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Will Self

An Interview with Martin Amis

Will Self: What struck me about the reversal of time and causality in *Time's Arrow* was this idea that once you have reached a certain plateau, death starts to suck you in.

Martin Amis: Who knows when it happens-it happens in your late thirties-but it happens. Suddenly you realise, both as a person and as a writer, that you are switching from saying 'Hi,' to saying 'Bye.' And, as I said in *London Fields*, it is a full-time job: death. You really have to wrench your head around to look in the other direction, because it's so apparent, and it wasn't apparent before. You were intellectually persuaded that you were going to die, but it wasn't a reality.

WS: That's the trope about suicide, isn't it? Tod's soul can't commit suicide .

MA: You can't do that. It's La Rochefoucault's line: 'No man can stare at the sun or at death, with unshielded eyes.' It's interesting to think that a child has no idea of death. They talk about it as something you can return from. Until they're about six or seven, and then death arrives as an idea. Maybe from then on in, it arrives in installments. The thirty-five year old, or thirty-six year old, doesn't get it. It's what being young is-almost by definition.

WS: So I'm fucked. Because that's what I got from the book. Perhaps I just read it at the right point.

MA: I did think it would be wonderfully comic to have somebody getting younger, and the inner voice continually exulting about feeling better. Because you never really do exult in your health. It's tragic.

WS: That's Dostoevski's idea of the reprieve from execution, isn't it? That you never really appreciate the very quiddity-one of your favorite words-the ordinariness of your existence, until it's under threat.

MA: The thing is that if you're going the other way, you know exactly how long you've got. When Anthony Burgess was told that

he had only a year to live-and he wrote fifteen novels to give his wife something to live on-he said he had a sense of luxury. Because he'd never been sure before that he was going to live . . .

WS: . . . That he wouldn't be knocked down by a car . . . About the critical reaction to *Time's Arrow*. I felt it was monstrously unfair.

MA: Among my writer friends I'm known as a sort of tyrant of cool. That I don't mind reviews. Some of my writer friends will assume the fetal position for eight hours after receiving a lukewarm review. And I always used to josh them along about this. I was thick-skinned-I am thick-skinned about this-simply because I'm the son of a writer. I do think that by various complicated processes this does thicken your skin. Being a writer is being someone whose solitary thoughts turn out to have some general interest. Which is an extraordinary thing, but it's never struck me that way because my dad did it. So I'm not as fragile as people who got there by themselves. When I was pissed off by some of the reviews for this book, my writer friends said, 'Well, there you are. Now you know.' And I said: 'Look, come on. You've never been accused of profiting from the slaughtered of Auschwitz, as I was. You haven't had your basic integrity questioned-more than questioned-mocked.' So I did think that it went beyond what one considers to be normal criticism. To be called 'talentless,' one would brush it off like a midge on a summer evening. But I was told that I was blasphemously intruding with the motive of profit. Sure, you wake up furious at three in the morning. You wake up feeling, 'son of a bitch.' I even entered into a correspondence-which I've never done before-with the reviewer on the *Spectator*, who had put all these points. Really, just as a way of letting off steam. Funnily enough, it didn't have that reaction in America, where you expect them to be more protective of the subject. In fact, my rough impression is that the more someone knows about the Holocaust, the more they like the book.

WS: Yes, I wondered, because I've read Fest and Levi. I knew all that material. I wasn't coming to it fresh. And in a way that made the book more exciting for me, because I knew what was coming. I knew just how horrible it was. And I felt myself sucked through the book in this way.

MA: That's right, you can't get off the train-and the image of the train is significant, because it's so resonant in this story. But you're taken the other way; and it's harder to resist that journey when you're taken the other way. Jeremy Treglowan taught a class at Princeton where he compared the American and English reviews. I sat in on the class and gave the reason that I've just given you. Which is that in America the Holocaust is much more present, much more visited, and therefore not hedged in what we might call 'good

taste.'

WS: Do you think that's anything to do with the different status of the Jewish communities? By this I mean that here-apart from the frumahs-the Jewish modus vivendi is to submerge itself in the English culture. There's a strange complicity between the English and the Jews, that the Jews shouldn't exist, in quite an important way. I'm half American Jewish, and I have a very prickly sensitivity for any gentile dealing with these matters, and I didn't find the book remotely offensive. I couldn't even conceive of how it could be perceived that way. I didn't actually look back at the criticism, but my hunch is that it didn't come from Jews, it came from the English.

MA: It came from the sort of philistine journalistic end of the market. Apart from this James Buchan guy in the *Spectator*. But I looked for all those sorts of explanations: how the Jews are much more intellectually prominent in America. In fact when Dan Quayle talks about the 'cultural elite,' that's code for 'Jew.' It means Hollywood and New York, basically. But Jeremy Treglowan looked at all these things and said, 'It's nothing to do with that, it's just that people hate you.'

WS: What you're talking about here, is the urge of the critic to elide the writer's moral being with his work. And although you talk about this business of inheriting the family trade, it does seem to me that this tendency in criticism washes right over that. Perhaps it's because I'm a writer myself, but I do feel that the novelist puts himself out on the line to a far greater degree than perhaps any other artist. It is a risky business in that way .

MA: In an age of growing literalism . . . there's also the vulgar interest in the writer himself-or herself. Because personalities are much more accessible than a corpus of work. Everyone can understand a person, you can see them on Terry Wogan, and you've got a handle on them. In TV age terms, it's pretty onerous to have to wade through a body of work, when all you're interested in is personalities.

WS: Do you think that's a reaction against Structuralism? Against the idea that literary works are separate, parallel worlds, that need to be considered in isolation, solely in terms of themselves?

