

## THE FICTION OF LAWRENCE NORFOLK: WHAT HISTORY LEAVES OUT. AN INTERVIEW

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Lawrence Norfolk was born in Richmond, Surrey in 1963. He lived with his family in Iraq until they were evacuated in 1967 after which they moved to Swansea and then to Bath where he was educated. He received a first in English from King's College, London in 1986 and went on to study for a Ph.D., during which time he occasionally taught seminars. Since then he has been a full-time writer, working freelance on reference books and reviewing poetry for the *Times Literary Supplement* and occasionally for newspapers. Both of his published novels can be considered as historical novels but do not fall into the category of what he himself calls *costume drama*. As well as dealing with actual historical events and meticulously researching his material (his books are full of things that actually happened in spite of their imaginative extravagances) his books consider the relationship between history and fiction, myth and reality. These are two very *big* books, novels which are sometimes panoramic in scope but loaded with detail, depicting, sometimes ironically, the society of distinct historical periods. His first novel, *Lemprière's Dictionary*, was published in 1991 and following the publication of his second, *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, he was awarded the Best of Young British Novelists Award in 1993. More recently he has edited with Tibor Fischer the anthology *New Writing 8*, published by Vintage and the British Council. At the time of this interview, which he kindly agreed to following a lecture given at the University of Seville, Lawrence Norfolk was in the final stages of his third and last *historical* novel, as yet untitled. Having lived for a time in Chicago, he now lives and writes in London.

*You have mentioned in your talk that there is no single intention in the work of any author. Could you talk about your aims as a writer? We'd like to hear your own views about your own work.*

As a writer, the first fiction that you create as an author is always that you're in control of the text which, I think, since the late nineteenth century has become a myth, really, and since nineteenth-century Romanticism, everyone realises that there are elements of the text which you're not in control of. However, that's an interesting way to read a text sometimes, but it doesn't give you any *rationale* for

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actually writing it. It's very unhelpful if you're to write a text, of course, to think in those ways, so you have to create this fiction that you are in control and proceed in that way. In both my books, I've started out with quite clear ideas at the story level and, when I say story, I do just mean story. There was a primitive intention, because I think story-telling is basically primitive, it appeals to primitive desires and fears, and then I continue on in that way. Both the books that I've written began life as quite short projects and it's obvious that they've grown, that the material that I've incorporated within them has unfolded itself to a certain extent, or even to a very large extent, so that what should have been a 200 page novel ends up being an 800 page novel. I think that the writer, who is the king of this kind of procedure is probably Robert Musil, who took it to, or rather failed to take it to, its logical conclusion, because there *is* no logical conclusion. The novel just keeps going; it's never sufficient to the world which it wants to describe and that dissatisfaction drives it on and on in an infinite expansion and its an exponential expansion, too. It's not just a line, it's an area which widens and widens and widens. So towards the end of a book like that, to advance even half a metre will take you hundreds of pages. So, I'm aware of that when I think of myself retrospectively as a writer; but actually, in the act of writing, that's something that I have to not think about.

*There's a great deal of verifiable historical detail in your novels. How much of your writing is research and how much is imagination?*

I came at this two different ways. To talk about the first book: in a commonsensical kind of way, in your first novel, you don't know anything; you don't know how to do what you want to do; you don't know how to write a novel. So you concentrate on the things you *can* do, and one of those things that I could do was research: I mean, I know my way round a library. So, the first novel is absurdly over-researched and, to give one example, there's one scene towards the end of the book when the two characters are walking down Berwick Street in Soho, and I think it's 1787 and it would be something like the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> of June, and it's quite a warmish day. It's rained earlier in the day, so there are puddles on the ground although the puddles have dried up because it's warm. But it's humid. So they go into a pub to have a drink and they sit down near the window because it's quite warm outside. The window's open, they look up and then, on the third floor window-sill of the building opposite, they notice a pot of geraniums, a pot of red geraniums, and that's it. And then the novel moves on to other things. But the geraniums were there, at that time, 2:30 in the afternoon, whenever it was, 1787, because later that day they fell off and killed someone in the street. So I didn't want to put the death of the person in, but I wanted the geraniums. And I went to absurd lengths. The surface texture of *Lemprière* is made out of things like that. Nearly everything in it at the level of surface structure is true, fact, and it cost me an enormous effort to do that and I don't know how many books I used to put that together, but hundreds certainly. And in the end I'd read all the newspapers from the time as well, which took some doing. But, then, underneath, in a way, that's completely pointless because unless someone's going to do the research that you do, they can't possibly know. You're at the very limit of what's recorded in history with that sort of thing. At that level of detail those are the last things which are recorded.

Beyond that, it's unknowable. But it gives you something. I know that the reader doesn't think, "O.K., the geraniums were there", but I think it gives them this confidence in the surface texture. I think your belief in it comes through in some way which I can't theorise or talk about because I don't know how it does. And then that gave me the licence to imagine the larger things in the book, which is, that, for instance, the French Revolution was begun by a cabbalistic group of former owners of the East India Company, who had made themselves immortal by robotic means and were living in a fossilised dinosaur under London. If you get the surface texture right, the readers will swallow the larger falsehoods of your book. And usually, it's the other way round. You make sure you get right the French Revolution, then you can make up the geraniums. But I reversed that in *Lemprière*. Quite exactly why I did it, I'm still not quite sure, and the amount of effort it cost was horrific compared to the effect that it had.

