
Beckett and His Biographer: An Interview with James Knowlson

José Francisco Fernández (Almería, Spain)

James Knowlson is Emeritus Professor of French at the University of Reading. He is also the founder of the International Beckett Foundation (previously the Beckett Archive) at Reading, and he has written extensively on the great Irish author. He began his monumental biography, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996) when Beckett was still alive, and he relied on the Nobel Prize winner's active cooperation in the last months of his life. His book is widely acknowledged as the most accurate source of information on Beckett's life, and can only be compared to Richard Ellmann's magnificent biography of James Joyce.

James Knowlson was interviewed in Tallahassee (Florida) on 11 February 2006, during the International Symposium "Beckett at 100: New Perspectives" held in that city under the sponsorship of Florida State University. I should like to express my gratitude to Professor Knowlson for giving me some of his time when he was most in demand to give interviews in the year of Beckett's centennial celebrations.

José Francisco Fernández

JFF: *Yours was the only biography authorised by Beckett. That must have been a great responsibility. Did it represent at any time a burden? Knowing that what you wrote would be taken as 'the truth'. Did you feel less free because of that?*

JK: Interesting. Two parts to that question, really. First of all, yes, I did feel a sense of responsibility and that responsibility took several forms. Beckett would say to me from time to time 'would you make something clear, please?' because some mistakes had been perpetrated earlier. For instance, I can give you an actual example from the biography. 'Will you make perfectly clear that my revelation, which is commonly thought of as having been like Krapp's revelation on the jetty at Dún Laoghaire, occurred in fact in my mother's room? I want you to make that clear, Jim,' he said. This happened to me several times. I was aware of the fact that, although he told me he had not read the previous biography very carefully, there were times when he said: 'that is not what happened; she got it wrong', meaning the earlier biographer. Now, my biography is not an attack

on or even a reply to the earlier biography of Deirdre Bair. It needs to stand on its own two feet. And I read with great fascination the biography of Deirdre Bair and have never said one word publicly against what she did. But it was a difficult time for her to write the book, while the writer "and a writer who felt very strongly about his privacy" was still around.

So, let me return to this question of responsibility. I indeed felt that there was a responsibility to produce something that would represent a kind of historical record. That I suppose must have been a major part of what I was doing. But don't forget I was writing a commercial biography and this means that you have to write a story that will take the reader from point A to point B: birth, death; and then there is rather a lot in the middle where you have to make it interesting.

Like writing a narrative?

The narrative has to be an interesting one, yes, so that all kind of things that, as a Beckett scholar, I would have liked to have developed, I did not have either the time or the space to

explore. Or perhaps the readership that the publishers were aiming at would not have appreciated some of the more sophisticated, more scholarly disquisitions on many of the texts that as scholars we study. There was a responsibility also to Samuel Beckett not to write a scandalous biography. I didn't want to write anything that was shocking. On the other hand, I did want to tell the truth. Of course there are ways of telling the truth; there are ways of telling a story which may have a certain potentially scandalous quality, and you can tell it as very shocking, shocking, not very shocking or not at all shocking. My main criterion in writing this book was that my bigger responsibility was to posterity, to the truth: the critic, Desmond McCarthy once said that the biographer is 'an artist under oath'. Now I don't approve at all of those biographies that treat the writer's life or the life of a famous person as a subject for what is really their own story, a fiction constructed around it; some people do more or less just that. I think that the biographer has an obligation to the truth, or as near to the truth as he can get. Of course you know that there will never be a definitive biography: things change; other facts come to light; there are gaps; etc. In fact all of the biographer's material is potentially misleading.

Now there was another issue in your opening question, that is, did I feel that there was a burden upon me? Yes, I did. I felt it as a burden that I did not want to let Beckett down. But remember that I also wanted to be honest; in English, we say we want to 'call a spade a spade'. So, if he's having a love affair, ok, everybody has love affairs at some time in their life. And if it happens to be a love affair at the same time he was living with Suzanne, well then I was still going to say so. So I was not going to dissimulate; I was not going to hide things. I thought that alongside the notion of responsibility towards Beckett, the great danger of writing an authorised biography is that you write a hagiography, that you write something where you whitewash everything. I'm not saying that my portrait of Beckett is not an affectionate, even quite often, a favourable one, but if you have read it carefully you will know that there are many times when Beckett comes