MA: No, I think that that's over-sophisticated. The people out there aren't reacting to Structuralism; I think it's a TV age thing. They want it simple. They want it explained: how do you do it? It's really a sort of sub-*Time Out* investigation. They want to know how you make money by doing this thing-that's basically it.

WS: The question you are most frequently asked by non-writers is, 'How do you get your ideas? Where do they come from?' To them, imagination seems to be this separate faculty in the mind that just spews out ideas, doesn't it? I don't know if you would agree with me, but I don't see my imagination in that way at all. I'm not sure I even believe in the idea of imagination conceived in that way.

MA: I agree. I think the real mystery is talent. Because all writers have had those days when it doesn't feel like endeavor, when it feels like you're just clearing away stuff to get at what's there. Auden described writing as scraping away on a dusty stone to see what the inscription is.

WS: There's the alternative idea though, isn't there? There's Hemingway's concept of being 'juiced,' or Simenon's view of himself as just watching an internal film, and copying down the dialogue as it's spoken. A sense of automatic writing and production, do you ever have that?

MA: Kerouac took writing off the top of the head as far as it would go; where you just write down what occurs to you, and trusted to a kind of inner mumble. But the nearest I get to that is a kind of comic flow, a flow of comic invention. Then ideas suggest themselves and seem to come very naturally, the comedy starts to impact and become more like itself, more ridiculous.

WS: That's like being a stand-up comic, isn't it? The timing of each gag suggesting the timing for the next. Presumably when that's happening you bifurcate, forming an internal audience that's giggling at what's coming out.

MA: Yes, I think that's true. And I'm very fond of the notion, which is summed up by the anecdote, that there was a writer-in the days when you still had to put your occupation on your passport—who was going to Amin's Uganda. And on the plane he thought that he would change his passport, just to be on the safe side. So he made a little squiggle and transformed 'writer' into 'waiter.' I do think writing is waiting a lot of the time. Not waiting on table, but a vigil. When it isn't flowing, when there isn't an internal voice dictating what you ought to say, then it's better just to sit and wait.

WS: There's a crucial need for indolence, isn't there . . .

MA: . . . It's a sort of dream state. It's amazing that that should be so, that that's how you earn your living. You enter a hypnagogic realm that's to do with words, and you hang out there until they're ready. It's Auden again: he spoke of poems, 'wanting to be written,' and him saying, 'not yet my precious.' He also had the

congruent thing of scrapping poems, like Graves whose collected poems got shorter every year. Auden said of that poem "September 1939," 'it's probably a good poem, but I shouldn't have written it.'

WS: It's a very revealing poem, a raw poem. It's interesting that you should talk about Auden. I wonder, what does he represent to you? Do you bring him up because of the question of 'Englishness' and exile?

MA: The common view is that Auden committed literary suicide when he left England. And there's a lot in that. To me Auden represents the last of the poet-legislators; an enormous figure who spoke with enormous authority. It's that authority-in the Shelleyan sense of speaking for the whole species-that seduces all the poets who are influenced by him. That's vanished from poetry now, and as we were saying the other night, it's the novelists who have moved in. But there was something inimitable and forbidding about Auden's high style.

WS: So it's that that attracts you to him?

MA: It's the voice . . .

WS: It's not the idea of literary suicide?

MA: But that's very much the received wisdom, it's not my conclusion. I wouldn't suggest, as Larkin did and as my father does, that it was the cowardice, the desertion, that destroyed his talent. I don't think it works like that.

WS: Coming back to *Time's Arrow*, just a small thing, but I particularly liked Tod Friendly's assonant perfecto. Perhaps it's because I'm writing a book at the moment in which the protagonist always smokes a cigar, and often it's a Partagas perfecto. Where did you get it from? It's an unusual cigar. Did you get it from Donald Duck? Or is it the bomb shape of the cigar? Or is it serendipitous?

MA: It's serendipitous. Anything that hangs around in my mind for a while gets in, purely on the strength of that. I think, 'What's this doing in my mind? It must resonate with some experience.' I think the appeal was that it was a kind of comment on his morality.

WS: But smoking is another continuum, isn't it? Like all habits it's a very powerful expression of the idea of temporal continua, that's what I got off it . . .

MA: . . . Was it?

WS: It's interesting that you didn't use that gag. There's a short

Woody Allen piece called 'Conversations with Helmholtz,' in which Helmholtz—who was a contemporary of Freud—is smoking a cigar; and despite the fact that he hasn't lit it, he's drawing on it so strongly that it actually decreases in length. You didn't put in a reversal gag on smoking.

MA: No, except for preparing the girlfriend's butts . . .

WS: Yeah, but no actual smoking. Perhaps that's because it's too central a continuum?

MA: Maybe, but there are some things you just decline to elaborate on.

WS: Moving on. I wondered, particularly with *London Fields*, whether you felt under pressure to produce 'movement' fiction. And by that I mean a book where you work consciously to unite your individual voice—in some way—with the zeitgeist?

MA: No, I don't think I've ever felt conscious of a pressure to write this or that. *London Fields* began life as a novella. It was going to be a sixty-page story called "The Murdere." There was going to be a Keith figure and a Nicola figure, just moving towards each other and then the deed would occur. But then, what opened the novel up was this third character, Guy, which enlarged the social ambit; and then there was the narrator, who became a kind of actor.

WS: So that came later? Because in some ways it seemed to me to be a reworking of the ideas in the back end of *Money*.