*This again has to do with details. How do you work? Do you start with details? Is the detail, as Pound would say, the "luminous detail", what makes a story pop up in your mind? Or do you start by imagining a story, writing long drafts and then rewriting?*

No, I don't start with a detail. But I know I'm going to need lots of them. But that does colour your larger decisions. I always start with a story and it's always a really simple story as well. The rhinoceros story is a simple story. I mean, the spine of the book is simple and *Lemprière's Dictionary* also began as a very simple story. You know, a guy arrives in London, writes a dictionary, finishes writing dictionary, leaves. That really was it. That's what I had to begin with. But then out of that develop the bristling outgrowths of plot, sub-plot, counter-history and things like that. So, I don't know. That's about all I have to say about that.

*There seems to be a paradox in your work. As we can see, there is a lot of detail, but with the number of characters who tell stories in a novel like The Pope's Rhinoceros there's a suggestion that the distortion of the facts is inevitable. Is this emphasis on detail still a valid option in the novel now, particularly considering the kind of audience that we might expect nowadays who might not have the same kind of attention span as somebody in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Do you think people will read all the detail or will they just skip over it and does that possibility bother you?*

Of all the operations that are performed on books, reading is definitely the most violent. Books are written, which means they come out of nothing. And then, they are edited and then published and bound and reviewed and talked about. But actually, when you hear readers actually talking about novels; if you actually overhear readers talking about novels amongst themselves, what they say comes down to two or three things: they say, "Yes, it was a great book, I really liked it", or they say "It was O.K.", or they say "Hated it". So, actually, your novel will be boiled down eventually to one sentence, if you're lucky. If you get the thumbs up judgement, that is a sentence, the rest are just "no". So, that's a fairly serious abridgement of your work. So you can't be too precious about how people read your book. I mean readers skip, they pick books up, put them down again. You don't know where they're going to stop reading from one day to the next. It could be

anywhere. You can't control that. You can control it to a certain degree, if you're good enough. You can lead people through. You can make them want this or want that, but you're not in control of that. Once you've given it over to your readers, it's theirs at that point, it's really theirs and you've got to let it go. Some of the versions which get back to you of what people thought of your book are extraordinary. When I wrote *Lemprière*, there was a scene in it quite near the beginning which is slightly obscene, where a priest smears himself with mashed potato. And there's a kind of sexual thing and I remember writing that scene more or less on a whim. It took about a day to write, if that. I really didn't think anything of it at all and it's been one of the few scenes in that book which readers come back to again and again and again and say, "Well, now, what about that scene where..." There must be something about it which really sticks in readers' memories for some reason and I didn't think anything of it at all. It didn't interest me as a scene; it still doesn't interest me now; it has nothing to do with the plot really and yet it's worked in a way that other scenes I've laboured over have not worked. So, there's an accidental quality to it.

*B.S. Johnson once said that writing a three-volume novel in the 20th century is an anachronistic act. Do you think writing long novels nowadays is an anachronistic act? Obviously not ...*

Yes, obviously not. I don't know. I outsell B.S. Johnson by about a hundred to one, so I guess I'm happy enough with that score-line. I don't know if you should really go with the grain of the times in which you live as a writer. I think your position should be contrarian, should be against that. At the moment, the culture in which we live, its habitual gestures are ironic and also brief. I don't believe in three-minute culture. You know, it's too simplistic. But I think that the importation of gestures from other art forms, particularly the jump-cut from T.V. and the three-line paragraph, which is a televisual gesture, and also the verbless sentence (you see there are more sentences without verbs), that's an attempt to be visual in a book. I think that's a false door; I think you're wrong, you're barking up the wrong tree if you're doing that as a novelist. If you want to do that, you write film scripts, or write for T.V. and you'll get better paid and maybe more people will see your work. Also, it doesn't work, I don't think. The interesting thing about the novel is that all the people who read them are blind and can't actually see anything. And you're also deaf because you can't hear anything. The words exist on the page and they're interpreted by readers, so that's not the same as the other art forms. The novel should also play to its strengths, not its weaknesses, and to try and ape the cut-up-ness, if you like, of habitual modern cultural gestures is probably stupid because the novel is almost the last art form which can treat a subject at length and in depth. You can't do that on T.V. any more: you can go long, but you can't go deep; or you can go deep but you can't go long. You know it's very difficult to write a symphony now, because there's hardly any contemporary composer who will write to the finish; it's very difficult to do. But you can still write novels; that's still a live tradition, and the novel is habitually long. The first novels were very long. You know, *Don Quijote* is not a short book. And if you take the English tradition, Fielding, Richardson, *Tristram Shandy* and then Dickens and the rest of them, that's

where the novel's strength is. It should play to its strengths, not its weaknesses. You shouldn't make it something it isn't.