out of it quite badly. Many people told me that he was a saint. But we have to be very careful when we talk about the sainthood of Samuel Beckett. He was indeed very generous, he was kind, he helped so many people – even now we don't fully appreciate the extent of Beckett's kindness and generosity. On the other hand, he could sometimes be irritating, difficult, and self-centred; as a young man he was very self-absorbed and narcissistic indeed, even though as an older man he behaved in a very saintly way. But if he was a saint, as one of the German actors put it, he was a saint who liked his beer (usually his Guinness) at eleven and his whisky at five and – let us make no bones about it – I almost lost count of the number of women that he was involved with in the course of his life. He was very attractive, magnetic, to women. So you can see that here you have somebody who likes to drink heavily, who goes with women, who is not a saint in that sense, but who behaves in a saintly way in terms of his compassion and understanding and humanity. So there was the notion of a burden; yes, I found it very difficult to live with writing it. It's maybe worth saying this, I haven't said it very often, that part of the difficulty lay in the fact that he died soon after I started. I had my interviews with him, which I've now edited with my wife, as you know, in *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett*, but there are always difficulties when someone has just died because people feel reluctant sometimes to talk. Now I had the advantage that I had letters from Samuel Beckett saying that I was his sole authorised biographer, 'would they let me have free access to their correspondence...', etc. I had a whole lot of letters from him which I would send to people in advance, so that was helpful. You then asked me in your first question, which I have elaborated on rather a lot, about the question of freedom. I think that with those twin responsibilities; responsibility towards Beckett and responsibility towards posterity, that you have to negotiate carefully between the two. So I think there were times when I used that whole scale that I spoke about earlier of how you can tell something, sometimes so as not to tell it in a

scandalous way. In other words I suppose I was performing a certain amount of auto-censorship. Nobody censored me; they tried to, oh, they tried to, but they didn't in the end, because they couldn't and I don't want to talk about that any more, but they tried: not the estate, no, not Edward Beckett – definitely not.

And you do not want to say who tried to ...
No.

If I may say so, in your book you are extremely tactful when you correct the mistakes of the other biographies.

That was my intention, yes. I didn't think that it was the place of this book to attack anyone. I had a very good friend, who happened also to be my agent, who said 'if a certain person who wrote a biography appears in your book, in the text of your book, you will have failed because you are writing your own biography, you are not writing it against anyone else'. I knew that someone else was writing a biography too at the same time. So I knew that I had to be focused on my job. I couldn't be concerned about Anthony Cronin, just as I couldn't be concerned about Deirdre Bair's book in the past. I had to try to bring what I had myself to the task. You can only do the best you can. So that was the way I worked and I didn't think it was my job to be nasty. Sometimes, I have learnt over my seventy plus years, these things come back to bite you, and that what in the short term is a situation where you want to be angry or correct somebody or not be tactful, some years later this seems like appalling taste. I didn't want anyone to say 'why did he have to do that?' so I have to balance the setting the record straight that Beckett asked me to do on many occasions with doing it in such a way that I was not indulging in bad taste or polemic or personal attack. All the other people who have written about Samuel Beckett have worked with the best of intentions. Nobody has tried to do an attack. It may happen in the future. But Deirdre Bair, Anthony Cronin, Lois Gordon, and myself, have, I believe, all done the best that we thought we could do at that particular moment in history.

Would you change anything in the biography as it is now?

Oh yes, if I were doing this biography again, I would change many things about it. If I ever do a second edition, I may well rewrite whole sections. I may also ask for two volumes. After all, I cut 327 pages of the typescript out. The way I cut it was partly by reducing, but also by putting a lot of the scholarly material in the notes. So in a sense there are two different biographies in one; the biography for the general reader and the biography for the scholars.

I was after all in a slightly difficult position as a biographer because I am supposed to be a Beckett scholar as well. I had also looking over my shoulder as it were, as I was writing, the picture of a very close friend of mine, Ruby Cohn, a friend of Beckett, but also the doyenne of Beckett studies. So I had to bear in mind with every sentence I wrote that that sentence is meant for someone who doesn't know anything about Beckett but at the same time it is going to be read by Ruby Cohn. Now fortunately that was a path that Ruby Cohn tells me I managed to negotiate fairly successfully. One doesn't always do that and there are many things that I would do differently now, but at the time that was 'all I could manage, more than I could', as Samuel Beckett once put it to Alan Schneider.