MA: From *The Rachel Papers* on, I've never really written a naive novel in the sense that the action is presented as actually happening, there's always a playful element and there's always a kind of writer figure hovering around, or a more than usually animated narrator. And then—in *Money*—there is the writer figure, me, who having hovered round on the outskirts of previous novels, decides to come in, to actually enter the book. *London Fields* is a kind of Post-Modernist joke in that the narrator is taking something down that's actually happening, he's incapable of making anything up.

WS: And there's this Mark Asprey figure who you can heap opprobrium on . . .

MA: . . . Exactly. He's an anti-writer.

WS: Is that self-hatred?

MA: No. It's really a deflected parody of hatred I feel aimed at me.

WS: He's drawing fire?

MA: In a sense. But this is what a *really* hateful writer would be like. And now there's the novel which I'm doing at the moment, which is about-well, sometimes you have a dry run for a novel in its predecessor-and this novel is completely realistic, set in London, with a trip to America in the middle of it. This was going to happen in *London Fields*, and I wrote a whole middle section that took place in America, which I just didn't use.

WS: It was all impacted into the Departure Lounge.

MA: He never gets there. I was writing the American section and wondering why I felt ill. After a few weeks it dawned on me that the reason I was feeling ill was that these pages shouldn't be in the book. So that was a dry run for this one, which is about two writers; one is hideously successful-and undeservedly so. And the other is undeservedly neglected. Deservedly in the sense that what he writes is unreadable, but he is talented and he is a genuine artist in the way that the successful writer is not. And I imagine this book will have a lot of what *Money* and *London Fields* had, which is just what it's like to live in this city, now . . .

WS: . . . And 'Madame Bovary c'est moi,' have you split yourself in two?

MA: Yeah, as usual. I think this is to do with my essential comic crudeness as a writer. Most writers, if they were writing a novel like *London Fields*, would have used only one male character, who would sometimes be romantic, and sometimes he would be lustful, sometimes have generous and beautiful thoughts, sometimes have mean and ugly thoughts. Most writers would have only had one child, sometimes nice and sometimes horrible. Comedy seems to flow from me when I can divide these traits. Many writers would be interested in the subtle shifts between these two moods. I'm much more interested in plastering them onto the walls.

WS: I would say that that's because, at root, you are a satirist. And satire is a form that depends on comic exaggeration, and on stereotyping.

MA: Do you feel *you* are a satirist?

WS: Unquestionably, yes. I mean, when critics say-well one critic said about *Quantity Theory*: I don't think Self is interested in character, or in narrative, he's interested in conceits and language-and I took this on the chin. I read this when I was writing *Cock & Bull*, which is, of course, an elaborate joke about the failure of narrative. It's true, I'm not really interested in character at all.

Indeed, I don't even really believe in the whole idea of psychological realism. I see it as dying with the nineteenth-century novel.

MA: Yes, I think a whole set of notions, of character and motivation, and fatal flaws and so on, are nostalgic creations . . .

WS: . . . It's sort of sentimentality . . .

MA: . . . Yes. Would that character were still like that-if indeed it ever was. It's much more jumbled and incoherent now.

WS: Kundera's point that people do construct elaborate motifs to grace their lives, to explain their lives to themselves. Perhaps in the nineteenth century people were much happier to do that, they had the sense that it was legitimate. Perhaps we don't feel that way any more?

MA: Think of the raw material that they had, and the raw material people have for this shaping now. What people are up to now is Post-Modernist, in the sense that they are loose beings in search of a form. And the art that they bring to this now, to shape their lives, is TV. In the nineteenth century, whatever it was, it wasn't TV. It might have been a penny dreadful, but it wouldn't have been a soap.

WS: Yes, that seems to be entirely legitimate. And I can't understand why people have difficulty with this philosophically, because it's obvious that something which is more commonly perceived, just does have more ontological validity. Television is the new substratum in that sense.

MA: What is the urge to give your life shape? It's a muted artistic urge-is it not? But instead of doing it on the page, you do it to your life, or the way you think about your life.

WS: But isn't that the paradox: that the people who are given the job of describing what non-writers' lives are like, actually don't-in quite a crucial way-understand what those lives are like?

MA: It is. Because I think to writers, non-writing life actually appears appallingly thin; sort of one-dimensional, because nothing is being done with it. You're like a slave in your own life.

WS: That's the point about Tod's soul, his homunculus, his inner being, isn't it?

MA: That was a kind of instant decision, because I knew the novel couldn't be written any other way, except with an innocent narrator. But it also comments on the idea that one is just obeying

orders, that one has no free will. And of course, later on, this was the most commonly grasped for excuse: we were only obeying orders.

WS: This makes the 'moral' thrust of the criticism against you even more disturbing. Because it's quite clear that that's what you are commenting on, given your credits at the end of the book. And especially Levi's 'If this is a Man'; because his suicide occurred, and some say it was predicated on, the growing tide of German revanchism, and their desire to abandon the notion of collective guilt-which they are. I was grilling a twenty-four year old Swabian about this the other night. And it's true, the new generation doesn't see themselves-as Germans-as having any responsibility for this. But I think the Germans committed a crime against the idea of nationhood that was so profound, that they must be denied the opportunity to become a nation-in that sense-perhaps ever again.

MA: Yes, I think the Germans should have a few centuries more to meditate on what they did in the Second World War. But what seems to be happening now is a kind of punk notion, that there's no future. And another notion that there's no past. Except for the imagery that's helpful for nationalism: you can always loot the past for a few flags and badges. There is a new breed of people who are absolutely concentrated in the present and have a kind of context-less view. This seems to liberate them from any kind of morality. They are fixed in time, with no present and no future.