*A lot of what you've written is really quite funny; there's a lot of ironic humour too. For example, there's the wild party at the end of The Pope's Rhinoceros when everybody seems to be tripping along to the sound of "Purple Haze." Just how important is the humour, or is this, too, part of a vision of the absurdity underlying everything?*

I feel slightly uncomfortable with this. Underlying both novels is a sense of the comic theme, which I think continues throughout *Lemprière*, which ends very traditionally, almost with a wedding, which is the most traditional view of comedy. And then, in *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, the underlying comedy fails at the end. It can't actually carry through. At the end of *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, it's the worst hangover in the world, in a way. Now my feelings on this have changed somewhat because the trouble is that it's very hard to write outside irony at the moment and I'm not sure how good that is for fiction. It means that if you actually want to say something as opposed to say what you're not saying, the idiom to do that in is being eaten away, I think, by irony. Almost everything now is an ironic gesture, but that's good because it gives you a lot of room for manoeuvre as the author. You can situate yourself at several different distances from what you're talking about and let it play at certain different levels. It keeps your options open. But at the same time it means in the end that you can't actually close those options. It's very difficult to make a sincere statement and I think this isn't just a problem for me. I think it's a problem for contemporary fiction right across the board at the moment. Because if you do write a simple-minded novel with a hero who does this and does that and meets the girl and so on, that will be read ironically because there's been so many of those novels written it's hard to conceive that this one has been written seriously. You have to make other gestures. You have to get behind the camera—again that metaphor creeping in—you have to get behind the act of writing and say, "No, no, reader, I'm really serious about this", which again will be read as an ironic reflexive gesture. So, I feel in some ways uncomfortable with the comedy in my own books. On the other hand—this sounds like a flip answer, but it's not—you want your readers to have fun. You know, fun isn't the end of the story, it's not everything, but it's something.

*As a writer of fiction, do you think all the importance should be placed on what happens next? For instance, we find fragmentation and a variety of viewpoints in your novels which tend to lead to the withholding of information from the reader: you know, creating suspense, getting them to move on, and so on.*

Briefly, yes. This isn't about the novel, it isn't about fiction. It's about narrative and I think narrative is essentially primitive. We've always told stories. Simple rhythmic music and story-telling are probably the first two art forms one way or another. If you want to remember something, you can actually relay to someone a very complicated argument, a very complicated series of events, if you couch it in a story. You can have lots of events, what they were wearing, what order they spoke in, if it's a story. Then try memorising Mendeleev's periodic table, which is very hard indeed because there's no story, it's just an abstract structure. So stories are

how you remember things and I think the question of what happens next appeals at a very, very deep level to human beings, not just to people who can read, but human beings, because we don't know what will happen next. Our situation as humans is that we are uncertain about what will happen next. You know what happened, you have a flickering consciousness of what is happening and you have a dread of what will happen next, because in the end, we're all going to die, we don't know when. That's a consciousness that all humans have had throughout history and it remains as true today as it did whenever people first thought of it. So narrative and suspense and what happens next play on very innate fears and very innate anxieties. You can always rely on what happens next. It's a question that's always relevant to everyone everywhere.

*Both Lemprière and The Pope's Rhinoceros are historical novels, among other things. Is there, in your view, a connection between the flourishing of this genre or this sub-genre and, on the other hand, the consideration of History, with a capital H, as another form of narrative?*

Yes, there must be. I think it's very problematic and it's getting even more problematic. I think the historical novel in Europe is almost as old as the novel in Europe itself, I mean the modern novel. *Salammbô* is certainly an historical novel, and the work of Dumas and people like that; Dickens's novels are set slightly in the past. Thomas Hardy's novels are set thirty years back. It just gives them some room for their perspective to have had effect. But I think the historical novel often becomes fetishistic and, in other words, it's kind of utopian literature where, although it deals with terrible things, often there's wars and so on and so forth, those events are kind of wrapped up in a gauze of beautifully applied historical gestures. And what those historical gestures say when they're applied like that is "this happened then, it doesn't happen now." In other words, it's a consolatory kind of literature and it takes a view of human history which I don't particularly subscribe to, which is that the uncomfortable matters which historical novels can deal with are over now and we can feel good about that. By reading, we can confirm the fact that they're over, by reading them as fixed in this or that particular text. And then, at its worst, it falls into costume drama. The tendency of historical fiction is to fall into a kind of *schlocky*, fetishistic genre which in the end is about its own gestures rather than anything else. Real historical fiction is extremely hard to write and people who have tried to do it in radically different ways, I think, have failed. I mean, Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil* is an extraordinary achievement, but what it achieves, I don't know, because it's almost unreadable. It's very, very difficult to read that book. That's a genuine attempt to do something different.

*In your case, is there a desire to express the histories behind History? Is it your intention in this sense to rewrite History and, if so, why?*

Yes. I touched on this in the lecture, but the odd thing about all History is that it happened. I mean, you can take any historical act, anything at all and say that it was actually far more likely that anything else should happen but not this. The number of courses that History could take at any one moment are multiple at least, but it actually takes one. It's this continuous, very unlikely decision-making process.