In the book there is not much reference to the Easter Rising 1916, the Anglo-Irish War or the Irish Civil war. Of course, Beckett was very young then, but did it not have any influence on his family, his social class?

No, there isn't a lot in there. I do talk about that when he is with his father over the hills, looking at the fires burning, and of course it did have one particular impact, that is that they were very anxious to get their two boys out of Dublin, so that was probably the main reason for sending them to Portora in Enniskillen, a long way away from the riots and the troubles, but the implications of that are considerable, of course. We've had in the course of the conference we are at [in Tallahassee, Florida]

a lot of discussions about the Irishness of Samuel Beckett and the influence of his Protestant upbringing in a country that is divided on religious grounds. One of the things I've been most impressed by " and I'm learning about this all the time " is how much this is actually part of the subtext in some of Beckett's later work. If I were rewriting my biography now, I would make some of those points that I have been learning from fellow scholars, because I am not an Irish scholar, I am a French scholar. So I have been learning from specialists in Irish censorship, in Irish history, the situation of the two cultures, which were very different cultures as well as different religions...When I'm talking about the later work, there's no question of total deracination in Beckett in the late work. There are images which recur constantly from his childhood. There are not only just images of his childhood but there is a whole world there which is very Irish in its feel. I mean *Waiting for Godot* has the feel of tramps, tinkers from John Millington Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* and *The Well of the Saints* and so on. There is always a kind of substratum of the old country present. Of course one of the reasons, I suggest, that we have 150 people here now talking about Beckett, and thousands throughout the world this year celebrating his birthday, is because he universalises those experiences. Consequently he allows us to put on, to attach our own experiences " it's like an affix where you can put on your own emotions. That's really why plays like *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Happy Days* are coming up as fresh as new paint: because they are not limited to the local. The stories in *Texts for Nothing* are full of echoes of Dublin and its surroundings, its sights, the Dublin bay, the mountains of his homeland. The significant thing is not that we can trace these elements. The significant thing is how they are used in the text and how they become universal themes which we can still appreciate, whereas so many of the works from the same period as Beckett's (and I mean I've seen many of the attempted revivals recently) are dated. Now Beckett doesn't date in terms of the things that Theodor

Adorno and many other people were talking about with respect to a post-Hiroshima world. *Endgame* is a remarkable 'after the bomb', as it were, kind of world. But it's not just that. It's full of the most human and at the same time most philosophical aspects of human existence. It's not a local thing but it does deal with human relationships. The nub of *Endgame* is the relationship between Hamm and Clov, dependence, the master-servant situation, if you like. Now you can relate that to philosophy, you can relate it to the Hegelian master/slave relationship, but in fact the text, the play, what we see on stage, the relationship between the characters, is something which is much wider than a purely philosophical concept. That is why Porter Abbott [one of the contributors to the conference speaking about Beckett and philosophy] is right. Beckett says "I am not a philosopher", but the seeds are frequently to be found in philosophy or in his own life. I'm saying that these elements of his childhood are obsessional, they keep coming back, but of course it's the way that these are used so that they don't leave us outside his text, as something which is alien to you will do. They draw us in by the very fact that they share our common experience as human beings. You can put your own emotions on to a particular image. I could quote quite a few examples. But I think of the trembling hand of the mother ill with Parkinson's disease shaking in the mirror in *Texts for Nothing 6*. When I read that I never fail to think of my own mother. I've tried this on my colleagues and students and they say, yes, I always associate such and such an image with my father. So in a sense what's happening with these images is what I like to describe in terms of a distillation. It's like distilling down the essence of human emotion without becoming sentimental because that's the other important thing: Beckett has realised that you can have more of an impact by seeming to be slightly distant.