WS: But I would say that one of the things which characterises Nazism is a kind of exaggerated sentimentality. You get that very well in *Time's Arrow*. And, of course, there's something mordant, if you look at Late-Romantic German culture, which presaged the Holocaust. This kind of sickly carping on emotion, a kitschness about it. But the irony is-and you got this as well-that the Jews were very much involved in that Late-Romantic phase of German culture. It's very odd.

WS: Do you have any ideas on the relation between drugs and creative inspiration, the 'machine a penser'?

MA: I'm a very habitual, but timorous, user of drugs. I think it's good for making notes, but not for the executive side of it. Good for ideas, but not for getting on with it.

WS: It's what you could say about Burroughs: that he abandoned the control tower.

MA: Yes. I think if you're seriously into drugs, then drugs are going to become your subject, and you have to look around for a method, a way of writing about drugs, that has to do with drugs as well.

WS: I suppose that's true of me. I am a drug-addict-writer in that way. But what I think is remarkable about marijuana is that it does produce this kind of conceptual synaesthesia: you 'hear smells' on the level of ideas. It produces these conceptual involutes. And I do think they're interesting. I've written on dope and off it, and I do think there's a certain 'X' factor.

MA: What's the difference? Is the whole operation different? Because when I'm actually writing a finished paragraph, I want to be straight. Even drink is no good . . .

WS: No, liquor isn't a working drug. Well, I wrote *Cock* entirely on hash. But that was smoking all day, every day, in Morocco, and that's a very different ambience. In England-I agree with you-I wouldn't finish a paragraph on dope.

MA: All day, every day, for how many days?

WS: Well, I wrote most of the first draft in about ten days. But although you say 'I'm an habitual but timorous user,' in *Dead Babies* your evocation of the drug-saturated consciousness is very exact. There's a point where one of the characters lights a joint, and you say: 'hash smoke had become like air to him.'

MA: Yes, well that did reflect the terror engendered by my four encounters with LSD, and one with MDA, during my last year at Oxford. Two of the trips were nice and two were not nice.

WS: Ego death?

MA: Well, I don't quite know what it was, just the horrors. But I do know what Hunter Thompson means at the beginning of *Fear and Loathing*, when there are these two old heads drinking cocktails and tripping at the bar, and they've become so habituated to the horrors that he says: an old head will look down and see a miniature of his granny crawling up his thigh with a knife between her teeth, and won't think much of it. There they are-these two heads-seeing all these people in this awful Las Vegas bar, as dinosaurs eating each other. They're drinking and smoking, and saying to each other: 'Jesus, did you see that pterodactyl, have you ever seen so much blood in your life?' But they're completely calm. I never got to anything like that point.

WS: You say that, but in *London Fields* you say that addiction is 'easy to understand.' What do you mean by that?

MA: My sister is an alcoholic, and my oldest friend is an alcoholic. Both of them are partially reformed, but still alcoholics, as they'll be the first to tell you. I don't know, I think it's got to do with waking

up and knowing that you're going to do it that day. And it's a deep physiological decision-if it's a decision in any sense-the body has made. And there's this great luxury-for a few hours-before you actually do it, of knowing that the debate is shelved, that you're just going to do it.

I increasingly find that once one has taken a drug, the next few hours have to be about *you*. And if you're a writer, it will either have to be planning something, or gloating over something. But you have to be the centre. And, as you get older, that begins to look like a steep price. You think, 'Look, I don't want it all to be about me this evening.' You don't want the self-communion.

WS: Yes, I agree. But-and there's an element of self-pity-I feel trapped in that self-communion, because I grew up on drugs. By the time I was fifteen I was a daily drug user.

MA: Which drugs?

WS: Speed and dope; and then heroin when I was seventeen. So, I feel sort of protective of my younger self. I don't really think I stood a chance. But I also thought that if you were a hard drug addict, you were an underground writer, of necessity. It was horse and carriage. I felt very cheated when I woke up at the age of twenty-one with a bad heroin habit, in complete obscurity.

MA: You thought you were working all that time.

WS: But I do think that the beat trinity of artist, hipster and spade was only the last in a long line of self-obsessed, thanatos-driven images of the creative sensibility. You do feel the pull of that, don't you?

MA: I don't know, 'Novel with Cocaine,' is something I might like to have written.

WS: It was a fraud, wasn't it?

MA: Yes. A lot people thought that Nabokov might have written it.

WS: I wanted to talk a bit about your willingness, and your freedom-which I envy-to acknowledge your mentors within your own work. Something I would find very hard to do-particularly with Nabokov. I'm thinking of a couple of passages in *London Fields*, where you explicitly draw out how you feel Nabokov might have dealt with, or reacted to, a situation. Are your spectral, ghostly mentors a bulwark against the Late-Romantic, self-destructive image of the writer?

MA: I feel much happier about acknowledging them in my books

now that they aren't influences, but rather inspirations. And that's a definite rite of passage: when they cease to be one thing and start to be the other.

WS: Is that-I'm skating on thin ice here-a feeling that they're your peers now?

MA: No. Absolutely not. It's just taking Nabokov and Bellow as examples-the feeling that I would no longer steal a phrase of theirs to get me out of a tight corner. The basis of all plagiarism is to feel the security of another writer's presence in your work, because everybody knows that *they're* good. So if I can get a bit of them in my work, it will give it a bit of strength. But, of course, it isn't; it's a bit of weakness. But now it's much more a feeling that when I address a particular scene or description, I think not so much: how would they do it? As just thinking that they've done it, and it can be done and it can be made new. So it's just a feeling of a kind of friendly presence.

