions (I think of Arthur Danto especially), a fact is an event under a description. The event is something "given" in the sense that someone records an occurrence. If the occurrence hasn't been recorded, it's not even something that's going to be speculated about. But if it's been recorded by a witness or two or more witnesses or however many you need, then the question has to do with whether that recording and the characterization of the given in the original recording is adequate or not, whether it's an accurate one, and the

fact then is the result of trying to compare different accounts or records of occurrences.

So for me, of course things happen to people in the way that someone gets run over by a truck. That's one thing. You can establish that pretty well without any problem. But was the taking of the Bastille the beginning of the French Revolution or not, that is much more difficult. Is that the beginning? Tocqueville thought no, he thought you had to go back to the Reformation to see where the beginning of the French Revolution was. So I believe that the real difficulty in historical writing and in all forms of realistic discourse, social science writing and so forth, is that you can't replicate historical events in a laboratory situation as you can in physics or chemistry or what-have-you. And therefore you can't set up laboratory controls over your description of whether this kind of event is an event of type A or not, whether this event occurred at time C, D or E or not. These are the sorts of questions you can ask about physical events. But historical events are not physical events. They're the result of actions of people who are oftentimes responding or reacting to physical events, but the historical event is itself a product of this reaction and always involves the intentionality, etc. of the agents. And you can't replicate those because the agents are dead. And by definition they're individuals and you can never replicate them. So every set of putative historical facts giving us an account of events is more like virtual reality than it is old-fashioned raw data.

*Perhaps we should talk about the philosophy of history, its importance in your work and where you place it as regards historiography?*

From around 1950 philosophers of history have been saying that no one believes in philosophy of history, right? There's history but there's no philosophy of history that is legitimate, so they tried to get rid of all of them, especially Marxism. That was another thing that offended many of the historians, both here and abroad, when I said that every history presupposes a philosophy of history. So in the same way that I seem to collapse the distinction between fact and fiction, so too the distinction between history and philosophy of history.

*Is there such a thing as a history which is not also a metahistory at the same time?*

They're *all* metahistories. It's an illusion, it's a founding illusion of modern objectivist historiography, that *they* have myth, but *we* have real history. The Germans have philosophy of history, we do real history. That's why they got upset at my notion of "metahistory," you see, and the notion that every history presupposes a whole complex web of commitments, ontological, epistemological, and so forth, that represents the suppressed philosophy of history that makes possible the writing... But when you think about historical

reality, whatever you mean by it, it's a chaos. There are too many facts, there are too many events, there's too many things happening. How do you get any sense out of it? You must postulate a metalanguage of some sort, you must start emplotting these events, you must exclude certain events, you must decide what is an important as against an unimportant event, and all those operations. It can be done on the basis of an implicit philosophy of history that tells you what's important, what's not important. Or it can be done on the basis of a rhetorically self-conscious philosophy of composition in which you more or less self-consciously recognize the aim you want to serve or have realized by writing your history this way rather than some [other] way and going ahead and doing it. That's the advantage it seemed to me of Marxism—they lay their cards on the table at least—whereas the straight historian claims to have no cards to play: "we're merely telling it like it is." I deny that that's possible in history, in the depiction of social reality.

*You mentioned, in connection with the reception of your work in France, that Roger Chartier has published a critique entitled, "Four Questions to Hayden White."*

Yes. Along the lines of "Aren't you threatened by relativism?"... "Isn't your approach relativistic?"...

*What's your answer?*

Correct. [Laughter] Yes. But it doesn't follow that you can say anything you want to about the text. All relativism does, as I envision it at least, is say that the kinds of questions you ask of a text or of history or of social reality, are context-specific. They're grounded in the experience, what Kosellek calls the "space of experience." There's the place that questions arise. These questions are not universal questions, they're not something that are found in all cultures. And then the criteria for determining what constitutes an adequate answer or solution to those questions are *also* context-specific in the same way that, for example, a national language allows you to ask certain questions that you couldn't ask in some other language, right?

What I'm suggesting isn't a kind of an absolute relativism. In certain sciences, in certain practices of representation such as history, the questions, the criteria for answers, are judged by culturally specific criteria. This is not the same thing as saying that this is also the case with physics or something like that. But in point of fact the human sciences are not *sciences* in the same way that physics is. You can transport physics from Japan to the United States and back, but you cannot transport historical inquiry. It's like psychoanalysis. It's very difficult to export psychoanalysis to Japan or China, where cultural factors have created completely different notions of selfhood and so forth. So the kind of questions that the [Western] psychoanalyst would put and did put to the

survivors of Hiroshima or Nagasaki are not the kind of questions that a Japanese psychologist would recognize as pertinent. So I think it's the notion of pertinency. In the same way literary discourse would have to be considered "culture-specific." It's very interesting to think of the way in which certain styles of writing just don't translate, right?

*You refer to the human sciences. Obviously, since the whole approach of your work is rhetorical in nature, it must be completely at odds with those historians who think of themselves as scientists and who do indeed regard their work as culturally "translatable."*

The historians, you see, have been getting so much mileage for the last 150 years on the idea that they represent *objective* takes on reality, that they serve as a kind of paradigm of any kind of inquiry into social reality in the present. That idea is one that has really sustained history as a legitimate discipline. It's allowed them to suppress the extent to which the discourse itself constitutes the objects of historians' analysis and they've been allowed and permitted—for reasons that Foucault makes quite clear—to pose as representatives of an objectivist way of looking at reality because the past, after all, is over and done with. It's fixed. You ought to be able to have objective, transculturally creditable knowledge about this past. This has allowed them to obscure the fact that historical discourse really has to constitute its object of analysis first by some preliminary or initial description of it, in a particular language, metalanguage or code. And this works it up, prepares it as a possible object of knowledge, of a particular kind of knowledge.

Everybody will recognize that history is an invention of Western culture. But they think that, physics, Copernican physics or Newtonian physics, is translatable. It's not. That's why history written by a Japanese scholar today would be regarded as perfectly adequate within the Japanese context but wouldn't even be recognized as such here. I have friends in philosophy—philosophy's the same sort of thing—I asked friends in philosophy, "Why don't you ever teach African philosophy?" They say, "There is no African philosophy." I say, "You mean they don't have an epistemology, an ontology, and so forth?" And they say, "Well, they may have, but it's all myth, you see." When they say they do philosophy here, they mean philosophy of the Cartesian sort or analytical sort. This had to do with styles or manners of thinking. My relativism isn't different from Wittgenstein's appeal to the notion of the life forms to which criteria of felicitousness have to be referred in order to know whether someone's using a language, playing a language game adequately or not.

*When you look at forms of history writing, even within a particular context, how would you distinguish between legitimate or illegitimate forms?*

I think it's a purely conventional criterion. By that I mean, conventionalist. The criterion for determining what is an adequate professionally competent form of history writing is, again, culture-specific. It changes continually. What was adequate history in the 16th century was not so in the 18th century, 19th century, 20th century and so forth. Styles of writing change in history as they do elsewhere. But it wasn't until the 19th century that history was constituted as a profession, and moved into the canon. History wasn't taught in the universities until the 19th century. The reason it was taught in the universities in the 19th century was that it was providing a basis for the constitution of these national genealogies... So historians since that time have felt that whatever is the dominant form of history at a particular place and a particular time represents the *final* form. But in reality they're always only styles. Up until the early 19th century, history writing was regarded as a branch of rhetoric. It was located under rhetoric. If you looked in any rhetorical handbook from the 18th century, when they discussed it they typically divided poetry and prose. Under prose, there was discourse, prose discourse, there's public forms, private forms. In public forms, there's history, philosophy, epistolary writing, and the romance. These are the four forms that are all regarded as falling under that domain of rhetoric—without any pretense that there's anything going on here in the way of science.

*While your criterion of legitimacy is not oriented towards the "scientific" I do see in your work a consistent goal of self-consciousness. You clearly place particular emphasis on the fact that historians should work self-consciously. In one of your articles "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" in Tropics of Discourse, you talk about the truly classical historians as the ones that preserve a dialectical tension between two or more possible emplotments. That dialectical tension is also similar I think to a kind of self-consciousness...*

That's right. Well, see, as long as you believe that the form of reality that you're studying in the past is in the materials, is given by the materials, either the documentary record or the events themselves, you don't need a great deal of self-consciousness about your writing up of them. You can go under the illusion that you're merely transcribing or delineating a form you've found. The great historians, the ones that are recognized as the classic writers of history, are always the ones who are aware that there are always at least two possibilities for characterizing the field that they're studying. And I think it's that tension that gives to them their interpretability, that makes them interpretable differently, one generation after another. As with Gibbon, for

example. Gibbon is in style at one time and place, he's out of style another, then comes back in. The same thing is true of people like Burckhardt or even Ranke, although he's kind of the father figure of the discipline, in his academic incarnation. But I think it is true that if you were aware that there were at least two plausible interpretations or representations of anything that came into your field of vision, then you would necessarily be thrown back upon a kind of reflecting upon the choices you make. Some years ago they used a piece of glass as a surface for Matisse's painting. Have you ever seen that?

*Was it Picasso?*

Yes, it may have been. And they did the slow-motion cinematic portrayal of the brush strokes that he made and they slowed it down to show the hesitation, the possibility of going one way or the other. It showed that what looked like a smooth kind of representational practice was in reality made up of thousands of kind of hesitations between alternative possibilities. I think that the resolution of that has some kind of consistency with what we mean by style, which incidentally is Foucault's definition of style too. And Foucault is a relativist too. After all, relativism seems to me like an old problem, I mean an old hat kind of a question that only a discipline whose doxa was stuck somewhere around 1920 could still be debating.

*There seems to be something particularly contemporary about the idea of self-conscious writing or this idea of a tension between simultaneously existing alternative versions. You say that the "classic" historians were always aware of this tension between different possibilities. But as a cultural "dominant" it seems to be a particularly modern phenomenon. It seems to go a step beyond even the idea of presenting not just one perspective but lots of them, simultaneously and contradictorily, as in Cubism. And it seems to me that this idea has developed even further in contemporary writing, to the extent that postmodern writers are obsessed by the idea of foregrounding the fictive when they present history, or in depicting the real as multiple possibilities.*

Well, that's certainly true. But I wouldn't even say postmodern. You mentioned painting, you mentioned Cubism. After all, Cubism is early 20th century and this question of conflicting or alternative perspectives being put into the same frame is exactly what they were doing, just as in Surrealism. The testing of the codes we can say, the metalanguages, is what was going on. I think that of course, as regards the field of history in the 19th and 20th centuries, the visual arts, the representational visual arts were much more experimental than their equivalents in prose writing especially. So the question of how you could build in multi-perspectival views upon a single reality or continuous reality is interesting. Perspectivalism—this after all was the question that Nietzsche posed.

Now of course when I say Nietzsche, all my colleagues say "Fascism," right? Carlo Ginzburg says, "You start out a relativist, but this makes even fascism possible" because you end up with some kind of pragmatic conception of what a true account is. I accept the pragmatist one. It seems to me liberating insofar as you liberate yourself from the illusion that you're producing absolute truth. I think this is a modernist invention. For example, there is the modernist critique of tradition as an illusion insofar as it's continuous, whole, organic, and so forth. This concentration on the fragment, upon discontinuous discourse, it's right at the basis of Pound, Eliot, and Joyce's conception of history, which I think is a much more realistic conception than the finely-wrought narratives with their glossy textures and their seamlessness and their continuities that were characteristic of historians writing at the same time.

*If history writing has always been a form of fictionality, a form of narrative writing, then what is it, about modern writing, 20th-century writing, that stands out? I mean, if historiography has always been fictive, there must be something that has changed in the 20th century to make us so aware of the fact that it's fiction?*

Yes, I see what you mean. I realize now that in using the distinction between fact and fiction, I was complicit in the ideology that underwrote history's claim to objectivity and scientificity. It seems to me that it's always been narrative. There is a sense in which history has always been fiction, if we take fiction in its broad philosophical sense of hypothetical postulates about the nature of reality, in the sense that Ernst Mach or the neo-Kantians used the concept of the "Als ob" approach, "Let us act as if we had an adequate accountable world." That would be fictional. Now if you mean by fiction, fabulous or merely imaginary as against real, the possible as against the actual, then history aspires not to be that, right? It aspires to be anything but imaginary and fabulizing and so forth. I made a mistake in saying there's factual discourse, and there's fictional discourse. Because fictional discourse turns out to be just another version of factual discourse and history. Or the factual discourse turns out to be a particular kind of convention that will call itself non-fictional even though its products are fictional in nature. I now feel that people like Foucault and Barthes were quite right in suggesting that modernist writing is neither fictional nor factual. Something like the sort of thing that you've been arguing in some of your work. Namely, that literature is a third possibility.

I'm writing an essay right now called "Literature Against Fiction." It seems to me that the great modernists certainly are trying to represent reality. They're doing it in a different style, a different mode from anything that 19th-century realist conventions—whether they be naturalism or what-have-you—had in mind. So literary writings, in the early 19th century by people like

Flaubert, but also elsewhere in western Europe, were invented in such a way that we can say that there's a new kind of language-use that comes into play at this time, and that while it may look like fiction—insofar as *Madame Bovary* is about imaginary people located in a specific time and places with proper names, like Rouen, what-have-you—the question is, how does this writing differ from every form of fiction that we might have imagined before it? We know there are certain stylistic attributes such as “style indirect libre,” that we can name at least, that makes it different. One of the things that makes it different is that it erases the marks of its fictionality. In some sense, it's writing that always scumbles or blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, not in order to make the factual fictional or the fictional factual, but to say that the representation of reality can no longer be carried out responsibly on the basis of that older distinction between fact or fiction, one or the other, where it has to be either/or.

Literary writing, I think you should agree on the basis of your own work,<sup>10</sup> literary writing in modernism is a new kind of cat. And what makes it a new kind of cat is that it questions the distinction that had made Western realism possible, namely, the possibility of thinking that you could adequately distinguish between fact and fiction, from the time of Aristotle on. So that Aristotle's opposition of poetry to history—history is what really happened, poetry is what is imaginable—that distinction became a kind of orthodoxy that continued to underwrite the distinctiveness of fictional writing, whether in poetry or prose, right down until the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. Then, I think as a result of the French Revolution, you have experimentation of the kind that Flaubert, Baudelaire carried out, even of the kind that Goethe was interested in, certainly Heine. I think Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* and I think Carlyle's *French Revolution* are *great* meditations on the fact/fiction distinction and the problematizing of it. Quite different from Sir Walter Scott. Sir Walter Scott is aware that there is a problem here, but he thinks he can resolve it by making *quite* clear what is fact and what is fiction, and putting in all those prefaces and appendices, documents and so forth.

*Taking your example Dickens as an instance of a 19th-century writing of history, a literary writing of history would presumably be something which meditates upon the problem of history-writing but doesn't necessarily concede all the time that that's exactly what it's doing.*

It doesn't quite conceive it. Flaubert is aware, the French realists and Flaubert problematize realism, right? As do so many of the writers in the French tradition. But I think we can say that there's a sense in which Flaubert and Baudelaire anticipate a certain kind of modernist writing. But in the period

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<sup>10</sup> Richard J. Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism and the Problem of Postmodernity*, appearing with Cambridge UP, 1997.

just before and after the First World War, something else happens. Maybe it has to do with the problem—or with confronting the problem—of trying to represent the horrors of the First World War, to try to find a different way, a way of representing the unimaginable but real. And I think that's exactly the problem that people face when they reflect on the Holocaust now. I mean, how do you represent the Holocaust responsibly without a kind of fake realism or without allowing your discourse to fall into kind of dream-like trances of non-reflexivity? I don't know.

*If the First World War represents a problem which also becomes a kind of turning-point in art, do you also see any other transitions or transformations later on?*

Yes, I think postmodernism is a variation on modernism myself. I see it of course as a reaction. But when I say postmodernism, I mean the reaction to literary modernism, I don't mean the reaction to the Enlightenment, Habermas and so forth. That's a different question from the one that Rorty, Habermas and others were debating, having to do with the Enlightenment. And I think that some time after the Second World War, with Robbe-Grillet, or someone like that, there was a beginning. Maybe it had to do with the 2nd or 3rd generation of modernists. I think that you begin to get a sense of the limitations of that earlier heroic period of modernism and, frankly, I think a kind of loss of belief in the modernist project, with the result that the world of the "grandfathers" if you wish, the first generation of moderns, becomes subjected to various kinds of satire. Their techniques and so forth become parodied and lampooned and it's that sense of parody, of liberation through parody that really is much more characteristic. I think that in modernism you still really have a serious engagement with traditional models, really a serious one, because that's what leads to the first generation of moderns. Pound, Eliot, and so on, all these guys are trained in classical writing and it's very difficult for them to break out of it. By the time you get to the end of the Second World War, who cares about classical writing to begin with. It doesn't seem to be a very desirable project to explode it, you know.

*You appear to take the modernist writers as your main point of orientation, is that right? Is modernism central for you?*

I'm still working out the questions posed by modernism. I think it's generational. After all, for me, coming into "intellectual adolescence" just after the Second World War, the writers we had to deal with were Pound, you know. I had a correspondence with Pound from Italy as a young man when I was still a graduate student, when he was at St. Elizabeth's Hospital. It wasn't extensive correspondence, but I felt Pound was the kind of person we had to come to terms with. Joyce still. *Finnegan's Wake* was just what?... 1939 or something like that. It's still the text that's primary for my generation. And I don't think

you ever quite get away from this if you're an intellectual. For me Jean-Paul Sartre was absolutely crucial in my formation. I could never just dismiss him like later generations.