Let me tell you an anecdote that you will like. My son was in a motorcycle accident and Beckett knew and telephoned every day for a week, to see how he was. Later, about a year

later, I published an article in a national British newspaper about that experience when I had thought our son was dying. He was in intensive care; the doctor was coming in, shaking his head, etc. I published the piece under another name and I received hundreds of letters from readers; more than I've ever had in my life, even with the biography. Then I was talking much later to Beckett about trying to use that in a work of fiction and he said to me, very tellingly, 'ah, but Jim, you've got to let the distance have its effect; you've got to bring W. B. Yeats' "cold eye" to bear on the experience.'

Now think of what happened with *Krapp's Last Tape*. It was seven years after his mother's death before he used the death of his mother in the incident with the dog by the canal when he is waiting for the blind to go down, indicating that his mother had died, or indicating rather that Krapp's mother had died. Only after such a period of time can you distil the essential and by this I mean the emotional essentials of an experience. It requires distance and time. That is Beckett speaking, not me or anyone else, that's what he felt. And I think that his getting away from the purely local is perhaps the reason why we're all here at this conference, because we admire the skill of the greatest prose stylist, with James Joyce, of the 20th century, but because we can also emotionally attach things in our own lives, our own experiences to what we are reading. Somebody wrote a book called *Beckett the Abstractor*, 'Beckett L' Abstracteur' in French. That seems to me to be far from the truth. It seems to me that Beckett is not an abstractor at all. He is a distiller: he distils; he crystallises the essentials of the search for being, the fact that you are born and inevitably you will die. Those are the only things really in the end, as you get nearer to death, that you realise are the essentials. Or if you escape it as I did ten years ago when I thought I was dying of cancer, you then realise that this boiling down to essentials is part of the magical secret of Samuel Beckett. This happens too with respect to the emotions that are working in the text. They are crystallised into the

essentials of human emotion. And this gives a remarkable power, complexity and density to the text.

You have mentioned Joyce. Was Joyce a guiding light or an obstacle in Beckett's career as a writer?

As so often, both. But let me preface my answer, and I won't forget your question, by talking about two writers whose work has been affected by Beckett. Paul Auster and John Coetzee spoke to me privately in letters but also in their brief essays for *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett* about their debt to Beckett. But each of them said that after reading Beckett they could not write for a long time. So Beckett with Joyce was at the same time trying to escape from Joyce, but at the same time he was, you used the phrase yourself, a guiding light for him. I do think that Joyce was indeed the master for Beckett. He recognised that you can't do again what Joyce did in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Beckett realised he had to find his own path. I don't know whether you remember, I quote it somewhere in the biography, as early as 1930 he is writing to Samuel Putman, 'I'll get away from JJ before I die. Yessir.' In other words, he realised as early as 1930 that he had to find his own way. *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, even *Murphy*, is very Joycean; the early poems are full of Joyce. Joyce becomes a presence too in the later writing; in *Ohio Impromptu*, he walks with the protagonist and so on. And you will find a lot of Joyce still in the late prose texts, *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, *Worstward Ho*. But nonetheless the influence has been absorbed or transcended. It has gone underground in these texts. Beckett has found his own way. My way lies in impotence and ignorance, he said, that whole zone of being that writers have set aside as not useable. Joyce worked with all knowing, with putting everything in. He was, in Beckett's words, a 'greedy writer'. Beckett worked on the other hand by taking everything out. You may have a spiritual father but as the spiritual son you have to make your own way in life and find your own direction.

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Editorial note: this little ad appeared in one of the Finnish local newspapers in May this year – surely suitable furniture for future meetings of the ESSE Executive Board... JAS

Interviewing Peter Ackroyd

Part 1: “I certainly don’t subscribe to any modern literary theory”

Lidia Vianu (Bucharest, Romania)

I briefly visited Peter Ackroyd when I was in London. When I left his flat, I had the feeling I had been talking to the room – the impressive walls covered in magnificent books – to the history of the building, to the roots of the city. Not many words were said. His shyness touched me deeply, but I could never put it into words, I could not say what it was that had made me fall silent, experience an absence of words I had never felt before.

Peter Ackroyd is a private man (and this is the understatement of the century). When I founded the MA Centre for Contemporary Literature in Translation at the English Department of Bucharest University and I started inviting British poets and novelists (David Lodge, Julian Barnes, Alasdair Gray, Ruth Fainlight, Elaine Feinstein, John Mole, Robert Hampson, Mimi Khalvati, Pascale Petit, Sean O’Brien, George Szirtes) to talk to the students who were attending my course on contemporary British fiction and who were also attempting to translate some of it into Romanian, I tried my luck with Peter, although I was not very hopeful. I knew he worked 14 hours a day. To my surprise, he did accept.