WS: Maybe you can comment on this: for a lot of writers, the extent to which they feel their work is universal is predicated upon how they deal with cultural markers in their work. It's interesting, that on the one hand you are very inventive-particularly with satirizing cultural semiology, signage is one of your preoccupations-and on the other hand you have this freedom about name-checking. Do you think about it in those terms? Do you think about things being more or less universal?

MA: Increasingly I've come to equate talent with the universal. Nabokov said, when asked to distinguish between various schools of writers, there was only one school of writers, that of talent.

WS: Is that in the *Lectures on Literatures*?

MA: No, I think it's in *Strong Opinion*. And it's a very peculiar idea-talent. When I create a character who I think people aren't going to like, and I proceed without worrying about it, it's almost axiomatic that the more I think the character is hateful, the more it will be liked by readers. This is largely true of literature: we do like rogues and villains. And as Updike has said, the reason for this is that what we like is life. And if the character is alive, we will like it. If it is vigorous, we won't care about the morality of liking it, we'll just respond. But I think it's a universality question in that there's enough, as it were, John Self or Keith Talent, in everyone-it may only be half a percent, but it's enough. We all are that person sometimes.

When invoking these writers in my mind, it ties in with the dissipation question. In that they both happen to be very good

examples of dedication. Fierce dedication. You can see the trouble with drugs in the history of American literature. After the Vietnam war, writers didn't actually have to be junkies, but they became identified with the drug counter-culture; the stately progress of the American novel actually disintegrated. And the writer became not an establishment intellectual figure, but a marginal one, with a sort of bandanna tied around his head. Robert Stone, Don DeLillo, etc. But I said to Robert Stone, 'What's your relationship with hard drugs?' And he said: 'I admire them from afar.' Mailer said that drugs were a form of spiritual gambling. What he meant by this was that when you take a drug, you call in quite a lot of future time and condense it in the experience. You are making a kind of raid on the future. And you have the intense experience-which lasts however long it lasts-but then you have depleted your future.

WS: That's why I'm so fucked. I've called it all in, far too early.

MA: It's a measurable deal. The time you've spent high, you have to spend at least that much time straight, to repay the debt.

WS: Nabokov, in the *Lectures on Literature*, is very preoccupied with the idea of topography in fiction as a means of understanding it. In his lecture on *Northanger Abbey*, he draws a diagram of the house . . .

MA: . . . And for Joyce, he draws a map of his Dublin.

WS: Now, in your writing on London-and this relates to the question of cultural markers-I wonder, how much do you want your readers to feel that they are in an actual London? And how much do you assume that if they don't know where they are, then they don't need to know where they are?

MA: Yes. Well, I don't know why Nabokov was so preoccupied by this. I think it's a kind of corrective literalism that he applies. He wants to cut through the haze that people feel when they read. That's why he always says: don't identify with the hero or heroine of the novel, identify with the author. See what the author is trying to do. Remember that debate that got going after *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. When Tom Wolfe wrote a piece saying the great subjects are all out there. The writer should be more journalistic, should do more research. And I think he even had a ratio between inspiration and research, which went something like: twenty percent inspiration to eighty percent research. I think that's fine for some writers, him for example. But for me it's the other way round, I don't want to do too much research. And this is what I try to do with London: I don't want to know too much about it. Of course, I soak it up willy-nilly, but I have to push it through my psyche and transform it. So it isn't, in the end, London any more. It's London in

the patterning of my cerebellum .

WS: I must say, I do find your London a bit Saul Steinberg. There's a lot of signs, there are a lot of clouds-you seem very much concerned with cloudscape and stars-and in a sense not a lot else.

MA: Sure, that's true. It is the same old street that they walk up and down .

WS: And the sky is a real obsession . . .

MA: Well, Bellow talks about transcendentalism as being an aspect of the ghetto. Because, if in looking round you see everything there is to see in the form of the master mounds of human turpitude-by the time he was ten, he said he'd seen everything, murder etc.-so the head goes up, it has to. So, if you live in a city, the head goes up. It's a kind of physical imperative. And the sky mocks this arrangement. I mean, I feel more and more writers are always looking for first principles. And when I look around at the city I think, what's this doing here? Nobody said there had to be cities. It's just a direction we took and went along with. When I'm walking the streets, I'm thinking: why cars? Why parking meters? Why walls? Why bricks? Who said? It doesn't have to be this way.

WS: You get this through your gag in *Time's Arrow*, where Tod's soul thinks about the arbitrary way in which the city will become country . . .

MA: . . . That's right, and he wonders how cities arrive. Just in a sort of gasp of soot and men.

WS: My London is, I think, much more literal.

MA: Well, your London is your world. It's this place that nobody knows, that's unwritten. A kind of shadowy super-suburb, beyond the 'burbs, where everybody has peculiar jobs that no one knew about before.

WS: But also, I can draw an A-Z of my London. A schizophrenic once knocked on my door in Shepherds Bush and said, 'Can you drive me to Leytonstone and give me £17.37,' and I did. As we were driving to Leytonstone he was ranting, completely incoherent. And I said, 'Look, you're mad. I want to check in the A-Z exactly where you want me to take you before I go further.' And he said: 'But you and I know that the A-Z is a plan of what's going to be built.' That's how I conceive my London. But-and it's not a criticism of you in any way, our perceptions are different-in my London there is a lot between the signs and the sky. I'm very concerned with the physical reality of the buildings, the landscape. I'm harping on this, I suppose, because of what you said about Nabokov. About

geography just being a critical corrective for him, because when you look at his own work it isn't really there. With a book like *Pnin*, it's a very odd New England, isn't it?