*Talking of Sartre raises the question of political choice. One of your commentators, Peter Da Bolla, has linked your work with that of Fredric Jameson, saying that you both have the same "utopian" drive.<sup>11</sup> What about the political dimension of your work?*

I've always regarded myself as a Marxist. I don't believe that you can be a modern historian and not have a Marxist dimension to your work, the base-superstructure dimension, the class analysis, and above all the idea of dialectic. You can't have sophisticated historiography without that. I think that's something that Marx had and that all the great historians of the 19th century all have versions of that, of one kind or another. But for the utopian dimension, though, I felt that what was wrong with Marxism was that, in rejecting formalism, it had great difficulty coming to the understanding of the ideology of form, which I think has been an achievement of the second half of the 20th century. And so like Barthes, whom I admire enormously, what you needed to add to the Marxist dimension—which sort of prided itself on finally getting to the reality behind the illusions—was an analysis of the forms of historical discourse, including Marxism itself. Marxism could not claim to be self-reflexive and so forth unless it historicized its own position. And it failed to do that—Marx less so than many of the Marxists who came after him.

*What does it mean to historicize or situate your own position in this regard?*

What does it mean to situate your own position? It means to account not only for the interest you have in a specific content of history, but also the interest you have in representing it in a particular way. So it seemed to me a formalist analysis was necessary. And you know, Barthes said that himself first of all. He said a little formalism leads you away from history, but a lot of formalism leads back. It's one of my favorite epigrams. Fred Jameson really is the one who has done this in everything he's written since *Marxism and Form*. And even in his doctoral dissertation he raised the whole question of the status of narrative in Sartre. I think that with this dimension—what does that mean about utopianism and so forth—one really has to do with the "imaginary" (I mean the Lacanian *imaginaire*) as providing a ground for understanding utopian impulses, impulses toward wholeness, health, social health, reparation of the body politic, and all those sorts of things. That's an imaginary projection against whatever symbolic forms of integration one is presented with and always has to resist.

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Da Bolla, "Disfiguring History," *Diacritics* 16. 4 (1986): 49-58.

It seems to me that we've inherited the idea that there was ideology on the one side and history on the other. And history could always be used to show the distortion implicit in any given ideology. I think that opposition is utterly wrong. Momigliano says, "Where there's ideology there is no history; where there's history there is no ideology." That's ridiculous. History is another form of ideological encodation of reality and it can be done in a progressive way, leading towards a utopian-founded critique of present social reality; or it can be done in a very conservative way, ending up justifying present reality as it is.

*But still in your writing, you don't valorize any particular form of history writing.*

Well, no, but I do think that there are limits that are set by the culture on what will be permitted to pass for a serious historical representation. And these limits are the limits of the culture. When some people say that this culture has no historical consciousness, what they mean is they don't have a recognizable one—usually in the light of some colonial administration's conception of what history is. [Laughter]

*I'd like to bring up a thought we had earlier about your reception in France and whether you see any links in your work to recent French thought?*

Recent French thought... well, people interested in my work tend to be the younger generation, not the kind of "establishment." The establishment tends to regard it as kind of interesting but off the mark. This is true of people whom I really respect and who read my stuff and say, "Well, you know, that's one way of looking at it, but it's kind of an American way." And I think there's much to that. We in the United States have in the first place this devotion to belief in history, as that drama in which we are the principal protagonists leading the way of Western civilization westward, on the one hand. And on the other, we are very skeptical of history insofar as history has always been of course written by, for and about the aristocracy. History is and has always been about nobility, people who "matter," are "somebody." And the populism in the United States and the pragmatism that I think are intrinsic to our culture really give us a different insight into history from anything produced by a French aristocrat or a German "Herr" of some kind or another, a Prussian. So I believe that that is important, and also our secularism. We did not experience the Middle Ages—that makes us utterly different from the rest of Western Europe. I think that makes us very much similar to Latin Americans too. So I believe that New World history is inevitably different, has different concerns, different formulations... and so too for New World historiography. When I lecture in France or Italy, they say "Well, this is very interesting, but we wouldn't ask those questions."

*One of the things I was thinking of before when I asked about the links between your work and recent thought in France is that it seems to me that there is not only a telling skepticism in your work regarding what constitutes history and what constitutes fiction—but that it seems to become an anti-foundational move, of the kind that happens so frequently in post-structuralist thought.*

Yes, it is, it is.

*I'm thinking of the work of people like Lyotard, his undermining of the "master narratives" or even Derrida (on whom I know you have written) and his move regarding the "transcendental signifieds." There seems to be an obvious link between your work and Derrida's, and Foucault's as well...*

Yeah, very much. That's quite right. Lyotard and I have exchanged, and spoken often about this kind of thing. He got interested in the sublime and he said he was reading an article that I wrote. The master-narrative idea is interesting, yes. He kind of deconstructs all these master-narratives at a level other than content. It's one thing to say that the master-narrative of Christianity is gone, of 19th-century progress, Karl Marx... And it's one thing to say that no one believes in the master-narrative. But in point of fact, almost everyone does, and even if they don't believe in, say, the Christian one or the classical one or the 19th-century master-narrative bourgeois progress and so forth, they all believe in *some* kind of narrative. Even Lyotard was forced to postulate "le petit récit," right? And that's still a narrative. Now that means that the narrative form is still treated as if it were neutral. The way to destroy belief in the master narrative is to destroy the narrative part.

Everyone points out that even the belief in the end of the master narrative is a kind of master narrative. And postmodernism has its own narrative, right? I would be wrong to put it in terms of a content-versus-form issue, because what we're looking for in postmodernism is a third alternative to that simple opposition, form and content. So when it comes to master narratives, I don't think that is a very insightful way of characterizing postmodernism, the end of the master narrative.

*Previously when we spoke about Marxism and your position, and about the utopian dimension of your work, you said that you would call yourself a Marxist historian. But on the other hand, a Marxist historian in the mold of, say, Lukacs, would be one that would say, Okay, this is not my idea of history, this is History per se, teleological, and so on... So isn't there a difference here to your kind of Marxism?*

That's right. Mine is much more existentialist. Along with Marxism, it's always been an existentialist framework. That was the importance of Jean-Paul

Sartre for me when I discovered him at age 18 or something like that. The idea that you have to choose among alternative possibilities. And you choose on the basis of criteria that I believe are ultimately aesthetic or ethical, not scientific, when it comes to history. You don't have a choice among different versions of aeronautics when it comes to building an airplane that will fly or not, right? But it seems to me that we become interested in history out of needs rather than intellectual interests or curiosity, and we write history out of needs that are more particularly ethical than scientific. It would hardly matter what we knew or didn't know about the past in terms of any possible science of society. I don't think you can build a science of society on the basis of study of the past anyway. What you're concerned with usually is group identity and the relationship of selves to the group identity, and I think that's the function of historical writing. It's to provide in Foucault's term "genealogies" and group practices and things of that sort. And you choose those, I mean, in more or less open societies you have choices here.

You are in a situation now where your daughter in some sense has to decide—and this is a very postmodern thing—whether she's going to be a British subject, an American citizen, a French citizen, right, all the above, or none. Isn't it true? It's very interesting. And it is not a genetically-determined decision. It's a distinctively social, cultural decision. All of this has to do with the choice of a past, you see, from which she will have wished to have descended. That is Nietzsche's formulation. Nietzsche says the difference between historical self-consciousness and mere genetics—a genealogical self-consciousness—is that you choose a past from which you would have wished to have descended rather than the past from which you have actually descended. And you know your daughter will be doing that in terms of national identity. As a matter of fact, when she grows up, she may very well be in a situation where a choice of a national identity will seem kind of absurd. She may have a European passport, not a British, American, so forth... But you see, that again is to choose a different history.

*As regards the question of national identity, I want to ask you about your current work. I understand that you are interested at the moment in the former eastern bloc and the way in which history is being rewritten after the fall of the Wall.*

Yes, that's a very interesting phenomenon. It has to do with reinventing the immediate past rather than a kind of long *durée*. People like the Ukrainians are told, "Okay, you're a nation now, go and write your own history." They have been told all this time that they didn't have a history that was separate from that of Russia. You recall that Stalin even got rid of Ukrainian as a language or tried to destroy it, substituting Russian. And now these people have got to decide, well, what happened the last 75 years? Exactly the same thing that's happening in the Soviet Union itself, in which for 75 years the

Stalinists sort of told people, "Forget anything that happened up to the Revolution." There's a complete discontinuity between that period and what's going to happen from now on. Now they're opening up the archives, and historians are saying, We realize we lied, but now we're going to tell the *truth*. They're selling off the archives to these American historical entrepreneurs who are gathering and buying up the archives that are being sold because the libraries need the money. Certain of these American historical entrepreneurs who want to gain control of the Russian past have hired out-of-work Russian scholars to go into the archives to copy materials, send them over to Harvard or the Hoover Institution at Stanford or what-have-you, and these people are now setting up their own version, not only of the historical record, but of the archives themselves. So this is going on in all of the nations of the eastern bloc. It was brought to my attention by an Oxford scholar named Catherine Merridale.

Another, Carolyn Steedman, is interested in the whole question of why we do history, looking for a subject, Latvian memory and narrative. Here are the Latvians. What kind of historical memory do Latvians have after 75 years of being assimilated to the Stalinist system? So she's interviewing a guy who's been to many prisons and many prison camps and whose experience of what it means to be a Lett extended only to about the age of 17 or 18 when he was picked up first of all by the Russian police and then sent around to all these camps, and so the last 20 years or so were all spent there. So what kind of history does he have? No community except these camps. This guy is trying to reconstruct his Latvian identity under these circumstances. He speaks a language that no oral historian speaks, right? It's really fascinating stuff: the attempt after all by the various regimes, like in China, as in the eastern bloc, to control consciousness, to engineer consciousness. Now of course the Americans all say, "We're not like that," see, "We're not engineering consciousness. We're just telling it like it is." So they're going in there now and they're trying to take over and define for the Russians how they *should* think of history. And of course how they should think of history is exactly the way in which *these* people were thinking about history during the Cold War on this side.

*So, for Western historians there's still no historicizing, no theorizing of their own position?*

You see, I think that history in the 19th century was established as the foundational discourse in place of both theology and metaphysics as something that was a neutral ground of fact that you could always have recourse to when debates of an ideological nature seemed resolvable by an appeal to the facts, you know, bring in history without having to think very much about it. Result is that historians grew up believing typically that you

didn't have to think very much about epistemological issues or even ideological issues as long as you had the chastity of pursuit of the fact as an end in itself. But it is an interesting development that even in Great Britain, which is against theory, which is against philosophy, you know... these issues are all coming back. They're connected with questions of communal identity, national identity, the whole debate that's going on now, should Britain be in the European Community, lose its individuality, become a log among a bunch of logs? The high school teachers are debating these issues in *The Times Educational Supplement*.

*... that education is in crisis because of the national identity issue?*

That's right, as it is everywhere. And part of it has to do with the fact that our sense of our historical belonging and so forth is in crisis too. Because the nation-state's gone. And that was the basic unit for understanding historical reality. And it doesn't count any more. Economic factors, communicational factors, and so forth... these are what count. Nowadays there isn't a definition of what community you belong to. There are people who belong to communities on the Web that are more meaningful to them than their status as citizens of the United States.

*So they belong to "virtual communities"?*

Yes, they are virtual communities. And maybe that's all we ever had anyway. Even the family is a virtual community as far as I'm concerned... [Laughter]. Isn't that true? Is that why we never felt we belonged to a community? I mean... only *other* people seemed to belong to communities.

*I think you have hit on a definition of postmodernity right there, because if these things were always a fiction, then the only difference now is the undeniable evidence of their fictionality or "virtuality." You know, all that emphasis on the image in the postmodern. Something that maybe always existed only in this fictional way has become so obviously "virtual" now that it simply can be accepted as such. One simply has to accept it as image.*

Yes, that's a very interesting idea. That may be what postmodernism is. You're right about that, that it was always virtual. You see, every community is always virtual. Now they take it for granted—that's all it is. What does it mean to be a good parent? It means to play the role of being a parent. It means playing that virtual reality role, it doesn't mean *being* a good parent.

*You were telling me that there was recently a conference in New York, a retrospective devoted entirely to your work.*

I don't believe in these kind of retrospective things and of course predictably, people were raising questions about *Metahistory*, which I always point out is now 25 years old and doesn't even interest *me* any more. I can't remember what I wrote. But it's very interesting that these were all historians but they didn't historicize the work at all. I mean, my response is, "Look, it was written 25 years ago at a particular moment, the moment of structuralism, and it's a structural analysis of historical writing, what's so strange about that?" I wouldn't do it *now* that way. It's interesting that whenever I go anywhere I'm invited to lecture, they want me to talk about *Metahistory*. And I say, "Look, I'm doing other things now." This is exactly what happened in New York. These were historians, and I said, "Well, look, you're historians, before you criticize the work, why wouldn't you set it in its context? Don't act like it's been raised out of time and you're dealing with timeless issues and so forth. That may be the effect of a structuralist analysis."

This is what offended many historians. They said, "We don't need theory, we don't deal with theory, we just go and study the sources and say what we've found." And that's true. That's what makes historical conferences so bloody dull. Because all they're doing is presenting their findings, and so what's to discuss? This guy says "I found out about the Renaissance that there was a great deal more homosexuality than previously thought and here's my evidence." Someone else says, "Oh, I found the same thing in France in a similar period." So what's to debate, you know?



## *“Remembering Beckett”*

### An interview with Herbert Blau

by Marie-Claire Pasquier

*Herbert Blau has had a long career in the theater. Cofounder (with Jules Irving) of the Actors's Workshop of San Francisco (1952-65), he successively became codirector of the Repertory Theater at Lincoln Center in New York (1965-67) and Artistic Director of the experimental group KRAKEN (created in 1971). He was responsible for some of the first performances of plays by Brecht, Beckett, Pinter, Ionesco, Durenmatt, Genet. Currently Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, he has gained an international reputation for his theoretical writings on performance and postmodern culture, amongst which: Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point (1982), The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern (1987), The Audience (1990),<sup>1</sup> To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance (1992). Herbert Blau is preparing for the University of Michigan Press a new book on Beckett, mostly but not exclusively dedicated to his theater. The “theoretical memories” presented here may be regarded as a kind of overture or prelude to this new publication.*



So, Herb, we hear that you are planning to publish a new book on Beckett, which is no surprise, knowing your interest in the man and his works. But did Beckett—this is an incidental question—ever read anything that you'd written about him, and did he react to it?

Marie-Claire Pasquier is professor of American Literature at the University of Paris X. The interview was conducted in Paris on September 18, 1996.

In all the time I knew him, a little over thirty years, I never gave him anything I ever wrote—except toward the end, once. In the early years, supposition was that Beckett never read anything written about him, whether by friends or by anyone else. That was just a fiction. It was soon apparent to me that he did. But for a very long time I never gave him anything. A while before he died, my wife, Kathy, berated me about that. I had written about him incidentally and sometimes extensively, but it was shortly after I had published two longish essays—the one on deconstruction and another on Beckett and Barthes—that I decided to bring him a book. He was already quite ill by then, over at the nursing home off the avenue du Général Leclerc. I gave

1. A French version will be published by Éditions Hyx, Orléans, at the end of 1997.

him *The Eye of Prey*. I know he was very moved by the gesture, but I didn't see him again after that, and so I never really knew whether he actually read the essays.

*Kathy berated you for doing what exactly? For not showing them?*

Yes, for not showing him anything, not even what I'd written about my work on his plays as a director. He was so moved, though, by my giving him the book that he got up with some difficulty—his arthritis, at that point, was severe—, made his way over to a bureau, and took out a manuscript. It was a manuscript of *Comment dire*.

*You have a manuscript by him which is a late present. Will that appear in the book? Will you give these personal memories as part of your introduction to the book, or will it remain on a theoretical level?*

I'm not quite sure what I'll do yet, but there will be personal materials in the introduction. It will give me a chance for some last reflections, maybe things that I never talked about. How much of a memoir, I'm not yet sure.

*What I would like to know is when you first read your first line by Beckett, when you were first introduced to his work, and when you first met him as a person, and how long ago this was.*

I came across Beckett early in the fifties, when I had my theater in San Francisco. I was also teaching at what was then San Francisco State College, which had one of the two major poetry centers in the United States. It was started by a woman named Ruth Witt Diamant. She had been in Paris, and first mentioned him to me. She talked about his fiction, which I remember vaguely—I may have seen something before. But she gave me a copy of *En attendant Godot*, which she said I must read. I forget exactly what year that was. It was probably about 1954 or 1955. Shortly after, we did the production of *Waiting for Godot* in San Francisco.

*So you knew *En attendant Godot* in French before you got the English version?*

Yes. Before we did the play, however, it was produced with peculiar notoriety by Michael Meyerberg in New York. Because they were afraid that the work might be prohibitive, they advertised, as I recall, for "ninety-six thousand intellectuals." That was apparently the number they needed to break even at the box office. Actually, it was produced first at the Copacabana Playhouse in Boca Raton, Florida, with Burt Lahr. It was a disaster. Alan Schneider directed it. People would have walked out on Beckett in those days

anyhow—as they did in Paris, and when he showed up in San Francisco—but down there in Florida, it was just totally...

*Are you telling me that Alan Schneider, who was then to produce most of Beckett's plays, started doing Beckett in the Copacabana in Florida?*

Oh yes, in Florida. I believe it was Burt Lahr and Tom Ewell. They did a production that was an utter disaster. Alan was shattered. I think it had just a couple of performances there. We were already interested. But it was impossible then to get the rights to a play that was being set up for production in New York. So we had to wait that out. The production in New York—directed not by Alan, but by Herbert Berghof—got a little respectful attention, and then pretty quickly disappeared.