In my own interview with him (via email, since talking in person had been such a failure on my part; see <<http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com>>). I had barely elicited one-line answers. My expectations were at best grim as far as the videoconference was concerned. I coached my students (one of whom was actually writing a PhD on Peter’s work) to keep asking at all costs. The videoconference began.

It felt as if a magic wand had touched the screen. Peter talked to the students telling them things I had never seen in print, in other interviews. It was certainly not the clever questions that set him going. The questions were as they were. I feel certain it was the youth and inexperience of the students. His answers exhaled tenderness. Was he talking to his own youth, I wonder?

The result was a genuinely affectionate, disarmingly open text. I learnt my lesson. When with Peter Ackroyd, do what Peter Ackroyd does: be tenderly silent and allow only literature itself to talk.

Lidia Vianu

STUDENT: *I have noticed that most of your books are full of historical personalities: writers (Dickens, Milton, Chatterton, T.S. Eliot), architects (Hawksmoor) and philosophers (Plato). Is your passion for history the reason why you chose them?*

PETERACKROYD: I think it must be in part my passion for history, my interest in history. It has been my abiding interest, ever since I was a student at the university, but it was only in recent years that this interest became quick and enlightened by a specific focus on the people whom you mentioned. The choice of characters,

some of whom you mentioned, was not an arbitrary one. In my opinion it was an instinctive or intuitive one, but not arbitrary. In the case of many of them, for example in the case of Dickens, Blake, Chaucer and Milton, I was trying to help to explore the concept of a ‘London sensibility’. I was interested in the writing that came out from London, that emerged from the cities for many centuries, and which is touched by the same preoccupations and the same themes, images and interests. So, there was a sort of line that worked in many of my choices. In the cases of others, such as

Nicholas Hawksmoor, whom you mentioned, and Dan Leno, I was more interested in discovering, how can I put it, the presence of the past, the way in which the historical presence of London still exists in a variety of forms. So there was a kind of logic to my choices of these people, yes.

Are there repeatable patterns of experience in The Great Fire of London?

Yes, I believe that there are patterns, there are rhythms, there are clusters of significant experience, themes connected to time. I'd tried to locate that in some of my books, with what I called the 'topographical imperative', by which I mean there are certain neighbourhoods, certain streets, alleys, houses, which actively influence the lives and characters of people who live there. It is not a subject which is taught at the universities or in schools, but it is one that interested me profoundly. I was asked two or three years ago to write a London biography, which was a study of that aspect, in part a study of that aspect of London's presence, where the forces of the city, the earth, the soil on which the city is based seem to have an indirect effect upon the people who lived there. Whether in a pattern of habitation, whether in a pattern of activity or whether in a pattern of accidents, crimes and so forth. So that aspect of experiential patterns is one of great interest to me.

In The Great Fire of London the setting for Little Dorrit is set on fire. Would you suggest that actually these patterns and the past which holds them are at some point completely useless and should be destroyed because they become barriers for understanding?

Yes, I see what you mean. I think that was just the ending of that particular novel, I don't think I would draw any great conclusions from it myself. That was actually the first novel I ever wrote. And in certain aspects it's slightly naïve. I will only say in its defense it carries in it all the seeds of the later novels which I've written. It's a novel preoccupied with the layers of times, you know, preoccupied with the nature of the city, whether invented by Dickens or

whether invented by me. And those ideas, those attitudes, those preoccupations have continued ever since. For the ending of that novel, it was simply a convenient way of concluding the narrative. I wouldn't leap to any metaphysical speculations about its purpose.

I was wondering, if you were to draw a comparison between traditional, old literature and modernist and postmodernist literature, would you say that history, the past in general, had lost ground, or, on the contrary, that it had gained a certain profounder importance compared to the past?

OK, if I gather your question correctly, you are asking whether history is losing its importance in a postmodern climate?

Yes, exactly.