MA: Yes, it is. And the train conceit expresses this very nicely. In that when the book begins, he's on the wrong train.

WS: And it's the same for Berlin in *King, Queen, Knave*. So it's odd . . .

MA: Yes, and in *King, Queen, Knave* our sense of Berlin comes from Karl. From seeing it through Karl's myopic eyes. That's the beauty of it. His vision is not good. That's what the novel is about-his myopia. And the journey across America in *Lolita*: while it's given the motel bookmatch, the tourist guide treatment, it remains as nebulous as this sinuous trail of slime he talks about leaving in his wake.

WS: It's interesting that in your introduction to the new edition of *Lolita*, you champion the book on moral grounds. Are you being a bit perverse?

MA: There's something Oedipal in this. In that my father wrote a piece on the book, attacking it on moral grounds. He made the preposterous claim that there was no distance between Nabokov and Humbert Humbert. He said, you know, you look at *Pnin*, and it's the same style, so there's no question that this is Nabokov all over, this is Nabokov's unadorned voice.

WS: So it is very Oedipal?

MA: . . . Yes it is. I must give my father this piece and say, 'Take that!' But what also pricked me was something I read that a friend of mine wrote recently. A very intelligent and good, close reader, Craig Raine. Who said that the end was tacked on to justify this priapic riot that's been going on for two hundred and fifty pages. And I thought, no, no, no. It's there all along. I think it is the truth of the novel, that he is in wonderfully subtle moral control throughout. He outsoaringly anticipates every possible moral objection from page one.

WS: The book is an enormous confirmation of that aphorism: God created sex in order to humiliate man, by forcing him to adopt ridiculous postures, isn't it?

MA: Yes. There's a link passage that happens both twenty pages into the novel and twenty pages from the end. The first instance is when Humbert is in Paris, and he's looking across a crowded bedsit, and in the half-light he sees what he thinks is a nymphet getting undressed. He watches, fascinated, and then as his climax is

arriving, the image resolves itself into a repulsively fat man, sitting at a table in a vest reading a newspaper.

WS: But you're ambivalent about sex in your work, aren't you? There's a certain strain there.

MA: No, I don't think so. I mean, the world I write about, that invented world, presents very few opportunities for healthy Lawrentian sex. It's just not going to happen in your world . . .

WS: . . . No, indeed. I only have the one sex scene in *Quantity Theory*.

MA: The one with the fat blonde with the post-coital sweats . . .

WS: . . . That's right. And my narrator describes the sensation of his penetration of her as being that of 'a rubberized claw, torn from a laboratory retort and thrust into the side of a putrefying animal.' That's why, when I wrote *Cock*, I was pissed off, because some of the criticism seemed to imply that they didn't expect this sort of thing of me. Whereas . . .

MA: . . . It was ready to go.

WS: That's right. But perhaps it's just projection on my part, because I do have this ability to actually feel disgusted with sex.

MA: I would say that there is a strain of youthful sexual disgust, and that comes from the fastidious end of things.

WS: That's the skid mark in *The Rachel Papers*.

MA: There's a lot of it in that. Sometimes I'll pick it up, and I'll be skimming along, thinking 'Hum, there's a lot of vigor in this . . .' and then I'll reel back from the page. It's partly a kind of jelly-kneed fear of the political thought police. But that book is so pre-feminist anyway. Once I'm into my stride, I don't think that sort of thing crops up. But anyway, I reckon I can spot an actual misogynist at a hundred yards, and you're not one. I mean, there's that aside in *London Fields* where I describe some type who fixes your eyes with his, and then tells you some ghastly tale about a purulent mackerel in some unfortunate lady's knickers. Now that kind of guy I can see coming a mile off, and I know I'm not one.

WS: A critic described this-in my work-as the 'standard nail-paring prose of the callow male writer.' But when we get to *Money*, there's the flip-side of this. There are the unfettered delights of Selena's knicker drawer.

MA: I've got into terrible trouble over underwear.

WS: But underwear just is sexy, isn't it?

MA: Well, statistically it is the case. Hugh Hefner's targeting people sorted this out many years ago. We all know that the difference between male and female sexuality is that men like pictures and women like words. There's a visual stimulus to do with the female shape, particularly when it's emphasised, or defined, by the standard underwear, that goes straight into the eye, then straight down the central nervous system to the penis. And that's the end of it: bingo.

WS: Yes. I wrote *Cock* out of rage at the involuntary character of my own sexual arousal. And I feel that in your work as well.

MA: I would say that the only aggressive feeling that I actually have towards women is to do with their power over me. That I've spent a big chunk of the last thirty years thinking about them, following them around, wanting to get off with them, absolutely enthralled. And that's bound to produce a slave's whinny for mercy every now and then. Tod, according to the narrator of *Time's Arrow*, is an insatiable chaser. He actually gets out of his chair to look at a passing shape, just because it might be a woman. The narrator says, 'Women are great,' and I pretty much go along with him there.

WS: Would you like to be Jewish?

MA: I'm a very definite philo-semite. My first love was Jewish. That's as formative as things get. I do like this kind of heightened intelligence, this tendency towards transcendentalism, which one associates with Jews. Because they are homeless, they're always looking upward.

WS: But isn't it also a corrective to the anti-intellectualism of Little England. It's a culture in which it's acceptable for men to be both effete and scholarly.

MA: Yes. I do think of the modern American Jewish experience as being to do with living in a ghetto and going, aged thirteen, to the library to read, say, Spengler. And then you went back to this house which you shared with eight families of Poles, who are killing each other all day long. The other thing I like is the promiscuity of verbal and social registers. So that the high and the low mix easily together. That's very attractive to me.