As far as my own books are concerned, I've changed my mind completely between my first two books. My first book, *Lemprière*, takes a cyclical view of History, really, which is that things come round and round again. For instance, in that book, there's a number of sieges which are alluded to at various different levels. Obviously, the siege of La Rochelle was the main one and then behind that there's the siege of Carthage and then behind that there's other sieges as well. And the idea is that these things keep happening with slight differences and that the accumulation of these slight differences is what we laughingly call progress. In other words, the eighteenth-century idea of an Enlightenment, an *Aufklärung*, is inherent either in a degeneration or a progressive amelioration of the things which keep happening, which are constants. And that's really the underlying idea in *Lemprière's Dictionary*, which I did not particularly consider while writing the book but is in there. In *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, it's more dystopian, I suppose, in that the main character in the book, Salvestro, was deliberately chosen as a kind of last man. He's the only survivor of his particular Wendish tribe and his course through the novel is really just a procrastination of the demise of his own kind. He's outside at every point; he's not included ever; and also, he's not a historical actor in the usual sense. I think I've managed to conceal this almost completely in the book and I meant to as well, because it would have created all sorts of technical problems. He doesn't actually do anything in the book. He doesn't actually act, I don't think, ever. What happens is that events recede from him: they pull away from him and he falls into the vacuum at the back of those events. He's drawn through the novel in that way by the recession of History; he's chasing after History, but it's a mechanism out of which he has fallen. And then there's a scene right at the beginning of the book where I hint at this: it's where he's thrown off the island as a child, and he jumps off this boat when the people there are going to drown him and they assume that he's drowned although he swims away under the water. Water is something that doesn't record History at all; anything that happens in water leaves no trace. He swims underwater and, in fact, emerges on the shore and then the novel begins from that point. But another version of him just keeps swimming underwater and, in fact, it's a kind of deferred death; there's a dead version of him through the novel and he pops up now and again; you'll sort of see him in the background now and again. But that's his real version, you see, that's the version to whom things can happen, but who cannot do anything. So in the second book, I was less interested in the particular form that History took than the people to whom, or, in this case, the person to whom that mechanism was not relevant: it doesn't include everything and I wanted to write about that. You know, fiction can deal with things that leave no trace, History can't. Fiction can record those people, those lost people.

*Lemprière's is a story about, among other things, a global empire. Nowadays we have all this talk, and more than just talk, about globalisation: in what ways are things different? Are we just repeating, as you said, another cycle and does it always have to be like this?*

Yes, it's very hard to say. Perhaps the cycle just goes round so slowly that it's impossible to discern any movement within it. For my first novel I did a lot of research on the East India Company, which was probably the second multinational

and was incredibly successful (the first being the Roman Catholic Church). There's an interesting thing about the East India Company: I put these evil men in semi-control of it, but even in the book they're not really in control of it; it has its own vector, its own life. Now while I was researching on the East India Company, which was very difficult for archival reasons, about half-way through, the Bhopal disaster happened, when Union Carbide failed to ensure the safety and they paid out, I can't remember how much, but something like 50 or 55 million U.S. dollars to the survivors. And the share prices of Union Carbide went up at that point because they realised it was a settlement. At that point I realised that you cannot expect a multinational company to behave like a human being. No human being would pay real compensation at that point because you are responsible. But a company, a structure, and, in this sense, a pure historical structure, only serves its own interests; it's only interested in reorganising its own components. What happens outside is of no concern to the structure, and the East India Company was exactly like that. And it hasn't changed. In fact, the multinational companies operate very easily within the logic of late western capitalism, as it happens. They don't have ideas of how things should be done: there's no thought behind it; it's a mechanism. You set it running and it just keeps going. What they do sits much more easily with that kind of economic thinking of, say, the 16th century. In fact, they were able to operate in exactly the same way. That's something that didn't change at all.

*In Lemprière's, the greed of merchants is mentioned, but you seem to refuse to analyse this idea in more historical depth. Is it because you want to concentrate on the personal or individual quality of this fragment of history or because you think that things are so obvious that analysis is really not necessary?*

There's a crude socio-economic argument in *Lemprière's Dictionary*, but if you source it in human greed, in a way, that's simply a way of stopping the argument. It then becomes a theological argument: there is evil in the world and it has these effects; there is good in the world and it has these effects. So I was not writing a theological essay. In as much as it's a philosophical text, which it's not really, it's not theological in that way. So I didn't want to get into human greed. It's not an essay in that sense. I was much more interested in how the society and the commercial organisation and also the narrative organisation, work towards a particular end, seemingly of its own agenda; that this is in some ways a robotic structure and this economic cycle which took place between, say, Britain and India, or Britain and France in the 18th century, made its own agenda, and that human beings in this were actually, basically, pawns in the game: they might have volition, but that doesn't get you out of the game, you're still in the game. You can't get out of the novel unfortunately.

*Now that you mention this robotic quality in people and structures, what about this image of sailors in the Vendragon? They're kind of 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century cyborgs. Are they symbols for, say, this sort of robotic quality you have just mentioned?*

Yes, the late 18th century was quite an interesting period because it was not the last point but it was a high point at which technology was believed in as an absolute good. And there were several expressions of it: most stupidly, there were a lot of



robotic figures made; Jacques de Vaucanson made his famous mechanical duck which quacked and walked around and ate things and even excreted them for the French Court; and then at the other end, perhaps the more serious end of the scale, there were writers who outlined this mechanical vision of man and the idea was that if you could actually reduce everything to its mechanical relations which are comprehensible in absolute terms in an almost mathematical way, you can solve problems, for instance, inequalities within society, in a correspondingly absolute way; you just have to put your terms into the equation and you can come out with the right answer. It's a very degraded and simplistic view of what the Enlightenment, perhaps, should have been about. Nevertheless, it was possible in that period of History to believe in that and people did. And the robotic aspect of various characters, particularly minor characters, and some characters literally are robotic; it's me putting the counter-argument which is that there is no content: they're just mechanisms. If you wind them up this way, clockwise, they'll do this; if you wind them up anticlockwise, they would do that. You haven't actually escaped the onus to decide what should be good and what should be bad; in other words, what you want and what form human desires should take. So that's what I was getting at with that.