*And I suppose that Beckett in those days was not as particular as he became about controlling every single production. Since he was not well-known, he didn't have the authority he later acquired.*

That's exactly so. He at least pretended indifference to what was being done to his plays then. Moreover, he hadn't yet directed. When we did early on a production of *Fin de partie* (*Endgame*), I sent him some pictures. It was just before I met him. The pictures were quite stunning, but the setting revealed was probably not what he had in mind when he called for gray walls in his stage directions. Our walls were gray, but with a sort of sumptuous poverty, shades of gray, textures of gray, an assemblage of materials that—as Hamm and Clov made their tour, counter-clockwise around the room—suggested, subliminally, the entire history of western culture in reverse. One would think that later on, had he seen the same pictures, he might have objected to the scene design. But I have a letter which indicates that he found what he saw, then, quite splendid. So he seemed to approve of what we did.

*Have you ever seen any of the productions by Beckett as a director? And as a director yourself, can you make any comment on what you thought of them?*

No, I was never there when he was actually directing. I was here in Paris, however, when they were filming the productions which he presumably approved. The series is called "Beckett Directs Beckett." Actually, the staging was done by another director, but following diligently Beckett's instructions, or repeating what Beckett himself had done. In all frankness, I found those productions rather banal, too straightforward and not terribly imaginative. I mean, they were pretty much what might be done off the page if in fact we sat here today, read the play, and said, "How should we put this on?" No, there was nothing extraordinary, and that, I think, is unfortunate, because

what's recorded on film will be taken as the authentic. Actually, a former student of mine had gotten the film rights, and I'd been invited, along with a couple of other people, to comment on those productions. It was very difficult to say much about the stagings, which more or less literalized what's apparent on the page.

*As a more general principle, what do you think of this right to control productions that Beckett, the author, considered he had? And now that he is dead, do you think that directors should be allowed more freedom in their interpretations of Beckett? For instance, I'm thinking of what we are going to see at the Peter Brook's theater this week (Oh, les beaux jours!). We don't know what it's going to be, but we will probably see evidence of such freedom. What is your opinion on the principle of freedom?*

I think such control is just untenable. There are no longer any grounds for it. Actually, if the ground went out from under, you could say that was in some measure Beckett's fault. After all, when we ask, who is Godot? and have no answer—"If I knew who Godot was, I would tell you," he said—we're into the indeterminacy of origins that, from Pirandello to deconstruction, would seem to jeopardize authority and virtually surrender copyright. Anyhow, I happened to be here in Paris some days after we had heard that Beckett had stopped the production at Bob Brustein's theater in Cambridge, at Harvard. The director was Joanne Akalaitis, who was associated previously with the Mabou Mines. Joanne had actually been with our theater in San Francisco; so I'd known her a long time. Several people in the Mabou Mines had been pretty well nurtured on our productions in San Francisco. They had virtually been weaned on Beckett. Later, they themselves had done work that he was aware of. Anyway, he and I were meeting at that place he frequented on the Boulevard Saint-Jacques, the Hotel PLM. I asked him about the controversy. I had not seen the production. I was already here in Paris when I heard that he had stopped it. The tone was probably critical when I asked why he did it. He immediately became flustered, even a little angry. I pressed the issue. "Look, Joanne grew up with your work. She's thought a lot about it. That's no sign of disrespect, her taking some unorthodox approach..." He simply became intemperate. It was very difficult. I'd never had any arguments with him. We could discuss almost anything, and sometimes we disagreed, but there was never anything like a real argument. But the more I tried to discuss it the more disturbed he became. Normally, if there were something of an impasse, I could joke him out of it. Which I tried. "Look Sam, we're in Paris. What are you worried about? People have been talking about the 'Death of the Author'..." That move backfired, it made him even angrier. Maybe I should have let it drop, but... He had been disturbed when he heard that I'd stopped working in the theater, and when I did see him, he'd always ask about when I'd start directing again. So when things calmed

down, I said, "Well maybe after all Alan was your best director." Because Alan Schneider was very, very dutiful in doing the plays. He would fly over, talk to Sam, get his word about something meant—I would never dream of doing a thing like that—and then he would produce it, at least to his mind, as Beckett would have wanted it done... Alan, you know, is dead now.

*And he died before Beckett died, I think.*

Yes, he died before Beckett, in a terrible accident in London. But in any case, I said, "Maybe he's your best director." Then I reminded him that he had wanted me to direct again. "But if I were to do that," I said, "the only thing I could assure you of is that I would never direct one of your plays so long as you're alive." I couldn't do it. Not with any guarantee that it would be dutiful as he wished.

*How did he react to that? Was he hurt?*

It was hard to tell. He took it, it seemed, calmly enough. It's very hard to reconstruct the atmosphere. It was quite tense.

*There was a sentence he said when he heard a biography was going to be written about him. He said "I will neither help nor hinder." Why didn't he have the same attitude about his theater?*

Well, let's go to the biographers. First of all, there's the more or less authorized biography that just came out, by Jim Knowlson. But the one Beckett was talking about was by Deirdre Bair. Beckett was equivocal about cooperating. He liked to think of it as a wise passivity, but maybe it was a little unwise, because it really upset him afterwards. In any case he did cooperate with Deirdre Bair's biography, which was done some years ago. She was a relatively young woman when she presumed to do it, and you have to give her a lot of credit. She was quite enterprising. She got a lot of material together, and if he didn't hinder, he did help. As for the theater, he eventually looked upon his texts as virtual musical scores, with more or less absolute notation, from which you departed at risk. It wasn't that he went to see other productions, he never did. But there were others around who served as guardians of the ring hoard, the text, alerting him to deviations.

*I would like to come back to your first meeting. You say it was after you had produced your Endgame, right?*

He was aware of several things by the time we met. We had done the production of *Waiting for Godot*, and while there were other things to be said

for it, it became notorious because that was the production we took to San Quentin prison—the first time a production had ever been done in a maximum security prison. Almost immediately after that Martin Esslin, who was completing his book on “the theater of the absurd,” turned up in San Francisco, saw *Godot*, and referred to the San Quentin performance in a kind of prologue. That made it widely known. Beckett knew about it. We had actually corresponded between the production of *Godot* and the production of *Endgame*, and then I met him. Before that first trip to Paris, I had directed two productions at once: a play by Sean O’Casey, *Cockadoodle Dandy*, which he was interested in, because he liked O’Casey, and *Endgame*.

*Did the fact that you were working on O’Casey at the same time make you more conscious of Beckett as an Irish dramatist?*

We were certainly aware when we were doing O’Casey that we were dealing with two Irish dramatists, but Irishness in Beckett was never a big issue with us. What we did with *Endgame* was quite unusual in other ways. In any case, it was right after I finished those two productions that I went abroad for the first time. It was at the end of the fifties. We had made an arrangement to meet, and Beckett came to pick me up at my hotel on the rue Monsieur-le-Prince, right across from the Polidor. The hotel’s no longer there. He was very gentlemanly, very courteous. He would always come pick me up at the hotel when we met, though I was over at his apartment on the rue des Favorites, when he was in Montparnasse—the first apartment where, next to the *poubelle*, there was the bicycle downstairs. There’s a picture of that somewhere. I think of it as a sort of Cartesian bicycle, head above wheels—I forget exactly how he put it, but like that in one of his novels.

*So, he met you as a director, and as an American director. And when you produced *Endgame*, you said, it was unusual, and perhaps you would like to talk a little more about it. But had you seen any productions before you did any yourself? When you say unusual do you mean as compared with other productions of the same play?*

No, I hadn’t seen any productions before. But we knew what we were doing was likely to be something more or other than what’s prescribed in the text. I like to think, however, that we were scrupulous to a fault. I mean that ontologically, the faultline there, its *rigor mortis*. I actually did two productions of *Waiting for Godot*. The second one was done after we did *Endgame*, when I came back from Europe, and that one was extremely different from the first. That was partly due to what we’d done with *Endgame*, a more “clawing” play, as Beckett himself said. Perhaps I can put the distinction this way: in *Waiting for Godot*, you may recall, there’s a moment when Didi—who is always in some

sense trying to recapitulate what's happened—keeps badgering Gogo to remember “any fact, any circumstance,” the trees, the leaves, the fishbones, Lucky's kick. Didi wants to be located in space and time, but memory is always failing and there are lapses of consecutive thought. As he keeps assailing Gogo with everything partially remembered that, moment by moment, keeps slipping away in thought, Gogo is merely bewildered, and except for the fact that he's hungry, only too ready to forget, even what happened a moment ago. “I'm not a historian,” he says. Neither is Didi, for that matter. Now, there are certain advantages to that. Because they have no historical memory, and no continuity of thought, the activity of performance feels almost improvisational. And I'm being very conscious of the distinction between activity and action in *Godot*. I mean there is no action. In this two-act drama, nothing happens twice. There is, however, a great deal of *activity*. What accounts for that? Well, you get a lot of promiscuous doing, because with memory always failing they have to do it again, making up reasons for doing it as they go along. And because they don't know *why* they're doing it, the reasons failing too, they accelerate the activity, doing more to cover up. In contrast, what's compelling to me in *Endgame*, focused in different ways in both Hamm and Clov, is that they seem never to forget anything. There is an almost remorseless continuity of self-excruciating memory. To see what that means: if I were to put my hand over this object, this remote control on the table, and at the moment I was deciding whether to pick it up or not to pick it up, at that moment two thousand years of Western history were to bear upon the prospect of action, containing all the reasons why I should and all the reasons why I shouldn't—the result is a kind of paralysis. If you can see all the motives for picking it up and all the motives for not picking it up, simultaneously present, what you have there, if in fact the action occurred, would be precisely that, an occurrence, a reflex, an abrupt or impulsive gesture against the incapacity to act. It would be an impacted version of the Hamletic impediment, the “ratiocinative meditateness” that Coleridge described. When Hamlet finally *does* the deed, it comes, after all the wild and whirling words, as if in a sort of brain fever, as a violent reaction against the incapacity—as when he stabs Polonius through the arras: “Is it the King?”

*Have you seen the movie by Resnais, Smoking/No smoking? This is also about picking up an object.*

No, I didn't see that. When we did *Endgame*, the distinction I just made determined how we investigated certain gestures or forms of behavior in the work—some of which were specified by Beckett, others we developed ourselves. For example, Clov is supposed to climb a ladder to one of the two windows at the back of the set, there like the eyes of the mind, split vision, one looking at the land, the other at the sea. He has to open some curtains. Now,

it didn't actually last this long in performance, but in certain rehearsals it would sometimes take him as long as fifteen minutes.

*You don't say fifteen seconds, but fifteen minutes?*

I'm saying fifteen minutes. He would literally stand up there, suspended over those curtains with an incredible tautness of the body, as if it were a moral issue to open or not open the curtains. When he finally opened the curtains—and by the way, the curtains were suspended on a metal rod with metal rings—they were opened very abruptly, with a revulsion of feeling against the necessity of doing it, or with some reflex against the resistance to doing it, the over-rationalized stasis I described before. When it was done, it was utterly shocking, literally shocking, because when the curtains scraped on the rod with their metal rings they made an extremely sharp sound. In the tight sequestered theater in which the play was staged, inescapably close, it felt like a scraping on the nervous system itself. I have said elsewhere, by the way, that Beckett's drama is like taking the spaces, silence, and stasis of Chekov one step further: realism *in extremis* at the very nerve-ends of thought. *Endgame* is a play I have seen since. It normally lasts an hour and a half. But certain of our rehearsals lasted as long as four hours.

*This is the kind of thing you could impose on audiences in the late fifties, perhaps, or in the sixties. Do you think that an audience today would put up with this?*

Well, no, the performance itself didn't last four hours. Actually the production lasted something close to two hours. I'm saying that the rehearsals often took four hours, because it was the ordeal of time that we were exploring. We took the time, and then compressed it. Now, what did last, and what Beckett might very well have objected to had he seen it, was the fifteen-minute opening. Gray stage, dim light, a kind of materialization of indecipherable objects in space; among them, gradually seeable, a shape, a body, barely perceptible in the back, Clov. The *poubelles*, Hamm in the center under his shroud, you have to make all of that out, including on the walls, as if measuring empty time, gradations in the gray. As I say, it took quite a lot of time before anything materialized, the objects infinitesimally, and then Clov unveiling Hamm. Well, I've seen several productions where the actors just go more or less routinely through the task of taking the covers off of Hamm. With us the process was fastidious. First of all, there was the veil, the actual composition of Hamm under the veil. When the veil is meticulously, immaculately removed, we see a handkerchief like a Veronica over his face. You may have seen the picture at my house in Milwaukee—it's really quite beautiful. The veil itself looks antique, and was in fact beautifully embroidered. When it was taken off, it was in the final precipitous moment almost the way

a bullfighter might whirl with a cape. It was a quite beautiful gesture, and it was done in such a way, with the one gesture, that the movement of lifting the veil also lifted the handkerchief, so that you got a little peek-a-boo effect on the face. Now you see it now you don't. That quick effect was startling in the extruded action of unveiling Hamm—the twelve to fifteen minutes before the veil actually came off. That's excruciating in the theater.

*When you said Veronica, I thought of two things. You mentioned bullfighting, but isn't it the term used for the veil that Jesus had on his face? So this is maybe an allusion that was sensed also in your picture.*

I suspect that is what Beckett had in mind. But as I've indicated, when I met with him I almost never asked him what he meant by anything in the texts. We might talk about something he wrote, but mostly we talked about quite other things than the work itself.

*You were wise because he would have answered that he didn't have anything to say, presumably.*

He sometimes took that tack, but if you did ask him something specific, he would say something about it, as he did with Alan and others, and in his letters as well. But you're right, he could be devious too.

*He was helpful to some of his translators. His German translator could ask him questions and he would answer so that it would be useful for the translation, but not for the interpretation. I think you saw the recent production at the Bouffes du Nord of Endgame, in which Hamm is sitting on a tire. Did you see that?*

No, I didn't.

*Because that was an interesting change of image. I don't think that Beckett would have approved. What was amusing also was that it was performed by an actual son and father. These two great German actors. Their family name is Tenant. I think that's their name. And then another thing: in the dustbins there were actual dwarfs. They could stand in there because they were so small, and that had a stunning effect, but also anti-Beckettian. I don't think he would have approved. You say "clove." Is that how it is pronounced? Do some people say "cluv?"*

No, we say "clove" in all productions in the United States. At least I haven't heard anyone pronounce it any other way than "clove."

*So, you've written, as you say, "incidentally" about Beckett. He always comes up in your books, as you mentioned. Among the recurrent features you have Genet also, sometimes you have Ionesco, not so much though, and you also refer to Artaud. I know your cultural references by now, and one of your references which I would like to come back to is somebody who quotes Confucius. Do you remember that? "Better to light a single candle, than to curse the darkness." And your comment on this is: "A Beckett play lights a candle and curses the darkness." Do you remember writing this, and could you comment?*

It's quite germane to things I feel about Beckett when I hear people discuss him today. There are those who have always tried to redeem him from his pessimism. The tendency in much thought about Beckett would be to reverse it and say "Curse the darkness and light a candle," the implication being that the darkness can be redeemed. But I've always felt that Beckett puts things in the order in which he in fact perceives them. The order is the lighting of the candle *and* the cursing of the darkness. But it's the darkness which is dominant. I think that this has to be the premise of any approach to Beckett. Or not to *him*, but to the materials he left us and to the reality that these materials contain. Which is to say that whatever powers there are in what we now speak of as the work of Beckett seem to consist of the really profound, essentially unrelieved, appalling perception of reality. That there is in some sense an impulse to move on, what Hamm says at the end, yes, is true. But the capacity to move is minimal. It's not to be redeemed in the way productions tend to do it today by, for example, putting an indulgent stress on the comedy, so that there's an evasive sense of levity in all the gloom.

*So that when he was given the Nobel Prize, it seemed that they were doing exactly what you're saying, redeeming him from his bitterness.*

Redeeming him. He disappeared, you recall, at the time of the Nobel Prize. Martin Esslin and I were actually in Canada the day we heard about it over the radio. We were in some sort of conference, giving talks, and after we heard it, we tried to get in touch with him. It was impossible. He had already disappeared.

*On this question of pessimism or not pessimism you have another formula, which is your own this time. You call it the "last ditch humanism of Beckett." That's a wonderful formula because it's an oxymoron in a sense. Would you develop it in case somebody did not understand what you meant?*

First of all, there's the "ditch." And sometimes the ditch is an abyss, a crevasse. It's deep, it's a big rift in reality. But the "humanism" is there. I think

it distinguishes him, particularly when people make distinctions between the modern and the postmodern. If you get involved in the debate as to whether there's continuity or a breach between the modern and postmodern, it seems to me that Beckett is really the pivotal figure. While many of the writers that we associate with postmodernity have similar strategies—parataxis, discontinuity, all of those things that are structurally identifiable in Beckett—the one thing that many of them don't have is simply the unrelieved poignancy of Beckett. Beckett has a way of saying in theoretical terms—he wouldn't put it in theoretical terms—that maybe authenticity is a fiction. Maybe origin never was. And yet, and yet... there is a kind of residual, unrelieved tenacity of memory that is inextinguishable in Beckett. He seems to be remembering something, whether or not it ever was. And that's something one doesn't have in most postmodern works. While the structural qualities are the same, the emotional content seems to me to be markedly different.