WS: Yes, as I see it one of the great achievements of your fiction is to mix high and low: the demotic and the mandarin.

MA: That's why the middle classes are underrepresented in my

books.

WS: You don't like their language.

MA: There's nothing going on there.

WS: You want the proletarian cock to penetrate the bourgeois lexicon. You want it to push in there and spunk it up a bit.

MA: That's right. The novel I'm writing at the moment opens with a longish scene in which two writers are jockeying for position around each other. Then, suddenly, we cut to two bruisers who are watching these writers, for reasons that become apparent, and the injection of energy almost had me reeling back from the typewriter.

WS: That's Lawrentian, isn't it?

MA: There is a parody of *The Rainbow* in the early pages of *London Fields*. You know 'Brangwen felt the wind on his chest, and how should this cease. . . .' This is all done in Keith's terms: 'He had the Saudi Arabian Granny in the back of the cab, and how should this cease. He felt the tug of the pub . . .' You see it's a thwarted energy. It's an energy that has nothing to do, especially in a modern, post-industrial city.

WS: But you feel betrayed by the working class, don't you? You feel that they're decadent as well?

MA: I think it is an absolutely exhausted culture. But that's kind of great from my point of view. I try to get that in *London Fields*, where Keith goes into the television studio for the darts final and says, 'Where's the pub?' And they say, 'Well, we have enough trouble as it is without having to wheel two hundred pissers in and out of here every week.' And they use these out-takes of grannies having a knees-up when they have dead time to fill, and they have a machine that snorts cigarette smoke onto the ochie.

WS: Is there also a fear there of tough guys, of people who really know how to fight?

MA: Non-civilians. I think that evaporates as you get older. I don't sense that much on the street anymore. Because I think it has to do with gangs. I was a mod in the mod and rocker days. I had a scooter. And I was a hippy in the hippy and skinhead days, when one was obsessed with the idea of being beaten up. But it didn't stop you having long hair or wearing flowered shirts. It was part of the deal. I think it's a kind of mob-testosterone-territory thing. I like talking to working class people, I like what they say. There's often something very beautiful about it.

WS: And that's your other life, isn't it? Down the club. It's also where the games make their appearance, isn't it? Which play a large part in your fiction. Chess, tennis . . .

MA: . . . Darts.

WS: Darts. But that's really a gag, isn't it?

MA: Yes, I suppose so, although I did get very deeply into darts culture, such as it is.

WS: But the gag about darts is really a gag about sports in general. You're really taking the piss out of your own interest in games, aren't you?

MA: Yes, that's right.

WS: I'm intrigued, because I don't have any interest in games, and I know why that is; it's because I can't stand to lose. I think you can't stand to lose either, but you're still prepared to play.

MA: I obviously can bear to lose, because I do a lot of it. I even set myself up to lose by playing people who are far better than me. I hate it every time, as if it's a fresh experience. But although the ludic element in writing is strong, games still feel like a relaxation from it. A therapeutic relaxation.

WS: I want all my playing to be in literature. Perhaps it's as Cocteau said that up until the age of about thirty-five he simply couldn't bear his experience, in the sense that he wanted to transmute it into art so much that he could hardly get on with it. Is that something you feel you've gotten over?

MA: I increasingly wonder whether writers experience anything.

WS: Is this what's coming up in the new book?

MA: Yeah, some of this. The Wordsworth phrase, 'emotion recollected in tranquility.' I think more and more of as, 'emotion *invented* in tranquility.' You're always on duty. It's like being a terrific snob. You're always looking for the writerly angle. When you're in the high-intensity phase of writing, you go home and you're not there at all. You're not there for your wife, or for your children. You are an impostor in your own life while you're living elsewhere. One definition of a writer is: 'He who is most alive when he is alone.' I don't know how that sounds to you, but it has a lot of pathos in it.

WS: Yes, well, Wittgenstein observed that, paradoxically, if you

view the world from a completely solipsistic viewpoint, then since you are the universe, the universe must be real. I see that as being the writerly consciousness.

MA: And you're in a thoroughly godlike position vis à vis what you create.

WS: On this new book, it's being put about that it's concerned with literary rivalry. That's a telling phrase, 'put about . . .'

MA: If people think it's going to be about what I think of Will Boyd, then they're in for a big disappointment.

WS: That's what they want, isn't it?

MA: Yes, and really this book is a way of answering all the curiosity I feel directed at me.

WS: This age of literal-mindedness?

MA: Exactly. You'll get so used to hearing these questions when you do interviews, or readings, or signings. And they all reflect the same central question, which is: how's it done? My book is a kind of a joke, in that I say: you want to know about me, about writers, well here it is. But, of course, nothing would happen in the book, if it were about a writer. He would just get up and go to work. So, in a way I've had to pander to vulgar curiosity by making these writers great schemers in their careers. And I've had to put in a sub-plot, to give myself something to write about. So, it's a self-defeating exercise from the off.

WS: You like to kick ass though, don't you?

MA: Whose ass?

WS: Well, the people in the philistine journalistic culture, who are scheming their careers, using the medium of tomorrow's fish and chip paper.

MA: I'd like to kick ass in a very particular sense. I'll give you an example. In the correspondence I had with James Buchan, who reviewed *Time's Arrow* for the *Spectator*: he had said in his review that the whole thing came down to a question of taste. Well, I'm glad it comes down to that, because, if I come to your house, then I'm going to behave with good taste. But if you're going to enter the experience of reading me, it's so intimate, there's so much at stake, that really good taste is something that we're not going to bother with. It has no bearing upon art at all.