*In The Pope's Rhinoceros there's lots and lots of shit, people rotting away and things like that. Do you see corruption underlying everything? I mean both physically and otherwise.*

Yes, it's definitely an entropic reality: the tendency is for everything to spread and to break down. Yes, that metaphor runs throughout the second book because that's historically what was happening. I mean, the Church was financing itself, was eating itself in a way, eating itself to death, it was eating its own limbs by sending Tetzl out to Germany to sell indulgences. It's not the first thing that needed to be done with the Roman Catholic Church, it had lots of projects to choose from, and that precipitated the German Reformation. So it was literally eating itself, and behind that vision there's a vision of moral decay because the wrong decision was made to begin with. I don't actually know how much I can say about this. That doesn't account for the whole thing. That metaphor runs throughout the book and it's very prevalent, and I'm not quite sure where it comes from. I'm not quite sure what it expresses, but I was very insistent about it, and I feel quite strongly that it should be there. But, it's one point where I really don't have an answer.

*In The Pope's Rhinoceros there's a character called Lucullo who manages to get everybody to agree with him, but at one point there's also a suggestion that in spite of all this agreement, there's only emptiness underneath. Is this the case of writing fiction: is there essentially nothing underneath?*

No, because the relationship between fiction and reality it's meant to express is fairly vexed in detail, to say the least -see any number of philosophers for details. I think for my purposes, the commonsense proposition is enough in that there is a reality, there is an "out there" out there, there is something outside the text and we all, in fact, agree more or less roughly what it is. That's good enough for me. That's a level of abstract contemplation which would disable a fiction writer. I mean there

are writers who, I would say, deal with that extensively, but they're not writing the kind of books I would wish to write. But I respect them, Alain Robbe-Grillet and people like that, addressing that really head on sometimes. But it's not something I can comprehend.

*This is a related question really: are stories just substitutes for explanations? (Like what you were saying before about how stories are how you remember things). Are your novels trying to explain these situations or are they just stories about these situations?*

You hope the novel will go on to be more than simple exposition, to be, in a way, more than the simple telling of a story which is embodied within it. But, as a writer, as the person producing the tale, telling the tale, I think you're on very difficult ground as soon as you inflect it in that way. As soon as you set up the case in order to prove it, then, in a way, you've broken faith with the reader, because they know then; because the actors that you create and have set running are circumscribed anyway, and one of the most important fictions that you produce is that they are free agents. Now that's actually very fragile and as soon as they start doing things only to prove a point, you've lost your readership. It's difficult to theorise trust between writers and readers, which is more or less a one way street, fortunately, but that trust is absolutely necessary. They don't only have to believe in the necessity of the story, they have to believe that it happened that way in its own terms, not in the terms that you are setting out to prove, which is something outside the book, of course. That's something that you haven't included. So if your story falls into being an explanation for something, it's because it's not complete enough, if you see what I mean.

*There's a very funny part of The Pope's Rhinoceros when Prior Björg is explaining different bits of history to the monks and they have this really exaggerated desire to give significance to those events and see them in religious terms. It seems you are making fun of this tendency: are you against interpretation?*

In that case, yes. I'm not against interpretation, but I think often interpretation leaves the object behind far too soon. You can get a remarkably long way just on description, because the line between description and interpretation doesn't really exist. Because if you describe minutely enough, with enough detail, with enough insight, there's a certain point where description will become an interpretation. It's very, very hard to see exactly where that line lies; there's a continuum between them, I think. What I'm making fun of regarding the monk's interpretation is not that they interpret, but that it's very mechanical. They had this theory which is derived from biblical parables and they're applying it to what is a straightforward description of the world outside their monastery, which they're going to have to get to know because they need to go to Rome. And I would argue with the Prior at that point that actually there is enough interpretative material in fully taking on what it means to go from an island in the Baltic sea to Rome; there's enough material there to fully occupy any human mind as long as it wants to be occupied by it, and you don't need to instantly fly off into theological extrapolations and theories. I think often the flight from things is too quick. I've got nothing against interpretation, I just

think it's a long road to real interpretation and often that jump is made too quickly and it leaves the object or the material behind.

*At one point, fairly explicitly in The Pope's Rhinoceros, the story of Salvestro and Bernardo is described like a fairy tale and, among other things, there is also an element of quest. Is this deliberately built into the narrative to give a sense of universality?*

It's there whether I put it in or not. If two adventurers go off in search of a rhinoceros you've got a quest story on your hands and whether you explicitly say that or not, all those other quest stories line up behind it. So my point at that juncture in the novel was really to acknowledge that, and, in a way, to forestall those other quest stories: this is not those quest stories, this is *this* quest story and it's actually one of a number of gestures where I wanted to actually halt the process of signification, because it was going into an area which I didn't want in the novel, that's not what the novel is about. The novel is about the rhinoceros and what the rhinoceros means. If it has to come down to something, and it's not about the holy grail for example. The rhinoceros *is* the holy grail of the novel. I want to keep that idea very distant. It doesn't help me and it doesn't help the reader reading the book.