Well, I don't think it is. I have never used the terms modernism or postmodernism because they mean very little to me as such, but in terms of historical consciousness history seems to be growing all the time. I don't want to speak personally, but when I wrote a book called *Hawksmoor*, in 1986, it was considered rather a joke to write a novel set both in the past and in the present. It was considered a conceit. But over the last twenty years there have been any number of historical fictions with one foot in the past and one foot in the present. It's become actually a genre of its own, and there are some novelists who are specialized in it completely. And in fact that transitional writing, if I can put it that way, between past and present, has also slipped into non-fiction, and some historical narratives and biographical narratives now make use of this device, confronting or transposing past and present. So as for its being a dead issue or a fading issue, I think it's becoming much more prominent in the literature of England.

How did you start using this technique? Did you rely on theories of intertextuality or did you just start using it to see if it worked?

I certainly didn't begin with theories in intertextuality because I know nothing about

them. I began writing just because I enjoyed it. And I chose these things because I wanted to explore them, there was no ulterior motive, no theoretical purpose behind my writing. I don't think there is any to this day. It would be very difficult for me to locate or identify any theoretical or literary explanation for what I do. I can only explain it in terms of what I have just tried to explain to you, the idea of 'cognate vision', the idea of London. I indeed legitimate old literature. It may be a way of resurrecting for example Milton, Chaucer but I don't have any apologies for that. I'm only interested in doing that and nothing else.

All your novels are extremely sensitive. Between the lines I feel some kind of regret, not only for the present but for everything, and this especially in English Music and in The House of Doctor Dee. Does this regret focus on anything in particular or is it just a mood to be conveyed?

Well, I don't have any deep secrets to reveal, and certainly it was conceived in that spirit. It was written at a time, I suppose you might say, of mental torment in my life, or whatever phrase you want to use for it, so it might be that my state of mind enters the book in a subtle way. I was really interested in trying to draw the strange figure of Doctor Dee. Necromancy has always interested me ever since I was a student. He was one of the figures that always remain in the back of my mind, and sometimes in the front of my mind, as when I was writing it. So I also wanted to try to bring to life that particular London. Whatever the secret meaning, whatever the mood that book caused, of course, I have no control of it. My conscious effort was to recreate 16th century London, and 20th century London, and see them as mirror images of each other.

You say that when you try to write your novels you don't have a particular technique, literary technique in mind, you just try to write what you feel. My question is, have you ever been tempted to guide your work and your creation according to some technique used in modern literature?

No, I never made that attempt. I've never relied upon theories, as I tried to explain before. And I certainly don't subscribe to any modern literary theory. I certainly wouldn't want to feel that my work embodied any modern literary theory. That would be far from my point. In terms of writing it just comes, it emerges from the pen and almost instinctively. I have very little conscious control of what I'm doing and, when I'm re-reading it, it often seems to me to be the work of someone else or something I don't remember doing. And that happens in both biography and fiction. I know the work is going well when that effect occurs, when the words seem to spring unimpeded from the words which came before them. So my role in the process is that of a person who allows reactions to take place. In that sense I don't have any control of what I'm doing, to such an extent that it is quite impossible for me to fulfil any theoretical expectation whatsoever.

When reading your novels, would you recommend that we should not take into account any literary technique we might identify in your work and just read and try to feel it, or should we look for a more technical side and try to capture some literary technique?

Well, that's entirely up to you. Any approach is reasonable, there are no laws about this, there are no laws about reading, just as there are no laws about writing. If it's more appropriate to you, and more fulfilling, to discover literary theory within it, that's fine. There's no reason why it should not be there despite the fact I don't have anything to do with it. If the narrative is written in that way, that's absolutely fine with me. Some readers just read them for the story, and that's fine with me too. Other people read them just for the historical consciousness which they evoke, and that's fine again. Any kind of reading is good as long as it's reading.

Some of your characters, such as Nicholas Dyer, appeal to occultism in order to communicate with the past, with the spirit of the dead. Does it come from any literary influence or is it a passion of yours for

knowledge beyond reason, beyond logic?