WS: Do you think there's something essentially phony about

aestheticism?

MA: Aesthetics as a field is fine, but good taste is just borrowing some social more and trying to plaster it all over literature.

WS: It's like Mill on money: you start off pursuing it for what it can get you, and end up pursuing it for itself. Isn't that true of aesthetics? You start off pursuing beauty for truth, and end up pursuing it for World of Interiors.

MA: Yes, we don't like that. It's an extra-literary consideration. It means, could you talk about it with your aunt in a salon. I don't want to write the sort of novels that people feel comfortable with.

WS: In that sense *Time's Arrow* was a definite advance on your earlier work.

MA: I don't know. It's too early to say. We won't know until it's been around for a few years. But in some ways I do view it as a bit of a diversion, in that what I feel I'm here for is to write about this city and what it's like to be alive in it now. That's the main thing. But I'm delighted to see any novel that comes along, asking to be written.

WS: Have you ever entertained this comparison between yourself and Evelyn Waugh? In the sense that you are both operating in a consciously postlapsarian world. A world in which we've fallen from grace. And while, of course, there are satirical elements in your books which suggest criticism from an ethical point of view, there is also a strong sense of amorality. Actually, I would also, contrary to yourself, view that as the congruence between your work and Nabokov's; it's amorality of tone. And an acceptance of the loss of objective moral correlatives.

MA: I am very interested in where my characters stand morally. And in that sense I'm not in a moral vacuum. But on the other hand, I don't feel any urge to convert them, or punish them, or bring them round. Or even to make them see what they're doing. Because that doesn't square with how I see the world.

WS: With the truth?

MA: Yes, with the truth. Also, whatever I inherit from my father, I inherit from my mother a deep reluctance to judge. If you said to my mother, 'I'm a junky, nymphomaniac, kleptomaniac.' She'd say, 'Of course, dear.' I was in Spain with her once, and we were walking down the street when the local spastic came past. He walked very oddly, like a marionette, with one eye here and one eye there. And he's very kindly treated by everyone in the street. My mother said as he walked past, 'I love living in Spain. I now

regard that as *completely* normal.' There's a paragraph in *London Fields* where I tried to express this-about Keith: 'I try to imagine him as a child, being slapped by his dad for getting the score wrong . . .' And then I say: but hold on a minute, if you go that far back in anyone's life-you can't judge them. Because it's all there, it's all intelligible, it's all written. There's nothing they can do about it.

WS: And now, as Camus says, 'Every man is responsible for the nature of his own countenance.'

MA: I don't agree. The forty-year old in the new novel quotes that line, not exactly, but, 'By the age of forty every man has the face he deserves.' And he's looking in the mirror thinking, 'But no one deserves the face I've got. Not even Caligula or Mengele deserves this face.' And, in fact, that's true. You know, the grinning porn star, the handsome child-dismemberer, they all exist.

WS: But maybe not true of writers?

MA: Not true of people. Period.

WS: I don't know. I look in the mirror and think, 'You've got everything you deserve. It's written there.'

MA: I think it's a great remark because it describes the suspicion of the truth.

WS: There's a great *New Yorker* cartoon with the caption: 'The T-shirt of Dorian Gray,' which shows a sort of grinning, nerdish, Alfred E. Neuman figure with his face hideously distorted on the T-shirt he's wearing.

We've skirted round this, and I feel a reticence on your part to pin down this business of being a stranger in a strange land. Englishness specifically. And your generation of writers has been accused of attaching themselves to other countries. Barnes to France, yourself to America. Is this true? Are you English?

MA: Oh yes, inescapably. But sure, I do need the North Atlantic, just for air as much as anything else.

WS: And what about monoglotism? Again, I don't think it's something you say in your introduction to *Lolita*, but there is a penetration into the English language, from outside, that gives Nabokov's narrative voice a peculiarly distanced feeling.

MA: There are very odd Russianisms: 'She had the cheek of taking my photograph.' But then again, for page upon page, startling intimacy with the English language, and terrific ear as well. They say the great twentieth-century writers are Conrad and Nabokov,

because they had to come to the language from outside. I do suffer from monoglotism, and sometimes think that it would be nice to take a step out of the language and look back at it. But Nabokov made all these super-articulate laments for the beautiful plasticity of the Russian language he had abandoned; and yet, when he came to translate *Lolita* into Russian, he found it terribly limited.

WS: One knows intellectually that one's lexical palette is a lot bigger in English. In fact Russian is the only other language with as large a vocabulary.

MA: Whereas in Spanish they have only one word for walk. There's no slouch, or amble, or wander.

WS: In a way that's a problem for English writers now; there's no incentive to get out of the language. It's like being a child in a room full of sweets; you needn't leave.

MA: Yes, I'm much more interested in how my novels go down in New Zealand than in France . . .

WS: Really?

MA: Oh yes. Because once it's translated, it's only half me. The historical accident of Americans speaking English is what's made it so encompassing. They were only two votes away from making it German.

WS: Is what attracts you to America the English view of it as being raunchy, emotionally immediate, lacking side? Lacking of class in that way, is that the appeal?

MA: The appeal is of another vast language center, really. But I think the greatest American export has really been one notion, and that is 'the cool.' That's an American idea-it's certainly not an English one.

WS: Perhaps Afro-American?

MA: I think just American.

WS: But I think there is a very powerful synergy between black and white. The modern popular song is an elision between traditional English ballad form and the 4/4 rhythm of Africa. It's a great myth that soul is black music; it's black/white music. And maybe 'cool' is black/white as well?

MA: Well, wherever it comes from, all Americans are capable of it-and the English aren't.

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