*When you say emotional, would you be ready to say metaphysical, perhaps?*

Well, metaphysical. It's one of those cases where you say, as Artaud would say, the metaphysics comes in through the pores, it comes in through the skin. It just seems to me to be a visceral metaphysics. It's not necessarily theological.

*There's another formula of yours, dealing with this "inextinguishable poignancy." I think that's what you said. Here is what you wrote: "What we see in all of Beckett's writing is the trembling of perception at degree zero"—we remember Barthes here—"on the edge of its extinction." Could you explain what you meant by that?*

There may be some combination there of what's in Beckett and what obsesses me, which is to say I've always been interested in the deception of appearances, and the incapacity at some limit of desire to see what we want to see. As Lacan and others have said, we see in the shape of our desires. But what seems to me to have been always provocative in Beckett is very much what I was describing before, when the objects materialized in *Endgame*. It seems to me that what really happens in Beckett, and what is most moving to me, happens in those moments when you are precipitously about to see something which, in the very activity of perception, disappears as if in fact exhausted in the energy required for you to see it. Almost as if there were a dramatization of the Heisenbergian principle: the very instruments of perception dematerialize the object, that is, the instruments of perception get in the way.

*This is something I always found difficult to understand. Could you just take a little more time to explain what you mean? What is this principle? Because I think it is captivating, but difficult to grasp.*

Well, as I understand the principle—and usually we presume on scientific ideas and use them metaphorically—but as I understand the notion of indeterminacy there, the idea is that the very instruments required for perception determine the nature of perception. They both permit us to see and get in the way of seeing, so that they in some sense change the nature of the object to be seen. And, in the case of human perception, it seems to me that the instrument is in part determined by want or desire, in other words, what we in some sense are looking for. And this both deranges the process and distorts the object of sight. But what, at a more basic level, has always interested me—and the same thing interests me in human experience, in Shakespeare, in Beckett—is the whole question of appearance itself. You love someone. You think you know that person. The person should be transparent to you. And suddenly you look again, and there's something else there, it's not what it was. So the whole question of the deception of appearances seems to me to come into play. But Beckett gets at it in a particular way that has to do with the apparent materialization. It's like something in a photographic studio, presumably coming into sight, the image materializing from the processing itself, and just when you think you've brought it into focus, it disappears. What you thought you were seeing is there and then not there.

*There's the movie, Roma by Fellini, in which he finds these frescoes. The moment the eye discovers the frescoes, the frescoes disappear, they vanish. It destroys them as it reveals them.*

I was once taken by Roberto Rossellini to see the frescoes at Cerveteri. You know, you have to open those tombs, and he had influence, we could get in. But otherwise they keep them closed, because they are afraid that if light got to them, they would disappear. Not only are the frescoes endangered by light, but also by the look. Here, the process I'm describing is very much like what was apparently believed in the Renaissance, that the eyes sent out energy. And it's as if the energy from the eyes erodes the object. In other words, as I look at Bernard Vincent, our technician today, the very energy of sight puts him in jeopardy, as an object subject to erosion...

*Please don't erode our technicians! So we have come to perception after all. I won't keep you away long from specularly and all that. The Eye of Prey is a wonderful title, and you once said it came from Beckett. Maybe you will explain where exactly it comes from. There is the essay on Barthes and Beckett, "The*

*Punctum, the Pensum and the Dream of Love.* "How useful is Barthes in your interpretation?"

It wasn't so much that he was useful. They were just two people that I wanted to write about for various reasons, and they permitted me to make an interesting distinction. At the time I wrote that essay, though I always admired Barthes, there was still the semiological retard in his work. Remember that through the earlier part of his career, he was at one level Marxist, always demythologizing.

*Did you say retard?*

Yes, a certain kind of semiological retard. Well, I thought it prevented him from seeing certain things. The semiological perspective, though it had certain assets, also had certain liabilities. If there was one fine difference between Barthes and Beckett, it's what Beckett couldn't contain in himself, which was precisely the emotional property that I was trying to describe before. Barthes always tried to displace that, emotions arising from privacy, subjectivity, depth. In the dialectic of surface and depth, Barthes preferred surface, and it wasn't until later on, with *La chambre claire*, when he withheld the fetishized picture of his mother, never showed it, kept it hidden, that it seemed to me something did surface that, in some sense, Barthes prevented himself from exposing before.

*To put it a little crudely, you seem to take two people, one of whom was a creative artist, and the other more of an exegete and interpreter, but who never pretended he was an artist. Is that distinction, to you, irrelevant?*

It's irrelevant. With Barthes, of course, the issue of what constitutes an artist seems to dissipate in his prose. Here you have two writers. They both write superbly. They write in different genres, but I was in some sense examining, I suppose, my own disposition, temperament, and instincts. At some final property of thought, they are, all told, a little more on the Beckettian side. And that's what I was trying to clarify.

*Could you imagine directing a piece by Barthes? Could you imagine turning it into a stage piece?*

I can imagine directing anything if I'm interested in it. When I first started to work in the theater, there were certain prescriptions about what was possible, and what was not possible. Certain things, they said, could not be put on stage. I tried dutifully to understand that, but after a while I realized

that there's nothing living or dead, under heaven or on earth, that can't be put on stage—if you have the right idea.

*So now we come back to The Eye of Prey, and this extraordinary expression.*

The “eye of prey” comes from *Imagination Dead Imagine*. And by the way, that in itself describes a distinction between Beckett and the Barthes of the semiological period. The Barthes of that period could not allow himself the second “imagine.” You’d say “imagination dead,” because imagination is a transcendental signifier. Therefore it’s out, along with “genius” and all those other terms that are no more than metaphysical derivations. Beckett critiques that critique in the title, *Imagination Dead Imagine*. In other words, you have to understand that imagination is dead before you can start imagining again. But imagination is like the leaves on the tree in *Godot*, going to sprout again, dead but always living. I think the later Barthes would have to accede to that. The eye of prey occurs in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, having to do with what, say, Lacan might have talked of in relationship to Saint Augustine as the *envenomed eye*, the eye which is always searching. It’s like the difference between the *look* and the *gaze*. The eye of prey is the one that searches, that looks, it’s the analytic eye, it’s the eye that’s incisive, that surgically cuts. It’s the eye which is on the other side of the eye which is slit in the Buñuel film. It’s the animal, predatory eye.

*You say at one point, the “envenomed stare.” I take it this is a translation from Lacan?*

That’s the phrase that Lacan gets from Saint Augustine. Saint Augustine has a passage in which the child is looking at his sibling, the younger child, and the “envenomed stare” suggests that the older one wants to kill the younger one.

*And you use your own formula, saying the “cutting look,” and you say for Beckett there’s no look that is not cutting.*

There is no look that’s not cutting. I think that’s an interesting proposition, the notion of the cut in the look. Most people in fact don’t like to be looked at. Why that should be so seems to me an issue of metaphysical proportions. By the way, I can explore this in any number of ways, but I remember vividly—since you know my daughter Jessamyn—an occasion involving her. But first consider the parents’ relationship to the child when, for example, the child is crawling on the floor. There you are standing over the child, a sort of monolithic figure. It’s still hard to decipher what a child, as an infant, may be feeling about the immensity of the towering figure. But there is

also, of course, the acquisitive or appropriative aspect of the gaze or the look. I'm collapsing the two at the moment. You look at the child, presumably with tenderness and love, but in fact the very look also contains the desire to be loved. In other words, I look at you, I love you, but I really want you to tell me that you love me. Now I remember one time, when Jessamyn was in the crib, and I was looking down at her. I'll come back to this in Beckett, but I remember looking at her, or was it gazing at her? I suppose there must have been something like the appropriative gaze, and I remember the first moment where she literally—I can't say this, but I'll have to show it to you—where she literally began to flail her arms in front of her, like this, as if she were saying, "Don't look at me!" Now why that should be is something that requires extraordinary reflection.

*Just one anecdote of my own. When my son was small, I would crouch next to him so that I would be his size, and he would see me crouching and he would crouch too.*

Exactly. But to stay with the unobtrusive or intimidating look: Beckett has another memorable phrase, I think it's in *The Lost Ones*, where he speaks of the *nesting stare*. Children, you know, before their necks are sufficiently formed so that they can keep the neck erect, tend to turn their heads around, as if they're looking behind. Beckett speaks of that turn as if they're looking back, so to speak, to the mother's breast. Thus, the nesting stare. It's as if they're staring back to where there was perfect accommodation...

*I would be tempted to understand the nesting stare as the opposite of the cutting stare. That would be the protective stare, or the stare seeking protection?*

The desire for that which is utterly protective and nurturing. Freud once said—and Beckett was very much interested in analysis; he worked with a Freudian analyst, Bion—although he was also very impressed with Jung, Freud said that all thought is a long detour from the memory of gratification. The nesting stare, it seems to me, is related to the memory of gratification. It is something other than the eye of prey, but speaking of that, and also of children, let me recall an incident which I referred to once before in something I wrote. In the year that I first met Beckett, we saw each other several times and, as I said, he would come to pick me up at the hotel on the rue Monsieur-le-Prince. My first wife was with me in Paris, and our three children, they were there. When he came to pick me up, the two of us would go out and walk, or go to dinner or whatever, but he always expressed interest in my children. I thought that this was more or less formulaic, at first, but from the questions he asked about them it became clear that he was really interested in the children. He said he would like to meet them, and my wife, so we eventually made an

arrangement to go out to dinner together, my wife, he and I, but he would meet my children before we went. So, he came to pick me up as usual, and I came down the staircase. He was down at the bottom, and he looks at me puzzled, because I was coming down alone. "They're all sick," I said. "They all have the flu. Everybody has the flu." He looked at me as if he could hardly believe it. But we went out and took a long walk. We had dinner somewhere, and when we came back near midnight, he looked upstairs—we had two rooms in the hotel—the light was out in one room, but was still on in the other. "I guess my wife is still up and the kids are sleeping," I said. Again, a puzzled look. "Next time you come to Paris," he said, "you must produce your children for my eyes of flesh." Twenty years later, he used that phrase in *Imagination Dead Imagine*. Some years after that I actually brought Jessamyn to meet him, and I said, "I've now produced a child for your eyes of flesh."

*And he remembered saying that?*

No, he didn't quite remember. I reminded him.

*There is a sentence by him you quote, which is "Am I as much as being seen."*

That's from a play called *Play*. It has to do with the verification of being by sight. It's like when Pozzo says, "Is everybody looking at me?" It's as if I have no confirmation of being unless I am seen. But you have to play with that phrase too. "Am I as much as *being* seen?" "Am I as much as *being seen*?"

*There is the same ambiguity as in Imagination Dead Imagine. You've been around actors a lot. Do they take pleasure in being seen? Are they different from other people in that sense, in that they want to be watched?*

I think that that is the most complex ontological problem of theater. We speak of such things as "stage fright." Why should that be? It has always occurred to me that the real issue in theater always pivots upon displacement. If there's pleasure in being seen, what's being seen is no pleasure—if you really think about it. For the person performing in front of you is dying in front of your eyes. If you're sufficiently patient, it will happen. You will see it, but it will not be visible.

*Could you repeat that? Because this is quite a paradox. I want to take it in. Could you repeat it?*

Well, it seems to me that it's existential truth. It's undeniable. The person performing in front of you is dying in front of your eyes, as I am right now. That's literally true. If you are sufficiently patient, you will see it...

*Unless you die first...*

Unless *you* die first, right. But it is not sufficient. It may be more or less covered up by various forms of theater, or mimicked in horrid splendor as it is in *King Lear*, but even when it appears to be empty, there is always death in the center of the stage. That's what's very powerful in Beckett, his consciousness of that, specifically dramatized in the very few seconds of his little play *Breath*. That consciousness is elaborated and mordantly focused in Hamm, who is being stared at, and, through black spectacles, seems to be staring back at us, subject/object, returning the gaze—and all the deadly implications of the structure of being watched. Again, in a very literal sense we're close to what the theater is: the seers being seen.

*Would you say that the curtain is a shroud?*

Oh yeah. But well, I'll come back to the curtain in a moment. The curtain is really an interesting phenomenon. Yes, it's a shroud, and many other things besides. It's a veil and a shroud.

*Hamm is supposed to be blind. Because he says, "One day you will be blind like me"...*

"One day you'll be blind," that 's what he says.

*And maybe that's what he sees...*

All of it pointing, sometimes painfully, to what we cannot see. "There's something dripping in my head," he says. You can't see that either, right? Something dripping in my head. But where was I before, I was trying to say something... Oh yeah. In *Waiting for Godot*, if you are following Beckett's stage directions—and in fact we did follow the stage directions in the first production that I did of it—the two tramps have to divert themselves from the impasse at which they appear to have come. There's nothing happening, so with increasing panic in the diversion, they resort to playing games. At one point, they're moving desperately back and forth across the forestage, looking out, presumably, into the maw of the auditorium, into the reversed and darkling perspective of what appears to be nothing there. That nothing, of course, is the audience. Which is—that body of conventional absence—*breathing death*, you see. Now, you might say this is the post-war existential aspect of the play. Even Winston Churchill shared its sense of reality. He spoke of this "great charnel house of Europe" at the end of the Second World War. The experience of the war and the nature of theater seem to merge in the immediacy of the play. The tramps move across the front of the stage,

pointing in horror at the darkness where the audience is, saying "A charnel house! A charnel house!" And that, in brief, is Beckett's view of it all. "You don't have to look." "You can't help looking." Which is what makes it theater.

*You said you would come back to the question of the curtain, which separates the audience. But relative to the performance strategy in Beckett, going from the womb to the tomb, perhaps, is the issue of the audience as an absence. I don't quite understand why you mentioned the audience as an absence.*

You've got a lot of questions there. Which one do you want me to talk about first?

*...we'll start with the curtain.*

Conventions of the theater are best approached if you try to imagine their not having been. Meaning, you try to imagine how, first, they came into being. For example, in almost every theater history I've ever read, if you look up the "curtain", it'll say something like this: "The Romans invented the curtain, which was called the *auleum*." And then they pass on. Yet it always occurred to me when I read things like that, well, yeah, that's interesting, but why did they do that? Who did that? Or how did it materialize? Try to imagine. Here we are, we're all looking at each other, right? Nothing between us. And then this phenomenon intervenes. Whether somebody invented it or it materialized at some time, what phenomenologically and psychically changed in human reality to warrant this intervention? In other words how...

*Except that you use it exactly like a mask...*

Well, that's what I was just going to say. A curtain is a shroud, a veil, a mask... But once you begin to reflect upon it, it can operate in various ways: you realize you can do this... you can do that... or you can do this...

*All kinds of things... lifting, opening...*

You can part the curtain, you can raise the curtain, you can move it from side to side. You can, of course, have a half curtain, the way they do in the Kathakali, so you can see the head-dresses above. Brecht had, similarly, a visible curtain line. You can have feet exposed below, like the Italian futurists did. I once did a production of Brecht's *Galileo* in which the curtain was raised over the heads of the audience, a vast canopy of resplendent blue. It hovered there like the sky itself, and when released, it came down floating, like a great minstrel galleon's enormous sail. But just as it was rustling to nest, a film suddenly came on, and it was a movie screen. On the other hand, in the

second production of *Waiting for Godot* that I did, the curtain was neither so gorgeous nor so adept. It was done in a smaller theater, and I wanted it performed in almost perfect silence. So the entire stage was foam rubber. When the actors walked on stage, you couldn't hear them, and then more often than not, you not only couldn't hear them, but they sort of sank into the stage. Whenever they walked they kept sinking into the stage. The curtain for this production was a shabby, see-through curtain. It had tattered holes in it like the clothes of the tramps themselves. It was a debilitated curtain. And, moreover, this curtain, which was supposed to rise, couldn't, as we say, "get it up." So, as it tried to rise, it would go halfway, then twitch and jerk, and then fall down. It would go limp. It was a limp curtain. It lay there on the stage like a ruined convention at the dead end of history. Even so, you can do a lot with a ruin when you think about it.

*You can also decide to have no curtain. And then for the audience, what is present is the absence of the curtain. Also, what you said about the see-through curtain... I mean there's a whole transparency...*

Opacity or transparency, the question is, why is it there? And why, historically, did it appear in the first place? By the way, that's what I think all my writing has been about. I've always been interested in the materialization of theater from whatever it is *not*. Life? reality? whatever we call it, the assumption of something other than theater, from which theater materializes, or out of which we make it, the thing which it is not. But, back to the history books. We're told, say, that theater came from ritual. When I read that somewhere, I always raise my eyebrows: "Who said so?" I mean, what had priority, ritual or theater? And is there any other reality except the reality which already has over it an integument of theater like a curtain or a film? After all, that's what the theater itself, or at least the drama, has traditionally wondered about. It's always been raising the question as to whether there is anything but theater. "Life is a dream." "All the world's a stage." Maybe so maybe not. But that's the thing in question.

*You say, raising your eyebrow, what comes first? But where does the audience fit in all this, as a metaphor linked to gazing?*

You asked about the audience as an absence. If the audience is not an absence, it's not a reliable presence. Think of even the conventional play: the reality that's dispersed through characters on the stage. Whatever may be improbable, impermeable, indeterminate about the characters, they are nevertheless there, featured on the stage. They have a certain palpability, embodied, carnal, spoken for. The one really indeterminate aspect of any performance, in some sense absent or unaccountably present, is the audience,

particularly when it's dark. We don't really know who's there, you know. I always make an issue of this in relationship to *Hamlet*. "Who's there?" "Nay, answer me. Stand, and unfold yourself." It's as if the text itself were speaking to the absence.