Yes, the hidden knowledge seems to be part of many of my novels. In real life, this does not concern me a great deal. But in my fiction it seems to concern me a lot. I don't have any explanation for that. I think it has to do with the sense that... let me put it this way: you can probably divide human kind into two categories, those who are secular and those who are religious. And I prefer to write religious or spiritual fiction rather than secular fiction. The means of doing that are various, of course. My own way is to illuminate the passage of time as it were, to celebrate the sacredness of time and the passage of time. So, in that sense, you are right to divine the presence of a knowledge of the dead within those books.

Your work seems to be very carefully worked. Does this come easily?

Do the words come easily?

You convey messages between the lines, like a cry for beauty. You are trying to express everything in the most beautiful way possible. You use hyperbole a lot.

That's certainly possible, I wouldn't put it that way myself, but I'm sure you're right to draw those conclusions. I began life really as a poet. My first published volumes were all poetry. There were some three or four of them before I was in my thirties, so I think the aspirations of the poet, the dreams of the poet if you like, the knowledge of the poet, inform the fiction in ways I really can't begin to understand. Certainly I think of prose as a way of representing beauty. So, in a sense I don't think I ever left poetry behind. It sort of migrated into my prose.

How do you see the future of literature? Is the vision in The Plato Papers your own vision on the future of literature?

No, not really. I can't remember what the vision was in *The Plato Papers*, but I'm sure it will survive. There were many prophecies, I think, at the end of last century that literature was dead, books were becoming dispensable; in fact the opposite seems to be the case. Now more books are being read; there are more

bookshops in London now than in the past, many more readers of books. So I think, in terms of survival, the future of literature is very good, I can't see any diminished interest or enthusiasm for these pursuits.

Talking about today's literature, are there any sides of it that you would change in order for it to become more valuable?

Well, I don't read any contemporary literature, I have to admit. I don't read any fiction. I read occasionally biographies and histories, but I really don't have any judgment about those matters, because I'm completely ill informed about contemporary fiction. I haven't read a novel in ten, fifteen years.

In the novel The Plato Papers you show how past and present can deconstruct each other. Do you think that cultural epochs can carry out dialogues with one another or they are just deconstructing one another?

That's a very difficult question to answer. I presume the dialogue is taking place. I can't remember the specific details of *The Plato Papers* now, but in general, in my books I've tried to say that there is a dialogue between past and present; sometimes they communicate with each other, sometimes they understand each other and sometimes they don't. There were times, for example, when history seemed to come to an end in some of the books, but I'd call it dialogue rather than deconstruction, if that is what you meant.

In historical metafiction, do the books about the past have any claim to truth, even if it is a very limited truth?

No, they have no claim to truth as such, but they might have in biographies or other studies. The concept of truth in this context is a very elusive one. I wouldn't claim my biographies of Blake, Dickens or More were true any more than the fictions about Hawksmoor and Milton are true. They are all fictive, they are made up of language, a language that lies, a language that is incapable of telling the truth. So, for example, that's why I never see much difference myself between fiction and biography.

Sometimes I'm asked which I prefer or which I think highly of, and in truth I don't see any real distinction between these activities. It is like asking a composer whether he prefers symphony to opus. Music is music, writing is writing, all forms of writing are similar. So for me the act of writing a novel is no different from the act of writing a biography or a historical study. The same principles apply and the same effects are engineered. To answer your question, the truth, whatever it is, doesn't really enter into it.

In reading The Plato Papers I found the glossary to be absolutely fascinating, and I was wondering if you ever considered turning it into a dictionary or perhaps writing a book for children, in which you could play upon words, something like Carroll's Alice in Wonderland. I found it absolutely fascinating and I wondered why you hadn't continued with it in the novel.

I see what you mean. I didn't continue with it because I ran out of words I could use. I went to the Oxford English Dictionary, the Concise version, not the twenty volumes, looking for words which could be used in that way, and I came to the end, that's why I didn't do it any more. I don't think I would do a book as such, but it might be quite an interesting enterprise. It will be for children to analyze the matter.

When you write your novels, what is more important to you: the story, the characters you write about or the language you use and how you write every sentence?