*We were speaking about the monks and their exaggerated desire to find significance in actual events. It seems in The Pope's Rhinoceros that the characters tend to be searching for meaning but in the end all of their struggle and effort virtually comes to nothing. Does all human effort resolve itself into absurdity? Are you an existentialist?*

I'm certainly not answering "Are you an existentialist"? It's actually a very gloomy book because it's true that all this effort does come to nought in the end. I'm really not sure where that came from. In fact, it's the wrong question; where it came from isn't perhaps very important; where it's going is important, however. I was aware in the book of pushing the characters past certain points where they could have stopped and pushing them on. In the end, especially with character, you reach a kind of exhaustion, and all the potentials in the character have been exhausted and it's at that point they must fail; they can't do anything else. If, for the purposes of my book, the Pope's desires really are completely satisfied by the gift of the rhinoceros, once you give the rhinoceros to the Pope, the Pope's finished; that's the end of the Pope in fictional, in narrative terms. And I built the rhinoceros up to be the surpassing gift in this book. It's what you want as the reader and as one of the characters. So once the rhinoceros appears for these characters, they've had it. I mean, it's a form of death, in a way. But I don't know if I can say much more than that. I wanted to push the characters through their logical ends right till the end. In a way, that's one of the reasons the book is so long. It takes a long time to exhaust the possibilities.

*In Lemprière's Dictionary one can notice references and allusions to Pynchon, to chaos theory, non-linear dynamics, and cyborgs. Are these new developments in science and technology a new frontier, a new frame of reference?*

Especially in *Lemprière*, I had enormous difficulties organising the material. You reach certain technical difficulties with plot as a method of organisation over a certain length. There's a reason *A la recherche du temps perdu* is not organised by plot. It's not possible to plot to that extent and you need other structures to organise the material. On the other hand, those structures can't be so oppressive that they start governing what happens. So, in a way, those presences which you've listed and my acknowledgement of the tendency of material to escape the bounds which you set for it, especially the non-linear dynamics, is really a description of how things don't do what you want them to do. And that's a problem which I was facing all the way through the book. It's a problem that any readers can face in the book as well. It does add up in fact. The plot does work perfectly, it does actually work perfectly, and that was more important to me at that stage. But, nevertheless, it doesn't comprehend everything. Let me actually get this straight: it does not resolve all the impulses that will be experienced by the reader through the book, specifically at a certain point in the book, somewhere near the middle, where it's not possible to hold all the plots simultaneously in your head, I don't believe. I was making them up and I needed very large detailed plans to keep track of what was where and when, just that basic stuff. Therefore, I anticipated that readers would have this slightly vertiginous feeling at that point, this slightly out of control feeling and those things that you mentioned are my acknowledgement of that in the book.

*In recent times chaos theory has become popularised and sometimes been used, apparently, in fiction. Is there only a purposeless flux which we try to give some semblance of order and significance to?*

No. I have a sense that everything has a significance, everything has an effect. The problem is perceptual, to account for those effects. I mean, at the heart, chaos theory is now and even then was overused as a metaphor, particularly because it has no content. Chaos theory doesn't actually describe anything. All it describes is its own limits. How can you go down to the level of detail that is necessary for predicting what vital ballbearing on the floor in this room will have an effect in Osaka in Japan three days later of some kind because no energy is lost in the system? Its effect would be so small that no instruments, our own senses or any instrument we can conceive, could possibly measure what that effect would be. Chaos theory describes that condition. I think that that is the condition of the modern novelist basically. You have to work with that limit to your own computation or analysis of perception in mind.

*Thinking about the idea of how to control the uncontrollable: in Lemprière's Dictionary another important motif and, as you said, the actual origin of this work, is the writing of the dictionary. Also, in The Pope's Rhinoceros, lots of characters tell stories, the monks write chronicles, etc.: is your fiction a kind of metafiction in this sense, a consideration of the narrative quality of anything that is ordered?*

I think you have to take that into account because by writing the novel you've already assumed that that is the case to a certain extent. The writing of the dictionary in *Lemprière* was exactly what I wasn't doing, but I took it seriously. The reason for that was that it's in some ways a genuinely historical novel. I touched on this before.

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In the late eighteenth century it was thought possible that a synoptic view of reality was possible, that there was a place for everything and you could order it, for instance, alphabetically, as a dictionary does. The efforts of D'Alembert and Diderot are famous enough, and that was the defining literary genre of the time. One of the points I was making in that book is that the significance of the dictionary escapes that structure and it has effects which have nothing to do with fixing knowledge in place. But there's parts of the plot which involve the dictionary; it means the dictionary breaks its bounds and becomes different kinds of reality as well and it's very problematic for my hero. So the novel works counter to what the dictionary—not just my dictionary but any dictionary—tries to do, which is to fix everything. And in *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, to one extent or another, the narratives are all deluded narratives. There's not many of them and I didn't really want them in at all, but for various reasons, in a way, I had to put them in. But they don't work; they're partial and they're partial because they're written from points of view which can't comprehend everything that has happened. And it's an obvious point, it's an obvious modernist thing. That's what I was saying.

*Jorge Luis Borges once said that arranging a library was an act of literary criticism. Now, beyond its function as incriminating evidence in Lemprière's case, is the dictionary a possible symbol also for the arrangement of reality, albeit in terms of classical myth or, as you have just hinted, also something that goes beyond the borders of fiction into the realm of reality?*

I've touched on this, obviously, in the last answer. For Lemprière, the dictionary is an exorcism of experiences. I think History is littered with that kind of attempt to comprehend human experience and to render it on the page in such a way that it will stop the process of signification, to say it does mean this but doesn't then go on and continue to mean other things which would be troublesome. I think that attempt is always doomed to failure and I include my own novels in that.