*You remember—I know the title in French—Outrage au public, by Peter Handke, in which they address the public directly...*

*Offending the Audience.* Well, offending the audience assumes, in fact, that somebody is there who can be offended. But what's interesting to me about *Hamlet* is that first of all there's a kind of reversal, which is to say that the person approaching the ramparts is the one who asks the question, instead of the guard who should. "Who's there?" It comes out of the dark like an existential question. "Nay answer me, stand and unfold yourself." It's as if the unfolding is required for the audience to materialize. Without answer, no audience. But there's another play that I always refer to, which, for me, defines this whole issue as deeply as anything I know. It seems a sort of poetic justice, or historical justice, that in the only existing Greek trilogy the first character to materialize—as if, you might say, from primeval darkness into platonic light—is the Watchman. The first play is the *Agamemnon*, in which the Watchman awakens from ten years of waiting and watching. Internally, dramaturgically, he is responsible for the exposition, what's happening in the House of Atreus. He's very nervous about that. Speaking elliptically, warily, he positions himself in the cosmos before "the grand processions of all the stars of night," vaguely suggesting what's going on. And then he says—I don't read Greek, but in all translations it amounts to this—"I speak to those who understand, but if they fail I have forgotten everything." It seems to me that those who understand are the audience. And anybody else who assembles before the curtain, as in the open sky at Epidaurus, is sort of irrelevant.

*You call him in English "The Watchman" and, of course, "to watch" has a double meaning, which we cannot grasp in French, but "Watchman" is particularly interesting.*

Another critical representation of this idea is the famous mousetrap, again from *Hamlet*, where you have the watchers watching the watchers watch. It's that aspect of theatricality that's always interested me. And Beckett's very attuned to it, for all his apparent indifference, conscious of the audience, or its absence. What always struck me is how attentive the plays were. In *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, those wonderful lyric duets of Didi and Gogo: they make a noise like wings, like ashes, like leaves... They all speak at once, what do they say? They say... well, what are they referring to? What is the referent? Who are *they*? As they speak, the actors are listening, as if they had a stethoscope to the heartbeat of the audience.

*When you said the actors, you mean the characters. Or do you really mean the actors?*

I mean the actors. I'm almost differentiating the actors from the characters. That distinction seems to me to be critically important. Take the one who is playing Hamm, presumably looking straight out toward the emptiness in front of him. Yet he may be more attentive to what's happening in the audience than the audience is to what's happening on the stage. He is a register of every sensation out there before him. It's as if he records the emanations of the gaze. He's like a sensitive photographic plate. In the deepest performance, he registers it all.

*I was expecting you to use, at some point, and you haven't, Lacan's expression, "the scopic drive." This is also something which is important in your reflections on the theater. Do you feel like mentioning it?*

There's a chapter in *The Audience* which is entitled "The Most Concealed Object." Lacan's treatment of the scopic drive, the desire to see, raises the question: to see what? Whatever there is to see that hasn't been seen. That's always in relationship to the taboo. What's interesting about the taboo, as we open up one taboo after another, is that the taboo is ingenious, the taboo always recedes. When you think you've got the taboo, it goes somewhere else. So the compulsion to see is, as Freud first suggested, an obsessive compulsion which is always and forever unrelieved. The most concealed object, as Lacan says, in reworking Freud, is in some sense the drive itself. One wants to see the drive. The drive itself is the most concealed object.

*You quote Lacan as saying "There are eyes everywhere, I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides." Could this be used to refer to the relationship between actors who see from one point, while they are looked at from all sides by the audience, so many eyes watching them?*

"Is everybody looking at me?" Again. Even now, is everybody looking at me? What's interesting—think here of Genet—is the sensation that, even when there appears to be nobody there, we're incessantly being watched. We are under surveillance. And of course, notions of shame and guilt are attached to that. Even when we are alone. To the degree that one feels guilt or anxiety or something. What is that about? It's as if we are still being watched, and there's nobody there, right? That, of course, permits Freud to construct a notion such as the *superego*.

*You know, in books I used to read in my childhood, the little boy would say, "The eye of God is watching me." He's looking at chocolate, and the eye of God is watching.*

That, by the way, comes up in *Waiting for Godot*. Gogo keeps looking up there to see whether somebody is watching him, who's utterly indeterminate.

*You quote Shakespeare, a beautiful sentence, which is relevant to what you were saying before. Gloucester says in Henry VI, "I'll slay more gazers than the basilisque"...*

No, that's *Richard II*...

*Richard II?* O.K. So did he really write that?

Who else could write that?

*Say it again...*

"I'll slay more gazers than the basilisque." It's as if Richard, with circuitous or devious vision, is an expert at the gaze. If anybody is inside the gaze, if anybody understands it as a phenomenon, he is it. "I'll slay more gazers than the basilisque." It's as if he has perfected from birth the envenomed stare, confronting the gaze with the gaze, as if it were lethal coming from him. He walks downstage at the beginning, he talks to the audience, virtually baits them: you can observe me all you wish, gaze at will, judge, you will never know me.

*I have a question which is not directly connected to what we said before, but which I would very much like to ask you. And it's about the relationship between the theater and visual arts, such as sculpture. You mentioned Giacometti, and you said he was Beckett's favorite sculptor. I would like to ask you, as a director, if you think that a director working for the stage works in a sense like a sculptor, like a visual artist.*

Without that capacity you don't have much of a director. But there are visual artists and visual artists, and how they detail and contour space is obviously a big issue. In the case of Giacometti, he figured in the way we were trying to conceive *Endgame*. What is compelling about the sculpture is the strength of its seeming fragility, submitting only as much metal to the air as the air needs to surround it. There would be less if it could be an intact structure. There would be even less, a desire shared by Beckett, who wrote the terribly moving *Lessness*.

*You know, I saw the other day an exhibition at the Jeu de Paume. One sculptor put a figure kneeling against the side of the wall, and he said, "This sculpture is made of plaster, paint and air." Air is part of the sculpture. So, is it true on stage also?*

Well, most of the stage is air. But this suggests something else I've always wanted to do in the theater. It has to do with what might be thought the opposite of air. Have you seen Picasso's *Death's Head*? It is, I think, one of his greatest pieces of sculpture. It looks like a great globule. If one can imagine the objectification of a black hole, the black holes in space, about which we say the mass is so dense that it impacts upon itself, in some sense implodes, gravity reversed to come out some other side—Picasso's *Death's Head* is like that. I wrote about it in *Take Up the Bodies*.

*Une tête de mort?*

*Tête de mort*, yes. That head is so dense it seems immovable, a totalized object. But theater is a temporal form. Now you see it now you don't. One of the reasons I never liked videotaping or filming the theater work I did is because it was *meant* to disappear. The desire to preserve it, I think, is a factitious sort of notion. It's a thing in passing that, once passed, not only shouldn't but can't be there. That makes for certain problems when publishers ask for pictures in my books, or even when, suddenly, I want them myself. But even in the fashion book I'm writing now, I like to describe things, and the idea of documenting them with pictures I always have mixed feelings about. I like the language to evoke it rather than illustrations. And that may come from some theatrical tendency. In any case, the theater's a temporal form. It moves through time, and therefore it changes and dissipates, and disappears, through time. Conceding that, the mind then moves, sometimes resolutely, in the opposing direction: to stop time, to make it all hold still. Imagine creating a theater work with all the obduracy, the gravity of Picasso's *Death's Head*. Now and then, I believe, I was close to imagining something like that on stage, with the illusion of achieving it. It was the doing of *Endgame* that initiated the idea, because of its stasis, its paralysis. The paradox: I wanted to create a theater work about which you would feel that it moves through time and disappears, utterly temporal, yet absolutely sculptured in space, immovable, an absolute object. Obviously, that's impossible. But the idea of doing that...

*Slowing down, slowing down the action, as you did with the curtain in Endgame, would that be part of the effect?*

*Endgame* had no curtain in our production...

*No, I mean the curtain... drawing the curtain...*

Well, that had some relationship to it, but I felt that—the desire to objectify the temporal—about almost anything that I ever did, and very markedly in what I did with my KRAKEN group much later...

*By the way, Kraken, did that mean something?*

The actual term comes from *kraken*, the Nordic sea monster. The reason we took the term is that we were interested in the relation of surface and depth. Tennyson wrote a poem about the kraken, which died when it surfaced after being fathoms deep. I got it, actually, not from Tennyson but from Melville, who was corresponding with Hawthorne, after finishing *Moby Dick*. Hawthorne asked him what he would be doing next. And Melville said, "I'm after bigger fish." The bigger fish would be the kraken. We Americanize and call it "krayken". The KRAKEN group did do certain work which addressed the problem, the fantasy, of achieving something marmoreal in a temporal form, as if the movement were frozen solid. A work we did, *The Donner Party, Its Crossing*, literally moved from beginning to end, over two hours, unceasing motion in the form of a square dance. I mean unceasing motion, intricate and exhaustive, even when the figures in the crossing, that fatal journey, were buried twenty feet beneath the snow. We wanted the materiality of the event to feel so dense that it virtually arrested time. That's essentially what I'm talking about, the illusion of immovable substance in this apparently dispersed form.

*Yes, I was thinking that we will have to stop sometime, but we will not come to a conclusion. So we could say what you said of sight: now we hear you and now we don't.*



# *A Gathering of Old Men*

## An interview with Ernest Gaines

by Raphaël LAMBERT  
and Claude JULIEN

*Ernest James Gaines was born in 1933 in Oscar (Pointe Coupée Parish), Louisiana, in a family of agricultural workers. At 15, after his parents' divorce, he left to live in California. His short stories and novels, however, are rooted in the land of his childhood. This flat country, marked off by bayous and screens of trees that border them, is isolated between an oxbow lake and the Mississippi. Gaines portrays the difficult coexistence among the inhabitants of this closed community which he "peoples" with native whites, Cajuns and, at the bottom of the social scale, blacks.*

*Nothing would seem to have destined Gaines to become a writer, unless it was the attentive ear he lent to the stories he heard at evening gatherings at his aunt's. Storytelling, supposedly an African tradition, is perhaps, more fundamentally, a distinctive feature of all rural cultures. In any case, Gaines's writing is characterized by a deceiving simplicity: his laconic dialogues, for instance, are much more meaningful than they at first appear. This minimalist way of composition makes use of simple situations, simple people, simple words. Such ordinary writing amounts to a sort of asceticism, and one could say that, in the work of Gaines, simplicity is sophistication.*

*Gaines is one of founders of the "quest for the past" in African-American fiction, this search for a painful history which must be weighed and understood in order to exorcise its present effects: such, for example, is the case of *Bloodline*, a collection of short stories published in 1968, whose very title evokes the call of blood, the memory of kinship. Gaines achieved success suddenly with *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), a book relating the life of a hundred-year-old woman who, in 1965, defies the segregation laws by drinking from a fountain reserved for whites in front of a courthouse. Miss Jane is so "real" that at the time many people believed the book was based on a true story, and the author was asked if he would lend out a copy of the tape recording. Gaines's most recent novel, *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), is a beautiful story with a solemn, meditative dimension.*

*The interview conducted by Raphaël Lambert focuses on *A Gathering of Old Men* (1984), a novel in which Gaines describes the courageous revolt (at a rather late stage in their lives) of a small group of men deprived of "their" lands by the white owners who try to deny the past by renting the farmlands to Cajuns.*

*At the end of the interview, we have included a short (untitled) text by Gaines, published in the Louisiana review, *Cultural Vistas*, in 1993. This monologue, written in a local dialect, takes up the central theme of *A Gathering of Old Men*; it evokes the land fertilized by the blood and sweat of the blacks—first as slaves and then as tenant farmers—and the cemetery (where, in the novel, the old men seal their alliance), threatened by the Cajuns' tractors.*



I wanted to ask you first about the question of “manhood,” which is at the center of *A Gathering of Old Men*. Has today’s American society finally granted manhood to black males?

Raphaël Lambert is a doctoral student at Orléans-Tours. Claude Julien is professor of American literature at the University of Tours: he revised the manuscript after an encounter with Ernest Gaines who recently visited France at the invitation of the “Fondation William Faulkner.” The original interview took place in Rennes on May 23, 1996.

I think this is something that we, as black men, will have to struggle for and fight for as long as we’re in... In America, in the United States, there are people who cannot accept the fact that we are already on an equal level with them; then there are those who can. They can see us as men in certain professions... When it comes to the athletes, you know, we are as much men as anybody else out on that playing ground, with these baseball, football, basketball, the fighting in the ring and things like that. Everyone can see that!

But when it comes to being representative—representing your people, your town, your parish or your state, then they feel that, you know, you’re not qualified for this sort of thing. So this is a struggle that we’re going to have to put up with, and continue to fight for the rest of our... of my lifetime, I’m sure. I would say that it will be there for quite a while to come.

So you think Dubois’s concept of “double consciousness” still exists?

Oh, yes. I agree.

What is the difference between people like Munford Bazille in “Three Men,” Billy in *In My Father’s House*, Copper in “Bloodline,” and people like Johnny Paul, Rufe, *Dirty Red*, etc. in *A Gathering of Old Men*?

You give me too many characters to work with here. You’ll have to choose one character and see what I can do with that one. OK, choose two characters. I need two characters you’d like to bring up, and then we’ll try to work with that.

Let’s say Billy in *In My Father’s House*, who is this young activist, and let’s take Johnny Paul in *A Gathering of Old Men*. My concern is with what they embody. Billy seems to be the non-constructive angry type while Johnny Paul and all his friends introduce militant behavior that will have a long-lasting impact.

Well, I think you find both of those situations there. Both of them are there. I just hope that the Johnny Paul type will continue to struggle. I know that men like Billy will continue to exist because of this anger that they cannot control. And when you have this kind of anger and cannot direct it towards

the thing which makes you angry, then you withdraw. I mean, you turn it within or upon yourself, upon your own community.

That's the sense in which, at least, Billy says it. As with Johnny Paul... There *are* very strong men like Johnny Paul. Not that they are standing up with guns to shoot something up, to shoot out in the street or anything like that, but they are men who believe in using some other approach to accomplish what they'd like to accomplish. Not with a gun, because there is no way to win with a gun. Billy does not care whether he lives or dies, you know, because of the anger. He's reached a point that it doesn't matter to him anymore. Johnny Paul is a guy, a more patient guy who says, "OK, maybe things will change a little bit if we keep working." That's the difference between those two characters who, besides, do not function in the same fictional contexts.

*In a loose way, A Gathering of Old Men can be regarded as your first protest novel, but at the same time, the protagonists are like one-day militants. They act for themselves, for their own salvation rather than for the cause of the entire community; their action is restricted to their own little area, they don't expect it to gain any political or national significance. They are very old and their rebellion takes place about twenty years after the sixties. But it is a success... Is all this a kind of a wry answer to your detractors in the past?*<sup>1</sup>

Well, no, it was not that. I just feel that what I was trying to do in *A Gathering of Old Men* was to show that all men, of any race, any nation, any whatever... who are oppressed do have that desire to stand. If it's only for once, they do have that desire to stand up. And that is about the only thing that I was trying to do with that story. I've heard many stories told by old men, by some young men about how wonderful my great-grandfather was because he stood up one day to a bad white man. But they're always talking about something like that happening a long time ago. They cannot put their hands on anything that happened only within the last year, or two years ago. They cannot do that. So they're living... it's all of it a false life. They are living a lie really, because that probably never did happen. But it is something that... it's a story that has to be told in a family to keep people sane, to keep people going. In the case of *A Gathering of Old Men*, I wanted a situation that would bring these men together for the first time in their lives. I was not mocking the sixties, I was not mocking that at all. This is just what I put in these old men: I heard a story from my stepfather about he and some friends, cousins, and brothers who got together one day into a group against someone supposed to be coming down there to shoot up a place for some reason or another. They'd come together just as a group, but nothing, of course, nothing like that story

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<sup>1</sup> The interviewer was alluding to the criticism Ernest Gaines had to face (in the late sixties and early seventies) from activists who contended his fiction was not militant enough.

ever happened to them. They were just there, they were ready, they were not old, they were just sitting inside our house if anything came by, if anything happened, like this: "we will be ready. If anybody come here and shoot up this place; we will be ready." Maybe I had that in mind when I was writing the novel.

But it's not all of men, and the whites can have a different approach to the same thing. And you'll find in different books, stories by whites, how to relive a day, try to relive like an old athlete tries to relive that day when he dropped the football, when he struck out in the baseball base: "I could live that day all over again. What I should have done that day was to keep my eyes on this ball just a little bit longer, hold the bat a little bit higher, I would have gotten this."

So what I did was just get a situation, the strongest situation I could think of, which would be a murder situation, and a group of old men who would never ever have stood up, not only to hit a baseball or throw the ball right, or to catch a ball, but who never stood up to all this brutality which they've suffered for all these years. And then I created this situation where they knew someone who would stand. They knew that one person—mad—who would stand. They are old men! And maybe that is one of the reasons why they would stand on that particular day. Because they are old men! And they have nothing to lose now. They are not afraid of anything anymore. They might die tomorrow, so what? Most of them don't have wives, don't have anybody else to live for. "So if I died... So what if I died?" I think it is a common thing among men, old men. It is a universal thing: "I would like to stand up." And those who have been suppressed... You occasionally find incidents where they just stand up.