Well I'm interested in all those things. There's no priority given to plot or character. If there is any priority at all, it has to be given to language itself, the way it is written, the way it comes out. The language creates the characters and the language creates the plots. And that might sound very silly, but, in the case of many novels I written, I didn't know what was going to happen next until the language told me what was going to happen. There are cases of course where you sketch out important details of the plots just as a sort of vision in your head, but the actual chapter-by-chapter work, the narrative,

is almost always decided by the flow of the language, and sometimes characters emerge almost by accident when you don't expect them to. A sudden turn of phrase or a sudden description will bring a character to life, and that character will enter the narrative and change the narrative, so you really do rely upon writing itself. I made that point earlier, that writing is writing, and the act of writing, the experience of writing is absolutely essential to the creation of any book, fiction or non-fiction.

You said earlier that sometimes you sketched out the plot in your head. Has it ever occurred to you might end up somewhere far away from what you originally hoped for? Does this ever occur?

Oh, yes, that happens all the time. In fact I would say it happens continually. It wouldn't happen, of course, in biographies as such, where the character is real, so you can't mess around that much with it. But in fiction it continually happens: a change of pen, a change of character, a change in the scene will materially affect the course of the narrative and you can end up with quite a different book.

Earlier you said that words simply flowed from your pen, and, related to Hawksmoor, I have a question. Was it difficult to write in the language of the 18th century?

No it wasn't difficult after a while, it required a certain amount of practice. What I did was sit down in the reading room of the British Library, which was then housed in the British Museum, and read every book I got my hands on from that period, which was roughly, I think, 1710-1720. It didn't matter what the book was. It could be a treaty of mushrooms, it could be a book about clothes, spells, I just had to soak in, soak out, I should say, the diction, the vocabulary, the rhythm of the words, the tone, and I had to do it to such an extent that I would be able to write 18th century English as fluently as I wrote 20th century English. And after some months that became possible, and then once again, as in so many other cases, the flow of words created the reality. I found it by far the best

way, for example, to introduce the readers to the historical period, to the historical context, instead of starting, like some historical novels, from clothes, buildings etc. I began just with the language, and I found that, by recreating that language, I was able to recreate the period with which I was concerned so it had more authenticity, it had... Well, the reader was drawn into it in ways which are quite uncommon in historical fiction. So in that sense it was the same process as I've described before, the language coming first and leading everybody forward.

In the poem entitled "among school children" you speak in the form of a lesson about some of the obsessions of mankind, and I quote: "What do these words mean? (a) love-cries (b) quantum (c) unemployed". My question is: do you think that we are offered, even forced into the main co-ordinates of our experience? Are we subjected to these patterns of experience and these obsessions from an early age? Can they be communicated or should they be transgressed?

I find it very difficult to answer that question. You're talking about a poem which was written many years ago and which I can hardly remember.

The poem discusses some of the main obsessions of mankind: love, quantum theory, unemployment, and some aspects of life. Do you think that these coordinates of experience, these obsessions are forced on us from an early age? Can they be communicated or should they be transgressed?

Well, I just don't know the answer to that. I'm sure that they can be communicated. I don't know whether they should be transgressed or not. I never thought of it.

Is there a symbol, a particular symbol in your novels which you feel more attached to? I think London appears in all your novels as an incomprehensible symbol. Are there any other symbols?

I don't know if you could call London a symbol as such. It is the landscape of the fiction. A symbol, no, I don't think there is one symbol, you know, I can't think of any. In any one book there will be a sort of trail of images which are suitable only for that one book. Again, I can't really tell which is which. As for symbols, no, I don't believe so, but of course they may be there. It is for other people, not really for me, to pick them up. I probably wouldn't see them if they were put in front of me.

How about a message? Is there a particular message that you are trying to send us?

No, there is no message as such. Only perhaps a mood, an aspiration, a susceptibility to the past, but no message. It would be wrong to impose a message on people. It would probably be misunderstood, and I don't see the point of messages. If you awaken the consciousness of people, if you allow them to feel the presence of other forces around them, if you make them aware of their past, the past of their country, the past of their area, if you convince them of the ethics of the past times, and if you convince them of the persistence of past times, that in itself is probably enough for any writer to do.

The MA Centre for Contemporary Literature in Translation, founded by Prof. Dr. Lidia Vianu at the Bucharest University, facilitated this interview with the British writer Peter Ackroyd, in a videoconference with Lidia Vianu's students (PhD, MA, second year majors), organized at the British Council (Bucharest-London) on May 9, 2006.

Part 2 of this interview will appear in the next issue of the *Messenger*.