*Your work gives the impression that you enjoy language a great deal as it draws attention to itself, perhaps at times for its own sake. Basically, how would you describe your own relationship with language? Are you more in love with the rise and fall or sounds of words, or is it a question of their referentiality? Is it how they describe an inner world or the outer world?*

I think the dream of a language which corresponds exactly to the reality it wants to describe is worth having, but you always wake up in the morning and it's not true. But I think it's worthwhile trying to believe that that's the case. On the other hand, there's an aesthetic component to language which can't be ignored because it's always there. Even the most bare, stripped-down language has its own odd beauty. It's perhaps an abstract kind of beauty, but nevertheless it's a kind of beauty. So the aesthetic component is always there. Both my novels have been described as baroque rather than classically spare, and I'm aware of that. But I would say this, that the English language doesn't have much in grammar; it's got lousy grammar, it doesn't even have a subjunctive, it can't play those kinds of tricks, but what it does have is vocabulary and it's big. And it needs those words to mean the different things. We have to use vocabulary to produce those shades of meaning.

And, again, I think if you're writing English, you should play to the strengths of English. That said, my argument is not with language. There are writers who deliberately go against the grain of written English, and for good reason, too, it's something that bothers them. But I don't feel this is problematic. I think, as long as you retain control over what you're doing—I'm not saying I do at every point—but as long as you can retain basic control of what you're doing, it's O.K. to have fun.

*There is a point in The Pope's Rhinoceros where the voice of the narrator or says "make yourself a simile" and then, "or something like that". Now, that, on the one hand, draws attention to the other possibilities that you spoke about in the lecture: you know, you're choosing one, and here it seems you're drawing attention to that. But at the same time, it strikes me that it might have to do with the kind of dishonesty of making use of a particular image. Is metaphor dishonest? Is it possible to escape clichés which have accepted meanings and so on? Has it all been said before?*

Well, again it's one of the reasons it's worth deploying the whole language. The old modernist injunction to "make it new" was more relevant in, say, 1910, than it is now. In a way, now the problem is how to slow down the making it new process as much as you can. And metaphor itself is interesting in the novel because it's taken from poetry wholesale. The novel couldn't get by without the deep structure of metaphor, but it can get by without metaphors, in fact. And the allusion, I think, in all novels which construct elaborate similes and metaphors, which mine do, is always to poetry. Now the region that that takes me into is a poetic region, it's the extra-lingual region whereby you've already established what you're going to say and you can stand on that and make the words sound and look and do different things at that point. At the same time, you do extend the range of the object you're describing; but it's always in a particular way, it's always in the realm of the aesthetic, it looks more strongly or it sounds more strongly. Whether it's possible to actually make it mean more widely, I don't know. I think metaphor in the novel is quite problematic. I do sometimes worry about that. Usually, I can see it creeping in where characters' extreme states of mind or particularly bizarre events are occurring and you want something corresponding in the language to that extremity.

*In that case, is it possible to escape the use of the objective correlative? In The Pope's Rhinoceros, again, it's as if characters are always seeing events, stories and History (I'm referring to the monks again) as if they were a kind of parable. Is it necessary to write in parables? Should there be a moral to the story? In The Pope's Rhinoceros, for example, are you writing a parable about modern corruption?*

No. The *Rhinoceros* book is, in my view at least, actually quite concrete and it's actually full of *stuff* and things. The way it goes on from there to signify the things it does signify is mainly through context. If you put a particular kind of frame around some *thing*, it will mean that, if you put another frame around that, it will mean doubly. In a novel of 800 and something pages, you've got time to build quite a lot of frames and you do need that space to do it in as well. At that point, in fact, you don't need the parable; the parable is built in, and, in fact, really the monks are the worst offenders, but in a way they're trying to jump off the thing and to jump

away from it, leave it behind and fly up into their own particular fantasy world, and most of the people who tell stories about their own experience in *The Pope's Rhinoceros* are trying to do the same thing. I'm not entirely unsympathetic to that attempt either for most of them, given the conditions under which they have to do it.

*How important is theory, especially, literary theory for your own work?*

I have a vexed relationship with theory. I think nearly all writers are hostile to it because you're at the other end of the equation; you don't like it and you don't like the totalising power of its narrative. But speaking autobiographically, when I was at college, there was a war going on between some traditional forms of criticism and the new thing in criticism which I was an enthusiastic supporter of at the time and produced essays which were more or less identical, saying the same things about very different stuff. But now I'm actually producing the stuff I feel that perhaps that's not quite the good idea that I felt it was when I was at college. As I say, I think most theories leave the material that they're theorising far too quickly. That's really what I think. Most of the theories which find a way into my books find a way in as failures, as examples of failure, the failure to organise one's thought and experience.