*In all your novels and short stories, you've been very careful to avoid caricature, and I guess that's part of your will to tell the truth, to show things and people as they are. For instance, Fix, who is known to be cruel, is also very touching with his son on his knees. Similarly, Mapes, known to be a brute, obviously shows respect—as much as the other black men do—for Mathu. Now, I wondered about people like Luke Will and Deputy Griffin. The story takes place not so long ago, in 1979. Could you tell me whether those characters are caricatures? And if not, do you think that today, seventeen years later, that kind of behavior and overt racism could possibly happen in rural Louisiana?*

Yes, it could. A simple yes. I was telling a student a few minutes ago that about ten years ago... or maybe six years ago, 65 % of the citizens, white people of the State of Louisiana, voted a Ku Klux Klansman to be governor of the State. That's David Duke. So there are people out there who would go for that, who would like to see this Klansman as our governor. We have a very conservative governor there, in the State of Louisiana, right now. And, so, that

Luke Will mentality is out there; and that little Griffin deputy, he is still there. Recently, my brother's wife was called for jury duty. But my brother was ill that day. So, his wife did not go to jury duty, but did not call them. So they sent this deputy out there, and he said: "What the hell is wrong with you niggers? I mean, now you can serve on juries, and you don't want to do it!"

*...Did he actually use that word "nigger"?*

Yes. He used that word. And he said, "If it was just up to me"—he was a deputy, like Griffin—"if it was just up to me, if I was sheriff I'd drag you back there to make you serve for jury duty." This happened in 1995. My brother told me about it. My brother told my wife and me about this insane incident. So those people exist.

*Do you see in Luke Will and his friends a modern extension of Albert Cluveau (the Cajun who murders Ned in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman)?*

Oh! yes, yes. You can see what's happening in different parts of the United States: these militant groups, these ones who blew up the F.B.I. building in Oklahoma City. I mean that's the same kind of guys. They are a group of brutes who will try to change the government their way, try to run the government their way. They're the same people. They are the same.

*History and the remembrance of the past is at the center of much of your work. In A Gathering of Old Men for instance, the old men stand up against their past lives. Thus, could the scene in the old cemetery be looked upon as a kind of a ceremonial in which the warriors pay tribute to their forefathers before the battle?*

Absolutely. Absolutely yes. I was discussing the same point with a student not so long ago.

*You have mentioned story telling as part of your childhood background, a folk heritage you claim as your own. You said once that you'd rather have your stories told in a loud voice rather than written to be read alone, silently. To what extent do you consider writing a distortion of this urge to tell stories aloud?*

Because you cannot get your point over in any other way, you have to write them. But as I said in that story, I'd rather be able to read to a group of people. And what I'd like to do really is to record my stories and sell the tapes. I would like to do things like that. Most of my books have been recorded. Not by me. They would always get someone else to do it; they'd ask an actor to

read the thing. But I still feel the same way: that I'd much prefer reading or talking to a group of students if I could get them to support me. I'd rather do that than have them read from the page. Well, I'd write it, but I'd read it out to them, you know. Because I think what I try to do is write from a storyteller's voice.<sup>2</sup> I'm telling you a story about something that happened. And I think this is what I try to emphasize to my students, that there must be a story. There must be a beginning, a middle and an ending. I want to see characters developing in these stories, which we are not getting very much of anymore. I still believe in the traditional storytelling. But you said something about distortion of...

*Well, yes. Doesn't the need to write distort the story-telling intention and voice?*

Well, I never thought of it as being distorted. I just feel that I try as well as I possibly can to repeat what I hear. And the sounds of the voice on the paper, I try to do it without using too much dialect, you know. So you can understand it.

*Talking about story telling and tradition, I have spotted in A Gathering of Old Men some small events and attitudes which, I think, have something to do with the culture of Afro-American people. Could you comment upon them, so I may gauge the relevance of my insights. In the cemetery, for instance, Dirty Red makes a remark that I personally find very strange: "graveyard pecans always taste good to me." Does it mean that dead bodies have sown ideas and that your forefathers, in a way, nourish you with their strength and their will?*

Well, others have chosen that as the meaning of that line. I have just felt that Dirty Red is the kind of guy who would say almost anything. And, you see, if he was eating pecans on a roadside, he'd say, "You know, those pecans really taste good, you know." I don't know that he'd say, "They're better than any other pecans." I don't know that he'd say that they are better. I have eaten pecans in the graveyard. The first time I took my wife back to this old place, she and I went back there in the fall, September or October, there were pecans on the ground and I broke them. They were ripe enough to break them with my hands, squeezing them. And we ate the pecans and they were very very good. Very good. So when Dirty Red says something like that, I'm saying the same thing. They're good, and we always had pecan trees in that cemetery. And our forefathers are there... their very lives that they gave to the ground made the ground richer.

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<sup>2</sup> When Ernest Gaines read chapters 1 and 23 from *A Lesson Before Dying* in Paris at a Cercle d'Etudes Afro-Américaines meeting on December 14, 1996, it was obvious to his audience that reading was in fact retelling a story: when a word substituted for another here and there, it captured a dynamics that pertained to oral delivery at that precise moment.

*This also reminds me of the passage in the Bible, the Valley of Dry Bones that comes up in Ned's sermon...*

In Pittman, yes, yes.

*You know, they will rise again.*

Yes, yes. Absolutely.

*And again, I am thinking about another remark Dirty Red makes when touching Big Charlie's corpse, hoping that, I quote, "...some of that stuff he has found back there in the swamps might rub off on me." Does this event, which already occurs in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman with Ned's body, suggest some link between those people and nature? And what kind of link?*

Those are men, those are brave men who have shown great courage. "By touching Ned, maybe this will give me some courage as well." This is what I had in mind. These men have shown this great courage. Both Ned in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and Charlie in *A Gathering of Old Men*.

*And what about Miss Merle feeding everybody, creating a situation where death and life are, in a way, side by side in a kind of rather joyful celebration?*

Well, for one thing, they were hungry! So we needed some food in there. And another thing, I wanted to show a certain side of the South. Not only trying to continue a patriarchal society, but a person like Miss Merle who knows the more basic needs of people. So it is she who would bring food to them. And who gives the food and, at a time when all this other thing is going on, there is still this: "you guys can be out there and play killers and all this sort of thing, but basically, you're hungry as well." And this is what I wanted to do. I just wanted to bring this good person to see beyond this—well this insanity that is going to happen, and to bring food. That's all I wanted with her.

*Also, it is interesting to notice—while Reverend Jameson is trying to convince them not to carry out their plans—how, I quote, "a pecan dropped from that tree in the backyard, fell on the tin roof, and tumbled to the ground." This is just a detail and it could be interpreted as a means to accentuate the silence or what we could call a collective rejection of the churchman's prayer, but it also made me think of the "goober"<sup>3</sup> thing in Louisiana. I've read that in the South—and I'm told this comes from an old African tradition—peanut shells spread in front*

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<sup>3</sup> Goober is a local word for peanut.

*of someone's door are the sign that something terrible is going to happen to that person. Did you include that on purpose?*

I don't know that... I don't know that. But the pecan falling off this roof. What I was trying to do was the silence, work with the silence. And the other thing I wanted to suggest was the time it took the pecan to tumble from the roof down to the ground; because what we're doing here... Everything takes place in one day. Although there are flashbacks, all the action takes place in one day; and I just wanted someone to concentrate on that small movement of time for that moment. And that of course broke the silence for a moment. But that small movement of time is what I was trying to concentrate on.

*My research focuses on orality, trying to show how this orality is much more than pleasure or entertainment for those people from the "quarters"—that it is deeply rooted in their minds and part of their daily lives. I've tried to show that it implies and shapes some behaviors and even some situations.*

Yes, yes.

*Would you agree with that idea, that everything goes together, orality and the situation, that, in a way, everything is connected?*

Well, yeah. Give me an example.

*I'm thinking of the dialogue between Johnny Paul and Mapes (the "I see / No, you don't see" game) which comes from the fact that they look at life in a totally different manner.*

Right, Right. Since you've explained it now I agree with you. OK. Yes, I know the scene you're talking about. Whenever I read *A Gathering of Old Men*, I would always read that particular scene. I wanted a rhetoric and I wanted a certain rhythmic, a way of distinguishing his voice from others' voices. And at the same time, letting Mapes know that, although Mapes thinks he knows blacks—and that's another thing that a lot of Southern whites think: "I know those blacks over there, I know exactly what they would do, I know exactly how they act, I know exactly what they want in life, you know, I know all of this." And Johnny Paul is convincing him, or trying to convince him, by telling him that "no, you don't know because you can't see anything, you don't know what we're talking about, you don't know why we're standing here at this moment, you don't know why we have these guns, you don't know why this poor old black man is standing here." This is what he is saying to him: "You don't know, because you don't know about the flowers over here, you don't know about the old people sitting over here, you can't just drive into the area

and see the people one time and think you know these things. You don't know anything about it."

I've been in Rennes now for nearly four months, but I don't know Rennes. This is what he's saying. You have just lived here for a moment, you don't know what you're looking at. I can't go back to the United States and write a big story about, a novel on the Rennes character, or the Breton character. I cannot do that. I don't know enough. And this is what he is trying to tell Mapes, although Mapes has been living there all of his life as well. But Mapes has not shared those little moments, that pecan falling there before. He has probably never noticed a pecan falling like that before. So, what Johnny Paul is saying is that "you may have come down here before, you may have arrested me before, you may have done so many other things before, but you don't know the basic things, you don't know the little everyday things. You don't know me."

*...You're not part of my club.*

No, no. That's right. "You are not part of the club. You don't really know me, you just don't live here. You have to live here seventy years to know what I'm talking about now." He didn't know, like Candy. Neither did Lou Dimes. Nobody knew these guys really like they knew themselves. But maybe, even they didn't know they had that kind of courage until that day as well, you know.

*The way you use "silence" for an effect has drawn my attention. For instance, after Gable has told about the killing of his son, Rufe notices that everything, I quote, "was quiet" and that "the only thing that moved was the shadow from the house. It covered the yard now." Can you tell me how you create those silences, when, and why?*

There was a break so that people could remember, could reflect on what this man had said. It's almost a reminder of why I'm here, because of these things. So that's a break for reflecting.

*There is also Aunt Glo looking at Snookum in such a way that it is enough to make him understand her orders. Nothing much is said about this way of looking, but the reader actually doesn't need extra comments to understand—and neither does Snookum—what he should or shouldn't do. Can you comment upon this way of making things very clear with a restricted number of words?*

I was raised by someone who used very few words. My aunt who raised me, you know, was a cripple who crawled over the floor all of her life, and she used few words to tell you anything. But, then that was characteristic of a great many of the older people in the South at that particular time. They had

communication without words all the time. And yet I don't know anyone else but maybe these people here in France who can talk more than they did because they would gather at my aunt's place all the time, and just talk and talk all the time. But then, there would be those long breaks of silence. Just long breaks of silence when nothing was being said. There is still that kind of communication going on. And when the old people spoke to a child, the child understood with one word or one phrase—whatever—and just that would break that whole silence and the child understood very well. [Chuckle] Look, I think you have read those books very well; I mean bringing up such points as silence is important to me.

*Thank you. The fact that you use a lot of dialogues helps to avoid long descriptions. But it also compels you to say a lot without actually stating things, since you let your characters express themselves in their own words. Could you comment on the advantages and drawbacks of this technique?*

The reason why I do that is because I, as a writer, try to avoid interfering with the story. I let the story tell itself, let it go on. Dialogues are one way to achieve this. I'm searching for a certain kind of way of telling in a dialogue who the character is.

*Do you sometimes regret not being able to say "this is how it is" because characters are talking to each other and you don't want to interfere?*

I do not wish to interfere with dialogues. Never. I think that through dialogues, you can get much description without describing. Once you start to describe, you slow up the progression of the story.<sup>4</sup> If the persons can convince you that the story is progressing through dialogues, then that's the approach to use. Another reason why I use more dialogue than I do descriptive passages is because I'm better at dialogues than I am at the other way. I prefer using dialogue to tell you something. I prefer... I forget who it is who saw these men beating down his brother...

*...That's Tucker's brother, Silas.*

Yes, right. You get a stronger feeling by hearing a voice telling you this than if the writer came in and tried to tell it omnisciently or just have someone

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<sup>4</sup> In Paris, Gaines discussed descriptions in his latest novel, stating that descriptions must be short and that they are best used as props supporting the "needed mood". He illustrated this point with an allusion to chapter 19 in *A Lesson Before Dying* where the smoke is shown drifting from the deserted quarters over the cemetery and on to the marsh, while unseen people keep indoors against the cold Christmas wind. But, Gaines added, that is mostly side fact supporting the main stream of the story.

narrate it. So let the character tell you these things. You feel closer to him. And this is one of the reasons why I definitely depend on dialogues more than I do on descriptive passages.

*A Gathering of Old Men is mostly dialogue: one gets the first person point of view and a lot of polyphony besides. There are fifteen different narrators, male and female, white and black, children, adults and old people. What is your purpose in writing a polyphonic novel?*

I needed that to show different opinions, a different approach to the same story. I thought that just one character could not tell this entire story. I tried to tell the story by Lou Dimes, and then I realized Lou Dimes could not tell the story because so much of it is internal. For example, Lou Dimes cannot tell the way Snookum feels. Lou Dimes was not there at the moment, so he cannot see Snookum running across the street—spanking his butt the way you whip a horse to make it run faster. Lou Dimes cannot hear Janey in that house when she is going up and down those stairs talking to herself. Lou Dimes can't hear that. And no one else could hear that. But Janey herself could bring it in; and I wanted that rhythm, I wanted that religious, that old polite woman calling on God and sort of praying in church, I wanted that. And the only way to get that is to have her do it, and yet she could not tell the entire story because she's not there all the time. She's not in the quarters. She's still at the house, the Big House. She can't go to Fix's place. So Janey can't tell the story. Candy can't tell the story either, because Candy cannot be involved, she cannot be in the area with every one, she cannot be in that room. When they leave, when they turn her out, when Mathu says "No, I'll go with them," Candy cannot be there. So Candy cannot tell the story. So, this is why I had to use the multiple point of view. I wanted the multiple point of view because I wanted voices, I wanted that Louisiana voice in there, throughout. From the religious Janey's to Snookum's, to Griffin's way of talking, Lou Dimes's way of speaking, the guy who goes with Gilbert—T.V.—T.V.'s way of speaking about things. I wanted all of these kinds of voices going... This is why I had to use this multiple point of view. I could not do it only with the omniscient point of view, because I could not have used all the internal voices, had I done it from the writer's point of view. I could not get all these internal voices, and I wanted those voices in it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In Paris, Gaines pointed out that this was a difficulty he had run against while writing *In My Father's House* (1978), which he changed and worked on over a period of five or six years, using every possible character as a narrator, but that neither was fully satisfactory.

*How come all the main characters, Mathu, Mapes, Candy are silenced?*

[Laughter] OK. I can't get away with this. I felt that Mathu could not speak without giving away the story, because Mathu knows what has happened. This is a mystery, *A Gathering of Old Men* is a mystery. You aren't supposed to know that Charlie did this. As a matter of fact, quite a few people don't believe Charlie did it. Obviously they think Mathu did this. Mathu is the one who killed the guy. Charlie ran. And at one time I had *that* as an idea: let Mathu do it and Charlie run—but then Charlie comes back... and "Pity!" you know, "Well I can't run for miles and let him take this; he did it, but I can't let him suffer alone, so I'll go back and claim that I did it." So I didn't want Mathu to narrate, and I reached the point with Mapes... Mapes is telling it at one time. But when I sent the story to New York—no, before I sent the story to New York, for publication, I thought that why not just have Mapes show up rather than have him starting all the way back in the courthouse. I mean it's not so important that this all starts all the way back at the courthouse. I don't want too many people... Lou Dimes starts at the newspaper place. I said (to myself): "That's OK. One person did that, but you can't have all of them do the same. Just have them appear on the scene." And that's enough. Mapes hears the news. And that's how he gets there of course. But it was not necessary for Mapes to narrate because others were narrating it for him. Not that this is an explanation to you... because there's always this same question: Why not Candy? Why not Mapes? And why not Mathu? And I say: "Well, why Candy?... Why Candy?" I get Candy's action and Candy's voice by other things. I get Candy, really. And I get Mathu by everyone talking about Mathu. Mathu is the central person here. The one everybody talks about...

*...but they don't have the responsibility of a chapter, they're not the narrators...*

...No, no, no. When I was writing the story... It was not until after I finished writing the story that I realized that Candy and Mathu, Mapes, weren't absolutely necessary to have been included (as narrators). I'd never thought about it. I've written a chapter of Mapes's. I've done Mapes that way. But I cut it out; as I said, I didn't think it was necessary for him to start, for that chapter to start back at the courthouse, and then come up to the quarters. I don't think that was absolutely necessary.

*I also wanted to bring up the influence of jazz, blues, rural blues in your writing.*

*You have already explained to a lot of people how all this has influenced you. But regarding A Gathering of Old Men, I'm thinking about Big Charlie's speech at Mathu's house, when he sounds like a preacher delivering a sermon. Are there other striking musical references in the novel? I was thinking of Jan...*

Oh yes Janey... It's like a sort of a call and response in a church, that's what Janey is caught in.

*What about the improvisational skills of the old men talking. Don't they also sound like jazz improvisations?*

Yes, yes. And of course there is the rhythm of Johnny Paul when he says "...you don't see, you don't see what I see," etc.

*It's like the chorus and antiphonal rite. I've read in an interview that you gave about "The Sky is Gray" a statement showing your conscious use of jazz and blues. You said that, in this story, like a jazzman, you were trying to "play around the note"...*

Yes, Yes. If I remember right, I may have mentioned Lester Young or somebody like that...

*You did. Your point was that the situation you put James and his mother in would make the reader understand the discrimination that was going on at the time; and then, instead of putting them uptown you have them go back of town, deep in the black area. And then, from that, the reader understands that they cannot go to the white area. He understands everything, the whole situation. Is there not a similar technique at work in A Gathering of Old Men? Actually, I was thinking of Johnny Paul's way of describing things. He doesn't say: "Look there's nothing"; he says: "Oh, there's something but you don't see it."*

Yes, yes, yes. It's the same thing.

*Are there other examples like that in A Gathering...*

I think Miss Merle brings that technique up at one time, when she's there feeding them, she tells Mapes... She says: "You see that sun, uh?" "You see what the shade is like?" She doesn't say: "Listen, those guys are goin' to be coming over here with those guns, and those guys are going to blow up this whole place, if you don't get Mathu to that jail." She doesn't say that to him. But instead: "You see that sun, you see them shadows moving?" What she's saying is that it's getting later, and later, and later. This is what she means, "You see that shadow moving, there?" Things, little things like that. So, when you've already established this kind of statement, you've already established your point. You don't have to keep hammering on this sort of thing. This is why in so many of my books (well, not so many of my books: I haven't written that many), but in *A Gathering of Old Men* as well as *A Lesson Before Dying*, the murder has already been committed. Everything's been done, put *down* in the first chapter. And then you begin to see the result of it. So you just establish it there... which is sort of off camera, off stage, and then you discuss it. The novel, I think you made that point in your opening comment, the novel is to

show the result of what happened here. And I was trying to do that in "The Sky Is Gray." I don't have to have this mother and child go into a white restaurant... and be thrown out and called "nigger," or whatever, you know. You don't need that sort of thing. All I needed to do there was to show that, once they've come out of that dentist office, there's no place for them to go, there's no place for them to go at all. And the mother insists on "keep your eyes in front," meaning "this is white people's business." But she doesn't have to say that, that's cliché. That's been said by every southern writer, every black writer, every white writer of the South. They've all said those things. I don't have to say that. And I said: "OK, I don't have to say that; but what can I say to show this racism, to show this segregation?" Have them stand in the cold, wanting to get warm. They cannot go in the place. And so, I just have them stand there. The little boy stands there and looks at the manikins, and he says "I'm gonna buy my mamma a red coat when I pick cotton; I'm gonna buy my mamma a red coat"; and this gives the feeling of this child, feeling for his mother. And then of course, they have to go back uptown to catch this bus. Well, she also goes into this hardware store pretending to look at ax handles, and that's only to warm the kid. But we don't have to say that. Once she has stopped this kid by the heater, she just walks in. You must understand the idea. That's why I say you don't have to hammer at this thing, but you can play around it. And that's what a great jazz musician does. Once they've made their statement—John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Lester Young—they can do all kinds of little frills, of little things. And then, you still get that feeling of that sound that they are trying to give you, which they do give you. Louis Armstrong had that with his singing, and so did Billy Hollyday... They would make their statement and start jazzing it up, making all kinds of sounds with their mouths. But you know what they are doing, you know exactly what they're doing. I am very much influenced by music. I love music. I love the rural blues. The jazz music, the spirituals—classical music of course I listen to. My wife and I listen to music all the time.

*I have one last question: it's still about all of this, but more specifically about A Gathering of Old Men: I'm thinking about this concept of a wall. When Lou Dimes arrives at Mathu's place, he sees a wall of old men. Then you have T.V. Sully, who (at Mathu's place) sees a wall of old men. Then you have Charlie: he says, "I've been running everywhere, and it's like a wall everywhere. I couldn't get out of here!" What is the idea behind all this?*

I know Charlie's meaning for "the wall," and that is an undeveloped consciousness, which he's not aware of, something developing in him that he's not aware of. That's his "wall": I mean, "No matter where I go, there's something standing before me; I can't go anywhere..." And before he realizes, before he falls down and starts eating this dirt, and hears a voice... that was

that wall that kept him from going... The voice is the thing that he recognizes, the voice he recognizes, the wall before he could not recognize. He was unconscious of it, he was conscious he was walled in, but he was not conscious what the meaning of the wall was. Whereas with the voice, now he becomes conscious, conscious of the meaning of the voice: "come back, come back, come back."

I think Lou Dimes, the way Lou is seeing it: "I see a wall of old men there," he must mean that: "I've never seen that many old men standing like that before." Although he had probably seen men in the fields working like that; but he's never seen this sort of stand before. I think this is what he's talking about.

And I would think that T.V. Sullivan, must have felt the same way. He's never seen anything like that. He's probably seen guys on a football field, but he could never have even imagined that, you know. As he says, "it seems that I'm in the Twilight Zone," I mean this is impossible, "I can't even imagine these things, I can't imagine these things." But Charlie's wall is that maybe he's becoming consciously aware of not being able to escape responsibility, and that's what that wall was: he will not escape this. He's not conscious, he doesn't know the meaning of it, etc. And then, when he falls and, I think he's eating dirt (I can't remember all of these things about the story), he hears a voice that says "come back, come back." And then of course he has to come back. And he does come back. That's the meaning of his wall, yes.

*And then, my very last question as a conclusion: what is your next book going to be about?*

Oh that! I never talk about something that I haven't started writing on yet. But I'll tell you this: it's gonna be about Louisiana. And there's gonna be a murder, and this sheriff, after he diagnoses murder, he tells the people: "You go tell him..." (I think Mapes's gonna be in there and there'll be a flashback to Mapes and this man) "You go tell him you'll come and get me in an hour—come and get me in an hour—. Don't anybody else come in with me *because the other guy has a gun*. So come and get me in an hour." And the people report to Mapes, to the sheriff: she says, "Come and get him in an hour!" "What the hell he thinks he is?" "He thinks he is going to shoot somebody and you don't..." And Mapes says: "Yes Madam. Yeah, I'm giving him an hour." And the point of the story is: why does he give him that hour? Why that hour? And then you begin to understand... why that hour... but the whole novel revolves around that: Why that particular hour? And why did Mapes say "Yes" to this? This is what it is about. But the story is much larger than that. The story is not about this hour. The flashbacks will take in much more... The starting point is: why does Mapes give him an hour? That's the starting point.

But the story will also cover years and years and years... But the starting point is: why would he give him an hour?

*Time is very important in your work. Not only in this next book. I've noticed time is always a shaping element.*

Well, I don't know how important time is, because *Miss Jane Pittman* covers a hundred years in time, and *A Gathering of Old Men* covers one day. Most of my books cover all kinds of periods of time. *A Lesson Before Dying* covers, I think, 4 to 5 months. Others 2 or 3 weeks of time... So I really don't concentrate too much on time. I say, "OK, this book has to take place within a certain time..." Although I have been influenced by Greek tragedy, and sometimes I'd like to write a story, a novel which takes place *only* within those 24 hours without any flashbacks at all, as I did in 2 or 3 of my short stories: "A Long Day in November", "The Sky Is Gray", "Bloodline"... The last one is "Just like a Tree"...

*Thank you very much.*



### A Peasant's Monologue

An untitled piece published in *Cultural Vistas* (Spring 1993)

*You had to be there then to be able to don't see it and don't hear it now. But I was here then, and I don't see it now, and that's why I did it. I did it for them back there under them trees. I did it 'cause that tractor is getting closer and closer to that graveyard, and I was scared if I didn't do it, one day that tractor was gon' come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all proof that we ever was. Like now they trying to get rid of all proof that black people ever farmed this land with plows and mules—like if they had nothing from the starten but motor machines. Sure, one day they will get rid of the proof that we ever was, but they ain't gon' do it while I'm still here. Mama and Papa worked too hard in these fields. They Mama and they Papa worked too hard in these same fields. They Mama and they Papa people worked too hard, too hard to have that tractor just come in just come into that graveyard and destroy all proof that we ever was. I'm the last one left. I had to see that the graves stayed in a little while longer.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Fallait être là-bas en c'temps pour pouvoir ne plus voir et entendre à présent. Mais moi j'étais ici, et, comme j'ne vois plus, j'me suis lancé. J'me suis lancé pour eux, là-bas, sous les arbres. J'me suis lancé à cause du tracteur qui vient de plus en plus près du cimetière. J'ai eu peur que, si j'me lançais pas, le tracteur finisse par y entrer et laboure les tombes pour liquider les preuves qu'on a existé. C'est bien ça à c't-heure quand ils essaient de liquider les preuves que les noirs ont cultivé cette terre avec des charrues et des mulets—comme si y avait jamais rien eu d'autre que des machines à moteur dès le début. Pardi, il la liquideront bien un jour, la preuve qu'on a existé. Mais j'vais pas les laisser faire tant que j'suis là. Maman et Papa ont travaillé trop dur dans ces champs. Leu' Maman et leu' Papa ont travaillé trop dur dans ces mêmes champs. Les familles de leu' Maman et de leu' Papa ont travaillé trop dur, trop dur pour laisser le tracteur entrer dans le cimetière détruire les preuves qu'on a existé. C'est moi le dernier. C'était mon devoir que les tombes restent encore un peu. (Trad. Claude Julien.)



# Writing my way out of Ireland

## An interview with Briege Duffaud

by Marc Amfreville

*Briege Duffaud is an Irish expatriate living in Brittany. She was born in Ulster, into a Catholic family. She has been writing for the past twenty years, mostly journalism and recently two novels, A Wreath upon the Dead (1993) and A Long-Stem Rose (1994), and a volume of short stories, Nothing like Beirut (1994). She left Ireland at the age of twenty-two, lived in England and Holland before finally settling in France.*



Would you mind telling us why you left Ireland?

I left because Northern Ireland is very small, very narrow, very constricting. The world was out there, it was wide, I wanted to travel, but I got as far as London. And it was the sixties

and London was the world of our time, so I stayed there. Then Amsterdam became the world for a while, so I went there too. And from there I arrived in France and stayed because I married a Frenchman.

*Before we talk about A Wreath upon the Dead, could you tell us a little more about the other novel and the volume of short stories you wrote?*

Well, the other novel is called *A Long-Stem Rose*, the title comes from a song by Leonard Cohen and the novel is about the eighties and about France. And about exile. There's a volume of short stories, which started life as a very autobiographical novel and I didn't dare have it published, so I scrapped it and then used parts for what turned out to be rather long short stories.

*So let's move on to A Wreath Upon the Dead now. Although this issue of Sources is to include a review/summary of your novel [see p. 166-69], I think it would be interesting for us to have you summarise it, in your own words.*

*A Wreath Upon the Dead* has been called a political novel, that's totally untrue. It is a novel about different generations of people trying to come to terms with life and the environment in which they were placed, were born,

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The interview took place on February 14, 1997 at Briege Duffaud's residence in Lamballe.

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and it happened that this environment is Northern Ireland: some of the generations lived in peace, some of the generations lived in war...

*Perhaps we should say, for those who haven't read it, that it spans several generations. It starts with...*

Yes, it starts with the Great Famine of 1845 and it finishes with recent history and each generation has been involved directly or indirectly with the effects of history on their lives and on their future destiny. But the politics and the struggles of war have always been a background rather than an essential part of the novel. The novel does deal with the more basic lives of the people.

*Is that why you seem to question the political label that has been attached to the novel?*

Yes. I suppose you could call it political, but it's political in the way that *Madame Bovary* is a sociological study of rural Normandy in the nineteenth century. My characters happen to live in a situation, in an environment that has been constantly at war.

*Could you perhaps account for the title?*

The title is a quotation from a poem by Patrick Kavanagh, who was a poet writing in the forties, fifties and sixties. He was a very non-traditional Irish poet in that he questioned the received ideas about nationalism, the special Irish quality of the Irish, about heroism. The quotation is "They put a wreath upon the dead because the dead will wear the cap of any racket," and effectively, in my novel, people who were ordinary, struggling characters trying to make their lives, were by circumstances in the following generation regarded as heroes or as villains because of what they did. Myths grew up about the hero figures and as the years went on, as the decades went on, they took on an extraordinary dimension. The novel tries to show that they were simply human beings.

*Is that what started the idea? I have read the book, among other things, as the story of hero-making processes. Would you say that this is one of the themes that you first had in mind when you started thinking about the novel?*

It wasn't actually, no. The novel started as all novels do, as an attempt to kill off my own demons, to make some sense of my relationship with Ireland, with my family, with the Catholic Church, with all the taboos that were making my life a misery when I was an adolescent and a young woman, and which I saw were making the lives of many young women and many young

men at the time very difficult. And I wasn't able to confront them until I was in my forties, and I simply put them into perspective, and in an historical situation; I realised that this was not something peculiar to me, but something peculiar to Ireland and maybe to any very closed, very Catholic society. So I did begin the book in the twentieth century, with a group of young women trying to live in their own ways, trying to break away from their upbringing and then, as it went on, I realised that this wasn't really enough, because I was writing in the late nineteen-eighties and I couldn't ignore what was happening in Northern Ireland at that time. So I had to put the lives of these women into a context, and I began to do a lot of research on what could possibly be the ancestry of people of that milieu.

*So you started off with a contemporary story and moved back towards the nineteenth-century famine?*

That's right, yes. I started off with a group of people of my own generation, and I realised that I couldn't write about them, well I could have written about them in isolation, but it would have been a very banal feminist novel, such as everybody was writing at that time. And I decided to put it into a wider context, and that's why I brought in the historical thing, because I realised that the forces these young women were struggling against weren't specific to that particular time they were living, but did have their roots in the context of the parents' lives, the grandparents' lives and thus in the wider political ethos of the twentieth and nineteenth century.

*Everything you say brings many questions to my mind. For example, on a recent TV show, Laure Adler's Cercle de Minuit on Irish writers, you said, I think, that the real enemy of Irish people nowadays was not the IRA, or the British government, but rather the Church, which you have briefly alluded to, just now.*

Yes, I wouldn't say *nowadays*, because things have changed, even in the past ten years. But certainly throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, from the Famine onwards, the Catholic Church had an enormous responsibility for inciting hatred, for inciting segregation. In my own time, when I was a child, when I was an adolescent, our whole lives were shaped by our Catholicism. The priest in every community was the ruling force. In everything, in education we weren't allowed to go to state schools, our parents were threatened with excommunication if they didn't send us to private Catholic schools. We weren't allowed to go out with Protestant boys, we weren't allowed to go to soccer matches, we had to go to Gaelic football matches which were presided over by the parish priest. Even the *bal du samedi soir* was presided over by the priest who went around afterwards with a stick, beating young couples out from behind the hedges. So, our whole lives in

working and middle class Ireland were shaped by the Catholic Church, and it had a very limiting effect on us. We weren't allowed to look outside our own social class, outside our own religious group. We weren't allowed to have ambitions to go and make our lives in England because it was a bit of a disgrace to leave our country and become an immigrant.

*In the novel itself this is shown as dating back to the nineteenth century by the very interesting story of a maid, a Catholic maid, who is hired by a Protestant woman, is quite happy with her position, and is forced by the priest back into her own community, being threatened with excommunication if she stays on.*

Yes, this was very, very common at that time. It was just "a last resort" to go and work for people who weren't of one's own religion. Because of the danger of mixed marriages. The Church wanted to keep the community pure and catholic and mixed marriages were a fate worse than death. So, yes, that maid, she was actually in the nineteen-thirties, and she was working, she had a very good position with a Protestant school teacher, and her priest and her family were afraid that she would lose her faith, become a Protestant. And so they got her a much harder job with a rickety Catholic family. And this was something that one heard of quite a lot when I was a child. In fact there were a lot of our neighbours going to work as maids and as barmaids, barmen, waitresses and so on. The thing to do was to stay in one's own community, no matter how hard the work was, no matter how low the pay was, it was much better to stay in a Catholic job, rather than work for Protestants.

*So I made an interesting mistake. I said nineteenth century, whereas this was in the nineteen-thirties. History does seem to repeat itself in Ireland. Because there is a story that amounts pretty much to the same in the nineteenth century, isn't there?...*

Yes, the story of the maid who changed her religion and was beaten to death, or something like that, by her family. Yes. I read that story in a journal by a Protestant minister who was serving in Ireland during the Famine. And he did a lot of very good work among the poor, among the people who were starving, he was very charitable. And he kept a diary, and one of the incidents he came across was this maid, who had changed her religion. Her brothers and her father took her and beat her until she was crippled. I don't know how frequent that was, but there was certainly an awful lot of intolerance. In the nineteenth century, you see, most of the Irish priests were descended from French Jansenists, they were trained by French Jansenists who, I think, had to leave France and went to teach in Ireland, and the Irish clergy were extremely puritanical compared to those anywhere else.

*On that television programme, you were opposed to other Irish writers on the issue of a writer's commitment. I was under the impression that there was a definite line of "ivory tower" type of writers who were taking part in the debate, and you sounded very offended and, if I remember correctly, you said something like "How can one be Irish and a writer and not write about Ireland?"*

Yes, this "ivory tower" thing is a reaction against the writers of the past, against people like Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain and so on, who were bourgeois people writing about working class communities and having—well I suppose, writing about them in the way that Pagnol, for example, would have written about Provençal peasants without knowing very much about them—having a fairly idealistic vision of them. So writers later (from, say, the nineteen-fifties, nineteen-sixties onwards) decided to ignore our Irishness, to write about us as though we were members of an international community. I talk in my novel about Edna O'Brien, for example, who writes about fairly jet-setting, beautiful young women, and John McGahern who, in his short stories anyway, and some of his novels, does write about highly intelligent university students who have a fairly high-powered life-style, and they do ignore the fact that the majority of Irish people do not live on that plane at all. The majority of Irish people are still absolutely obsessed by their history. They are about twenty years behind the rest of the world, as far as sexual liberation, as far as political liberation and so on go. And I, who come from a very, very *populaire*, a very working class background, I'm perhaps more aware of this reality than people who grew up in a nice suburb of Dublin.