*These are more general questions: how to you see the situation of the novel at the moment in Britain?*

I've spoken about the novel *vis a vis* other art forms, but in Britain at the moment it's quite good, quite good, it could be better. The scene at the moment is extraordinarily fragmented. There's no real consensus as to who the best writers are in Britain at the moment and who is doing the best work. The old guard, the Rushdies and the Amises and so on, are not producing their best work at the moment, but nevertheless, they remain preeminent on the basis of the work they've done before. And the generation underneath them, amongst whom I count myself, are still not—I mean, I'm finishing my third book now and other members of my age group are only now producing what might later be considered their best work. So the situation's in flux. Other than that, it's hard to know what to say. The interesting thing is what's happened with what's been called the multicultural novel because that was trumpeted throughout the eighties as the saviour of the English novel: there was this influx of new blood. And I felt at the time that that was maybe over optimistic and it looks like it was. Because actually, there was no real new blood and writers who were producing that work, well mostly, their sort of very early experiences would be brought into fiction in such a way that it rejuvenated it completely. I'm a bit doubtful about that. Also, there's been no radical stylistic experiments in British fiction in the last twenty years, I don't think. Really, *Midnight's Children* was an import: it imported the stylistic habits from certain Günter Grass novels and certain Gabriel García Márquez novels into an Anglo-Indian novel and just expressed that material in that particular way. It's an international style. And then along with that we have a certain number of satirical writers, Martin Amis would be preeminent amongst them, but they've rather gone quiet of late, I think primarily because Mrs. Thatcher is no longer in power and the contrarian position which you naturally fell into when she was running the country is no longer there. I mean, oddly, for a satirist, the comfortable seat is when you have a

dictatorship of some kind. In a country where everyone is really quite well off and all driving around in big German cars and drinking vintage wine, it's all a bit more difficult: it's "who are you meant to be making fun of" at that point.

*You have often been considered as a postmodern novelist. How do you feel about this label?*

It's come to mean everything and nothing, hasn't it? I mean, are there any novelists who aren't postmodern? I'd like to meet at least one. The category has expanded, it seems to me. It's come to include absolutely everyone. When I was in my intellectual infancy, postmodern novelists were the people doing exciting work and they were mostly Americans, actually; people like Don DeLillo, William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon. Next to their work, the novels being produced in the straightforwardly realistic tradition looked rather simple-minded and I'm not sure how fair that judgement was. And also, the hey-day of the postmodernist novel is gone; now it doesn't work outside the United States. There are two sets of uncertainty in the procedures of the novel and that has to do with whether we should have a greater interpenetration of factual material into fiction.

*One last question: what are you working on at the moment?*

I'm working on my third novel and it's the third historical novel that I've written; it will certainly be the last. At one level, it's about the various disquiets that I have with the historical novel as a form, and it's an attempt to address those. The story, briefly, is simple; no, it's not simple. It tells two stories: one is the story of an ancient Greek boar hunt, the hunt for the boar of Caledon, which took place probably in the generation before the siege of Troy. That begins the book, and then, there are classical footnotes underneath it, which are references to classical texts. Then we start: there's a bit of a jump and we're in Romania in 1939-40 and there's a Romanian-Jewish poet there and then the Nazis arrive and then he escapes, goes to Greece, and there he's involved in this adventure with this group of Partisans who won the war. I mean, the Germans are in full retreat, as they were, and he has this adventure with them where they go on this hunt for a high-ranking Nazi officer.

Afterwards, he writes about this in a poem called "Boar Hunt" and then you realise that the earlier hundred page version in prose at the beginning of the book is in some way a version of this poem which becomes extremely famous. And it becomes famous less because of its own merits than because of the biographical role in it, the idea that it was actually true, that it actually happened: this is what propels it to fame. And then, later again, in Paris, in the 1970s, where he's now living in famous exile, his old lover from Romania arrives from California, where she escaped to, as a film-maker and starts to make, in a way, a kind of sequel to the "Boar Hunt", that is, the poem of the "Boar Hunt", the art form, the poetic form. In the course of making the film, it gradually becomes clear that certain events which are alluded to in the poem didn't actually happen. You know, the poem's still there, it's still a really good poem, but the events out of which it has grown didn't, in fact, exist, which leads me to wonder about the myths, such as the hunt for the boar of Caledon, which is an excellent myth, and it's still with us and it's lasted three and a



half thousand years. So, at some point behind it, there must have been some reality, but we don't actually know what it was and it's certainly not the version that we have. So does that mean the story is no good, does that mean the narrative is not worth telling again? When you've broken the link between what really happened and how that's subsequently represented, what happens to the representation? And this is particularly relevant if you're a Jewish poet writing about the Nazis in the second half of this century. So, I'm investigating these issues through this book. It's been complicated to write because the early Greek myth has to relate to what will happen to him in Greece, and the footnotes relate to the doubts which will be cast on his version later on by other elements in the story, which I have yet to write. So, basically, it's like trying to solve four Rubik's Cubes at the same time. So, it's difficult. And then, basically, I'm trying to deal with those areas that can't be dealt with by normal historical methods. So it begins just before what we call history begins. Troy is the first real historical event that Europe has and you know it happened; there's evidence. But what about the father of Achilles, of Pelleas, or people like this? It starts to get really cloudy at that point. It's right on the edge of history and myth, right on that line. And then, 1941 and 1970, I think those are also lines that we draw. 1970 for me is my first experiences. That's where what I can consider history starts because that's where my life, my conscious life, started: my first memories, my first clear memories, are from there. It kind of bracketed history. History is the bit that you jump over to that.

Seville, February 2000