I did seem to be criticising John McGahern on that television programme and just now, but it's simply that I come from Northern Ireland and he comes from Southern Ireland and realities are extremely different in each half of the island. I am talking about people whose lives have been shaped by a knowledge and by, in many cases, an approval of violence, even if they've never come across violence in their everyday lives. The majority of Ulster people would not, themselves, indulge in violence, but they would have an instinctive understanding of why violence might seem necessary in some situations. Even I, who am no longer particularly Irish, do have that understanding, because of the pressures of my upbringing. People like John McGahern, people like Edna O'Brien, people like Joseph O'Connor, the writers of now from the south of Ireland have never lived under those pressures, and they can afford to see Ireland simply as another member of the European Community with sophisticated inhabitants. When you visit Crossmaglen—you perhaps see a different reality.

*Do you think however that you may be sharing the reality of the oppression of the family? I'm looking for things you may have in common, on both sides of the*

*border. There is such a strong emphasis on the oppressive role of the family in your novel...*

Yes, that is something I share with both Edna O'Brien and with John McGahern, this total dictatorship of the family in Ireland. As an individual, one doesn't count very much, one's needs don't count very much in the traditional Irish family, one exists as part of an entity and everything one does, has to be done for the good of the family. I mentioned in my novel, actually I mentioned it in the same context as I mentioned Edna O'Brien and John McGahern, that these writers do live in the same Ireland as those unfortunate teenagers over the past ten years or so, who still at the end of the twentieth century find a pregnancy such a terrible, overwhelming shame that they will give birth and drown the children, or simply go off and give birth at the back of a ditch, you know, and die in the attempt, because they're so terrified of bringing shame on the family.

*You see, in everything you say, one feels you are impatient with, perhaps even critical of, Irish society. But at the same time, reading your novel, one does feel such an immense irrepressible love, affection—irrational ties. Maybe you'd like to comment on that apparent paradox?*

Yes, I would like to think that that is Art! In fact I don't have very much deep affection for Ireland anymore. I think I've broken off my ties with Ireland. I hope I have. I am very, very impatient with it.

*But would writing perhaps be a way of maintaining those ties?*

No. I had seen writing as a way of breaking them, of cutting the cord completely. And I think I did succeed. I used, in *A Wreath upon the Dead* especially, those aspects of Ireland that horrify me, that scare me. I deliberately used them in the way that for example a composer would use the passion of Christ as a basis for an oratorio... Pasolini used the passion of Christ as the basis for a film. It was something that I knew, something that was there. But I wasn't necessarily terribly implicated by that time with the reality of Ireland. My characters were. I wasn't.

*This is time for a question about that central character in the novel, Maureen. She is a writer, she lives in France. You're a writer, you live in France. Of course, when one begins to know you, one does realise how different you are from the narrator. But perhaps you would like to tell us how close you feel to her?*

Yes. Maureen is me, up to a point. There but for the grace of God go I. Maureen and I shared a childhood. That's certain. We shared part of an

adolescence. Maureen left her ghastly boarding school at the age of fifteen and went off to live her life. I continued, and began to live my life a bit later, consequently. I did not marry an English millionaire... Maureen was carried along by the received ideas of her time. She was a conventional person. I was not. Maureen escaped from her childhood and adolescence soon enough to be able to become conventional. I didn't. I had to fight my way out of it with blood, sweat and tears. OK, we both lived in France... Maureen lived in France because a millionaire husband had paid a vast sum of money for a ruined château. I lived in France because I came to do the *vendanges*... I fought my way out of Ireland through being a *marginale* in the sixties.

*But she seems to have been a little like that too. She has at a certain point an involvement with the Socialist Party, doesn't she?*

Yes. And so did I, yes. That was in her teens, when there was a political party in Northern Ireland that seemed to be about to become a Socialist Party, and in fact this was the only way that a working class Catholic could get out of her Catholic working class background, and get into the middle classes. You joined the Socialist Party—the Ulster Labour Party, it was called—and you listened to modern jazz instead of listening to rock and roll. And this was one way in the late fifties and early sixties of becoming middle-class in Ireland. Maureen did that. I flirted with that too for a while. It was a way of getting to know Protestants. And getting to know Protestants was one way of becoming liberated.

*Why did you choose to make her a writer of cheap romances? Before she writes her first novel, Maureen seems to have written cheap, sentimental trash, which you haven't.*

Yes, that again was another way of getting out of one's working class background if one had any sort of literary talent, whatever. I began writing at the same age as Maureen, but I wrote poetry at that stage, and short stories, and I wasn't getting very far with them. I mean, I got paid something like three pounds for a short story, and I realised that I couldn't live on that. So, I stopped writing during all my youth. She continued writing, but she was a much more sophisticated person than I was and she had her eye all the time on social success. I did know a lot of people. A lot of my friends at that time were like that, they were in advertising or working on magazines and so on, and they had lovely lifestyles, and while I was sitting around in squats in London smoking joints, they were giving dinner parties... It was at that point that my character and Maureen's diverged.

*Maureen also, once a famous writer, goes back to Ireland. There is that bittersweet, very interesting moment when she meets her family again, and feels misunderstood. I guess that is a thing you have experienced, or have you not gone back to Ireland?*

I have, unfortunately, gone back. Maureen kept these wonderful relations with her family all the time, and her mother wrote her these beautiful letters, very literate, very articulate, keeping her up to date with everything that was going on. My mother wrote me letters of abuse all the time, telling me how I was ruining my life, you know, and why wouldn't I be a teacher and do something decent, or why didn't I come back and marry a good Catholic and do things like that. So that was quite different. I didn't have a good relationship with my family in the same way as she did, but I did go back because—it's, as I mentioned earlier, this domination of the family—I always felt that no matter how much I did, no matter how far away I got from them by rebelling, perhaps they were right after all. So I used to go back and check up from time to time and then flee. But, like Maureen, when I went back, I was OK with my family. But when I went out in the village and met people I'd been at that ghastly boarding school with, no matter how enlightened I knew my life was, no matter how sophisticated I knew I was compared with them, they made me feel that I was still a little peasant with nits in her hair. So this happened to Maureen, and this happened to me too. And we dealt with it in our own ways.

*There was definitely a ring of truth to certain of those moments, that's why I asked you the question. To stay with the book, there are two aspects of the novel I was particularly sensitive to. First, what I would call the creation of different languages according to the different narrators you use. Perhaps you could tell us what you found most difficult? Was it to recreate the nineteen-sixties, very contemporary type of language, or rather the nineteenth-century sort of prose?*

No, the nineteenth-century prose, that was easy, because I read a lot of nineteenth-century novels. I mean I love Jane Austen, for example. "Marianne's diary" was very easy. That wrote itself practically. The historical things were great fun to write because I was brought up on a vision of Ireland seen through upper-class English eyes. The Reverend Flowerdew, with his accounts of voyages among the peasantry, I was brought up on that sort of thing. Some of it was deliberate parody of cheap patriotic novels—"A Forgotten Hero" and the chapter of "Maureen's novel." I enjoyed doing all that specious profundity. We had a house full of old books and that was easy enough to do. The folk song was great fun to write too.

*And to translate, I can tell you...*

As for the Sixties, of course, I knew the language, the idioms, the *argot* of the Sixties. That wrote itself. What was very difficult was the nineteen-thirties and nineteen-forties. I wanted to be authentic in that. A lot of it—I didn't realise when I was writing it—was actually buried in my unconscious memory, for example the account of that maid and her dreadful life. When I was a small child, I used to listen a lot to conversations in my parents' house, my grandmother's house. And apparently, subconsciously I conserved a lot of this, a lot of what I had heard. Because many of the things that came out in that story of the maid and in the story of people living through the Second World War, were things that I didn't know I knew. But my mother told me, yes, these were things they used to talk about in the house when I was a very small child, you know, three or four years old. So I must have tape-recorded that somewhere in my subconscious, and while I was writing the novel, it came out *tout cru*.

*I'm glad you have brought that up because that was the second aspect I was going to allude to. I was very sensitive to the recreation of a child-like type of vision. I am thinking particularly of quite funny moments, frankly comical moments, when, for example, little Maureen confuses Cromwell soldiers with Roman soldiers, mixing up religious history with the history of Ireland.*

Yes. Well, that was part of this terrible domination of the Church. I mean, we all grew up thinking that Jesus was probably an Irishman, and that if he wasn't, he ought to have been, because outside of Ireland there was no salvation. And religion and Ireland were so inextricably bound up. I mean, when my mother first came to France, she assumed that the French were all Protestants because they were all rich!

*You mean, when you were already here and she came to visit?*

Yes. When I was living in France in the seventies, she came to visit me and she saw that people looked very, very prosperous at that time, before *la crise*, compared with Irish people. The houses were beautiful, people were elegant and so on, and she assumed that these must all be Protestants. She couldn't believe that France was a Catholic country, because it was so rich. And we were brought up to believe that the poor Catholic Church was oppressed everywhere in the world. And you couldn't attempt to tell anybody what a ghastly, rich organisation it is, because they wouldn't have believed it. Everybody worthwhile must be Irish. I mean, Shakespeare must have been Irish, his great-grandmother at least... and so on. Everybody's Irish. So

obviously, Cromwell's soldiers, the Roman soldiers were one and the same thing. They were all persecuting poor Ireland. That's how we grew up.

*So, since we are talking of your generation in Ireland, of present-day Ireland, perhaps you could evoke the Sarah and Malachy couple, in the latter half of the novel?*

Yes. I've been talking all along about the Ireland of my generation, church-dominated, history-dominated... and we mentioned the Socialists, joining the Socialist Party as a way of social climbing. And the great thing about my generation is that there was a Socialist Party in Ireland, that you could have thought that eventually there would be some sort of international aspect to an Irish future, where we would get out of this obsession with our past and go forward to sing the *Internationale* or whatever. As time went on, as the sixties wore into the seventies, for example, there was no longer a Socialist Party, there was a Nationalist Party and a Loyalist Party, each one with their own type of subdivisions. And at that point, hope of a future died. Hope of an international future died. Because, whichever side you were on—the Nationalist side, Sinn Fein, IRA, Anti-Partition, Nationalist Catholic-this or Catholic-that—or whether you were on the Loyalist side, your future was centred on this little province, whether it was going to remain attached to England or to become independent. And given the realities, given the demographic realities for a start, no particular solution to that problem seems possible. Not that I'm a politician, it just doesn't seem to be. So the younger generation of Ireland, who didn't have any hope for the future, who didn't have the liberation of the sixties, the sexual revolution of the seventies, the sort of thing which happened in other parts of the world, what did they have? They had their identity as Catholics or as Protestants. The young people tried to look outwards, the way young people do everywhere, like the Sarah and Malachy characters who epitomise the generation who were in their teens and early twenties at the time of the novel, and didn't have much of a future outside of political identities. And even though they tried, in their own ways—Malachy through drugs, and Sarah through her wish to revenge herself on a father who had abandoned her—they still found themselves caught up in politics. They were totally uninterested in politics. They had their own hang-ups, their own neuroses, but they couldn't resolve them on any personal level. They still had to be caught up in this larger obsession, which was the Nationalist or Loyalist issue.

*Now, this is of course related to the question of pessimism, since this trap Sarah and Malachi find themselves locked in resembles Cormack and Marianne's type*

*of trap, five generations earlier. So that the overall impression is very pessimistic. Is that what you wished to convey?*

Yes. Because now it is not only a question of Northern Ireland. More or less everywhere since the break-up of the Soviet Union, since the break-up of the post-colonial euphoria in different parts of the world, national identity has become so important for everyone. Even in France at the moment, it's practically impossible to express oneself on any individual level, one is always the mouthpiece of some social class or some political class, or some tribe, quite simply.

*In the French translation of your novel, you added a sentence. I'm quoting from memory. You said: "The gunmen might miraculously turn into statesmen." Should we take this as the final streak of optimism, or as one more ironical comment on the situation?*

I think one more ironical comment. When I wrote the novel in English it was at a time when nobody even dreamed of such a concept as a cease-fire, or of the IRA moving towards peace talks or any sort of settlement. And then suddenly, the year after the novel was published in Ireland, there was a cease-fire, suddenly everybody was believing that the IRA were transformed into little saints with halos and wings and all the rest of it and I didn't particularly believe that they were and I was right. And I think maybe eventually they will transform themselves into statesmen, but I doubt it very much.

*In the end, you bring together the Palestinian cause and the Irish one, that is, more precisely, the IRA part of the Irish question.*

Yes, so look at Palestine, so look at South Africa. It isn't Utopia. It isn't peace yet. Something has been dragging on in all of these places for years and years and maybe eventually, miraculously, it will turn into lovely, peaceful, I won't say Utopia, but what we all hoped for. And maybe in Ulster too. But I doubt it.

*Now, of course, my question has further implications than just the Sarah and Malachy couple. I'd say that the overall impression is that passivity and political activism are equally decried throughout the novel. Is that one of the possible lessons that you wish us to draw from it?*

Yes, there's an interesting character in the novel. He's interesting because he represents a part of me. Eric, who is a good old sixties liberal, who dreamed of revolution, of a Brave New World, and who in his thirties and forties is sitting there writing courteous letters to dictators in the name of Amnesty

International, and he realises the utter uselessness of what he's doing, because any dictator worthy of the name would take one look at the letter and use it as toilet paper, but he keeps on doing it, because there's nothing else to be done. And in Northern Ireland, besides the Nationalists, besides the Loyalists, there's quite a sizeable minority of people like Eric and myself...

*Although he's a Protestant, and a wealthy one, isn't he?*

Wealthy, no, middle-class, yes. He is a teacher, but I suppose he is wealthy compared with Maureen's family.

*I'm thinking of his family, he comes from a wealthy family...*

Yes, they're a very well-heeled family, and it's the wealthy, well-heeled people who are above the political struggles, can afford to be, and Eric finds the only way he can hope to change anything is by conventional liberal gestures... He can't afford to get out of his milieu, and for example desegregate the education of his children. He's afraid to send his children to a Catholic school, in case they get knifed, or something, so he has to continue perpetuating the old segregations, and lives in a Protestant neighbourhood, sends his children to nice Protestant schools and salves his conscience by being a member of Amnesty International.

*By creating a museum. Perhaps you could tell us about that.*

Yes. One of his ways, harmless ways, which won't endanger his family in any manner, of approaching himself to the other side, to the Catholic side, is by creating a museum of folk culture, preserving three old shanty houses, which date from the time of the Famine, and filling them with artefacts of Catholic poverty; and he simply doesn't see at the time how stupid it is, and how it can be interpreted as a hostile gesture, rubbing the noses of the Catholics in the inelegancies of their lifestyle. Eventually, he does see this, but by the time he sees through all the emptiness of this liberalism, it's too late.

*And of course the interesting thing is that the house he turns into a museum is the one Cormack had left from in the nineteenth century, before leaving Ireland for America. And also the place where Sarah and Malachy die in the end.*

Yes, and this is a deliberate metaphor. Nothing changes in Ulster, we still keep running on the spot of our little obsessions. The same house that was the scene of Cormack and Marianne's descent into hell that their lives became, later on becomes the setting for their great-great-great-grandchild's end as well.

*You see, you've just said "we" still keep running...*

Oh God! [laughs]

*So, this book may have been a way of cutting off some ties, but it is also, I've been thinking, a way of maintaining some of them. Perhaps in a less conscious type of way. But it cannot be totally innocent that you write a book which will show French readers, for example, a large part of Irish history they've never heard about. Are you conscious of that historical, didactic, highly interesting dimension to your work?*

I perhaps was, at the time. It's six years since I wrote this book, and at the time, yes, I think I did want to show the French readers, if any, that Ireland was a highly complex place, because at the time, the French idea of Ireland was pretty simplistic and pretty folksy.

*You're helping us move away from A Taxi Mauve stereotype, aren't you?*

Well, I hope so. I hoped so when I was writing it. But in writing it I think that I have moved myself away from a fixation on Ireland, so that I can see Ireland now, perhaps, as a foreigner might see it.

*Any projects for the future?*

That's something I don't like to talk about. It might bring me bad luck. I'll probably be writing another novel about different things. Better keep quiet about it.

*One final question, perhaps. Could you try to help us define what being an Irish writer means to you?*

To me, no, it doesn't mean very much. Given that I have lived out of Ireland for so many years, and yet write about Ireland, I write as a person who knows Ireland thoroughly, but when I meet other Irish writers, I'm not considered to be an Irish writer. I'm considered a French woman who writes about Ireland, which is a pity perhaps. But in fact, the writer I feel closest to in experience, background, personal hang-ups is Annie Ernaux. Leave out the political violence, and Claghan is very close to Yvetot. The tragedy is that one can't leave out the violence, but that's a very narrow way of defining an Irish writer, which is why I prefer not to define myself as one.

*Is that why you chose to write under your husband's name rather than your family name?*

No, it's because I preferred my husband to my family. I didn't particularly want to be called by my father's name. I know it's supposed to be a great advance now that in their professional lives women choose to use their family name rather than their married name. It's meant to define them as authentic human beings rather than as just their husbands' wives. But in fact they're defining themselves as their fathers' daughters. I mean, if they chose their mother's maiden name, it might be more logical. Though, there again, isn't that just their grand-dad's name? And so on, *ad infinitum*... Anyway "Duffaud" is prettier than "Finnegan".

